

**The Intersection of Motherhood and Academia During a Pandemic:
A Storytelling Approach to Narrative Oral History**

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Abstract: This paper takes a storytelling approach to narrative oral history using reflexivity as analysis, making meaning through social engagement between co-authors, friends, family, and colleagues. The story presents the first author's lived experience as a mother and academic, both journeys at their peak as the pandemic loomed closer to and arrived in Canada. These journeys and their intersection are presented in chronological order, detailing the stressors and struggles of mothering in academia during a pandemic. The second author played an integral role in telling this story, by drawing out the narrative through an open-ended interview. Reflexive thoughts, authentic accounts, and interview quotes are embedded throughout conveying lived experience, feelings, and concerns. The paper magnifies structural gender inequality in academia by sharing struggles, such as loss of opportunity for scholarly contributions, pregnancy secrecy and career advancement anxieties, the reality of maternity “leave” in academia, and accounts of personal support and lack of professional support. We hope this piece gives mothers in academia comfort in knowing they are not alone in work-life challenges, encourages women in similar positions to share their stories, opens the academic world to these lived realities, and inspires equity-informed change for the good of mothers and academia.

Keywords: Mothering, Academia, Storytelling, Reflexivity, Narrative Oral History

Résumé: Cet article adopte une approche narrative de l'histoire orale narrative en utilisant la réflexivité comme analyse, donnant du sens à travers l'engagement social entre les co-auteurs, les amis, la famille et les collègues. L'histoire présente l'expérience vécue de la première auteure en tant que mère et universitaire, deux parcours à leur apogée alors que la pandémie se rapprochait et arrivait au Canada. Ces parcours et leur intersection sont présentés dans l'ordre chronologique, détaillant les facteurs de stress et les difficultés de la maternité dans le milieu universitaire pendant une pandémie. Le deuxième auteur a joué un rôle essentiel dans la narration de cette histoire, en dessinant le récit à travers une entrevue ouverte. Des pensées réflexives, des récits authentiques et des citations de l'entrevue sont intégrés tout au long de la transmission d'expériences vécues, de sentiments et de préoccupations. L'article amplifie l'inégalité structurelle entre les sexes dans le milieu universitaire en partageant les luttes, telles que la perte d'opportunités pour les contributions savantes, le secret de la grossesse et les angoisses d'avancement professionnel, la réalité du « congé » de maternité dans le milieu universitaire et les récits de soutien personnel et le manque de soutien professionnel. Nous espérons que cet article rassure les mères universitaires en

sachant qu'elles ne sont pas seules face à des défis travail-vie personnelle, encourage les femmes occupant des postes similaires à partager leurs histoires, ouvre le monde universitaire à ces réalités vécues et inspire un changement fondé sur l'équité pour le bien des mères et du milieu universitaire.

Mots-clés: Maternage, milieu universitaire, narration, réflexivité, histoire orale narrative

Resumen: Este ensayo utiliza un enfoque narrativo para contar relatos orales utilizando la reflexión como análisis, generando significado a través de la participación social entre coautores, amigos, familiares y colegas de trabajo. Esta historia presenta la primera experiencia vivida por la autora en la cúspide de su trayectoria como madre y académica, mientras la pandemia se acercaba cada vez más a Canadá. Estas trayectorias y sus intersecciones son presentadas en orden cronológico, pormenorizando los factores de estrés y luchas de la maternidad en el entorno académico durante una pandemia. La segunda autora tuvo un papel preponderante en la narración de esta historia, extendiendo la narración a través de una entrevista abierta. Pensamientos reflexivos, relatos auténticos y citas de entrevistas están incluidas a lo largo del texto transmitiendo las experiencias vividas, sentimientos e inquietudes. Este ensayo amplifica la inequidad de género estructural existente en el ámbito académico compartiendo las luchas, como la pérdida de oportunidades de realizar aportaciones académicas, el secreto del embarazo, ansiedades en relación al desarrollo profesional, la realidad de la incapacidad por la maternidad en el medio académico y relatos de apoyo personal y falta de apoyo profesional. Esperamos que esta obra pueda brindar alivio a otras mujeres en el medio académico al saber que no están solas en los desafíos de la vida profesional, incentivar a las mujeres que se encuentran en una situación similar a compartir sus historias, abrir el mundo académico a estas realidades vividas e inspirar cambios fundamentados en la equidad para el bien de todas las madres y la academia.

Palabras Clave: Maternidad, medio académico, narración, reflexión, narración de historias orales.

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Introduction

A family member who knows my story well encouraged me to contribute to this special issue. Said person is a woman, has worked in the field of gender and equity-based analysis for 20 years, and presently serves as a federal senior policy analyst in mental health promotion for children and families; hence the concern for the mental health of a mother of two young children in academia during a pandemic. Though I was eager to delve into this paper to share my story—especially since I knew I was not alone in my experience and sharing it would be for the betterment of mothers (and families) in academia—I found myself hesitating and procrastinating. I put other projects first because I knew others were relying on me, whereas this paper was about me, as a woman and a mother.

Yet, I took any opportunity I had to engage friends and family about this piece I was planning to write. The hesitation persisted. I kept wondering, will readers think I am complaining? Will colleagues see me as weak? Will the academic community really listen and make equitable space for mothers in academia? After a few more weeks passed, a friend—and co-author of this paper—offered to conduct an interview to draw out my story. The offer was the perfect motivation. I felt supported and understood, opening the door to much more than I had anticipated.

In academia we strive to understand phenomena—but we cannot genuinely understand something unless we are fully immersed in it. Accordingly, I share with you my authentic experience to encourage other female voices and to embolden mothers in academia to contribute to the change needed to equalize women’s intellectual contributions to the academic world. Presented to the reader is a narrative oral history using a storytelling approach, recounting my lived experience of motherhood, academia, and how the two have intersected during the (presently ongoing) COVID-19 pandemic.

Situating the Storytellers

Author 1

At the time this paper was written, my son was 3.5 years old, my daughter was 14 months old, and I had started a tenure-track assistant professor position. Adding to these major events, the Province of Ontario, where I reside, was more than a year into the pandemic—restrictions began two weeks before my daughter was born.

To situate myself, I come from a place of privilege. I am a white, middle-class individual who identifies as a cisgender woman. My parents’ style was authoritative, and they supported me in all my life happenings and career undertakings. They encouraged me to voice my ideas, especially when it came to something I cared deeply about or believed should change. On a personal level, I have always been self-reflective, observant, and inquisitive. Specializing in early childhood education was a natural academic progression for me, fueled by a passion for social justice and equity for young families.

Author 2

When I was introduced to this paper and this project, it immediately resonated with me as a professional building a career while parenting a young child. I was reminded of my undergraduate studies in journalism and women’s and gender studies, which has led to a lifelong passion for telling stories that depict lived human experiences and contribute to the truth and fabric of our society.

I, too, come from a place of privilege as a white, middle-class person who identifies as a cisgender woman. Growing up, I was raised by a single mother who built a career while raising two children. Witnessing the sacrifices, she had to make for her career, as well as her personal life, to be available for her family has certainly coloured my perspective on structural gender inequalities. I have always been keenly aware that women in particular feel an obligation to advance and succeed within systems and structures that were not built for our experience.

Telling My Story

To draw out the narrative account of my story, a supportive space was needed to break through anxiety and social acceptability that can mask sharing real experience. Author 2 initiated the process, prepared questions and conducted the interview (see Appendix 1 for questions). This provided a sense of freedom and trust to share events and feelings from my personal and professional life, consistent with a feminist approach to oral history research (Haynes, 2010). I felt my voice being heard and valued. During the interview, open-ended questions were used to extract details from my young academic career and overlapping journey into motherhood, whilst coping with a novel infectious disease that turned pandemic overnight. The audio-recorded interview lasted approximately two hours and was transcribed using an automated transcription program and checked for accuracy.

In addition to the content of the interview, other sources of “data” were my personal thoughts and ideas, as well as conversations with my life partner, friends, and colleagues. Each conversation brought up more stories from personal and third-party experiences. These contributed to unveiling issues related to being a mother in the academic world, what the pandemic revealed about women’s roles, and the longstanding challenge of work-life balance.

A Feminist Dilemma

While I am not a feminist scholar, using this research methodology elicited feminist issues. Westcott (1979) argued to understand (the lives of) women we must listen to their thoughts and feelings, not solely interpret their actions or activities. To this day, professional mothers conform to roles and behaviours that are expected or socially appropriate within the dominant society. Similarly, the imperative to succeed within the world of academia drove me to actions that did not match my feelings of discouragement and exhaustion.

Beyond the need to acknowledge the perspectives of mothers in academia is the inner conflict that follows us around. For instance, in writing this paper, I was uncomfortable sharing the content with the academic

world. I felt anxiety over how I might be perceived by my peers. Thus, I found myself in a feminist dilemma between researcher, in which “theoretical, conceptual and formal traditions...are located [in a] predominantly ‘public’ and ‘male-stream’” (Edwards & Ribbens, 1998, p. 2), and sharer of personal life experiences of motherhood. I attribute these negative feelings, later identified as shame, to structural gender inequalities (Mann, 2018). At the end of the process, I have come to appreciate the value of voice-as-empowerment through women speaking the truth of their lived realities, which tend to go unrecorded in mainstream research (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Thus, “decentering the primacy of the Anglo-American realm in scientific knowledge production” (Bisaillon et al., 2020, p. 133) was a driving force behind producing this paper.

Methods

This reflexive narrative oral history brings together journeys into both motherhood and academia, along with the added challenges of a pandemic. Using a storytelling approach, a ‘sensemaking tool’ without connection to others’ thoughts or ideas (Rindfleisch et al., 2009) intentionally advocates for decolonial research, where conversation and story are valued in and of themselves (Stanley Henry, personal communication, September 15th, 2021). This oral history comes from the perspective of a privileged white woman in a predominantly white man’s world, confronted by a system that does not account for her reality. In truth-telling, I connect with systemic biases within academia perpetuated by white men in dominant roles driving research based on their experiences, perspectives, and interests (Anderson et al., 1987). Presenting a young academic mother’s experience during a pandemic is one small step toward deconstructing gender bias in the academy; a system that continues to ignore the intersecting realities of groups outside of the dominant male norm.

As expressed by Kovach (2009), “[Stories] are both method and meaning. Stories spring forth from a holistic epistemology and are the relational glue in a socially interdependent knowledge system” (p. 108).

No scientific or methodological rigour was applied in the traditional sense, rather, an active reflexive process was maintained, and meaning was processed through social engagement between the co-authors, friends, family, and colleagues (Patnaik, 2013). As this research did not involve collecting data from third party participants, it did not require ethical approval and was confirmed exempt by Brock University’s Research Ethics Board (#21-269). With respect to the inclusion of contributing statements that informed the reflexive process, approval of identification and statement use was obtained. This paper shares an interpretation of my story with three aims: (a) to encourage mothers in academia to share their stories, (b) to contribute to deeper understanding of mothers’ experiences in academia, as well as the challenges and constraints amplified during a pandemic, and (c) to initiate research and bring about change to support young families and encourage women to enter and remain in academia (Edwards, 1990).

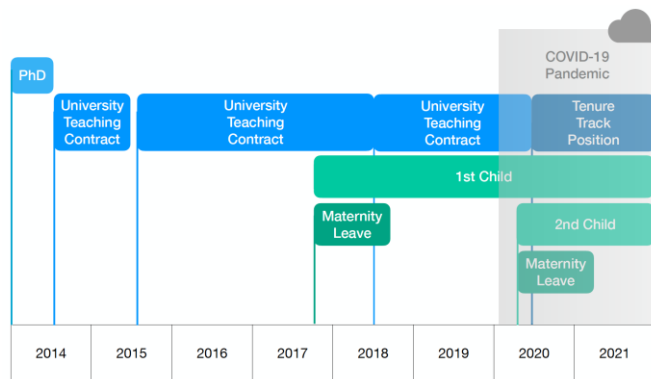
I recognize these experiences occurred in a space of relative privilege, being a white, middle-class, cisgender and able-bodied woman with a strong and stable support system. My own unique experience and perspective does not represent or equalize experiences among women of other typically discriminated groups (Kim, 2008). Thus, I implore readers to consider what such experiences may be like for mothers whose lived realities may include more layered and nuanced challenges and barriers (e.g., racialized, LGBTQS+, refugee, disabled mothers). Sharing stories such as this, through an oral account of experiences using reflexive practice, supports the need to reveal the multiple hidden realities of women in the academic world, challenging unconscious bias in all its forms.

Timeline

The timeline representing the intersection of my career path, journey into motherhood, and COVID-19 pandemic is presented in Figure 1. In brief, I graduated with my PhD in 2014, started as an assistant professor on teaching contracts in 2014, and in September 2017, my son was born and I began my first maternity leave. On March 14th, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced

Ontario to go into lockdown. Two weeks later (April 1st), my daughter was born and I began my second leave. On July 1st, 2020, I signed my tenure-track offer.

Figure 1. Intersecting timelines: Career, motherhood, pandemic



Findings

Academic Career

I embarked on a career in academia with a passion for building and mobilizing knowledge in early childhood education and care; this was quickly dampened by concern I would not attain a position. I was entering not only a hyper-competitive market, but also a limited one that requires matching your area of specialization with an available posting. The result tends to be widening the job search to places outside the realm of your support system. If nothing comes of your search, you start to wonder if you should follow others who have changed career direction. My back-up plan was—a *Play Café*, incorporating the three most joyous aspects in my life: play, baked goods, and coffee!

I took on a full-time teaching contract in my search for a permanent position. In such positions, there is no guarantee of renewal. As I was striving for a tenure position, building my research program was crucial. On top of fulfilling the requirements of the contract (and doing it well), I was completing research projects, writing manuscripts, and applying and interviewing for permanent positions. Evenings and weekends were not allocated to taking breaks and having time for self-care.

Especially after my son was born, staying on track toward a tenure position became exhausting. Soon after, I decided if I did not get a permanent position by 2020, I would go back to the drawing board. I owed it to myself and my family to enjoy life and all the other amazing things it has to offer. In line with Bisailon et al.'s (2020) paper on women's experiences in academia, the stress of taking on contract jobs can have harmful effects on a person (e.g., burn out, acute illness).

Motherhood Secrecy in Academia

I never thought being a woman was debilitating in academia until I became pregnant with my first child. Only then did I understand the fear-instilling and anxiety-provoking advice from colleagues over the years. For example, "have children during your PhD because afterwards there will not be time", "plan to have your children outside of the academic year so you can plan good birthday parties" or listening to professors grumble when they hear or suspect someone pursuing a PhD or applying for an academic position is starting a family.

During my first pregnancy, I applied to renew a teaching contract. While I waited to learn the outcome of the competition, I concealed my pregnancy. I thought if the committee knew, it would potentially use this knowledge to inform its decision and I would be out of the running. Still, it felt as though I was cheating by not saying anything. After I learned I was successful, I felt uncomfortable sharing what was wonderful news, and further, felt guilty I had placed colleagues in a difficult position of having to complete the hiring process anew.

I also felt compelled to hide my second pregnancy during tenure-track interviews. Soon after my daughter was born, in preparation for a short-listed full day interview through video conference, I strategized to reduce the possibility of the committee hearing the baby cry and scheduled breastfeeding around breaks. I was concerned if the search committee learned I was on leave, it would be a disadvantage. I have heard stories of other women who lived the same experience, hiding pregnancies and hiding babies' cries during

interviews. We should never feel we must hide our pregnancies or caring for our babies because of guilt, or worse, diminished chances for advancement and success in academia.

Maternity Leave in Academia

The term "leave" legally means you are not able and technically should not be working, otherwise you are violating the requirements of the leave and not meeting the qualifications for Employment Insurance benefits (Government of Canada, 2021). As academics, however, we have responsibilities with advising and research. Otherwise, graduate students are sent to new advisors and colleagues' works and students' contributions to publications are delayed. If we are on leave, then we should cease all academic duties. I would predict most academics, if not all, who take maternity/parental leave complete work during this time and feel obligated to do so. I have, and I know of colleagues who have taken meetings, read manuscripts, advised graduate students, and contributed to papers while on leave. Where does this leave the mother (or parent)? They are recovering from giving birth and caring full-time for an infant—which as we know is already an around-the-clock job.

Though I specialize in early learning and development, I too made a "to do" list for while the baby was sleeping (eruption of laughter). As I used to say to students when teaching a class on parenting: you can never fully understand what it means to care for a child and/or engage in parent-child dynamics until you have a child of your own! Once I became a parent, I felt determined to include in my Annual Report that one of my "non-remunerated professional activities" was raising a child.

Maternity Leave #1

Career-wise, I missed out. For instance, a project one of my colleagues and I started was already pushed because of other commitments. When my colleague had time to dedicate to the paper, I—being in my third trimester—did not. My initial

feeling was I did not want to hold this person back in their scholarly production, so although this was a joint idea combining our specialties, I stepped away. I ended up coming back on board and significantly contributing during revision, however, the feeling of accomplishment and authorship was impacted.

During this leave, I also continued coding data for a project of my own and got on board with another project to build the research portion of my resumé. I worked during my son's naps and had meetings while he played in a baby-safe space (see Figure 2). That was a difficult time and I realize now that I put my son first, my career second, and myself last. I delayed showering, exercising, getting fresh air, and resting because I wanted to keep up with my research and be a competitive candidate for a tenure-track position. On top of this, I was jobless after my leave, thus, I spent time applying for post-doctoral fellowships and tenure-track positions. I applied for fifteen jobs and interviewed for seven.

Figure 2. My son keeping busy while i work



Transition: Maternity Leave to a Teaching Contract Position.

I received an offer for a teaching contract position in another province on August 21st, 2018, for a September 1st start date. It was the last day of my leave and I was expected to start teaching three

courses as of September 5th. Due to the timing of the position, distance to travel between Québec and Ontario, and return from leave, the Chair advocated for a course release and the Dean agreed. I was extremely grateful. If it were not for this support, I would have certainly burnt out. I almost did as it was. This was one of the most stressful times in my career: traveling, leaving my son, and preparing courses in a short window of time. Though I was eager to take the position, something had to give. My partner left his job to care for our son and I was away from my family three days a week for a month and a half until we found a place to live.

Maternity Leave #2 During a Pandemic

My daughter was born two weeks before pandemic restrictions began in Ontario. Luckily my parents had arrived (from another province) a week before the lockdown and were able to provide support for a short while. My partner was holding down the fort taking care of our son (daycares were closed) and me as I healed and nursed our infant in what is appropriately called the fourth trimester. With the pandemic in full swing, not being able to take children anywhere indoors in the dead of the summer heat was difficult. We felt imprisoned in our own home. Days melded into each other with no events or activities to break them up. We spent significant time trying to provide novel experiences for our older child.

Enduring the pandemic during this leave brought constant anxiety. I became anxious about small things and later wondered why I was so worked up. The concern to keep myself, my partner, and our children healthy and virus-free—as well as worrying about extended family—came with a heap of stress. Research during the first few months of the pandemic found a considerable increase in the likelihood of maternal anxiety, depression, insomnia, and other mental health concerns (e.g., feeling loss, sadness, irritability) (Davenport et al., 2020; Ollivier et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2020). Particularly in homes with children, women reported poorer mental health in

comparison to men (Johnston et al., 2020). Furthermore, because we had moved away from family and friends for my career, we were concerned about who would care for our children if we were to become ill (this was pre-vaccine availability). We adapted to this unusual way of living, though. We created new habits and got acquainted once again to life with a newborn, all while I was going through the roller coaster of hormones recovering from birth and breastfeeding. Becoming a second-time mom during the pandemic, like many other women, I was *not* okay.

It was only after my partner and I were vaccinated that I felt some sense of relief, not just for myself, but for my children because we were protecting them. One way we coped was by sharing what we could from our children’s lives through video calls and sending photos and videos to family and friends. As a new mom, one of the greatest joys is showing off the adorable baby you created and working hard to keep happy and healthy. Though we could not feel that in person, we did our best to spread joy to validate these feelings. It was not as satisfying as it would have been in person; giving others opportunity to hold the baby, simultaneously giving you a break while you eat a meal someone else cooked or enjoy some adult time—what a dream.

Just as I had done in the first maternity leave, but not as intensively, I had a list of academic tasks to accomplish. I revised a paper, reviewed a manuscript, supervised a research assistant’s tasks, and completed a video as a student resource in an undergraduate textbook. Though I could have refused to do these, timing in academia is not (that) flexible. If I did not contribute to the field, I would have missed out on those opportunities and would have had to find others at a later date. Somehow, I found the time and mental capacity to complete the tasks on my list—mostly thanks to my partner’s support, but also by working during my child’s naps and enduring late evenings. To complete these tasks on leave during a pandemic was challenging, to say the least. Thinking back, I wonder: how did I do it?

On top of this, a few weeks postpartum, I was invited to two tenure-track interviews. I was grateful for my partner, my parents and their support while I continued to strive for that academic position. Nursing my daughter and passing her along to someone else between her second and fourth week of life was not what I had in mind when I anticipated those first crucial weeks of motherhood. Though some may say I could have refused the interviews, I would argue such positions—especially ones that match your specialty—do not come along often in this field. I accepted a tenure-track position offer that June (see Figure 3).

Transition: Maternity Leave to a Tenure-Track Position During a Pandemic. Upon my return to work, delayed feelings of gratitude swept over me. What a great feeling to be able to drive my research program that started in my graduate years (2007). My research program was a teenager already! I also finally had a permanent position—at least if I continued providing evidence of high-quality academic work. Starting on probation after completing teaching, service, and research (without remuneration) for six years on contract feels offensive. Enter anxiety—again—of publishing, completing projects, and applying for funding!

Figure 3. Signing a tenure-track offer as a new mom



I was also grateful to be back during the spring; thank goodness my daughter was born in April. I am not sure how I would have found the time to prepare courses if I were to return during the academic year. Teaching requires preparation of content and planning of course proceedings. I have a colleague who was to return to work mid-September after an 8-month maternity leave but decided to go back earlier to start the course at the onset, rather than have someone else teach the first two weeks. Even if they returned when planned, they would have had to train the incoming instructor—which likely would have taken just as much time! This same colleague had another child, returned to work mid-February, and was not expected to teach that semester. As instructors, we have an obligation to students to follow through with our syllabus. Thus, being able to teach a course we prepared in its entirety is appropriate. Moreover, having a smoother transition not only helps the individual mentally prepare for teaching effectively—and in turn the students for learning effectively—but also positively impacts breastfeeding and bonding with a new child.

When I started back at work, it took time before I felt at my pre-leave (or at least pre-pregnancy) mental capacity. After everything that had happened in the past year, re-focusing on high-level work was not easy, especially not with the added pandemic anxiety. I had to figure out where I left off with research projects, go through a year's worth of emails, re-familiarize myself with the updated Learning Management System, learn new research protocols, apply for funding, and, oh yes, build my research program. I felt as though I needed time to recuperate from leave during a pandemic to be better prepared to return to academic work.

Thinking on these points reminds me of a clip from Stanley Tucci's series: *Searching for Italy* (2021), where he visits a family sharing a meal with three generations (29:00). The scene plays out as such:

Tucci (narrator): "As delicious as the food is, traditional cooking like this also tells you the story of a place: how they live, and what was important to them. For as long as anyone can remember, there's been a strict hierarchy to how the rabbit has been served."

Nonna: "So, the thigh is the most important part, and it was given to the patriarch, the man." "Then, the children were very well respected as well because they were considered the future."

"Once there were the field workers, the ones who worked the land [would be the next ones fed]."

Tucci (narrator): "Sadly, in this traditional hierarchy, the mother of this family is left with the bony neck and skull."

So, the hierarchy is: patriarch, children, labourers, then finally, matriarch. This resonated with me in that it mirrored what I felt about being a mother in academia—getting what was left of the meal (the scraps). For example, missing funding deadlines due to leave and the interference of funding application completion due to daycare/school closures, delaying research productivity due to having to support the needs of two young children under five, and putting students' needs before my own research project tasks. In academia too, all the good stuff gets doled out along a hierarchy: the patriarch, the children, the students, and then the mother in academia.

Discussion

Growing a child in your womb, birthing, and raising happy, healthy children is one of the most beautiful experiences of my life. So why do I feel as though my career advancement has tainted this experience? The pressures of academia "I believe have taken away some of the joys of motherhood that I have experienced or had the opportunity to experience" (Part 1; 43:00). But would I change my decisions if I went back in time? Absolutely not. I would, however, change my perspective. It has always been family, career, then me and my partner—but should it continue to be?

As a woman in academia with young children, I wake up in the early hours, care for my children, help them get ready for the day, drop them off at daycare and school, go to work, and frantically get research,

teaching, and service tasks completed in the small window of time before daycare and school pick up. Once I get home, we eat and spend time together, and my partner and I put the children to bed, complete household chores, and finally, pass out from exhaustion—or at least I do while my partner preps the next day’s meals. Though my partner is fully supportive of my career and takes on many roles maintaining our home, I am the primary caregiver; the parent the children seek for comfort. So, when I get home from work, I switch hats and take on my other big life role: being a mom.

Yes, academic life can be flexible to a certain degree, but you still have to get your work done and done well. When you add a family and a pandemic to the list—wow. Though I am confident I can keep doing my job well while raising a family, let us be honest, things are not fine, as has been made ever-so-clear during the pandemic. The added anxiety and limitations to what makes us human—that social connection—impacts stress levels (Seppala et al., 2013). People say this is just the “new normal”, but it is *not* normal.

In my resumé, I do not indicate my maternity leaves because I want the years, I would have served the university in a full-time faculty position to count. However, through the reflexive process, I now believe they should be included. Completing each maternity leave is the lived experience of nourishing the body and mind of a human being, which is directly relevant to my area of study. In fact, my professional capacity to conduct research with young children, to teach in early childhood education, and to understand families has greatly improved since I became a mother. I have gained rich first-hand experience of what it is like to parent, co-parent, and to raise siblings. Moreover, during the pandemic, I have become more creative, organized, and appreciative of the need for human connection and compassion.

Something’s Got to Give

“You can do anything, but something’s got to give. Is it going to be the kids? Is it going to be the partner? Is it going to be the job? Or is it going to be yourself?”

(Part 1, 31:18). Pursuing a career—especially as a woman—has its negative consequences, and I can recall occasions when I expressed that the situation was my fault. My fault for having a drive for an academic position; to pursue a research area I am passionate about and a field that I believe requires scholarly attention for positive change. My fault that my career took us (myself, my partner, and my children) away from our families and close friends. And my fault this career journey I chose sometimes takes me away from my family for longer than I would like.

As one example of many, when my son was 6-months old, I travelled seven hours away to interview for a position. It broke my heart to telephone home and hear my son call for me and I could not hug him or read him his bedtime story (see Figure 4). When you become a mother with a career, your career choices are no longer just about you; they impact your entire family. In balancing academia and dedication to family, your best-self may not be what is possible in either role. Women can (potentially) “do it all”, but at what expense; the family, the career, or the individual? Either way, we need support.

Figure 4. My son and I a few days before an out-of-town interview



Mothers Get Mothers in Academia

Throughout my time as a mother in academia, colleagues have provided words of support. Dr. Renée Kuchapski once commented, “all mothers who raise a child to adulthood deserve a PhD” (relayed by Elaine Inkster, personal communication, n.d.) and Dr. Mary-Louise Vanderlee who shared the sentiment, “thank goodness your daughter was born in April!”. Dr. Vanderlee also asked often how I *and* my children were and encouraged me to take summer vacation, while I was otherwise thinking I had just returned to work and felt I should not be entitled to one. Comments and encouragement like this remind us we are human beings, not machines.

Another significant comment was made by the Social Development journal editor, Dr. Gail Heyman, after I had asked for an extension on a paper indicating:

Our deadline to submit revisions is the end of August, however, I am presently on maternity leave and have a toddler at home during COVID-19 daycare closures. As such, I would like to request a month extension.

Her reply was “I can’t even imagine how challenging that must be. I am giving you a three-month extension so that you have a little more flexibility” (Dr. Gail Heyman, personal communication, July 7, 2020). When a male friend heard of this reply, he asked if the editor was being sarcastic. I remember feeling shocked and appalled by his question, but I laughed it off.

Notably, all the women who have provided meaningful, supportive comments are women with children—two each, in fact. Clearly, real-world experience has fostered deeper understanding and consideration of the challenges of being a mother and mothering in academia. Thus, the onus is on mothers to step forward to inform change—to re-invent the way the academic institution functions.

Faculty and University Support

In my experience working at two universities, I felt more connection and support at one over the other. Both departments were in education—a caring profession—but one set of colleagues seemed more

in touch. Was it because one was a smaller unit? Or because that unit was all women? I would predict the latter. When women come together, it is easier to share and support personal struggle, even professional for that matter, at least in my experience. In academia, the hyper-focus on individual research agendas and teaching and the constant battle for faculty lines and other limited resources does not leave much room for personal human connection and professional support.

I remember being invited to social events as a new instructor and wondered, “who has time for this?”—especially since I had a young child at home at the time and was teaching so many new courses (again). I felt pressured to attend (not explicitly relayed by colleagues) because I wanted to make a good impression. The culture is competitive rather than collaborative, even though we stress 21st century competencies (e.g., building interpersonal relationships, co-operation, active listening) in our education system (Government of Ontario, 2016). This provides context for the lack of support for families in academia.

When asked by the interviewer if I have ever felt misunderstood or unsupported by my peers or superiors in academia, my response was, “It’s hard to answer because I haven’t received...there’s just not much support. You’re so independent as an academic” (Part 2, 13:03). Universities recognize the need to support students now even more than pre-pandemic, however, similar changes and courtesy does not seem to be extended to faculty. Of course, it is all about students. Students are the ones who will move the field forward, needless to say, contribute to keeping us afloat monetarily. But how can we best support students if we are running on empty? The research is clear that if employees’ overall health and well-being are supported, they are more likely to be productive and at their best (Adams, 2019; Haddon, 2018). This point leads to a major issue with the structure of academia. It is not built to suit the needs of actively involved parents.

This antiquated structure was built in a time when family life looked a lot different than it does today.

And it hasn't changed. And now you're trying to still make it work, but it doesn't work anymore. It doesn't work, but we're forcing it to work and it's hard, and it's stressful (Interviewer, Part 2, 20:47).

Implications

Need for Change

During the pandemic, positive thoughts have floated around in my mind, searching for a silver lining. The pandemic revealed the reality of parents' additional responsibilities (e.g., caregiving, housework, enriching children's environments, and extra-curriculars), principally taken on by women (Leclerc, 2020; Moyser & Burlock, 2018). Moyser and Burlock (2018) further point out as women's time in paid work increased, men's time spent in unpaid work has not increased. This leaves women with additional paid but the same unpaid work, where they perform an "extra shift" at home after work. As reported by Johnston et al. (2020), during the pandemic the number of hours per week men have taken on for childcare has increased from 33 to 46. However, it has increased 2.5 times more for women, from 68 to 95 hours. The pandemic magnified this already entrenched reality and should serve as a trigger for change.

Interviewee: "I don't know what's going to change" (Part 2, 16:41).

Interviewer: "But that's why telling these stories is so important" (Part 2, 16: 17:11).

So here I am telling my story with hopes of encouraging others to share their stories and contribute or form committees to change how we understand and re-invent faculty support for mothers in academia.

Institutional Recommendations

Some universities in Canada have 12-month leave with supplemental benefits, while others offer less, for example, an 8-month leave with supplemental benefits, and in this situation the employee decides whether to have financial stability and return to work after 8-months or be home with their infant for a full year or longer (up to 18 months in Canada) and endure financial loss. This has implications not only on the

mother's health, but also that of the infant who may still be breastfeeding, forming attachment. There must be a policy where mothers do not have to choose between caring for themselves and their infants for that first crucial year of life and financial/job security. The choice should not be on the shoulders of individuals. Instead, women and parents' financial and mental well-being should be supported by the university they service and represent.

In addition, when returning to work from maternity leave, having a clear-cut policy on teaching expectations would be beneficial. For example, course release after leave or delayed teaching start if the return to work is during the semester. If someone is to return mid-semester, they should not be expected to jump into a course—there would be no preparation time, unless it is done on leave, which is inappropriate.

In terms of work completed during maternity and parental leave, articles in the collective agreement should be clearly outlined to support mothers and parents. Teaching and service would halt, but it is unclear what the procedures are for service to graduate students and dedication to ongoing research projects. Who takes over graduate student supervision? And what are scholarly contribution expectations? In academia, we are placed in difficult positions when it comes to supervision and research when on leave. I motion to add such a policy. Any seconders?

A recent piece from Inside Higher Ed (Flaherty, 2022) shared Stanford University's new policies for junior faculty with young children, offering an additional pre-tenure year or quarter research leave, plus childcare and research grants. Unless we follow suit with supports such as this, the structural gender inequalities will continue to divide, favouring those in privileged positions making strides in their careers during the pandemic, leaving young parents—especially mothers—in academia lagging in their own research agendas.

Implications are that universities should provide equitable opportunity for mothers to thrive in academia. The big question is: How can we meet the needs of women in academia so they can be at their

best to produce their highest quality work and contribute effectively to their field, students, and communities? Alternately, we should consider: what is the cost of not supporting families in additional ways? Who loses? I would argue that we all do—at the individual, family, institution, and scholarly level.

Conclusion

Themes of this paper connect to Bisailon et al.'s (2020) collective offering of seven women's experience with responsible, meaningful work and caregiving, identifying lack of fairness to women, tensions between tending to the profession and those dependent on us for care. My story and those of many others (e.g., Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006; Pitt et al., 2015; Willey, 2020; Williams, 2015) are proof of the disproportionate realities of women in academia.

In continuing the reflexive process, I contemplate and seek understanding as to how individuals marginalized by other identifying group factors may be impacted as mothers in academia. What is presented here is the story of my challenges, as a person structurally impacted by gender—but coming from a place of relative privilege. Others' experiences would undoubtedly render more complex intersections; for instance, Indigenous mothering tends to be described based on disturbing facts from colonial history, rather than by authentic maternal traditions (Brant, 2014) or as evidenced by the invisible, devalued, and silenced experiences of Black mothers in academia (Hinton-Johnson, 2011; Pitt et al., 2015). We must revive the voices of those who remain victims of systemic oppression, creating counter-narratives to understand lived realities to positively inform equitable systemic futures (Parker et al., 1998). Within the decolonialist methodology in which this paper situates itself, the need is even stronger to re-invent the white-male-created system dominated by "superior" ways of knowing by recognizing the needs of, listening to, and appreciating "Other(ed)" voices and stories in academia (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021).

My hopes for change with this paper are two-fold: One, I hope my story offers women in similar situations some comfort in knowing they are not alone and motivates them to tell their stories. No, you are not complaining and yes, we want to hear what you are going through. If we do not share, we will not see a need for change. There *is* a need, so please *do* share. Two, I hope this paper provides the academic world a view into what it is like to be a mother in academia during a pandemic, but more importantly, during more "normal" times.

I hope this method of meaning translation through storytelling serves as an active agent, actively listened to, and utilized, to inform future inquiries for the good of women, mothers, *and* academia (Kovach, 2009). I have faith we can take what we have learned from the consciousness of mothers in academia during the pandemic and rebuild an institution that better supports the well-being and performance of its members.

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Appendix 1. Interview questions prepared and delivered by author 2

1. Let's talk about the development and trajectory of your career before children. Set a pace: what were your goals and expectations for yourself?

- How did this change after your first child was born? How did this change again after your second child? Then the pandemic?

2. Since the start of the pandemic, have you ever found yourself getting caught up in just the day-to-day survival?

- Example?

3. Have you found yourself putting goals and further professional attainment on the side burner?

- Example? Anything you had to give up? Do less of? Felt you were not able to accomplish to your usual standard because of the new limitations placed on you?

4. How much more often were you putting your own personal fulfillment aside to focus on the needs of others (children, family, etc.)?

5. What additional personal sacrifices did you find yourself making during the pandemic?

- How did that impact your life? Your physical and mental wellbeing? And did any of these impacts further affect your professional life (ie. Stress, fear, exhaustion)?

6. Coping mechanisms. How did you handle the new stresses and requirements on you and your family during this time?

- What did you do to get by in work and in life?

7. The act of normalizing the struggle. Did you ever find yourself trying to work in a way that disregarded what you were going through at home/in the new world? (ie. Work late into the evening/early in the morning to try to get the same amount of work done, or maybe said 'yes' to things you normally would have, but in these times were actually impossible because of new restraints on your time and attention).

- Did you ever have to pretend things were fine/put on a professional face, even when things were not fine? How did that make you feel?

8. In what ways have you felt misunderstood, unsupported by your peers/superiors in academia during this time?

9. In what ways did you feel seen and supported by your peers/superiors in academia during this time?

10. Recognizing and legitimizing lost or robbed experiences and giving ourselves time to grieve it. What was lost for you during this pandemic time as a mother working in academia?

11. Did you step back/or did you feel like you should step back from your career at any point thus far in your mothering journey?

- During the pandemic specifically?

12. The pandemic is gendered. Would you say that has applied to you and your situation?

- How so?

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