

## **Academic Motherhood: “Silver Linings and Clouds”**

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Historically speaking, men dominated the university sphere and women were not typically present in academic positions (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). The dominance of male academics lead to gendered norms and expectations that influence academic life presently (Jakubiec, 2015). Today, more women are entering into higher education as students and as professors; however, sexism and gendered notions about women have not been eradicated (Rhoads & Rhoads, 2012). Further, it is especially difficult for women who are mothers to succeed, get promoted, and achieve tenure. For example, women (more so than men) have reported that parenthood and childbearing are main barriers in their attainment of full professorship (Sanders, Willemson, & Millar, 2009). In fact, Dryfhout and Estes (2010) found that professors who were women were 30% less likely to have attained tenured faculty positions, and were also more likely to have intentions to leave the academic profession. Thus, the impacts of having children on an academic career may be greater for women than it is for men. Thus, what can be said for the state of academic motherhood in Atlantic Canadian universities?

In my master’s research (Jakubiec, 2015), I hoped that the findings would add to what is currently know about being a women leader in Canadian universities, but also what it meant to be a mother and an academic—which is the focus of this conference presentation and paper. I used a phenomenological research design to explore participants’ lived experiences and analyzed the data (16 participant interviews, 8 journals). My

design was grounded in Dorothy Smith's (1999) standpoint theory, which argues for a feminist stance. According to Smith (1977), "[a] feminist takes the standpoint of women...we begin with ourselves, with our sense of what we are, our own experiences" (p. 13). Dorothy Smith is a known researcher and sociologist, but also a woman and mother. Smith wrote, "taking the standpoint of women in exploring the social has meant for me, among other things, opening up inquiry from that inside positioning. I am, of course, a participant of the ruling relationships. I know them from the inside" (1999, p. 225). For me, as a neophyte feminist researcher, Smith's writing is significant as it places Smith within her work and places me within mine. When I approached data analysis using standpoint theory, I understood that individuals have different standpoints and do not possess objective knowledge.

## **Participants**

I purposely selected (Schwandt, 2007) participants in two Atlantic Canadian universities and contacted women, by email, who held senior leadership and professoriate positions. Four women volunteered from each site and were each able to commit to two interviews, as well as maintaining a leadership journal for seven days. The eight participants were as follows (pseudonyms were given): Joanne, Charlotte, Liz, Freda, Pamela, Heather, Erin, and Allison. Five participants had children. In the journaling task, they reflected on their day-to-day experiences, such as what went well or didn't go well, and to think about the influence of gender in their behaviours, thoughts, and interactions. In total, 16 interviews and eight leadership journals were primary sources of data.

## Results

In both the interviews and journals, the participants shared challenging and difficult stories. However, I noted that the stories also included moments where the women felt a sense of choice and control. I also believe that the women felt a sense of empowerment in their choices and hope for the future and what it would mean to be a woman (and mother) in academia. Specifically, several participants noted that change has happened (e.g., changes to the collective agreements for faculty), and change continues to happen in terms of gender equity and how women are perceived in academia. Allison said, “Historically, it has been an issue to have children and do this job. Now we have a very good maternity deal here, or parental deal so you can get 12 months off at almost full salary.” This quote highlights an example of how procedures around maternity leave have changed in terms of terminology (maternity leave/parental leave), addition leave time, and leave with pay.

**Flexibility and the Balancing Act.** Almost all participants (with children and without) described a never-ending struggle for balance. For example, Joanne reflected on her earlier days in the professoriate as a mother:

The biggest challenge was when I started in this position at this university. I had three kids in daycare and one in grade 1. I was dropping kids off to daycare and coming to teach. I had 8:30 classes every day of the week and I taught six courses. Having never taught before, you could only imagine what it was like. It was a nightmare.

On the other hand, Heather—who was also a mother in the professoriate—had a formula for her perceived balancing act

success that included energy, organization, routine, and a very involved partner. Heather's husband was also employed at her university in senior leadership. Allison, Heather, and Charlotte noted that having supportive husbands could help them achieve work-life balance, as they assisted with such things as childcare and household tasks. Additionally, the participants agreed that their jobs were flexible and that this flexibility helped them achieve some resemblance of balance. The benefit of having a flexible job was also reflected in the literature, such as in Cummins' (2012) study. In this study, 19 female professors from one Canadian university noted that they were able to control their work hours, leading to a greater sense of job flexibility. The women in this study felt a greater sense of autonomy and independence in managing their multiple roles as mothers and academics.

**Challenges of Motherhood in Academia.** Of course, there are challenges in being both a mother and an academic, as both roles are demanding of time and energy. For example, in her earlier days as professor, Charlotte began teaching a course while on maternity leave. She recalled, "I remember driving home every lunch—and I lived in the country—to nurse my daughter. Back in and back out. That was stupid, but that was my nervousness about my position [at the university]." Other women spoke of their present experiences pertaining to children and motherhood in academia. Heather said, "Other [women] said they got pregnant and their dean said, 'See you.' There was no security." After becoming pregnant in a two-year contract, Charlotte believed that she was passed over for a tenured position. She recalled, "I know that the pregnancy was not the only thing that kept them from giving me that position, but I know that to them it affected my sense of seriousness about it."

The strain and job insecurity did not end there. Some women, even while on maternity leave, felt pressured to be engaged and to remain active in faculty life and academic tasks. For example, Allison said, “You’re always feeling the pressure of your publications and your next grant. I do know a lot of women who have been sitting there nursing and writing their grants and papers.” The stories and experiences revealed here reveal academic motherhood as a challenging dual-roll, one that is difficult to balance and maintain, even when on maternity leave as described above.

**Feeling a Sense of Choice and Control.** In addition—but not in contrast—to the above stories, all of the mothers that I interviewed also shared positive stories and experiences about being both academics and mothers. For example, Allison shared that she was happy to have had her children before achieving tenure. She said, in retrospect, she did not have a “torn feeling” of trying to manage her multiple roles (mom, academic, researcher, and teacher). Freda also reflected on her past experiences and revealed that, for her, taking her time through graduate studies so that she could spend time with her young children was a good decision. She said she was able to take part in their lives and their schooling in a way that may not have been possible had she powered through her graduate studies. I argue that a sense of empowerment emerged through women’s stories, as shared above, including a sense of choice and control. Stories of choice, control, and empowerment as shared above add to the overall discourse around women leadership and motherhood in academia in a way not told before.

## **Conclusion**

The above stories and experiences add to the current literature on the state of academic motherhood in universities. I believe that affirmative stories and excerpts, like those from Allison and Freda, are often left out from the greater discourse around academic motherhood. Negative stories of academic motherhood are overemphasized leading to an unbalanced view of what it means to be a woman and mother in academic positions in Canadian universities (for example, the focus on the “motherhood penalty” for academic mothers [Baker, 2012]). I argue that by including positive and balanced stories to the broader discourse, a more representative picture of motherhood in universities can be revealed, and with it, a greater understanding of the challenges, hardships, and positive aspects that come with it. I am not alone in this goal, as Ward and Wolf-Wendell’s (2012) book, *Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Manage Work and Family* attempts to do the same.

In reviewing and analyzing the interview transcripts and journals, I have argued that the personal experiences disclosed by the participants with children reveal a fuller picture of what it means to be an academic and mother. Women revealed that oftentimes being a mother and academic was a mixed experience, with both ups and downs, such as experiencing greater flexibility in their day-to-day schedules (which they argue assisted in their day-to-day parenting) to feeling insecure about their employment, as Charlotte shared. Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) also spoke about this contradiction—the ups and downs of academic motherhood—and described the experience of academic motherhood as having both “silver linings and clouds,” with both positive and negative experiences (p. 49). In presenting multiple perspectives of academic motherhood, young mothers entering into the professorship may feel better prepared knowing the lived

realities of other academic women and mothers as highlighted here within.

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