



## Professor Daddy has a zebra on his head

Miguel Mera

To cite this article: Miguel Mera (2020) Professor Daddy has a zebra on his head, Ethnomusicology Forum, 29:3, 300-306, DOI: [10.1080/17411912.2020.1873560](https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1873560)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1873560>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 18 Jan 2021.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 534



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## Professor Daddy has a zebra on his head

Miguel Mera

Department of Music, City, University of London, London, UK


Let me start with a story. After I was last promoted I tried to explain this to my two children (aged 9 and 6 at the time). My son, whose only point of comparison for a Professor was *Harry Potter*, asked if it meant that I was going to ‘be like Dumbledore?’ I joked that they would have to call me Professor from that point onwards. This resulted in them conspiring in another room, lots of whispering, fits of laughter, and the presentation of a drawing that had been completed by my daughter (Figure 1). This was a cheeky reference to my increasingly ‘black and white’ hair and was obviously intended to put me firmly in my place. Of course, the real learning here is that if you are going to make fun you really should spell Professor properly, so I made my children write it out a thousand times ... only joking. In the interests of equality they also drew a picture for their mother whose name is Claire (Figure 2). In my family we show our love and affection in many different ways and we do also tease each other, which keeps us all grounded. The main point is that my children do not care about what we do at work and they also find the concept of academic hierarchy faintly ridiculous. They only care about how we are with them and that we are open and available.

Academic work, however, seems to demand my undivided attention. Much of the research on parenting in academia focuses on productivity and the challenges of work-life balance. Hunter and Leahey, for example, argue that ‘Children are likely to have an adverse effect on both productivity and visibility’ (2010: 434). The academic pipeline model disproportionately stalls women’s careers, while the early baby effect does not seem to impact male academics, at least not in the USA, according to Hile Basett (2005). This is further compounded by what Sandler, Silverberg, and Hall coined the ‘chilly climate’ (1996) which idealises workers who embody traits such as competitiveness, dominance, and a strong identification with work (see also Prentice 2000; Williams, Alon, and Bornstein 2006). The model academic, therefore, is unencumbered by family and is ‘expected to dedicate their life to the pursuit of knowledge, leaving little time for domestic responsibilities’ (Gatta and Roos 2004: 126). In this line of thinking, children are a hindrance to academic success because ‘the dual demands of work and family are constantly vying for attention’ (Townsend and Broadfoot 2008: 135).

Without diminishing the troubling gendered aspects identified by these researchers, I want to identify some more positive aspects of fatherhood and how these have intersected

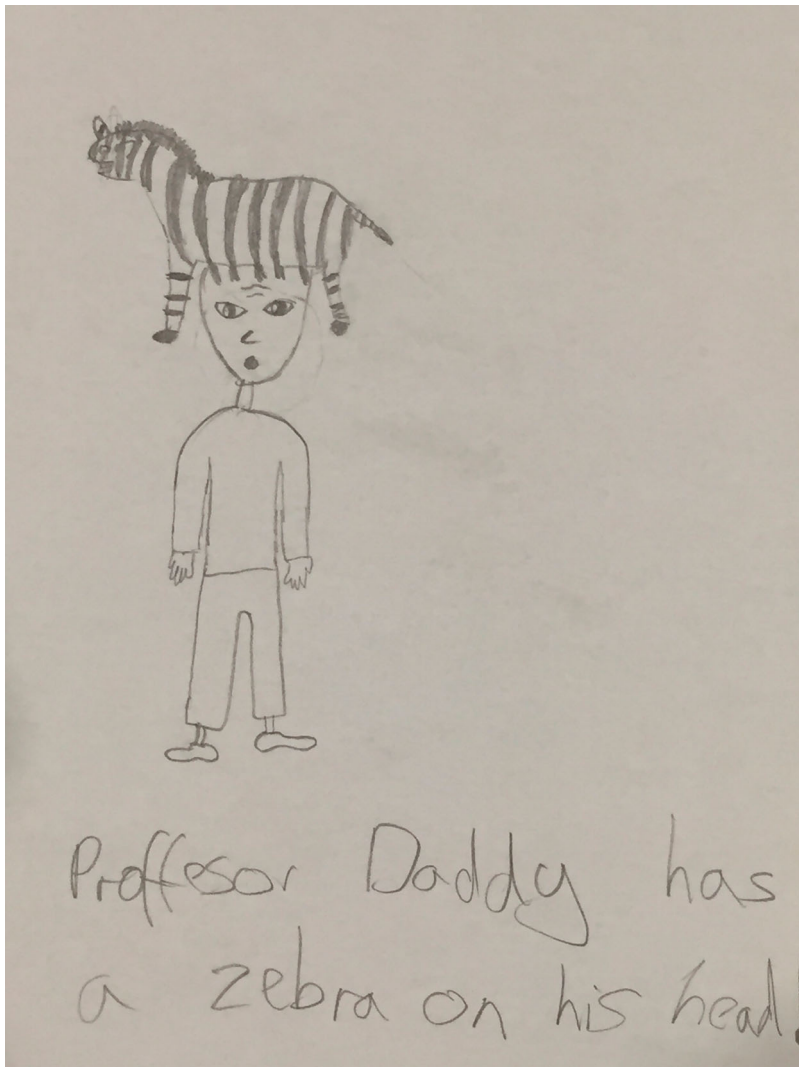
---

**CONTACT** Miguel Mera  miguel.mera.1@city.ac.uk  Department of Music, City, University of London, Northampton Square, London, EC1V 0HB, UK

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed <https://doi.org/10.1080/17411912.2020.1873560>

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

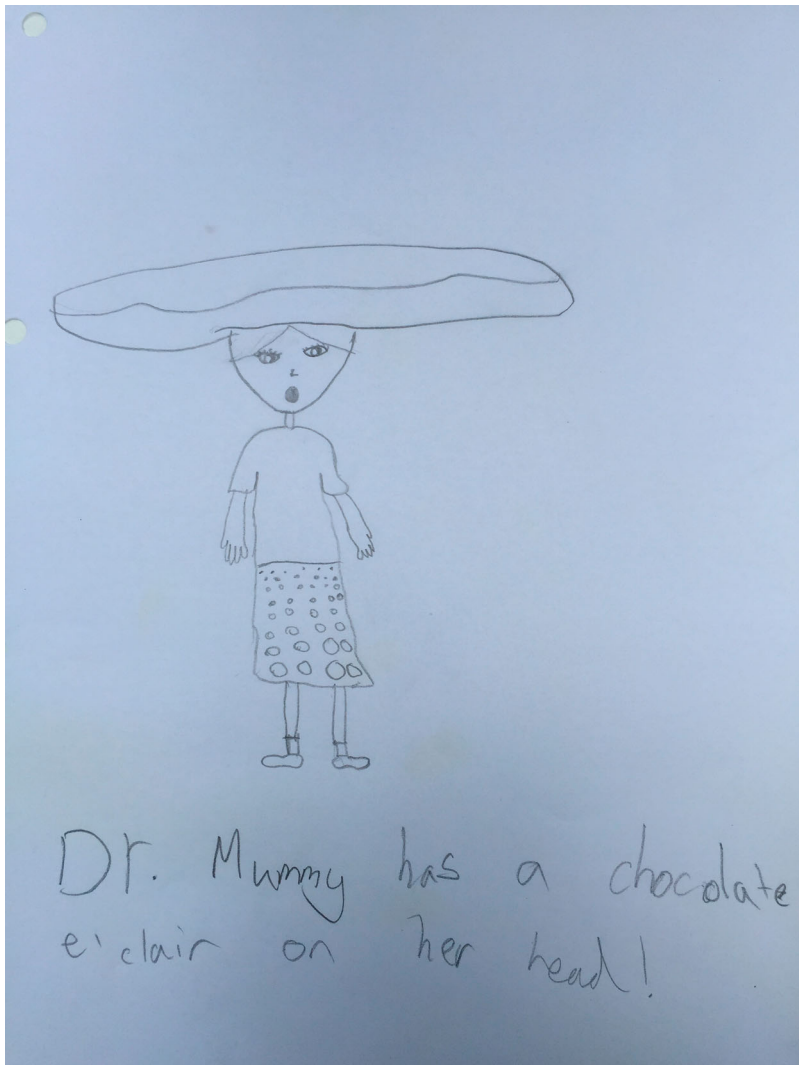
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.



**Figure 1.** Professor Daddy by Rosa Mera.

with my work. Caring for my children has helped me reframe what it means to be a musician, has shaped my understanding of people and relationships, has obliged me to prioritise, and has helped me reconsider the purpose of my research. I suggest that we need to focus less on *loss* and that we need to both tell and hear more positive stories about parenting, especially fatherhood, otherwise we reify structures that devalue aspects of academic work that are just as important as measurable productivity.

Just before we had our first child, conversations with academic colleagues seemed to focus exclusively on loss. This ranged from the 'You'll never be able to sleep again properly,' discussion, which was partially true, to 'We won't see you at any concerts anymore,' and 'You won't be able to do any research for a while.' Having children has certainly forced me to prioritise, but it has also made me strive for a reasonable work-life balance and to value the importance of time with family. I had to *learn* to use my



**Figure 2.** Dr Mummy by Rosa Mera.

time much more efficiently and had not realised how much time I wasted before having children. Time was more pressured but I also had to rethink where to focus. My approach became less scattergun and I also found it important to concentrate on work that I found much more personally enriching. This included, for example, truly savouring the time I spent in conversation with other scholars about particularly thorny issues. I also found myself agonising less about writing or composing and just getting on with it. I wrote more quickly, but I thought about it beforehand more carefully.

Being a parent has certainly made me more self-aware and has shaped my willingness to try and understand others. There is a meme I find amusing, because it also reveals a fundamental truth: 'I never knew how annoying I could be until I made a miniature version of myself and started arguing with it.' My children have constantly made me reflect on my own behaviour and attitudes. As a result, I think I have become more

tolerant, more prepared to listen to different points of view, and more encouraging of ideas that are still being formed, because that is precisely the kind of the development that I see happening in my house every day.

If I had to identify the core skill that cuts across all types of musical activity, it would be listening. We did not particularly push them towards it, but both of my children are currently learning musical instruments and are developing all of the skills that come with that. I do not know how that will progress for both of them, but I am glad that they have music in their lives in this way. When they were younger I felt like I had a more acute sense of hearing, which may just come from being protective. If you watch any group of parents at a Soft Play area, in the midst of the tired group, you will at some point witness the meerkat-like movement of a parent who has identified the very particular timbre of their child's cry above the din.

One of the things we do as a family is make sonic postcards together. Having encouraged my children to listen more closely, both to music and the sounds of their environment, I find that we all notice things that we did not before. They hear the world with a sense of curiosity and fascination that is extremely energising. I listen through their ears. Some brief sections from a sonic postcard we sent from our 2017 summer holiday in Italy, with my daughter as narrator, are in the online supplementary material ([examples 1 and 2](#)).

One of the prevailing assumptions about parenting men is that they do not feel the tug-of-war between 'job self' and 'parent self', that there is a less conflicted space between family and work than is the case for women. I probably do feel this in a different way from my wife in that I am clearer about some of the demarcation, but there still is a challenging negotiation of identity, as well as the same kinds of concerns around responsibility and guilt. In *Redefining Fatherhood*, Nancy Dowd makes the case for focusing on social, nurturing behaviour as a core meaning of fatherhood, and she argues that as long as masculinity identifies nurture and care as feminine 'men's socialization will work against them rather than for them' (2000: 181). The difficulties of holding work and parenting identities is also aptly described by Amitava Kumar in his engaging article entitled 'Disney Dad' (2011). In his general writing he is extremely critical of American consumerism, but he also does not want his daughter's innocence to be spoiled by high theory and activism, at least not while she is very young. Unfortunately for him, her world is one full of Disney princesses. So, despite himself, Kumar agrees to take his daughter to Disney World and finds, ironically, that he quite enjoys it, with many insightful reflections on the experience. He writes:

A part of me believes that my child, at four or six or ten, is a child and should be treated as one. When she's older, I hope that she'll read Virginia Woolf and, if she's interested, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. But I'm quite happy that she isn't a young critic right now. And that she doesn't want to mimic the thoughts and actions of her parents. (2011: 5)

He also muses, rather provocatively, '... why it is that as academics we expect our pleasure to be pure' (Kumar 2011: 5). Sometimes the practicalities and pragmatisms of parenting come into conflict with values and belief systems, and I do not know any parent who has not had to negotiate this in challenging ways. Kumar's own reflection on this challenge is not to question whether he is somehow a better teacher than he is a parent, but rather to 'allow the parent to keep the teacher in check and vice versa' (2011: 6).

My research is in screen music, which means that I am very interested in audiovisual relationships, so another consequence of parenting has been watching lots of children's television. I was delighted when my kids grew out of *In the Night Garden* and that I never had to watch another soporific episode of it ever again. The main problem, aside from finding Iggle Piggle unbearably annoying, was the dreadful music. I found it harmonically patronising, dreadfully performed, and sloppily put together. I am pleased to say that one of my ex-students, having castigated the BBC in the past for the quality of their children's music, is part of the composing duo, Banks and Wag, who are among those leading the charge in creating well-crafted and engaging music on the BBC preschool network, CBeebies.<sup>1</sup>

A number of academic parents have written about music in children's television. Jennifer Fleeger has written about music and sound in the Nickelodeon network arguing that its 'sound effects reinforce a contradictory view of contemporary childhood as a period that ought to be both highly regulated and free of worry' (2017: 603). Nicholas Reyland also highlights contradictions in his chapter 'A Postman Mans Up: The Changing Musical Identities of Postman Pat' (2010) which shows how the moral, educational and developmental instruction of such programmes involve a series of stereotypes that attempt to indoctrinate children into attitudes that are at odds with the politically correct surface of the show. In these cases the 'job self' and 'parent self' seems to have found an interesting point of connection.

Finally, I want to highlight an issue that I propose to call Useless Bloke Syndrome. This is where men are perceived as less competent or simply incapable of looking after children because they are men. In my experience, this includes comments such as: 'Did Daddy dress you today, darling?' directed to my daughter by the leader of one of the various parent-child classes that she attended, with sniggers from the other participants. The answer, incidentally (in my head but not confident enough to say out loud) was: 'Actually, her mother dressed her today before she went to work, but I don't know why you felt the need to say this.' I have received extensive unsolicited advice from complete strangers, especially when the children were younger, but only when I was looking after them by myself. And at the risk of 1970s comedy cliché, some older women I know have come very close to a version of 'mansplaining' when it comes to commenting on my parenting abilities.

I am aware that this is nothing like the discrimination that women have habitually experienced in the workplace. To the best of my knowledge, my competence has not been questioned at work except when my performance has justified it. The same is not true for many women, and it manifests in many subtle and wearing ways that accumulate and inhibit confidence and self-esteem. However, I would say that I have experienced my own version of this 'chilly climate' in the more domestic sphere. I think this is also what Nancy Dowd is speaking about when she says, 'The redefinition, and lived difference, of fatherhood centred around nurture would be a tremendous change' (2000: 232).

Fully engaged male involvement in family responsibilities is, happily, more and more commonplace. In my own Department, several male colleagues have, in recent years, taken parental leave, one acting as the primary carer for their children. I am glad that legislation and the University supported this in a way that was only just becoming possible when my first child was born. There is obviously still much to do, but there is also progress, primarily in legislation and policy to make the workplace more equal. One

thing we could do, in addition to the development of legal provisions, is to make a point of talking to male colleagues about their life beyond work and to discuss work-life balance, not just their research. It is a very small thing, but I think that could be part of a broader series of ways in which we can try not to legitimise a culture of overwork and highlight the importance of nurturing children.

I do not want to be give the impression that I am putting forward the idea of parenthood, or family, or a heteronormative approach as some kind of heroic model. It was our choice to have children. Some people cannot and others do not want to. For me, though, parenting has allowed me to direct some attention away from my career and, ultimately, I think that is the most important point. To be more rounded and balanced people and, therefore, better academics I think we need more in our lives than just work.

## Note

1. Banks and Wag are responsible for amongst others, *Space Pirates* (2007–2008), *Zingillas* (2010–2012) which had the specific aim of encouraging young children to listen to and appreciate music, and latterly *Go Jetters* (2015–).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes about contributor

*Miguel Mera* is a Professor of Music in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at City, University of London. He is a composer of music for the moving image and a musicologist. His film and television music has been broadcast around the world. Miguel is the author of *European Film Music* (2006), *Mychael Danna's The Ice Storm: A Film Score Guide* (2007), and co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound* (2017). He serves on the editorial boards of *Music and the Moving Image*, *Music Sound and the Moving Image*, *The Journal of Film Music*, *The Soundtrack*, and the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*.

## References

- Dowd, N. E. 2000. *Redefining Fatherhood*. New York: New York University Press.
- Fleeger, J. 2017. 'The Sound of Slime-Ness: Telling Children's Stories on the Nickelodeon Network'. In *The Routledge Companion to Screen Music and Sound*, edited by M. Mera, R. Sadoff and B Winters, 603–14. New York: Routledge.
- Gatta, M. L. and P. A. Roos. 2004. 'Balancing Without a net in Academia: Integrating Family and Work lives'. *Equal Opportunities International* 23 (3/4/5): 124–142.
- Hile Bassett, R., ed. 2005. *Parenting and Professing: Balancing Family Work with an Academic Career*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Hunter, L. A. and E. Leahey. 2010. 'Parenting and Research Productivity: New Evidence and methods'. *Social Studies of Science* 40 (3): 433–451.
- Kumar, A. 2011. 'Disney Dad'. In *Papa, PhD: Essays on Fatherhood by Men in the Academy*, edited by M.R. Marotte, P.M. Reynolds and R.J Savarese, 3–6. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Prentice, Susan. 2000. 'The Conceptual Politics of Chilly Climate controversies'. *Gender and Education* 12 (2): 195–207.

- Reyland, N. 2010. 'A Postman Mans Up: The Changing Musical Identities of Postman Pat'. In *Popular Music and Television in Britain*, edited by I. Inglis, 213–30. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Sandler, Bernice R., Lisa A. Silverberg and Roberta M. Hall. 1996. *The Chilly Classroom Climate: A Guide to Improve the Education of Women*. Washington, DC: National Association for Women in Education.
- Townsley, N. C. and K. J. Broadfoot. 2008. 'Care, Career, and Academe: Heeding the Calls of a new professoriate'. *Women's Studies in Communication* 31 (2): 133–142.
- Williams, J., T. Alon and S. Bornstein. 2006. 'Beyond the Chilly Climate: Eliminating Bias Against Women and Fathers in Academe'. *Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal* 22: 79–96.