

# Overlapping clocks and the CS early academic career "grey zone"

A collaborative autoethnography of motherhood and systemic precarity in Greece

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## ABSTRACT

The hyper-productive landscape of Computer Science (CS) necessitates a reconciliation between relentless institutional temporalities and the unyielding biological trajectories of the human life course. This study examines this precarious intersection via a collaborative autoethnography by two early-career researchers at a Greek university, specializing in Data Science and Marketing. Through dialogical analysis of critical incidents, we identify points of convergence regarding the material and psychological dimensions of academic precarity. We conceptualize the post-PhD transition as a "grey zone" where mandates of mobility and availability collide with the timing of family formation. Findings indicate that while formal equality frameworks that apply also to CS offer symbolic visibility, they fail to address the structural vulnerabilities of non-permanent staff. We document a mismatch between expectations of "excellence" and the realities of motherhood-related caregiving, where professional identity is sustained through extreme exhaustion. Ultimately, motherhood-related precarity is systemic. Genuine equity requires protections that accommodate the biological and social realities of the life course.

## KEYWORDS

Motherhood, Early-Career academics, Greece, Autoethnography, Life Course Perspective.

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## Introduction

*"Tania... Nicolas... go brush your teeth and I am coming..."*

Navigating the highly demanding, hyper-productive landscape of Computer Science (CS) often requires balancing relentless institutional clocks against the unyielding timelines of human life. This study investigates this precarious intersection through a collaborative autoethnography conducted by two early-career researchers at a regional Greek university, one rooted in Data Science and the other in Marketing (MKT). We utilize dialogical sessions to share life stories and critical incidents, and we compare narratives from these distinct fields to expose "points of convergence" regarding the material and psychological realities of academic precarity.

In doing so, we contribute to the literature in two ways. First, we draw attention to a relatively underexplored "grey zone" in existing research and institutional policy: early-career researchers without permanent positions, whose experiences often fall outside the primary focus of Gender Equality Committees and related initiatives. By focusing on this field, we seek to highlight a less visible group, whose precarious position affects the extent to which institutional equality measures are experienced in practice. Second, the study provides situated, accounts of lived experience that complement more aggregate or policy-oriented analyses, highlighting how institutional expectations intersect with caregiving responsibilities associated with motherhood in everyday academic work.

## Literature review

Despite a growing body of research on vertical segregation in academia [1], the parenthood gender gap remains a central mechanism that influences women's career trajectories and attrition patterns. This gap is highly prominent in CS environments. Evidence illustrates that gender inequalities are not simply the result of differential productivity but emerge through gendered academic structures that regulate access to resources such as time, stability, and recognition [2, 3, 4]. These dynamics are further reinforced by neoliberal academic norms prioritizing competition, individualism, and narrow definitions of merit without taking into account social or personal constraints, often rendering inequality invisible or considered an "individual problem" instead of a structural one [5]. The transition from doctoral to postdoctoral employment

constitutes the most fragile phase of academic careers including CS, where expectations of independence, mobility, and productivity intensify before equivalent access to institutional resources has been secured [6]. Women are more likely to encounter cumulative disadvantage through restricted access to funding, networks, and authorship opportunities, as well as biased evaluation processes that determine long-term career outcomes [7]. Within this broader context, the Greek higher education system reflects similar structural dynamics where Gender Equality Committees improve visibility primarily among established faculty, leaving early-career precarity largely unaddressed. Thus, the early academic career is conceptualized as a "grey zone" structured by overlapping temporal regimes where the institutional career clock intersects with the biological and social timing of family formation.

Rather than treating parenthood as an external or individual factor, it is presented as a structurally embedded temporal conflict in which CS academic careers are organized around an idealized model of uninterrupted productivity, geographic mobility, and full availability. These conditions affect people differently depending on gender [8]. This approach is in line with the Life Course Perspective, emphasizing how the timing of lives and linked lives shape individual trajectories within institutional constraints [9, 10]. Specifically, this study looks at the pressures created by the demand for hyper-productivity during intensive early-years parenting, treating these challenges as structural outcomes of an academic career path designed for an unburdened researcher who is constantly spatiotemporally available.

## Research Questions

The study addresses three specific research questions. First, it examines how CS and MKT early-career female academics in Greece experience and negotiate the collision between the biological clock and the institutional career clock during the precarious post-PhD transition. Second, it explores the extent to which the empirical challenges of academic motherhood are consistent across different scientific fields and what this suggests about the structural nature of academic precariousness. Third, it investigates how the current gap between formal equality policies and the lack of material support for non-permanent researchers manifests in the daily professional lives of academic mothers.

## Methodology

This study employs a collaborative autoethnography (CAE) framework to investigate the systemic precarity and institutional temporalities faced by early-career researchers in CS. Originally developed in anthropology [11] and widely adopted in sociology and communication studies, autoethnography has recently

emerged in CS and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) as a robust methodology for bridging subjective lived experience with technical and structural inquiry, as demonstrated in recent HCI scholarship examining transformative digital interactions [12]. Primary data was generated through three structured dialogical sessions, each lasting between 1.5 and 3 hours, which were recorded and transcribed. Preliminary findings of this study derived through thematic analysis [13] and focused on identifying latent patterns and "critical incidents" for the transition to academic professional life.

## Findings

Preliminary findings show that while Gender Equality Committees provide essential visibility, their impact often fails to reach computing and data science researchers in the early academic career phase who lack permanent ties to the institution. Furthermore, our findings show that there is a mismatch between the neoliberal demand for continuous excellence and the actual conditions of care that motherhood entails. In our experience, the work of Gender Equality Committees does not always seem to reach researchers in the early stages of their careers, highlighting a gap between institutional initiatives and everyday experience. Although caregiving is not exclusive to women, this study focuses specifically on how motherhood shapes these experiences.

**Researcher B:** I think the technical struggle is shared. Anyone can spend hours debugging. But not everyone is doing it while negotiating presence, attention, and care as a mother at the same time. For me, the pressure isn't just to make the code run. It's to decide, constantly, where I am needed more.

Finally, the study documents how academic mothers in both disciplines exercise agency to maintain professional identities, often at the cost of extreme personal exhaustion, revealing the systemic reliance on the resilience of the individual to fix structural flaws.

**Researcher A:** It's funny, the literature always frames COVID-19 as this "productivity killer" for women. All these papers about the drop in journal submissions because of childcare...But for me, in that "grey zone" of precarious contracts, the digital shift was a brutal blessing!

**Researcher B:** A blessing? How so?

**Researcher A:** Because I had no maternity leave. No security. If I didn't show up, I didn't get paid, and in our system, that's the end of the line. So, I taught a Master's module with my camera off, breastfeeding my son who was just a few days old. I was a high-availability academic on the screen, but a ghost in the

room. I had to hide my biological reality just to maintain my professional "uptime".

## Conclusions

In conclusion, this study, based on the experiences of the two authors operating in Data Science and Marketing, offers qualitative evidence that the challenges associated with academic motherhood in Greece extend beyond individual or disciplinary contexts. Rather than positioning these experiences as exceptional, our analysis points to patterns that appear linked to broader institutional structures, particularly during the early-career stage.

Our findings suggest that, for institutional efforts at equality to move beyond formal compliance, that is, implementation only "on paper", greater attention needs to be paid to the particular precarious conditions that characterize the early stages of academic careers. In this context, substantive equality presupposes a move from simply documenting inequalities to implementing more tangible forms of support, such as flexible research schedules and institutional recognition of parental status for researchers funded through research programs. Furthermore, our findings suggest that the motherhood penalty may have systemic dimensions, meaning that diversity cannot be achieved through recruitment alone, but also requires revising the structure of the academic schedule to better align with the biological and social realities of the life course.

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