

# “Having a family is the new normal”: Parenting in neoliberal academia during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made explicit the burden of care shouldered by academic mothers, in addition to juggling their scholarly commitments. Although discussions are abundant on the impact of caring responsibilities on the careers of women academics, neoliberal academia continues to minimize such struggles. Despite the disruptions to family routines caused by the health crisis, academic institutions have expected academic mothers and fathers to continue undertaking their professional responsibilities at the same level as before, disregarding their parenting demands. This paper contributes to the research on parenthood in academia by looking at how, throughout the pandemic, academic parents have negotiated the tensions between parenthood and academic demands, and by investigating the strategies they use to confront neoliberal culture of academic performativity, even amid the health crisis. The paper engages with the “space invaders” concept used by Puwar (2004) to analyze the “hypervisibility” of academic mothers’ and fathers’ “bodies out of place” during the pandemic, and to investigate their “renegade acts” against the uncaring attitudes of their institutions. Evidence is drawn from a qualitative study conducted during December 2020 and January 2021 among scholars affiliated to Portuguese academic institutions: 17 in-depth interviews conducted with women, and two mixed-gender focus

groups. Our results research reveal how the experiences of academic mothers and fathers were not uniform during the pandemic. In addition, it shows how, despite their commitment to their academic responsibilities, these parents have crafted various resistance strategies to confront the institutional pressure to continue maintain their working routines, and instead positioning themselves as “more than just academics.”

**KEYWORDS**

COVID-19 pandemic, gender, neoliberal academia, parenthood, resistance

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

It is broadly acknowledged that academics mothers have been particularly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (hereafter, pandemic), both in terms of their personal lives and their professional careers, when compared with women without children and with men in general (Minello et al., 2021). In fact, even before the health crisis, the issue of motherhood in academia has spawned an abundance of literature covering the obstacles faced by such women in their professional paths (Amsler & Motta, 2019; Baker, 2012; Dickson, 2019; Santos, 2015; Thun, 2020; Tsouroufli, 2020; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2015). Despite this wealth of literature, as well as the growing debate surrounding work-life balance in academia (see Rosa, 2021) and the profusion of gender equality policies (van Brink & Benschop, 2012), the neoliberal trends in academia and the academic culture performativity hinder overcoming the challenges of motherhood for academic mothers (Amsler & Motta, 2019). In the neoliberal academia, scholars are the entrepreneurs of their career and are solely responsible for its success (Rottenberg, 2014). Following market-oriented logics, neoliberal academia is characterized by the intensification and extensification of academic work, expansion of auditing and control mechanism, exorbitant competitiveness, and rising casualization. Likewise, the academic regimes of performativity pushes for uttermost productivity and the metricization of scientific labor measured by quantified outputs (Gill, 2010; Pereira, 2017). This continuous pressure boosts high levels of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion among scholars (Tzanakou & Pearce, 2019).

In addition, the gendered nature of the academic institutions (Acker, 1990), built upon a model of dissociation of work/family, penalizes those who have caring responsibilities (Fusulier et al., 2017). Hence, as academic mothers do not match the disembodied “ideal worker” without personal constrains and who pursues a linear career (Acker, 1990), they face more obstacles in their career progression than their peers who are men (Fusulier et al., 2017). For such mothers, the demands of parenting limit the time they can devote to their academic duties. Although women tend to bear more of the burden of childcare than men (Dominguez-Folgueras et al., 2018), recent studies have also indicated that academic fathers who are actively engaged with raising their children are also penalized in career terms—though to a lesser extent than women (Reddick et al., 2012; Sallee, 2012). By performing a role that is deemed to be feminine, such fathers clash with the model of “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), and are thereby exposed to some of the struggles that are regularly faced by academic mothers. Indeed, Lynch (2010, p. 57) wryly labels academia a “care-free zone” in which “careless” workers have more chance of succeeding than those with caring demands.

In performative academia, demands for productivity have naturalized long working hours, including in the weekends, and a culture of 24-7 availability (Gill, 2010) in which the boundaries between work and personal life are often

blurred (Sang et al., 2015). Moreover, constraints aimed at ensuring excellence in performance, as well as intensive auditing and monitoring practices, have heightened levels of physical and mental exhaustion among academics (Pereira, 2017), negatively affecting their availability to their families (and to work). Blackmore (2020, p. 1) states that given the advance of the neoliberal logics, academia have become “careless of people and values.”

Looking at the Portuguese context, we engage with the “space invaders” concept used by Puwar (2004) to analyze how academic mothers and fathers have negotiated the tensions between parenthood and neoliberal academia demands that have emerged from changes to their personal and professional routines during the pandemic. In addition, we investigate the strategies they use to confront the performative academia, in the midst of the health crisis. We argue that despite their “bodies out of place” (Puwar, 2004) becoming even more visible during the pandemic, the merging of work and personal space has led to academic parents engaging in “renegade acts” that disclose and challenge the careless nature of neoliberal academia.

This paper draws upon evidence from a qualitative analysis carried out among scholars affiliated to a Portuguese institution during the first year of the health crisis. This research consists of 17 interviews with women, as well as two mixed-gender focus groups.

The disruption brought by the health crisis to the lives of academic mothers has been widely documented (Boncori, 2020; Crabtree et al., 2020; Crook, 2020; Guy & Arthur, 2020; Minello et al., 2021). In this unprecedented situation, with schools and childcare facilities closing and social distance measures being enforced, the structured systems that enable women to juggle motherhood and academic demands have disappeared (Fodor et al., 2021). Academic institutions, meanwhile, have opted to continue with “business as usual” (Pereira, 2021). Given the gendered division of household labor (Dominguez-Folgueras et al., 2018), academic mothers have found themselves taking on the job of child-rearing full time, including home schooling, while also having to keep up with their academic work remotely (Crabtree et al., 2020; Minello et al., 2021). While we fully acknowledged the gendered implications of the pandemic, we believe that shedding light on the struggles of academic fathers also contributes to deconstructing the myth that all academic men conform to the model of “hegemonic masculinities” (Pereira, 2021).

Although, the rise of the neoliberal trend in the Portuguese academia is rather late when compared to other contexts like UK or Australia (Pereira, 2017), by centering our analysis on the pandemic context, our paper offers innovative insights for the discussions on parenting and neoliberal academia. Moreover, of greater significance are the findings we present on the strategies put in place by academic parents to tackle the hardships imposed by the pandemic on their identities as parents and academics, which have so far gone unaddressed.

## 1.1 | No space for such a thing as a family

In her seminal work, *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, Nirmal Puwar looks at how non-white and non-male bodies are not welcomed in institutional spaces such as “Parliament, Whitehall, academia and the art world” (Puwar, 2004, p. 34). She explains how the spaces with which we engage have been built and still are dominated by white men and by hegemonic masculinity. Thus, women and people from racialized minorities do not fit into these gendered, racialized, and class-based institutional spaces. By entering spaces in which they do not belong, women and racialized individuals become “space invaders”: “bodies out of place” in privileged spaces in which they are “not the normative figures” (Puwar, 2004, p. 33). To be granted the right to “invade” such spaces, it is therefore expected that they will “disembody” themselves.

Although the number of women scholars has been growing, this does not mean that they have an “undisputed right to occupy the [academic] space” (Puwar, 2004, p. 1). As space invaders, women academics face the “burden of doubt” as well as “super-surveillance” with regard to the quality of their work (Puwar, 2004, p. 58). Motherhood accentuates their “hypervisibility”: as a conspicuous body, academic mothers are immediately spotted—becoming visible for “what they might be incapable of” (Puwar, 2004, p. 92). Their visibility as not being the normative body within that space places pressure on them to prove constantly that they deserve to be there.

The great diffusion of the hegemonic “intensive mothering” ideology normalized the idea that mothers’ are expected to be omnipresent for their children and respond to their demands unflinching (Hays, 1996). Discourses of intensive mothering relates to a child-centered approach, which equates good mothering to great energy, time, financial, and emotional investments in child-rearing (Hays, 1996) and to the protection of their children’s physical, social, emotional, and cognitive well-being (Villalobos, 2014). Women who conciliate intensive mothering and successful careers are effusively celebrated by neoliberal feminism (Rottenberg, 2014). The rising of intensive mothering ideology has fostered changes in mothering practices—for example, increase in time devoted to in childcare; involvement in educational activities, and praise of extra-curricular activities (see Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). This intensive mothering ideology clashes with the academic culture of performativity, which also requests scholar’s total engagement, foregrounding the prominence of faculty mothers’ bodies in the academic space as out of place.

Turning back again to Puwar’s framework, we argue that men who do not conform to the hegemonic masculinities by performing “caring masculinity” (Elliott, 2016) and taking over caregiving tasks in their families are also deemed to be “space invaders.” By actively engaging in fatherhood, they confront to some degree with the expectations of “hegemonic masculinity” and the norm of academia’s “ideal worker” in which faculty men should be unencumbered by nonwork demands (Peukert, 2019). Hence, to a certain extent the experience of fathers who are actively engaged in their children upbringing resembles mothers’ ones, as they also struggle to address the performative demands of academia.

With the aim of avoiding suspicions being raised with regard to their capability to do the job, academic parents have to hide their caring identities, as “any mistakes they make are less likely to be overlooked or pardoned” (Puwar, 2004, p. 92). They are advised not to disclose their status as parents, and to avoid using their children’s affairs as an explanation for not being available for meetings or having to leave early (Ecklund & Lincoln, 2016; Sallee, 2012). While, women are frequently recommended to schedule getting pregnant or giving birth to an appropriate moment, men tend to be criticized or discredited when taken parental leave (Sallee, 2012). Moreover, the dominant discourse within academia portrays parenthood as a personal choice and a private matter (Huppertz et al., 2019; van Engen et al., 2019); hence, academic parents should manage their career challenges privately. The negative impact of the academia’s organizational gendered norms is totally disregarded and, in some cases, work-life balance policies that take into consideration the demands of parenthood are seen as preferential treatment (Harris et al., 2019; Powell et al., 2018). It is not surprising that parenthood is seen as one of the main obstacles in academic career path (Fusulier et al., 2017).

However, some parents do engage in “renegade acts” (Puwar, 2004)—speaking out about the careless nature of neoliberal academia; challenging its institutional narrative of being an impartial, disembodied organization. They perform active practices of resistance, refusing to negate their identity as carers, thus “carving a third path” for their academic careers (Ollilainen & Solomon, 2014). They reject the norm of the ideal worker without a family, and instead place their families as a visible and integral part of their lives. Tapping in, Ahmed’s (2004) work, we argue that these “renegade acts” are emotional responses that challenges the normalization of the careless neoliberal academia. Therefore, they are not only individual experiences, but rather, embodied experiences of social relations. Despite the importance of these acts of resistance, which show other possibilities for occupying academia, studies on the topic are still scant (Minnotte, 2021).

## 1.2 | Parenthood, academia, COVID-19

During the pandemic, the space of the workplace has shifted to the personal space of academic mothers’ houses, blurring all possible boundaries between professional and personal lives, and rendering it impossible for academic mothers to “hide” their motherhood (Crabtree et al., 2020; Plotnikof et al., 2020). As work and family began to coexist in the same space and time, motherhood and academic demands have become almost irreconcilable. For Ceuterick (2020, p. 898), the incompatibility of the forced merger of the professional sphere with the domestic space rests on the fact that

“these are very different types of embodied use of space.” Children, who were constantly at home, became prominently visible in their mothers’ “new” workplace, exposing still further such women’s bodies out of place.

In some cases, the dissolution of the boundaries between personal and professional spaces made it more difficult for women to work, due to an increase in the domestic and care workload. In others, continuous exposure to reminders of work amplified the porosity between nonwork and work time and space, resulting in a “never-ending shift” (Boncori, 2020). Newcomb (2021) and Minelo et al. (2021) describe the emotional distress they experienced through being constantly on call for their students at the same time as being responsible for ensuring the well-being of their families. Thus, doing care became even more prominent in academic mothers’ routine. Academic mothers enacted care in multiple forms as institutional requirements to provide pastoral care to their students, as a maternal normative gendered performance, but also as an ethical standing point and a relational practice alternative to the neoliberal discourses of individualism and atomism (Hughes et al., 2007; Tronto, 1993).

In Portugal, the government implemented a furlough scheme covering 2/3 of the wage of parents, including academic mothers, whose children were under 12 years old and who were unable to work due to caring responsibilities (CITE, 2021). Despite the reduction in the wage, academic institutions neither came up with alternative schemes nor offered to compensate for scholars’ monetary loss. Thus, regardless their caring responsibilities overload, for most of academic mothers opting for the furlough scheme was not a viable alternative. Furthermore, given the super-surveillance that space invaders endure, by opting for this scheme, academic mothers would reinforce the assumptions that their bodies do not belong to the academic space.

Although women bore most of the burden of care during the pandemic (Power, 2020), fathers have also reported struggling with the demands of care (Crook, 2020; González-Calvo, 2020; Shafer et al., 2020) as some of them already shared responsibility for their children’s upbringing before the health crisis. Furthermore, the pandemic has forced a rearrangement in family dynamics that has enhance fathers’ caring responsibilities to their children (Abdellatif & Gatto, 2020; Craig & Churchill, 2021; Hall, 2020).

The last decade showed a burgeoning of studies concerning the impact of fatherhood in academia (Reddick et al., 2012; Sallee, 2012; van Engen et al., 2019; Vohlídalová, 2017). Sallee (2012) argues that, albeit to a smaller extent, faculty fathers also face challenges similar to women in balancing the demands of work and parenthood. In some cases, academic fathers have reported being criticized by their colleagues for using flexible working arrangements with the aim of sharing care responsibilities with their partners, as such policies are seen to be designed for “mothers only” (Sallee, 2012).

Against this background, we aim to investigate how academic parents have navigated parenthood during the pandemic while keeping up with their academic responsibilities. We argue that, despite their commitment to their academic responsibilities, parents have crafted various strategies of resistance to confront institutional pressure to continue “doing business as usual.” They have positioned themselves as more than just academics by refusing to comply with the careless neoliberal status quo within academia and maintaining their caring commitments to their children and to their own well-being (Jones & Whittle, 2021).

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

This article is part of the project “SAGE19: Scientific and Academic Gender (in)equality during COVID-19,” a mixed-methods investigation looking at gender inequalities in academia during the pandemic. The study was approved by the Ethical Commission of the authors’ institution, as well as for appraisal by the GDPR representative. This article discusses only its qualitative results, with the aim of grasping how academic parents have negotiated the tensions between their parental and professional demands during the pandemic, as well as exploring their strategies to confront pressure regarding their academic performance. Fieldwork was conducted remotely between December 2020 and March 2021. The participants were scholars holding a PhD degree who were affiliated to a Portuguese academic institution and were in Portugal during the pandemic outbreak in 2020. A total of 17 semi-structured inter-

TABLE 1 Participants' profile

			Interview	Focus groups <sup>a</sup>
Personal aspects	Gender	Women	17	6
		Men	0	6
	Relationship status	In a relationship	8	9
		Not in a relationship	9	2
	Parenthood	With children	11	7
		Without children	6	4
	Nationality	Portuguese	14	8
Foreigner		3	3	
Professional aspects	Academic status	Researcher	6	2
		Professor	1	0
		Researcher and Professor	8	7
		Researcher, Professor, and Administrative duties	2	2
	Scientific field	Social sciences	5	4
		Computing	1	0
		Life sciences	4	2
		Health	1	0
		Agriculture	2	0
		Language and communication	4	1
		Physics	0	1
		Sport	0	1
		Maths	0	2

<sup>a</sup>One participant joined the section after it had started and we could not collect her sociodemographic information. Therefore, the remaining categories have a sample size of 11.

views were carried out with women academics, each lasting between 30 and 90 min. The two mixed-gender focus groups lasted 60 min each. The first group comprised three men and five women, while the second consisted of three men and one woman. In both cases, questions focused on the impacts of the pandemic and the individuals' strategies to cope with it both professionally and emotionally, given the struggles with work-life balance brought about by the situation at the time. Before starting the interviews and focus groups, we explained the purpose of the study to all participants, and assured them of the confidentiality and anonymity. All participants gave oral consent indicating their willingness to take part in the study and allowing their sessions to be recorded.

In striving to achieve diversity in our samples for both the interviews and focus groups, various recruitment methods were used: snowballing, invitations through our personal networks, and volunteers expressing interest via an online survey. Table 1 summarizes the profiles of participants.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded in video, and later transcribed verbatim by Author 2, allowing us to take into account the context of the interview during our preliminary analysis of the material. The qualitative software MAXQDA was used to organize, archive, and code the data. Using a grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2006), both inductive and deductive procedures were followed, while rereading the transcription enabled us to create a list of thematic codes and to map the key themes. The codes were compared against the literature and further explored by taking into account their redundancy, affinity and/or inadequacy in order to consolidate the main categories for analysis (Prazeres, 2017). The final categories were shared with all of the authors, and no disputes emerged regarding them. In this paper, we present only the two categories that relate to our main proposes: *unbalanced professional-caring demands* and *resistance*. For each category, excerpts that better represent the data gathered were chosen.

### 3 | ANALYSIS

We start by looking at how parenthood and academic tensions came into play during the outbreak. This discussion is followed by the most innovative part of this article, in which we explore the resistance strategies used by parents to navigate the clash between parenthood and academic demands.

#### 3.1 | Unbalanced professional-caring demands

During the pandemic, many parents physically rearranged their homes by moving furniture around or buying new equipment, aimed at creating a “work space” (Gourlay, 2021); however, it was not feasible to entirely isolate this “new space” from family dynamics. Hence, “out-of-place bodies” of academic parents (Puwar, 2004) became blatantly visible, as their caring responsibilities either could not be postponed, or because they would brusquely emerge into the so-called “work space.” As Lourdes, a nontenured professor who has been solely responsible for her two children since her husband passed away, describes her experience with her 9-year-old son:

He didn't refrain from entering my room while I was teaching, because he didn't realise the importance of the moment and so he would come in, interrupt, and say in a panic “I can't make it” [join his class via Zoom], (...) it hasn't been easy.

This conflation of work and family space has hampered any possibility for many parents of hiding their caring responsibilities. Therefore, academic parents constantly violated the norm of the academic “ideal worker.” This was particularly true for solo parents, who were the sole care providers and references for their children. As Lourdes continues:

I had to do the housework by myself, because I had suspended the services of the cleaning lady (...) I was worried about their psychological well-being (...) the youngest one didn't even want to go out on to the balcony (...) So, an extra concern for me (...) the oldest one is in a complicated phase; he is a teenager. (...) the youngest started to ask to sleep with me because he was afraid.

The family demands to which academic parents had also related to providing emotional comfort and care—an even more complex and mentally draining type of support. In feminist studies on the subject of care, a long list of literature has discussed its costs and impacts on the well-being of the carer (see Hughes et al., 2007). In relation to solo parents, the question “Who cares for the carer?” becomes fundamental, as they bear the entire burden of caring for their children by themselves.

This erosion of an already overstretched work-life balance arrangement emerges as one of the main challenges faced by academic parents. The pandemic made it impossible to continue juggling their professional and domestic demands, due to a clear increase in the latter. As Ayres, a researcher under a temporary contract, father of two children—one aged 6 years, the other 7 months old—who before the pandemic was already sharing childcare with his partner, told us:

The number of hours dedicated to childcare increased enormously. (...) I have a temporary contract, so I have to submit projects for funds, but I don't have time to respond to all the calls (...) A lot of people [who don't have kids] say to me “hey the pandemic was spectacular, because now I don't spend time in traffic to the university. I get home, get up, write my article.” (...) I only hear people saying “one more [article published]” to me. It just gives me anxiety (...) I am always running from one place to the other (...) I am working, then I have to stop and do I don't know what (...) Then things get delayed, and at

six o'clock in the evening it's shower time [for the kids], and one of us have to prepare dinner and the other has to walk the dog.

During the pandemic, fathers who claimed time for caregiving also found their dedication to academic work disrupted. Ayres' experience reinforces the observation by Ecklund and Lincoln (2016) prior to the health crisis, that the tension between family and work demands were not only a problem for mothers, but affected all parents who actively engaged with their children's upbringing.

The experiences of parents whose children are older and autonomous, however, adds further nuances to our analysis. As, Sophia, a divorced mother living with her three children, all in their twenties, explains:

My daughter would help with the clothes, and the twins cleaned and hoovered the house. These things helped (...) Meals were a problem, because I did not teach them how to cook, but it was also an escape for me, (...) so my case is not the worst, because my kids helped me a lot.

Sophia is a senior researcher and her account underscores how despite changes to daily routines brought about by the closure of schools—for example some increase in cooking or cleaning—parents whose children were older and independent were not as strongly affected as those with younger children. For parents of younger children, school are important not only for its educational role, but also because they partially cover some childcare demands (nutrition, exercise, social contact, attention, etc.), allowing parents greater freedom to engage with other responsibilities (Chung & van der Lippe, 2020). During the pandemic, however, not only did the parents of young children lost support from schools, but they were given the additional task of home schooling.

The experiences of academic parents presented so far challenge the idea that their domestic and care responsibilities were uniform during the pandemic. Our interviewees' accounts show how differences in marital status and children's ages confer different struggles. As Ségeral (2020) stated, the experiences of single faculty mothers were qualitatively different from women who lived with other family members, as they could neither rely on a support network nor institutional childcare arrangements, and instead had to assume all responsibility for their children's needs. Furthermore, children's levels of autonomy also diversely affected the caring responsibilities of academic parents. In addition, the excerpts above also illustrate how some faculty fathers who were involved in caring for their children struggled to navigate the tensions between parenthood and academic demands.

### 3.2 | Resistance strategies

Amid the total collapse of their family and professional routines, some of our interviewees acknowledged the impracticality of carrying out their academic assignments as they had previously. Thus, they engaged with various resistance strategies to confront the institutional pressure to keep up the same level of dedication to their academic work, despite the increase of their caring responsibilities.

### 3.3 | Naturalizing

Some of our interviewees tried to insert their parenthood responsibilities "spontaneously" into their working routines. Given the total impossibility of maintaining rigid boundaries between work and family, as both spheres were simultaneously in the same space, these parents chose to make their family circumstance visible, and to openly explain the constrains they faced, showing that "having a family [is] the new normal" (Ollilainen & Solomon, 2014, p. 34) in academia.



Carolina holds a temporary fellowship position. As a single mother whose daughter was 2 years old during the spring 2020 lockdown, she recounts the unfeasibility of preventing the presence of her daughter in her “work space” while teaching remotely.

I was alone with her [the daughter] all the time. Sometimes, she would (...) interrupt me, she would jump into my lap just to watch and listen to what I was doing (...) She would talk to my students (...) She would see me reading excerpts from a book, and then she would grab her book and also want to read it for the students – at the age of 2.

As we discussed earlier, single mothers had no possibility of sharing their caring responsibilities. It was only by having the children present in their workspace, hence, by exposing their body out of place and transgressing the academic expectation of work/family dissociation that these mothers could carry out their academic duties.

Children were made present not only by showing up during online classes or meetings, but also discursively through parents' constant references to family responsibilities, as Almada, a Brazilian associated professor, father of a daughter aged 11 and twin boys aged 5, recounts:

Sometimes I had to interrupt a meeting and say “excuse me, but now I have to leave because it is time for my kids to eat and they are hungry.” That is it. They are not adults, and they cannot control their hunger.

As we argue above, given the masculine nature of the academic space, parents were not expected to display their family commitments within their academic work. However, given the disruption of their personal and work routines, some academic parents overtly embodied their identity as carers. Rather than choosing between being “parents” or “academics,” some scholars embodied both identities at the same time (Amsler & Motta, 2019). They shared their family constraints when they were unable to attain their planned academic commitments at the same level as they had previously, becoming visible as parents and thus unveiling their identities as “space invaders.” Hence, as Ollilainen and Solomon (2014) found on their study, our interviewees were “injecting family into work life” by openly bringing the subject into the academic environment.

### 3.4 | Managing expectations

In our fieldwork, we also found many scholars who were well aware that due to the escalation of their workload, both in the domestic and academic spheres, they would be unable to maintain the same working rhythm. They therefore opted to readjust their academic targets and goals, and manage their own expectations of what they would be able to achieve. This was the case for Floblerla, an associated researcher who lives with her husband and two teenage sons:

When I realised I could not really concentrate [because of the constant interference of family demands with her work] I was a bit worried (...) but then, I thought “OK, that’s it. If you don’t have the best level of productivity this year, you are not going to die because of that. (...) So I ended up relativising things a bit.

This position was also shared by Natalia, a researcher on a temporary contract, whose husband lives abroad, while she remains in Portugal with their 2-year-old toddler and 6-year-old son. She acknowledges, however, that this decision would have a detrimental impact on her career, as she holds a research fellowship under a temporary contract:

I had to adapt my expectations (...) If I had the expectation that my productivity was going to be similar to before the pandemic, it would not have been possible, but bearing this in mind, it has been OK. (...) But now, there are fewer job opportunities, fewer opportunities for career progression. (...) So this [decrease in the productivity] brings an immediate impact on my career.

Accepting the fact that it would be naïve to expect the same levels of productivity under such far-from-ideal conditions can also be considered a “self-care” strategy (Ahmed, 2014). Looking at this strategy through the feminist ethics of care (Lorde, 1988, p. 205), it was not an indulgence to rebalance work goals and acknowledge one's limits, but rather a way to be mindful of oneself (Ahmed, 2014).

### 3.5 | Refusal

Among the academic parents we interviewed, some embraced more radical strategies to resist to the pressure of continuing working as if the pandemic had not disturbed their personal lives and academic routines. During the most critical moments of the pandemic—namely, lockdowns—they halted their academic duties. It is paramount, however, to foreground the fact that this decision was not taken negligently, but was either agreed with their superiors or in accordance with official the government furlough scheme to support workers affected by the pandemic. This was the case for Brites, a single mother of a 4-year-old son. At that time, Brites was working under a temporary research contract scheme. After spending the first 2 weeks of lockdown trying to continue working normally in the evenings when her son was asleep, she decided to suspend some of her activities.

I explained to my coordinator that, as I had to be with my son at home, it would be impossible to reconcile the classes with having a 4-year-old child at home (...) As a single mother, I have to be with my son 100%. I even tried to work during the evenings. I managed it only for the first two week. After that, it was so tiring that no person would have the patience to assist any children. So, for me to keep my sanity and continue being a mother, I dropped it (the classes).

Although well aware of her precarious working situation, as her research contract expires at the end of 2021, Brites was also mindful of her limits as a solo carer. This does not mean, however, that her decision did not bring frustration and fear about her future, as she continues:

On a professional level it is frustrating, because we're at the stage where I'm either taking a step forward or stagnating my career (...) I am worried about what is going to happen to me at the end of the year.

Forced to perform intensive mothering, solo mothers were left with neither space nor time to do anything other than carework, which depleted them emotionally and physically, compromising their ability to work (Hertz et al., 2020; Ségeral, 2020). In the midst of such an extreme family configuration, in which academic parents recognized the unlikelihood of being able to properly respond to the demands of their work, refusing to go beyond their limits was an honest decision.

At the time of the interviews in January 2021, a second lockdown in Portugal was imminent.<sup>1</sup> In the context of this possibility, some of our interviewees stated that they had learnt from their experiences during the first lockdown in March 2020, when they had tried to maintain their ordinary working routine, and that they would not do the same again. Such a situation was described by Rosa, a researcher under a temporary contract scheme, whose husband is an essential worker and who therefore had to take care of their 6 and 9-year-old daughters by herself:

[In the event of a new lockdown] I will not go through that stress again, trying to do everything at the same time and aiming for all of them to be perfect, (...) because if in the future they [the directors of her centre] say “During the remote working modality, your productivity was not good enough”, I will have to accept it. That’s why I am also considering [for the second lockdown] going for the special COVID parental leave.<sup>2</sup> If I do it, what I am saying to my centre is: “I am not going to produce during this period, so you cannot demand anything from me.”

Similar to what we identified in the previous strategy, academic parents' refusal to meet academia's expectations regarding performance also aligns with practices of self-care. In doing so, they refused “to be subsumed by the demands of the neoliberal workplace” (Jones & Whittle, 2021, p. 348). The importance of self-care lies in its potential for resistance against neoliberal atomism and its capability to enable the construction of a caring community (Mountz et al., 2015). We are aware of the criticisms surrounding self-care, due to the eminent possibility of it being co-opted by neoliberal individualism, leading to full responsibility being placed on the individual for his/her own wellbeing (Jones & Whittle, 2021; Rottenberg, 2014). Our interviewees' self-care practices, however, were intertwined with a relational caring network, for example, Their parenting responsibilities, which made them aware of their “multiple identities, relationships, and commitments” (Jones & Whittle, 2021).

Moreover, engaging again with Puwar's framework, the refusal of these parent scholars' to subsume themselves in the performative ethos of academia resembles what she terms “renegade acts”—taking a position that makes the invisible rules visible. By speaking out about academia's “parenthood blindness,” these parents unmask the institutional narrative that academia is governed by meritocratic principles, and expose its careless and disembodied nature. They refused to legitimize the institutional discourse that during the pandemic, scholars' working routines were minimally affected. In doing so, they exposed the need for care spaces and practices in the neoliberal academia.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

Our study has provided valuable insights into the experiences of academic parents during the global health crisis. We look at how on the one hand the pandemic exposed their bodies out of place and reinforced their position as space invaders and on the other hand, it prompted renegaded acts that challenged the neoliberal academia performative norm.

Our analysis shows how the pandemic blatantly exposed the careless nature of neoliberal academia that disadvantages those with caring responsibilities, allowing no space for family matters (Lynch, 2010). Active parenthood was an overall problem during the pandemic, whether it was performed by women or men. Despite this overall suspicion about academic parents' belonging to academia due to their childcare responsibilities, not all parents face the same challenges. While single parents had to bear all domestic work and childrearing responsibilities alone, those who lived with other family members had the opportunity to share the burden. The literature shows, however, that most single-parent households are headed by women (Pollmann-Schult, 2018), and that fathers tend to report more support from their partners in ensuring caretaking demands are met than mothers do (Sallee, 2012). Indeed, looking at the Portuguese cases, Santos et al. (2021) highlights that while men dedicated more time during the global health crisis to domestic work and caregiving than they have previously, women's workload also increased. Therefore, while we acknowledge that academic fathers were also affected by the pandemic, we emphasize that overall, the experiences of academic mother were more intense. Likewise, we underline how children's age and level of autonomy also distinctly affected faculty parents' availability for academic work. In some cases, having older children at home was positive as it allowed parents to share the housework, and provided some company, whereas younger children were a constant source of caring demands.

Indeed, care turned into a central point in our analysis. Chatzidakis et al. (2020, p. 889) state that “COVID crisis has finally foregrounded ‘care’ as a keyword of our time” as practices of care became key to control the spread of

the virus. Although neoliberal academia showed high levels of concerns regarding students' wellbeing, scholars' care work demands and caring needs were overlooked (Newcomb, 2021). Despite academic parents not being able to continue concealing their childcare responsibilities as prior to the pandemic, the careless academia minimized how the disruption of childcare arrangements overload academic parents', expecting them to engage in an equal pace to their work demands. As a result, academic parents were exhausted (Minello et al., 2021).

Care, however, is crisscrossed by ambiguity and contradictoriness. Thus, caring practices can generate despondency alongside resistance (Hughes et al., 2007). During the pandemic, after reflecting on their personal situations and limits, some academic parents refused to continue working normally under the unprecedented circumstance. They recognized that their lives extended beyond academia, and accordingly embodied an ethics of care by creating "spaces of honesty for themselves" by opting to care for themselves (Jones & Whittle, 2021, p. 384). Academic parents' self-care practices materialized in their refusal to comply with academic performative culture as strategies of resistance against the careless nature of academia. They performed their agency and political activity by engaging in renegaded acts that speak out about the embodied work condition of neoliberal academia. Even if these renegaded acts were neither formally organized nor intentionally aimed at structural changes in academia, they did confront the academic performative culture.

Emotions form the very basis for various resistance practices against the neoliberalization of academia (Askins & Blazek, 2017). As Ahmed (2004), we acknowledge that emotions are not a private matter as it connects the individual and secure collective practices. Hence, each individual renegade act was also a collective resistance and communal "caring act" with regard to other members of academy who were in a similar situation, but could not afford to take the same position.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This article contributes to debates about parenthood and academic careers in neoliberal academia by engaging with the space invaders concept presented by Puwar (2004), to explore how academic parents navigated the tensions between parenthood and academic demands during the first year of the pandemic in the context of Portugal. Due to the closure of schools and caring facilities and enforced social distancing measures, professional and domestic spheres were conflated into the same space and academic parents' bodies out of place were disclosed. This abnormal circumstance overloaded faculty mothers and fathers with care work, but also prompt practices of resistance, in which self-care emerged as key.

It is undisputable that women academics with caring responsibilities were more affected in terms of their availability for work, compared with men. However, men with caring responsibilities, in spite of their "male bodies" are "bodies out of place" in academia too. Thus, the disruptions brought by the pandemic also affected faculty fathers who share responsibility for their children's upbringing with their partners.

While caring for their children, some parents opt to care for themselves as well as challenging the academic institutions' expectations that they would easily adapt to the "new (ab)normal" (Crabtree et al., 2020). The resistance practices among faculty parents against the pressure to keep up with academic performative norms have problematized the central place of masculinity in the academy, its embodied nature and careless values. More than an individualistic choice, academic parents' self-care practice was a political activity aiming at building a caring community within their homes and confronting neoliberal academia.

As renegade acts, resistance practices, however, bring even greater visibility to academic parents' bodies out of place, increasing suspicions as to their suitability for academia. This is particularly true here, because in spite of the collective reach of their resistance, these self-care strategies adopted by academic parents consisted of isolated acts, drawing even greater attention to these parents' marked bodies. Therefore, as we return to the "old normal," it is fundamental that resistance on the part of academic parents is performed collectively, pushing for the acknowledgment of their struggles before and during the pandemic.

Lastly, we recognize some limitations of our study that could offer food for new investigations on academic parents' experiences during the pandemic. We are able to grasp how scholars' family arrangements—marital status, children's age—shaped academic parents' experiences differently throughout the pandemic. However, other aspects of their biography, for example, career stability—tenure and precarious positions—, economic background, race etc. might also impact on how they navigate the “new (ab)normal.” Likewise, experience of migrant academics, who overall have less access to social safety networks than local academics, should also bring innovative insights to further studies. Looking at the diversity and complexities of scholars' background is fundamental to prevent misleading comparisons and conclusions being made between the very different experiences of academic parents. Finally, as our fieldwork was carried amidst the pandemic, while academic institutions were still attempting to return to the “old normal,” we could not grasp the implications of these resistance strategies for those who perform them and if there has been any impact on their academic organization context. Therefore, new studies could explore the impact of faculty parents' renegaded acts on their careers and institutions.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> From 14 January to 15 March, a second lockdown was enforced in the country.

<sup>2</sup> The government furlough scheme for workers with caring responsibilities.

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