

# Academic Motherhood and COVID-19

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## Learning from the Experiences of Mothers of School-Aged Children on Tenure Track during the COVID-19 Global Pandemic

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*How are mothers of school-aged children navigating the tenure track in the global pandemic of COVID-19? In this article, I weave my reflections with the voices of other early career academic mothers of school-aged children to tell our varied stories traversing tenure. To access these stories, I conducted synchronous and asynchronous (email) dialogic interviews with six early career academic mothers of school-aged children from a variety of disciplines, departments, and universities in North America. Although COVID-19 will likely have much longer lasting implications, this article focuses on how participants felt in March 2020 when COVID-19 physical distancing plans were widely implemented. As the interviewees suggest, time was negotiated, reorganized, and felt in different ways among academic mothers of school-aged children. There were innumerable factors shaping the various responses to COVID-19 lifeworld reconfigurations while pursuing tenure, and my hope for this article is twofold—that others are able to feel seen and heard and that universities might begin truly listening to the voices and experiences of nondominant faculty to consider reorienting their tenure cultures to be more inclusive of the diverse lifeworlds their faculty inhabit. Importantly, in their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, universities ought to be reflecting on the cultures and temporalities of tenure to better attend to the decline in numbers of women through the professorial ranks. Particularly in heightened times of uncertainty and intensification of historical gender inequities compelled by the global pandemic of COVID-19, this article introduces some considerations for differently approaching and reconfiguring individualist and competitive tenure processes.*

I became a mother while pursuing my doctorate. When I defended my dissertation, my son was almost six months old, and my daughter was two and a half, and when I started in a tenure-track position, my daughter began kindergarten. My experiences during this first year on the tenure track, while learning how to be a mother of a school-age child, prompted me to reflect on these two socially inscribed roles: mother and scholar (McDermott). Two years later, my son entered kindergarten, and I felt I was catching the rhythms of living in these two worlds simultaneously and began embracing the identity of mother-scholar. Then, COVID-19 changed the world. When I heard that K-12 schools in my province were cancelling in-person classes, my heart sank, my head spun, and I worried. How will my children respond, as they were just forming their relationships with(in) school? How can I continue quality teaching and research while facilitating kindergarten and grade-two schoolwork at home? What does this mean for my children's future school experiences and my pursuit of tenure?

In this article, I weave my reflections with the voices of other early career academic mothers of school-aged children to tell our varied stories navigating the tenure track. To access these stories, I conducted synchronous and asynchronous (email) dialogic interviews with six participants from a variety of disciplines, departments, and universities in Canada and the United States. Initially, I sought participants who were in tenure-track positions; later, I reconsidered and broadened early career to include contractual and postdoctoral appointments.

Although COVID-19 will likely have much longer lasting implications, this article captures a moment in time, focusing on how participants felt in March 2020 when COVID-19 physical distancing plans were widely implemented across North America. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory (Collins; Harding; Hartstock; Smith), motherhood studies (DiQuiznio; O'Brien Hallstein and O'Reilly; O'Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*; Rich; Ruddick; Walker; Weiss) and gendered workplaces scholarship (Acker; Acker and Armenti; Grumet; Massey), I framed the research through the following question: How are mothers of school-aged children navigating the tenure track in the global pandemic of COVID-19? I have learned and grown so much from listening to the participants' narratives in relation to my own experiences. In this article, I amplify those learnings, and the sense of being seen and heard. In addition, I share some considerations for reconfiguring individualist and competitive tenure processes, particularly during heightened times of uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 global pandemic.

## COVID-19 Reconfigured Lifeworlds, Mothers, and Tenure

Early in the pandemic, institutional communications and social media conversation were rife with urgent pleas to return to the way things were. These desires never sat well with me. Indeed, I wondered how the normatives underlying our relations to each other and the earth may be responsible for the pandemic we are confronting. Rather than a return to normalcy, perhaps (if we can express hope in this situation), the pandemic could provide an opportunity to reconfigure our lifeworlds and to come into alternative social, cultural, political, and environmental relations.

In this portion of the article, I animate the context within which this research resides, including the racial, patriarchal, and capitalist logics underpinning tenure processes as well as broader social relations. Indeed, in the moment of #BlackLivesMatter, I admit concern about speaking to the privileged and exclusionary space of the university, and my place in it as a white, heterosexual, married, middle-class, able-bodied, neurotypical, and cisgendered woman and mother. Yet I do believe it is important and necessary to turn our attention here. As one of the participants, Cynthia,<sup>1</sup> said:

I don't feel I can complain and, you know, just getting it off my chest because, then, I think of my friends, my colleagues, and all women who are in very precarious economic conditions, all the things that also happen with Black Lives Matter and all these social discrepancies. So, I don't feel I have a right to complain and voice it out. Still, it's hard. It is.

It is hard. In this section, then, I specifically address the ways in which women have been positioned within universities while those same universities tout the language of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). I also suggest that the role of universities as social and political sites of knowledge production urgently requires us to do and be better with regard to questions of access and representation, particularly in times of social, economic, and environmental upheaval. I am committed to possibilities for the university to return to, or become, a site for critical social engagement—a space that offers alternative ways of doing, being, and relating in the world. Indeed, I desire a university that takes up an ethical responsibility towards making better worlds.

### *EDI: Why We Need Mothers' Voices*

Universities across Canada have increasingly committed to principles of EDI, which support the “mobilization [of] a full spectrum of ideas, talent and experiences ... essential to creating a higher education and research ecosystem that responds to changing Canadian demographics and global challenges” (Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* 4). Yet I find myself

frustrated. These EDI statements feel nonperformative (Ahmed): the statements are held up as evidence that the work of challenging existing structural inequities is taken seriously by the institution. For all the EDI statements and strategies that exist, in 2018, Universities Canada described startling declines of women through professorial ranks. As equity-seeking faculty, women accounted for 48.5 per cent of assistant professors, 45 percent of associate professors, and only 27.6 per cent of full professors (Universities Canada, *Recent Data on Equity*). These numbers amplify the “pyramid problem” (Mason and Goulden) or the “leaky pipeline” (Martin; May), in which more women are entering the professorate; however, their representation decreases as you move through the ranks. Within the decreasing ratios of women in the professorial ranks, the literature also shows particular tensions with women who become mothers early in their tenure pursuit (Casteñeda and Isgro; Evans and Grant; O’Meara; Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion*). Additionally, initial research on the COVID-19 global pandemic has shown the intensification of long-standing gendered inequities (Alon et al.; Andrews et al.; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”).

I see these inequities as beyond a simple numerical decrease of women throughout academic ranks. In alignment with Sara Ruddick’s central text on maternal thinking, Jane Roland Martin suggests the following: “More than talent is lost when women go missing in academe. Different viewpoints, interests, and life experiences capable of revitalizing existing fields of knowledge and opening up brand new areas of inquiry disappear” (89). As an institution, the university plays a significant role in shaping how we think about and recognize our social, economic, political, and environmental worlds. Problematically, the historically present hegemonic orientation is masculinist and imperial (Chatterjee and Maira). Furthermore, universities are sites of work—employing thousands—and those who are feeling pushed out of the workforce are predominantly women (Alon et al.; Chemaly; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”). So, we are confronted with concerns around further declines in women’s participation in the workforce, exaggerating the public-private gendered division of labour, which has broader social implications regarding knowledge production and diversity of thought.

As much as I worry about the nonperformativity of EDI statements, policies, and commitments, I also recognize how the fact that these statements exist gives us something tangible to point towards in demands that universities better address social inequities. In other words, how we may use the master’s tools in efforts to dismantle and reconfigure the master’s house (Lorde)—in this case, the tenure track. So, I ask, why does it matter that women, more specifically, mothers, go missing as we travel up the ranks within the professoriate? The principles of inclusive excellence espoused in EDI work to show how increasing access, representation, and knowledge production at the

faculty level influences the success of more diverse academic staff as well as students (Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion*). This goes beyond expanding the horizons of knowledge production within universities to “build[ing] an innovative, prosperous and inclusive country and [creating] institutions that are responsive, nimble and able to ensure the next generation [i.e., our children] can navigate a fast-paced changing world” (Universities Canada, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* 6).

### ***COVID-19 and Intensified Gender Inequities***

If COVID-19 is amplifying gender inequities, this is in part due the stay-at-home mandates, including the large-scale closures of schools and childcare centers. Women, specifically mothers, who can retain their jobs during this crisis, such as academics, are facing severely limited hours within which to carry out their professional expectations, as children are home and requiring care, entertainment, and education (Alon et al; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”). Mothers still disproportionately tend to housework and childcare, sometimes called the “third shift” (O’Reilly, *Matricentric Feminism*), and early studies, including this research, indicate that of those working from home, mothers are interrupted more than fathers by responding to childcare needs (Alon et al.; Andrew et al.; Featherstone; Moore), adding a “fourth shift” (O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”). Although the participants interviewed in this research all indicated their spouse’s role in childcare and housework, all six commented that for a variety of reasons, they felt they took on more of the work (see also, Alon et al.; Andrew et al.; O’Reilly, “Trying to Function”).

### ***Gender and the Culture and Temporality of the Tenure Track***

Alice Walker stated during a graduation speech at a women’s college, “Your job, when you leave here—as it was the job of educated women before you—is to change the world. Nothing less or easier than that” (70); I carry that call-to-action with me in this research. I am interested in mapping the experiences and navigational tools mothers of school-aged children use on their way towards tenure. Additionally, however, I want to uncover the limiting problematics and open space for rethinking normative expectations constituting the grinding temporality and masculinist, individualist culture of tenure—I want nothing easier or less than to reconceptualize the tenure world.

The most precarious and, arguably, most intensive time in an early academic’s career—pretenure—overlaps with the time when many families have young children (Casteñeda and Isgro; Martin; McDermott; Shahjanan). Further to these conditions, Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden found that men who have children within five years after completing their doctorate are substantially more likely to achieve tenure than women who have children in the early portion of their academic careers. Furthermore, women with babies are 29 per



cent less likely to enter the tenure track than other women, making them underrepresented within the already dwindling number of women in academe. One site of concern, for this research, includes the ways in which mothers are deemed unreliable academic colleagues (Casteñeda and Isgro; Raddon), and now, with COVID-19, pretenure mothers of school-aged children are feeling additional pressures and stresses as they take on education, entertainment, and fulltime childcare.

As already stated, responses to the COVID-19 global pandemic have amplified concerning trends, which have substantial implications for gender equity (Alon et al.; Andrew et al.; Featherstone; Kitchener; O'Reilly, "Trying to Function"). Relating to the tenure track, the most notable trends include a decrease in the percentage of articles submitted by women, whereas men's rates of submission have increased (Kitchener; Oleschuk); moreover, mothers are spending on average four hours more per day tending to children's needs and housework than fathers in heterosexual relationships (Alon et al.; Andrews et al.).

Grounded in these complexities of the COVID-19 global pandemic, I oriented this research in the following way: I engage knowledge as situated in lived experiences shaped through power relations (feminist standpoint theory) to disrupt the discourses that naturalize motherhood as central to womanhood (motherhood studies) while limiting the role and influence of women in the public sphere (gendered workplaces). Before I share parts of the participants' stories, I briefly unpack the research design, which was guided by these theoretical orientations.

### **Feminist Qualitative Methodology**

Research considering the cultural politics of universities—the ways universities are configured to produce particular ways of knowing and being in the world—is necessary to increase EDI and ensure the policies and strategic plans move towards demonstrated cultural and material shifts (Ahmed; Alexander and Mohanty; Chatterjee and Maira; Mills and Berg; Pereira). For this research, I used qualitative interviews to gather stories of mothers' experiences navigating the tenure track. These stories provide embodied details and context in relation to the quantitative research being conducted to help understand the implications of COVID-19 (Teti, Schatz, and Lievenberg). I maintain hope that these stories of how institutional life is navigated by equity-seeking groups will play a role in moving towards the goals of EDI.

**Methods**

The six participants, who all self-identify as mothers of school-aged children pursuing tenure, work in four universities—two in Western Canada, one in Eastern Canada, and one in the Eastern United States—and hold positions in a variety of disciplines: education, religious studies, community health, marketing and business, kinesiology, the performing arts, as well as English and communications. They had been in their respective positions for six months to five years. Two of the participants are in the process of applying for tenure this year. Because tenure is already rife with much anxiety and uncertainty, I promised each participant that I would protect their identities. In the below table, however, I include the participants' pseudonyms and ages of their children to provide some personal context to the narratives shared later.

**Table 1. Participant Pseudonyms and Ages of Children**

Pseudonym	Children's Ages
Chante	8 6
Stacey	8 5
Annalise	8 5
Lisa	19 12
Cynthia	10
Candace	6 3 2

That three of the interviewees had children of similar ages as mine struck a chord with me. I, too, have children ages six and eight. I wonder how the different ages of our children informs our experiences of navigating the tenure track. When comments around the ages of the participants' children emerged in the interviews, I wondered whether there is something to the early elementary years that requires particular attention. Furthermore, and something that challenged me, one interviewee indicated that the move to online learning had to be managed and supported for her child in university as much as for her twelve-year-old. What assumptions do I bring about what it is like to be a mother of children of different ages? Of course, in these



questions, I am amplifying the situated and necessarily incompleteness of my sense making within this research, and, thus, the questions, experiences, concerns, and topics that come up for others never occurred to me.

The primary method of data collection, after institutional ethics approval, was a dialogic interview. Because of the shifting conditions and time constraints with the stay-home regulations and increased childcare (including education), participants had two options: a synchronous Zoom interview or an asynchronous email interview (Linabary and Hamel). In the interviews, instead of asking each participant the same questions, there were three topics I wanted to address. The questions then flowed from the narratives being shared, which allowed me to capture the different ways in which the participants storied and made sense of their experiences. All participants were invited to share the details of the tenure process at their institution and where they are in that process. Then I wanted to have a sense of their home lives, the number and ages of children, as well as whether there are any other adults in their households. Finally, the heart of the interviews included an invitation to discuss the events of mid-March 2020 when mass school-closures and work-from-home responses were put in place to help slow the spread of COVID-19. In this part, I asked the interviewees to reflect on how their newly configured lifeworlds informed their academic trajectories and tenure plans and how that made them feel.

In my interpretive process, I engaged an iterative approach with the narratives by identifying concepts, narratives, and ideas heuristically while thinking with the research question. For the remainder of this paper, I take up the descriptive and reflective sense making to capture what resonated with or challenged my experiences and expectations.

### **Narrative Resonances from the Data**

Each participant commented at some point on how they appreciated having space for these conversations. Indeed, six months into the school closures, I did not realize how important casual conversations with other parents at school pickups and drop offs, or at the park, were for me in terms of feeling seen and heard. These interviews provided me a sense of community and a way to reconnect with other mothers.

#### ***Finding New Rhythms and Seeking Well-Being***

I write this in the early hours from the kitchen table—before my children awake and need breakfast and attention. We are now over five months into COVID-19. Alberta Education just announced that schools will be open, and once again apprehension and concern surge; I want my children to have the social experiences cultivated in schools, but I worry about the health risks to

them and to society. Compound this with the financial cuts to education put into place by the United Conservative Party (UCP) just before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the work-from-home mandates that shifted the terrains of home-work spaces and access to research and teaching materials. As a pretenure mother-scholar in the field of education, I wonder what futures are being made possible in this time. To ground myself, I return to womanist writer Alice Walker, whose chapter “A Writer Because of, Not in Spite of, Her Children” speaks to me. I am determined to find a way to get the writing done, and that means writing in the moments of quiet solitude early in the morning. I must adjust my daily rhythms and expectations for sustained blocks of writing time.

I am relieved, and yet saddened, that others, too, made purposeful shifts in the spatiotemporalities of academic work. Each interviewee addressed changes in when, where, and how they engage their work now that schools are closed. Annalise summed up the nonchoice in these decisions: “Just buckle down with the time you got.” Of course, there is a critical history of women writers sharing their experiences writing early in the morning and well into the night while the children slept before COVID-19 restrictions were in place: Toni Morrison, Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, to name a few.

While the children were at school, Chante previously had time to teach her classes, take a walk, and do some of her administrative and research-related work. Chante had the intention of submitting her application for tenure as well as several projects nearing finish that she earmarked to work on after the teaching term ended. Then schools closed, and her husband had to work outside of the house. Chante’s days suddenly became filled with facilitating teaching for her kindergarten and grade-two children as well as keeping them entertained, all the while physically distancing and continuing to teach her courses. When her husband returned from work, she would nap from 3:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. and would then get up to write at night while the children slept.

Cynthia, in contrast, had a different narrative around time and space. She recently started a tenure-track position at a university in another province. The plan was to fly back to her husband and child once a month. When COVID-19 restrictions were announced, it was spring break in her child’s school district. Mother and daughter intended to spend the week together. This bonding time was cut short as the university where Cynthia works closed the campus, and she and her daughter returned to the province where the daughter and husband were still living. She did not have time to collect all the things she needed when the university announced the closing of the campus. As a result, Cynthia was tasked with continuing to teach her courses without all of her books. Space and time shifted rapidly as Cynthia was in her first six months of a tenure-track appointment. While Cynthia did not express concern about how

this may affect her chances for tenure, she did concede that she was worried about her well-being. I remember feeling like she was so calm and relaxed, taking all this upheaval and change in her life with seeming ease. Then she shared: “Like I really, really push myself too far. Like this summer, I didn’t feel like I had any vacation, which is okay, where I took one week of break, meaning I didn’t work. I just answered a few emails, but we didn’t go anywhere. So really pushing myself too hard.”

Lisa also touched on well-being: “My commute also provided an end time to my workday. Without my commute home, I’m finding it difficult to have a natural end time. I will admit that in the early days of COVID-19, my workdays were becoming far too long. I was starting earlier and ending later and then extending my work on the weekends.” I wonder, when rereading these portions of the interviews from Cynthia and Lisa, how hard it can be to turn the work off when our boundary markers—vacation or commutes—disappear.

Lisa also added: “At first, I was delighted not to commute to campus and thought this additional time would be great.” Interestingly, Annalise and Chante also commented on recovered time now that they were no longer up and down the road doing various drop offs and pickups. Lisa continued: “However, I soon realized that my commute provided me with an opportunity to reflect and listen to music alone in the car. I no longer have this alone time and now I miss it. This forced me to find other ways to make time for reflection.” Annalise mentioned that now she takes morning walks, and her family understands that is her space. During these walks, she found time to reflect and reorganize her research program now that three research projects were cancelled or postponed. Notably, Stacey and Candace also talked about research that is on pause, which has substantive implications for tenure. Recreating protected time for reflection was important to the interviewees professionally and for well-being. Annalise even said: “I have to say what I’m coming out of COVID with ... is a lot more well-aligned and meaningful for my scholarship program, maybe, than those studies individually would have been.”

Maybe more is not always the answer. What if we continued slowing down expectations of what needs to be accomplished in relation to our work? How could this support moving away from the competitive nature of quantifiable metrics determining success? Before COVID-19, several of the participants spoke of having protected time or days. As pretenure faculty, Annalise’s and Chante’s schedules were institutionally organized to ensure one protected day without teaching, meetings, or administrative work, whereas Lisa self-organized protected days. As work entered our homes and work-hour availability could not be assumed, Candace resented the flexibility presented to her by her coworkers. When colleagues offered to have meetings during the evening or on weekends, she expressed frustration with giving up the only

time she had for herself. Lisa, in contrast, found the flexibility to be helpful, not only to herself, but with regards to her ability to supervise and support graduate students who were also facing dramatic shifts in COVID-19 lifeworlds. Lisa shared her process of balancing awareness of the graduate students' newly configured lives and her well-being: "I try to make accommodations for the different circumstances my students are facing but also try to take this into account as I'm working through my day and balancing home-life."

COVID-19 lifeworld shifts required reflection to reorganize days around the various needs and expectations in our roles as mothers and early-career academics, although finding time for that reflection was challenging. One participant, Stacey, while also going through a spousal separation, put family first and made the difficult decision to take a leave of absence from work. This allowed her to be present for and with her children: "And yes, it was tough for me to say no to things and to cancel things. That was really ... the initial was like, 'I can't believe I'm doing this.' But also, there was this like gut feeling that, 'No, my priority is my family and I will fit in what I can.'" It is tough to say "no" to things at work, particularly when pretenure, as there is a fear of being seen as unreliable bubbling under the surface. Being able to say "yes" to and prioritize family, to me, was something I had to conscientiously learn (McDermott). Other interviewees also indicated how COVID-19 created conditions of possibility and limitation to say "no" to work. I felt habitual academic identities were shifting as we sought to catch the newly configured rhythms between work and life. Similarly, with children at home, several interviewees noted how their mother identities were challenged, whether that was by way of conceding to increased nonschool-related screen time during work meetings (Stacey, Annalise, and Candace), letting children have access to social media (Cynthia), feeling guilty for desiring schools to open and reckoning with sending children into a risky environment (Candace), giving up on trying to facilitate the children's school work (Candace and Chante), or feeling happy with the cultural shifts that made it acceptable for a ten-year-old to be outside the house without adult supervision (Cynthia).

### *Renegotiating the Boundaries of Ideal Academic and Mothering Discourses*

Slowing down and realigning research as well as saying "no" to work and "yes" to home revealed a variety of ways in which the interviewees engaged, accepted, and challenged the ideal academic, unencumbered by responsibilities beyond time to read, think, and write. Annalise and Stacey expressed increasing annoyance with stories from colleagues on social media about having all this time to get research and writing projects done. Annalise said: "But if I hear one more male colleague tell me about how productive this time has been, I'm going to kick them in the face right through the zoom screen ...

they would be saying like, 'Oh, it's been so productive and so much time to get all that data I've been sitting on,' And I'm doing a Zoom meeting with ... [my youngest] behind me asking for a snack." Stacey shared:

You may have seen the article that was shared on social media, but it was about all of these academics being grateful they're working from home because they get all this time to write and work on these manuscripts that have just been on the back burner ... and the piece was about how they're all coming from male authors.... We don't have a hope because all the parenting is landing on the mother. All the homeschooling is landing on the mother. Yeah, I'm definitely feeling that.

When our days shifted to facilitating home schooling and we had to figure out new learning management systems and tend to ours and our family's well-being, the publish or perish pressures embedded in the competitive tenure process were acutely felt amongst the participants.

Universities responded to these different COVID-19 lifeworld configurations through automatic extensions to the tenure clock (Oleschuk). Additionally, some universities proposed foregoing student evaluations of teaching for the winter 2020 courses. For me, this second institutional offering became a limiting factor. I was hoping to include student evaluations from a new course I just taught as part of my "evidence of quality teaching" in my tenure application. Additionally, for Annalise, the yearly requirements set up to scaffold the tenure process would be incomplete without the student evaluations, and there was no clarity on how this would be addressed later on. For Chante and Lisa, the automatic tenure clock extension seemed unreasonable as they were both submitting their tenure applications this year. Chante said: "I'm not taking it because I just can't take the stress of this for a whole 'nother year. And then the uncertainty or if they lay people off, and I'm not tenured. So, I said, 'No, I'm going to roll my dice.'" Lisa included this perspective: "With the current COVID-19 situation limiting knowledge mobilization activities and research, one additional year does not seem sufficient to add substantial contributions to my tenure application package/portfolio."

I wonder, too, how the research projects that are paused or cancelled will affect tenure prospects in a few years' time. Candace, when discussing a particularly tense relationship with her postdoctoral supervisor, aptly noted the following: "I think things are getting better now, but when I think part of what made it better is that I finally got a draft of a paper out. That's her currency. You're speaking her language if you're submitting a paper." Getting papers published is currency, an interesting economic metaphor in the marketized university, for tenure as well. Much like capitalist sensibilities, the more publications one has, the more known one becomes in their field, which

increases the relations and networks one can draw from to continue mobilizing research. What are the implications when some early career academics are in positions to be putting out more work during these times? Blanket extensions of tenure may simply become a reproduction of status quo inequities (Oleschuk). Yet I fear heading in the UK direction, where accountability metrics literally ask the question “How many papers is a baby worth” to calculate for missed publication opportunities while on maternity leave (Klocker and Drozdowski).

### **Mentoring, Representation, and Being Seen/Heard**

I empathized with an undercurrent in Candace’s narratives about her challenging relationship with her supervisor; she felt she could not become an ideal academic, and the only currency in their relationship was publications. When I asked her about her desires to continue on an academic career path, with a sigh, she said: “Over the last couple of months ... things have been really difficult with my supervisor. I have just felt like I don’t think that I really like a lot of people in academia.” Her supervisor, a full professor, is a woman without children. Janice Wallace, in her work on women in educational leadership positions, notes the importance of representation. However, she shows, women who take on leadership positions sometimes wind up proving themselves by reasserting masculinist norms and keeping other women down. For Candace, the supervisor denied her an opportunity to learn a new program critical for being competitive on the academic job market in her field. While Candace was on maternity leave, the supervisor hired someone else to learn that program and lead that portion of the project. Candace shared how her role as a mother was positioned as a limitation. About returning to work after maternity leave, she said: “The thing about coming back to work and feeling like ... I’m not good enough because I’m not as productive. Rather than feeling like now I’ve gained another level of understanding about the world, that I have something more to offer.” Later, specifically regarding her relationship with her supervisor, she said: “But for me, it’s not only this immediate kind of lag in getting out papers. It’s also the feeling of not being supported in the workplace, not being supported by other women in the workplace who don’t have kids.” I want to believe that this is an exception to unstated rules in university relations. Yet too often the tacit norms underlying processes and expectations are not questioned or explicated. Chante, for example, spoke of two moments relating to tenure and the ideal academic. The first was around unquestioned support offered to those getting their publishing rhythms going: “When they put together a writing retreat, they don’t think about women and children.... I can’t find someone to keep my kids in the summer for the entire week. So, you weren’t thinking about me as a demographic; you were thinking



about the men in the engineering school who were going to leave their kids with their wives probably.” I wonder about the link to the nonperformative possibilities within EDI statements. The department can say that they offered support, without having the responsibility to consider ways to include faculty with various life situations. Being able to access the support becomes an individualized problem, begging the question of who or what is required to diversify the university?

Another story shared by Chante animates the ways in which tenure expectations are masked behind a cheerleading approach. When I asked her about how her colleagues are supporting her in preparing for tenure, she said:

Now, at my own institution, they're supportive. [They say] 'you're going to be fine. You're okay.' But no one's saying, 'Okay, look publish in this journal because I know this editor and I can put a word in for you.' ... My foray into publications was ... I felt kind of delayed because I didn't know about the circles and who you need to talk to.... I completed my dissertation in 2012, and I was engaged in mothering. And then when I really kind of got back in the swing of things, I didn't know anybody ... so I was out of the loop for a while and that affected my ability to publish. And I didn't really understand the importance of networking and knowing the editors in order to get a publication.

When Chante shared this with me, I felt a rush of relief. It was not just me who wondered how everyone else figured this publishing game out before I did.

I want to end, however, on a promising note—one that suggests we can reconfigure how we are doing, being, and relating as academic mothers. What stands out from Candace's and Chante's stories, in particular, in addition to the continued reproduction of status quo through institutional responses that deflect responsibility, are the deep-seated roots of oppression producing and being produced by university lifeworlds. However, individuals and groups are embodying alternative relations.

Stacey noted that several leaders in her department are also mothers; they have lived university and mothering lifeworlds simultaneously. Earlier, I spoke about Chante and Lisa who decided to continue on their trajectory to apply for tenure, even though their universities extended the tenure clock. Stacey, who would potentially be going up for tenure next year, instead calmly commented that she would take as much time as she needed to get there: “I am driven to progress in this career and to be at the university until I retire. And, so, what if that takes me a couple of years longer than what my colleagues would take?” I wondered what conditions allowed Stacey to rescript the grinding, individualist, and competitive culture of tenure. Although there is no way of

knowing this for sure, Stacey took the thought swirling in my head: “And all of that recognition of putting family first given our situation has come from women who are moms and that’s really interesting to me in light of your research topic.... Because if I were in a male dominant environment, I don’t know what my experience would have been, if it would have been as understanding or what.”

As she said earlier, taking leave was a difficult decision because Stacey loves her work. However, the decision was made easier because others in her department have lived the life of academic and mother. I believe it is really important to recognize oneself in these spaces—for having the ability to have conversations with others who are navigating tenure as well as for demystifying the processes, experiences, and tacit assumptions underpinning living well in this world. Cynthia took it into her own hands to establish a community with other recently hired parents in the time of COVID-19. Perhaps there is hope for another way. I know I was inspired and gained confidence in dialoguing with other mothers of school-aged children pursuing tenure.

### **Some Final Thoughts**

As the interviewees suggest, time was negotiated, reorganized, and felt in different ways among academic mothers of school-aged children. Of course, there were innumerable factors shaping the various responses to COVID-19 lifeworld reconfigurations while pursuing tenure, and my hope for this paper is twofold—that others are able to feel seen and heard—that universities may begin reorienting tenure cultures to be more inclusive of the diverse lifeworlds their faculty inhabit. As I share some of the narratives and stories that resonated with me and challenged me to reconsider how I was reading and interpreting my experiences, I similarly urge universities to engage in more sustained and genuine dialogue with equity-seeking groups. Perhaps, then, the work of reconfiguring competitive and individualist tenure and promotion cultures undergirding who has access to and represents knowledge producers can materialize.

### **Endnotes**

All names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality and identity of the participants.

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