
Swimming Upstream: The Experience of Academic Mothers of Young Children

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to explore the experiences of 10 tenured and untenured women from various disciplines who were engaged in academic careers while mothering pre-teen children. Analysis of the in-depth interview data uncovered six themes common to the participants: (a) sense of vulnerability, (b) sense of isolation, (c) sense of compromise and inadequacy, (d) overwhelming sense of stress and pressure, (e) lack of acknowledgement and structural support, and (f) perception of positive gains. The implications of the findings are discussed, with emphasis being placed on the counseling and institutional support needs of women faculty who are raising young children.

RÉSUMÉ

Une méthodologie de phénoménologie qualitative a été utilisée pour explorer les expériences de 10 femmes de diverses disciplines, ayant une permanence ou non, qui poursuivent une carrière universitaire tout en élevant des pré-adolescents. Une analyse des données des entrevues en profondeur a révélé six thèmes communs à toutes les participantes : (a) un sentiment de vulnérabilité; (b) un sentiment d'isolement; (c) un sentiment de compromis et d'impuissance; (d) un sentiment accablant de stress et de pression; (e) un manque de reconnaissance et d'appui structurel; et (f) une perception positive de gain. Les répercussions des résultats sont discutées en mettant l'accent sur le counseling et les besoins d'appui institutionnel du personnel enseignant féminin qui élève de jeunes enfants.

Researchers have found that the road to academia is significantly different for men and women (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Butterwick & Dawson, 2005; Cummins, 2005; Knights & Richards, 2003; Kraus, 2002; Palepu & Herbert, 2002). Women across disciplines (e.g., psychology, law, education, and medicine) and across countries (e.g., England, Germany, United States, and Canada) are grossly underrepresented among careers in higher education, particularly within the upper ranks of the academy (Williams, 2004). Mason and Goulden (2002) report that although the percentage of women has steadily increased to almost 50% of all PhDs, "the percentage of women among tenured faculty looks very much the same as it did in 1975 ... and the gap between men's and women's salaries has actually grown wider in the last 30 years" (p. 21).

In Canada, the proportion of women steadily declines at each stage of the academic ladder, representing approximately 58.9% of undergraduates, 52.3% of Master's students, 36.1% of doctoral students, and 20% of total academic job applicants (Moyer, Salovey, & Casey-Cannon, 1999; van Anders, 2004). The consistent gaps in career advancement and salary between male and female academics are particularly noteworthy for women who attempt to successfully combine the often

disparate roles of academic and mother (Armenti, 2004; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Krakauer & Chen, 2003).

Academic careers typically begin when women are in their early to mid thirties and as a result, women's biological and tenure clocks run simultaneously. In the academic culture, tenure and promotion are based on independent scholarly production as evidenced by research grants and publications obtained within the first seven years of a tenure-track appointment (Davies, 2005; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Thomas & Davies, 2002). Consequently, academic women who elect to have children are faced with meeting the rigorous requirements of tenure during the most demanding and intensive stage of parenting. Faced with this reality, "only one in three women who takes ... a university job before having a child ever becomes a mother" (Mason & Goulden, 2004, p. 22). Of those who become mothers, most have fewer children than their male colleagues and fewer children than they had wanted (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Kraus, 2002; Krakauer & Chen, 2003).

Women with children also have lower publication rates, and consequently, the likelihood of academic mothers receiving university promotions is significantly reduced (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Caproni, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2002; van Anders, 2004). Citing data from the large American government-sponsored longitudinal employment database on PhD recipients between 1973 and 1999, Mason and Goulden (2002) report that women who have babies during the early years of their academic career are significantly less likely to achieve tenure than men who become fathers in the early years of their careers. In addition, attrition rates among women academics who are mothers are also disproportionately high (Armenti, 2004; Chae, 2002).

Based on responses to a survey of more than 800 postdoctoral fellows, Mason and Goulden (2002) found that "fifty-nine percent of married women with children indicated they were considering leaving academia" (p. 25). Family/work conflict was cited as the primary reason women were shifting their careers away from academia.

To date, there has been very little research exploring family/work conflicts in the lives of women academics (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). The present study involved an in-depth qualitative exploration of the experiences of academic mothers of younger children to understand the challenges women face when attempting to balance these two worlds. The question that guided this research was: *What is the experience of women who are pursuing an academic career while mothering young children?*

METHOD

A phenomenological approach was considered most appropriate to study a phenomenon about which little is known, as is the case of women attempting to balance the demands of mothering and an academic career (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). This inductive qualitative approach provides openness to new ideas and is useful in uncovering common themes and the internal meaning

structures of a phenomenon (Osborne, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1991; Stebbins, 2001; van Manen, 1992).

Participants

Ten women in academic positions who were mothering children under the age of 13 participated in this study. The women ranged in age from 32 to 56 years. Nine women were Caucasian and one was Asian-Canadian. At the time of the interview, one woman was in a same-sex relationship and co-parenting with her partner, seven were in heterosexual co-parenting relationships with the father of their child(ren), one had adopted her child as a single parent, and one was divorced and the primary custodial parent.

Five women had one child, three had two children, and two women had three children. None of the children had serious health or developmental challenges. At the time of the interview, six women were tenured associate professors, while four were tenure-track assistant professors. All of the participants had their first child or were pregnant while pursuing tenure. At the time of the interviews, all of the women were raising children under the age of 13. The women represented a range of disciplines, including four from science or engineering, two from medicine, and four from social sciences and education.

Three participants were recruited through flyers widely distributed at two large west coast Canadian universities, while seven contacted the researchers after having heard about the study from friends or colleagues. Attesting to the relevance of the topic, we received numerous requests to participate in the study from women faculty across the province who had heard about the study via word of mouth. Unfortunately, geographical and fiscal restraints made it impossible to interview more than the first 10 women who met the inclusion criteria.

Procedure

Data were collected through in-depth tape-recorded interviews (Kvale, 1996). In terms of situating the researchers, the first author is a childless woman in her mid thirties who at the time of the interviews was in the final year of her doctoral program. The second author is a professor in her early fifties who became a mother in the first year of her tenure-track appointment.

All of the participants engaged in face-to-face interviews conducted by the first author, who made every effort to create a comfortable and empathetic climate within which participants were encouraged to share their experiences without judgement. As a result, the themes that emerged from this study reflect each participant's expression of both the positive and negative aspects of their experience within the academy.

Interviews began with a statement orienting the participant to the study, reiterating the research question, and inviting each woman to share the story of her experience of combining motherhood with her career in the academy. Open questions were used to deepen the exploration of issues raised by the participants (e.g., "What was it like for you when you were first attempting to balance the

demands and challenges of being both a mother and an academic? How has your career been affected, both positively and negatively, by being a mother of young children?”). Participants were also asked what changes were needed to better support women attempting to blend the two roles of academic and mother. Interviews lasted between one and two hours.

Analysis

The interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed according to the methods of phenomenological analysis proposed by Colaizzi (1978) and Mishler (1986). This involved an intensive process of concurrently reading and reviewing the tapes and transcripts to enhance the words of the participants by paying particular attention to the tonal quality of their reflections, the pacing of their speech, and the manner in which their stories were told. Significant statements were identified and, in a step described by Colaizzi as a “leap from what subjects say to what they mean” (p. 59), the researchers noted the various thematic meanings that occurred. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, these themes, as well as significant differences that emerged among participants, were then highlighted. These steps were repeated, and meanings were aggregated into common themes agreed upon by both researchers.

RESULTS

Descriptions of the six themes are presented below in no particular order of significance and, to the extent possible within limited space, are supplemented with direct quotes from the participants. The six themes that were common to the participants included (a) sense of vulnerability, (b) sense of isolation, (c) sense of compromise and inadequacy, (d) overwhelming sense of stress and pressure, (e) lack of acknowledgement and structural support, and (f) perception of positive gains.

Sense of Vulnerability

All of the participants reported a sense of vulnerability within the academy based on their maternal status. The extent of this perceived vulnerability appeared to vary depending on tenure status, with those who had yet to achieve tenure reporting greater vulnerability. However, both tenured and untenured participants perceived themselves as being significantly more vulnerable than their male colleagues who were parents, as well as their non-parent colleagues of either gender.

Messages regarding their potential vulnerability began to be received for some participants while they were negotiating their maternity leaves. One assistant professor was cautioned by her department head that “the tenure clock extends automatically but ... the tenure committee might later question [her] productivity level if [she] extended the tenure clock.” Other participants also reported feeling vulnerable about the potential risk to their careers if they elected to take their full maternity leave. As a result, several women elected to cut their leaves short. One participant decided against taking a leave and continued her academic work almost immediately after giving birth to her first child.

Once back in their academic jobs, the participants often felt as if they were perceived by their colleagues as not being fully committed to their academic careers. One participant stated, "When a woman takes six months off people feel that she's not serious about her career, so right away you're labelled and it's difficult to get out of that labelling once you're back at work." Another participant noted, "A lot of men who are going up for tenure, they have wives at home that are stay-at-home moms—it's a completely different situation." The sense of vulnerability was particularly acute for participants who were not yet tenured: "There is a big difference between tenure and pre-tenure. Having children pre-tenure is an issue—you are very, very vulnerable if you're pre-tenure."

Sense of Isolation

The tenured and pre-tenured participants identified a sense of isolation, both from their non-academic peers who were mothers and from their female academic colleagues who were childless. Described as living a "split life," the women did not feel they fully belonged in the academy or in the world of non-academic mothers: "I feel fairly isolated because the mothers don't understand my academic life and the academics who aren't mothers don't understand my mothering life."

In their personal worlds, the sense of isolation was particularly acute when the women spoke about how mothers in their community stayed at home to raise their children. "I detect some judgement. It's never explicit ... it's a subtle message that I'm doing my child a disservice by working and that I'm being selfish."

The participants also spoke about their sense of isolation in their professional worlds. The women reported feeling that they had different priorities compared to their non-mothering colleagues. "I feel there is a division between the women in my department who have kids and the women who don't. The women who don't have kids don't really understand what it's like to balance two worlds." Contrary to what one might expect, participants in female-dominated disciplines, such as education and nursing, reported a significantly greater sense of isolation from their academic colleagues than participants in male-dominated disciplines, such as engineering and computer science.

Sense of Compromise and Inadequacy

All of the women described feeling continually compromised in their efforts to achieve what they perceived to be success in both their private and professional lives. The women used terms such as "treading water," "walking a tightrope," and "juggling" to describe their experience of attempting to meet what felt like the competing and endless demands of these two roles. "When you're here at home, you're feeling the pull, 'I should be working on this paper or that grant application.' And when you're at work, you're thinking, 'Oh, I should be spending more time with my child.'" Feelings of disappointment, guilt, and concern were apparent as the participants reflected on the impossibility of adequately meeting both their home and career demands. "The guilt and the fear. It's awful ... just awful. It's awful that my choice to be an academic and mother might not be the right choice

for another human being.” This sense of continual compromise was significantly more apparent for those who had pre-school-aged children and for new mothers who had recently returned to the academy. This theme was also more pronounced for participants who were pre-tenured.

The participants stated feeling torn between their passion for their research careers and their desire to be the best mothers possible. They often reported feeling as if they were unable to give either role the energy it required or deserved. “I think as a mother you feel that there is always more that you can do. There’s always more you can give. You’re never done. And there’s always more I can do academically so there’s also no end to that.” All participants commented on the unique nature of academic life.

The thing about being an academic is it’s not like you’re doing this job and then you’re gone and it’s done. You could work 20 hours a day for 365 days of the year and still have more work to do. When you’re teaching, you could always do better. You could always do more, and rarely do you feel you’re really good because you only hear back when you’re doing badly. It’s just the nature of the job.

Another participant referred to the academic culture as a “bizarre sort of secluded environment where you are constantly being compared to other people ... You’re constantly being judged by other people ... constantly getting negative feedback rather than positive feedback.”

Despite being very successful in their educational pursuits, the participants found themselves seriously questioning their competency and feeling inadequate in both their personal and professional lives. This sense of inadequacy was a pervasive theme reflected in numerous comments about “not feeling competent as a mother or an academic,” “not doing anything well,” “not being totally present or effective in either world,” “faltering in both areas,” “trying so hard but things are sliding.” Reflecting on those drawn to a career in academia, one participant stated, “People who get faculty jobs tend to be naturally competitive and everybody’s always [raising] the bar. It’s a constant struggle to sit back and say ‘no.’”

Overwhelming Sense of Stress and Pressure

In terms of their work lives, all of the women spoke about the endless demands of an academic career that did not cease even while they were on maternity leave. They reflected on the realities of graduate supervision and the fact that there is no vehicle within the academy to release them from their supervisory or research responsibilities. “When you’re on maternity leave, it’s not a real leave because you’re not completely separated from your work. You still have publications and research grants to work on, and there are students going up for their thesis defence.”

After returning from maternity leave, participants were concerned about the potential impact of being unable to meet the multiple demands of attending committee meetings and out-of-town conferences or being unable to take on late afternoon or evening teaching positions, often due to the lack of available

childcare services. Adding to this burden was the fact that most of the participants had geographically relocated from their home towns, and consequently lacked the support of grandparents, siblings, or other family members.

We don't have any family help out here. I think it's pretty common in academia because people typically have to move away for jobs, so on average it's more difficult because there is that lack of family support which I think is critical. When your child is sick and they are sent home from daycare and you have to teach a class of 300–400 students, what do you do?

While all of the women spoke about the ongoing and sometimes overwhelming pressures, the extent to which the participants experienced these multiple stressors appeared to differ depending on the age of their children and their tenure status. Women who were tenured and new mothers with their second or third child described their experience as “stressful and demanding.” Participants who were pre-tenured and new mothers with their first child described their levels of stress as “overwhelming.”

Pre-tenured participants were especially cognizant of the potential costs of taking any time away from their scholarly work. “When I go for tenure and they look at my publication record and there's a big gap for a year and a half . . . There's a good reason for it but will people recognize that?” Those considering having another child spoke about the tension that exists between the “two clocks in competition with each other—the biological and the tenure,” making it difficult to decide the best time to have another child without further compromising their careers.

Several participants reflected on the impact these pressures had in terms of their intimate relationships and own self-care. “When I was on maternity leave and I had to work, it was incredibly hard and frustrating for my husband because he didn't get it. He's not an academic. He tried to be supportive, and eventually his frustration would bubble to the top and he'd say ‘Aren't you on leave!’” The women also lamented how, at the end of the day, there was no time or energy left for themselves: “The part that gets lost in all of it is me. I did have a life before I went into the academic world. But all of those interests have been put off to the side.”

Lack of Acknowledgement and Structural Support

Both tenured and pre-tenured participants described a significant lack of acknowledgement and structural support in their professional lives, with participants in female-dominated disciplines reporting significantly less support within the academy than those in male-dominated disciplines. The participants experienced the academy as an “archaic dinosaur” that had little acknowledgement of, or appreciation for, the realities of the lives of academic mothers with young children. “I don't think academia is built for mothers to succeed as working mothers with both of those words—academic and mother—being equally important.” Another participant said, “In the academic world it's all about perception, and the perception is that families are those shadowy people in the background and there is a little woman to take care of it.”

The participants reported that there were times when they desperately needed help but did not know how to reach out or to whom they could turn for assistance. Many felt they would be negatively sanctioned if they appeared weak or incompetent and feared the consequences of letting anyone know they were struggling. "I have been very reluctant to share or let on that I was struggling ... I had no idea who I could turn to. Who would give me straight answers? What was their motivation? Who could I trust?" The participants also acknowledged their own role in not reaching out and asking for help. Being fiercely independent, these women found it difficult to admit they were struggling. They noted how they had "always done things on [their] own" while acknowledging that it was "foolish."

Generally, the participants found their male colleagues to be more supportive and trustworthy than their female colleagues. One woman stated, "The history of this department is mainly women and so you would think that there would be an openness and acceptance of this. It is *not* true." Participants interpreted this lack of support by other women in their fields as "backlash," based on the assumption that many of their senior female colleagues had sacrificed having children to be successful within the academy.

Sometimes I think that the older women who are in positions of power and do not have children—and maybe they were not given a real choice to have a career and family—but it's almost like if they see younger women having both, they feel a need to make it difficult for them because why should they have it easy?

On the other hand, when asked what factors helped them survive life as an academic mother, some participants spoke about having good female role models. One woman stated:

I've been lucky to have some good mentors in academia and in my industry ... people that I think manage to accomplish a lot but don't seem to stress too much about it. You don't have to play the mega grants and that egotistical "I'm the best in the world" type of game. It doesn't have to be that, and those mentors taught me that.

Perception of Positive Gains

Despite the formidable challenges, all of the participants spoke about ways in which their lives, their children, and their careers have been enhanced as a consequence of combining these roles. One participant noted:

When I was tenure-tracked I was pretty driven and uptight. Everything had to be perfect, and now I'm more willing to let go of stuff. I think having our daughter makes me think more critically about what I'm saying yes to ... Having a child forces me to make more informed choices about what I do.

Some participants also felt they were important role models to other women, particularly women students. One participant highlighted this:

Several times I have been asked to be at international conferences and I've taken my daughter with me. I've made it clear that she needed daycare. And other mothers have come up to me and said, "Wow, I should have brought my child."

Others spoke about being pioneers within the academy by advocating for workload changes, extending the tenure clock, or being the first woman in their department to take maternity leave.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the participants spoke about the positive spin-offs of their dual roles, in terms of their children and themselves. One woman attributed her career in academia to making her “a more interesting person—more well-rounded and content.” Another participant said:

I think it has a positive impact on my daughter because I see myself as a positive role model. I want her to grow up seeing herself as someone who is competent and can try things in a variety of fields, and I think because of who I am and what I do she is exposed to that. Overall, I hope she will feel very lucky to have an academic mom.

DISCUSSION

Williams (2004) refers to the phenomenon of *the maternal wall*—which reflects institutionalized “patterns of bias and stereotyping that affect mothers as opposed to women in general ... [which are] ... triggered when a woman gets pregnant or seeks a maternity leave” (p. 18). She notes how these problems are especially challenging in academe. The findings from this study support this statement and further add that those especially affected are women who had children while they were in the pre-tenure period of their careers. Similar to the findings of other researchers (Armenti, 2004; Caproni, 2004; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Kendler & Kendler, 2003; Krakauer & Chen, 2003; Mason & Goulden, 2002, 2004; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Quimby & O’Brien, 2004), the mothers in this study struggled to determine the best time to have a child—or in some cases a second child—with the seven-year tenure clock working in opposition to the realities of their biological clocks.

Once pregnant, the women faced institutional rigidity related to the timing of their maternity leaves. Some received mixed messages about the implications of stopping the tenure clock, and while on leave they found themselves trying to cope with raising an infant while also dealing with the unrelenting demands of the academy. When they returned to work, they struggled to balance the demands of their home lives with the continuing demands of their academic commitments. This was particularly true for first-time mothers who were confronted with navigating their way through the practicalities of childcare and learning how to be a parent while coping with the pressures and expectations of the pre-tenure period of their careers.

Mason and Goulden (2002) suggest that within the academy, “we have done a better job of opening the competition to women than we have of levelling the playing field ... raising children takes time and only an accommodation to that basic fact can ultimately allow women to achieve their career goals” (p. 26). The findings of this study support this contention and further add to the literature by identifying the critical need for greater flexibility within the academic tenure structure so that junior women faculty in their childbearing years can fulfill their desires to have children without fear of compromising their success within the academy.

Accommodations like those implemented at the University of Washington (Quinn, Lange, & Olswang, 2004) would assist faculty members to maintain their research productivity while coping with such major life transitions as parenthood. These include (a) allowing faculty to extend the tenure clock without negative consequences; (b) providing concrete transitional support in the form of release time from teaching and student supervision; (c) providing research personnel, such as graduate students or postdoctoral assistants, and lab equipment; and (d) creating part-time tenure-track options to support women balancing academic careers with familial responsibilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

Although it is evident that several institutional changes need to be made within the academy, the results of this study also underscore the vulnerability and isolation of academic mothers of young children and their needs for emotional support and understanding. Nine of the ten women who participated in this study stated that they have sought either individual or couples counselling to help them cope with the overwhelming pressures and emotions that arise as they attempt to balance the conflicting roles of academic and mother. It is therefore important for counsellors to be aware of this need and to help women navigate their careers within institutions that fail to adequately accommodate the realities of women's reproductive lives.

From a psychosocial perspective, counsellors can help women recognize that their feelings of personal inadequacy or insufficiency are a reflection of the fact that they are attempting to balance two demanding roles within an institutional context where policies are based on the traditionally defined life trajectories and needs of men. It is necessary for counsellors to validate the unique struggles faced by academic mothers of young children and situate their experiences within the broader context in which they work.

Consistent with the literature (Cummins, 2005; Dohm & Cummings, 2002; Mason & Goulden, 2004; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005), isolation and perceived lack of support, especially from female colleagues, were prominent themes in this study. According to Palepu and Herbert (2002) and van Anders (2004), depression, anxiety, and feelings of low self-worth are common experiences among this population. Counsellors working with women academics who are mothering young children need to be aware of the high degree of isolation that occurs in the work and parenting lives of academic mothers and the potential negative impact of such isolation in terms of their physical and emotional well-being.

The findings of this study underscore the value of encouraging these mothers—many of whom are independent and self-sufficient by nature—to seek out more senior members of the academic community as mentors with whom they can feel safe sharing resources and discussing their challenges. Counsellors can also support these mothers in networking with other mothers, both within and outside of the academy, who are faced with similar demands and challenges.

The results from this study also highlight the need for counsellors to provide women with assistance in making decisions on child-bearing and in planning and managing the multiple demands once children are part of their lives (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003). Counsellors can also support women in identifying their personal self-care needs and encourage them to engage in self-care practices. This could include helping women to (a) set realistic expectations of themselves as both mothers and academics, (b) recognize and manage the institutional culture and demands, and (c) learn how to reach out for help without feeling inadequate in their maternal or academic roles.

Finally, it is important to note that despite feeling overwhelmed by the pressures of motherhood and their academic careers, all of the participants felt there were benefits to themselves, their children, and their careers in combining these roles. They were able to see ways in which motherhood contributed to both their private and public lives by helping them keep their careers and priorities in perspective. Counsellors can reinforce the multiple benefits, for both the women and their children, of combining both roles. Women can be encouraged to “bridge” their roles as mother and academic and develop some practical strategies that will enable them to successfully exist in both worlds.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a 2006 mentorship grant from the Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia.

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