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Tensions, Challenges, and Resistance among Academic Mothers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Gabriela Rubilar Donoso, Catherine A. LaBrenz and Caterine Galaz Valderrama

Abstract

This chapter presents a reflection of the processes through which academic mothers have reconciled work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior research has evidenced gender disparities in academia, with lower proportions of female faculty as rank increases. During the pandemic, academic mothers have encountered intensified productive and reproductive responsibilities. As three academic mothers, we engaged in autobiographical interviews and conducted an analysis of these narratives across diverse points during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three main themes emerged from the analysis: (1) *bodies that produce and reproduce*; (2) *the triple shift of academic mothers;* and (3) *resistance and change.* Implications for research and policy are explored.

Keywords: academic mothers, gender disparities, triple shift, COVID-19 pandemic, transformations in academia

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the experiences of reconciling work and family life among academic mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic, through an analysis of narratives that we constructed from our own lives. These narratives were constructed through the use of self-interviews, conducted in the context of remote, academic work during the shelter-in-place orders that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, women in academia faced tensions between production and reproduction. Traditionally, academic careers have followed a linear trajectory in which productivity is rewarded over time [1, 2]. To be promoted, academics must meet competitive criteria related to research, teaching, and service. These criteria are transnational and have been exacerbated by neoliberal universities [3, 4]. This has led to a colorblind approach to ongoing disparities, in turn maintaining barriers to academic careers among mothering academics [5, 6]. As many of the challenges related to work-life balance have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this chapter explores the narratives of three academic mothers and the tensions and resistance they have displayed since March 2020.

2. COVID and transformations in academia across the globe

In the first 3 months of 2020, people across the globe experienced disruptions to their daily routines because of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions. By April 2020, more than 185 countries had closed schools and/or changed to remote-learning, from preschool to higher education [7]. In parallel, remote work became common to comply with shelter-in-place or other sanitary measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In academia, remote work was already an option for some research or administrative tasks but expanded greatly as the pandemic worsened.

Nonetheless, these changes were met with resistance from some students and university administration. For example, concerns were raised about issues with internet connectivity. As the pandemic continued, other concerns were raised about a possible gendered impact of COVID-19 on academia [8, 9]. On the one hand, remote work has allowed some advantages such as more flexible schedules and reduction in risk of getting COVID-19. On the other hand, as schools closed and parents became responsible for overseeing their children's remote education, gender inequities became apparent. For example, initial researchers have found that the lack of separation of work and family space has led to challenges setting boundaries and productivity [10, 11]. Furthermore, academic mothers have experienced a triple shift in which they must navigate domestic tasks, work, and childcare [12, 13]. Indeed, multiple studies have found that the proportion of female-authored publications has decreased since the pandemic began [14–16]. Thus, the pandemic has exacerbated already-existing disparities [17], such as tenure and promotion opportunities [18, 19].

One possible explanation for the gendered impact of the pandemic on academics may be due to the lack of separate work spaces. The loss of a separate work space, such as an office, laboratory, or meeting rooms, has affected women academics more than men [20]. In addition to losing the physical space, academics have also missed out on opportunities to build community and collegiality. This has reinforced the notion of individuality and survival and intensified neoliberal practices and policies within academia [21].

Neoliberal practices and policies emerged four decades ago and have led to *academic capitalism* [22]. Through academic capitalism, universities view trajectories through a lens of individualism [23, 24]. Under this lens, academics guide their careers based on standards that require colleagues to compete for limited resources (e.g., awards, grants) [4, 17, 21].

2.1 Academia and the gender gap

Researchers across the globe have evidenced a gender gap in academia [4, 25–28]. Robust evidence suggests that female academics publish less, are promoted less, and tend to have more interruptions in their trajectories [29–35]. Indeed, there tends to be a horizontal segregation among disciplines and a vertical segregation in promotion processes [21, 24, 36–38]. In parallel, the dichotomous nature of academic work into teaching-administration or research-publications may also contribute to the gender gap [36].

Academic capitalism, and specifically, competitiveness and individualistic practices, have been observed across national state entities as well. A recent analysis concluded that there was a need to change policies to recognize and value academic trajectories from an anti-sexist lens [39]. At the beginning of an academic career, women may encounter barriers to engage globally as research has found that female academics travel less and may have fewer opportunities to

build professional networks. At the mid-career level, women academics tend to have more time dedicated to administration and teaching, which impact the time they can dedicate to research and scholarship. This in turn impacts tenure and promotion opportunities, which often are based heavily on research and scholarship production. At the senior-level, there is a low proportion of women who retire after achieving full professorships or other high-level administrative positions (e.g., deans or provost).

A recent report by the National Agency for Research and Development (ANID) documented gender gaps across doctoral programs and academic careers. In Chile, females are least represented in public universities (around 40%). Across public and private universities and across age groups, male academics hold more academic positions than females. In parallel, for each female-led project that is submitted for federal funding, there are 1.5 male-led projects, a disparity that carries over to awards of funding [40].

In this context, motherhood in academia does not fit or align. By placing the responsibility for work and motherhood on the individual, it is often reported as a barrier to mobility and that can cause delays in academic trajectories of mothers [27, 37].

2.2 COVID-19, motherhood, and care

Before the COVID-19 crisis, women constantly faced tensions from horizontal and vertical segregation [41]. Across disciplines, the gender gap has often been conceptualized as a *glass ceiling,* in which there is a barrier that prohibits females access from top positions [37]. The glass ceiling pushes women away from top positions (both prestige-wise and pay-wise) within academia. Difficulties in obtaining top positions may also arise due to ongoing disparities in domestic work and childcare, which continue to fall disproportionately on women, and may impact tenure and promotion trajectories.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified disadvantages that mothering academics face, while in many ways, it opened up possibilities for their male colleagues. The marketization and neoliberalization of academia create certain metrics of excellence [42]. These metrics have not changed despite the ongoing impact of the pandemic, forcing mothering academics to prioritize the demands of their child(ren) or productivity. The effects of these decisions will have long-term repercussions as research productivity has stagnated and scholarship has decreased.

Notably, mothering academics are pressured by gendered roles that promote *intensive mothering* as well as work productivity and achievement. These gendered norms are different in male academics, from whom society almost exclusively measures success by work productivity and achievement [41]. Even before the pandemic, mothering academics dedicated less time to scientific production, largely due to domestic tasks. This has only been amplified and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, mothering academics have been affected by a triple shift of triple expectations: work excellence at the university, excellence in mothering, and excellence in domestic tasks and chores.

Over time, academic mothers have been subjected to dominant discourse and norms of academic institutions. Among mothering academics, dominant discourse includes intensifying work expectations, gendered demands involving being a "good mother," and a cultural value on individual success and merit. This leads to a polarization between one's public work identity and one's private, invisible family work. Despite these tensions, we also see resistance and solidarity among mothering academics [37].

3. Methods

This study used a qualitative approach that allowed for an in-depth and flexible exploration of reconciling tensions among academic mothers during the pandemic [43]. We used a biographical approach so that the academic mothers themselves could guide understanding and interpreting the social conditions they had experienced [44–46].

Using this approach, we explored the lived experiences of three mothering academics during the COVID-19 pandemic. We focused on how they reconciled tensions from the triple shift of work life, childcare, and domestic chores, along with uncertainty from the pandemic. All three mothering academics worked at research-intensive universities that had high expectations for research and scholarship productivity. The autobiographical narratives were constructed as part of an auto-interview [44]. Auto-interviews are a technique that are used in qualitative research; in this study we followed the structure proposed by several experts [44, 47–49] who propose the use of auto-interviews in research to emphasize researcher reflexivity. Often, this technique is used in combination with biographical interviews, and has been used in prior studies [13, 50–52]. In the analysis presented in this chapter, we used fragments from auto-interviews of the three academic mother researchers and analysis of narratives that emerged from the federally-funded FONDECYT project 1,190,257.

The scientificity of this technique is based on the epistemology that guides the research process. The application of the auto-interview is based on the contribution it can make to knowledge of how an individual experienced and perceived a specific event. While this technique has been questioned on occasion, some initial critics such as Bourdieu [53] applied the technique later on, recognizing its value. That being said, we do acknowledge the limitations of auto-interviews, including a more singular, unique focus on an individual process that creates a theoretical-reflexive dialog, instead of generalizable results [54].

Each mothering academic completed three auto-interviews across different phases of the pandemic, and reflected different mothering experiences, family compositions, and academic trajectories. Two of the mothering academics were in Chile, while the third was in the United States. Both Chile and the United States share similar types of government and handled the pandemic response in similar ways: through increasing remote work opportunities and responding with shelter-in-place orders.

From the constructed narratives, we developed processes to reflect and write collaboratively [51, 52, 55] and deconstruct the disruption that COVID-19 has had on our work and family lives. As we constructed our auto-interviews, we were guided by a Feminist lens to consider a critique of emerging gendered roles [56].

4. Results: bodies that produce and reproduce

There were three main themes that emerged from the reflection and analysis of auto-interviews: (1) *bodies that produce and reproduce;* (2) *the triple shift in mothering academics*; and (3) *tactics for resistance and change.* All three of the themes reflected experiences of all three academic mothers as they reconciled tensions from disruptions to work, family, and household life during the pandemic. Consistent with other qualitative research, our results were validated through reflection on the research process, saturation of themes, and a triangulation of these auto-interviews with 20 additional interviews that were conducted as part of project FONDECYT 1190257 and an extensive literature review.

4.1 Theme 1: bodies that produce and reproduce

The first theme was *bodies that produce and reproduce,* and related to contradicting demands of production and reproduction among mothering academics. The mothering academics reported feeling tension to conform to *intensive mothering* [57] through expectations that they would accompany, educate, and provide stimulation for the children. Even for mothers who work outside of the house, the idealization of the maternal role has resulted in demands to "be prepared for any challenge" [58]. During the pandemic, there were constant domestic and educational responsibilities and, as demonstrated by the following extracts, mothering academics experienced internal tension about their own expectations of their maternal role while also having their private world made public with remote work:

> *"I've had to break many of the rules I had as a mother. Screens, for example, Before, we only allowed them on special occasions or on flights. Now, they have become the best option to entertain M while I work" (Mothering academic of a 3-year-old, USA).*

> *"I've seen how some aspects of my life have been made public, things that before, were considered private. Like my intimate relationships, a move to a new place, even getting new furniture to adapt my home to the new demands of my job" (Mothering academic of two teenagers, Chile).*

On the other hand, all three academic mothers had to meet high research productivity demands, such as multiple publications and presentations. Consistent with prior research [59] the mothers shifted between the need to fulfill productivity demands and their own expectations as a mother. This required them to balance family and work time, as demonstrated by the following quote, in which childcare and household responsibilities acted as a barrier to academic productivity:

> *"Where do you write? When can you write? I've been asking those questions as part of a longitudinal study I am conducting. Today, I must add the following question: 'how have you done it with the pandemic? What have you had to give up?' I'm trying to acknowledge and raise awareness about the juggling act that we academic mothers have had to do to reconcile housework and child care (young or adolescent) with research and scholarship. The urgency of household tasks have caused my research to get delayed or postponed as I wait for better conditions for production" (Mothering academic of two teenagers, Chile).*

> *"I look at some colleagues reading books and writing articles, while I can't even read two pages in a row of anything [...] finally, we started using false documents to be able to move B, so that I could have at least two or three days per week without worrying about him. During these days I tried to make up for late work. Our society assumes that mothers should always be the ones who are with their children more. I feel completely alone" (Mothering academic of a 7-year-old son, Chile).*

When balancing demands related to reproduction and productivity, their bodies were visible affected. The ideal "bodies" that are prioritized in academia tend to connect to the notion of productivity, in which male academics by and large have fewer interruptions or disruptions with their commitment to work [60, 61]. Through a process of embodiment, the academic mothers' bodies have adapted

and organized to crisis mode [62]. On the one hand, the three mothers in our study reported feeling *loneliness, exhaustion,* and *stress.* In their cases, their bodies embodied tensions from the productivity demands at all costs, possible as a response to the academic capitalism and neoliberalism present at the universities [63–65]. The demand to finish delayed work, finding time to write, and converting private spaces into spaces for productivity, led to physical problems and embodiment of structural tension.

4.2 Theme 2: the triple shift in mothering academics

During the first semester of 2020, confinement policies enacted by governments across the world to try to reduce the spread of COVID-19 led to isolation and disconnectedness. Many mothering academics entered in a cycle of endless tasks that took over their lives. For many, this led to exacerbating the triple shift that included: (i) *work life* with administrative responsibilities, teaching, and research—all virtual; (ii) *family life* with childcare and motherhood, including overseeing child education; and (iii) *domestic life* with chores and actions to convert one's home into one's work place.

For these academic mothers, the pandemic led to an intensification of responsibilities: elimination of any free time, taking over all aspects of their lives. As presented in the following quote, this led some of the mothers to be "on" 24/7 as they always had some duty to fill, whether that be maternal, household, or academic. Furthermore, in the extracts below, we can visualize certain subjections—produced by gendered norms and neoliberal labor—which led to the inability to successfully fulfill all three demands:

> *"Quickly, you realize that you have no free time. That is over. For practically one year, every minute from the time you wake until you go to bed, every day of the week, I was required to accompany my son with his school and homework, to care for him (my son also has a disability that requires additional care), to maintain my household, and to complete my work remotely, which involved administration, research, and teaching. That alone required me to distribute each task or activity at specific times from Monday through Friday. Quickly, I realized that the only free time I had was when I was asleep. Obviously, this led to more stress, less sleep, and anxiety. Constantly feeling like you are not capable or you are not giving one hundred percent in any of these areas: not in your own work, not in your research, not as a mother, not even in household chores" (Mothering academic of a 7-year-old son, Chile).*

> *"It is not just a matter of child care, but rather of coordinating their education that has multiplied during this time. In my work, I also must justify resources, respond to the ongoing financial crisis, or meet external demands. And there is the triple crisis: the academic difficulties that are the base, the transformation of mothering, and reorganizing time that has led to my productivity being diminished after the first third of the pandemic (…) Long work hours that start very early and end at an unpredictable hour. Then it's night, because evening has set in, and without realizing it I'm in front of the computer screen again and promising that this is: 'the last email I'll check, the last evaluation I'll send, the last recommendation that I'll send my students before the new day breaks'" (Mothering academic of two teenagers, Chile).*

On the other hand, these narratives show how the State, by focusing exclusively on a hygienic approach to the pandemic, did not consider how these

measures could affect the organization and division of work (both paid and unpaid), or how to promote more equity in the co-responsibility for children. Instead, the state-imposed measures reinforced gendered norms and stereotypes, shifting responsibility instead to mothers. As presented in the following quote, mothers reported feeling drained emotionally, mentally, and physically:

> *"The State has a double presence: It limits our mobility and requires each person to function individually in the middle of a global pandemic, but it also fails to acknowledge the disparate distribution of childcare and household work. It's not that there is an explicit policy, but rather it is doing it implicitly, by reinforcing the idea that mothers are responsible for those areas.....and in parallel, the university demands rhythms of work that do not align with the diverse experiences of the workforce during the pandemic. Obviously, looking at it structurally, the system leaves the responsibility with each individual—in this case, with us as women workers. They say: you have to take care of yourself, engage in self-care, and you will be successfully and achieve excellence. The immediate effect this has on us is obvious: stress, physical exhaustion, mental exhaustion, anxiety, burnout, and anger (Mothering Academic of a 7-year-old son, Chile).*

> *"We get the call from daycare. For the second time since we sent M back to school, they call us to let us know that one of her classmates tested positive for COVID-19. We just adapted to this new normal, and yet another disruption to the routine" (Mothering Academic of a 3-year-old, USA).*

The measures taken by government to curb the pandemic required mothering academics to reorganize their work and develop new strategies to get their work done. Some of these strategies are observed in the following fragments include a more equitable distribution of responsibilities with their partners (among those with partners), contracting external help when possible, or collaborating with other academics to maintain productivity and publications. Through the following narrative, we see how extended family or support is missed, and the disruption in community support and camaraderie:

> *"Our society assumes that mothers should be the ones who are with their children more. I feel extremely alone. I asked my family for help to pay for someone to come and help out, but everyone is scared and no one wants to leave their house (…) I have realized that I am very social and I miss little get togethers and interactions with other people. Perhaps during another era when families were not so nuclear, rather extended, care would have been difference. But how we are currently, I believe that the individualism of this pandemic has been very apparent, more so than solidarity" (Mothering Academic of a 7-year-old son, Chile).*

> *"For now, the semester has finished. My teaching and service responsibilities at the university have been reduced. With my partner we take turns watching M. Once she is asleep, we work late. In contrast to last summer, this time we know it is temporary. In a few more days, daycare will open back up. I will catch up on proposals, articles, and preparing for the upcoming semester. And then, we can go back to our normal schedule" (Mothering Academic of a 3-year-old, USA).*

Strategies to reorganize daily life and responsibilities are described in the following narratives. This takes on a new meaning when coupled with strategies these mothering academics followed to keep up with their academic career, which required them to perform everything at once:

> *"Trying to turn my home into a double work space has been, without a doubt, challenging. I've had to learn to turn off the microphone and camera to respond to scenes in my house where the lines between public and private life have blurred. Three months into the pandemic, I can say that I have found a new way to organize my work, with breaks to prepare food, eat, chat/visit with my children, do some cleaning, and then try to disconnect after hours of online meetings and teaching"* (Mothering Academic of two teenagers, Chile).

Through these processes, mothering academics learned by trial and error, developing strategies over time to accommodate and reconcile the triple shift generated during the pandemic.

4.3 Theme 3: tactics for resistance and change

Despite the tensions and challenges faced by the academic mothers, we also were able to see individual and collective tactics for resistance and change. Throughout the pandemic, there has been a focus on individual or family strategies to better cope with stress. For example, several agencies have called for self-care strategies, and families have been tasked with childcare and education.

One tactic that emerged from our auto-interviews was publicly acknowledging discomfort, needs, and problems with the pandemic. The idea of putting the triple shift in the public eye helps raise awareness of the negative impact on careers, creating at the same time coalitions and alliances among peers. Through these tactics, academic mothers retook their space, calling for more inclusion of the family, to generate collective contexts of support. The following narrative focuses on the role of new technology to be able to gather with other academic mothers and organize. Not only for solidarity as they navigate the triple shift, but also to raise a collective critique of governmental practices [66] that have been generated during the pandemic. Furthermore, they can organize and collaborate to demand changes to academia, without risking their own individual careers.

> *"We have created a certain camaraderie among various people who have been aware of this intentional invisibility of the tiple shift imposed on by the governmental policies. Taking advantage of technology, we have opened up spaces to seek solace from the issues of the pandemic, but also to share with one another ways to challenge the pressure and connect with other academics. All of this helps us not stay behind in our own academic careers. This is one small example of how we don't just assume that the invisibility of the triple shift is something that cannot change. These meetings give us an opportunity to consider possible alliances among academic mothers, since we have scarce time to get together in our professional and personal lives"* (Mothering Academic of a 7-year-old son, Chile).

Similarly, resistance can occur in the private sphere. During the pandemic, it has been important (for those who have one) to negotiate daily tasks and responsibilities with a partner. In the following quotes, the academic mothers emphasized strategies they used to change how they performed roles within their families:

> *"With my partner, we begin the negotiations. We open our calendars to compare our scheduled meeting times. We decide which ones we can postpone or miss, and which we could do while watching our three-year-old daughter. Given the confidentiality regulations at institutions of higher education in the USA (FERPA)*

and other privacy protections for my students, I try to avoid taking M while I am teaching or attending confidential committee meetings. On his end, my partner avoids attending shorter meetings when he is with M, since the last time he tried she started yelling that he was being "too loud" during his meeting. We try to arrange it so that one of us can pay attention to her, but inevitably we have some overlapping meetings" (Mothering Academic of a 3-year-old, USA).

"Just as there is resistance, there is also adaptation and more subtle tactics like turning off the cameras, mentioning connectivity issues, or equipment problems, to try to adjust paid work and family work. There is a sort of resignification, which leads to new accommodations and in some sense risks in adapting and organizing academic work during the pandemic, which has normalized time and time again inequities in academic work, in child care and domestic chores. I take advantage of the week "of break" that the university gives us, so that I can catch up on all of the work I need to do, with publications, revising articles, and other documents" (Mothering Academic of two teenagers, Chile).

5. Conclusion

This chapter provided a critical reflection of the tension and resistance that have emerged from remote work and conditions during the pandemic for three mothering academics. Their career trajectories have been affected and impacted by the measures the government has taken to contain the pandemic, coupled with gendered norms of household work and childcare, and the demands of productivity imposed by the university. The triple crisis alluded to in this text highlights the tensions and adaptations that these mothers have experienced in the care of their children, household and academic responsibilities, while also confronting gendered notions of motherhood during the pandemic.

As we conclude this chapter, we advocate for additional research to explore how other academic mothers have experienced structural changes in care—both within family systems and beyond. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen evidence of the importance of paid and unpaid work, highlighting the need to value unpaid work in the interior of the family. The COVID-19 crisis has drawn awareness to the need to redistribute responsibilities within the private sphere and convert them into a public problem, with a need for collective responsibility. In summary, more than a "care crisis," there is a need for "policies around care" [67].

The government and universities have not directly observed the care crisis that has intensified during the pandemic. As highlighted by the three narratives in this chapter, research is needed to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the academic gender gap. Therefore, it is of upmost importance that we critically review how we view care and its relationship with paid academic work, which often fails to acknowledge other roles or responsibilities individuals may have. Through tactics for resistance, even more subtle ones, we can begin to raise awareness of these inequities and call for collective action for change.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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