

New Fathers—New Care—New Work: Leaving “Homo Academicus”?

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Abstract: The article asks about the potential of a care perspective for New Work in science. Care work is largely eliminated in the meritocratic performance system of science. Based on qualitative data, the article shows that fathers in the science through their experiences in the COVID-19 pandemic deal with heteronormative invocations and develop new practices and a changed self-image as caring scientists.

Keywords: Masculinity, science, fatherhood, care, COVID-19

Nouveaux pères – nouvelle préoccupation – nouveau travail : un abandon de l’«homo academicus» ?

Résumé: L’article s’interroge sur le potentiel d’une perspective de *care* pour un nouveau travail dans le domaine scientifique. Le travail de soin est largement éliminé dans le système de prestations méritocratique de la science. Basé sur des données qualitatives, l’article montre que les pères en science se confrontent aux appels hétéronormatifs grâce à leurs expériences dans la pandémie COVID-19 et qu’ils développent de nouvelles pratiques ainsi qu’une perception modifiée d’eux-mêmes en tant que scientifiques bienveillants.

Mots-clés: Masculinité, science, paternité, care, COVID-19.

Neue Väter – Neue Sorge – Neue Arbeit: eine Abkehr vom «Homo Academicus» ?

Zusammenfassung: Der Beitrag fragt nach dem Potential einer Careperspektive für New Work in der Wissenschaft. Sorgearbeit wird im meritokratischen Leistungssystem der Wissenschaft weitgehend eliminiert. Anhand qualitativer Daten zeigt der Beitrag, dass sich Väter in der Wissenschaft durch ihre Erfahrungen in der COVID-19-Pandemie mit heteronormativen Anrufungen auseinandersetzen und neue Praktiken sowie ein verändertes Selbstverständnis als sorgende Wissenschaftler ausbilden.

Schlüsselwörter: Männlichkeit, Wissenschaft, Vaterschaft, Care, COVID-19

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1 Introduction

The discussion about working conditions at universities was brought to the attention of the wider German public by #IchBinHanna (#IamHanna) and the pandemic. International studies also point to the occupational stress of employees at universities. Young academics below professorship level are increasingly asking themselves under what conditions they want to work in the future. However, the issues surrounding the new form of work at universities are rarely discussed. The desire to become a parent plays a particularly important role for many academics. Nevertheless, parenthood seems to contradict the academic professional ethos. Academia is still entrenched in the structures of old work and the narrative of “academia as a way of life”. In contrast, care work does not seem to fit in with this concept of an academic career. As many studies show, this is particularly true for mothers (e.g. Brandt & Spangenberg, 2022). The perspective of fathers in academia, however, remains largely unexplored (Haag & Gamper, 2022). This reproduces a homogeneous image of masculinity in the academic field, in which there is hardly any room for different masculinities. In this article, we want to explore the question of how fathers describe their care work during the different phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, what narrative of “homo academicus” they construct in the process, what consequences this has for their concept of work-life balance and what opportunities this offers for a New Work approach.

We first give a short definition of New Work (section 2) and continue with Old Work and hegemonic masculinity as the dominant *conditio operandi* in science (section 3). Afterwards we reflect on parenthood in the scientific field (section 4) and take a deeper look at the pandemic as an impact factor on New Work (section 5). Based on interview excerpts from two research projects on experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic at German universities (Haag & Kubiak, 2022; Haag et al., 2024b), we describe how fathers balance academic careers and care work and what consequences they draw from it against the background of the New Work approach (section 6). In the discussion of the results, the myth of the independent scientific subject is questioned, and the care perspective is reconsidered as a resource for a process of change (section 7).

2 New Work—Beyond Traditional Gainful Employment

Before we address the issue of New Work in science using the example of parenthood with a special focus on fathers, it is important to look at the concept of New Work. In our paper, we mainly refer to Bergmann (2019), whose main argument is about questioning working methods, structures and gender roles that are taken for granted.

The concept focuses on factors for fulfilling individual needs and self-realization that place the individual in the spotlight: “The work should not drain and exhaust us, it should give us more strength and more energy, it should develop us into a fuller human being” (Bergmann, 2019, p. 3). New Work therefore includes aspects such as happiness, meaningfulness of work and, in particular, self-realization in professional and private life. Cornils and Reimers (2022) incorporate an expanded concept of work into the concept developed by Bergmann, which is particularly relevant for this article. The authors speak of an “expansion to include all socially necessary work. In addition to gainful employment, this includes educational, care and nursing work as well as all forms of work for the community and society”, so it is about “all unpaid and remunerated activities performed by people” (Cornils & Reimers, 2022, p. 3). With this perspective on work, the focus shifts from the classic definition of work as a productive activity with remuneration to the integration of reproductive practices such as care work. Derboven (2022b) emphasizes that only by expanding the concept of work beyond traditional gainful employment can total workload be identified. Parents are all-round workers (Derboven, 2022a). In particular, the double burden of parenthood (often motherhood) and employment often leads to excessive demands due to a combination of high demands, a lack of time, and a lack of mental strength and even personal stability (cf. Derboven, 2019, p. 79).

3 Old Work and Hegemonic Masculinity—Conditio Operandi in the Scientific Working World

New Work in science must be considered in comparison to traditional working conditions. This so-called Old Work can be expressed

in the language of means and ends. In much of the past the task to be performed was the goal, the end, the purpose. The human being was used by others, or also by [themselves], as the tool, the instrument, the mere means for the achieving of this end. We, human beings, subordinate ourselves. We place ourselves into service of work that needed to be done (Bergmann, 2019, p. 3).

Old Work is thus characterized by an instrumental character of the human resource and is visible, for example, through hierarchical structures with a lot of external control, competition, pressure, and subjugation to institutional guidelines. In this classic form of work, people and their needs are subordinated to profit, competitiveness, and growth, whereby, as Bergmann also illustrates, these subjugations and

constraints can vary depending on the field of work.¹ Studies on the field of science, for example, indicate that high workloads and stress have become part of everyday life (Ahmad et al., 2022; Winefield et al., 2003). This is particularly evident among junior researchers (Satinsky et al., 2021). The old ideal of the “homo academicus” (Bourdieu, 1988; Wagner et al., 2023) still applies: the ideal academic is white, male, childless and comes from an educated background (Zimmermann, 2022). He is available 24/7 (Engler, 2001) and works 60 hours a week, withstands enormous pressure to perform, is globally mobile and flexible in terms of space and time. Work thus becomes “omni-value” (Bergmann, 2019). As such, Old Work fits perfectly into the concept of work at universities, whose work processes are increasingly characterized by deregulation, competition, and output orientation at the structural level.

The academic personality (Engler, 2001) can be derived from the idea of focusing exclusively on university work. The qualities of appearing to be overshadow the actual skills or abilities (Beaufays & Kraiss, 2005, p. 89). This makes it clear that work in the academic field is not only linked to classic ideologies of Old Work such as individual performance, submission to the ideal of “homo academicus”, and hard work, but also to a traditional image of masculinity and a certain image of elites. Those who advance are those who, in Bergmann’s (2019) sense, submit to work and embody a “masculine habitus” (Bourdieu, 2002) in those “androcentric spaces”. “Interwoven with the heteronormative separation of the world of work and the private sphere, this reproduction of homosocial spaces leads to the exclusion of female academics” (Zimmermann & Weibel, 2020, p. 161), but—and this is a central argument of the paper—also to the disadvantage of masculinities in academia who do not or do not want to conform to this heteronormative image.

The seemingly neutral academic system has a highly gendered and gendering effect due to the requirements and the resulting closure and selection effects. According to theories of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Maihofer, 1995), masculinity manifests itself in practices of subordination, complicity, and marginalization. Such a self-image is based on an understanding of autonomy, independence, impermeability, and constancy, as Zimmermann (2022) points out. The heteronormative subject, which sees itself as omnipotent, always sees other subjects as a threat to its own autonomy. “From this follows the necessity to fend off the influence of the other on the self and to subjugate and devalue the other in order to secure one’s own dominance.” (Zimmermann, 2022, p. 59) In this arena of struggle, a form of self-discipline emerges that can be understood as “conditioning, disciplining and normalization, especially towards oneself” (Maihofer, 2021, p. 36) and thus also

1 We would like to point out, for example, that the profession in science is highly flexible compared to band work. It is therefore important for us to clarify that the attributes Bergman uses to categorize Old Work must be weighted differently depending on the field of work. Nevertheless, an orientation towards usability in the sense of a standardized output orientation can also be identified for science without exception.

reproduces “old work”. Hegemonic masculinity and structures of “old work” are closely interwoven in the field of higher education.

4 Parenthood in the Arena of Scientific Giants

4.1 Discrimination Against Parents in Science

These working structures differ from the wishes of those working in the field of higher education, particularly when it comes to starting a family. In Germany, 73 percent of doctoral students would like to have children (women 72 percent; men 74 percent), although almost 50 percent of these doctoral students state that they do not want to have children during the career phase of their doctorate (Federal Report on Young Scientists, 2021). Doctoral students without children see difficulties in family planning primarily in the working conditions at universities. The main reasons are job insecurity, a lack of work-life balance, or low financial security. This is also reflected in the proportion of parents among early career researchers. Just 17 percent of doctoral students have children, which is below the general population average (also compared to people with a university degree). Many mothers (approx. 75 percent and fathers approx. 60 percent) consider abandoning their doctorate due to a (lack of) compatibility of family and career (Federal Report on Young Scientists, 2021). The “traditional working conditions” at universities, particularly regarding family-friendliness of the university structure, do not appear to be compatible with the strong desire to start a family (Melin et al., 2014). Parenthood is associated with clear disadvantages in science, especially for mothers (Bonache et al., 2022; Brandt & Spangenberg, 2022).

4.2 Old Work and the Blind Spot on Fatherhood in Science

Research shows that this also applies to young and family-oriented fathers who want to actively participate in care work and therefore have to avoid the anticipated availability in science (Lind, 2008; Neumann, 2012; Reddick et al., 2012; Reuter et al., 2008; Sallee, 2012). Men also perceive academic careers and fatherhood as competing spheres that are difficult to reconcile, because they do not correspond to the typical role expectations of Old Work and existing structures do not support the desire for parenthood (Sallee, 2012).

The little research that has been conducted over the years suggests that, in addition to the old working structures and patriarchal gender order in science, there is also a relationship of superiority and subordination between different masculinities and that there is by no means always solidarity among fathers (Lind, 2008). Rather, a large proportion of men follow the “rules of the game” (Meuser, 2006) of hege-

monic practices, for example by keeping family-related absences and duties secret and excluding the sphere of parenthood from their professional lives to conform to the ideal of work at universities. Many would not even know about the offspring of other colleagues because it may be kept secret (Liebig, 2008).

However, the scientific debate on family self-realization is still tied to the gender issue (Paulitz et al., 2015, p. 141). Men are not addressed in this discourse as potential caring fathers and are thus homogenized as a group. As a result, they are ascribed the role of *Hasardeuers*, who *must* feel committed to the ideal of Old Work in science without loss. Anyone who breaks with this role and does not fulfil expectations must also expect restrictions (Reuter, 2020). Old Work structures at universities therefore make it difficult for men to stand by their desire to take on parental responsibilities as part of their lifeworld (Liebig, 2008), but this is not the case for female academics. Thus, both are trapped in the structures of Old Work at universities, whereby the prison cell is designed differently for both and the consequences for self-realization as a parent and scientist differ for both.

5 The Pandemic as a Driver for New Work in Science?

With the COVID-19 pandemic, an unforeseen phenomenon appeared and led to far-reaching changes such as the increasing digitalization of teaching, a predominant shift of activities to working from home, and the temporary loss of research contexts and delays in qualification work, which has had far-reaching consequences, especially for financing positions (Federal Report on Young Scientists, 2021). The tense situation on the job market also proved to be a cause for concern for many young academics. Fears about the future and even leaving academia increased (Rigotti & Schielbach, 2020). While the amount of time spent on careers in essential fields such as publication, research, and third-party funding acquisition decreased, the proportion of working time spent on the digitalization of teaching and the pressure of constant availability increased. Early career researchers, especially those with short employment contracts or a high teaching load, were particularly affected by this due to their precarious employment conditions. However, the presence of children had a very negative impact on academic work (Shalaby et al., 2021; Wegrzyn et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the perspective on the compatibility issue in the discussion about science remained largely a gender issue, although family-oriented fathers also experienced restrictions (Haag & Gamper, 2022). However, initial results from studies about the situation of fathers in everyday working life under pandemic conditions reveal the first signs of change. Hans-Georg Nelles (2022), for example, decidedly examines the effects of COVID-19 on the division of labour within the family and the involvement of fathers in families. In the literature, there is discussion of “paradoxical simultaneities” regarding the distribution of family care work

(Peukert et al., 2022). This refers to retraditionalization at the expense of mothers. At the same time, however, the partnership-based division of labour has proven its worth during the crisis (Nelles, 2022). According to the British survey “Lockdown Fathers: The Untold Story” (Burgess & Goldman, 2021) by the Fatherhood Institute, positive influences of the pandemic working methods on fathers can be observed. For example, 48 percent of respondents stated that they perceived themselves as more competent in their role as parents after the lockdown, and 78 percent spent significantly more time with their children. The extent to which this also applies to fathers in science needs to be investigated.

6 Fatherhood, Pandemic and Science: Insights into Empirical Research

Against this background, the question arises as to what new practices fathers have developed during the pandemic to meet the ideal image of a scientist and what potential new types of work can be derived from this in relation to gender-specific expectations of the scientific persona. This question will be answered empirically. We will focus on: (6.2) changing working conditions in the pandemic, (6.3) negotiations on expectations of the “homo academicus” and (6.4) lessons learned in post-pandemic science.

6.1 Methodological Approach

The results are based on two studies conducted at the Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences. The German university context was considered for the survey. The first study examined the experience of the pandemic at universities (Haag & Kubiak, 2022) in three federal states. In three survey periods (May 2020, October 2020, and October 2021), students and academics from different status groups were interviewed about their experiences during the pandemic against the backdrop of changing work and study conditions. People interviewed included fathers with different academic status (doctoral students, postdocs, and professors). The interviewees were recruited through the researchers’ own networks and through the snowball principle. We initially made no stipulations regarding paternity about the sample. During the interview, the concept of fatherhood was negotiated discursively. It turned out that the respondents were challenged in their fatherhood by the pandemic, and they proactively made this a topic, without the group being put together per se about science and fatherhood. There were also women among the interviewees, including two mothers.

For this article, the interviewed fathers² (N=3) were selected from the first study and their statements are included in the analysis. Among them two hold a profes-

2 There have been other male interviewees without fatherhood.

sorship and one was PhD candidate at the time of the interview. The second study, conducted in February 2023, builds on the results of the previous study³ and focuses on the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups in higher education in six German federal states (Haag et al., 2024b). Different groups (including academics with care responsibilities) were interviewed (see Table 1). To recruit the interviewees, the study drew in part on its own networks and on multipliers (e.g. representatives of students with disabilities, advice centres). Due to the self-thematization of the previously interviewed fathers and their negotiation of fatherhood in science, we decided to select a group exclusively with fathers. Following the ongoing debate about precarization in academia, we focused on young academics (i. e. postdoctoral fathers of pre-school children, N = 3).

In both studies, the data was collected using group discussions (Bohnsack, 2000), which were analysed for this article using the grounded theory coding method (Glaser & Strauß, 1967).

Table 1 Interview Persons Considered in This Article

Study I (three waves)	Study II (one wave 2023)
Mr. M.: Professor, two children	Mr. L.: Postdoc, two children (one of them with Down syndrome)
Mr. K.: Professor and Dean, two children	Mr. S.: Postdoc, one child
Mr. B.: PhD, one child	Mr. N.: Postdoc, two children

6.2 Changed Working Conditions During the Pandemic

The fathers in both studies have noticed serious changes for themselves and their work, although these vary over time. The increasing digitalization of familiar practices and the simultaneous integration of these activities into previously outsourced care responsibilities (homeschooling, home daycare) are leading to an increasing blurring of boundaries in everyday working life, which is already perceived as blurred, as Mr. M., professor at a university of applied sciences and father of two children, explains. He refers to the home office as an expression of this process of dissolving boundaries:

Working from home can really suck, you have to be honest. Yes, when you realize, okay, I've finished this now and look at the clock and think, yes, my wife's alarm clock is just going off in our bedroom, then you realize that something has gone wrong. (M., Professor, Study I, May 2020)

3 However, the same people were not interviewed again.

Coherent work that needs to be carried out over several hours becomes increasingly difficult, especially when childcare must be done alone. “You can only work through a few non-demanding emails, then the morning is over” (K., Professor, First Study I, May 2020), as described by Mr. K., Professor University of Applied Sciences, Dean and father of two children, who took over childcare at the end of May 2020 due to his partner’s return to work. The online teaching situation is an enormous burden, “because I want to avoid my children somehow crawling on my lap” (K., Professor, Study I, May 2020). Both statements manifest the space and time problems of scientific work under the conditions of the pandemic measures, which result from the double burden of pandemic science and parenthood. The decisive factor is that old routines in the field of higher education and research must be continued, while the framework conditions have changed fundamentally.

6.3 Negotiations on the Expectations of the “Homo Academicus”

Due to changes in work routines, fathers question the expectations placed on them as scientific subjects and how these expectations fit in with their care practices, which have also changed because of the pandemic. This inevitably leads to a conflict: how much time should be spent on work and how much time should be reserved for the family? Mr. M. already addressed this issue very specifically in the first wave in May 2020 and once again clearly emphasized the great importance of the desire to be a father and underlined the opportunity:

I now have my two children, who are five and seven, and I can carry on like this for another five years, but then at some point I will only see them from behind as teenagers, and I don't fancy that. And in that respect, I also see this as an opportunity to have them in front of my eyes. (M., Professor, Study I, May 2020)

Looking back (in October 2021), in the second interview, the interviewee makes it clear that he is striving for a new work-life balance and wants to draw a line between work and private life. The emerging feeling of adapting to the old structural expectations and routines in the field of science is thus evident in the background:

In retrospect, it was very, very good that this happened. ... For example, I've resolved, if possible, to only work in the office and no longer in the living room, in the kitchen and somehow in bed, and also to read emails on Sundays and no longer after 10 pm. And I hope that I can keep it up, that would be my greatest wish. (M., Professor, Study I, October 2021)

Breaking out of expectations is not easy for all interviewees and must first be learned and fought for. Mr. K., for example, has learned to “do nothing at weekends” and

to do so “without a guilty conscience” (K., Professor, Study I, October 2021). On closer analysis, the ongoing conflict becomes clear: Free time must be fought for on the one hand and justified on the other, which shows the orientation towards the norm of the performance-oriented academic. Mr. K. also tries to adapt his working hours to care work and being a father/spouse. Unlike Mr. M., however, he adopted a different strategy during the pandemic. Firstly, he is trying to distance himself from the prescribed workload, which he believes can never be fully managed anyway, and secondly, he is shifting his working hours to the evenings to satisfy his desire for care work:

It's impossible for work to be finished. I now approach things differently. For example, I explicitly stick to saying that I work at home in the evenings because it's best compatible with the family ... and I find it more relaxing when I know that I'm doing it then and I'm not working until six in the evening, so to speak, and then I'm home at, I don't know, half past six and then the children are in bed at eight, and then I miss it—so I prefer to postpone it until the evening. (K., Professor, Study I, October 2021)

This reveals an active confrontation with the norm of being always available. By explicitly demanding time for the family, the interviewee succeeds in increasingly withdrawing. However, breaking out of the self-imposed expectation is a lengthy process and must first be achieved.

While the previous statements come from professors who already hold an established position in academia (e. g. W2 or W3 salary, two types of salary for professors in Germany with civil servant status), the descriptions of Mr. B., a doctoral candidate and father of a 20-month-old son, illustrate the interplay between care work and academic career planning. Unlike the professors, Mr. B. is in a precarious employment relationship, which is clearly reflected in the interviews. For him, the demand to be a good father, husband, and scientist and the actual practice for an academic career path were far apart. The time he refers to career-enhancing activities such as third-party funding applications or peer-reviewed:

Last week, for example, my wife also had seminars all day, so I was able to work during the windows from 6:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m., and then again from 4:00 p.m. until the evening, after I somehow managed the childcare and was pretty worn out from it. And of course I'm constantly failing because of my own productivity demands, because I've internalized the fact that I actually have time to write now, and of course it's very rare to have the peace and quiet. (B., PhD, Study I, May 2020)

One year later, in Fall 2021, the interviewee left academia and decided against a career in science and in favour of his family and fatherhood. In the interview, Mr. B.

reflects above all on the question of pressure in combination with the demand for productivity in the scientific field and the pandemic:

So maybe I would have worked more productively without the pandemic and would now have one or two journal articles that I would have somehow pushed forward better, but I don't actually think that would have changed the fact that I see my academic career as very difficult to reconcile with—with my small child and the way I want to do it and also the limits of my resilience, so to speak. (B., PhD, Study I, October 2021)

This statement also manifests the conflict with high performance requirements as the basis of scientific work, which have increased once again due to the pandemic. The “normal” tasks for a successful career must continue to be completed, while new challenges arise with childcare. The limits of resilience are thus exceeded or—more likely—only become apparent as a result, although they were also repeatedly mentioned in the interviews beforehand. Crossing boundaries, as exceptional conditions, acted like a magnifying glass, which led to previous difficulties of normal everyday life being brought into sharper focus.

In all quotes, there is a process of negotiation with the norm of academic lifestyle as an implicit orientation and, for the most part, also as a guiding maxim from which—against the background of the pandemic experiences in the sense of a “wake-up call”—more and more distance is being maintained. As these interviews show by way of example, the concept of the hegemonic image of masculinity resonates in all of them as an implicit guiding principle of the “right scientist”, without it being explicitly addressed in a gendered way. Unlike in the interviews we conducted with women and mothers, men do not emphasize the gendered invocation; it seems to be part of scientific normality for them. Although the fathers interviewed change their practices or question the old ones, they do not tie this back to hegemonically effective ideas of a male scientist.

6.4 Lessons Learned? Fathers in Post-Pandemic Science

In the follow-up study conducted in 2023 (see above), the fathers we interviewed⁴ learned new practices of everyday life and work management during the pandemic, sometimes even in the face of resistance from the organization to which they belong. Mr. L., a post-doc at a university of applied sciences and father of two children, including a child with Down syndrome, describes:

Somehow, the department always wanted me to be present, take part in the culture and so on, that was always the department's credo, and with COVID,

4 This is no longer a longitudinal section, but a new sample.

like everywhere else, that disappeared and that also, well, for me personally, it was maintained with other colleagues that you work at home as much as you can (L., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)

As we can see, COVID led to the development of new ways of working. Though the amount of work has not yet been reduced, work and family have been intertwined. Mr. S., a postdoc at a university research institute and father of one child, describes the post-pandemic situation in a similar way.

And here at the institute, now that the restrictions have been lifted, the management is pushing for everyone to come into the office a bit more, to show a bit more presence, because everyone has really got used to working from home a lot. I wouldn't have thought that I would be working from home several days a week after all. I'm in the office two days a week. (S., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)

Through their experiences during the period of absence, the two fathers gained awareness of the way they want to work in the future. The statements show a resistance to a return to the status quo ante as a learning effect from the pandemic period.

The third interviewee, Mr. N., a postdoc at a non-university research institute and father of two children, talks about the difference between scientists with and without care obligations and notes a development over the course of the pandemic for consideration:

At the beginning, there were so many emails: take care of yourselves first. It's clear that you can't do everything now, especially those with children or other care work and so on. But at some point, that eased off. And at some point, the same workload was expected as before and sometimes even more. So somehow my perception was that it sometimes became even busier than it was before COVID and that having a child and being a father was always a good reason to say, yes, but I also need a break. Like this. And that's for those who weren't involved in care work, they didn't have the excuse, that's the wrong word, they didn't have the reason they could give as to why they had to stop working. (N., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)

Care work is now used as an argument to minimize the significance of the tasks addressed to the “homo academicus” by the institution of higher education and to withdraw from them. Taking on the role of father is one way of no longer having to conform to the ideal and thus challenging the hegemonic notion of masculinity of the available work subject. However, this still requires a legitimate motive, in this case care work, which has also increased among male colleagues due to the pandemic

and has also gained recognition. Unlike in the first study *during* the pandemic, care work is now proactively referred to post-pandemically, thus deconstructing the classic image of men. The caring masculinities are thus confronting entrenched structures in science and negotiating spaces for development.

In terms of spatial flexibility and the autonomous working subject, fathers are also working off the narrative of the “ideal academic worker”, which has consequences for everyday life. For example, after the pandemic, they are finding it difficult to travel to conferences or apply for jobs that involve an increased commute or even a family move. They realize that they want and need to invest more in care work. Conferences or applications to distant universities are seen as a burden. They are an obstacle to being a father and partner, which the pandemic has once again brought into sharper focus for the interviewees, as Mr. S. points out:

I think the pandemic has shown me what the limits of what is possible are. Somehow, the child was already there before the pandemic. It was always clear that you have to negotiate, you have to distribute the resources somehow and it's not all that easy anymore, but I think the pandemic has made it even stronger, it's somehow clearer, it's just more resources that are needed. In terms of my time and energy alone, that has to be distributed. (S., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)

The question arises as to why they continue to adhere to the performance maxim of “homo academicus”, although at the same time the compatibility issue is becoming increasingly urgent. Mr. L. reveals:

When I ask myself, yes, I don't yet have the feeling that I've somehow reached a stable, secure state where I think, okay, I'm safe for the foreseeable future, but I always have the feeling that I still have to put in at least 40 hours or more to reach a secure state. And that means, theoretically in this system it would mean something like, I have to work as a professor now, but it doesn't even mean that. It just means that you want to work towards a position that is reasonably reliable. (L., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023)

The precarious working conditions in academia, from which they suffer greatly in contrast to the professors interviewed in the first study, and the hegemonic image of the ideal academic create fear and pressure. Extra work in the form of weekend work or evening shifts continues to be accepted to balance both care work and the narrative of the “homo academicus”. Their vulnerability as junior academics becomes clear in comparison to the group of established academics from the first survey, who can at least grant themselves freedom through the privilege of a permanent professorship. Although a feeling of “still having to do more” is initially subjectivized,

the interviewees increasingly came to structural aspects such as the expectation to work on qualification work outside of working hours. It is the lack of a “feeling of having achieved a stable, secure state” (L., Postdoc, Study II, February 2023) that extrinsically drives junior academics in mid-level academic positions to work harder. However, the necessity and, above all, their own desire to become more involved in care work has led them to partially avoid the demands of the “homo academicus”. It is an oscillation between autonomy and dependence, which creates tensions that cannot be resolved precisely because of the status passage of the qualification.

7 Discussion

We were able to show that employment relationships in academia still follow the concept of Old Work (Bergmann, 2019) and that these structures are linked to a hegemonic ideal of masculinity. Studies show that those working in science follow the concept of “omni-value” (Bergmann, 2019). In a working world that functions according to Old Work and androcentric structures, in which temporary employment is the norm and employees are constantly confronted with job insecurity, parenthood becomes an insecurity factor that runs counter to the ideal of “omni-value”. It is precisely the idealization of permanent productivity that is criticized by supporters of New Work. This carefree attitude and independence are necessary to meet the demands of academia. As studies have shown, the simultaneous burden of private or family demands in the form of reproductive work is a barrier to the required dedication to academic work for academics (Pestel et al., 2014). This applies not only to mothers—as most research assumes—but also to fathers who become more involved through the pandemic and being at home.

The desire for parenthood is seen as something that hinders and disrupts productivity and availability, even though most academics would like to be parents. Even if the respondents criticize these requirements, our results show that the guidelines linked to the concept of Old Work are still used as an evaluation template for their own work. Fathers work off the academic worker as a hegemonic doctrine that has internalized the maxims of Old Work. Furthermore, the Old Work guidelines are reproduced by the fathers using this ideal as a template for good work. They thus follow the Old Work discourse and do not invent alternative narratives and practices. No new ideal of New Work is designed, but why one does not want to conform to the ideal of “homo academicus” is mainly argued.

If we turn to the idea of New Work according to Bergman (2019), the increasing awareness of care relationships appears to be an opportunity to question the existing dysfunctional and sometimes destructive structures. As a normative concept, care thus forms a counterproposal to ideas of subjective autonomy in science (Haag et al., 2024a; Zimmermann, 2022). In this conception, however, care also becomes

a motor for transforming society, which has so far focused on the gender-hierarchical division of labour, capitalist modes of production and work as omni-value (Gerhard, 2014, p. 71). Like a magnifying glass, the pandemic has made visible the dependencies and needs that could previously remain hidden. This is also because some of them were picked up outside of academia or the role of the father was interpreted as an adapted “homo academicus” in the sense of the classic father or partner role: he is hardly ever at home, has no time and pursues paid work alone. Until now, academia has only been able to function through the reproductive work of others and their own “exploitation”, which is not recognized (Haag et al., 2024a).

According to our study, parenthood should therefore no longer be subordinated to the concept of Old Work and treated as an individual challenge. It is a structural task for universities to implement new ways of working that run counter to the ideal of academic work as omni-value. New ways of thinking about parenthood and academic careers are needed to break away from the “old homo academicus” and integrate New Work concepts. In future research, this perspective needs to be deepened. For example, a longitudinal design could be used to investigate the long-term consequences of the pandemic for fathers in academia and new practices they develop in terms of New Work. It should also be noted that the group of fathers is not a homogeneous group, and there are differentiations along different categories that need to be looked at more closely.

8 References

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