

**Experiences and Challenges of Women Combining Academic Careers and Motherhood
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The proportion of full-time female faculty members in the U.S. almost doubled from 1984 to 2008 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Yet, women continue to “leak” from the academic pipeline, especially from the tenure track. Of women faculty nationally, 31% hold non-tenure-track positions, 26% are on the tenure track, and 43% have tenure (AAUP, 2010). Compare this to male faculty: Although a lower percentage of the men start out on the tenure track, a much higher percentage of them, compared to women, hold tenure, and far fewer are on the non-tenure-track.

The question is--- where do the women go and why? Understanding how motherhood affects the careers of academic women is one place to look. The childbearing years coincide directly with climbing the tenure ladder, leading women to delay or forgo having children. Only 1/3 of women who start on the tenure track without a child will ever have one (Mason and Goulden, 2004). Faculty women report having fewer children than they desired, or putting off having kids until after gaining tenure. Such findings suggest that the academic career may be a difficult place to combine career and motherhood.

Why might this be the case? Timing. The average age at which women receive the doctorate is 34, the time when college-educated women are beginning families (Marcus, 2007). Add seven (or more) years to tenure and a woman is in her 40's.

Yet, there is a paucity of attention paid to academic women as mothers. An example of this inattention comes from a 2005 report from the Provost's office at Virginia Tech, that summarized exit surveys of ‘voluntary departures’ among tenured and tenure-track faculty. Women averaged 40% of the ‘voluntary departures’, mainly pre-tenure, while they were only 20.6% of the tenured and tenure-track faculty. Women were significantly more likely to report feeling intimidated, harassed, or discriminated against in their departments, yet nowhere in the report were work-family issues discussed.

Explanations for why the women leave: *Women opt-out, or do they?* The notion that professional women freely choose not to work after becoming mothers- has been pushed in the media. The data suggests otherwise, with the majority of educated women with young children in the work force. In 2007, over 70% of women with children worked outside the home (Halpern, 2008). Statistics are similar for highly educated women in their thirties where 2/3 of those with a young child work outside the home (Boushey, 2005).

Another explanation for fewer women on the tenure track is that women ‘choose’ the softer, less secure, lower paying academic routes, either in anticipation of having children or once they become mothers. Again, the notion of ‘choice’ has been questioned and calls for further study.

In light of women's increasing presence in the academy, and their higher rates of leaving, work/family issues deserve far greater attention. A 2003 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that having children can have a devastating impact on the careers of academic women but not men (Wilson, 2003).

What is clear is that women in academia face unique challenges, which require further investigation if we are to create an academic environment that is supportive of women as parents, particularly during the early years of career and parenting.

Given the many unknowns about why women leave, our qualitative study was designed to explore academic women's experiences combining career and parenthood. We chose mothers of young children because the toddler years are particularly challenging for parents. Broad questions guided the study- What challenges do the women face? What changes occur when they become mothers? How does it feel to meet the demands of being a mother and a faculty member?

Current Study

Twenty faculty women at 7 different institutions were interviewed, all with children ages 1-1/2 to 3 years. Women held positions in a range of fields, including the sciences and neuroscience, social sciences, arts and humanities.

- Subset of a larger study (n = 247) about being a parent of young children
- 9 Assistant Professors; 5 Associate Professors; 6 non-tenure track Professors or Researchers
- 18 PhD, 2 MFA
- 95% working full-time at the time of interview
- Diverse Backgrounds: Caucasian (60%), Asian (15%), African-American (10%), Latino (10%), Middle Eastern (5%)
- Avg. age when became parent: 35.7; range: 26-45
- 1 to 3 children
- Participants recruited through a preschool in NYC

Interview/Protocol

The interviews averaged 1.5 hours; they were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The semi-structured, open-ended interview covered several areas, including: *Transition to Parenthood, Challenges and Rewards of Parenting a Toddler, Work and Family Issues, and Parenting Concerns*

Trained interviewers used standard probes and follow-up questions to elicit in-depth information. Here are a few example questions: *Describe any changes you made in your career once you became a parent. Did you experience any difficulties or conflict while you were deciding to make changes in your work? What do you find most challenging about balancing work and family?*

Participants were overwhelmingly positive about being interviewed, stating their pleasure in being able to discuss these issues.

Coding

In order to understand women's experiences as mothers and attempts to combine academic careers and mothering, verbatim transcripts of the audiotapes were analyzed using grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where themes emerge from the participants' narrative. Identified themes were based on a thorough read of a subsample and revised over time. Two coders worked on the themes, with 80% reliability across all themes. The aim was to pull together the collective voices of the women as they spoke of the challenges they faced.

Themes that emerged: *Never-ending nature of the job. Flexibility. Changes in how one views and does work. The Work/Family balance myth.*

NEVER-ENDING NATURE

Women spoke of the never-ending nature of the job. We begin with this theme, because it is this aspect of the academic job that leads to many of the work-family struggles the women described. Here, three mothers, in three different academic fields, state this theme:

The thing in academia is you could always be doing it...it just doesn't go away ever...but it's a struggle to do all the parts.

You have to do it all the time to make it work.

We don't really have eight-hour jobs here.

Children require a parent's time. Pregnancy, nursing, and taking care of children take time, emotional investment, and energy. Just because the child is in arms, does not mean the work day is done.

Time. How does time play out in an academic job? The theme that emerged in response to this question had three parts- 1) there is no way to calculate the hours worked, which is due, in part, to 2) the many facets of an academic job that 3) blur the boundaries between work and home.

The nature of the job was discussed as double edged - an asset and a hindrance to working and having young children.

Setting one's own schedule, as well as the larger rhythm of the academic calendar, were recognized as assets. Two mothers noted:

There are things in academia that are in place to help you out. Sabbaticals, summers off, things like that help enormously. I would die if I had a 9:00 to 5:00 corporate job. I have nearly six weeks off in the winter and I have three months off in the summer. And even if I'm researching or writing like mad, those are massive breaks...

I am lucky that I have a job where I can go home early and nobody says anything. If I get my work done, if I teach my classes, if I do my [projects], then I'm good and I can have summers off.

Yet, mothers found it impossible to say how many hours they actually worked. Work was described as 'never ending', and you can 'never do enough'. One mother summed it up as "A million hours, I think." Mothers discussed working early mornings, nights, weekends, and in any bit of space they could find without their children. The feeling of not being able to "turn off" work was described:

*It's hard to say because my job as a professor involves lecturing many classes, and also doing research. And my research time is almost impossible to gauge because it's constant; **it's always on your mind**. In the middle of the night sometimes I'm up trying to do some things.*

Even during maternity leaves, mothers felt work pressure, worries about being left behind as their colleagues pulled ahead, or being looked down upon for not working during a maternity leave. Mothers could not really take a break:

The month after [my son] was born, I was finishing writing a paper. I've never had the luxury of doing six months of total maternity leave. I would not understand what that means 'cause I don't know how to turn off my work 'cause it's really mine; this is my research and I'm the only one that can drive it forward...

Another mother commented on the looming pressures she felt while on maternity leave. It was highlighted when she joined a new mother's group for support, but found the non-academic mothers could not understand her stresses:

They just did not understand the kind of looming pressure of my job- which I wasn't [even] doing- but nevertheless [the pressure] was kind of hanging over the whole maternity experience.

Treading Water: Even with all the hours of working, women did not feel they were productive enough. This was in spite of objective evidence that they were carrying out productive careers at prestigious academic institutions:

It's just [treading water], yep, it's just teaching and advising and doing committee work and all the stuff you have to...and I chair the department...it's all I can do. This is just to keep all of the people happy that need to be kept happy.

Another mother spoke of working in the first year of her twins' lives:

[Sleep deprivation.] And I went back with very low productivity. My mind was wandering about, and I was just on survival mode: Just do the things that I can to not be kicked out.

Mothers conveyed a general sense of not doing enough, or not of the quality they strived for:

On the work side, it's really difficult not to stress about the competitive edge that you have to obtain, versus the amount of hours you can dedicate to [working]. That's difficult- to relax and think [that being productive at work is] going to be fine...

That's the biggest thing - to get home and not feel like I did everything shoddily or I left everything half done, or I have to do it at night after he goes to bed...

On the other hand, mothers had ambitious career goals, with a broader time line for accomplishing them. In this longer range view, one aspect of work is focused on while another goes on the back burner, to be returned to at another time:

I think what will happen is some things will take the lead at different times. For awhile, the book's going to have to be more important—the research is going to have to suffer. While my research is going to be more important, I'm not going to be writing. It's just going to have to come in these waves, where it'll go from one focus to the other in a more long-term scale.

FLEXIBILITY

Related to the open-ended nature of academic work was flexibility, a key factor in combining academics and mothering. It was seen as another double-edged characteristic of academic life. To begin, mothers openly discussed the *positive aspect* of setting their own schedules:

The flexibility, the autonomy that you have is just priceless...I teach on certain days and other days if I don't have a meeting, if I need to take a kid to the doctor this can be done. It's not a huge ordeal.

Having flexibility meant one could work at all times. Mothers described the need to “make up for” time spent with their children:

*The good thing about being an academic is that I have more flexibility around my schedule. I go to my office Monday to Thursday. Fridays, I stay home. **But doing that means I work every single night and weekends.***

Switching modes- from child mode to work mode and back

The challenge of flexibility is the mental switch from work to family and back again, and the strain that accompanies it. Mothers spoke openly about this switch and how draining that can be:

It's a bit difficult to switch on and switch off, or get roughed up and obsessive about the things you have to do at work, then not [think about work when you go home].

If I'm thinking about work when I'm being with my son, that's not fair to him - it's the other way around also. So if I'm thinking about him I'm not working.

HAVING A CHILD CHANGES THE WAY ACADEMICS VIEW AND DO WORK

Becoming a mother brought a new perspective to women's work: putting work into a more realistic context, realizing what really mattered to them, and not sweating the small stuff anymore. This new perspective pushed women to change work habits and become more efficient. It also increased their conflict over balancing work and family, leading some to question their careers ("do I really want to do this?").

Women discussed shifting identities- work continued to be an important part of life and their identities, but no longer the only part. Work rejections or set backs were viewed in a broader context:

There is always disappointment in the professional world; you will submit a paper and it will get rejected. When you don't have kids, it's like your whole world and it's horrible to be rejected; once you have kids, it puts all that in perspective.

Mothers made changes in how they conducted their work lives- turning down speaking engagements, traveling less or not at all, and cutting back to accommodate the child, even as they recognized downsides:

I have people who invite me to speak and I say I have a young child and I'm actually not traveling. I don't think I'm getting a very good reputation for that. And what's interesting is after awhile people stop inviting you, so it has a real career impact.

A less obvious, yet impactful change mothers spoke of was no longer having uninterrupted, concentrated time- to think, to create new ideas, for breaks in the day. The issue was met with frustration:

"Until having a kid, I relied on having a lot more time to formulate ideas and write...The formulating of something new, is really like a second job for an academic. And that's barely possible when you don't have a kid. I haven't figured out how it's possible with a kid... I need an opportunity to block everything else out in order to think about this problem and to write about this problem...that is simply impossible right now."

In struggling with these changes, women spoke of modified aspirations and questions about what they were aiming for. Their aims now encompassed doing their job well and devoting themselves to their families. And yet, the women in our study share a high degree of success already.

And I'm never going to be one of those superstars. To be a superstar I have to publish endlessly and I have to travel a lot. And I'm not wanting to do it anymore.

***I seriously contemplated leaving my work...** And part of me thinks in another life, or if I were a man, I would be trying to run myself up the ladder in academia.*

'MYTH' OF THE WORK/FAMILY BALANCE

Mothers wondered how they could possibly 'do-it-all':

I wish there were more hours in the day. I wish there were more hours to get the work done without eating into my son's time or eating into my sleep... I do everything I can to find those extra hours.

It will come as little surprise that mothers overwhelmingly viewed the ideas of a work/family balance or being able to 'have-it-all' as myths. Prior to having children, they believed it would be possible to have a balanced career and family. As mothers, they no longer felt this was so:

[I expected] that I would be able to do it all. People watch me and say, 'I don't know how you do it all'. And I always respond, 'I'm not'. It appears to people that I'm together and have it all, but I know I don't.

I think this whole myth that you can have a job, have a deep relationship with your children, and have a great relationship with your partner, which they've been telling women since the 70s, it's just bull. It's just completely not true.

Mothers repeatedly stated that it was not possible to do it all and do it well. They noted the compromises they had to make and that trying to balance the two domains was not possible, because "...something just has to give."

DISCUSSION

What do academic women tell us about combining careers and young children?

The overall story of these academic mothers with young children was that *having a child changed the way they viewed work and brought new conflicts and compromises*. While work remained important after they became mothers, its place in their lives shifted. Women questioned which aspects of work really mattered as their children became new priorities, and space was needed to accommodate that within a career that lacks limits on the amount of time one could work. An inevitable outcome was a conflict between career and family needs, (partly due to the blurred boundaries within the academic job and between work and home) as women strove to find the elusive balance, while they struggled with the persistent feeling of "choicelessness" when figuring out how to *do it all*. For some women, this led to making changes in their career paths, although still in academics, and mostly with reservation. It also meant developing more efficient work habits, foregoing aspects of their career, at least for now, or modifying career goals. These work and family struggles within the limits of 24 hours in a day overwhelmingly lead mothers to characterize the idea of *balancing work and motherhood as a "myth"*. This theme was present whether the desire was to have more time to be with their children or for working.

It is not that the mothers did not want careers. Work continued to be important, but so was being a parent. Mothers felt torn between the two domains and when they erred on the side of being with their children, they worried about what they were losing in their careers.

The nature of the academic setting provides pros and cons for motherhood. On the one hand, there is the flexibility and the ability to set your work schedules. On the other, there was a sense

of 'making up for the time spent as mother', never being done with work, and a enduring feeling of losing ground, or the competitive edge, in their field.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Greater support and understanding of family issues in academia are clearly called for in order to lessen the work/family stress experienced by academic parents and thereby improve job performance and satisfaction. Even when policies to address parental responsibilities are in place, faculty members do not necessarily use them. Yet, when mothers know that childcare and other family needs are adequately addressed, they can turn their attention more fully to professional matters. Institutional attention to providing, publicizing, and encouraging the use of policies that help faculty deal with professional and personal responsibilities will both enhance the quality of the environment, making it more attractive to academic women, and help individual scholars fulfill professional and personal duties. Such policies can reach beyond parenting issues to areas such as elder care and personal or family illness.

If we believe that women who are mothers are a valuable part of the academic system, then we need to rethink the structure of the tenure system in profound ways. What would it mean to envision a career over a longer time span, not over a 7 year span? Rather than a linear progression, peaks and valleys over time would be expected. What does it mean to invest up front and allow a woman to become a mother, then to see her productivity soar at a later time? Perhaps being a mother makes one a better scholar and teacher, and if so, a major rethinking of the structure of success in the academic setting is called for. Otherwise, being a mother will continue to pose the risk of derailing active and promising careers.

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