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Faculty Writing Groups: A Support for Women Balancing Family and Career on the Academic Tightrope

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Abstract

This qualitative research project explored the experiences of women who juggle the demands of family or parenthood while engaging in academic careers at a faculty of education. The researcher-participants consisted of 11 women; 9 women provided a written narrative, and all women participated in the data analysis. The data consisted of the personal, reflective narratives of 9 women who participated in a faculty writing group. Analysis of narratives uncovered 5 themes common to the researchers and participants in this study: gender-specific experiences surrounding parenting, second-career academics, pressure surrounding academic work, human costs, and commitment to work and family. Implications of the findings are discussed with particular emphasis on how a faculty writing group framed by a relational model of interaction can be used to support untenured faculty who experience difficulty balancing the demands of family and academia.

Résumé

Ce projet de recherche qualitative a exploré les expériences de femmes qui doivent jongler avec les exigences de la vie familiale ou parentale, tout en s'impliquant dans des carrières académiques au sein d'une faculté d'éducation. C'est le travail de onze chercheuses-participantes. Neuf femmes ont fourni un exposé écrit de faits, et toutes ont participé à l'analyse des données. Ces

données consistaient en exposés personnels et réflexifs de neuf femmes ayant pris part à un groupe de rédaction de la faculté. L'analyse de ces exposés a permis de révéler cinq thèmes communs aux chercheuses et participantes de cette étude, soit des expériences propres à leur sexe en matière de rôle parental, de seconde carrière académique, de pressions en lien avec le travail académique, de coûts humains et d'engagement vis-à-vis du travail et de la famille. On discute de la portée de ces conclusions en mettant une emphase toute particulière sur la façon dont le groupe de rédaction d'une faculté, organisé selon un modèle relationnel d'interaction, peut être utilisé pour soutenir le personnel non permanent qui a de la difficulté à harmoniser les exigences de la vie parentale et académique.

Introduction

Historically, the Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, has been rooted in teaching practice and the education of preservice teachers. Most faculty of education positions require teaching experience in the public school system, and many new faculty members have less experience conducting research, applying for grants, and writing for publication than those in nonprofessional disciplines (Badenhorst et al., 2013). While faculty promotion and tenure committees (governed by university policies) consider teaching and service in the process of gaining tenure, research productivity remains the primary area for assessment. Without research and publications individual faculty members are unlikely to gain tenure and be promoted even if they excel in teaching and provide service above and beyond institutional expectations. Consequently, there is enormous pressure on individual faculty members to publish and to secure research funding (Polster, 2007).

A faculty writing group was created 7 years ago to support faculty with writing and research. Previous research literature has pointed to the value of writing groups as support mechanisms for new academics (Galligan et al., 2003; Grant, 2006; Lee & Boud, 2003; Morss & Murray, 2001). Our writing group was structured to be noncompetitive, non-judgmental, and relationship based (Badenhorst et al., 2013; Fassinger & Gilliland, 1992). Although the writing group was open to all faculty members, initially only untenured faculty and faculty with contracts attended, and most were women. In the second year of the writing group, only female faculty and female faculty with contracts continued to attend.

In our faculty writing group, we start with a check-in circle, we collect items for the weekly agenda, and we share successes and failures. In the centre of our table is usually a notice to use "soft eyes turned to wonder" when others are speaking (Palmer, 1998, p. 116). As a writing group we have provided support for group writing and individual writing. To date our writing group has published together in journals (Badenhorst et al., 2013), magazines (Badenhorst et al., 2012), and edited books (McLeod et al., 2015; Young et al., in press) and has presented together at several conferences (Badenhorst et al., 2012; Badenhorst et al., 2013; McLeod et al., 2011; McLeod et al., 2012; McLeod et al., 2012b; Young et al., 2013; Young et al., 2014). The group has also provided support for writing projects that are specific to individuals. Through receiving supports (as needed and requested), such as reading drafts and providing feedback and encouragement, individual faculty members feel more confident when submitting for publication.

This study focuses on a set of issues that surfaced regularly in writing group discussions over the years—namely, balancing family and an academic career. Writing group members strongly felt that this topic warranted further study. The women in this study previously worked in other settings, including public schools, mental health clinics, hospitals, and private schools, prior to making a transition into the academic environment. In their previous work environments most of the women had much clearer boundaries between their work lives, family lives, and other activities. While these boundaries were not necessarily “impregnable” (Nippert-Eng, 1996, p. 280), they were more obvious.

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within the framework of work/family border theory. According to Clark, the contradiction between “determining and being determined” makes work and family balance challenging. Each individual’s life is “differentiated by borders that vary in permeability,” and the degree of permeability affects how much individuals feel that they are in control (determining) or lack control (being determined) of the transitions between work and home (Clark, 2000, p. 752). Building on the work of Nippert-Eng (1996), Clark’s theory describes the lines between the domains of work, family, and other (nonwork) as being physical, temporal, and psychological. In the university environment the flexibility to work from home, to teach online, and to communicate with colleagues and students through wireless means has blurred the boundaries that are clearer in other work environments (Fleck, Robison, & Cox, 2014; Nam, 2014). In our writing group, the teachers, counsellors, and psychologist (in public practice) generally had set work hours (temporal), were required to be physically present (physical), and were able to take time, when not working, to be with their families and complete nonwork activities without worrying about the rigorous requirements of tenure (psychological) because their jobs were secure. In the university setting the physical, temporal, and psychological boundaries are sometimes nonexistent or blurred and permeable for many. “When boundaries are less clear employees have more difficulty negotiating with family and employers about when and where work and home responsibilities are carried out” (Clark, 2000, p. 758).

Clark (2000) noted that some domains could be more powerful and intrude on the less powerful domain. In academia, faculty members who are untenured face a powerful domain; they are vulnerable and are more likely to allow university expectations and demands to interfere with their family lives. Academic work is competitive, and the ideal worker is perceived as one who is tirelessly devoted to the job (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2013). Academic women, in particular, are forced to examine the tensions in their roles as ideal worker and “good mother” (Middleton, 2005, p. 73), especially in some academic fields where “traditional gender norms still prevail” (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2013, p. 104). “Gendered ideologies push women to be primary caregivers” (Adel, 2013, p. 84), making this a larger societal issue as well as an institutional issue.

Clark (2000) argued that when individuals identify with or are “central participants” as opposed to “peripheral participants” in the more powerful domain, then they are more likely to have a better work–life balance. Therefore, work–life balance is complex and individually determined based on many complex factors. In addition, Clark (2000), citing Lewin (1969), compared transitions (between employment, between work and nonwork) to moving from one country to another. Some transitions are easier, such as when coun-

tries share a common culture, while other transitions are more extreme, because of different language, currency, and customs. Transition into the university environment for most of us was like experiencing the culture shock of moving from Canada to Norway, having to learn new language, culture, and customs. The expectations (temporal, physical, and psychological) for most writing group members were extremely different from their previous employment experiences.

Other domain awareness (by “border keepers,” e.g., supervisors for work; spouses or children for home) is critically important in determining work–life balance (Clark, 2000). Clark’s theory suggested that frequent communication between individuals and border keepers could mediate the ill effects of the intrusions and interference across the work and life domains. Unfortunately, in the university environment the mechanism for negotiating and communicating with border keepers (such as promotion and tenure committees) is often vague and ambiguous.

In comparison to other sectors of the workforce, the organizational culture of academic institutions provides high levels of autonomy and freedom, making it seem like the ideal profession for work–life balance. However, the flexibility present within academic institutions, coupled with the demands of promotion and tenure, can make it more difficult to establish work–life boundaries (Gatta & Roos, 2004). For many women in the academy, tensions arise between societal expectations of child-rearing and institutional pressure to perform, leaving a sense of guilt surrounding their inability to meet the expectations of either a good parent or a good academic.

In their study on the role of technology in managing work–life balance, Fleck, Robison, and Cox (2014) reported that individuals have preferences ranging from segmenting work and life along a continuum to integrating work and life. These authors reported that spillover from one role to another leads to heavier workloads that ultimately result in stress; however, it is the violation of the individual’s preference (for segmenting vs. integration of their work/nonwork life) that leads to stress.

Menaghan (1989) found that distress is likely to occur when family and work roles conflict, such as when reading for a course while faced with children who are demanding a nighttime story. According to her study, women are generally more likely than men to experience distress with the addition of the parenting role. Similarly, Milkie and Peltola (1999) found that for women, the role of parent had a significant negative impact on work–family balance. In their study, both men and women consistently rated women as holding greater responsibility for childcare and household labour. A decade later not much has changed, as Duxbury and Higgins (2012) reported similar findings. Employees who are overloaded are more likely to let work interfere with family life and be in poorer physical and mental health (Duxbury & Higgins, 2012).

Gender and Academia

In Canada, women are earning a growing share of doctoral degrees, but they are less likely than men to be hired into tenure-track positions (Drakich & Stewart, 2007). In North America, female faculty account for approximately one third of all full-time university faculty (CAUT, 2010; Galaz-Fontes et al., 2008; West & Curtis, 2006), and academic women tend to occupy lower ranks and fewer upper-level administrative positions (Marschke, Laursen, Nielsen, & Rankin, 2007). In addition, women lag behind men in

every measure of academic career advancement (Krefting, 2003; Ornstein, Stewart, & Drakich, 2007; Perna, 2001). Perna (2005) found that institutional structures, policies, and practices disadvantage women in the determination of tenure and rank. Women are expected to meet the demands of family, pregnancy, and children, which constrains their ability to invest in the male model of academic success and meet tenure requirements (Mason & Goulden, 2002). By contrast, Perna (2005) stated when compared with women academics, men were more likely to be in tenure-track positions and hold the rank of full professor if they have children and a partner.

In academia, receiving tenure is strongly associated with an ability to publish and obtain research funding (Bence & Oppenheim, 2005; Mason, Goulden, & Wolfinger, 2013; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Female faculty members publish less than their male counterparts (Fox & Mohapatra, 2007; Leahey, Crockett, & Hunter, 2008; Posen, Templer, Forward, Stokes, & Stephens, 2005), and in Canada this is especially the case for female faculty with children (Padilla-Gonzalez, Metcalfe, Galaz-Fontes, Fisher, & Snee, 2011). Poor publication records reduce the likelihood of promotion and tenure (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Leahey et al., 2008; van Anders, 2004), and increase the likelihood of leaving academia (Armenti, 2004).

Research has identified the tenure process as privileging men (Fox, 2005; Leahey, 2006; Mason et al., 2013; Perna, 2005; Valian, 2005). Mason et al. (2013) suggested that in the United States, female scientists with young children (under 6) are 27% less likely to achieve tenure when compared to their male counterparts with young children. Mason et al. (2013) suggested that scholars are 65% more likely to achieve tenure if they secure federal funding, and women with young children are 21% less likely to obtain federal funding.

Several studies have indicated that there is a conflict between tenure and motherhood (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Powell, 2013; Thanacoody, Bartram, Barker, & Jacobs, 2006; Valian, 2005; van Anders, 2004; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Institutional structures disadvantage women in academic environments, as women are more likely than men to be called upon to demonstrate their competencies, and more likely to work harder to prove themselves (Williams, 2004). Women, regardless of country or culture, are more likely to publish less and advance at a slower pace (Thanacoody et al., 2006).

Women often enter into academia in their early to mid-thirties, which causes their biological and their tenure clock to run on the same timeline (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009). Female academics are likely to have no children, fewer children than their male counterparts, or fewer children than they desire (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Williams, 2004). Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) observed that while more women are entering academic professions, structures within the academic environment do not serve women well, particularly women with children and family obligations. These authors suggested that the ideal employee within a university environment is married to his or her work, leaving little time for bearing and raising children. Balancing academic work requirements with other life factors, such as time with spouses, young children, and aging parents, has been shown to be difficult for some academics, with noted gender differences disadvantaging women (Schoening, 2009; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006).

Rationale for Study

In a faculty where no formalized supports or mentorships were provided, our writing group was able to informally provide writing supports, relationship supports, and a mechanism for understanding the culture of the province and the university. The membership in the group has been relatively stable, with new members joining as they were hired into the faculty. Throughout the past 7 years the writing group has met, there have been ongoing discussions about many features of academic life; however, balancing family and career goals has been a subject that constantly arises. A previous self-study completed by the writing group members (see Badenhorst et al., 2013) suggested that, while many aspects of working in a university environment are positive, the flexibility to work whenever and wherever has challenged our work–life balance and has left us “feeling fragmented and stretched taut with the wants of others and ourselves” (p. 30).

Based on the above experience, the first and second authors, with support from all writing members, subsequently designed a study to help us understand the experiences of balancing the demands of family and academia. This research was intended to further explore the perceptions of the writing group members and to provide a rich description of their experiences in balancing family and work. The presented narratives highlight the demands placed on women as they attempt to negotiate the tenure process.

More than a decade ago Castle and Woloshyn (2003) suggested that gender inequality in academia exists and needs highlighting. While several recent publications (Castaneda & Isgro, 2013; Diem, 2012; Evans & Grant, 2008; Mason, Goulden, & Wolfinger, 2013; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012) have explored issues affecting women in academia, inequality continues to exist. Our study collected rich narrative data elicited within a supportive environment, allowing our analysis to further characterize the roots of this intractable problem and contribute toward its eventual solution.

Methods

Researcher–Participants

Nine members of the writing group opted to use a lens of writing as inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008) to examine their shared experiences surrounding family responsibility while in academia. This all-female group ranged in age from 30 to 54; all are Caucasian, one is lesbian, and eight are heterosexual. All have been married or are currently married, and three are divorced and either remarried or in a committed relationship. At the time of writing, two individuals did not have children (although one now has a child); the other women have from one to four children or grandchildren ranging in age from under three to young adult. Two of the teenage sons and one of the young adults have health complications that require regular monitoring, and one of the young adults has a developmental delay.

All of the writing group faculty members had previous careers, having invested from 2 to 20 years as teachers (from varying disciplines), guidance counsellors, school psychologists, and health psychologists prior to transitioning to academia and joining the Faculty of Education. At the time the narratives were written, only one woman was tenured, at the rank of associate professor. One was starting her second 3-year contract, and the remain-

ing women were in their 1st, 2nd, 4th, 5th, and 6th years of their tenure-track positions. Three had accepted a tenure-track position while completing the final chapter(s) of their doctoral research.

Data Analysis

The researcher-participants wrote personal narratives, allowing each individual to better understand their experience, and a collaborative dialogic analysis enabled group members to link personal experiences to those of other academic parents. The authors read their narratives aloud to other researcher-participants. This was an emotional experience, sometimes requiring a pause for the narrator to compose herself, but it was enriching nevertheless. This disclosure enabled participants to reflect more meaningfully upon their own story and created a space for a collective understanding of experience and knowledge co-creation. To identify the emerging themes, members of the writing group were asked to write down pertinent terms and phrases that came to mind while listening.

Utilizing a modified concept mapping approach (Kane & Trochim, 2007), the first two authors independently sorted the key terms and phrases into separate thematic groups that were labelled according to their unique content. Both analyses yielded eight themes: (a) cost to family, (b) commitment to work, (c) commitment to family, (d) gender-specific experiences, (e) pressures surrounding academic work, (f) lack of control, (g) human cost, and (h) second career in academia. Three pairs of these were remarkably similar, so closely related themes (commitment to work and commitment to family, cost to family and human cost, pressures surrounding academic work and lack of control) were combined, creating the five themes presented below (see Results).

Following identification of the themes, the first two authors reread each narrative, extracting sections of text that highlighted participants' experiences. At a subsequent meeting all researcher-participants were asked to categorize the selected excerpts into the identified themes or create their own categories if necessary. The coding scheme was created inductively, as it was based on the patterns and themes that emerged from the data (Patton, 2002). With few exceptions, the data were easily categorized into the themes that emerged from the narratives.

Narratives were processed using a content analysis approach that involved coding statements based on their key concepts, clustering these concepts into themes, and refining these themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to check for interrater reliability, the second author reviewed the key phrases and sections of text that were deemed to be representative of each theme. Key phrases were placed together in order to determine whether each statement was representative of one or more themes. Then, 10% of the key statements and phrases were selected, and the number of times a key statement appeared within each theme was compared against the number of individuals involved in the coding activity. With a score of 85%, interrater reliability was deemed sufficient to move to the final stages of analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data analysis was deemed complete as no new information emerged from the analyses, all excerpts could be classified, and the categories were saturated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

The following account of our experiences provides an overview of the five themes identified in the narratives: gender-specific experiences surrounding parenting, second-career academics, pressure surrounding academic work, human costs, and commitment to work and family. While depictions of each theme are supported by direct quotes from the researcher-participants, we decided to allow our voices to speak but not identify ourselves in each quotation.

Gender-Specific Experiences Surrounding Parenting

The narratives portrayed gender-specific experiences surrounding the decision to have children as well as parenting as an academic. Seven of the nine narratives provided key phrases that highlighted the female perspectives of the different experiences male and female academic parents encounter. Participants reported that in addition to their demanding work schedule, they had a second job of tending to their families in the evenings. This stood in contrast to their husbands, “who, while being extremely supportive and caring about my career change, is also an academic who is very good at shutting his home office door until 10 or 11 p.m. to get his project, research, paper, or teaching preparation complete.”

The researcher-participants in this study, all of whom were female, assumed greater parenting responsibilities during their work day: “When my daughter is sick, it is always me who stays home with her or rushes to get her from school.” Three of the participants were married to academics. Despite holding similar academic credentials, their male counterparts generated more income. One participant reported, “My husband is a committed father, but his earning capacity as an academic was so much more than mine—despite the fact that we finished our PhDs at the same time.” Differences in income generation helped determine who would focus on parenting:

My husband and I came to the conclusion that I would have to leave full-time work and go part-time so I could spend more time helping my son get better ... he took up extra consulting work to help us balance our books.

Some of the researcher-participants had young children when they completed their doctoral studies. One participant discussed the difficulties she experienced as a doctoral student and a parent:

My youngest child turned six the month before I began my doctoral studies ... Within a week of starting at that university my supervisor, a male in his late 50s, told me that given the fact that I had a family, he highly doubted that I would be able to complete a PhD.

Despite being warned of the difficulties associated with being a parent and a doctoral student, participants in this study remained committed to their role as a parent:

I devoted myself to her. I likely would have completed my PhD three years earlier than I did if I had not done this, but I have no regrets. For me, being a mother is the most meaningful and valuable thing I do.

Other researcher-participants grappled with the decision of whether or not to have children while in graduate school. Some opted to postpone child-rearing: “We made a conscious decision to postpone pregnancy until our PhDs were complete.” Another participant lamented that

I was miserable for a few months, trying to reconcile how I would have a baby while simultaneously pursuing a doctoral program ... I felt to the very depths of my being that having a baby at this time would mean I would never pursue a doctoral program ... I could not do both—have another child and become an academic!

One researcher-participant reported, “I now refer to my PhD as my second child ... However, I do wonder about what it would have been like to have had a second child.” Another commented, “I have never spent hours grappling with the decision of whether or not I should have children or consciously mulled over how having children would affect my career—that is, until I entered this side of academia.” She noted that now “I wonder how I will navigate this territory. When I had my son, in my faculty there had not been another woman to be pregnant while on faculty in 23 years, let alone a lesbian.” Another researcher-participant stated, “Someone described us as ‘childless.’ I cannot help but feel frustrated by this term ... it is laden with loss and holds a particular viewpoint of worth in society.” She continued to ask herself, “Am I too late to add ‘mother’ to the list that defines me? ... Should I even try given the pressures that exist to become tenured and given the difficulty of conceiving a child in my forties?” Even after having children, participants continued to wonder if their lives would be more manageable if they had opted not to have children:

I wonder if my journey would have been easier if I had delayed having children or never had them at all. I also wonder if I would be happier or more productive as an academic if I were childless or if I would feel like a better mother if I were in a different career.

Second Careers

Seven researcher-participants provided key phrases aligned with the theme of a non-linear path to academia or second careers. One reported, “The journey has not been linear ... I have come from a practitioner background with over 20 years of experience.” Another reported that her “life has been a never-ending twist and turn to get to this point, much of which I had never expected nor could have anticipated, including becoming an academic.” The imposter complex was also a concern: “Yes, of course I had a bit of an imposter complex—after all, I was new to this side of academia and my route of arrival was non-traditional at best.”

Researcher-participants portrayed the difficulties they encountered as they transitioned into academia: “I encountered a steep learning curve as I moved from a practitioner role into an academic role ... I left a position in which I felt competent and stepped into a totally foreign domain where I felt overwhelmed and incompetent.” Researcher-participants felt their nonlinear path to academia left them at a disadvantage in regard to their research: “Coming from a practitioner background left me at a disadvantage as I struggled to set up my research agenda.” Similarly, another said,

I came to the university from the school system and not from a PhD program. Getting a research agenda off the ground has been extremely challenging, but this means nothing to anyone but me; the institution does not consider this when evaluating for promotion and tenure.

Researcher-participants completed their doctorates to inform their practice: “After teaching science for 15 years my discontent with my teaching practice led me towards a change.” However, the need for flexibility was an additional factor that contributed to participants’ pursuing a career in academia. One participant questioned why she remained in academia:

I still come to the same answer, flexibility. In the school system I would not be able to drop what I am doing and take care of my grandson. I would not be able to take my own child to appointments or to various programming opportunities.

Similarly, another researcher-participant reported that her “academic ‘career’ has been shaped by decisions around my children ... I took the job because I thought an academic job would give me the flexibility to maneuver around my children’s schedules and to work from home.” Another reported that she scheduled her work hours to fit around the needs of her children: “A big part of my decision to take an academic position was the flexible schedule it offered; it would let me continue to be as involved as possible in my children’s lives and allow me to work full-time.”

As one researcher-participant reported, “Academia does provide me with flexibility and freedom to challenge myself and grow in so many ways.” However, with this flexibility came consequences, which included “the guilt of having to catch up to some arbitrary writing goal in the evenings and on weekends.” Similarly, another researcher-participant reported, “Flexibility is really a double-edged sword, because even though I am available to do the daytime appointments, I spend many hours making up for the time I am away during the day.” This individual also reported that flexibility came at a cost: “This usually translates into working late at night after [my daughter] is in bed or arranging for her to go to a friend’s house on the weekend so I can catch up.”

Pressure Surrounding Academic Work

In reflecting on their experience as female academics, six of the nine researcher-participants wrote about work-related pressure: “Currently I find myself employed at a good university with generous colleagues and a heavy workload ... I feel tremendous pressure to publish and to have a greater presence as an academic in my field.” The demands of the job caused two participants to question whether they should have children. Individuals asked themselves, “Can I survive the tenure process and, more importantly, have my soul remain whole if I commit to pursue adding ‘parent’ to my identity?”

Other researcher-participants discussed how difficult it was to balance the demands of parenting and academia. One individual said, “How torn I have been feeling in getting everything completed ... The tension of what to place first and the consequences of these decisions weigh heavily on me.” Another described life as “extremely hectic as my husband and I both tried to navigate work, research, and a family of three children.” Participants discussed the time commitments associated with an academic position: “Teach-

ing was time-consuming as there was so much new material to learn ... The research is progressing but requires constant nurturing in order to continue to develop and grow ... My [academic] service can be consuming as well.” Due to the demands of the job, work-related tasks spilled into the evenings and into designated family time:

I wrote on my laptop at swimming and many other lessons. I read in doctors’ rooms, next to hospital beds, and I worked long hours at night ... Often, I had one child playing on a blanket on the floor of my study while the other was in a sling around me while I banged away at the keyboard.

Researcher-participants felt that the demands of the job consumed their lives: “The need to produce ... to meet deadlines consumed me and my life at times ... If I was not physically working I was thinking about work ... It was never ending.”

Two of the researcher-participants accepted academic positions while they were completing their doctoral dissertations. One participant who had recently been hired reported that

I have been asked to be on three different committees ... How do I navigate those “distractions” in the face of needing to complete the dissertation, and even more importantly, make a valuable contribution to a new position and new faculty?

While writing the last chapter of her doctoral dissertation, another participant felt guilty for the time taken away from other projects: “Now the task of writing is often flooded with the guilt of data sets that still need to be published.” In addition, this participant reported that she now felt “overwhelmed by the guilt of ‘stealing from the academy’ by not writing enough or not meeting the standard of the understood need for two peer-reviewed journal articles per year.” The researcher-participants who were new to the tenure track felt immense pressure, and one who was in the process of applying for tenure reported, “The pressure to meet deadlines meant that I did not take advantage of my holiday time.”

The tenure application process made researcher-participants feel “extremely anxious and uptight” because “the requirements of the tenure and promotion process do not seem to be tangible.” A participant reported:

I have found the process of tenure extremely stressful. I went from feeling competent in my career and permanently employed in a school district to always feeling like I am not good enough, that I don’t work hard enough, and that I do not have enough hours ... I have had many wakeful nights worrying about the financial repercussions on my family if I do not make tenure.

Researcher-participants struggled “trying to balance the life of an academic and family.” A participant noted, “While my old job made it easier to hold onto guarded time for me or my family, this job made it almost impossible.” Participants experienced difficulty maintaining an appropriate work–life balance and noted that it was something they continued to work at: “I wake up every day planning and working toward a more balanced life.”

Human Costs

Six of the nine narratives discussed the impact an academic career could have on individuals and their families. Faculty members felt guilty because work-related tasks took

away from valuable family time: “I often reflect on those nights when she did not want to go to bed and my getting angry and impatient because of all of the work that I knew I still had to face.” Other participants expressed guilt surrounding the need to meet the demands of an academic career while parenting:

I was constantly filled with guilt as I missed events and time with my children in order to complete my work ... They were more important to me than my job, but I was not putting them before my work at this time and it was “eating me up” inside.

Researcher-participants discussed the impact pursuing an academic career had on their families. One noted:

I felt like I missed parts of her childhood that were important, as well as disrupted her day-to-day life ... I have now put her in another position of change, which she has not asked for, all in order to begin my academic career ... How have the decisions I have made to further my career in the academic world taken away from hers?

This individual also reported “other areas of my life were suffering as a result of the long hours needed to cope in this new role.” This sentiment was echoed by another researcher-participant who noted that as she “worked diligently to gain a sense of competence in my work, I found that I was ‘robbing Peter to pay Paul.’” This individual felt that her children were especially impacted by her new academic career because “they missed me ... they felt my absence and I felt my absence as well.”

In discussing the personal costs they accrued as a result of juggling the demands of academia and parenthood, one participant reported:

Having young children and starting a PhD was challenging ... What this meant for me is that it took longer to complete the program; plus it meant that while my peers were getting excellent grades and applying for scholarships, I was being a mother and taking care of family.

Participants who had yet to have children reported that they

feel guilty for not doing enough work and guilty for doing too much work ... I have been told that having children helps put things into perspective, but what if it doesn't and I'm left feeling even more guilty for having to divide my time between my work, husband, and future children?

Some participants were reluctant to have children; one said, “I could see that a 70-hour work week would be draining on one's health; however, this was what was expected if one was to maintain an academic career while juggling the demands of a family.” Other participants also felt that their decision to pursue graduate studies and a career in academia impacted their child-rearing status; as one noted, “I chose to wait to have children after getting married, and instead I started graduate school.” She continued, “Yes, I am 43 and have no offspring. But did I *choose* this? My immediate response was a resounding no, blaming it on life circumstances and complexities.”

Of the researcher-participants six of them needed to leave their families to pursue their doctoral studies and/or an academic career. They also discussed the impact this

move had on their families and themselves. One participant asked herself, “What will the impact be on the family and my new marriage as I move to Newfoundland while my family is still in Alberta?” A second participant discussed how difficult it was for her to be away from her family:

I had been with my husband five years before leaving Newfoundland, my husband, and my son who was nine years old at the time, to start full-time study ... My separation from my husband and son did not end upon the completion of my PhD ... While my productivity as an academic was very high during this time, which is especially important considering the criteria for tenure and promotion, it was a very lonely time in my life.

Commitment to Work and Family

Seven out of the nine narratives included key phrases that highlighted participants’ high level of commitment to their doctoral studies, academic careers, and families:

I do not think my choice to have children at 35 and 37, when my biological clock was ticking, reflects poorly on my commitment to my students, my developing research agenda, or my service work. I am committed, engaged, and passionate about both my work and my family; the two are not mutually exclusive.

Researcher-participants reported that they worked hard to achieve their career goals, and one said she “feel[s] blessed to have the opportunity to place myself on the ‘torture track’ [participants’ term for the tenure track].”

Participants reported that their children and families helped to shape their academic careers: “I viewed returning to school as an opportunity to get a career that would allow me to better provide for my child and spend more time with him in the process.” Similarly, another researcher-participant noted, “During my PhD program my youngest child was diagnosed with a developmental disability. I actually switched my program from an internship-based program to a coursed-based program so I could make myself available to be involved in his rehabilitation program.”

Despite the value they placed on their academic careers, researcher-participants reported that “family came first and the work was fitted in around them.” One individual stated:

This year, for the first time since my son was diagnosed, I have been away from home to attend conferences and workshops ... I feel that now at 50 years of age I’m finally starting a “career” instead of making do, accommodating, and compromising because the family’s needs come first.

Participants were committed to their families and their careers; however, as one noted,

If I had to choose between my success as an academic or the happiness of my children, there would not be a moment of hesitation. This does not mean that I am not committed to my career—it just means that there needs to be a balance. Perhaps part of that balance will be that I will never make full professor, but I’d rather that happen than my children say, “You were never there for us growing up.”

Discussion

As women working in the 21st century, we had expectations of an academic career that were shaped by the misperception that gender equality exists in academia. However, we learned, the role of an academic can in fact be considered “oversized” (Castle & Woloshyn, 2003) and gendered to favour the male worker devoted to his career (Wilson, 2001). The majority of our group had previously experienced successful professional careers and did not anticipate the difficulties we have experienced as academics. Bonawitz and Anandel (2009) suggested that women in academia should draw attention to the demands placed on them in the context of a society that continues to push women to be caregivers to children and elders. These gendered expectations for caregiving interfere with productivity and create stressors and fears associated with success in promotion and tenure.

Williams (2004) suggested that females who stop the tenure clock are more likely to be judged harshly and to be criticized for their lack of publications and presentations even while on leave. While some institutions have policies in place, Bonawitz and Anandel (2009) suggested that there are unspoken biases against individuals who avail of these benefits, and that women need to be proactive in getting institutions to address these biases, which most often affect female caregivers. Institutional policies need to consider childcare as well as eldercare needs; Duxbury and Higgins (2012) suggested that employees with childcare and eldercare responsibilities face more significant challenges than those faced with only one caregiving role.

While holding multiple roles can contribute to a person’s sense of self-worth (Marks & MacDermid, 1996; Reitzes & Mutran, 1994), distress is likely to occur when family and work roles conflict (Menaghan, 1989). The participants in this study spoke about the conflict they endured as they engaged in the roles of caregiver and academic. As was the case with women in Hirakata and Daniluk’s (2009) study, the participants in this study struggled to determine the best time to have a child, opted to cut their maternity leaves short, or continued academic work almost immediately after giving birth. Similar to the work of Milkie and Peltola (1999), the participants in this study spoke of the demands of holding an academic position, as well as the expectations surrounding their “second shift” of caregiving and household responsibilities. While participants were equally committed to their work and families, they spoke of the guilt they felt regarding dividing their time between their responsibilities. As employment can lead to favourable psychological consequences for women (Barnett & Baruch, 1985), universities may want to consider facilitating support groups to provide academics with opportunities to develop supportive communities. This would allow members to work together to navigate demands of the tenure process and the conflicting roles of parent, caregiver, and academic.

Many of the participants in this study travelled a nonlinear path to academia and experienced difficulty becoming familiar with and adjusting to the norms and expectations in their new academic careers. According to LaRocco and Bruns (2006), new academics face a steep learning curve as they come to understand the structures of the university, adopt the language and culture of academia, and define themselves as researchers. A women’s writing group can be an effective intervention for increasing the publishing rates of female junior faculty (Sonnad, Goldsack, & McGowan, 2011). In addition, writing groups can help new faculty develop confidence and a sense of identity (Gillespie et

al., 2005; Pasternak, Longwell-Grice, Shea, & Hanson, 2009); this is especially true for female academics (Grant & Knowles, 2010) and was the experience for the members of our group. Our writing group comprises primarily assistant professors, and as such, we face yearly evaluation by a promotion and tenure committee. For many of our members, the writing group provides a much-needed sense of support and community that helps us navigate work–life balance as we move through the promotion and tenure process.

As Clark (2000) suggested, the borders between work and home life are complex. The narratives in this study show that, overall, individuals feel they are “being determined” by the work context, and family life suffers as a consequence. Key limitations of this study were that the majority of the researcher-participants were assistant professors who had yet to receive tenure, all were women, and the majority had moved from another province. These limitations indicate possible areas for future research. For example, it will be interesting to see if attaining tenure will change the permeability of the borders between work and family life for group members. To this end, future research on the longitudinal experience of women academics as they move through various stages in their careers would be beneficial. In addition, there were no men in our group. While this was not intentional and, indeed, may reflect the need for relational support among women, research on how untenured men experience work–life balance would add substantially to the literature in this area. Since only two of the 11 participants were originally from the province, and two of the participants had left their partners in another province, this mobility and transitioning in from other areas may have affected participants’ experiences. Like many academics, several of the participants moved to a new city and province to gain access to a tenure-track position, leaving behind their systems of support. Living in a remote geographical area, as well as our current stage of employment, may have impacted our experience of balancing the demands of family and academia. Research in other provinces with more resident participants would help build our knowledge in this area. Finally, it would be useful to further explore the effect of supportive groups, such as writing groups, and their ability to mediate the stressful and competitive nature of the academic environment and to help women manage the border crossings between work and family life. 🍁

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