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The Continuous Clock: A Working Academic Mother during COVID-19

My vision for maternity leave was quickly flipped upside down, as I had our second daughter on March 13, 2020. Amid the most significant pandemic of my lifetime, I was not prepared for what was to come over the next several months and how it would change the trajectory of my career. As a fulltime faculty member at a university, I am heavily involved in both teaching and research. During my maternity leave, I was planning to be home with my newborn for a few months while sending my older daughter to daycare. This bonding and recovery time are critical for both mom and baby. However, as universities closed, I no longer had the assistance needed to facilitate my research, nor did I have childcare. That burden was now placed back on my shoulders soon after delivery. COVID-19 has had significant effects on both the plans and expectations of mothers in academia. This piece will touch on societal expectations of mothers as well as the discrimination they have faced in academia during this crisis. I will tell a personal story as well as share stories from my peers about women's (and men's) roles and responsibilities for the family, while managing expectations as university faculty members. Four themes emerged from the qualitative interviews: productivity vs. efficiency, opportunity vs. challenge, collaborative parenting vs. parenting alone, and the repercussions from COVID-19 and responses to them. It is an important time to describe the personal and professional setbacks academic mothers have faced because of this pandemic.

Introduction

This article explores the personal and professional effects of COVID-19 on academic faculty members who also play a parenting role. We will take a deep dive through my personal story as a mother and academic faculty member who had a baby amid the pandemic. My life shifted from having a planned maternity leave to be a fulltime stay-at-home mother of two children under

two years old. This article also describes the perspectives of eight female and male academic faculty members on how they have been able to manage their professional workload while having to care for their children. These faculty members range in their career stage and come from nutrition and public health departments at universities across the United States. These other perspectives were included to echo the challenges I was facing as COVID-19 surged. This article aims to give insight into how academics have struggled and managed to overcome the different barriers (e.g. caring for children, disrupted research plans, and professional pressures) thrusted upon them during the pandemic. Ultimately, these findings can inform and support academics who can relate to these experiences.

Story

Life before Birth

I started my academic journey as a professor in the fall of 2017; soon after, we found out that we were pregnant with our first child, which would be due at the end of my first academic year. The unplanned timing seemed perfect, as I would be able to focus on my academic responsibilities from August to April and then focus on my daughter during the summer, when my responsibilities would be a fraction of what they had been in the school year. Although my university does not have maternity leave policies set in place, I was able to reduce my workload and focus on my newborn daughter, giving her my complete love and attention. I believed I successfully achieve work-life balance and was able to be a good mother and a successful academic (Castle and Woloshyn; Houpalainen and Satama; Isgro and Castañeda). I eagerly anticipated maternity leave and was so eager to relive these moments of early motherhood with our second daughter in March 2020.

As I started the spring 2020 semester, I was vigorously trying to get as much done as I could before my planned maternity leave in March. For my teaching, I already was scheduled to teach online classes, giving me the ability to plan all the content in advance. For my research, I trained my research assistants to manage my research programs and conduct my in-person research studies. I was relieved to know they were trained and ready to step in my place to continue facilitating our research projects.

On March 10, 2020, my daughter was one week late. With the media focusing on COVID-19 and my fears of what it would mean for my delivery, I opted to get induced on the twelfth. We welcomed our new baby on March thirteenth, one of the last days that the hospital allowed two people in the delivery room and two guests to visit us in the postpartum room. As I look back at that time, I am so thankful that I was able to have my husband and birth doula in the room helping me during labour.

As I lay with my beautiful new daughter, relearning the ins and outs of breastfeeding, I soon came to realize that my maternity leave would be much different than I'd ever imagined.

Life after Birth

The day after we came home from the hospital, we realized that my university would be switching to completely virtual (e.g. classes and meetings), my husband's work transitioned to telework, and my oldest daughter's school was no longer open. My hopes for my maternity leave were erased and replaced with the reality of the four of us home fulltime. I was so excited to be able to spend time as a family and watch my two girls' bond together. I was also terrified about how I was going to manage a newborn and potty-training toddler at the same time, with a fraction of sleep. I was worried that I was going to fail as a teacher, wife, and mother to my family.

The World Health Organization describes the postnatal period as "the most neglected period for the provision of quality care" ("WHO Recommendations"). It is a time when the focus is on the health and wellbeing of the newborn, yet care for the mother is almost obsolete. There is little discussion about the incredibly high rates of postpartum depression, internet misinformation, and the constant fear new mothers go through as they begin this new phase in their life. Whether it is a mother's first baby or third baby, she feels an insurmountable amount of pressure to care for herself and her baby as well as to manage her home (e.g., cooking and cleaning). These roles are deeply gendered, and COVID-19 has exacerbated them.

As a working faculty member, I was trying to balance working, caring for my two children, and recovering from my daughter's birth. As I look back, it seems like a blur. My newborn did not get the time or attention she needed and deserved as a young baby. As a mother, I worried whether she would develop normally or would she have delays in reaching milestones due to the lack of attention and care. The mom guilt was (and still is) real.

Although my teaching responsibilities were lessened due to my early preparations before my daughter's birth, my work related to my research projects was just as demanding as pre-COVID times. My research projects were forced to end early because I could not manage them. Two projects ended with a rocky finish, as the data I collected were not as complete as I would have liked. I wondered if I had made a mistake terminating some of my projects. Will the work still be able to be published even though it is missing some of the follow-up results? With only a limited amount of time to spend working at a computer, I had to drop it from my responsibilities.

There is no way to tell what is going to happen in the future, but I knew then that COVID-19 had negatively affected me personally and professionally. The inability to continue my in-person research projects and collect completed

data will have long-term implications on my ability to turn the data into publications. The phrase "publish or perish," which is the sad reality of tenure-track faculty members (Coolidge), became very real to me. My work productivity took a step back, as did my mental and emotional health. Daily, I battle being enough as academic mother. In the words of Katharine Low and Diana Marin, "There is a silencing tension between the experience of being a new mother and the ambition for one's work and research as a female academic" (pp.427).

Peer Stories

My narrative illustrates the challenges of being a new mother and academic under COVID-19; however, it is not the only one. I have included narratives of both female and male academic faculty members who are also parents to highlight that personal and professional implications of COVID-19 on academics.

Methodology

Study Population

The study population included eight academic mothers and fathers who teach in higher education. Female faculty members were recruited on an academic Facebook page and then asked to recommend a male faculty member at their respective institution. The interviewees were a female and male from a nutrition or health related department from four different institutions, two from each. Institutions were in Florida, California, and South Carolina, which range in student population size from fifteen thousand to over fifty thousand. These institutions varied from a community college to a research-one university. All the interviewees had from one to three children, ranging in age from newborn to thirteen years.

Research Method: Semistructured Interviews

Semistructured interviews were selected as the data collection method for this research; the interviews provided the participants' perspectives, feelings, and emotions related to COVID-19 and its effects. Interviews were conducted in July and August 2020. I had asked some background questions about position status (i.e., tenure track vs. tenured) and number and age of their children. I asked questions related to COVID-19, including how much they were responsible for providing childcare and how it had impacted their work responsibilities. Lastly, I asked whether interviewees would have changed or kept their responses the same if they knew the pandemic was coming in advance in order to determine how they would have responded differently.

Following each female faculty members interview, I politely asked if they had a male colleague with children they could recommend for a counter perspective from their same college. The interviewees all gave their verbal consent to use their comments in this paper.

Data Analysis

This study used a thematic-analytic approach to analyze the interview data. The advantage of a thematic approach is that it allows themes to naturally arise from the data rather than being predetermined by the researcher.

Findings

During each of these interviews, it was apparent that COVID-19 had been both a blessing and a curse for many of these academic parents. Although they enjoyed spending more time together as a family, it often led to strains in family dynamics, work-life balance problems, and lower productivity. These findings are consistent with the research of Brooke Burk, in which the authors find teleworking has "led to an unideal merger of their personal and professional spaces, disrupting any harmony that these mothers were working so tirelessly to achieve" (pp.1). Having no distinct separate work and home spaces made it difficult to carve times specifically for work or caring for the children. Women often reported doing most of the caregiving responsibilities for children, whereas men perceived themselves as an equal partner.

In terms of parental responsibility, the findings demonstrate that each family unit is unique and functions in different capacities, so there is no blanket statement that can be made. Figure 1 is a comparative review on parental responsibility based on the interviewees' responses. It was clear that no matter the size of the institution, female faculty members said they did more domestic labour than their male counterparts. Interestingly, as the student population size grew of the institution, there was an inverse relationship in amount of parental responsibilities expected of the father academic. Although this may not be true for each family unit, it was an interesting trend to highlight because, typically, the general perception in academia is that a higher ranked research institution is parallel to an exponentially higher demand on faculty in terms of research responsibilities.

Position & Children (ages in years)	% watching/ caring for children	Student Population Size	Position & Children	% watching/ caring for children
Associate professor 2 kids (19 & 9)	70-80%	15k	Assistant professor 2 kids (2 & <1)	80-90%
Lecturer/ISPP Director 1 kid (<1)	50-60%	21k	Associate professor 3 kids (13, 10, 7)	75%
Assistant professor 2 kids (5 & 2)	50%	28k	Associate professor 1 kid (4)	75-90%*
Associate professor 2 kids (6 & 3)	40%*	52k	Assistant professor 2 kids (6 & 3)	30-100%*

*also had child(ren) taken care of by external caregiver or enrolled in school/program during March-July 2020

Figure 1: A Comparative Review of Parental Responsibility

In this article, various themes were highlighted during the data analysis. The four main ones were productivity vs. efficiency, opportunities vs. challenges, collaborative parenting vs. parenting alone, and repercussions from COVID-19 and the adjustments made.

Productivity vs. Efficiency

Productivity is often used as a physical concept to measure output over time, whereas efficiency describes maximizing outputs given a fixed set of resources (Sullivan et al.). In higher education, productivity is traditionally equated to a greater number of publications, secured grants, completed projects, and creation of course content. Labour productivity is hard to measure when it comes to teaching and service, all of which comprise a good percentage of tenure job responsibilities. There was a wide variety in productivity outputs from the different faculty members, with the majority reporting being less productive by 20 to 25 per cent of their normal output. The consensus was well described in the following statement: "In general, I am less productive because of taking care of my kids." However, there was a clear shift in what they were productive at. Most felt productive when it came to their teaching and service but not so much with scholarship (e.g., publishing manuscripts and securing grants). It is at this crossroads where the theme of efficiency emerged.

Several faculty members recognized that there was less time during the day to devote to work; thus, it was imperative for them to be more efficient. What would normally take hours or days to work on was now being done in brief thirty-minute sessions. One male faculty member described it as "My work has transitioned to short bursts; there is no closing the office door and being left alone." This is significant because it demonstrates academics can be successful, but success comes in short bursts rather than lengthy sessions. Gender did not play a role; it was seen across both genders and all academic ranks. Additionally, all faculty members expressed that they were working less

during the day and transitioned much of their work schedules to early mornings or late nights when the children were asleep. This is similar to broader findings about the detrimental effects of COVID-19 on one's sleep quality and psychological wellbeing (Salehinejad et al.).

Opportunity vs. Challenge

COVID-19 has created challenges in terms of changes in job status, financial status, and security status. Despite this, every faculty member interviewed was able to see COVID-19 as an opportunity for their personal and professional life. Many described it as an opportunity to step back and appreciate being able to spend time with their kids and re-evaluate their work-life balance. Fathers enjoyed spending more time with their family, which for them was a silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic. Fewer mothers, however, agreed to this, regardless of their position.

What opportunities and lessons has COVID-10 brought to our attention? One lesson may be that academic parents can and should improve their work-life balance and spend more time with their children. One faculty member noted that "In many ways, I think people needed a kickstart, needing to work harder on work-life balance," whereas another said, "It [COVID-19] has been a positive because it has forced a lot of people to stop and rethink to move forward."

Another opportunity that emerged was the opportunities for new avenues of research. COVID-19 brought forth new investigations of how various audiences were affected and then overcame barriers thrust upon them from the virus. Although some sought this as an opportunity, some criticized those who altered their research agendas to catch the wave of COVID-related research. One faculty member felt that "People are filling their free time with 'junk' and what will that look like as we move forwards." As an associate professor, she questioned how this distraction of pursuing scholarship opportunities outside of one's research agenda may be perceived for those trying to move forwards in the tenure process. Likewise, a junior faculty member, who thought this was a prime opportunity, realized that "lots of projects I got involved in didn't lead to anything; I wish I was more selective with new research." Such challenges were seen at all levels.

COVID-19 delivered possibilities, but it has given rise to challenges. Academic faculty, especially mothers, were challenged in more than one way, including transitioning classes to the virtual environment, stopping/adapting research endeavours, and re-evaluating their job description. There was a call to help support faculty early in the pandemic, including calls for creative a more cohesive and collaborative faculty community and redefining faculty professional development policies and practices (Baker). The faculty that I was able to interview described the challenges that they immediately faced and

continued to face as their universities shut down in March. Many of the challenges mentioned were personal, such as trying to balance teaching online and watching the kids. All four mothers described their personal struggles, such as caring for children during this time, whereas most fathers did not echo that sentiment. One female academic described that her "two worlds [academia and parenting] collided and it's complicated." Surprisingly, few of the challenges described had anything to do with teaching.

As teaching usually makes up at least 25 per cent of faculty workload—for some it was as high as 75 per cent—the teaching aspect was the least affected by COVID-19. The main challenge was having to shift classes from in-person to online in such a short timeframe, with little to no training in teaching online. It should be kept in mind, that these interviews were conducted in the summer, so not during the major teaching transition point in March. Beyond that, in general, faculty did not perceive teaching online as a challenge; rather, they disliked how COVID-19 was shutting down their research projects. A female junior faculty member said the following: "There is no question about men's productivity [during this time]. They are excited to be more productive; [I] feel stressed there is so much pressure [to keep up]." Likewise, a male senior faculty member felt that he was feeling active because "he was able to focus on publications and not on hands-on research." There was a clear distinction between pre-tenure and tenured faculty in terms of their scholarship, as the junior faculty expressed greater concerns and challenges with productivity in the COVID-19 climate. Both position ranking and gender played a role in these differences of opinion.

Collaborative Parenting vs. Parenting Alone

There was a dissimilarity in attitudes towards COVID-19 between parents who had their significant other present at home compared those whose co-parent was an essential worker and out of the home. Five of the faculty members had their significant other at home all day, and three had significant others who worked outside of the home all day. The parents who adopted a more collaborative parenting model, in which they tried to split caregiving responsibilities more evenly with their partner, had more positive outlooks toward COVID-19-related changes. In describing their situation, one faculty member said, "We split the day, morning and afternoon shift, a simple trade off on the day," whereas another said "They [responsibilities] vary day to day; its manageable when we share responsibility." In both situations, there was a clear collaborative parenting style that was present. When responsibilities were shared between both work-at-home parents, mothers experienced fewer burdens. This finding is similar to what has been seen in the literature, which debunks the double standard that mothers have to hold the main childcare responsibilities (Thun). Thus, it was evident that collaborative parenting, even

though it was not fifty-fifty in equal duties, at least allowed both parents time to work. The three mothers who fostered a collaborative parenting style still expressed that although they shared parenting skills, their household pressures still accumulated (e.g., cooking, cleaning, and shopping). One mom described it as "a million people coming from all angles, among all of the noise, [I was] trying to weed out the needs."

For parents who were alone with their children, there was increased frustration and stress while trying to work. Not all parents were alone during the entire summer; however, when they were alone, it was clear that the demands they faced were overwhelming. One mother felt that her childcare responsibilities really affected her work responsibilities, which caused her a lot of stress, especially since COVID-19 had hit during the middle of the semester. None of the fathers reported parenting alone for extended periods of time, unlike the academic mothers.

In addition to the parental burden, all four mothers felt a tangential burden. There was an increased reliance on the use of screen time for children for parents who parented alone compared to collaborative parenting situations. One mother felt that "There is a lot of mom guilt … it feels like [I am] not doing enough or my child isn't getting the attention or learning they deserve." Likewise, all parents commented on the increased amount of screen time their children were engaged in compared to before the pandemic.

Repercussions

COVID-19 caused personal, professional, and financial stress on faculty members. At the personal level, all eight faculty members felt overwhelmed and exhausted trying to keep up with their professional responsibilities while caring for their children. They felt the tensions of trying to be a good parent and a good academic. Moreover, they felt guilty allowing increased screen time to occupy their children, thus enabling them to work. This guilt is well documented, ultimately because there is a short supply of time in a given day to complete an academic workload while tending to family needs (Ward and Wolf-Wendel). Mothers have also not been able to focus on their emotional and physical health as much as before the pandemic. One mom said that COVID-10 had taken its toll on her personal health; she had gained weight, was not sleeping, and her cortisol levels were "through the roof." Another mom said, "I feel like one thing being overshadowed in a sense is the social and emotional wellbeing of working mothers and children." None of the fathers said COVID-10 had affected their personal health, perhaps because personal health is not often spoken about by men. It is important to highlight the personal physical and emotional strains that academic faculty members are going through. While they may be able to be professionally successful, a person's mental health is important for their longevity.

Professionally, beyond the themes presented above, faculty members described the support they received from the upper administration as positive. They felt their chairs, deans, and other university administrators were understanding and were willing to provide ample resources to help with teaching, research, and other service responsibilities. They described how tenure-track faculty members were given extensions on their tenure clock. Additionally, they felt supported in their research transition and adaptations due to COVID-19 shutdowns. One male faculty member said, "Having upper administrative support is huge and encouraging; it takes some of the unnecessary pressure off [the tenure requirements]." Faculty members face many professional pressures to be exceptional teachers, productive researchers, and committed service personnel, so having support and leniency from upper administration were incredibly helpful.

Lastly, there were several faculty members who described the financial stress caused by the virus. At the end of these summer interviews, none of the faculty reported any job losses themselves or of their significant other. However, several faculty members described that being home all summer with their kids had resulted in some increased costs, such as meals, entertainment, and home projects. Additionally, there was an increased need for external caregivers (e.g., babysitters, daycare, and camps) to help provide some free time to the faculty to be able to focus and work more. Responses were location and time dependent, as COVID-19 initially shut down all cities, with some returning to some sense of normalcy more quickly than others. Regardless of location, half of the participants indicated they requested childcare assistance from friends or family during the summer months. As campuses reopened and jobs ramped up for the fall, one faculty member indicated that abruptly changing childcare options resulted in great financial strain.

Conclusion

This article has described experiences in relation to the demand of being a parent and an academic faculty member under COVID-19, which has had a significant impact on the personal and professional expectations of academic parents. It was shown that women experienced a greater burden of caregiving responsibilities; however, each family unit was able to find a solution that worked out best for their families. Each family unit had to navigate the division of responsibility for children, as both parents worked at home or away, modified financial expenditures, altered the time allocated for personal health, and adjusted professional responsibilities. Although only some faculty members had family or friends readily available for childcare assistance, others were faced with tough decisions concerning the delicate balance of managing children and work responsibilities. Clearly, there was no one-size-fits-all

approach for academics the United States.

Women felt a greater impact from the pandemic on them personally and professionally as compared to their male counterparts. For these women, traditional motherhood roles and responsibilities were incredibly demanding. COVID-19 exacerbated mothers' roles and responsibilities, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and strained mentally, physically, and emotionally. Only time will tell how academic mothers will be affected professionally long-term and if they will be disproportionately affected when it comes to tenure and promotion in the future.

This article does not describe all perspectives of academic parents. Rather, it has explored how both mothers and fathers have felt the burden of COVID-19 and serves to kickstart future dialogue around the short- and long-term implications of COVID-19 on the success of academic parents.

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