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Ethnomusicology Forum
Parenting and Music Studies
Introduction

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In the summer of 2017, a chance online exchange between myself and Fiorella Montero-Diaz about the challenges of juggling academia and parenting led to the idea of a conference panel on the topic. As someone who had been dealing with the parent-academic juggle for more than 25 years, I empathised with Fiorella’s experience as a relatively new parent and it also made me reflect - as I had many times previously – on how little we talk about these issues openly. During that discussion, Fiorella conceived the idea of a talk or seminar and it was this that eventually gave birth to the panel on ‘Ethnomusicology and Parenting’ at the 2018 Annual Conference of the British Forum for Ethnomusicology at the University of Newcastle. The panel attracted a great deal of interest and generated a wide-ranging discussion on a number of issues, including the impact of caring responsibilities more generally on academia. Such was the level of interest that a broader panel on ‘Parenting and Music Studies’ was convened for the September 2019 Annual Conference of the Royal Musical Association at the University of Manchester. The current Forum includes contributions from both of these conference panels and explores a number of issues concerning the relationship between parenting and music academia. Of the original seven presentations, five are included here, representing a range of ages, genders, sexualities and different career stages. Two contributors directly address questions relating to undertaking fieldwork with children; the others deal with broader issues of the impact of parenting on academic work, including in relation to institutional policies. Many of the issues raised are not specific to Music Studies, and intersect closely with national initiatives such as Athena SWAN, which are undoubtedly making a difference for some. Although there has been some discussion within music studies of the relationship between our scholarly and personal lives, this has rarely extended to the impact of parenting or caring roles more generally, which have tended to be rendered invisible or considered irrelevant to scholarly discussion.¹ Whilst this

¹ For a recent example of a publication focused on the personal lives of scholars, see Sarkissian and Solís 2019. For discussion of parenting experiences of ethnomusicologists, primarily postgraduate students, see the Society for Ethnomusicology Student Union blog, although it appears not to be currently active. <https://semstudentunion.wordpress.com/series/ethnomusicology-and-parenthood/> (accessed 6.8.20).

relationship clearly has a profound impact on all aspects of our scholarly work, theorising the personal is not easy. In his contribution, Stobart points to the difficulty of making any ‘meaningful theoretical contribution’ to this topic, given the highly specific nature of each fieldwork situation and the very different responses of children to sharing the fieldwork experience. Several panel members shared with me their discomfort and some reticence in taking part in this Forum because they felt that their contribution would be too anecdotal and not ‘scholarly enough’. At the same time, all recognised the importance of using the personal as a channel through which to discuss more substantive issues. Thankfully we have travelled a long way from the days when it was acceptable for an interview panel to ask a candidate (as I was) how they would manage with childcare should they accept the position, or when it was preferable to call in sick oneself rather to make an issue with an ill child. As an academic and mother of young children in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a real sense of isolation as I struggled to balance parenting with the demands of full-time teaching and the pressure to publish and fulfill the expectations of a REF- and KPI-driven environment. I didn’t have the time or energy to reflect much on this at the time; only now, and looking at my peers, do I realise how unusual it was and how few women of my age there are in music academia who would have had young children at that time and earlier.

Things have clearly changed a great deal over the past 30 years or so and the gradual normalisation of family-friendly initiatives, as well as schemes such as Athena SWAN, shared parental leave, changes to REF rules, and so on are having an effect. At the same time, as some of the contributors to this Forum testify, the culture and attitudes within some individual departments and institutions may lag some way behind government policy. I have spoken to women who have been made to feel that they are a nuisance or ‘playing’ the system by taking parental leave to which they are entitled ‘too soon’ after joining an institution. Some of these stories reveal managers to be shockingly ill-informed about workers’ rights and institutional policies relating to parental leave. Women have described to me being ‘welcomed’ back from maternity leave with comments from colleagues suggesting they have been on an extended holiday (as I also experienced in the 1990s). This attitude to parental leave as being a nuisance or bothersome and to be tolerated, contrasts with some other European countries (in Scandinavia, for instance) where parents are required to take leave because the government and employers recognise the benefits to institutions and to wider society. We have not yet reached such a holistic view of how society as a whole can benefit from caring skills, and we still work in a system that tends to ‘devalue aspects of academic work that are [not about but] just as important as measurable productivity’ (Mera).

Such attitudes will continue until being an active parent academic is normalised within our departments and until the identities of parent and academic are not seen as being in conflict with one another. This is clearly not just an issue in academia. Barbara Kelly, who spoke as part of the RMA conference panel described how many women experience a loss of confidence when returning to work after having children and at a very vulnerable time of their lives when they are also trying to negotiate a new kind of personal-professional identity; she had witnessed ‘several professional friends outside of academia being marginalized on their return to work, leaving their jobs shortly afterwards’. Since music departments are typically smaller than in some subject areas, it is not unusual for a woman to be the only person on a team who is the primary care giver to young children, and this can be very isolating. Barbara pointed to the need for more support for women returning to the workplace, including mentoring, as well as for mechanisms that would give such women a voice and a sense of agency rather than feeling trapped in their situation. Whilst it is perhaps the case that academia currently benefits from greater awareness and family-friendly initiatives, compared with some areas of work, at the same time the general culture of overwork adds additional pressures to women returning from leave. And whilst REF and institutional monitoring systems now take account of parental leave, they rarely recognise the many years of caring that follow. Little wonder, then, that the 2015 NAMHE report ‘Gender and Equality in Music Higher Education’ revealed that many female academics in Music still felt pressured to choose between family and career due to the long working hours in higher education and anxieties about being able to manage both. Reading these intensely moving personal testimonies made me wonder to what extent women in other fields of work feel pressured to make such difficult life choices. In her contribution to this Forum, Montero-Diaz describes how her experience of attempting to take parental leave as a gay woman starkly exposed the gaps between policy and practice, particularly in relation to departmental culture. The quotation from a colleague suggesting that family-friendly policies are discriminatory to those who don’t have children reveals what might be called ‘classic scholar fragility’. To provide support frameworks for parent academics is not to suggest that other academics don’t matter, but to redress historical and ongoing imbalances in a system which is premised on a normative model of the scholar as ‘unencumbered by family’ (Mera). Regardless of whether they acknowledge it or not, the latter have been beneficiaries of a system that effectively penalises those for whom it is more difficult to participate in the long-hours culture. Such normative structures have a direct impact on employment and career prospects in ways that arguably differ from many other areas of work. They also make it difficult for those ‘holding

[both] work and parenting identities' (Mera), which tend to be presented as being conflictual. Whether seeking to reduce the loss of talent as colleagues leave higher education or removing the barriers that have stood in the way of those with caring experiences moving into positions of leadership and decision-making, it is important to understand why inclusive policies benefit everyone and make higher education a better place. Many colleagues do understand this, of course, as testified by audience members at both conference panels who are not parents but who were supportive and understood the broader benefits for all; at the same time, universities could certainly do more work in communicating the benefits for everyone, not just parent academics.

Of course, the issues described above are not just experienced by female academics, although they do tend to bear the brunt, and I'm delighted that this Forum also includes the perspectives of fathers, whose voices we need to hear more often. In my own department, several male colleagues have taken paternal leave in recent years, including shared parental leave for an extended period. Even in the space of a few short years, changes to government policy and law has encouraged a normalisation of paternal leave in my institution which I am aware has yet to reach others. I also work at an institution that has sought to normalise academic parenting by discouraging post-4pm meetings and holding family days when staff can bring children to work and engage with them in fun activities; one very memorable activity in the Music Department was staff and their children from across the university participating in a *gamelan* workshop (see Figure 1). Having more children involved and present in our work environment would certainly be a positive thing.



Figure 1. Gamelan workshop held at City, University of London, UK, as part of the School of Arts and Social Sciences Family Day, April 2019. Photograph by Andrew Boateng.

Whilst initiatives such as Athena SWAN are to be welcomed, not everyone benefits from the changes. One area that I have been concerned about for a long while, and which is addressed directly in Emma Brinkhurst's contribution to this Forum, is what Mera refers to as the 'early baby effect'. The current structures of Higher Education mean that we continue to lose good talent from our pool of (particularly female) scholars who, often at the very time when they are completing doctorates, applying for post docs and building up publication profiles in their late 20s or early 30s are also mindful of the biological clock. The decision to take time out to have children prior to securing a permanent position, often means the end of an academic career. Describing this kind of 'maternity leave anxiety', Brinkhurst points out that once out of the publications race, and without institutional support or access to library facilities or childcare to attend conferences - an important means of staying in touch (she describes these as a 'costly lifeline' for those without regular income) - etc, it's almost impossible to return from 'the wilderness'. Such scholars find themselves isolated, vulnerable, lacking in confidence, with gaps in their CVs and without the kinds of support available to other ECRs. Is there any other profession where there are such barriers to re-entry for those who don't already hold a position? Brinkhurst makes a number of suggestions for practical support (mentoring and conference bursaries, for instance), as well as the need for more role models within academia. But arguably this issue can only be seriously addressed by structural changes in relation to hiring policies that recognise the impact of a career break on research productivity in ways that are not currently allowed for. This is our loss, and I believe that professional associations and institutions should be doing more to address this.

The contributors to this Forum offer some wonderful stories about the positive lessons learnt from parenting and how this can contribute to teaching and research. As Pope observes, we need to open 'up discourse which acknowledges academics as parents and sees this a potentially enriching rather than constricting their academic careers'. Mera also calls for a shift away from predominantly negative perceptions and discourses of 'loss', which also help to legitimise the long hours culture that discriminates against those with caring responsibilities. Both Mera and Kelly (in her panel presentation) described the benefits of the parenting experience to their work in terms of heightened focus, determination and prioritising, greater productivity, but also being able to appreciate time away from work. Such observations are not about valorising the work of parent academics over others, but of redressing the historically chilly climate for the former, and particularly challenging the all too prevalent denigrating discourses by which they are regarded as a problem and less

productive than their colleagues and recognising the value of parenting (and other caring experiences) to the workplace. Along the same lines, Mera advocates talking to male colleagues in particular about life beyond work and argues that to be better academics, ‘we need more in our lives than just work’. He also offers the perspective of children on our work, a potentially fertile area for future investigation. Similarly, for Stobart, seeing his fieldwork through his family’s eyes gave him a fresh perspective on his research.

Not surprisingly, given that the original panel was on ‘Ethnomusicology and Parenting’, fieldwork was the central focus of several of the conference contributions, of which two are included in this Forum. As with scholarship more generally, discourses around fieldwork have continued to be premised on the researcher as a single ‘unattached’ person. The classic text for ethnomusicological fieldwork, *Shadows in the Field* (Barz and Cooley, originally published in 1997), makes no mention of fieldworker scholars as parents, let alone children accompanying parents on fieldwork. The conference contributions discussed the impact of parenting on fieldwork, including the logistics of undertaking fieldwork with (or without) children and adapting research projects and methodologies around particular family situations, the challenges and potential benefits both to the fieldwork and to children, and the impact on family relationships. The nature of ‘fieldwork’ has of course changed a great deal in recent decades, including the increase in ‘doorstep’ and online fieldwork - but the discourses and perceptions have lagged somewhat behind. Moving away from such discourses, Pope describes the ‘enabling presence’ of her toddler son, who facilitated ‘further-reaching, more nuanced research’, particularly in the way that, as a pre-linguistic infant, he provided insights into local learning processes as well as allowing for richer modes of communication, informal interaction and for longer periods than would have been possible without him. Stobart similarly describes how the presence of children can help with fieldwork relations, particularly when undertaking research in communities where a person is considered somehow ‘incomplete’ without a partner and family. But not everyone is in the position of being able to benefit from the presence of their family whilst undertaking fieldwork. Each fieldwork and each family situation is unique, and is inflected by myriad and complex factors, including finance, children’s schooling, and so on, which often demand hard choices to be made. Whilst Stobart and Pope were fortunate to be able to share their fieldwork experiences with their families, Morgan Davies’ plans (as described in his conference presentation) to do the same were thwarted by practical matters: by the time he secured funding for fieldwork, his daughter had reached school age. Having previously stopped touring as a professional musician in order to spend more time with his partner and

child, Davies now found himself faced with an impossible choice between fieldwork and family. The compromise was to re-structure his fieldwork into relatively short stretches, which allowed him to undertake the necessary research whilst minimising periods away from family. Nevertheless, for Davies there was a strong sense of loss in the precious time during his daughter's childhood necessarily spent away from home. Ethnomusicologists are not the only music scholars dealing with these issues, of course. In her panel contribution, Kelly described taking her children with her when undertaking archival work in Paris. Fieldwork represents a particular kind of context where one's children and wider family can experience - and even participate in - research in a much more tangible way than may be the case 'at home'. As Pope notes, this 'encourages us to think about research as a collective enterprise', and raises questions about how 'we fully acknowledge the impact of dependents and spouses on research paths and findings'. Further, in relation to ethical questions, Davies pointed out that we are required to consider a whole range of ethical issues in relation to research projects, but are not obliged by institutions to consider the impact on our own families.

The contributions to this Forum offer a range of perspectives which we hope will open up discussions relating to parenting and music scholarship, and caring responsibilities more generally. We believe this to be a timely and important topic; as we enter the third decade of the 21st Century, it becomes increasingly untenable to ignore these issues, particularly where they impact on questions of diversity and equal opportunities. Clearly, this is part of wider considerations around enabling a greater range of voices to be affirmed in our scholarly institutions and organisations. Much of the discussion is not specific to Music Studies, but we hope that this will contribute to a productive conversation that will encourage us to reflect on how we do music research and how we balance our scholarly and personal lives.

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