Women academic's experiences of maternity leave in the neoliberal university: unmasking governmentality

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Women academics experiences of maternity leave in the neoliberal university: Unmasking governmentality

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Abstract

Addressing a paucity of large-scale studies about women academics maternity experiences of leave in academia and under-theorizing the influence of neoliberalism on this phenomenon, this research provides one of the largest studies of women's experiences of maternity leave in the academic sector. Secondary analysis of a subset of data from a global online mixed method survey with 553 women academics (82% UK, 18% international) was undertaken to explore experiences and implications of maternity leave for women. The findings reveal that women academics continued to undertake core academic work duties during maternity leave such as writing grant applications and journal articles, supervising doctoral students, teaching, and responding to emails. We document four distinct orientations adopted by women during maternity leave that characterize neoliberal subjectivity and use Foucauldian governmentality to unmask the inculcation of such norms. Our analysis shows how neoliberal ideology has gained a hegemonic position in academia that leaves little space for maternity leave, resulting in many women effectively relinquishing their maternity rights to sustain academic productivity. We argue that neoliberalism and new managerialism within the academy undermine policies to support women's maternity rights. The findings of this study will be of interest

to scholars and Human Resources professionals, academic mothers, managers, and policymakers who are championing change in the sector.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Women academics experiences within the hegemonic masculine power structures of academia (Manchester et al., 2010) has been a topic of considerable debate and policy intervention for several decades. The extant literature characterizes the academy as rampant with gendered and racial inequalities (David, 2015) and more specific to gender—bias, misrecognition, exploitation, bullying, and cultural sexism on a global scale (Savigny, 2019; van den Brink and Benschop, 2011). Attending to maternity needs adds to the complex set of challenges that women face. Despite statutory and institutional policy obligations to maternity rights, an observation made by Guth and Wright (2009) over a decade ago remains salient: universities may be committed on paper to gender equality but the positive impact that policies should have does not translate into reality. Research indicates that women suffer from inequitable maternity rights (Epifanio & Troeger, 2019; Weststar, 2012), ineffective family friendly policies (Feeney et al., 2014), and a lack of suitable formal policies to support career success (Gerten, 2011).

A parallel strand of literature on academic mothers elucidates the issue of exhaustion and disadvantage that stems from pressure to meet institutional productivity expectations for research outputs and grant capture (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Allison, 2007; Epifanio & Troeger, 2019; Gerten, 2011; Huppatz et al., 2019; Mavriplis et al., 2010). As such, neoliberalism has been implicated in women's plight, associated as it is with corporate management techniques, unmanageable workloads, performance targets, performance criteria and homogenized systems for assessing research and teaching performance (Erickson et al., 2021; Gill, 2009). However, little rigorous analysis has been undertaken of the impact of neoliberalism per se on academic mothers (Huppatz et al., 2019) and even less on their maternity leave experiences. Bridging important gaps in knowledge, Huppatz et al. (2019) offer one of the first serious discussions of academic mother's maternity leave experiences in the neoliberal era. The results of their qualitative study with 35 women nonSTEM academics in Australia and the UK found gender equity policies were routinely undermined and inadequately implemented. Women felt compelled to continue to work during periods of formal maternity leave through "symbolic force" and "as if by magic, without physical constraint" in response to managerial expectations and the psychological pressure of meeting performance outputs. Teamed with the threat of redundancy and precarious employment contracts, maternity protection and entitlements were effectively eroded. Upon returning to the workplace, they believed they were no longer seen as dedicated, ambitious, or career oriented and reported punitive measures such as the loss of authorship of articles, courses, and doctoral students that were detrimental to their career (Huppatz et al., 2019, p. 779).

Except for Huppatz et al. (2019) and a small number of auto-ethnographic studies (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Lupu, 2021), there is a paucity of large-scale international research into maternity leave in academia (Ollilainen, 2019) and under-theorizing of the influence of neoliberalism on maternity leave experiences. This paper seeks to address these gaps by utilizing secondary analysis of a subset of data drawn from a large-scale global mixed-method online survey with a sample of 553 women academics, of which 444 (80.6%) had previously taken maternity leave and 107 (19.3%) were still on maternity leave at the time of the study. The study has strong relevance to the UK since 420 (82%) of the women gave the UK as their country of residence. A further 93 (18%) represent many other countries around the world, thus providing international insights. By undertaking secondary analysis of this unique quantitative and qualitative dataset and applying Foucauldian governmentality as a lens to describe the inculcation of neoliberal

norms relating to women academics' maternity leave experiences, this paper offers an original methodological, empirical, and theoretical contribution.

The paper proceeds with a review of the extant literature on academic mothers and maternity leave. We then contextualize the study with literature on neoliberal ideology and new managerialism in academia and examine Foucault's notion of neoliberalism as a particular art of governing people. Included in the section on materials and methods is a discussion of the survey, the strengths and limitations of secondary data analysis, ethical considerations, and our methodological strategy and methods. Quantitative results are reported first to outline the extensive range of academic work that we discovered the women had undertaken during maternity leave. Next, through fine-grained analysis of qualitative data, we document four distinct orientations adopted by the women in response to research and teaching performativity. Each orientation characterizes unique aspects of neoliberal subjectivity and reveals hidden mechanisms at play driving the women to relinquish their maternity rights by undertaking academic work during maternity leave. The discussion moves beyond maternity leave infringements to examine how neoliberalism and new managerialism interact and perpetuate discriminatory practices. The conclusions simultaneously highlight implications for policy and practice and encourages debate on cultural shifts that are needed in academia.

This study is relevant to fields of feminist literature on academia, gender, maternity, and motherhood, to subfields of higher education studies, such as the neoliberal, marketized university, and new managerialism in academia, and to scholars of a Foucauldian tradition.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Motherhood and maternity leave in academia

The transition to motherhood has been described as a critical life event that has significant implications on any woman's career (Arntz et al., 2017). Motherhood has been implicated in women's marginalization in academia (Britton, 2017) with evidence pointing to a number of compounding factors. It has been noted that the ticking of the biological clock typically coincides with the precarious early career stage of academia (Colbeck, 2015; Mason, 2014; Mason et al., 2013). During this stage, networks are often underdeveloped (Felisberti & Sear, 2014). Research publications and grant capture, which play a critical role in enabling the early career researcher to progress in their career, can be negatively impacted by breaks taken for maternity leave (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019). Timing pregnancy to fit into an academic career is challenging, particularly for women in the probationary years and those on temporary contracts or tenure track (Ollilainen, 2019). Academic work is unique, in that it typically involves long periods of input to produce outputs such as research grant capture, publications, and doctoral completions. Consequently, extended breaks from projects can be difficult to re-establish (Bailyn, 2003), resulting in a research publication productivity penalty for mothers (Morgan et al., 2021). Pressure to conform to the academic ideal worker norm can cause women "to remain absorbed by the publishing game and to overwork until the very last day before giving birth" (Lupu, 2021, p. 1898) or to continue engaging in academic work during maternity leave (Huppatz et al., 2019). This may be a response to institutional norms around the ideal worker, as suggested in research, which shows that many women overachieve in an attempt to rebuild their professional identity as a new working mother (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015).

Unsurprisingly, exhaustion has been implicated in women's marginalization. It is well known that pregnancy and early motherhood are taxing (Huppatz et al., 2019). Acker and Armenti (2004, p. 1) capture this in the phrase "sleepless in academia" and show that academic mothers are at high risk of suffering from exhaustion and disadvantage due to the dual demands of academic work and family responsibilities. Not only do women struggle to balance the pressures of the academic workplace with family life (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016), but the psychological adjustments to motherhood (Allison, 2007), paired with unsociable hours (Duberley & Cohen, 2010), prompt many women to sacrifice research to keep up with the demands of teaching and administrative responsibilities (Misra et al., 2012), putting them at a disadvantage in progressing their careers (Huppatz et al., 2019).

Heightening the impediments women face, the transition to motherhood can result in gendered career paths (Maxwell et al., 2019), characterized by cycles of career breaks to attend to caring responsibilities, transitions from full-time employment to part-time employment or of not returning to employment for some time (Arntz et al., 2017). This can lead to a teaching intensive career track, which not only carries less prestige (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011) but also reduces women's access to vertical social capital, which in the gendered hierarchy of higher education has been shown to negatively impact women's careers (Angervall et al., 2018). Not only can maternity leave damage career advancement (Duberley & Cohen, 2010), but the resulting cumulative effect of taking one or more period of maternity leave can lead to women suffering a downward trend in their career (Nicholson, 2015). Fear of not being able to integrate back into the academic profession contributes to negative perceptions of maternity leave for many women (Mavriplis et al., 2010) and internal challenges about how to integrate their professional and maternal self (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). To mitigate the potential negative effects on their career, familiar labels attached to women's choices of having children in an academic environment include "'May' children, holiday babies and post-tenure pregnancies" (Troeger, 2018, p. 1).

Against this backdrop, the term institutional "care ceiling" has been used to indicate the ideal academic is care-free and childless, since systems of performance appraisal in the "careless" university rely on the "careless" worker, meaning those who are not hindered by caring or familial claims on their time (Lynch, 2010, 2016; Lynch et al., 2012). According to Lynch et al. (2020), carelessness in higher education is deeply gendered. Even though women already hold a marginalized status within the research economy (Fletcher et al., 2007), a meritocratic view prevails in academia that "women" don't succeed because they don't "play the career game" (Gander, 2019, p. 119). Although managerialism and neoliberalism has been implicated in women's plight (Lynch, 2010), little focused analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on academic women's experiences of maternity leave exists.

2.2 | The neoliberal academy

Neoliberalism has been described as a socio-political ideology rooted in free market capitalism (Lynch, 2014b), International comparative research indicates that neoliberally inspired agendas for higher education exist around the world; however, the effects of neoliberalism are not uniform across academia (Kandiko, 2010). Compared to other countries, the UK Higher Education policy agenda is more explicitly neoliberal and all-encompassing than many other countries (Maisuria & Cole, 2017). Veiled in rhetoric about individual freedom and responsibility, neoliberal ideology is attributed to global reforms over the past two decades, aimed at reducing public spending in universities (Lynch, 2014a).

One consequence of neoliberalism in higher education is the rise in nontenured fixed-term or temporary contracts (Kandiko, 2010). These are disproportionately held by women and are more common among early career and junior staff (HESA, 2023). As early career women are more likely to be of childbearing age (Colbeck, 2015; Mason, 2014; Mason et al., 2013), a further problem is the eligibility criteria of maternity provision for fixed contract workers. This is evident in an analysis of 214 higher education maternity schemes in the UK, which found stark variation between maternity provision and eligibility criteria, with fixed-term workers frequently excluded from most of the occupational maternity schemes provided on top of statutory provision (Epifanio & Troeger, 2019). A recent analysis of 24 research-intensive university policies found similarly limited enhanced maternity pay for fixed-term workers who face redundancy during maternity leave and/or do not have a record of continuous employment. The study also found that the odds of returning to work after maternity leave were lower for staff on fixed-term contracts compared to open-ended contracts, indicating that lack of appropriate maternity provision contributes to the leaky pipeline in academia (Davies et al., 2022). Although most countries provide statutory paid maternity/paternity leave, the main exception being the United States, this tends to be more generous in Nordic, Central, and Eastern European OECD countries compared to the UK which offers one of the lowest rates of statutory maternity pay followed only by Ireland (OECD, 2022).

Another dramatic impact of neoliberalism in academia is the rise of new managerialism, which acts as the organizational arm of neoliberalism (Lynch, 2014c). The tools of new managerialism include a plethora of teaching and research performance measures and institutional and national surveys. These are particularly evident in the UK where performance exercises include the national Research Excellence Framework and more recent Teaching Excellence Framework, all of which seek to provide quality assurance of academic outputs (Fletcher et al., 2007). These tools, together with league tables and benchmarking measures, at subject, institutional, and global level represent the management control tools of new managerialism and are designed to ensure that both individuals and institutions are held accountable for the highest quality of outputs (Huppatz et al., 2019). Prominent commentators such as Ball (2012) argue that universities have turned into powerful consumer orientated, corporatized, and commercialized entities with performativity-led modes of governance and systems of intensive auditing. Marking a departure from the so-called golden era of ivory towers in academia, where learned scholarly activity was undertaken purely for the sake of furthering knowledge, "new" academia, is driven by neoliberal demands for productivity (Anderson, 2008).

Managerialism, with its emphasis on accountability, high productivity, and efficiency, is not unique to academia; however, Bailyn (1993, 2006) argues the unbounded nature of academic work is unique. Bailyn contends that to meet the multiple demands of teaching and produce high-quality publications, along with the requirement to contribute to departmental and university-wide committees, academics are compelled to work long hours as there is simply not enough time to do all the things the job requires. The type of high value intellectual labor required to produce large quantities of high-quality research and teaching output is typically characterized in the neoliberal university by high work overload and psychological pressure, with a mix of so-called efficiency measures and controls to increase worker productivity and performance (Floyd, 2016). The overwhelming pressure to be productive in research and teaching, to meet the demands of ranking, auditing, and performance measures is often exacerbated by precarious contractual arrangements that offer little job security resulting in the added difficulty of meeting the standards for tenure (Allison, 2007).

2.3 | Governmentality

Governmentality offers a lens for understanding the mechanisms that drive people to take up neoliberal agendas (Huppatz et al., 2019). In recent years there has been a surge in critical studies of neoliberalism in higher education, with commentators such as Morrish and Sauntson (2020) providing a poststructural analysis of cultural changes within the sector that examines the role of language and discourse. Much of this work is in the Foucauldian tradition and draws on his concept of governmentality, which originates from Foucault's work in the 1970s and arose through his interest in shifts in discourses and practices of power, from power over subjects to new forms of power that work at a distance through liberal rationality (Joseph, 2013). Governmentality refers to how governments or institutions direct people's actions or regulate conduct through techniques of power (Sokhi-Bulley, 2014), the role subjects play in power, how they internalize and respond to discourses, and how those discourses guide their behavior. But more than that "governmentality is as much about what subjects do to themselves as what is done to them" (Doherty, 2007, p. 197). Governmentality is often discussed in relation to neoliberalism to explain how concepts of the market and competition become accepted as common sense (Lemke, 2002). As an analytical tool, governmentality can magnify the tactics of power (Sokhi-Bulley, 2014) by uncovering ideological influences and social relations of power and discrimination that discourses submerge (Doherty, 2007).

Applying ideas from Foucault (1994) to the analysis of neoliberalism as a particular art of governing people in academia, Morrish and Sauntson (2020) argue that neoliberal discourses such as the free market and value systems stemming from that spread around creating "discursive formations" which are internalized by people working in academia. These discursive formations are not something that are simply out there, rather they act to structure people's actions and beliefs and, most important of all, they lead to the construction of new subjectivities that render people governable. Morrish and Sauntson (2020, p. 27) refer to this as a "new form of totalitarianism" and argue that

the goal is to produce the ideal worker. Ball (2001) goes further by arguing that people are expected to commit to an existence of performativity, which he describes as "a powerful and insidious policy technology that links effort, values, purpose and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output" (Ball, 2012, p. 19). Appropriating Foucault (1997), Ball (2012) contends that the internalization of constant appraisal produces an actuarial mindset in workers by expecting them to actively set their own increasingly ambitious targets for more publications, grants, and students, to confess and confront weaknesses, and engage in value-enhancing professional development, while appropriating institutional goals for productivity. Describing the neoliberal new managerial turn in academia as a "new paradigm," Ball suggests that the transformation of the sector requires "the re-invention of professionals themselves" (Shore & Wright, 2015; p. 559 cited in Ball, 2012, p. 12). This reinvention manifests in the way that individuals think and talk about themselves (Scharff, 2016), and since neoliberal ideology emphasizes ambition and personal responsibility (Du Gay, 1996), it is lived out through entrepreneurialism and competitiveness, not only with others but also competition directed at the self (Scharff, 2016). Although individuals may resist new managerial practice (Anderson, 2008) and discourses are not deterministic since people can draw on multiple and even competing discourses, Scharff (2016) suggests that neoliberalism works at a deeper level by taking on a psychic life.

Drawing on the concept of governmentality provides new theoretical insights in relation to maternity experiences and implications for women in academia, therefore the research questions guiding this study are:

- What are women academics experiences of maternity leave?
- What are the implications of taking maternity leave for women's careers in academia?
- How can these experiences and implications be understood through the lens of Foucault's concept of governmentality?

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 | Research design

The study utilized a subset of data from a major online global survey into academic career breaks, conducted in a partnership between Piirus.ac.uk, Jobs.ac.uk, and Research Media. The survey was made available through the online platform SurveyMonkey between February and March 2016. A total of 5035 academics from around the world took part, making it the largest independent study of its kind that we are aware of. Foregrounded by the broader shift to nonlinear careers and the rise in portfolio careers in higher education, the likelihood of a career break has increased. Career breaks may occur, for example, due to the end of a fixed-term contract or due to zero contract hours and freelance work as well as redundancy, maternity, and paternity or extended breaks to attend to family and caring responsibilities.

The survey sought to gain insight into the views and experiences of the academic and research community on the motivations, opportunities, and the perceived and real implications of academic career breaks. While respondents gave many reasons for taking a career break, maternity was the most common; consequently, this large subset of data was identified as worthy of further examination. In 2017, the University of Reading responded to a call made by Piirus.ac.uk for support with the secondary analyses of subsets of data. This was made possible with funding from the University of Reading Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme.

The subset of data used in our study only focused on 553 participants that attributed their most recent career break to maternity leave. As participants were asked to base their answers on their most recent career break, this subset of data provided considerable insight into maternity leave experiences in academia.

3.2 | Use of secondary data

Promoting the use of secondary data has been a key priority of research councils and universities in recent years. Secondary data analysis is viewed as an effective way to deliver high-quality high-impact research through deeper

exploitation of major data resources for smaller focused, impact-generating projects. Notwithstanding the benefits, some concerns have been raised relating to research ethics and the use of data that was originally intended for a different purpose to subsequent research projects. To mitigate potential risks, the data were treated in accordance with research ethics and principles of good practice in the use of secondary data (Tripathy, 2013). Specifically, agreement was given in writing for the dataset to be shared with the researchers for the purposes of this study (and one other study). The data were stored on a password-protected computer in an anonymous form that could not be linked to participants. To provide reassurance of trustworthiness the original survey was examined to evaluate how information represented in the dataset was generated and subsequently coded. A series of discussions took place between the first author of this paper and the researcher and the principal investigator of the original study to discuss its purpose and design. The analysis and reporting of the study is aligned with two of the original research questions—to examine experiences and implications of career breaks from academia—in this instance focusing on maternity leave. Our third research question, which utilizes Foucauldian governmentality, emerged a posteriori when we discovered one major theme concerning the extent of academic work undertaken by women during maternity leave and identified patterns relating to neoliberal subjectivity. Although the survey was not designed with neoliberal ideology, new managerialism, or Foucauldian concepts in mind, we wanted to adopt methodological strategies through which mechanisms that are hidden can be disclosed and understood (Costa & Murphy, 2016). This paper omits two other research questions from the original study that were not directly relevant (i.e., motivations for taking a career break and perceptions of career breaks among those who had or had not taken one).

4 | SAMPLE

After screening and cleaning the data, 553 participants who confirmed their most recent career break was for maternity leave were included in this study. Of those, 444 (80.6%) had previously taken maternity leave, 107 (19.3%) were taking maternity leave at the time of the survey, and two did not indicate when their maternity leave occurred. A total of 522 participants gave their gender as women and 31 who missed this question were screened carefully to ascertain that their answers were based on maternity leave before being included in the dataset. Participants held a range of roles across a broad range of academic disciplines and academic levels from PhD candidates and post-doctoral researchers through to professors and senior managerial levels of the hierarchy. The majority were under 55 years of age. As the end of a women's reproductive years is approximately age 49 (World Health Organization, 2021), it is likely that participants in the older age group took maternity leave some time ago, however, it was not possible to establish the timeframe for taking maternity leave from the survey data. Table 1 provides the profile of participants. This shows 430 (82%) named the United Kingdom as their country of residence, with another 93 (18%) representing many other countries around the World, including 50 from Europe (excluding UK), 24 from Australia, 8 from North America and Caribbean, 6 from Asia, 3 from Africa, and 2 from South America. Another 30 participants did not provide their country of residence. Although a larger international sample would be desirable, it is the largest we are aware of in a study of this kind.

4.1 | Data analysis

The mixed-methods survey comprised a series of single- and multi-choice closed questions and open text questions. To gain familiarity with the dataset initial exploratory tests were conducted using frequencies and percentages to examine quantitative data alongside close reading of the qualitative data. During this initial phase, several interesting themes began to emerge, including women working during maternity leave, concern for career and for research productivity. These themes became increasingly important so were subjected to more detailed analysis, which occurred in three phases. First, we utilized a closed multiple-choice question that asked: "*While on your most recent career break, did you (or do you) do any of the following things?*" The response-set for this question included various core academic duties, such as doctoral supervision, teaching, etc., through to relatively un-demanding activities such as

TABLE 1 Profile of participants.

	N	Percent
Academic role		
Teaching role	45	8.1
Teaching and research role	253	45.8
Research role	219	39.6
Other (e.g., administration/research support)	36	6.5
Position held		
PhD candidate	37	7.1
Post-doctoral Researcher	156	29.8
Lecturer	86	16.4
Assistant/Associate Professor, Senior Lecturer	118	22.6
Professor	33	6.3
Head of Department, Management, Professional & Support Services	29	5.6
Administration, Technical, Consultant, and other	64	12.3
Discipline		
Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (including Applied Sciences)	245	47
Arts and Social Sciences	261	50.1
Other	15	2.9
Age group		
≤34	106	20.3
35–44	277	53.0
45–54	108	20.7
≥55	24	4.6
Country of residence		
UK	430	82.2
Europe	50	9.6
Australia	24	4.6
North America, Caribbean, Asia, Africa, South America, and other	19	3.6

keeping in touch with a mentor. Consequently, the data were divided into core academic duties (Table 3) and less demanding activities to stay connected/up to date (Table 4). The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively as the main objective was to identify the number and percentage of women undertaking each type of work/activity. Importantly, the quantitative data provided a picture of the extent and nature of laboring during the maternity leave, and this subsequently directed the analysis of qualitative data. Thus, in the second phase of analysis, we delved deeper into this phenomenon to understand *why* women labored during maternity leave to understand their motive. The second phase of analysis utilized data from an open text question that asked: "*If you did any of the above, what motivated you to do this?*" Qualitative data were also utilized from other questions that gave women the opportunity to share in their own words the impact of taking maternity leave and anything else they felt was important about its effect on their professional life. All qualitative data were analyzed following the six-stage thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006). The process was iterative and involved cycles of data familiarization and open coding of words and chunks of text at a semantic level (i.e., what was said/written by participants) to produce first cycle codes. The codes were collated with relevant data, reviewed, and adjusted as needed and then organized into potential themes. In the third phase of analysis, following (Patton, 1990), we undertook interpretive work to theorize important

patterns in the data. The motives given by women for laboring during maternity resonated strongly with the literature around neoliberalism, new managerialism, and governmentality. Further reading of this literature yielded new insights into themes identified in the previous phase of analysis, aiding interpretive work of the results. Table 2 provides excerpts of data, showing how the data evolved from first cycle coding to themes and the theoretical final phase of analysis, where we arrived at four orientations toward laboring.

This is not to suggest that women are fixed into one specific orientation or represent a specific type of academic persona. Indeed, some participants exhibited overlapping orientations, and it is possible that these orientations may change over time according to context, individual circumstances, and career priorities. However, the analysis does untangle what is driving women to work through their maternity leave and their primary orientations, as exhibited in the data.

5 | RESULTS

Of the 553 women who had taken maternity leave or were currently on maternity leave, 69% (*n* = 382) performed core academic tasks during the maternity leave period (see Table 3). Many more undertook activities to maintain scholarly connections and keep up with their field (Table 4).

The qualitative data provides rich insights into women's motives for laboring. In the following section, four orientations toward laboring are documented (see also Table 2). Each orientation characterizes unique aspects of neoliberal subjectivity. Pseudonyms are used for readability as opposed to identifying the women by a number as in the survey.

5.1 | Scholars

Illustrating how governmentality operates through freedom, love, and passion for work characterized scholars, who like Huan (Associate Professor, Asia), labored during maternity leave for "*personal interest*" or like Mandy (Associate Professor, Australia), out of "*love for what I do*," or Nisha (Post-doctoral Researcher, UK), because of "*Passion and interest.*" Like these participants, Rebecca (Post-doctoral Researcher, UK) expressed love of work, but she spoke of how this was enhanced by the sense of freedom she gained from academic obligations during maternity leave: "*Because I enjoyed being able to do the things that I love, as a bonus, as nothing was expected of me!*"

While these data had some throwbacks to romantic discourses of academic life, reminiscent of an era of dreaming spires and ivory towers that predate the neoliberal university, the dedication to scholarly work exemplified in the data illustrates the unbounded nature of academic work (Bailyn, 2006) and the neoliberal notion of the ideal academic worker (Morrish & Sauntson, 2020), an enterprising individual who is constantly active (Scharff, 2016). In the data, keeping active was often associated with the brain or mind. For example, giving a sense that life would be intolerable without intellectual pursuits, Helen (Associate Professor, UK) said she labored during maternity leave: "*Mostly [due to] the desire to exercise my brain – caring for an infant can be very boring!*" Similarly, Hazel (Senior Lecturer, UK) said: "*I love research, and I would have felt totally isolated at home with a young baby, with no adults to talk to.*"

However, signaling how governmentality is achieved through "multiform tactics" (Foucault, 1991, p. 95), among those who emphasized love and passion for work, some simultaneously expressed concerns about their academic productivity and employment prospects. For example, Karen (North America, Lecturer) expressed love of her job but referred to precarious contractual circumstances. "*Love my job, contract coming to an end so 'on market', knowing I needed to finish my book and maternity leave actually allowed some unstructured time, no meetings…*"

Similarly, Maria (Associate Professor, Europe), referred to a surge of creativity with a mix of additional factors as prompting her to continue laboring during maternity leave. Her excerpt brings to life the complexity of rationalizing academic discourses and subject positions:

TABLE 2 Representative quotes and analysis.

Orientation	Illustrative excerpts of data	1st cycle coding	Labor motive theme	Neoliberal subjectivity
Scholars	• I love my job • Because I enjoyed these activities! • Passion and interest • I needed to keep my brain active! … I enjoy research • Because I enjoyed being able to do the things that I love, as a bonus, as nothing was expected of me! • Mostly [due to] the desire to exercise my brain … caring for an infant can be very boring! • I love research, and I would have felt totally isolated at home with a young baby, with no adults to talk to • I like my work, and I didn't want to be totally left behind	Love Passion Interest Enjoy Like work Bonus Nothing expected Exercise brain/keep brain active	Choose to labor, motivated by love of scholarly work, need to keep (mind) active	Epitomize the free choosing neoliberal (Lorenzini, 2018). Statements resonate with the neoliberal philosophy of time—making the best use of time, being active (Scharff, 2016)
Collegials	• Sense of duty. However, in hindsight I tried to keep going with too many job-related duties • I felt responsible • Felt obligated to team • Felt obliged/expected to do so • Obliged by line manager • I felt obliged to my collaborators … • I was supervising a research student and had a duty to the student • I felt I had to, there was no one else to do it. For example, no one took over supervision of students • Interim supervision arrangements for PhD student broke down as alternative supervisor left the university • There was nobody to do certain tasks. I didn't want the project to fail	Sense of duty Felt responsible obliged to team/line manager/collaborators/students/project Expected to Prior commitments No one else to do it	Did not want to labor, motivated by sense of obligation/personal responsibility (to co-authors, colleagues, team, institution, or students)	Epitomize the responsibilized neoliberal subject (Du Gay, 1996)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Orientation	Illustrative excerpts of data	1st cycle coding	Labor motive theme	Neoliberal subjectivity
Entrepreneurs	• Publish or perish • Publish or perish. Get data or perish. Keep up or perish. I resent all these things... • Needing to keep the publications moving along as you can't stop the rest of the world whilst you are on maternity leave • Necessity to publish and remain relevant • I wanted to meet publication and grant application deadlines that were set to external deadlines... • Requirements to get publications in order to meet REF targets • My peers kept publishing and I felt that I could not afford to publish less than them. It already felt that by making the decision to have kids I was not conforming to the ideal academic type	Publish/keep up or perish Keep publications moving Can't stop Requirement/necessity/needed Productivity REF Left behind Ideal academic type	To avoid negative impact on publication profile; to remain competitive with (childless) colleagues	Significant identification with discourses of productivity and neoliberal principle of competition (McNay, 2009) Absorbed by the publishing game (Huppatz et al., 2019; Lupu, 2021)
Careerists	• Fear of career death • Fear about the interruption • Fear is a major motivator • I felt pressured to try to work or my career would be down the drain • Terrified of not being employable again • If you don't, you drop out of your career, very quickly • Fear of not being employable/competitive when I go back on the job market once my fixed term contract expires • Because the hamster wheel of academia keeps on turning, and if you hop off it for a second—even for a really good reason like having a baby—then your career will suffer • It was the realization that being cut off from these activities would be detrimental to my career. It was not motivation but need • Career would have collapsed if I didn't	Fear of career death Fear of interruption fear Pressured Career down drain Career will suffer Terrified of not being employable Fear of not being employable Career will suffer Detrimental to career Career would have collapsed	To avoid negative career consequences	Fear of damaging career resonates with the notion that neoliberalism seeks to "function through the generation of consent via fear" (Tyler, 2013, p. 8)

Abbreviation: REF, Research Excellence Framework.

My brain did not stop working on maternity leave, quite the opposite! I experienced a surge of creativity during each leave, because my brain had the space to, freed from daily admin duties. I carried on working on publications and other research activities because I wanted to prove 'I can do it' (our field is very competitive), and because friends and colleagues carry on soliciting you, and if you stop responding, there is the risk you may disappear. I like my work, and I managed because I have a very supportive partner. No way this is possible alone. But I do feel under pressure to work a lot to perform. I carried on supervising students because I like students and I did not supervise many.

Maria went onto say: 'I was treated well and never put under any pressure to work during my maternity leave, but I did carry on working because in academia career breaks do not really exist, publications, students still request work. I just had to perform those duties with a baby strapped to my chest.'

5.2 | Collegials

As illustrated in Maria's explanation above, by far the most common reason for self-imposed laboring through maternity leave arose out of: "*Feeling like I had to rather than wanted to*," thus illustrates how governmental power operates within universities to construct the ideal self-governing responsibilized academic (Morrish & Sauntson, 2020). Collegials felt they had to labor due to a strong sense of obligation to others. Neoliberalism may appear at odds with the behavior of the collegials, as neoliberals are typically viewed as unattached (Pendenza & Lamattina, 2018). However, the data brings to life how governmentality (Li, 2007), operating through neoliberal tactics, transfers responsibility to individuals (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017). Certainly, collegials experienced responsibility, which they expressed in terms of not wanting to let other people or their institutions down. For example, Suzy (Lecturer, UK) said she continued laboring during maternity leave due to: "*Prior commitments, commitments that I had made that couldn't wait until I returned, and to help out colleagues*." Similarly, Marina (Lecturer, Europe) said she was "*Working with co-authors, so not working on publications impacted on them*." Carol (Professor, UK) felt the "*Need to keep to pre-existing deadlines. External deadlines and professional expectations do not change because one is on maternity leave or becomes a mother*."

Helen (Lecturer, UK) felt obliged to students but also referred to research obligations:

I felt I had to continue supervising students as I think I made a commitment to them when I took them on. Publications and existing proposals also had to be pushed forward. I didn't start anything new.

Nicola (Lecturer, UK) stated:

Necessity - interim supervision arrangements for PhD student broke down as an alternative supervisor left the university. I'm the only person with this particular field of expertise in my multi-disciplinary department, so I get roped into a lot of funding bids.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of governmental power in Nicola's excerpt, above, is that she did not question or complain about the obvious lack of maternity cover even though this effectively eroded her right to maternity leave. Instead, the demands of the department took precedence over her own needs. The data epitomizes how governmentality works at a distance (Rose, 1999), conditioning the responsibilized ideal academic worker and neoliberal subject to carry out the goals of the university, assuming those as their own and exercising the rules of the university upon themselves (Huppatz et al., 2019; Morrish & Sauntson, 2020; Ollilainen, 2019).

TABLE 3 Core academic duties undertaken while on maternity leave.

Activities undertaken	N	Percent
Respond to emails on academic email address	314	73.5
Work on projects started *before* maternity leave	271	63.5
Work on a publication started *before* maternity leave	251	58.8
Attend meetings	176	41.2
Supervise students	122	28.6
Work on projects that started *while on* maternity leave	115	26.9
Work on a publication started *while on* maternity leave	104	24.4
Work on funding bid started *before* maternity leave	81	19.0
Work on funding bid started *while on* maternity leave	70	16.4
Engage in outreach or impact activities	61	14.3
Teach	44	10.3

TABLE 4 Activities to stay connected and up to date while on maternity leave.

Activities undertaken	N	Percent
Stay in contact with those in field	305	71.4
Use the academic materials made available by university library	284	66.5
Keep abreast of field	269	63.0
Maintain relationship with mentor	263	61.6
Maintain membership of learned society and professional body	176	41.2
Attend conferences	110	25.8

Similarly, Grace (Professor, UK) maintained projects and labored, in this case to heroically stave off insolvency. The data suggests that these practices may have impacted on underlying health problems:

> Unexpectedly sudden departure meant list of loose ends and no proper handover. Professors also don't get maternity cover, so no one else to do some of the work to finish projects. Not so much due to motivation - I was quite poorly - but a necessity to keep my team financially afloat.

It is worth highlighting once more the distinct lack of institutional support and the subtle way that maternity rights were eroded in Grace's account. Like Nicola, Grace presents this as normal ("*Professors also don't get maternity cover*") and in doing so fudges the thorny question of inequality.

Highlighting how neoliberal techniques of governmentality act as a force over which one has no choice or control, Carly (Post-doctoral Researcher, Australia) was similarly wedded to a distinctly neoliberal subject position, laboring as the ideal academic worker (Morrish & Sauntson, 2020) even when she knew this was detrimental to her own health and wellbeing:

> Only because I had to. I had post-natal depression after both pregnancies which frankly severely hampered my desire to go to work while I was on leave. I had enough on my plate to deal with but still had to do "work", sometimes even dragging kids to work to attend meetings. Even with mental health issues, I was still "expected" to contribute to work while on leave...

5.3 | Entrepreneurs

Governmentally inscribed rationalities and representations of the highly competitive higher education research economy (Morrissey, 2013) guided the actions of entrepreneurs. They emphasized discourses of productivity and engaged in symbolically powerful forms of labor (e.g., research outputs). Entrepreneurs were not attached to collegial obligations, instead they pitched themselves in competition with peers and thus they embody a classic individualized neoliberal subject position (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). Illustrative of how governmental power operates, they internalized the need to produce research outputs, especially outputs viewed as essential to success in the field of academy. Chloe (Senior Lecturer, Australia) sums this up with the well-known phrase: "*Publish or perish*." Such discourses were prominent in the data and appeared to have become internalized, rendering academics like Holly (Post-doctoral Researcher, Australia) governable. For example, explaining why she labored during maternity leave, Holly said:

> I had to in order to return to work (to meet research output requirements). I would very much have preferred not to have this obligation, as it was extremely difficult and stressful to manage with a new baby.

Again, a striking feature of the data is that laboring is articulated as a matter over which one has no choice. Indicative of how techniques of governmentality operate, the data reveals that neoliberal discourses of productivity not only guided conduct but also shaped sense-making (Pyysiäinen et al., 2017) and the way the women thought and talked about themselves (Scharff, 2016). This is captured in an excerpt from Sarah (Lecturer, Australia), who explained that she labored during maternity leave due to:

> Pressure to keep on top of my field. A feeling that I was being "left behind" and being compared to my single, childless colleagues whose research outputs and productivity far exceeded mine.

Similarly, illustrating the neoliberal concept of competition and showing how neoliberal governmentality works within universities through the ideal academic worker discourse (Morrish & Sauntson, 2020), Kate (Lecturer, UK) stated:

> I felt that as an academic I can't take proper time out and felt that I had to keep going with research while on maternity leave... My peers kept publishing and I felt that I could not afford to publish less than them... It already felt that by making the decision to have kids I was not conforming to the ideal academic type.

The data shows how the participants internalized discourses of productivity and simultaneously codified standards associated with the ideal academic worker, which locked them into enacting neoliberal values (Huppatz et al., 2019).

5.4 | Careerists

For careerists, the underlying urge to labor stemmed from fear that taking maternity leave would threaten their career. Governmental power operating as practices of the self were directed toward ameliorating the potential negative impact of maternity leave on their career. Like entrepreneurs, careerists internalized discourses of productivity and felt they had no choice but to labor during maternity leave. However, careerists placed greater emphasis on

their future career and expressed the belief that it would be detrimental to their career not to work during maternity leave. For example, Maddie (Professor, Australia) stated she wanted to and "*needed to for career progression.*" Similarly, Luciana (South America, Associate Professor) said she was mindful of "*career goals.*"

Another distinguishing feature of careerists, not evident among entrepreneurs, was their almost apocalyptic vision of career failure if they did not labor during maternity leave. Many careerists believed that taking time out (i.e., for maternity leave) would permanently damage their career. For example, Christine (Senior Lecturer, UK) expressed the view that: "[My] *career would have collapsed if I didn't.*" Meg (Senior Lecturer, UK) said she continued to work due to "*Fear of not getting another academic job.*" Similarly, Charlotte (Associate Professor, UK) referred to "*Fear of career death.*" Expanding on this theme, Aurora (Professor, Europe) said: "*It was the realization that being cut off from these activities would be detrimental to my career. It was not motivation but need.*" The word "need" again suggests that laboring during maternity leave was a necessity, not a matter of choice. Similarly illustrative of anxieties careerists harbored, Margarite (Associate Professor, Europe) said: "*If you don't, you drop out of your career, very quickly. Academic work is not one you can just leave behind at the office when you go home.*"

Certainly, careerists did not want to be in a deficit position that might render them disadvantaged within academic space. It is worth noting that the perceived risk of career damage extended long into the future. For example, Malik (Lecturer, UK) explained:

> Because the hamster wheel of academia keeps on turning, and if you hop off it for a second - even for a really good reason like having a baby - then your career will suffer, and you might miss out on that once-in-a-lifetime job offer that comes up in exactly your field in the part of the country where your family are.

Evidently, Malek, like other careerists, did not want to make the wrong type of choices that might negatively impact their career either in the present or in the future. Indicative of how "technologies of governmentality operate on the individual" (Cho, 2009, p. 21), careerists were acutely aware of the expectations within academia and felt compelled to labor to ensure that they were a position of strength for upward career mobility.

Taken together, the four orientations illustrate how neoliberalism and new managerialism are experienced in different ways in the academic space, but this does come with the caveat that orientations may overlap and change over time.

5.5 | Implications of taking maternity leave

When asked about the implications of taking maternity leave, divergent and often contradictory discourses emerged in the data. Several themes were identified but by far the most striking observation was the cultural hostility that women experienced following a period of maternity leave. This surfaced strongly, but it was not expressed uniformly, rather it tended be something that could not be pinned down, especially by participants who had taken more than one period of maternity leave and those who returned to work part-time. An example of this is given by Maria (Associate Professor, Europe), who, we reported earlier, had continued to labor through maternity leave with a baby "strapped" to her chest:

> There is however a strong backlash, very perceptible as [a] promising female academic, especially after 2 maternity leaves: I became gradually invisible, less relevant, and gradually marginalised, despite working full-time, and delivering. It is colleagues who started seeing me differently, especially male colleagues, and often those of my generation. My employer was wonderful - it is the wider academic community which is still culturally biased towards women of reproductive age. Rules and administrators

were wonderful, but these have no influence over the behaviour of colleagues within my field. I was aware of my gender and discrimination from the moment I had 2 children. Because one can be tolerated, 2 becomes almost a provocation!

Concerns about invisibility emerged in the data. Maria (Associate Professor, Europe), went onto explain: "I still pay the price of choosing motherhood and going on maternity leave..." I feel I now need to work 5 times as hard as a man to fight against the creeping invisibility which often creeps over working mothers.

Other respondents, like Rachel (Teaching and Research role, UK), were supported both taking maternity leave and changing to part-time contracts, but experienced a similar acute sense of being treated differently by colleagues:

It's difficult to pin it down but in some quarters, there seemed to be an idea that my career progression became less important than that of senior male colleagues. I was not championed or defended as much as I would have expected given the size of my contribution... Actually, I got many papers completed on my leave without the management tasks and it was enjoyable.

Similarly, Eleanor (Lecturer, UK), who like Rachel returned to work on a part-time basis, said:

It's difficult to know which effects are due to the career break, and which to a change to part-time status, but I had severely underestimated the negative effect being away would have on my confidence to do the job. This is slowly returning, 4+ years after my second period of maternity leave. Colleagues have made inappropriate comments both about my commitment (which I have repeatedly and consistently demonstrated) and my interest in having children. I have lost confidence in applying for promotion, even though on paper I more than tick the boxes- and this is because of the word 'trajectory'. I think I am more motivated and more committed than before, and I certainly have a new 'fire' which was not there prior to the break.

Another problem arose explaining maternity leave gaps in a CV:

I can only ever account for my maternity leave on a CV (that was my break)- but for 9 months prior to that I couldn't work in the lab (so there's 18 months data collection time gone), and then returning to work took a good 6 months to settle in to new scientist/mum role- a good 2+ years to get back on track, and I can only account for 9 months. Needs wider thinking by employers about the true time cost of being pregnant and having leave.

A contrasting theme was a sense among participants that they had benefited personally or had been negatively impacted by the experience of taking maternity leave. Issues relating to confidence were not prominent, and opinion differed, but a small number of participants said they had lost confidence, although some overcame this: "*At first, I experienced a severe lack of confidence and struggled with anxiety. Eventually I have overcome these difficulties and am a stronger persona and more confident researcher for it.*" (Sharon, PhD candidate, UK). By contrast, other participants referred to increased confidence, improved productivity, and job satisfaction: "*...gave me a bit more perspective. I gained confidence in my ability to carry out research. I became far more productive in shorter working hours, and I am now more satisfied with my job.*" (Sara, Post-doctoral researcher, Europe). This noncritical stance was not widely evident in the data but reflects the view of women who valued the opportunity to have time to dedicate to research and publications while on maternity leave. Similarly, Gabriella (Head of Department, Europe): "*My research productivity peaked after both career breaks because I was single minded about keeping that going while I dropped other work obligations.*" Sharon and Gabriella's accounts suggests an adeptness to neoliberal discourse. Even though many women effectively

relinquished their full maternity rights by continuing to labor during maternity leave, they suffered from cultural hostility and punitive measures upon returning to work and long into the future.

6 | DISCUSSION

Through secondary analysis of an exceptionally large and broad dataset gathered via an online mixed-method global survey that produced quantitative and qualitative data with a sample of 553 academic women who had taken maternity leave, this paper provides a striking picture of maternity leave experiences and implications. As such, the methodological strategy utilized for this paper and the empirical results represent a highly valuable and original contribution. It has been suggested by Huppatz et al. (2019) that new managerial discourses drive women to take up marketized research activity and this effectively compromises maternity leave entitlements. This study has demonstrated consistent findings, but on a much larger scale and in more diverse international contexts than any other study we are aware of. We found that 69% (*n* = 382) of the women in our study undertook core academic duties while on maternity leave, including activities defined in academia as status accumulation, such as writing publications and grants, working on research projects, and doctoral supervision, as well as teaching and responding to email. Our analysis of open text (qualitative) data highlighted four orientations, each representing distinct manifestations of neoliberal subjectivity: "Scholars" were a minority, as they were primarily motivated by the love of work and aligned with the neoliberal focus on efficient use of time and the need to be active (Du Gay, 1996; Scharff, 2016). "Collegials" epitomize the neoliberal responsibilized subject, obliged to labor out of a sense of obligation and moral responsibility (Brown, 2003). "Entrepreneurs" epitomize the type of individualistic, highly competitive, acquisitive, and entrepreneurial behavior advocated by neoliberalism (McNay, 2009). "Careerists" epitomize the notion that neoliberalism functions through fear (Tyler, 2013). They feared maternity leave would damage or have a catastrophic impact on their career.

Consistent with prior research (Huppatz et al., 2019), the empirical findings point to discriminatory practices or at best poorly communicated maternity policies and patchy support for women. Women's entitlement to maternity leave was frequently eroded. Punitive measures and backlash were reported by women upon their return to work, even when they had undertaken academic duties during maternity leave. The meaning extracted from negative encounters had a profound impact on women's sense of self-worth and belonging in their institutions.

Gill (2014) asserts that neither feminist nor labor movement scholars have kept pace with the extraordinarily rapid shift in contemporary working practice in which the boundaries between work time and all other time have been blurred, meaning that new laboring subjectivity is underexplored. Representing an original theoretical contribution in this paper, Foucauldian governmentality provided a lens to disclose hidden mechanisms that prompted women to engage in academic work during maternity leave. The survey was not designed with Foucault's concepts in mind; however, it became apparent that a broader lens was needed to aid the analysis and interpretation of the data. As none of the women were forced to forfeit their maternity rights by working during maternity leave, Foucault's work helped to elaborate the relationship between neoliberal discourse and the production of new modes of subjectivity linked to governmentality (Lemke, 2002). Statements made by the women academics indicate that they internalized neoliberal discourses prevalent in academia and practiced technologies of the self (Martin et al., 1988). As explained by Lorenzini (2018, p. 155), Foucault viewed neoliberalism as a "specific *rationality* or *art of government*" and neoliberal governmentality primarily as an "environmental" action that structures the "milieu" of individuals in order to foster desirable behavior. This resonates strongly with the findings from this study. Many of the women academics epitomize the ideal neoliberal subject, someone who is "manageable," who responds systematically to the needs and expectations of their environment and is highly governable (Lorenzini, 2018). That is not to blame women, rather the data reveals the specific effects of neoliberal governmental power, its capacity to permeate academia, and to be internalized by individuals. While in the classic neoliberal sense, women academics are free-choosing subjects, governmentality governs subjects through freedom, thus transforming individual freedom into something produced by power itself (Lorenzini, 2018, p. 159).

The need for critique and change appears significant. Our analysis reveals the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in academia and brings into critical focus the transformation that has occurred across the sector, including international higher education contexts. Given the breadth of influence of neoliberal regimes in higher education, this raises the question of mechanisms that are at work. Morrish and Sauntson (2020) maintain that neoliberal governmentality works within universities to construct the ideal entrepreneurial, self-governing, responsibilized academic. This was certainly the case in the data. Our study accords with observations that the women had a well-developed understanding of norms and social pressures operating within the structures of the higher education research economy (Huppatz et al., 2019). Having internalized the system, they undertook self-imposed labor during maternity leave, without questioning the mechanisms that led to the erosion of their maternity entitlements and encroached on their private lives and family time. Certainly, the data from this study gave a strong sense that the women internalized whether they were a good academic and productive enough (Morrish & Sauntson, 2020). Thus, their professional life appeared to be governed by the need to generate research outputs. Foucauldian governmentality appeared to engender practices of self-auditing. Certainly, the data shows that these women were acutely aware of the metrics and performance indicators that would be used to assess their academic performance. Some women calculated and benchmarked their productivity in comparison with work colleagues, especially "childless" colleagues. Fear of being in a deficit position in academic space compelled many to labor.

Brown (2003, p. 42) has argued that, in contrast to classic liberalism, neoliberalism does not assume that people will automatically adopt an entrepreneurial position, rather, neoliberal regimes develop institutional practices for enacting this vision, making individuals responsible for meeting productivity targets. She equates moral responsibility with rational action, arguing that "responsibility for the self is taken to new heights: the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action." Applying this logic, maternity choices are constituted as a personal, private problem for women to manage, meaning that any negative effects that arise are of a woman's own making—or her failure to manage her reproductive life without negative consequences. This effectively exonerates institutions because according to gender equality discourse, managerial policies provide the conditions to support maternity rights. It is our position that political and institutional policy rhetoric of family friendly policy and gender equality is being obstructed by intense forms of academic labor that merge the boundaries between private and work life. Although maternity rights are enshrined in law (Addati et al., 2014), women's maternity entitlement to leave is at odds with current systems of reward in academia. Neoliberalism and the escalation of managerialism undermine the provision for equal opportunities by placing women under considerable pressure to compromise maternity leave and entitlements to fulfill workplace responsibilities and meet productivity targets (Huppatz et al., 2019). This is not a simple choice, since the compulsion to labor operates, not from "above" but "in and through the individual" at a powerful psychological level (Gill, 2014, p. 516).

7 | CONCLUSION

Addressing the under-theorizing of women's maternity leave experiences in academia (Ollilainen, 2019), we utilized Foucauldian governmentality as a lens for unmasking the inculturation of neoliberal norms that drive women to labor through maternity leave and identified four orientations to laboring that represent distinct manifestations of neoliberal subjectivity. This, we argue, is our key theoretical contribution and identifies a crucial area for future exploration in order to examine these complex relationships in more detail to gain a deeper understanding of the competing subjectivities and career experiences for women academics working in the neoliberal university specifically and in neoliberal professions more generally. The power and relevance of Foucault's work would, for example, provide insight to management and organizational studies into a range of contemporary empirical phenomena such as the intensifying commodification of professional life, the range of contemporary discourses, related subjectivities and labor behavior, the increasing use of surveillance technologies and the forms they take, the way that these are both embraced and resisted in different professional settings, the notion of responsibilization, and the increasingly marketized rationalities that permeate all aspects of society (Binkley and Capetillo, 2009). Equally important and of

relevance to other professions, our analysis highlights how neoliberal governmental power can be experienced as ongoing and agonizing conflict between being an academic and a mother. Crucially, as neoliberal governmentality works at a distance, people are not aware of its influence on their beliefs and behavior; therefore, it is imperative that research interrogates the "how" of government so that we can perform "the art of not being governed quite so much" (Sokhi-Bulley, 2014, online).

One issue related to these findings is that maternity leave is associated with improved maternal mental health and positive outcomes such as lower perinatal, neonatal, and postneonatal mortality rates and lower child mortality; therefore, it is imperative that women's maternity rights are protected (Mason & Goulden, 2002; Mavriplis et al., 2010). Findings from this study show that work needs to be done at institutional level to embed maternity policy so that all staff, especially line managers, departmental heads, and senior leaders are aware of the policy, their responsibilities in relation to the policy and how it is to be applied in practice. This includes protecting maternity leave and observing it as actual "leave." Practical solutions can support this, such as ensuring that maternity cover is in place for teaching, administration, and research activity but it also entails senior and departmental leadership engaging in practice and discourse that actively discourages staff from feeling like they should be involved with academic activities during maternity leave. In this regard, there is a clear need to instigate institutional culture shifts to ensure that women do not feel obliged to conform to neoliberal discourses and feel pressured into continuing to engage with academic work during maternity leave. To support cultural change, language used in both policy and practice should reflect the fact that maternity leave is a perfectly normal and positive aspect of life and actively supported throughout the organization. Another way to support and demonstrate a cultural shift is through more progressive university policies, such as maternity provision for fixed contract workers along the lines proposed by Davies et al. (2022) and extensions to track tenure or other types of major institutional evaluation that represent the true time cost of maternity leave. Other innovative solutions, along the lines of returner schemes, would fund and protect time and research support to enable women to re-engage with academic work considered crucial for future career success, such as publications and grant writing. Such schemes would help to endorse the message that it is all right to take some time off.

Notwithstanding the contribution of this paper, it was limited to secondary analysis of survey data originally designed for a broader study on career breaks. While this allowed analysis of a large and wide dataset, we recommend future large-scale studies. As the study has greater relevance to the UK, international research could build on the relatively smaller international sample that took part in this study, compared to UK participants. A larger sample of international participants could be more revealing regarding countries that have a stronger neoliberal history (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015) and allow for more comparative analysis. Such a study could also allow some insights into experiences of early and late motherhood for academics and those on fixed-term/untenured and open-ended contracts, as this information was not captured in the dataset. Although the survey produced rich qualitative data, qualitative interviews offer a further natural progression of this work, to explore maternity related issues in more detail and highlight further theoretical nuances, for example, biographical and contextual exploration of different aspects of neoliberal habitus for academics. Reforms in maternity and parental policies in the UK and internationally have occurred since data were collected for this study. Future research could examine the potential impact of these changes. The need for further research into women's maternity experiences in academia has even greater relevance in light of calls for the protection of women's maternity rights (Epifanio & Troeger, 2019; Troeger, 2018) and due to the amplification of gender disparities and hierarchies of labor in higher education internationally since the Global COVID-19 pandemic (Altan-Olcay & Bergeron, 2022).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

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