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Academic motherhood and fieldwork: Juggling time, emotions, and competing demands

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The idea and practice of going “into the field” to conduct research and gather data is a deeply rooted aspect of Geography as a discipline. For global North Development Geographers, among others, this usually entails travelling to, and spending periods of time in, often far-flung parts of the global South. Forging a successful academic career as a Development Geographer in the UK is therefore to some extent predicated on mobility. This paper aims to critically engage with the gendered aspects of this expected mobility, focusing on the challenges and time constraints that are apparent when conducting overseas fieldwork as a mother, unaccompanied by her children. The paper emphasises the emotion work that is entailed in balancing the competing demands of overseas fieldwork and mothering, and begins to think through the implications of these challenges in terms of the types of knowledge we produce, as well as in relation to gender equality within the academy.

KEYWORDS

Development Geography, emotion, fieldwork, gender equality in the academy, motherhood, time

1 | INTRODUCTION

I don't know anyone else who puts themselves through this! There's literature about taking your kids with you [to the field], but none about leaving them behind! (Excerpt from fieldwork diary, 28 April 2017, Peru)

Embedded within the discipline of Geography is the notion of the Geographer as intrepid explorer, gatherer of knowledge, getting their hands dirty in the field. Despite multiple critiques highlighting the problematic nature of this image of the Geographer, implicitly white, male, and able-bodied (Bracken & Mawdsley, 2004; Domosh, 1991; Rose, 1993), as well as the colonial origins and Eurocentric presumptions underpinning such an approach (Rose, 1993; Sidaway, 1997), fieldwork remains a central defining element in the production of geographical knowledge. As Sundberg recognises “fieldwork confers authority and legitimacy on the Geographer, making it key to processes of professional self-fashioning and identity formation,” going on to describe fieldwork as “a rite of passage” that continues to be “one of the most important means by which Geographers as faculty and graduate students produce knowledge” (2003, p. 10). However, Sundberg also convincingly argues that masculinist epistemologies are central to understanding the primacy of fieldwork in scholarship on Latin America by global North Geographers, and emphasises the need to break the silence surrounding fieldwork as a form of knowledge production, predicated on particular power inequalities.

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In the intervening 16 years since Sundberg's piece, positionality has become a standard part of the toolkit of (particularly) feminist Geographers (e.g., Nast, 1994, and others in the special issue of *Professional Geographer*; Rose, 1997; Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000), and an increasingly accepted part of the methodological repertoire of Development Geography (Baillie Smith & Jenkins, 2017; Chacko, 2004; Smith, 2007; Sultana, 2007). The role of fieldwork has, however, remained central within much Development Geography, wedded to the empiricist tradition of first-person observation and experience as the cornerstone of producing reliable data. Indeed, I do not aim to undermine this assumption here. Fieldwork provides a unique opportunity that enables us to work and collaborate with the people whom we are researching, to begin to understand something of their lives and the places in which they live. At its best, it is underpinned by a strong sense of relationality – empathy, trust, friendship, and reciprocity are central to much qualitative research and the partnerships that underpin it (Cotterill, 1992; Jones & Ficklin, 2012; Lund et al., 2016). While it is now widely recognised that our experiences in the field, and the data we collect, are shaped by multiple factors – including gender, class, and race, among others – the ability to undertake fieldwork at all is also shaped by social relations that are often less recognised. These may include experiences of disability or illness, our privilege as affluent scholars residing in the global North, and our domestic and caring responsibilities which may constrain our ability or desire to travel for fieldwork. One aspect of this, which has received relatively little attention, is how being a mother affects experiences of, and capacity to undertake, fieldwork. This paper therefore grapples with the multiple ways in which motherhood shapes experiences of overseas fieldwork (in this case within Development Geography), when unaccompanied by one's children, and the impacts of this scenario on the careers of mothers in Geography and cognate disciplines.

The paper thus takes up Sundberg's call to break the silences (still) surrounding fieldwork, through opening up discussion of the experiences of Geography mothers “in the field” without their children (in this case specifically focusing on international fieldwork by global North scholars in the global South). Critically reflecting on my experience of conducting fieldwork as an academic mother, unaccompanied by my children, through the lenses of emotion work and time constraints, sheds light on the ways in which fieldwork exemplifies the challenges of academic mothering writ large across time and space, with their attendant impacts on knowledge production, career progression, and gender inequality in the academy.

2 | MOTHERHOOD AND ACADEMIA

A diverse literature considers the multitude of ways in which becoming and being a mother impacts on women's identities, practices, and experiences in all spheres of life (Arendell, 2000; Gatrell, 2005; Holloway, 1999; Longhurst, 2008), theorising notions of mothering and motherhood and the ways in which these ideas change and are negotiated over time, space, and place. As Holloway recognises, “motherhood is a complex social phenomenon: it varies over time and space, and is intimately bound up with normative ideas about femininity” (Holloway, 1999, p. 91), while Longhurst grapples with the intersections of maternity, gender, and bodies, complicating our understandings about “mothering” and the people who do it (Longhurst, 2008).¹

More specifically, a growing body of work explores the experiences of mothers in the academy, and how motherhood shapes, and often constrains, women's careers, focusing on issues such as work–life balance (Gilbert, 2008; Munn-Giddings, 1998; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), the gendered nature of academic transnational mobility (Jöns, 2011; Lubitow & Zippel, 2014), and the difficulties for academic mothers in achieving promotion and/or tenure, particularly when working part-time (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Klocker & Drozdowski, 2012). The potential benefits for mothers of a career in academia are also recognised, principally highlighting the high degree of flexibility and autonomy that academia can provide (Gilbert, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). However, the gendered implications of this flexibility and the accompanying blurring of boundaries between academia and home life are increasingly evident, with several authors emphasising that such “flexibility” often simply results in mothers doing “more” in order to successfully juggle home and work (Ekinsmyth et al., 2004; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). In this regard, Drozdowski and Robinson argue that “the temporalities and the formal spaces of wage work in academia are slippery” (2015, p. 373), with a blurring of work and non-work spaces meaning that care-work and wage-work sometimes take place concurrently, providing both a valuable flexibility but also an inescapability, “we are always then ‘available’ to work” (2015, p. 373). In a similar vein, Crang provides a cogent discussion of the ambiguities embedded in academic time, alluding to the gendered implications of the conception of academic time as “almost infinitely malleable” (2007, p. 512). These issues are framed by the ever-deepening neoliberalisation of the university sector and the ensuing intensification of academic work (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Crang, 2007; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016), and speak to broader (especially feminist) debates around self-care, caring, and the neoliberal academy (Datta & Lund, 2018; Hawkins, 2018; Mountz, 2016; Mountz et al., 2015).

Notions of time – a constraining of available time, a perceived lack of time, and also the fixity of time in relation to childcare schedules and the demands of small children – are central throughout these discussions (Gilbert, 2008; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013), echoing debates beyond the academic workplace about women's juggling of domestic and work

commitments and the time burden this places on them (Hochschild, 1997). However, as a mother of now two small children, I found little literature within Geography that reflected on how these issues play out in the context of conducting overseas Development fieldwork as a mother, without one's children in tow. Here then, I argue that these blurred boundaries, the slippage and juggling between work and non-work, and the simultaneously time-bounded context in which academic mothers operate, are keenly felt, and constantly negotiated, in the context of conducting a period of overseas fieldwork.

In thinking through the nexus of motherhood and fieldwork, there has been some visibility of academic mothers (and sometimes fathers) who have undertaken fieldwork *accompanied* by their children (and often partners) – within both Geography and Anthropology (where longer periods of fieldwork are more common). This literature critically discusses the practicalities and challenging logistics of arranging and undertaking fieldwork with family, in often remote and less developed locations (Dombroski, 2011; Drozdowski & Robinson, 2015; Friedl, 1998; Johnston, 2015; Starrs et al., 2001; Sutton, 1998), and the ways in which this experience shapes both the research process and the focus of the research itself. Examples include Geographer mothers who have been accompanied by their children in the field while also researching motherhood: Julie Cupples' critically analyses her experience of taking her children into the field in Nicaragua (Cupples & Kindon, 2003), while Kelly Dombroski reflects on how she negotiated ethnographic fieldwork in China accompanied by her child and partner (Dombroski, 2011; Farrelly et al., 2014), both highlighting the ways in which being with their children in the field opened up new insights into their research topic, as well as enabling the breaking down of barriers with research participants.

Researchers critically explore the ways in which being accompanied by your children facilitates certain types of interactions – particularly in small and rural communities where fulfilling the everyday needs of one's own children provides an entry point into the community and its dynamics (Brown & de Casanova, 2009) – while shutting down or limiting other types of (non-child-focused) research interactions such as evening socialising (Farrelly et al., 2014; Johnston, 2015). Several mother-fieldworkers also reflect on the experience of being judged against particular cultural norms about mothering (Brown & de Casanova, 2009; Cupples & Kindon, 2003; Friedl, 1998; Johnston, 2015), and how this shapes both their participants' perceptions of them and their own understandings of the cultural context of their research.

Mother-fieldworkers also consider the impacts of their decision to take family into the field with them, with perceived advantages including the independence and resilience this experience affords children (Farrelly et al., 2014; Johnston, 2015), as well as the opportunities for cross-cultural learning (Cupples & Kindon, 2003; Datta & Lund, 2018). On the flip-side, many researchers highlight concerns around illness (e.g., Dombroski, 2011) and exposure to (different) risks and danger (Farrelly et al., 2014; Johnston, 2015), while Friedl – reflecting on a lifetime of prolonged periods of fieldwork in Iran – observes that her children “learned to live in two worlds but at the very great expense of having only shallow roots in either” (1998, p. 163). Cupples and Kindon (2003) also discuss how being accompanied by one's children requires the negotiation of “competing demands,” which may impact on the ability of researchers to dedicate focused attention to the fieldwork, and caution against romanticising fieldwork with children. Nevertheless, despite recognising the many challenges involved, overall most researchers find the experience of being accompanied in the field by children and partners to be positive for themselves, their families, and their research.

However, for many academics, taking their children with them on fieldwork will not be desirable or feasible. When we consider this perhaps more mundane scenario of leaving one's children at home while conducting overseas fieldwork, there is little to guide, reassure, or recognise the experiences of the Geographer mother-fieldworker. The exception here is the auto-ethnographic work of Farrelly et al. (2014), who reflect both on the experience of taking one's children into the field and also leaving them at home to conduct fieldwork, providing a compelling exploration of the multiple ways in which children's absence/presence is felt by mother-fieldworkers, and how this is embodied in their experiences and shapes their interactions with participants. Beyond this, the paucity of discussion of the experiences and implications of being a Geographer mother-fieldworker conducting overseas fieldwork without her children, including an absence from this journal, suggests there remains ample scope to critically explore these dilemmas, and begin to remedy this lack of visibility.²

While fieldwork is undertaken in many sites both close to home and far afield, here I focus specifically on conducting Development research in the global South, in this case in Latin America. This scenario has particular considerations given the geographical distance involved (in relation to my home in the UK), which in turn requires relatively extended periods of fieldwork. Although similar issues may also be experienced by fathers in the field, I argue that the gendered roles of mothers and the nature of mothering make for a very particular experience of undertaking fieldwork in the global South (unaccompanied by one's children). Following a brief discussion of my own circumstances, which have informed the writing of this paper, I critically analyse the experiences of motherhood and fieldwork through the lenses of emotion work and

time constraints. I draw on extracts from my research diaries to capture the emotive nature of these experiences, and situate these discussions in relation to knowledge production and gender inequality in the academy.

3 | JUGGLING MOTHERHOOD AND FIELDWORK

Missing the boys, but already this is day 3 of 20, and FaceTime and WhatsApp are a godsend. Can't do this too often though, it is a wrench being away from them and a source of stress and anxiety. I wonder why I am doing this? (Excerpt from fieldwork diary, 22 April 2017, Peru)

Exhaustion, total exhaustion. It has really hit me, the stress of the workshops and interviews, the exhaustion of cramming fieldwork into a really short time period so I'm not away too long from the boys – and the stress that creates in terms of making sure I get the data I need. (Excerpt from fieldwork diary, 4 August 2017, Peru)

As the extracts from my fieldwork diary above illustrate all too clearly, doing fieldwork as the mother of two young children is a personal, professional, and logistical challenge. These sorts of emotions (stress, anxiety, sadness) are often written out of the research process but are increasingly recognised as a fundamental aspect of understanding the experience and outcomes of Development research (see special issue edited by Baillie Smith & Jenkins, 2012; Griffiths, 2014; Lund et al., 2016; Woon, 2013). I have two boys, now aged 7 and 9, but my first experience of fieldwork as a mother was when my eldest son was 16 months old and I spent three weeks in Peru and Ecuador in 2012, leaving him at home with my husband in order to undertake a research project on women's activism. Since then, I have been to Latin America on eight other occasions, for between one and three weeks, conducting research on topics related to gender, activism, and large-scale mining in the region (see, e.g., Jenkins, 2015, 2017),³ both on my own and with colleagues. While for some mothers (and also fathers) taking their children with them is a feasible option (see, e.g., Drozdowski & Robinson, 2015; Friedl, 1998), particularly for longer periods of fieldwork and/or if both partners are academics, for me it is not one that I have seriously considered. To do so would require my husband to use up his own annual leave to come with us and act as the main carer, and would make the task of caring for our children significantly more difficult for him than doing so at home, unencumbered by jetlag, and unfamiliar cities and food. No doubt, when our sons are older, this option may seem more attractive but at the moment having them with me would only make life harder for everyone.

I am fortunate to have a partner whose stock response when I broach the topic of (yet another) trip to Latin America is “don't worry, we'll be fine,” and who picks up the pieces (and the children) when I am away. Nevertheless, we rely on a network of other people, including grandparents and paid childcare, to enable family life to function while I am “in the field.” My experience therefore resonates with Pallson's observation of the importance of recognising the “social histories of fieldwork as a cooperative enterprise sustained by relationships with other people – spouses, friends, informants, and colleagues” (1994, pp. 915–916, cited in Sutton & Fernandez, 1998), to which list should be added grandparents and nannies, among others.⁴ Thus my capacity to undertake fieldwork is subject not only to my availability, but also to my husband's busy work schedule, and (often) my father-in-law's availability and willingness to come and stay while I am away, delimiting both when, and for how long, I can travel overseas. One of my research partners recognised this collective endeavour (unprompted) at the end of my trip, commenting “We thank your lovely children, and your good husband, who are also collaborating with us, in allowing you to come” (“Agradecemos a tus hermosos hijos, a tu buen esposo, que tambien están colaborando, dejándote venir”) (personal communication with research partner, April 2017).⁵

3.1 | Positionality as a mother in the field

As the above comment illustrates, being a mother shapes the interactions one has in the field, and the data one is able to collect. However, most discussions in this area have been limited to scenarios where mothering or motherhood is the topic under investigation or where the researcher has their children with them in the field (Brown & de Casanova, 2009; Cupples & Kindon, 2003; Dombroski, 2011). As a white, lone, female British academic, I am doubtless rather difficult for my predominantly poor, Peruvian women research participants to relate to. On the one hand, being married and a mother makes me even more of a conundrum – motherhood in Latin America is reified and a culture of *machismo* continues to exist, with women still overwhelmingly responsible for domestic and reproductive activities. Among the working class, provincial, and *campesina* women I work with, it is not usual for women to be separated from their young children for any great length of time. That my husband is at home looking after the children therefore generates a good deal of discussion, interspersed

with some disbelief and even hilarity. On the other hand, many of my women research participants are mothers and grandmothers, and thus my being a mother also provides a commonality and allows participants to “place” me to some extent, making me less different to them and easier to relate to. Being understood to be away from my children also develops a degree of empathy with my female participants, who sympathise with me at being so far away from them – although being a working mother able to pay for childcare may also simultaneously mark me out as “a mother with privilege” (Brown & de Casanova, 2009, p. 47), thus distancing me further.

Though I have never set out to “use” my identity as a mother in a deliberate or instrumental way in my research, talking about my children, showing photos or exchanging anecdotes, has often naturally become a way of breaking down barriers, softening power inequalities, and generating empathy with research participants, hopefully leading to more successful research outcomes for both me and my participants (see also Farrelly et al., 2014). On several occasions, I have been asked for advice “as a mother” or asked whether my children had had similar problems – e.g., sleep-related issues, how long I had breastfed for, what foods were good for weaning. I did not interpret these exchanges as somehow privileging my knowledge over those of my participants, or erasing the multiple power inequalities between us, instead they were the everyday concerns and conversations of mothers the world over, that allowed us to share experiences beyond the confines of the particular research project (not focused on motherhood).⁶

Being a mum in the field has also caused me to re-evaluate the risks associated with doing fieldwork. Both the everyday and the more unexpected and, on occasions, dangerous situations that we find ourselves in as Development researchers are seen through a new, emotional, risk-averse lens. For example, on a fieldtrip in a remote part of the Atacama Desert, Chile, our vehicle broke down on a stretch of high altitude, isolated, unmade road, many miles from the nearest settlement, in the hot desert sun with limited food and water supplies and no mobile phone signal. I worried not only for my own immediate safety, and that of my colleagues, but also for the impact on my children, were things to end badly (which obviously they didn't, but that's another story). Risks are now perceived not only in terms of my personal wellbeing, but in the knowledge that others' lives are also intimately interwoven with mine, and risks are thus re-calibrated accordingly. Whether that's a decision not to travel on budget airlines, to avoid taking taxis off the street in Lima, or that certain countries are off limits due to their political situation, my decisions are certainly more risk-averse than pre-motherhood, and my fieldwork experiences are generally characterised by higher levels of anxiety and emotion. Being a mother is a key identity through which I assess the risks involved in any particular activity, despite not having to consider my children's immediate health and safety – a recurring concern among mother-fieldworkers accompanied by their children (Dombroski, 2011; Farrelly et al., 2014). This increased caution therefore also influences the research projects I am willing and able to get involved in, the ways I choose to conduct that research, and the day-to-day decisions I make on-the-ground in a fieldwork setting.⁷ Despite the absence of my children, or perhaps because of this keenly felt absence, my embodied identity as a mother fundamentally shapes every aspect of my fieldwork experience – as Dombroski cogently observes, “my embodied vulnerability as a mother provoke[s] certain limitations on what I [can] do in the field” (2011, p. 27).

3.2 | The emotion work of motherhood in the field

The incessant demands of being a parent, and particularly a mother, do not disappear when we fly to the other side of the world. As Erickson (2005) recognises, within heterosexual partnerships, women continue to be disproportionately responsible for organising the minutiae of day-to-day family life, even in dual-career households, and ours is no exception to this. As feminist theorists have argued for many years, much of this work is invisible and often unrecognised; it is imbued with emotion and central to the work of “mothering.” Family life and caring responsibilities cannot be entirely put on hold while we are in the field. Thus I find myself organising extra school pick-ups with the nanny by text message from Chile; replying to messages about where swimming kit might be; organising emergency grandparent cover while at Schiphol airport as I wait for my connecting flight; and reminding my husband via WhatsApp about the birthday party the boys are invited to on Saturday. Before leaving, I not only have to undertake all my preparation for an intensive period of fieldwork, and make sure the myriad usual academic and administrative obligations are fulfilled while I'm away, but I also want to ensure that I leave home in a way that can enable daily family life to function smoothly in my absence – extra breakfast club slots booked at school; after school pick-ups coordinated; grandparent help drafted in as necessary; online grocery order booked.⁸ I recognise that taking on the role of sole parent for two small children for two or three weeks while working fulltime in a demanding job is a significant ask and, though undertaken willingly by my partner, requires as much logistical support as possible in order to ensure that it is feasible for me to be away. This is echoed by Lubitow and Zippel, who found that “even when women faculty travelled [without their children] ... the burden of organizing the work at home still fell on them” (2014, p. 75), meaning academic mothers were exhausted and stretched as they embarked on their international travel.

So although being an unaccompanied mother-fieldworker challenges some gendered norms around caregiving and maternal proximity, other norms around the day-to-day reproduction of the household are reproduced – the double burden of home and work stretches across time and space, as I micro-manage the logistics of a busy household across several time zones, allowing me to continue to fulfil commitments to both academia and family (to some extent), despite the distance, and to maintain an emotional proximity and presence in my children's lives while physically absent.

While I'm away, despite the six-hour time difference, I need to build into my working day an opportunity to FaceTime with my sons and hear about their day, to minimise the impact on them of their mum being away, as well as for my own emotional wellbeing. I send them photos to help them make sense of where I am and what I am doing in the far-off country they do not yet know. The ups and downs of daily life continue at home, and they want to share with me the picture they've done at nursery, the goal they scored, or the certificate they got from school (see also Farrelly et al. 2014, who discuss similar ways in which mother fieldworkers negotiate their and their children's presence/absence in the field). However, the time difference between the UK and South America often means that the time my children are available to talk (after school and dinner, before bed) coincides with the middle of the working day for me, creating a logistical difficulty that cannot always be surmounted, especially given the need for Wi-Fi access. So I endeavour to carve out spaces to make this possible and juggle my fieldwork schedule around a domestic routine playing out several thousand miles away, exemplifying the way in which being a mother in the field requires us to “do” Geography in ways that enable us to continue to care for our children, even when we are distant from them (Datta & Lund, 2018).

These strategies enable me to maintain connections with home and be in the field for several weeks without becoming detached from the everyday realities of family life, reflecting Longhurst's (2013) observations on the ways in which Skype and similar video technologies enable intimate family relations to stretch over time and space, and facilitate the continuation of gendered patterns of caregiving. Sometimes though, my children refuse to talk to me, as is the wont of a seven-year-old, absorbed in his own activities, or simply too exhausted at the end of the day to manage the emotions of an online encounter (again, see Longhurst 2013 on the disturbance and interruption wrought by these technologies). Comforting an overwrought child, empathising with an exhausted partner, managing the emotions of family illness and bereavement, dealing with one's own emotions of being far from home and family, these everyday realities permeate my experience of the field and illustrate the continuation of “emotion work” across time and space, complicating expectations of fieldwork as consisting of “wholly unimpeded tracts of time” (Drozdowski & Robinson, 2015, p. 372). Erickson (2005) attributes often invisible “emotion work” overwhelmingly to women within the family, and Hochschild (1997) calls this “the third shift,” an additional pressure to be managed, juggled, and accommodated by working women – a pressure that I argue extends over time and space to the field. While they may seem mundane examples, such tasks are a fundamental part of my identity as a mother, an identity that continues in the field. Drozdowski and Robinson (2015, p. 372) recognise this “mixing [of] ‘care-work’ with fieldwork” in relation to having your children with you in the field, but I argue that this is also the case when you are unaccompanied by your children.

Technology plays an important role here, and obviously makes the experience of being in the field very different to 20, or even 10, years ago. Even in quite remote parts of Peru, I have been pleasantly surprised to find reliable internet connections, unheard of when I was doing my doctoral fieldwork in Lima in the early 2000s. When the time difference means I do not have an opportunity to speak to my children every day, we use WhatsApp to leave each other voice messages and stay connected over time and space:

Lovely message from the boys via WhatsApp when I got to my hotel. Reassuring that they sound completely unphased by me being away – just me that's a wreck! (Excerpt from fieldwork diary, 20 November 2017, Chile)

Making this emotional connection – through practices Datta and Lund (2018) term “distant mothering” – ensures my own emotional wellbeing, as well as that of my sons, and sustains my ability to be in the field and be away from my family, albeit for what others may consider to be relatively short periods of time.⁹ This also resonates with the way in which Longhurst describes mothers' use of video technologies as “‘sticky’ with emotion and affect, ‘sticky’ with everydayness, with missing and reconnecting with family members and friends” (Longhurst, 2013, p. 672). While I am certain that fathers conducting fieldwork also make time to keep in touch with their children on a daily basis, and face many similar challenges, for men to be away from the family home for prolonged periods of time is probably less unusual (or at least more normalised).¹⁰ At least in a traditional heterosexual family set up, mothers are usually assumed to be on hand to do the “emotion work,” reflecting enduring gendered expectations around male breadwinners and female caregivers, as well as the ways in which motherhood in a Western context is intimately bound up with ideas about proximity and an expectation of

continual availability (see also Farrelly et al., 2014). Indeed, as McRobbie (2015) cogently observes, it is rarely recognised or made explicit that the careers of male academics are often predicated on the unseen labour of their female partners at home, enabling the unfettered mobility and dedication to academic endeavour required for “success” (see also Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

The above examples underline how being an academic mother conducting fieldwork both disrupts and reinforces gendered norms about performing motherhood, particularly as a working mother, even in a context where parenting duties are routinely shared (though not necessarily evenly) on a daily basis. Every time I pack my bags for another trip, I find leaving my children upsetting, and struggle to control the guilt of the working mum, amplified 10-fold (see also Gilbert, 2008). As Farrelly et al. recognise, the notion of “good mothering” is imbued with culturally specific connotations of “being there” and “being physically and emotionally present” (2014, p. 8), particularly in fulfilling the mundane everyday tasks of nurturing children. But I know (intellectually if not emotionally) that this scenario highlights precisely why it is “a good thing” that my boys see their Mum going off to do fieldwork on the other side of the world, and see their Dad, and often Granddad, (more than competently) taking on the role of primary carers during this time. Nevertheless, managing guilt is a key aspect of the emotion work involved in being a mother-fieldworker, and one which underlines the way in which conducting fieldwork overseas brings my professional and personal identities into dialogue/tension: how can I do the work that I want to do as a Feminist Development Geographer while also being a “good mum?” Such tensions are a recurring feature of my fieldwork diaries:

I feel guilty because of how little we’ve achieved this week and at the expense of being away from my family and having my father-in-law come and stay. A lot of people inconvenienced for little output. (Excerpt from fieldwork diary, 24 November 2017, Chile, during a challenging period of fieldwork)

Being here, in the field, is a constant challenge, an internal battle between me as home-loving Mum and wife, and me as feminist academic and researcher, with more than capable husband supporting my career by staying at home with the kids and holding the fort. I couldn’t do this without him. Do other people (women, mothers I mean) do this? (Excerpt from fieldwork diary, 22 April 2017, Peru)

This tension between personal and professional commitments is also articulated by Hirakata and Daniluk, who found that female academics who were mothers felt “continually compromised in their efforts to achieve what is perceived to be success in both their private and professional lives” (2009, p. 287), while more specifically in relation to mothering and fieldwork, Trisia Farrelly comments “I felt I was constantly walking a tightrope of maintaining roles of what I considered to be a “good wife” and “good mother” while also trying to attain research excellence” (Farrelly et al., 2014, p. 26). This is a constant process of negotiation and compromise; I am probably neither as good an academic as I could be, nor as good a mum as I could be, but I hope I manage to achieve a degree of competence in both, while also (sometimes) maintaining a degree of sanity. Toffoletti and Starr frame this balancing act as itself placing an additional burden on academic mothers – “the work of being good at sustaining a balance between these two spheres [work and family]” (2016, p. 408) – and argue that by women undertaking this labour, structural gendered inequalities are masked, and recast as the personal failings of individual women.

3.3 | Time constraints and being a mother-fieldworker

Notions of time are central in the literature on academic mothering and integral to understanding the constant compromise and juggling that characterises doing Development fieldwork as a mum. On every trip, I find myself compressing my activities into the shortest possible timeframe, in order to be away from home for the least time possible, while still achieving my research goals. There is no slack built into the schedule for unexpected delays, jetlag, fieldwork hiccups, logistical challenges, or a rest day in the field, everything needs to be coordinated, dovetailed together, and timetabled in advance to enable fieldwork to “fit” within the slot of time I have carved out for it, in an echo of the daily challenges of balancing motherhood and academia. Yet, as many will attest, this does not always fit with the messy realities of doing Development research in the global South, where time (to wait around, to hang out, to reflect, to follow up an unexpected contact, or to benefit from a chance encounter) can be a crucial element (Palmer et al., 2017).

When you are “in the field” you are always “working,” never really off-duty, thus two weeks away is also two weeks of “lost” personal time, evenings, and weekends (albeit willingly), exemplifying the critique of academic work as never-ending (Crang, 2007; Rafnsdóttir & Heijstra, 2013). Additionally, for part-time workers (overwhelmingly women who are

mothers), a period of fieldwork necessitates (more than) full-time working, for which there is seldom formal recognition or recompense. Given that most places where I work in Latin America take at least 24 hours to reach from the UK, a compressed one-week trip brings its own challenges of stress, jetlag, illness, and exhaustion. These are also unrecognised in the machine of academia, and absorbed by stretching one's personal life yet further to enable recovery time on returning from the field – again highlighting the blurring and permeability of home and academia, as family time is eroded in myriad small ways.¹¹

The type of research projects I can undertake are also constrained by the realities of family life. When I write research bids, these have to be designed in such a way that they involve only short periods of fieldwork – three weeks is my own personal limit for how long I feel able to be away from home, once or twice a year at the most.¹² In this regard, Farrelly et al. (2014) observe that being a mother means fieldwork is planned and undertaken with a greater – and I would argue more explicit – awareness of our limits, and Brown and de Casanova (2009) also emphasise the particular time constraints that motherhood imposes on fieldwork decision-making and planning. While institutional pressures require a steady stream of research bids, I have a particular set of parameters that limit the frequency and duration of my travel (not only for fieldwork but also for conferences etc.) and therefore the volume of fieldwork-based research bids that I am able to submit; my capacity to conduct fieldwork and overseas travel is finite, in contrast with the prevailing notion of academic time as infinitely extendible (Crang, 2007). I cannot risk a scenario where, were several bids with a fieldwork element to succeed, I would be committed to multiple overseas trips in any given year.¹³ This situation has recently led me to decline an invitation to collaborate on one fieldwork-based international research bid, and to delimit the scope of my participation to rule out fieldwork in another case. These constraints should also be situated in relation to Mountz et al.'s feminist critique of the accelerated “temporal regimes of the neoliberal University” and their manifesto for slow scholarship as part of a “collective feminist ethics of care” (2015, pp. 1236–1237), in relation to which motherhood is only one of many different constraints that may influence academics' need or desire to limit or curtail their fieldwork-dependent activities.¹⁴

The types of research methods I can use are also influenced by such a time-bounded approach – ethnographic work over a long timeframe is not feasible, imposing a shift towards more focused, structured, time-efficient approaches to data collection.¹⁵ This is echoed by Drozdowski and Robinson, who reflect on the way in which “Prior to having children, fieldwork (and especially ethnography) provided opportunities to explore, immerse, ask questions, be uninterrupted and on-task for long periods of time” (2015, p. 372). Such a shift sits uneasily with me, bringing my feminist commitment to understanding the lived experiences of research participants and avoiding overly extractive forms of data collection into conflict with the practicalities of having a limited amount of time at my disposal.¹⁶ In trying to negotiate such constraints, I have begun to design more participatory projects around shorter “bursts” of fieldwork,¹⁷ facilitated by having excellent research partners and more time-intensive research assistant support on-the-ground. Preparatory work by research assistants allows me to “hit-the-ground-running” on arrival, and their more frequent or extended presence gives a degree of continuity to research participants in my absence. Additionally, researching in a context where a commitment to activist organisations and their particular causes tends to be a prerequisite for gaining, and maintaining, access, being a mother also enables a degree of understanding and acceptance that I am not able to accompany my participants over an extended timeframe – cramming research activities into a relatively short period of time, and being able to visit infrequently, is less frowned on or at least tolerated.

The sorts of decisions, juggling acts, and time constraints discussed above obviously have (unquantifiable) knock-on impacts in terms of career progression – fewer bids submitted, fewer publications realised. However, they also signal a less visible way in which motherhood impacts on academia in terms of the knowledges that are ultimately produced, problematically reinforcing fieldwork as the domain of the unencumbered (usually male) academic.

Though seldom made explicit, for some female academics, not only in Development Geography, becoming a mother precipitates a shift in research focus and/or location in order to avoid the need for overseas fieldwork, perhaps enabling motherhood and academic research to co-exist more easily. While this is a pragmatic response to the challenges discussed here, it does also have implications for the construction of knowledge, limiting possibilities for global North women scholars to collaborate and research with communities in the global South. Especially given that much gender and development focused research is conducted by women, it seems likely that if women Development Geographers with young children face significant barriers and constraints to conducting fieldwork, this will impact on who is written into and out of research in Development Geography, with more research conducted by and about men and their experiences. Thus the challenges that mothers face in relation to conducting overseas fieldwork are not only of concern in relation to the pressing issues around continued gender inequality in academia. They are also important to grapple with in order to ensure a plurality of voices and approaches are active in constructing new Development knowledges, and to protect, deepen, and extend the hard-won spaces that feminist geography has carved out within the discipline.

4 | CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the course of this paper, I have explored the experience of being a mother conducting Geography fieldwork in the global South without her children, using ideas of emotion work and time constraints to critically analyse the ways in which overseas fieldwork exemplifies the challenges of academic mothering amplified and stretched across time and space. The paper makes evident that motherhood has multiple implications for fieldwork: we are faced with “competing demands” (Cupples & Kinson, 2003) even when unaccompanied by our children. Motherhood constrains our “availability” to undertake fieldwork – practically, emotionally, geographically, and intellectually – while simultaneously significantly constraining our “availability” for our families, thus disrupting assumptions of both academics and mothers as continually “available.”

In problematising this gendered experience of fieldwork and its implications, the paper opens up an under-developed aspect of scholarship on the experiences of women Geographers attempting to balance the conflicting demands of family and academia (both “greedy institutions”; Coser 1974 in Lubitow & Zippel, 2014). However, I also emphasise the consequences of this juggling act in terms of who is able and unable to produce Geographical knowledge. While here I focus on knowledge construction with and about communities in the global South, these debates will resonate across Human and Physical Geography where fieldwork is undertaken. Thus it is imperative that fieldwork is recognised in thinking through the multiple ways in which motherhood shapes (and limits) academic careers – from ruling out overseas fieldwork or impelling a change in research focus or location, to constraining bidding and publishing activity – all of which have implications for the types of Geographical knowledge produced and by whom, underlining the continued salience of Sundberg’s (2003) critique.

Despite the various professional and personal challenges of undertaking development fieldwork as a mother, as I finish writing this paper while on a fieldtrip to Chile, I remain committed to pursuing feminist and participatory methodologies in the global South. I continue to see fieldwork as an important aspect of my research, thus recognising that the above dilemmas may well continue to structure my professional and personal life – though no doubt as my children get older the challenges will be different, and the juggling act will vary. However, cognisant of broader discussions around self-care in the academy (Mountz et al., 2015), I emphasise the importance of being explicit – with colleagues and with institutions – about the constraints that mother-fieldworkers face and juggle, and the limits that we need to set in relation to fieldwork-related research (how long, how often, etc.), making visible the less tangible “costs” entailed in balancing fieldwork and motherhood – personal, familial, financial, and emotional.¹⁸ This also involves lobbying and working with our own institutions to implement appropriate support structures that might help mitigate and manage these “costs,” constraints, and challenges (for both fieldworking mothers and fathers), recognising these as requiring a collective response rather than deeming them “problems” to be resolved by individual women (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016). By implementing support for fieldworking parents (and not only mothers), we can also begin to disrupt implicit institutional assumptions that our male colleagues’ partners are willing and able to take on the additional family-related labour that their absence creates.

Alongside this, funders must be open to making available additional funding to enable overseas fieldwork by academic mothers (and fathers), and to developing mechanisms for recognising such costs as legitimate and expected elements of funding bids. Clearly these costs will vary with personal circumstances, but could conceivably include extra childcare costs, the need for more numerous but shorter overseas trips, and travel costs for family members who might come and stay to help look after children, while for others there will be costs associated with taking one’s children into the field.¹⁹

Overall, I argue that the emotion work and juggling of time entailed in being a fieldworking mother exemplifies the tensions of combining academia and motherhood writ large across time and space. In making visible these tensions, I hope that this paper might stimulate the opening up of intellectual and institutional spaces for collective reflection and conversation around the challenging (and often hidden) intersections of motherhood and fieldwork, and the consequences of this scenario for the production of geographical and feminist knowledge. Bringing these discussions into dialogue with emotion work and conceptualisations of time in the neoliberal academy allows us to expand critical analysis of gender inequality within the academy to encompass less well-rehearsed aspects of the experience of academic motherhood.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For the purposes of this paper, I do not delve into this challenging and contested terrain, but recognise that motherhood carries a multiplicity of meanings and, although constituting a highly gendered set of practices, is not always or only carried out by women.
- ² Similarly, Ekinsmyth et al. (2004) discuss “coming out” as mothers in *Geography* in relation to the importance of making mothering normal in the academy.
- ³ This is on top of all the usual travel that academics also undertake (conferences, external examining, meetings with research partners and colleagues, workshops and seminars, meetings for external roles on journals, committees, etc.), which is also predicated on relatively unfettered mobility (see also Crang, 2007), but is beyond the scope of this paper.
- ⁴ I also recognise that I am in a privileged position to be able to rely on others, and to pay for extra childcare as needed, to enable me to pursue my research career, and I recognise the even greater, quite possibly insurmountable, barriers which other women (especially single mothers) who do not have this support network would face.
- ⁵ Though I wonder how many male academics’ wives would receive similar recognition?
- ⁶ See Oakley (1981) for an early discussion on shared identities as mothers of researcher and researched, and information sharing in this context.
- ⁷ A similar sentiment is articulated by Robinson (as a father) in Drozdowski and Robinson (2015).
- ⁸ The financial implications of my absence are also significant – for a recent two-week trip to Peru, I estimated that we spent an additional £300 on extra childcare to enable me to be away from home.
- ⁹ In this regard, it is also important to recognise that in other types of job women with many fewer choices are required to work and live away from their children for extended periods of time – for example, global South women working in global North households as maids and nannies, leaving their own children to be cared for by extended family (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Madianou & Miller, 2011), or women shift workers who ‘fly-in, fly-out’ on a fortnightly or monthly basis (see, e.g., Macintyre, 2006).
- ¹⁰ Both within academia but also far beyond in all walks of life (see, e.g., Gustafson, 2006).
- ¹¹ See also Acker and Armenti (2004) on “sleeplessness” in relation to academic mothering.
- ¹² Lubitow and Zippel (2014) found that academic mothers in STEM subjects were much more likely to impose limits on their international collaborative activities, and to modify their research focus to rule out international travel, than were fathers.
- ¹³ Between 2015 and the end of 2018, I had eight fieldwork trips to Latin America, and the cumulative impact of that on my personal and family life, aside from all the usual academic travel, feels substantial.
- ¹⁴ Personal circumstances including long-term illness, disability, mental health issues, and caring responsibilities should also be recognised here and more openly discussed.
- ¹⁵ Such dilemmas are not unique to mothers but also reflect the intensification of contemporary academia and the difficulty in blocking out extended periods of time for overseas fieldwork.
- ¹⁶ Trisia Farrelly (in Farrelly et al. 2014) also reflects on this challenge as being just as acute accompanied by her partner and child in the field.
- ¹⁷ See also Pink and Morgan’s (2013) discussion of the value of “short-term ethnography” in enabling intense and rich data collection that produces “alternative ways of knowing about and with people and the environments of which they are part” (p. 359).
- ¹⁸ This is of course much more difficult for early career colleagues on precarious contracts than for those of us in relatively secure positions.
- ¹⁹ See also the work by DARG and GFGRG on “Care and the Academy” (Development Geographies Research Group, 2018).

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