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"It's a Choice"

Graduate Student Mothers' Sense of Agency in Decision-Making

Although a growing number of research universities have formal student-parent policies, many do not. Graduate student mothers attending institutions without student-parent policies must make decisions and exercise agency within this context. This work explores the sense of agency and decision making of ten graduate student mothers raising young children (under the age of five) while attending a research university without official student-parent policies. The findings demonstrate that women attempt to exercise their sense of agency by separating motherhood from school and by negotiating individual solutions to conflicts. Findings also indicate that the choices and agency exercised provide power in a temporary capacity but do not provide long-term power or control over schooling and family life. Overall, this research highlights the importance of formal policies and support for student mothers; without these policies, women's agency and their ability to participate fully in graduate school are limited.

A growing number of research universities have adopted formal student-parent policies that graduate student mothers may access, such as maternity leave or infant daycare (Springer, Parker, and Leviten-Reid), but many others do not have formal policies even as a growing number of students have children during their years in the university. As such, graduate student mothers who attend universities without comprehensive policies must navigate the existing realities of their academic lives and motherhood. Yet, even without the benefit of formal policies, they still may exercise a sense of agency about their choices as students and mothers. This work explores the sense of agency and decision making of ten graduate student mothers raising young children (under the age of five) while attending a research university without official student-parent policies.

Theoretical Framework and Background

The combination of motherhood and graduate school creates a unique set of social, personal, and professional consequences for women (Detore-Nakamura; Gerber; Jirón-King; Springer et al.). Mason's work shows that graduate student mothers combine both paid and unpaid work more often than graduate student fathers and childless graduate students do. Furthermore, many graduate student mothers must navigate a work-life balance without structural supports through seeking affordable and accessible high-quality daycare for infants and toddlers (Brown and Amankwaa; Medved and Heisler; Pearson), persuing clear policies about students' pregnancy or postpartum rights (Mason and Younger), and finding family-friendly practices in the university (Brown and Nichols). Additionally, graduate student women face a reduction in faculty support once they become mothers (Spalter-Roth and Kennelly), and this reduction continues even as more student mothers appear on college campuses (Kuperberg).

Precisely because graduate school is constructed as an already-existing career—and not as preparing one for a *future* career—having children in graduate school can make one appear less serious, less committed, or less competent (Mason; Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden). Thus graduate student women who become mothers make choices within these expectations. As a result, graduate student women do not believe faculty careers at research universities are conducive to achieving work-family balance and to having a life outside of academe; instead, graduate student mothers view these choices as mutually exclusive (Mason, Goulden, and Frasch). As a result of the dominant cultural norms that prevail at research universities and the perception that graduate school is a career that does not support having a family (Long; Mason, Wolfinger and Goulden), graduate student mothers are less likely to enter research universities than graduate students without children are.

Graduate student mothers' sense of agency and decision making around future career plans is developed in a context that does not offer comprehensive campus policies, resources, and support for families. Social scientists understand that human agency provides persons the sense of power to exercise their will over their work and life in order to create circumstances they would like (Elder), but it is not a free choice that exists outside of a person's social, political, or cultural reality and/or barriers. Instead, agency is constructed within these existing social-structural realities, and it reflects the decisions one makes to maintain a sense of power and control over life and work (Elder; Marshall). Graduate student mothers' further contextualize their sense of agency within the existing social expectation that all students must devote the totality of their lives to graduate school. They must make their decisions (choices) without proper student-parent policies, resources, and/or support in place.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design with in-depth semi-structured interviews. During 2008-09, I conducted interviews with ten graduate student women enrolled in an urban midwestern research university campus. The work addresses the following central questions: 1) What influences the graduate student mother's sense of agency when combining student and mother roles; and 2) Is the graduate student mother's sense of agency influenced by a lack of student-parent policies? If so, how?

Participants

All ten women in the study were between twenty-three and thirty years old, had one or more children under the age of five years, and gave birth to a child during graduate school. Six of the women self-identified as black/African American and four self-identified as white/Caucasian. I interviewed the women only once, at a location and a time of their choice, and each interview was approximately one hour. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed in their entirety. These interviews took place as part of a larger study on the experience of university student mothers. Recruitment of participants occurred in several different ways: posting flyers in the common areas of the university campus adverstising the study; giving short presentations about the study in courses and handing out flyers to all students; and sending emails to department assistants to provide information on the study to students. Initially, participants were selected via a purposive convenience sample and then via a snowball sample so the participants could recommend other qualified women to participate.

Analysis

I read each transcription in its entirey, extracting, highlighting, and coding significant statements for meanings, before clustering them into themes. I used a constant comparative method to code the data into major themes as each interview was transcribed (Corbin and Strauss; Glaser and Strauss). I strengthened the thematic coding by having research colleagues read over the transcripts and codes and provide feedback to cross-check my coding process. During the data collection process, I did *bracket* my own experiences through journaling, the wording of the questions and probes, and my responding to their questions. I took field notes directly on the interview guide during the interview. Moreover, because my researcher positionality during data collection was that of a graduate student and a mother, outside reviewers provided feedback on my experiences to assist me in identifying possible preconceived notions that I may have had. These actions were done to help understand the

experiences of the participants and how my own personal experiences may have impacted the data collection or analysis process. In presenting the findings in the next section, I aggregate the data to protect the participants' identities. For example, I do not refer to their programs by name because it may inadvertently reveal who they are. Furthermore, I refer to them by pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Findings

During the interviews, the women said that motherhood should not interfere with graduate life and that they made their decisions on how to navigate school and motherhood without the help of formal policies. Although all of the women interviewed stated that they wanted to be mothers and made the choice to become mothers, they also expressed the idea that motherhood was a choice not accepted by university culture. Furthermore, while these graduate students did mention the need for support, they did not want to be perceived as different from other graduate students and/or have their motherhood status held against them in their graduate student careers. Instead, they exercised their sense of agency by making decisions to attempt to keep motherhood and school separate and to negotiate individual solutions to any conflicts that arose (e.g., planning pregnancy around the school year or hiding the maternal body).

Graduate Life: Keeping Motherhood Separate

A major finding from the interviews is the belief that graduate school is a career and a way of life, and that letting motherhood interfere with school is not an option if a graduate student mother wishes to succeed. Graduate student mothers noted that the entire culture of a college campus was geared toward childless students without outside responsibilities and that this reality impacted their decision making during pregnancy and childbirth. While pregnant, one woman said, "I felt like an alien," noting that there were no accommodations in classrooms for pregnant students. In particular, the desks did not fit a pregnant body, and faculty members were not always receptive to understanding the physical or emotional changes that pregnancy brough about. Another student, Lisa, concurred. She noted that it was difficult to "fit into" the "horribly small seats" and that it took effort to try to "squeeze into" the desks at the end of her pregnancy. Furthermore, the negative connotations associated with pregnancy affected the students' decisions to stay active or remove themselves from campus at the end of pregnancy. Fran explained the experience of feeling uncomfortable as a pregnant student on campus and her choice to stop attending class:

> *I didn't like being seen pregnant. It just, in one of the classes, it's well, you know how some of the special classes [are] half undergraduates and graduates and, like, I was the only graduate student in the class. So, it was very weird to be around undergraduates who didn't have any responsibility or anything. You know, just to know you are going to be switching to a completely different lifestyle and seeing somebody on completely the other side was just too hard.*

Another woman, Rebekah, said that she responded to emails while at the hospital in labour during the birth of her fourth child. She explained how graduate school was a way of life:

> *Graduate life is posters, papers, presentations and work is important and it's hard to really qualify everything you do with your life." [I don't] want to be judged on that ground [being a mother], I don't want excuses made [e.g. for late work].*

In Rebekah's view, graduate school as a way of life means someone cannot take time off from school without serious penalty; the culture of graduate school expects constant and consistent work. The belief that one must constantly work (even during labor, childbirth, and recovery) comes from the accepted social norm that graduate school is highly competitive and that no outside responsibilities should interfere with one's work. If she did not perform, Rebekhah worried that she might lose her paid position, which provided her with funds to pay her tuition, or that she might be expelled from the program. The other women agreed with Rebekah's perspective, noting that they were in vulnerable positions as graduate students since gaining social, cultural, and economic capital was highly competitive while graduate support was limited. For these women, allowing motherhood to negatively affect their work means perhaps losing what little support they do currently have (e.g., assistantships and guidance on publications). Thus it is important for them to appear as non-mothers living the graduate student life without the outside responsibilities of childbirth or young children.

The choice to hide labour and delivery by answering emails or to hide one's body from fellow students demonstrates that a visible maternal body on campus is a non-normative body. The normative body is non-pregnant and non-maternal; it results from the social construction of the university as a place of the mind (Sutherland), geared toward childless students who can completely devote themselves to their coursework without outside distraction (West Steck). Yet, once graduate student mothers become pregnant their bodies signal that they are no longer normative. Despite the fact that the student mothers decide

when and where their maternal bodies are on display—providing them a sense of control over their changing lives and bodies—their choice replicates the social norm that pregnant students or new mothers do not belong on campus. In turn, they argue that this choice to hide their maternal limits their sense of agency because of a campus culture that does not recognize motherhood.

Individual Negotiation

As a result of the socialization process in which student mothers come to understand graduate school as a way of life, the women's sense of agency favours decision making via individual negotiation. In part, this process is shaped not only by the reality that student mothers cannot rely on the social-structural supports of existing university policies, but also by the expectation that motherhood should not interfere with graduate school. Thus the student mothers exercise a sense agency by chosing their graduate programs, taking "off the books" maternity leaves, and scheduling childcare or breastfeeding times around their coursework. However, individual negotiation cannot create the circumstances that support decision making for the student mothers in the full meaning of agency.

Several women chose their program because they thought the courses were less time-intensive (i.e., programs without additional hours of lab work, longer on-campus time commitments or summer requirements). They sought these less time-intensive programs because they believed those programs provided a better chance to create the work-life balance that they wanted. Anna explained she chose her program because, "It would work with my family. I knew that I could work it into my current family schedule." These women noted that programs with added on-campus requirements were difficult to maintain due to competing family commitments. Others noted that they left more intensive and accelerated tracks in their programs when they first discovered that they were pregnant or at a point later in their pregnancy. They wanted to complete their schooling *and* be attentive mothers, but they did not believe they could do this to their satisfaction in their previous track or program because of the lack of flexible options available them as student mothers. However, all of these women want to graduate and have careers; they make decisions as best as they can within the gendered nature of academe.

Without a formal policy in place, student mothers make decisions about how to access maternity leave after having children . The participants in this study did not in any case discuss possible maternity leave options with their departments because there were no formal policies in place. Instead, all of the women made decisions on their own. Their decisions included planning pregnancies around academic calendars, taking a direct study section (i.e., staying in school but completing work from home), or taking a preplanned incomplete in a course.

When I asked one woman how she handled her childbirth and leave, she stated that she received an "incomplete" as a final course grade when she gave birth, meaning she made an individual arrangement with a faculty member so that she could complete her coursework at a later date and time. This, however, meant that when she returned to graduate school after childbirth she had to complete her remaining coursework while she also completed work for her new courses, allowing little time to adjust to her concurrent roles.

Elise discussed how she planned her pregnancy "around my school schedule" because she had hoped to take the minimum amount of time off from school without negatively impacting her degree completion. She avoided *stopping-out* by giving birth to her first and only child in the summer near the end of her degree program since her graduate program did not require working over the summer. Stopping-out occurs when one interrupts her education by stopping and starting again at a later date without maintaining her standing. Other women made the choice to stop-out because no option existed for them to stay in school while on maternity leave.

Stopping-the-clock, on the other hand, gives women the opportunity to take a maternity leave and maintain standing in their programs. Donna described making this choice: "When I was pregnant with both my children, um, I needed to take a semester off after they were born." She went on to note that this was not an ideal choice, but it did allow her to have time off with her newborn child. She wanted a maternity leave, but it was unavailable for graduate students, so she had to stop-out for a semester. Her stopping-out also caused her graduation date to be delayed, and caused her to stress over her ability to finish the program in the allotted time. Because their graduation clocks keep running, even if they are not actively taking classes, stopping-out hinders students' ability to complete their coursework in a timely fashion: they may lose their program standing or run out of time to complete their degree. The women did state that they would have rather stayed in school, essentially stopping-the-clock, than stopping out. The choice to stop-out was not a truly free choice, and it caused a new set of challenges like worrying about finishing on time. Having a formal maternity leave or a stop-the-clock process in place would give graduate students the ability to remain in their programs without essentially stopping-out or attempting to plan a pregnancy around limited summer breaks.

After giving birth and returning to campus, student mothers encounter the new challenge of returning to school without infant childcare and breastfeeding support. The university provides daycare, although it only accepts preschool-aged children and has a limited number of available spots. However, preschool is not problematic for these women; instead they struggle to find infant and toddler options. Moreover, the majority of the women (nine of ten) did not even know there is a daycare centre on campus. Only one woman, Kyla, was aware of the

daycare option on campus. Kyla said it did not meet her needs as a graduate student because the daycare neither had extended evening hours (after 6:00 p.m.), when many classes or events were scheduled, nor accepted a variety of age groups. Consequently, because of the limited childcare options, the women noted that they made the choice to schedule their childcare around courses, and that they often worked with the kids at home. Carrie discussed how working on her graduate work from home (because of her childcare situation) was not "productive." She tried to "set limits" for "two or three hours" on studying at home, but she noted that this was not a good solution because "[S]ome days nothing gets done. My reading doesn't get done; taking care of my son doesn't get done. Nothing gets done." Other women spoke about missing classes because they had no back-up childcare available, and their children's illnesses often caused them to fall behind in their coursework because they only had time to care for their children.

A new graduate student mother who wants to continue breastfeeding faces many challenges because of the lack of breastfeeding rooms or pumo locations available on campus. Gabby discussed trying to pump breast milk on campus, noting "I have a really hard time finding a place on campus that is private for pumping." She tried to work out various arrangements to pump while on campus but found no arrangement that afforded her enough privacy for pumping regularly. As a result, Gabby made the choice to limit her time on campus, and this decision left her feeling disengaged in graduate student life. Gabby seemed to believe that she made the choice to limit her time freely and to maintain control over her ability to breastfeed, but in reality the inadequate options on campus for breastfeeding women made that choice for her.

Although they faced significant challenges in their efforts to continue in graduate school after becoming mothers, all of the women believed it was worth it to continue and complete their degrees. The women believed that while few family-friendly policies exist in academe, it offered more flexibility and it was more conducive to family time than other career options. This belief was based on their ability to work from home and to schedule courses or to work around their children. Flexibility, however, comes with limitations and exacts a toll. The flexible schedule and ability to work from home was premised on their lack of childcare. Additionally, all of the women made choices to divide time between family and school in ways that made them feel they never had enough time and were never able to disconnect from school because they worked from home. Furthermore, while the women did not necessarily choose to prioritize motherhood, this is nonetheless what happens when their choices surrounding graduate programs, maternity leaves, pumping options, and how to work from home are a direct consequence of the limited support systems and policies available to graduate student mothers.

University Culture, University Support, and Decision-Making

Motherhood as a choice combined with the belief that graduate school is the sole focus of a graduate student's life led many women in this sample to observe that the overall academic system did not offer much, if any, support. The women felt campus culture excludes graduate student mothers, making them discount their own power to enact long-term change on their own behalf. Individual choices become the solution to larger systemic problems. By discounting the possibility of institutional change, the women reinforced the same exclusive culture that deprived them of the fullest capacity to make decisions. Anna asked me what the purpose of this research study was and whether any policy changes would be made based on the data collected. She expressed a general interest in more programs for graduate student mothers. Yet, when asked if she thought there were policies that needed to change, Anna was unwilling to address the institutional policies that affected student mothers:

> *I think everyone should be treated equally whether they're a mother or not. I do think professors that have children, you know, probably without there being an official policy might be more understanding. Not sure. But I think everyone should be treated equally whether they're a mom or not. I think, it's a choice to be a mom most of the time and, um, you know, if you want to be a student and a mom then you have to juggle.*

Although she stated that university-wide policies should exist to encourage student mothers' integration into the larger university population and provide them with support in a more official manner, Anna at the same time contradicted herself by putting the responsibility of balancing motherhood and school work on informal faculty relationships and the student mothers themselves. Similar to Anna, Lisa did not blame the university for not knowing about or for not dealing with her concerns as a student mother. If a woman decided to reach out for support, her options were limited. Lisa said she was directed to psychological counselling provided by the university to assist her in understanding her choices and her day-to-day experiences. She went on to explain that it was the only option offered to her when she expressed concerns to her academic counsellor about balancing her concurrent roles of mother and student. However, Lisa said that a parenting support group would be more helpful because it could connect her with other student mothers going through similar experiences, providing a better fit for her needs. But she then discounted her complaint and her discussion of potential changes on the campus for student mothers by stating:

> *[I] thought they [faculty and staff] would be more knowledgeable about the population of the students they have. Then I realized maybe I'm just a small percentage of students they have, and the problems I'm having with resources aren't important.*

Maria expressed a similar view that the university does not make the accommodations it should make for student mothers, but that university culture probably will not change. She held that the culture would remain the same even if the university were presented with information demonstrating that change was both needed and beneficial to student mothers and the university.

Still, the women did offer suggestions for possible accommodations: places to pump breast milk, infant and toddler on-campus daycare, flexible daycare times (evenings and weekends), better desks to accomodate the changing maternal body, official maternity leave (that protects their standing in both their program and assistantships), the ability to receive information on how to secure care for sick children, and how to receive mentorship and support from faculty. Other suggestions included peer-to-peer graduate student-parent mentors or support groups run for and by graduate student mothers, or a student parent center offering helpful advice. Nonetheless, even as they offered these suggestions, the graduate student mothers asserted that a comprehensive set of formal institutional policies and supports would never emerge. Instead, they believed that student mothers, as one woman stated, needed to continue to "figure it out" on their own, reinforcing the idea that individual solutions are the only remedy. The idea that enacting positive institutional change was impossible and that individual solutions were the only option demonstrates that (1) while the women expressed that they had made choices and exercised agency, they in fact were not able to demonstrate their full sense of agency, and (2) the choices that they made were restricted.

Conclusion

This study makes a unique contribution to our knowledge about graduate student mothers and their sense of agency in decision making about school and family life. All the women discussed how formal university policies would change their decision making process, but they did not believe positive progress would be made on the issues of student mothers. Thus they viewed that their decisions as individual choices separate from enacting campus-wide change. Still, while the choices the graduate student mothers made do not provide long-term control over their schooling and family lives, their decisions do often provide power in some temporary capacity. Changes in the existing policies and support structures—such as formal maternity

leave policy, child care on campus, and faculty mentoring design for student parents—would provide the women a greater sense of agency in decision making and more options when making decisions. Otherwise, inequality is maintained and reinforced.

As S. Williams notes, "choice" is a way to "mask economic, social, and political disparities in power" (28), and the idea that choice will create long-term positive environments for graduate student mothers on campus will not work. Instead, substantial policy, resource, and support changes must occur to make campuses an inclusive space for graduate student mothers. Without structural changes and/or new policies that address student mother issues, informal norms are subject to the discretion of authority figures, and allowances for certain groups (like student mothers) could be seen as favoritism. Moreover, these allowances could be applied inconsistently. Without a comprehensive change in university culture, the belief that student mothers can solve conflicts in school-family life via individual choice will continue.

As previous research indicates, individual choice is not a solution for systemic inequalities and may reinforce the status quo, continuing to disadvantage student mothers; systemic change therefore is required (Pearson "The Erosion of College Access"; Williams). Here, the importance of cooperative student cultures for women who are becoming, or already are, mothers needs to be stressed to reduce and to alter the overreliance on individual solutions and to improve the sense of agency women have in their decision making. If women do not have access to formal policy, resources, and support designed for student mothers, we will continue to see student mothers who stop-out of their degree programs, effectively pushing them out (Correll, Benard, and Paik; Peskowitz; Stone; Springer et al.; Williams, Manvell, and Bornstein). The more that women, families, researchers, workplaces, and educational institutions understand about what these women are experiencing as student mothers, the more effective we will all be in developing the necessary tools needed to help student mothers accomplish their goals, allowing them a fuller sense of agency in their decision making.

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