Academic Motherhood and COVID-19

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Identity and Connection as Working Mothers during the Pandemic: An Autoethnographic Account

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected working professionals around the world, causing many to alter their identities to cope with their current realities. This article explores the effect the pandemic has had on the identity of two mothers, who are also working professionals/educators. Using a heartful autoethnography approach, the authors implement the listening guide method of analysis to authentically understand how these mothers experience identity and connection while working and parenting during this worldwide crisis. The listening guide approach involves the creation of "I-poems," which are included and explored in the current article. The listening revealed four main themes: (1) mental load and exhaustion; (2) conflicting identities; (3) shame cycle; and (4) connection and reflection. The goal of this manuscript is to highlight the experiences of working mothers through an authentic and relational approach.

Introduction

Since women entered the workforce, they have struggled with balancing work and home life. In particular, working mothers have been pressured to separate their identity as mothers from their identity as professionals (Turner and Norwood 396). However, working mothers are frequently faced with situations that force them to combine these two roles, such as when attempting to parent and work in the same physical space (Turner and Norwood 396). These identities are even more intertwined during the COVID-19 pandemic, as mothers who are also working from home have been juggling how to both parent and work in the same space, at the same time. As such, the coronavirus pandemic has set the clocks backwards in terms of gender equality, especially for working mothers, whose employment during the pandemic is more at risk

than that of men (Alon et al.). It is nearly impossible for working mothers to keep their professional lives separate from their personal lives while working remotely because during the pandemic women are still expected to take on the majority of the housework and childrearing responsibilities (Power 67). Furthermore, motherhood has become particularly challenging for women working in academia because as Brooke Burk argues the patriarchal systems in higher education do not account for the needs of women and their families (Burk et al. 1).

In this study, we focused on the stories and experiences of ourselves, two working mothers—one faculty member (Brittany) and one staff member (Sheva)—at a large Midwestern research institution. We happen to be colleagues and friends, which led to an authentic conversation. Christopher Clark argues that authentic conversations require care, trust, and safety, as participants must be willing to share their vulnerabilities, experiences, and opinions. Clark further suggests that these conversations cannot be forced and are often developed over time. Through this study, we engaged in an authentic conversation; we were open and were willing to be vulnerable by sharing our honest feelings and experiences. This qualitative study is implemented through a feminist lens using dialogue, which ensures our stories are told in our own words. This study is a follow-up to our recent "Academic Motherhood During COVID-19" (Guy and Arthur) article, in which we employ a reflective dialogue to highlight our struggles as working mothers during the pandemic.

The purpose of the present study is to expand on our previous study and allow for the struggles of working mothers to be highlighted as they relate specifically to identity and connection during the pandemic. Gaining insights into the struggles of mothers attempting to work from home during COVID-19 may allow for more authentic conversations to be had around how we can continue to best support our colleagues, peers, friends, and families. This study uses a feminist lens to implement the listening guide method to analyze qualitative, narrative data, and it is theoretically framed by the methodology of heartful autoethnography.

Method

As this article uses autoethnography as a feminist method, we, the researchers, are also the participants; thus, we implement a modified autoethnographical method to collect data through dialogue (Burnard). Autoethnography traditionally uses personal narratives to highlight the experiences of researchers as subjects (Burnard). Feminist autoethnography highlights inclusivity and social justice in an autoethnographic approach to ensure the voices of marginalized individuals are heard (Allen and Piercy); heartful autoethnography involves valuing dialogue as a way of meaning making and coping

(Ellis). Autoethnography traditionally employs a personal narrative, whereas heartful autoethnography involves dialogue. We chose the listening guide as a data analysis tool to complement our feminist, heartful autoethnographical approach, as both methodologies are rooted in feminist thought and embrace the use of narratives as qualitative data.

The listening guide—a method of psychological analysis focusing on voice, resonance, and relationships (Gilligan et al.)—was used to analyze the participants' written reflections and verbal discussion. This method works as "a pathway into [a] relationship rather than a fixed framework for interpretation" (Brown and Gilligan 22). Carol Brown and Jessica Gilligan outline the listening guide as a method of analysis that allows the researcher to truly listen for voice and relationships within an individual's story (23). This method has universal utilization, since every person has a way of communicating "that renders the silence and invisible inner work audible or visible to another" (Gilligan et al. 157). Highlighting the uniqueness of this method, Brown and Gilligan mention that the listening guide is "responsive to the harmonics of psycho life, the nonlinear, recursive, nontransparent play, interplay, and orchestration of feelings and thoughts, the polyphonic nature of any utterance, and the symbolic nature not only of what is said but also of what is *not* said" (23). From our standpoint, the listening guide provides a feminist relational approach to understanding and analyzing the experiences of participants. The listening guide has often been used to explore and discuss difficult and taboo topics, such as experiences of rape and sexual objectification (Brown; Brown and Gilligan; Guy; Koelsch; Johnstone; Chmielewski). More specifically, women often speak in "indirect discourse, in voices deeply encoded, deliberately or unwittingly opaque" (Brown and Gilligan 24). Therefore, the listening guide was an ideal tool to help us authentically explore the unspoken struggles working women and mothers face.

Data Collection

Using a modified, heartful autoethnography approach, we, two women and mothers, record and transcribe an authentic conversation (Clark), in which we discuss as friends and colleagues answers to the question "What is alive for you right now?" This question sparks dialogue around how we are feeling, what we are struggling with, and how the pandemic has changed us. Our conversation was conducted and recorded via WebEx, a video conferencing application supported by our university. Each of us participated in the conversation from our homes, Sheva in her daughter's nursery and Brittany in a spare bedroom. We engaged in dialogue around the prompt for one-hour. We then transcribed the conversation, which became our raw data.

Brittany is a thirty-one-year-old mother of one, James, who is ten months

old. She identifies as a white, able bodied, and cisgender woman. She is married, and her partner works in an essential industry outside the home. She is an associate professor at a large research institution and is a doctoral candidate in a PhD program. She attempts to get her teaching, scholarship, and service responsibilities accomplished while working from home with her young son.

Sheva is twenty-eight-year-old mother of three: C, a seven-year-old second grader, D, a six-year-old first grader, and Finley, a seven-month-old toddler. She identifies as a white, able bodied, and cisgender woman. She is married and her partner stays at home. She is the manager of a faculty development centre at a larger research institution and teaches psychology at a large private institution. Sheva is attempting to accomplish her traditional staff role in a regular nine-to-five working day while working from home and homeschooling two young children.

Data Analysis

The listening guide was utilized for data analysis, as it provides a voice-centred approach that requires that the researcher deeply listen. Throughout the analysis the researcher listens for the "different voices [of participants] and follows their movement" throughout the interview (Brown and Gilligan 25). For our research, this deep listening was essential, as we wanted to remain authentic to uncovering different relationships and voices through our analysis while also thoughtfully articulating differences and attending to the different voices embedded in an individual's experiences, which the listening guide allowed us to do. The listening guide consists of at least three listenings, with additional listenings conducted as needed. We individually conducted four listenings and compared and consolidated our analyses, which led to a degree of reliability in our findings by providing interrater reliability.

The first listening listens for two items: the plot and the researchers' response to the interview (Gilligan et al. 160). This listening requires that the researcher pay particular attention to the plot and "landscape of the interview," thinking through "who is there, who or what is missing, are there repeated words, salient themes, striking metaphors or symbols, emotional hot-spots, gaps, or ruptures" (Gilligan 71). Additionally, the first listening asks the researcher to reflect on where they see themselves in relation to the data and to explore their own feelings and thoughts as they listen (Gilligan 71). This listening ensures that the researcher reflects on any potential countertransference to avoid (as much as possible) projecting feelings onto others in the writing process.

The second listening involves listening for and identifying "I" statements to highlight how the first-person voice discusses being and acting in the world (Gilligan 71). The second listening also involves reviewing the transcript and picking out every "I" statement and listing them in order of appearance within

the transcript. These statements can be used to tell the participants' stories in the form of I-poems, as when read, they fall into a "poetic cadence" while also allowing the reader to listen for dissociation (Gilligan 71).

In the third listening, the reader listens for contrapuntal voices, which draws us back to the research question. Within this listening, we are looking for the complexity of the interviewees thinking, listening for the "tensions, the harmonies and dissonances between different voices" (Gilligan 72). The researcher may need to complete additional listenings past the third listening to attend to the various voices that may surface as they relate to their research question. The contrapuntal listenings allow us to develop an understanding of the different layers that comprise a person's expressed experience (Gilligan et al. 165). Listenings beyond the first three are not necessary but are encouraged in order for the listener to understand the overarching themes of the narrative and to find answers to the research questions. Although a fourth listening is not always necessary, for our research, it was important in order to listen more closely for the complexities of experiences.

Our fourth listening involved reading through the dialogue and identifying the dominant ideologies throughout. The previous three listenings unveiled several overarching themes, which led to implementing a fourth listening that listened specifically for the aforementioned patterns that were identified. The fourth listening was conducted to elicit a more thorough understanding of the dominant findings.

Findings

First Listening: Listening for the Plot

Throughout the discussion, we expressed that our identities of being a mother and an educator are important to us. Before the pandemic, these identities could be separated, as we were able to effectively compartmentalize them. However, due to COVID-19, these identities must coexist while working from home, where we are both mother and professional simultaneously. The difficulty of this was noted, not only from a logistical standpoint but also from an emotional one. We discuss feelings of exhaustion, fatigue, guilt, and shame throughout the conversation.

The topic of self and identity was discussed. We both mentioned that we felt as if we had lost a part of ourselves as we moved to working from home. Although internally we were emotionally struggling with this transition, we recognized that we strive to ensure that our colleagues see us as put together and confident. We acknowledged that our emotions about the situation are constantly evolving and changing from moment to moment and recognized that some days we felt exhausted, whereas other days, we felt thankful and grateful. This constant shift in emotion was also something we identified as

exhausting; this instability and constant adjusting left us feeling helpless.

Throughout the conversation, we discussed feeling emotionally tired from carrying such a large mental load. This emotional exhaustion came from working from home and being mothers. This mental load was amplified by frustration of not knowing what the future would hold as a result of the pandemic. This exhaustion had significant implications for the way we felt about our identities and our productivity, which led to other emotions, such as shame and guilt.

We both identified with the idea of perfectionism. We noted how important being productive was to our professional identities, even though we recognized that the idea of perfectionism was detrimental to us at the moment. The idea of being efficient was also a common thread throughout the conversation; efficiency was now a constant in our current realities, as we tried to satisfy the expectations of being a mother and a professional simultaneously, which required that we were intentional and efficient with our time. This need for efficiency also left us feeling exhausted and unable to be present in the current moment.

Shame and guilt were common emotions that we mentioned experiencing. We felt guilty because we were not as productive as we once were, when we were able to physically go into the office and when being a professional and mother were separate identities and realities. Feelings of guilt arose when we could not be emotionally present in moments with our children because of the heavy mental load we were carrying. Feelings of guilt led to feelings of shame, as we felt that experiencing guilt was not an acceptable emotion to be feeling.

Second Listening: Listening for the "I"

In these statements, Sheva describes what it is like being at home, trying to work remotely, while also mothering three children. She also discusses dealing with the uncertainty of the future due to the pandemic:

I'm giving you everything right now
I'm home all the time
I don't know
I find myself
I have to acknowledge
I am not in control
I am a control freak
I'm really annoyed
I can't fix this
and
I'm trying
I feel like it's helplessness

In Brittany's statements, she discusses how working remotely with an infant has affected her identity as well as her emotions:

I can't even sit down
I could be editing
I need to do this
I can't relax
I can't relax
I need to get this
I wish that
I could be
I could just be more present
I'm just on edge all the time
I'm on it
Guilt for what I'm feeling
I'm not doing enough
I feel like I'm losing myself
I feel like I'm losing it
I feel
I've already
I've already lost it

In these statements, Brittany and Sheva go back and forth and talk about being mothers and their experiences of raising infants:

I don't know
I think it's not super fun
I'm trying to figure out
I thought people said that this was enjoyable
I didn't like this
I could distinguish his cries
I started to enjoy this
I'm a control freak
I let my anxiety rule
I didn't enjoy the earlier stuff
I felt so disconnected

I felt like
I was kind of in a different position
I have to pay more attention

I mean I'm tired
I mean you know you're exhausted
I will never do this again
I love her
I will never do this again
I will never forget
I was traumatized
I think that that's normal

Third Listening: Listening for Relationships

Many of the salient relationships described primarily transpired in our homes due to the constraints of social distancing and quarantine imposed by the pandemic. These relationships created some tensions stemming from the frustrations that arose while working from home. Both of us described the difficulty our spouses had with understanding our mental load as mothers, which led to some level of strain in our marital relationships. Yet we also talked wanting to make as much time for our partners as possible, which was challenging due to our children being constantly in the house with us as well as feeling exhausted at the end of a long day of working and childrearing.

Additionally, both of us became mothers within the last year, so we navigated our relationships with our children under particularly unusual circumstances. We grappled between feeling grateful for spending time with our children and feeling overwhelmed and frustrated while attempting to work our fulltime jobs while our children were at home. However, we both expressed feeling lucky to be able to watch our children grow up and be with them all day, every day, but this also led to mental exhaustion, which caused us to sometimes lose patience with our children, leading to feelings of guilt and shame.

We also discussed a need for connection as well as the struggle to maintain relationships outside of the household during this troubling time. As we engaged in remote dialogue, we both wished to be physically next to each other and to have these intimate, vulnerable conversations in person. Although the conversation would have primarily been the same, there was a level of added discomfort and disconnection when we spoke with physical barriers.

Fourth Listening: Listening for Themes

Several key themes and subthemes emerged during the fourth listening, which combined the main ideologies and ideas that arose during each of the three previous listenings. The four main themes that appeared throughout the listenings were mental load and exhaustion, conflicting identities, shame cycle, and connection and reflection.

Mental Load and Exhaustion

One of the most prominent themes was general exhaustion, which is in part caused by the mental load that working mothers face. We described an overwhelming need to make every moment count, which manifested from our perfectionism and need to be efficient and productive while juggling several responsibilities both at home and at work. Brittany described herself calculating her every move and choice in regard to efficiency. Sheva agreed and described the mental load of mothers in general; she constantly felt that every single second had to be productive, which led to overall exhaustion, both physically and mentally. We feel tired in the sense of needing sleep, but are also tired of constantly thinking about all that needs to be done, while at the same time worrying about staying safe during the pandemic.

Conflicting Identity

We described a conflicting identity that arises from working and parenting in the same physical environment and at concurrent times. Sheva said, "I feel like I'm losing myself a little," and Brittany agreed: "I feel like I've already lost it." Brittany asked, "Will I ever be able to be these two people independently ever again?" whereas Sheva felt the same fear, wondering "How do I prioritize [my identities]?" Regarding our conflicting identities, we felt a disconnect between needing to appear put together and professional at work and not being able to hide the chaos going on in our homes. We both worried that the way we appear on video calls to our supervisors and colleagues could affect our career trajectory. Sheva worried that parenting her children while working would lead her supervisors to wonder "Why would we trust her with more responsibilities if she's got all of this going on?" Brittany said that "this constantly back and forth" between her two identities also contributed to her exhaustion.

Shame Cycle

Throughout the dialogue, we described a salient shame cycle, which is present in our everyday lives while working and parenting during the pandemic (see Fig. 1). The cycle typically begins with guilt, which leads to shame, then the need to feel grateful, and then back to guilt.

For example, we both described our feelings of guilt stemming from being unable to commit 100 per cent to both our roles of mothers and educators during the pandemic. This guilt led to feelings of shame that we could not succeed in either roles; therefore, a feeling of failing became prevalent. These feelings of guilt and shame then lad to feelings that we should feel grateful that we were able to spend so much time with our children and that we should be thankful to be mothers. This led right back to guilt, in that as mothers we felt guilty when we were not expressing gratitude for the time we could spend with our children.
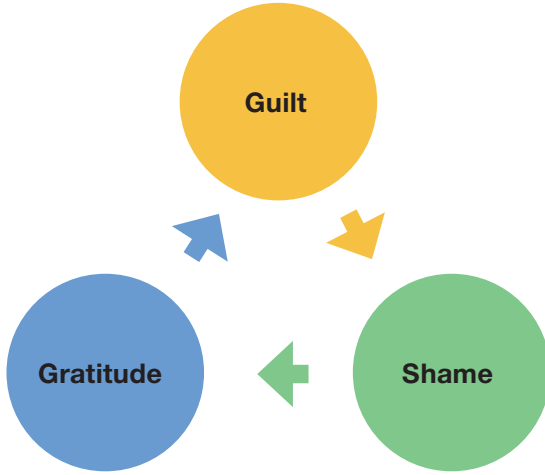
Fig. 1. Shame Cycle

Another example of the shame cycle involved fear of the pandemic, and it started with gratitude. We felt grateful that we could stay safe and keep their children safe at home. However, Sheva said the she felt guilty that she felt grateful to be at home and safe, which led to feelings of shame regarding privilege.

Connection and Reflection

During quarantine and social distancing, we found ourselves craving connection and normalcy in our relationships. We both have made effort to maintain relationships and create connection and social interactions both virtually and socially distanced. Yet it still felt like even though we were having the same conversations that we would normally have and were the same people, there was still that disconnect when forced to communicate six feet apart. Moreover, we felt that a certain energy was missing with these types of interactions.

Although we missed social connection, we also became more reflective and intentional about the relationships we maintained, as we set boundaries for our own mental health. Brittany asked, "What do I need ... in order to do my job, in order to be a good mom," and, for her, setting clear boundaries in relationships was crucial. Sheva did a mental inventory of the things that were healthy and helpful for her and the things that were not; she cut from her life those people and behaviors that were harmful emotionally. This was itself an act of self-care, and we discussed other self-care practices we used, such as talking walks, wearing comfortable clothes, and making time to have alone time with our spouses.

Discussion

Professionals around the world are struggling with the reality of attempting to work from home. Mothers are experiencing a heavier burden, as they juggle the competing roles of being a mother and professional. Through this heartful autoethnography, we authentically and relationally analyzed the experiences of ourselves as two working mothers. From the analysis, we see how we attempted to juggle our multiple identities, more specifically our identities associated with being a mother and a professional. We were forced to develop and utilize a variety of techniques to create a structure for ourselves and our families, as the pandemic created much chaos and uncertainty. Overall, we see mother professionals adapting and assimilating to a tough situation.

The themes of mental load and exhaustion, conflicting identities, shame cycle, and connection and reflection were uncovered and analyzed through the listening guide. Overall, we experienced cognitive dissonance between what we were feeling (anger and frustration) and what we thought we should be feeling (thankfulness and gratefulness). Oftentimes, we felt feelings of thankfulness and gratefulness were expected from us, due to thankfulness and gratefulness being more associated with a feminine identity. This cognitive dissonance led to an overarching feeling of guilt, which then led to a heavy feeling of shame. In our analysis, we referred to this move from guilt to shame as the shame cycle. Throughout the analysis, we saw a cyclical nature to the feelings that we experienced.

A limitation of this study is its small sample size; future studies would benefit from exploring the experiences of a larger and more diverse group of women. Although we, as the only two participants, acknowledge ours privileges, we are both white, cisgender, able bodied, employed and middle class. Therefore, our experiences cannot represent all working mothers. Future research must explore more diverse experiences to gain a better understanding of mothers working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, we both work in the context of higher education. Although this study was specifically designed to explore the experiences of working mothers in academia, research on the overall experience of working mothers in this pandemic is crucial to better understand the barriers that this population faces.

We hope that this article will support the continuing of conversations around the concept of academic motherhood and the juggling of competing identities. Women in the academy continue to face challenges and barriers, as the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified these struggles. Attempting to work from home with children requires that mothers balance their dual identities of being a mother and professional. By using authentic, feminist approaches to research and analysis, we can better understand the experiences of working

mothers, ensuring that these experiences are not portrayed as monolithic but as complex and diverse.

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