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Parenting as Lightning Rod

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

# Averting Burnout in Academia; Parenting as Lightning Rod

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Burnout is one of the well-known occupational hazards within academia; every semester there are academics in Iceland that barely manage, or worse, that are simply unable to finish the term because of a burnout. The academic work culture and the academic work ethic have among other things been identified as causes for burnout (Heijstra, under review). Conceptualising burnout has been problematic though, and a unified definition of the concept is still non-existent. In a book on burnout for experts (Bährer-Köhler, 2013, p1) it can be read that: *“Burnout can be described as a condition based on the protracted depletion of an individual’s energies, characterized by emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment, and feelings of insufficiency and depersonalization. Burnout features certain facets and other characteristics that are related to the individual, always context- and/or organization-related and influenced by living conditions”*. While the association between burnout and work has functioned as a general identifier to the condition for the past three decades, more recent research argues that burnout should be approached as a multi-domain condition (Bianchi et al, 2014) in which triggers for burnout do not necessarily derive from the work environment only, but can for instance also develop from private sphere situations. Most burnout studies have the tendency to emphasize the relation between organizational characteristics and burnout (e.g. Zamini, Zamini and Barzegary, 2011), or that between personality characteristics and burnout (Taris, van Beek and Schaufeli, 2010; Kim, Shin and Swanger, 2009; Swider and Zimmerman, 2009; Fernet, Guay and Sénégal, 2004), but little has been written on the relation between parenting and burnout.

The role strain theory (Goode, 1960) is a classic, and relevant way of approaching the topic of parenting and burnout. It focuses on the stressors that are attached to upholding different roles in life such as being a parent and worker. The role strain theory identifies both role overload; which refers to a lack of time deriving from upholding different roles, and role conflict; referring to a situation in which the demands of one role, for instance parenting, interfere with the participation or expectations that are attached to another role, such as that of being an academic. A number of studies (e.g. Noor and Zainuddin, 2011; Montgomery, Panagopolou, de Wildt and Meenks, 2006; Karim, 2009; Wharton and Erickson, 1995) have also focused on the mediating effect that work-family conflict can have on the relation between emotional labour, such as experienced in teaching, and burnout. Furthermore, gender has been an important aspect of various studies relating to role-strain, and work-family conflict as well. For instance, even though parenting was not found to negatively effect the career making of women in Iceland (Heijstra, Bjarnason and Rafnsdóttir, 2014), these women do tend to struggle more with creating a work-family balance than their male colleagues (Rafnsdóttir and Heijstra, 2013; Heijstra and Rafnsdóttir, 2010). This study explores the possibility that in addition to working in a demanding environment, the parental role has the potential to further enhance the daily hectic that academics are dealing with, which in turn might enhance feelings of emotional exhaustion among this group.

The role accumulation theory takes a different stance, by highlighting the advantages of multiple roles. It reflects the notion that multiple roles are good for people’s wellbeing as they enhance feelings of worthiness, and personal accomplish-

ment (Sieber, 1974; Brown and Harris, 1978). A study by Maslach and Jackson (1985) almost three decades ago found indeed that employees that were married and had children experienced less burnout. More recent reports based on physicians with parental responsibilities reach similar conclusions (e.g. Woodside et al, 2008; Lemkau, Rafferty and Gordon, 1994). Therefore the care for children may function as a lightning rod as it regularly moves the focus away from work-related chores over to parental-related chores. Subsequently academics with parental responsibilities may be less vulnerable to burnout. As both the role-strain theory and the role accumulation theory seem plausible for the situation of academics in Iceland, this article revolves around the question: *Does parenting prevent academics in Iceland from burning out?*

While a number of inventories have been developed to diagnose burnout, the Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educational Professions (Maslach, Schafeli and Leitir, 2001; Maslach and Leitir, 1997) is one of the widely known inventories. It consists of a set of questions that measure the three burnout dimensions; emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced personal accomplishment. The emotional exhaustion dimension refers to feelings of emotional exhaustion related to interactions with other people; the depersonalisation dimension reflects cynical perceptions towards one's work and work organisation, while the personal accomplishment dimension revolves around the extent to which people negatively value their own work. While there have been discussions on the core dimensions that are necessary to measure burnout (e.g. Shirom, 2002; Lee and Ashforth, 1996), and the advantages and disadvantages of abandoning one or more of the dimensions (Brenninkmeyer and Van Yperen, 2003), all three of the dimensions will be utilised in this article.

## Data/Methods

This study is part of a larger mixed-methods research project that revolves around the work circumstances, work-family balance and well-being of academics in Iceland. The study builds on cross-sectional data deriving from two data collections; an online quantitative survey and face-to-face interviews with academics. The survey was sent to the total population of academics in Iceland consisting of senior lecturers, associate professors and full professors. Apart from being relatively inexpensive, this particular research method also has the potential to reach participants within a large geographical area within a short period of time (Fowler, 2009). The list of all potential academic participants consisted of 827 names, and the survey obtained a 55 percent (N=452) response rate of the total population. While this is an acceptable percentage, Fowler (2009) indeed warns that Internet surveys come with relatively large non-responsive rates, due to lack of interviewer intervention, and a growing number of participants that have become weary of surveys. While it is only possible to speculate about the specific characteristics of unresponsive academics, it seems reasonable to assume that some of them were too busy to participate. The project is registered at the Iceland Data Protection Authority (reference nr. 54951/2010).

While the survey consisted of 42 questions regarding various topics, 16 of them derived from the Maslach Burnout Inventory for educational professionals (Maslach and Leitir, 1997). Eight questions enquired about emotional exhaustion, two about feelings of depersonalisation and six about feelings of personal accomplishment. Each question had a rating scale between 0 and 6, in which a value of 0 stands for "feeling has never been experienced" and 6 for "feeling is experienced every day". The variable emotional exhaustion ranges therefore between 0 and 48, in which low emotional exhaustion rates (<18) indicate a situation in which people feel mildly emotionally exhausted and high scores (>40) a situation where people experience major feelings of emotional exhaustion. Lower scores therefore indicate a healthier situation. The

second burnout dimension, feelings of depersonalisation, is measured by two questions. The created variable has a range between 0 and 12 in which low scores indicate mild feelings of depersonalisation (<6) and high scores (>10) very strong feelings of depersonalisation. Lower scores on the depersonalisation variable are therefore linked to better well-being. The third burnout dimension, as measured by the personal accomplishment variable ranges between 0 and 36. Here, high scores represent strong feelings of personal accomplishment (>30) and low scores (<24) feelings of low personal accomplishment. In contrast to the emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation dimensions, a high score on the personal accomplishment variable represents a healthier state than a low score.

The qualitative data derive from 20 semi-structured interviews taken between 2008 and 2009, with 10 male and 10 female academics. Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling; they worked for different Icelandic universities and different faculties and they all had parental responsibilities. The interviews lasted between 25 and 90 minutes and were with the interviewees' consent digitally recorded and transcribed. The interviews were based on an interview frame that contained 12 open questions and a number of probing and specifying questions. The discussion topics revolved around similar topics as the online survey.

For each of the three burnout dimensions, independent sample t-tests, ANOVA analyses and Tukey post-hoc tests were performed to reveal presumable differences between academics without and with parenting roles. As women still tend to hold the main responsibility for caring tasks, the analyses were done by keeping presumable gender differences in mind. This means that the analyses were performed for the total group of academics, but also for each gender individually. The qualitative data in turn were screened for themes, utilising Grounded Theory Analysis (Charmaz, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

## Findings

### **Emotional exhaustion**

With regard to emotional exhaustion, the overall average score for academic men (9) is significantly lower ( $\alpha = 0.01$ ) than that of academic women (12), which make men less often emotionally exhausted than their female colleagues. However, it is important to be aware of the large range of the scale. Even though significant, both the averages of men and women fall into the same category; that of feeling mildly exhausted. The next phase consisted of looking at the average emotional exhaustion scores, for each gender individually, according to the binary division of either having or not having parental responsibilities. The findings are displayed in Table 1. The results reveal that for both men and women parental responsibilities do not significantly affect their emotional exhaustion rate. That is to say, men and women with children (averages of 10 and 12 respectively) are neither more nor less emotionally exhausted than their same-sex colleagues that do not have children (averages of 8 and 12 respectively).

**Table 1 Average burnout dimension scores for men and women according to the binary variable having parental responsibilities or not, and number of children.**

		men	Sd	n	Women	sd	n
Emotional exhaustion	no children	8	6.9	103	12	9.2	65
	Children	10	8.0	133	12	8.3	109
	0 children	8	6.9	103	12	9.1	65
	1 child	9	6.9	41	11	8.8	44
	2 children	10	9.7	49	12	7.9	45
	3 or more children	10	6.8	43	12	8.5	20
Depersonalisation	no children	0.5*	1.1	103	0.9	1.7	67
	Children	0.9	1.9	136	1.3	1.2	114
	0 children	0.5	1.1	103	0.9	1.7	67
	1 child	0.7	1.8	40	1.2	2.2	48
	2 children	1.0	2.2	50	1.5	2.0	46
	3 or more children	1.0	1.8	46	1.3	1.7	20
Personal accomplishment	no children	25	7	92	24	6.3	57
	Children	27	5.8	131	26	5.9	79
	0 children	25*	7.0	92	24	6.3	57
	1 child	25	6.0	36	26	6.9	37
	2 children	27	5.6	48	26	5.6	43
	3 or more children	28	5.4	47	27	4.4	7

Emo: parental responsibilities: men:  $t(234) = -1.8, p=n.s.$ , women:  $t(172) = 0.329, p = n.s.$

Emo: nr of children: men:  $F(3, 232) = 1.345, p=n.s.$ , women:  $F(3, 170) = 0.286, p=n.s.$

Dep: parental responsibilities: men:  $t(220,463) = -2.150, p=0.033$ , women:  $t(158,863) = -1.6, p=n.s.$

Dep: nr of children: men:  $F(3, 235) = 1.586, p=n.s.$ , women:  $F(3, 177) = 1.055, p=n.s.$

Pers: parental responsibilities: men:  $t(171,889) = -1.798, p = ns$ , women:  $t(152) = -1.726, p=ns$

Pers: nr of children: men:  $F(3, 219) = 3.192, p=0.024$ , women:  $F(3, 150) = 1.092, p=n.s.$

Table 1 also displays the average emotional exhaustion scores for men and women according to the number of children within the household. While a pattern can be discovered for men in which the emotional exhaustion rates go up when the number of children increases from 0 to 1, and from 1 to 2, these results are not significant, and neither are the fluctuations within the scores for women. This means that the number of children in the household does not significantly affect the average emotional exhaustion rates of men and women. This outcome shows resemblances with the qualitative findings; academics explain that their children bring structure in their daily lives, and that they force their academic parents to take time off work and to take holidays. As for the strong work ethic the academic environment thrives on, taking time off is not considered the norm, even though academics have a legal right to do so. The unwritten rules of the academic environment only acknowledge a few rationalities for taking time off work and parental responsibilities are one of them. The prominence of this convention was striking; quite a few interviewees mentioned that they would not take any holidays if it was not for the children, while others described, with a certain envy, their childless colleagues as people that dedicate all their time to work, work, work. Furthermore, despite all this, academics with parental responsibilities make strong efforts to live up to this convention anyway. Many of them work during the family holiday, while simultaneously trying to justify this behaviour for their family members. Overall, it is the children that seem to be the least convinced by the need of this. They complain that their parents are absent-minded, and ask them when they are going to be “on Summer holiday like others”. There are also children that express to their parents, that they themselves have no interest in seeking an academic career, because of the demands and sacrifices it takes. Simultaneously though, there is a discourse of academics arguing that they are unwilling to completely sacrifice their family and personal well-being because of their

work. A male full professor said: “If you get to a point where your family life is just in the way of your research productivity you are on the wrong path”.

### **Depersonalisation**

The results of the second burnout dimension; feelings of depersonalisation, contains a significant difference ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) between men (0.7) and women (1.1), in which men feel depersonalised to a somewhat lesser extent than women. However, the rates itself do indicate that these feelings are on average only experienced in a very mild form, by both men and women. When parental responsibilities are taken into account (Table 1) it can be seen that men and women with children score slightly higher on the depersonalisation dimension than academics without parental responsibilities. These results are however only significant for men and not for women. Furthermore, the average depersonalisation scores for academics with children are still considered to be very low. When taking the number of children in the household into account, the findings for both men and women are insignificant indicating that the number of children does not affect the depersonalisation scores of either men or women. The outcome that feelings of depersonalisation are not playing a prominent role within the daily life of most academics corresponds to the qualitative findings. There were few signs of cynicism among the interviewed academics although there was scepticism about the gender neutrality of the academic institution. What stood out was the passion for the profession that the academics emanated. Many of them described working in academia as lifestyle and not as a job.

### **Personal accomplishment**

The third burnout dimension, feelings of personal accomplishment, does not reveal a significant difference between men (26) and women (25); both genders experience a moderate level of positive feelings of personal accomplishment. When accounting for parental responsibilities, it seems that the averages increase for both men and women with parental responsibilities as compared to colleagues without such responsibilities, but also these findings are not significant. When taking the number of children into account, the personal accomplishment rate for men does significantly increase when there are more children in the household. For women such significant effect is not observed.

While the evidence on this topic deriving from the quantitative data is not very strong, the qualitative findings do provide some more indications that parenting can enhance feelings of accomplishment. Without exception do the parents speak proudly of their children, and especially many of the moms reveal stories about their young children being intrigued by the buildings of the academic institution. Some also proudly reflect on having provided their children a special and privileged childhood: “They attained schools in different countries, and they’ve been to Disney World and they have been to Disney Land and they’ve been to you know, they’ve been all over the place”.

## **Discussion**

This article examined the relevance of the role-strain theory and the role accumulation theory with regard to burnout and parenting responsibilities of male and female academics in Iceland. While a study among academics in the USA, by Lackritz (2004) indicated a burnout rate of 20 per cent, there is little evidence that this rate applies to Icelandic academia as well. As the article relies on burnout dimension averages, rather than on burnout scores for individuals, only further research can give more exact insight into the ratio of academics in Iceland suffering from burnout. However, this

current study does indicate that the number of academics that do suffer from a burnout is not sizeable enough to make the average burnout dimension scores reach worrisome heights. That is not to say, that there is no need to be alert to this occupational hazard, and preventive measures. After all, an alternative plausible, but purely speculative explanation, is that the low burnout dimension averages were created by a large non-response of academics suffering from burnout.

The research question however, did not revolve around exact burnout rates among academics, but was aimed at the possible role of parenting as a lightning rod within the discussion of burnout among academics. The findings indicate that academics with parental responsibilities are not more emotionally exhausted than academics without parenting responsibilities. Having children does in that respect neither positively nor negatively affect burnout of academics. Woodside, et al. (2008) that found similar results have speculated that parental responsibilities may come with a set of inner priorities that make parents better able to focus on the things that are really important, instead of wasting time on daily stress. From the perspective of the role-strain theory, and prior research indicating that academic women struggle more with their work-family balance than men, it is however interesting that women with parental responsibilities are not more emotionally exhausted than their female colleagues without such responsibilities. It has been argued though that people with parental responsibilities, and especially moms, may hold a slightly different norm, with regard to as what qualifies as emotionally exhausting.

Although the score for both groups were low, men without parental responsibilities experienced less often feelings of cynicism than their colleagues with parental responsibilities. The findings for women showed a similar pattern, but these findings were not significant. What is interesting is that these contradict earlier findings among physicians where feelings of depersonalisation were lower among physicians with parental responsibilities. Woodward et al. (2008) suggested that parenting may have a humanizing influence which in turn works against depersonalisation. However, in the case of academia, it is plausible that the academics that have the possibility to fully live up to the academic work ethic, because they do not have parental responsibilities, are also the ones that are less critical and cynical about their workplace.

While the role-conflict theory receives little support from the findings of this study, there is some evidence that supports the role accumulation theory. Academics with children, but especially men, seem to experience feelings of personal accomplishment to a somewhat higher extent than academics without children. The fact that academics in Iceland do not have to forego family formation because of career making, as is the case in some other countries, may also intensify their feelings of personal accomplishment.

Altogether, parenting responsibilities turned out to have little influence on the burnout dimensions of academics in Iceland. There was no evidence that parental responsibilities increased burnout among academics, instead they either decreased the burnout dimension averages or were similar to that of academics without children. There was some overall evidence that parenting enhances feelings of personal accomplishment among academics. Altogether the findings support the role accumulation theory to a larger extent than the role strain theory. Parenting may not have the power to prevent academics from burning out, but it forces them to spend time away from work, structure their lives and place it into a larger perspective.

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