Episode 65: Micky Lee

# KL: Katie LinderML: Micky Lee

# KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode 65.

# [*intro music*]

# Segment 1:

# KL: Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus. Along with every episode, we post show notes with links to resources mentioned in the episode, a full transcript, and an instructor guide for incorporating the episode into your courses. Check out the show’s website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast) to find all of these resources.

On this episode, I’m joined by Dr. Micky Lee, an Associate Professor of Media Studies and the Program Director of Asian Studies at Suffolk University in Boston. She has published one book, 19 journal articles and numerous essays on feminist political economy; telecommunications, new information and communication technologies; and media, information, and finance.

Thanks so much for joining me, Micky.

**ML:** Sure, thank you!

**KL:** So Micky, we know each other because we used to work together at Suffolk University in Boston, and you are actually a member of a writing group that I interviewed on a previous episode. You couldn’t join us, but I’m so glad you could join me for this episode talking about researching as a parent. And this is something that I’m really excited to talk with you about, I know you’ve given it a lot of thought, so I thought we could just start talking a little bit about at what point in your professional life did you become a parent, and how did that change your perspective on your academic life?

**ML:** I became a parent post-tenure so looking back I’m actually one of the lucky few, especially for women in academia, that I was still on my biological clock so to speak, you know I first got tenure and then I gave birth. So in terms of the change of my perspective, actually not much. I mean there were critical things that I needed to tell my chair and other people that I work with, for instance I needed to tell them I can no longer teach an evening class, I need to go at 4:00 and I cannot do any weekend activities. So I have always done, but now as a parent, I feel more strongly about, is just do things early, because you know once you become a parent, there are things that you can control and there are things that you cannot. So things that you can control academically is, you always know you can write that sabbatical proposal, even though you may be one year, two years ahead of time. The thing that you cannot control, well your baby [*laughs*], basically, and also sometimes if you have a journal editor who will need your copy editing done in two days, you cannot control that, so by doing things early you actually will feel more stressed out, because there are more things that you cannot control as a parent. One thing I realized is, well a lot of people they may take a break from publications, because they want to spend more time with their children and I find out that children actually just kind of would be fine growing on their own, they have their own interests, but your research does not really grow on its own, you really need to take time to work on it for it to grow. So you know, despite a lot of people telling me, “You need to take a break from your research and publications,” I actually feel that by being a parent made me realize something, meaning the baby, can grow on his or her own, but your research doesn’t.

**KL:** I love that point about kind of, you need to nurture both sides, your work life and your personal life, and that’s a really great segue way into thinking about some of the challenges you found balancing your role as a scholar and a parent. It sounds like you’ve thought and kind of made some contingency plans for things like timing and as you mentioned getting things done early, but I’m wondering if there’s other challenges that you’ve found and how have you dealt with some of those challenges?

**ML:** Umm, well I think time is the one that everyone talks about, and I mean when you talk about time, it also links to energy. [*laughs*] So I think like everyone says, yeah you need to pay more attention to time, how you use time, and I have always been very conscious of how I use my time, but after becoming a parent I’ve realized that I don’t have one whole day or half a day blocked off just to read or to write, especially at the beginning, when the baby was still an infant. The intervals were 15 minutes or half an hour, so I did not really wait until.... My son grew up to one year old before I started to write again, so I make use of those 15 minutes. For instance, I would have an article on my iPad and I would just read that during the 15 minutes. So I was much more conscious of how I used my time. So two things that I used strategically, actually both of them I learned from you Katie, one is the Tara Gray method, I know she was in one of the podcasts, so feel free to go back to that one. Another one is what you showed me Katie, which is the Google Spreadsheet. I’m a pretty visual person, so I color coded each of my projects so that I could have a much more holistic view of well, is it too much of this color, how about this project, have I been thinking too much about that? So I find both the Tara Gray method and also the Google spreadsheet have been useful. Another thing that has been a supportive partner to some other people may be another spouse that can give care and time and have consistency, you know that is pretty important to negotiate that time with that person. In my case, we changed our living patterns so that I will be the person who wakes up early but also goes to bed late, and my husband will wake up a little bit later and also go to bed late, so we need to work out a schedule so that each of us will have some time that we can have to our own.

**KL:** Those are such great suggestions, and I will make sure to link to the Tara Grey episode in the show notes, and also a template for the Google Doc you mentioned which is just a way of tracking projects and how much time you’re spending on some of your projects. I think you also make a great point Micky, I think a lot of people think they can only do writing in large chunks of time, and for many of us that’s our preference certainly, to kind of dig into a project over multiple hours, but there are many things that you can do in 5, 10, 15 minutes if you know what’s going on with your project and you’ve chunked it out, and this is something that I’ve written an essay recently about, and I will link to that in the show notes as well about the different kinds of tasks you can do in a short amount of time. And you’ve mentioned too having a supportive partner and thinking about other people in your life and how they can accommodate you, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about if there were any challenges that you found that are particular to women and motherhood, not just parenthood but your role as a mother.

**ML:** Sure! I do think that for the female parents there are some structural difficulties, because society as a whole still puts more expectations for the female parent. I’m just going to say a mother, they need the mother to be the one who is more caring, more nurturing, you know not necessarily from colleagues, but if I take my son to a daycare center, usually the workers are more comfortable with talking to me directly about things that he will need like today, or they will advise mothers, you know they will advise all parents, but they have a tendency to advise mothers to volunteer at the daycare center. So you know, I do see fathers at the daycare center, but I think the assumption is fathers are less interested in doing nurturing things or doing event planning. Another key thing, if you are a mother who is the biological mother you are still the one who gives birth, which is fairly exhausting, which is just not about you don’t get sleep for a couple of nights, because that process is just exhausting for the body. And also breast feeding itself takes time, you need to rest a lot, you need to keep yourself hydrated, so these are some biological things that no matter how conscious you are of gender, these are things that as a biological mother, you have to do.

**KL:** These are such excellent points, I’m glad that you’re raising them. We’re going to take a brief break, when we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from Micky about support structures that are positively impacting her productivity and also some of her productivity tactics for successful tenure. Back in a moment!

[*music plays*]

# Segment 2:

**KL:** Micky, one of the things that I know that you have done a really amazing job of, is setting up support structures for yourself to really impact your productivity. And I’m wondering if this is something you can talk a little bit about this, I know one of them is certainly the writing group that you are a part of, what are some of the support structures have you found to be particularly helpful for you, as you are balancing parenthood and your research?

**ML:** Well, I think maternity leave is very important, and I know a few employers in this country would give paternity leave, but these are usually pretty forward thinking, so I do encourage people to check them out even before you get pregnant or once you become a parent because there are a lot of lee ways. And I’m not saying that you should exploit them, but let’s say you want maternity leave, well your department chair or your dean, they are not allowed to ask you why you need three months or four months, because they are seen as privacy issues. Initially, you talk to the HR person about that. So the person who is really important to talk to is your primary care provider, in my case it was a midwife, talk to that person about how long should I take for my maternity leave? That is one thing I think people should explore a little bit more earlier than the baby is born. So unfortunately, I work in a small scale university, so there isn’t too much institutional support unlike a large state university where there might be child care centers on site, we don’t have that. We also don’t have a lot of faculty members who are new parents, so in that case it is a little bit hard. I have been finding that a lot of support that I receive is from individuals, for instance, you know colleagues who are sympathetic to me being a new parent, so sometimes if I cannot do this thing, I will ask them, “Can you do this thing for me and in return I will do other things that you are supposed to do?” So, I think, for new parents or for people who hope to be new parents, if they want to look at the employee handbook, check out HR website to see what policy is in place....

**KL:** This is an excellent point. I think that especially raising this idea of thinking about these things before having your child or children is imminent, and kind of planning and thinking ahead, is really an excellent point. So, one of the things I know you’ve thought a lot about, especially since you had your child after tenure, is just thinking about parenting while you’re trying to earn tenure, and what are some of the strategies you can use before and after to help balance your role as a parent. I’m wondering if you can talk about, just in your experience and talking with other academics who have been working toward tenure as they become parents, do you think there’s just one plan to help academics earn tenure while being a parent at the same time? Are there specific strategies that you think people are using? You know, is there like a secret thing that people who are going to become parents need to know about earning tenure while they’re also becoming parents?

**ML:** Right. I don’t think there is one good plan. I have seen various models work. I have seen people who, you know, were on track of getting tenure while having young children—you know, a couple of them, not just one. I have also seen people not getting tenure even though they don’t have children or the children are grown up. So I tend to think there is a correlation between having children and whether your chance of getting tenure will be higher or lower.

My advice is people should focus on what really matters, whether you are a parent or not, and it boils down to three things. First is regardless of your type of institution, you need to teach well. So, the “well” here, I think it depends on expectation of your institution. The second thing is publishing in visible places. So, very often, it does not only mean how many, but where, or after you publish them, and then what are you going to do to make your publication visible. And the last one is do not really take on any mundane services. It is very easy, especially for new faculty members, to sign themselves up in a wide range of services, but most of them are pretty inconsequential. They don’t make your CV look better. So instead of thinking of, you know, “I should be active in ten different minor committees,” why not just sign up for one big thing, but that thing will make you visible, will make you to work with people higher up in the institution. So I don’t think there is one good plan to be a parent and an academic at the same time. But one thing I think, you know, whether one is a parent or not, one should really do things that matter.

**KL:** That’s such excellent advice, and I also think one of the things you’re really emphasizing is that everyone’s plan is going to be a little bit different, —

**ML:** Yep.

**KL:** —and it’s going to have to fit their family structure, their parenting style, and what they really are hoping to achieve, —

**ML:** Mm-hm.

**KL:** —in terms of their tenure plan.

We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from Micky. Back in a moment.

[*music plays*]

# Segment 3:

**KL:** Micky, I would love to hear more from you about some of the productivity strategies that you’re using to help you balance your research and your scholarship with your role as a parent. Again, I know this is something you’ve thought a lot about and have really implemented some things, so what are some things that are working for you that you might recommend to other folks?

**ML:** Well, I know, Katie, you had a podcast about five-year plans—

**KL:** Yes.

**ML:** —and that is something that I highly recommend. Actually I just started to do one starting in 2017. So, before I was a parent, when I did my five-year plan, I did not have any personal component in it, so that was mainly just professional. And I find five-year plan is very helpful in thinking about tenure, because if you know what your goals are and you actually look back, you know that you don’t have any time to lose. But if you don’t have a plan, you just think about next month or next year. You will still feel, “Oh, you know, my tenure application is something down the road.” So you always feel that there is more time than you actually have, so looking back, if you know where you will end up with, you will know exactly what you need to do tomorrow or next week to take that plan off.

So, after becoming a parent, when I do my five-year plan, the personal goals become much more important, because, like what I said, time is a different thing altogether. Another thing is I also want to think about five years from now what my child will be. Like, he will be probably in grade school, and by saying that, it means that he will be in school five days, he’ll be in aftercare, so I’ll be like, you know, having more time during the week. But then, on the other hand, we cannot just take vacation anytime that we want during the summer. You have to fall in the two months that school has vacation. Other things that I thought of when I’m doing my five-year plan now is, well, how much daycare we can actually afford for the next year, because where I am, Massachusetts, has the most expensive daycare in the entire country. So we are really talking about a huge amount of money to send him to daycare five days or three days, so that is something that I need to take into consideration for my five-year plan.

Other things, especially if your five-year plan includes years after you already get your tenure, you want to think about how to make more time for yourself, and what that means is whenever there is a call for opportunities that will give you flexible time—and I don’t mean less work, I just mean flexible time—what it means is you can teach less, so that you don’t need to show up for two classes at a fixed time. So what that means is sabbatical leave, you still need to put in your work, but you don’t need to be in your office at those times. Course relief.... Also, if there is administrative duty that you can take—for instance, I’m a program director of Asian studies now, so with that, I get a one course load off. It isn’t something less work, it only means that I don’t need to teach one class, so that allows me to be more flexible in terms of allocating my time.

**KL:** Hm. Hm. Yeah, I mean, I think that that’s such an interesting point about.... It’s kind of like conversations you might have with people who are negotiating a new job, and you might say, you know, salary is not the only thing to consider. There’s all these other factors as well. And I think that when it comes to productivity, it’s kind of similar. It’s not just time that you’re necessarily thinking about, but it’s kind of the longevity of projects, it’s the flexibility that you might have, it’s the collaborators.

**ML:** Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

**KL:** You know, like, it’s all these other kinds of variables that might impact how you think about signing on to something or negotiating different kinds of work strategies with your colleagues or within your department. I think that’s really interesting.

**ML:** Mm-hm. Mm-hm. Yeah.

**KL:** So I thought we could shift, Micky, to talking a little bit about advice you might offer to new parents who are maybe working toward tenure, or maybe they’re post-tenure but they’re just really trying to keep their scholarship and research a priority. What is some advice that you have for new parents?

**ML:** Well, I think one thing that I find exciting, and I have heard other parents talk about that, is you can actually see how children learn, and they are extremely adaptable and curious. And somehow I think when we are working at those, very often we have forgotten how to find fun when we are working, because work, it’s supposed to be a drag, you know, not something that is exciting. So I think this is something that I have been finding, and the joy thing, which is to look at how my own child learns, how he finds curiosity in very simple things in life, and I think as a researcher, this is exactly what we should continue doing—you know, being curious, feeling excited about the most simple things. Another practical thing is, just seek help. I know this is not a society in which that people will seek help all the time, but what I have been finding is even if you can only afford to pay someone three hours a week so that you can go grocery shopping without your kid, I mean, that just makes your week completely different. Or if you have [*inaudible*] means grandparents, uncles, aunts, even if they can only be here once a year, just take advantage of that.

Another thing that I have done, but probably have not done enough, is if you know new parents, whether they are academic or whether they are graduate students, do offer help to them, even though you think, “Oh, I don’t really have time,” because especially the week after someone gives birth, there is no time, no energy, no nothing to do anything else. So when a former colleague whose wife gave birth, and I just offer to cook a week of meals for the family, and, you know, they were extremely thankful for that.

**KL:** That’s such great advice, thinking about not just yourself as a parent, but the people around you who are becoming parents, and the kinds of things that they might need. Just being collegial and helping them out when you can.

**ML:** Right. Yep.

**KL:** So, I think, Micky, you know, we get all these messages about, you know, supermoms and people bouncing back right after they have babies, and how it’s just kind of this message of “you can do it all.” I think there’s also some competing messages now saying, that’s not really the point, to try to do it all. But I’m wondering, especially because you are a media studies scholar, if you can speak a little bit to that, and what are some of the messages that you’re seeing about motherhood more generally, and what are the ones that you’re either embracing or combatting a little bit, just in terms of how they fit with your own experiences as a parent?

**ML:** Sure. So, I think in the past decade, we definitely see more supermom examples, such as Marissa Mayer of Yahoo!, or Sheryl Sandberg of Facebook, that they seem to be having it all--that they are married, they are mothers, they have high-power jobs, they are being respected. And I know there has been a discussion, especially among white, upper-middle-class women about mothers are having it all now, that you can have a career and be a mom at the same time, and I think sometimes it’s so easy to buy into that idea, “I’ll achieve that” —you know, if you are successful individually, your life will be better, and then other women will look up on you, and, you know, the world is all better. Because I’m a family scholar, so, you know, I do not really think that we can burden responsibilities to individuals, and charging them that, well, if you work hard enough, you are smart enough, you will find your rewards at the end.

So, in academia, also, I find, is to be more progressive that a lot of industries, but if you look at statistics, women are still getting less pay. Women tend not to be full professors. They tend to work as part-time instructors more than men. And also, going back to an earlier point that I made, women are still asked to do more services, especially services that actually don’t really matter, such as open house, because, you know, women faculty members are supposed to be more relatable to new students. And women still find it harder to say no if, you know, if they are asked to pick up yet another thing. So I do feel there is a structural problem in academia, but also in society as well, because the U.S. is one of the few developed countries that does not have maternity leave, that, yeah, you can ask for leave, but whether your employer asks you to come back to work is another question.

So I do think there are structural difficulties, yet I am seeing some very positive changes in terms of how two parents allocate responsibilities, because I’m seeing more fathers who are as educated as the mothers, so, you know, both of them have PhDs, or both of them have professional degrees, but it is the mother who is the one who’s the breadwinner. That is because almost all cases I know, it’s the fathers who want to spend more time with the children, so it is not because—you know, the fathers still have the same economic opportunities. So I find that to be extremely positive, especially if a woman faculty member, if she can... you know, not explicitly bringing that as a topic in a classroom, but if a woman faculty member does kind of bring that into a teaching moment, I find that extremely empowering to all female and male students in the class, but especially to male students, because especially at this time, I think men are facing a bigger crisis than women, because men are still supposed to be the breadwinners, but at the same time, men are losing jobs faster than women, so I think men are actually having a bigger identity crisis than women in this country, so I find it extremely empowering for women faculty members who kind of embrace a different kind of economic model in the family.

**KL:** Well, I’m so glad, Micky, that you brought this around full circle to talking about teaching moments and also just women who are role-modeling for their students. I think that’s a great point. Micky, I want to thank you so much for coming on the show, —

**ML:** Sure! It’s a pleasure.

**KL:** —sharing your experiences, and your tactical suggestions for how people can be productive and balance their role as researchers, scholars, and parents. Thanks so much!

**ML:** Well, thank you.

**KL:** And thanks also to our listeners for joining us for this week’s episode of *Research in Action*. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with a new episode.

[*outro music*]

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# Bonus Clip:

**KL:** In this first bonus clip for Episode 65 of the *Research in Action* podcast, Dr. Micky Lee discusses choosing long-term projects as the parent of a young child—take a listen. So I’m wondering, Micky, if parenthood – if you’ve ever had situations when parenthood really did impact your productivity and, if so, did you ever disclose that to collaborators, editors or colleagues that that was the reason why you weren’t hitting a deadline or you were a little bit behind?

**ML:** Right. Well, I did and will disclose that there was a real reason. A real reason is very different to an excuse so, at that moment, you may not even think that that excuse is not a real reason. I think a real reason is that you are able to do the work (and it is good work); you are not looking for people to accept substandard work. So that is how I differentiate both. Let me tell you about a few instances in which that in one case I did not disclose and in one case I did disclose I’ll give you what the outcome was. After I gave birth, my son had a number of medical complications, so he needed to be checked back into the hospital when he was 4 weeks old. I was in the intensive care unit with him. There wasn’t really much that I could do and there was a lot of support that we had at the hospital. I was working on this journal article and it came back as a second submission and resubmission. I working on that in the intensive care (unit). I sent it away and the editor came back to me really quickly and said “you did well for your second submission and resubmission, but this is not exactly what we’re looking for”, so I was actually very upset at that moment because, you know, my son was in intensive care. How dare you to talk to me! A new mother with a new son! It was very tempting for me to write back to him to say that my article doesn’t fit the bill is because of this. I did not do that because, well, I thought that I should leave that aside and think about it more. What I did was submit that to another journal and the editor there wrote back and said that the article is OK to be printed. I’m actually glad that I did not tell the editor of the first journal what is happening because, later, I did meet him in person in a conference and if I sent that email, I would appear to be unprofessional when I met him eventually in person. I’m very glad that I did not. There were two instances, though, once again when my son was very old (he was about 6 months old at the time) – I got 2 emails within the same month asking me if I’m interested in two projects. One person asked about co-editing a book, another person asked about a textbook and my son was about 6 months old and I was tempted to say no because I did not know if I would have time. Instead of just saying no right away, I just said that I need a month to think about it. In both cases, they did both say “yes, go think about that and get back to us within a month” and, eventually, I did say yes to both projects and I did not regret it because the projects were both much longer than a child growing up. One of them is still in the process of co-editing two years later and another one is still in the process of drafting chapters. So, if I look back and if I had said no, I think, at this point, I would regret it since my child has grown tremendously between 6 months old and now he is 3 years old and both book projects are still in process, so I’m glad that I did not say no. Another reason that I did not say no is that, very often, when you deny an opportunity that is given to you, people don’t come back to you. You may want to say no, but you may want to tell people “I’m not interested in it at this moment, but check back with me in a year’s time, check back with me in 6 months’ time…” because they may still be in the process of finding someone to edit the book or to write the textbook but your situation may have changed because, what I said, even though seeing a child growing up is very amazing (they grow up very fast), maybe in a year’s time or maybe in half a year’s time, you may have changed your mind. In general, I think people should not say no even though at that moment, you do not have time.

**KL:** I love that point, especially about if you do need to take the time to think about it, taking that time to think about it – just this idea that your situation changes pretty rapidly. Even if you’re feeling a little underwater or overwhelmed in the moment, it doesn’t mean that you will feel that way even 6 weeks later. Even these long term projects, such as books, you’re not going to have to complete it immediately. There’s definitely going to be some time to work on it.

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 65 of the *Research in Action* podcast with Dr. Micky Lee discussing choosing long-term projects as the parent of a young child—thanks for listening!