

**Academic mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic: Stressors, strains,
and challenges in adapting to work-life enmeshment**

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic had numerous unexpected impacts on academic mothers around the world. In the current article, the challenges being faced by academic mothers during the pandemic are illustrated based on recently published peer-reviewed and grey articles. The enmeshment of work and family life and the lack of separation from work increases the possibilities of significant professional challenges and possible mental health and physical health problems. Specific themes are highlighted, including strains of learning new technologies for online teaching, increasing workload, and household chores, barriers to scholarly productivity, insufficient support from institutions, loneliness due to disconnection, and pursuing perfection. The need for adaptability is also highlighted. This article also provides some institutional recommendations designed to support various academic mothers in increasing their empowerment, adaptability, and resilience, when they are facing the enmeshment of work and life. Given that the pandemic is continuing and now clearly represents a prolonged stress sequence, it is essential that academic mothers develop and utilize positive resources in order to limit the impact on their personal and professional lives.

Keywords: Stress, Enmeshment, Strain, COVID-19, Adaptability, Perfection, Mothers, Professors

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Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has led to unprecedented changes worldwide and it has significant negative impacts on economic conditions as well as physical and mental health (Racine et al., 2021a). Parents have faced never seen before difficulties and challenges in parenting school-age children due to online schooling at home and care responsibilities for preschool children due to the closure of daycare, which generated tremendous pressure during this pandemic and resulted in massive shifts in family life due to work-at-home parenting formats (Racine et al., 2021a).

In the current article, we consider the stressors and challenges faced by academic mothers. Of course, academic mothers experience the challenges faced by all mothers, including taking care of loved ones (both children and perhaps aging parents), but they also have unique demands associated with the academic role. Below, we consider the issues facing academic mothers. Most notably, we discuss the need for adaptability and highlight some unique themes that can substantially complicate the dual roles of academic mothers, especially those with the enmeshment of their work and family lives. Various findings attest to the challenges being faced by mothers during the pandemic, especially work-at-home mothers. A recent longitudinal Canadian study found substantial increases in depression and anxiety among Canadian mothers (see Racine et al., 2021a). The greatest increases in distress were found among mothers who reported income disruptions, problems in accessing childcare, and problems due to needing to balance homeschooling with their work responsibilities.

Academic mothers faced similar challenges as other work-at-home mothers. However, besides their online teaching responsibilities, they also need to submit their manuscripts for publications, apply for research grants, and engage in departmental and university services. At the same time, they need to fulfill household responsibilities, such as childcare at home, and helping their children with virtual learning and chores (Donner, 2020; Kasymova et al., 2021; Rao, 2019). The toll taken is indicated by new research showing that women academics, relative to their male counterparts, have

been impacted disproportionately throughout the pandemic (see Deryugina, Schurchkov, & Stearns, 2021). Aspects of daily life are typically quite different for academic mothers, relative to male academics, and this extends to housework and childcare considerations (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021). As we outline below, academic mothers face a set of complex and unique challenges and stressors.

Many academic mothers might have no choice but to devote less time and energy to research and academic productivity. A qualitative study revealed that the pressure on academic mothers is enormous since the beginning of the COVID-19 (Kasymova et al., 2021). Three major themes were found: (1) inability to meet institutional expectations; (2) juggling work and family life; and (3) proposed solutions during the pandemic to help academic mothers fulfill their job responsibilities. Many mothers indicated that they spent fewer hours researching and manuscript writing than they used to (Kasymova et al., 2021).

In this commentary, we consider what these changes have meant for academic mothers who have become a unique class of stay-at-home mothers. Academic mothers who are now working online at home have little separation between work and family life. To reflect this uniqueness, we (two professors from the psychology field and one professor from the nursing field) introduce the concept of “work-life enmeshment” to refer to those academics who feel a need to put some distance between their work and family lives yet feel their respective roles offer no separation, both objectively and subjectively, in terms of thoughts and feelings. The concept “enmeshed” refers typically to a relationship between two people; in this instance, we use it to refer to the relationship that one role-related part of the self has with another part of the self. The notion that people have a relationship with themselves offers a unique perspective that captures such issues as whether the person engages in self-care and whether the person engages in excessive self-silencing and self-sacrifice.

Stressors and Challenges Academic Mothers Experienced During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This segment of our commentary focuses on academic job-related issues and considerations, but first, we must briefly underscore the range of potential problems being faced by most if not all parents. Parenting stress increased substantially during COVID-19 (see Adams et al., 2020). The issues experienced by parents will be multiplied by the number of children they have, their ages and developmental levels, and how these children and adolescents are facing the challenges of the pandemic. The mental health problems among children and adolescents have essentially doubled during the pandemic according to meta-analysis results (Racine et al., 2021b). Relationship issues with partners also may be more problematic and involve significant relationship strains, assuming that the academic mother is not a single mother and there is a partner. In short, any attempt to represent the need for a work-life balance needs to consider that the life component of the equation potentially involves a vast array of challenges.

Specific work-related themes are now considered below. These themes reflect new emerging challenges and issues that now come with added complications.

a. Learning new technologies for online teaching.

Online teaching is different from traditional face-to-face teaching, which requires academic mothers to learn new technologies to fulfill their teaching assignments; for instance, pre-record lectures for asynchronous teaching, strategies to engage students in the class activities, and share screens for synchronous teaching, and breakout rooms for group discussion. These new technologies undoubtedly require considerable time and energy to become familiar with this new format and then use it to teach in an effective manner. These new changes might be overwhelming for some faculty members.

b. Maintaining the stability of the Internet and a quiet space for effective online teaching.

The quality of home internet is an essential factor for online teaching. A quiet and separate environment is also essential in order to reduce feelings of work-life enmeshment. Academic mothers are bound to be

interrupted by their children or pets while working from home. Academics engaged in virtual teaching need more dedicated space for videotaping their lectures. No matter whether it is virtual teaching or pre-recorded video, a clear background is needed (Kasymova et al., 2021). There are more challenges for some faculties who are living in an apartment with limited space for working and children’s playing during the day.

c. Increasing workload from academic responsibilities and household chores.

Usually, as noted above, academic mothers assume a disproportionate share of caregiving and household chore responsibilities. The lockdown due to COVID-19 and other protective but restrictive measures, including working from home and homeschooling, may exponentially increase their workload.

Academic mothers often have to contend with competing demands and needs due to their dual roles. For example, they might struggle between their online courses and those of their young children. It may become increasingly difficult for them to set up their online teaching environment because of the overly active children at home. The instability of the schooling system during this pandemic heightened these challenges.

Furthermore, due to the pandemic, there is usually no way for them to send their children out for childcare or hire service providers such as babysitters to their homes (Sharma & Vaishb, 2020). Some academic mothers might also need to take care of their elder parents at home due to the risk of long-term care outbreaks. As a result, it is easy to become drained and exhausted. Of course, other mothers may have to contend with not being able to see their elder parents due to physical distancing guidelines, and this represents another source of worry and stress.

d. Reducing research productivity.

Past studies showed female scholars with newborn children and the increasing number of children decreased their research productivity (Krapf et al., 2017; Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010). A recent study found that academic mothers in America who acknowledged their extra burdens from the larger household and

childcare workload might result in diminishing time and energy in maintaining their research productivity (Kasymova et al., 2021). It is very hard during the pandemic for scholars to collect in-person data, perhaps resulting in projects being put on hold (see Kasymova et al., 2021). The tendency for academic mothers to submit fewer journal manuscripts than male academics has increased as universities have gone virtual (Flaherty, 2020). Less productivity might delay academic mothers' promotions to tenure (Kasymova et al., 2021) and magnify existing gender inequities (Oleschuk, 2020).

e. Lacking support from institutions.

It is safe to assume that most academic mothers have not received sufficient support from their institutions due to abrupt transitions and being unable to access the campus when it is shut down. Meanwhile, they may have needed to attend many training programs for online teaching, research, and services (Kasymova et al., 2021), which increases mental and physical exhaustion. It is highly challenging for academic mothers to maintain the same quality of teaching with insufficient support from their institutions (see Drew & Marshall, 2020). Delaying tenure and promotion.

For junior faculty, pursuing tenure and promotion is one of the utmost goals in their career. The impact of the pandemic may have made it substantially more difficult to achieve this significant task. Research programs have also been restricted because of the shutdown of universities and colleges across Canada and around the world. Academics have not been able to use campus or community centres or engage in usual pursuits that involve face-to-face interaction or group activities. Obstacles that limit research progress will ultimately be reflected in fewer publications for those academics who cannot have long periods of uninterrupted work time. It may be the case that when there is time to work, it may be difficult for academic mothers to concentrate due to numerous worries and fears, including the fear of personally contracting COVID-19 or fear of a loved one becoming ill (for a discussion, see Lee et al., 2021).

f. Loneliness and disconnection.

One potentially positive element of working online from home is that it offers more ways to stay in touch with

students, colleagues, and friends. However, this will be limited by how much time is available to connect with others. It is also possible that the lack of social interaction in person will promote a profound sense of isolation and loneliness among some academic mothers. Reports of worker loneliness among academics during the pandemic have been documented (Stadtlander & Sichel, 2021). One proactive step at the institutional or department levels that would be highly beneficial is to facilitate opportunities for academics working from home to connect with each other and thereby have the chance to share their experiences.

g. Lack of sufficient amount of sleep.

The lack of a sufficient amount of restorative sleep is one overarching problem for academic mothers during the pandemic and it may signal a general lack of focus on self-care. Extensive evidence attests to how the pandemic has disrupted sleep and had a destructive impact that is quite pervasive. One systematic review and meta-analysis concluded that sleep difficulties have escalated with more than 1 in 3 people experiencing sleep problems during the pandemic (Jahrami et al., 2021). Sleep issues were featured in compelling personal accounts provided by five academics (4 women, and 1 man, Creely et al., 2021). Issues were presented in curated narratives based on personal experiences. Problems included lack of sleep, interrupted sleep, and sleeping and waking at work because of working at home. One academic noted waking up to immediately be thinking about work and feeling guilty. Sleep issues influence everyone, but they are especially problematic for academics when they impair concentration.

h. Academic mothers pursuing perfection.

Other stressors may come into play for women with certain personality characteristics. An overarching concern is that some women academics tend to go beyond being conscientious and instead aim for perfection or alternatively, feel they are expected to be perfect. Perfectionists may be especially at risk throughout the pandemic for myriad reasons (Flett & Hewitt, 2020) and this should certainly apply to academic mothers, as illustrated by the personal narratives of perfectionistic academic mothers coping with the pandemic (see Guy & Arthur, 2020). Meta-

analytic data gathered prior to the pandemic has firmly established links between burnout and certain perfectionism trait dimensions (Hill & Curran, 2016). While it is assumed that perfectionism boosts achievement, when it comes to professors, existing data suggest that perfectionism undermines academic productivity and the quality of the work produced (Sherry et al., 2010).

Recent research has extended the scope of inquiry by establishing links between trait perfectionism and parental burnout (Sorkkila & Aunola, 2019). The pressure to be perfect may be especially acute for mothers, including academic mothers. There have been extensive analyses of the perfect mother myth and the potential pitfalls awaiting mothers who have internalized this extreme ideal (Maushart, 1997). Qualitative analyses have established that the perfect mother myth is highly salient for many women, and it is a constant source of stress and distress (Nahas & Amasheh, 1999; Pun et al., 2004). Academic mothers who feel they must be perfect should find it difficult to cope with the many uncontrollable and uncertain aspects of the pandemic.

Adaptability and Other Positive Aspects

There are some vital individual differences factors that have not been studied empirically among academic mothers, but they nevertheless need to be considered when examining the stress and strain of the pandemic for academic mothers. Adaptability to the pandemic is one key individual difference variable. Adaptability has been described as "... the capacity to constructively regulate psycho-behavioral functions in response to new, changing, and/or uncertain circumstances, conditions, and situations" (Martin et al., 2013, p. 728). Adaptability shares some features but is distinguished from other positive tendencies such as grit and resilience (Martin, 2017). Adaptability is typically reflected in various ways, including emotional adaptability, cognitive adaptability, and behavioural adaptability.

Research on university students has shown that differences in self-reported adaptability are associated with lower levels of psychological distress and better psychosocial adjustment in terms of indices such as loneliness (Besser et al., 2020a). Moreover, this work has

found that students with higher reported levels of adaptability have a more positive orientation when required to make an abrupt transition to online learning (Besser et al., 2020b). These findings can be extrapolated to academic mothers. It is certain that there are salient individual differences among women academics in adaptability and women who are high in resilience and adaptability should cope better with working at home, including having lower work-life enmeshment.

When viewed within this context, adaptability is relevant in various ways, and it must be considered from a variety of perspectives. Adaptability is certainly required in terms of specific occupational demands such as sudden shifts to synchronous online learning. But more generally, there is a need for adapting to a new way of life and the new demands and approaches that are needed at a family level in the home.

Potential Benefits

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the lifestyles of everyone in the world. Although it brought crisis and challenges to academic mothers, it also has benefits and creates opportunities. Saving transportation time and costs are two significant benefits. Academic mothers do not need to go back and forth between home and campus, which can save at least half-hour of traveling time, not to mention the expense of gas and parking. They can start learning Skype, Zoom, or Hangouts to deliver their lecture to students more efficiently, no matter whether the lecture is synchronous or asynchronous. Pre-recording lectures enable students to access the course material at a time of their comfort. Live online polling and surveys can capture students' feedback not only fast and conveniently but also anonymously. The breakout room option via Zoom makes group discussion assignments possible and calculates students' participation rate quickly. Academic mothers have opportunities to think creatively about using various informative teaching options and resources, such as videos and the Internet. Furthermore, subtitles can be added to the video content, making the video more understandable, especially for the students with English as their second language (Kalaimathi et al., 2020).

Other potential benefits include the accessibility of online meetings, which allow faculty to join meetings from any location of their choice. They can also participate in two Zoom meetings simultaneously, which is impossible in the past. The video-off option during meetings allows faculty to attend without the need of applying makeup, and picking out outfits, which saves a lot of time and money. Homeschooling requires academic mothers to spend more time with their children, this may be exhausting, but on the other hand, it is an opportunity to enhance their bond and create stronger and closer relationships. They can better understand their children’s individual learning needs, interests and abilities. A more relaxed learning environment can be provided. Also, possible physical and psychological bullying can be avoided. Children can learn at their own pace, which is very suitable for children with learning differences. Mothers can set a schedule convenient for children to learn. Again, the time required to pick up and drop off children from school can be waived.

Coping with Challenges: Proposed Recommendations

Academic institutions need to make significant efforts to address the new challenges the pandemic created and come up with considerate solutions that adjust the expectations, requirements, and responsibilities of academic mothers (Kasymova et al., 2021). The following are our recommendations and suggestions:

- a. Governments and school institutions need to provide stable financial income and job opportunities for academic mothers to help relieve their stress (Racine et al., 2021a).
- b. Additional years should be granted to meet tenure and promotion requirements. Similarly, requirements for teaching and services could be more flexible, such as reducing the teaching and service loads (Kasymova et al., 2021). Workloads must be closely monitored for each individual and departments and faculties need to establish parameters to safeguard academic mothers who are taking on too much and being asked to take on too much.
- c. Reconnecting with friends and colleagues via online platforms or phones to share experiences should

be facilitated and this should include opportunities to participate in parent groups that can share the parenting skills to keep their children on the daily routine, helping their children online virtual learning, organizing virtual activities to make connections, managing children’s problematic behaviors and learning to cope with stress, and anxiety skills. If they feel overwhelmed, they may need to meet a therapist virtually or through phone calls or access counselling services provided by their institution. School counseling services for academic mothers should be accessible given the evidence showing that anxiety and depression symptoms increased for mothers during COVID-19.

d. Scholars must have opportunities to voice their urgent concerns to their institutions for social support and support for efficacy and mattering. A sense of having a voice and being heard and seen is central to a feeling of mattering at work and mattering in general (see Flett, 2018, 2022) and this is particularly important for junior faculty members who are facing more challenges while adapting to the new job. Moreover, school institutions can provide more social support for single mothers with children, such as childcare facilities which can be flexible to academic mother's working schedules. Even small considerations that project seeing the academic mother as a person will increase a sense of mattering and enhance the ability to adapt and cope.

e. Facilitate setting clear boundaries. Academic mothers working from home may blur the lines with the home hours. Institutions could and should heighten awareness of the need to avoid work-life enmeshment, but measures can be implemented to provide assistance (e.g., implementing “no-email” Sundays).

f. It is imperative at the institutional level to proactively assist academic mothers to provide online workshop and coaching sessions designed to promote their adaptability and resilience to provide them with a solid sense of self, coping skills, and problem-solving skills (Guarino & Borden, 2017). Adaptability and resilience are fueled by opportunities to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and by learning to respond to setbacks with self-compassion rather than self-criticism. Ideally, academic mothers are encouraged to be self-

advocates who are willing to seek help when it is needed without any sort of self-stigma.

g. A strong system of mentorship needs to be created with expedited training for mentors and the development of a clear understanding of the mentoring role. Time spent with matters can enhance a sense of mattering for both the mentee and the mentor.

Summary and Conclusion

In the current article, the challenges facing academic mothers during the pandemic were illustrated. Several specific work-related themes were highlighted as well as issues involving broader factors. The lack of separation between work and home sets the stage for work-life enmeshment and significant professional problems and possible mental health and physical health problems.

Given that the pandemic is continuing and now clearly represents a stress sequence, it is vitally important that academic mothers develop and rely on positive resources to limit the costs and consequences of this global health pandemic. Self-care seems essential, perhaps now more than ever. Mothers who hold themselves to exceptionally high standards have a tendency to be exceptionally self-critical, but instead, they need to exercise self-compassion and be self-forgiving when they are not able to be all things to all people, both at home and at work. It is natural to feel responsible for everyone and everything, but the ultimate responsibility is to take care of oneself and find ways to lessen the stress and strain of daily life.

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