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Motherhood and Academia

Learning from Our Lived Experience

We are two women academics in a university in Canada. We are also mothers, each of us with two children. We are committed to both spheres of our lives—the public university sphere and the private family sphere—and we cherish all that is sacred in both. Yet we have learned over the years that in attempts to live both dimensions of our lives fully, we have encountered considerable conflict. In short, we have learned that the sanctity of academia does not merge well with the sanctity of motherhood.

In this paper, we share our stories and highlight what emerged as we reflected on the juxtaposition of our lives as academics and mothers. Initially, the two of us began sharing stories in an attempt to uncover ways in which our experiences as academic mothers had differed. One of us entered academia 25 years ago while the other came ten years ago, and this led us to anticipate vastly differing stories. Our stories did indeed reveal significant differences in our background experiences, career paths, university work, and future goals, but we also discovered to our surprise that our experiences as mothers were very similar. We learned not only that we had encountered the same conflicts and adopted the same strategies to manage conflict, but that, more importantly, in both our cases our development as academics had been directed by our mother selves.

Context

Our decision to engage in collaborative conversations had been driven by our desire to explore each other's experiences as mothers in academia in light of the reality that one of us had been in academia much longer than the other. Key to our decision to engage in storied conversations was a shared belief in the value of talk (Baum, 1971) and a commitment to the notion that personal narratives serve as a primary way to make meaning of our lives (Bruner, 1990;

Carter, 1993). As well, we were influenced by Van Manen's (1990) view that researchers can explore issues in collaborative conversational formats that are hermeneutic in nature and lead to the unfolding of deeper meaning as individual input is examined.

Procedure

The two of us first came together simply to talk about our experiences under broad topics such as "the demands of academia" and "working mothers," and then to record the differences in our storied experiences. Yet when we quickly discovered that despite substantial differences in our ages and academic careers, our lives as academic mothers were more similar than different, we shifted to a more formal sharing of stories in order to uncover the specifics related to our development, both on personal and professional levels. This involved each of us writing accounts of varied aspects of our lives, and then sharing and using these written accounts as the source for follow-up conversations. As we explored each other's writing, often calling on one another to expand or clarify the meaning of specific entries, we kept account of our experiences, especially as they related to conflicts and ways of managing conflict. We later searched for and negotiated themes in our writing and discourse. Finally, in efforts to understand ourselves more fully, we explored these themes in relation to the literature.

Individual lenses

Because the meaning individuals make is shaped by the norms and values of the context of their lives as well as their experiences, we offer a brief biography of our lives here to illustrate the lenses through which we interpreted our own and each other's stories, as well as the literature in the field.

Joyce. I was part of the influx of women into academia in the 1970s. Typical of women hired at that time, I came to the job from a career as a schoolteacher. Also typical of the time, I was hired for a contract position (three years). I had a masters degree only, and was told I was hired to teach at the preservice level based on my teaching record.

In accepting the position I moved from another province with my husband and two school-aged children. It was stressful for all of us to adapt to a new lifestyle in a new community where we knew no one. I often felt isolated and anxious. Yet I completed my first contract and then accepted another. After 6 years of this I was offered a tenure-stream position, which I accepted. At this point I decided to begin doctoral studies, all the while holding down my full time job and tending to my family. Juggling the demands of university work during the day and doctoral studies at night often left me feeling drained as well as guilty for not attending adequately to my family. Yet I persisted, and completed my Ph.D. in my 40s, after having worked ten years at lower ranks in the university.

My post-doctorate years brought shifts in my work and family roles. Research and publication took on increasing importance in my life and I came to greatly enjoy this aspect of my work. And like other females of my era, I contributed to the phenomenon that women are most productive during their 40s and 50s. I rose to associate professor rank and began to feel comfortable in my new role. But during these years my family responsibilities also shifted. My children were leaving home for lives of their own, requiring little of my time and energy, but aging parents began adding new responsibilities, leaving me still to deal with competing public/private demands. These demands have continued and I now find the struggle becoming even more difficult in light of the increasingly frenetic pace now characterizing academia. I am now in my late 50s and find myself wondering what goals to set for the future.

Vera. I am associate professor in graduate studies in Education. I am nearing my mid thirties and have two young children, aged 6 and 7. I fast-tracked my academic career, accepting a tenure-track research position immediately after completing a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. I had been trained as a school psychologist, with no experience as a teacher, but I was readily hired for an education position. I credit my employment in part to the equity hiring policy at the time, but also to my strong research background at an early age—my *vitae* was very strong for a beginning academic.

Two years after coming to the university, I gave birth to my first child. Following a three-month maternity leave I returned to work, leaving my son in the care of my mother. One year later, I was pregnant with my second child and again prepared for a maternity leave. At this stage I also opted to fast track my progress through the academic ranks and I applied for early tenure and promotion. I was granted both, but the experience was a particularly acrimonious one and I believe that the difficulties I experienced were decidedly related to my status as a young mother-academic.

While on my second maternity leave I started part-time studies in teaching in order to obtain the teaching degree I felt I needed in my position. I completed this several years later, while continuing to maintain my full-time teaching and research position. I am married to a professional, and my husband and I continually struggle to balance our private lives with our professional work lives. As I now begin to assume increasing responsibility for my elderly parents as well as the upbringing of my own children, I worry about the impact my dual responsibilities will have, and I wonder just what this “sandwich effect” is doing to my career.

Outcomes

As we explored and reflected upon our storied experiences, we learned much about ourselves. We were struck by the extent to which we had experienced similar conflicts when merging our dual roles and then used similar strategies when dealing with the conflicts. We were also struck by the degree

to which we had both undergone substantial changes over the years in our self-perceptions, as well as by the degree to which the mothering dimension of our lives had impacted our development. And finally, we were struck by the ways in which our learning was tied to much of the literature we reviewed.

In this section we highlight the four key themes that emerged as we explored our experiences. We present these themes here in the context of selected literature and we include direct quotes from our stories to illustrate each theme. Taken together, these represent the routes we followed as we struggled to manage our lives and reconstruct ourselves.

Redefining ourselves as academics

Collins (1998) observes that the lines between teaching and mothering are often blurred, and that many women's teaching careers are shaped by a domestically-oriented ideology of teaching that views women as nurturers and caregivers. In this sense, Collins argues, many women experience a sensation of "fluidity" between their professional and personal lives. Our stories revealed that we too experienced this fluidity, but that this clashed with an academic notion of professional life. We discovered that in attempts to integrate the mothering-teaching-academic aspects of our lives, we had learned to adjust our notions of ourselves. Yet, as our stories reveal, it was our perception of ourselves as academics that we redefined.

Joyce: When I was hired for a contract position, I remember feeling relieved. I wasn't at all sure I would prove adequate for a university job and I wanted the option of returning to a school. But more importantly, I shied away from a job and career that kept me from my family. I was also relieved to be told that teaching was to be my focus—this was a role I was comfortable with, especially in relation to my home life.

Yet later, during doctoral studies, I came to redefine my work and my view of teaching. I became excited about scholarship and enjoyed researching and publishing. I still held to my view of myself as a teacher, but I came to see this role as including an academic dimension. I could now contribute even more as a teacher—by taking on research studies that generated new understandings I could pass to others. I had moved into a new space as an academic—yet this space was directed by a mothering ideology.

Vera: It was only recently that my notion of scholarship changed. When I first entered academia, I had a research-oriented view: my emphasis was publish, publish, publish. I believed that my merits as an academic were assessed by the quantity and quality of publications and grants in my vitae.

Yet over the years, my notion of scholarship shifted from work that is readily publishable to work that relates to the betterment of the community. I only fully realized this shift during an informal conversation this past summer. A colleague asked what accomplishments I was "most proud of" that year. My

greatest joy, I responded, had come from securing government funding to implement an after-school literacy program for children with literacy problems. My colleague, in turn, commented on the publication of her three books and numerous articles. I suddenly realized that the countless hours I had spent in connection with this literacy program would never be represented on a vitae. More importantly, I realized I could accept this because I felt fulfilled and sustained by this work. My notion of scholarship had changed to one more consistent with my role as mother, nurturer, caregiver.

Our words illustrate how our experiences as mothers impacted our views of academia. While we are hesitant to describe motherhood as the most significant learning opportunity in a woman's life, we readily admit that what we learned as mothers both supported and challenged what we learned as academics. For one of us (Joyce), what had been learned early on as a mother affected how academia was later interpreted and understood. For the other (Vera), later learning as a mother challenged and redefined the identity constructed earlier in an academic setting. We found that "interpersonal reasoning" and "receptivity and responsiveness" (Noddings, 2003) played a major role in our stories and that caring and nurturing relationships became central in both our home and work lives. It was the mothering dimension of our lives, then, that directed our development as academics and our conceptions of selves as scholars.

Collaborating with others

Krug (2000) stresses that motherhood leaves women feeling that they can only truly relate to other mothers; "...in having children I have crossed into a land from which there can be no return and in which only those who dwell can truly understand" (p. 54). Given that motherhood leads women to view others in a new way, it inevitably impacts one's relationships with colleagues in the workplace. In academia especially, it is well documented that many women find the academic world a hostile and lonely one, one in which feelings of discomfort and isolation add to feelings of inadequacy and guilt (Young, 1992). Our stories revealed that we also found the workplace difficult and we yearned to relate to others who understood and shared our perspectives as mother-academics.

Joyce: In my earlier years at the university I was torn between retaining a silence about my family life and seeking out opportunities to share this part of me. I recall thinking it was dangerous to acknowledge limitations around my time because of home responsibilities. I didn't want to be criticized as inferior at work because of limitations imposed by my children. Yet I still felt a need to share my experiences with others at work. At first there were few mothers available, but as the number of women increased over the years I found myself gravitating toward those who were mothers. I discovered that there was a need among all of us to be with others who understood if we cancelled a meeting

because of a sick child or failed to complete a task on time because of a family commitment. I found myself wanting to work with other women.

Vera: As a grad student, I held a steadfast belief that I was responsible for my own success and that academic merits were best evaluated at the individual level. When I was invited to join a Collaborative Centre after I came to the university, I did so more out of a desire to socialize than out of a feeling of academic need. But over the years I formed strong relationships with these women and started to realize that the quality of my work improved as a function of sharing with others. And then collaboration took on even greater meaning after the birth of my children—working with others allowed me to participate in projects and complete tasks that were now impossible to do alone. I acknowledge now that my ability to sustain an academic career is, in part, dependent on my ability to work with others.

We learned from our stories that our need to seek out others was directed by our mother self. The notion of motherhood as a means to deeper connectedness is a recurring theme in the literature. In the 1980s, Rothman (1989) referred to motherhood as “the physical embodiment of connectedness” (59). In the 1990s, Umansky (1996) held up the mother-child relation as the actualized ideal of a community, and Collins (1998) labelled motherhood as that significant “defining moment” that remains throughout a woman’s life and leads her to see the world and relationships differently. In our cases, motherhood led us to seek out and sustain collaborative relationships at work.

Seeking support systems

Another recurring finding in the literature is that women who opt to have children while maintaining work outside the home suffer from a lack of adequate resources and support related to child care. According to Saunders, Therrien and Williams (1998), such support is crucial: “Without adequate child care, health services, sports facilities and budget, resources, work space and networking opportunities with women’s special needs in mind, women have a hard time advancing” (217).

In Canada, Burke (1991) referred to the lack of alternate care arrangements in the 1990s as a crisis, and estimated that as many as 3 million children were in need of non-parental childcare on a regular basis. Hornosty (1998) says that the problem is exacerbated in universities where the needs for care are more diverse because of unusual working hours, meeting times, and out-of-town travel demands. But beyond the specifics of child care, a deeper problem resides in the attitude and value structure of the university. Finkel, Olswang and She (1994) documented university females’ stories of having to return to work after childbirth earlier than necessitated by policy and then experiencing hostility from colleagues when attempting to change working hours or juggle times and responsibilities to attend to the mothering role. While university policies

continue to be developed to accommodate faculty who bear children, these policies vary considerably across universities, and none offer comprehensive preferential treatment such as that suggested by Hensel (1990) a decade ago when she called for conditions to include extended maternity leave and work arrangements compatible with parenting responsibilities.

In our own storied experiences, we found some of the concerns outlined in the literature, as well as others unique to each of us. Given the differences in our ages and work and home lives, the resources and support we sought differed.

Vera: The greatest testament of my mother's vitality was that she volunteered to live in my home so I could return to work after the birth of my child. I would have been much less certain about returning to my career without this arrangement. But after the birth of my second child, my mother's health began to fail and I turned to community agencies for support. Yet even with day care until 6:00pm, schedule conflicts often arose and it was not uncommon for my husband and me to argue over work time and career priorities. This always left me questioning my need for a career.

Joyce: Since my children were in school when I came to the university, day care was not a concern. But I needed different support, like more time at home when my children were there, and academic work denied me this. I would be frustrated with meetings scheduled late in the day, or classes scheduled on evenings, or conferences scheduled over times like the Easter weekend. Even more frustrating was the lack of understanding from colleagues. I hardly dared voice a concern. I knew I was expected to do the job without bringing motherhood into the equation.

In both our cases we continued to struggle to find adequate time for family, albeit in different contexts. Over the years, this led us to establish support systems to reduce the conflict and the stress. In Vera's case, as her mother's support disappeared and her children began school, she found ways to combine work and home life. In Joyce's case, as her children grew and left home, she shifted her efforts to attending to working conditions for others.

Vera: I've learned over the years to consciously arrange meetings and work sessions that include my children and have some form of "play" built in for them.... I also combine work and child care with many of my female graduate students. In fact, I include such conditions as part of any initial conversation with any potential grad students.

Joyce: As my children required less and less of my time, my personal need for support services reduced. But I came to serve on numerous committees where women's and mother's issues surfaced. I recall being so angry in one meeting when colleagues openly discussed a junior female's lack of contribu-

tion, suggesting she was a poor candidate for promotion because she devoted too much time to home life. Such injustices have taken on significance for me over the years and I now want better resources for younger women. I feel better that I'm finally speaking up.

Controlling our actions

Potts (1997) recently explored the notion of tension in academia and how it was that a group of academics in Australia had adapted to their work world during the 1960s through the 1990s. A key finding related to the deliberate power and control exercised by these individuals; they took action to manage and control their work. Potts concluded that there is a process of situational adjustment that shapes an academic's self image and that this entails "taking control." Plater (1995) cautioned that the work of academics in the new century would be so demanding that the ability to self regulate time would be a key to success.

These concepts of control and time management surfaced clearly in our stories; we both talked about constantly facing decisions around how best to control and use our time.

Vera: Like any other mother in academia, I continue to feel the incredible burden of making sure that my time is spent in an efficient manner. I am conscious that my work day is shorter than most of my colleagues and I always find myself making decisions about how this time is used.

Our stories also revealed our awareness that these demands on our time and energy were often conflicting. Edwards (1993) described both the family and higher education as "greedy institutions" which place excessive demands on women. In our attempts to control these conflicting demands, we found that the decisions we made were often difficult ones to make.

Joyce: Over the years I learned to regulate what I would do. Yet I found that what I dropped often related to my work. While I hated to turn down students wanting help, or turn down involvement in a research project, I learned that I couldn't do all of these things and still attend to my family in ways I wanted. I had tried connecting the two, bringing my work home, but that wasn't good for home life. So I learned to maintain a separateness and to say no to a number of work demands.

On reflection we realized that such decisions related to what Edwards (1993) referred to as varied emphases on connecting or separating education and family. On the one hand, we yearned for connectedness, as was evidenced in our desire to establish and maintain collaborative relationships in the workplace. On the other hand, we sought out separateness in our lives by finding ways to ensure that our work did not affect our family lives. We used

a mixture of both connection and separation to control our lives and manage our actions. Yet our emphasis on placing family life first tended always to control decisions.

Vera: I recently turned down an invitation to assume the role of a primary researcher in a charter school in the U.S.A. I knew this was a flattering offer and that this role would be higher profile than the one I now hold. But I also knew it would radically alter the shape of my family and leave me with even less time to spend at home. The cost was too high. I turned down the offer.

Joyce: This year I made what seemed to me a monumental decision—I negotiated a reduced work load. My aim was to achieve a greater balance in my life. This was a difficult decision—one I recognized as pitting individualism and intellectuality against connectedness. Yet my decision seems right to me—I'm keeping much of what matters in my life, including the excitement of academia, but letting go of some demands that keep me from meaningful nurturing relations.

Final reflections

As we reflected on the outcomes, we recognized the ways in which our learning confirmed that university environments still remain far from favorable to women's equality. Glazer-Raymo (1999) recently emphasized that one of the key myths now existing in academia is that gender inequity has become a thing of the past, and we fully concur with her contention. Indeed, despite the huge gap in the number of years we had each been in the university setting, our findings pointed out the ways in which we had both experienced inequity and the ways in which much of this was rooted in our status as mothers in academe.

Yet we must acknowledge here that we, at some level, have managed to survive the "chilly climate" in academia. In this historically patriarchal environment that has witnessed stages of gender equity (Brown Packer, 1996), both of us have somehow resisted exiting through the "revolving door." We have even managed to make a small "scratch" in the "glass ceiling" that still permeates academia. We have come to attribute our modest success to deliberate decision-making on our parts about what is important in our lives and to our forthright use of the strategies we described above.

Yet in deconstructing our development, we also have to admit to some discomfort and we wonder what price we have paid over the years as we worked our way through our identity construction. We have emphasized here the connection of our identity to our role as mothers in the private sphere, and yet our academic self has come to recognize that our construction of identity might have been shaped entirely by the underlying, more traditional belief system that women's primary responsibilities lie in the home. When we encountered conflict connecting our public and private responsibilities, it was our mothering role that received priority. So despite our claims to cherish the

independence and intellectual stimulation associated with our academic role, we were unwilling to sacrifice the connectedness associated with our mothering role to allow us to achieve more in academia. Have we, after all, simply fallen into the trap of viewing gender through a traditional male model of separation?

We realize as well that our inquiry into our own lives was a highly subjective process. And we are aware that what we ourselves experienced is not necessarily unique to women in academe; some of these experiences may arise for mothers working outside universities, and some may arise for some men who are academic fathers. Yet this does not negate the reality of our experiences or the importance we connect to understanding our conflict and managing it. We would argue that what we learned from our collaborative experience was indeed valuable. As Frank (2002) points out, “stories are attempts of a self to find identity in terms outside itself.” We discovered what Frank highlights: individual stories allow us to make sense of our own worlds, but collaborative dialogic analyses of our stories allow us to link our own worlds and troubles to more public issues. We came to see and understand ourselves, both as mothers and as academics, in a new light and to recognize that our experiences as academic mothers have been, and continue to be, things that matter.

Joyce: I guess I hadn’t realized when I started working with Vera just how much I had expected our storied experiences to differ. In looking back I see that at some level I must have accepted the notion that the equity problems of the ’70s and ’80s were gone and that young mothers in academia today did indeed have a much easier time. But sharing stories with Vera taught me more. Sure, some issues from 25 years ago have gone, and some conditions have definitely improved, but it’s still no easier!

Vera: Talking with Joyce was wonderful. It was inspiring to hear her stories of being a mother in academia and to learn how she managed to balance both roles. She confirmed that it was possible to be a “good” mother and a “successful” academic. I find myself gravitating to other women like Joyce, drawing strength and encouragement from their stories and wisdom from their experiences. In turn, I hope that I can be such a model for other women entering academia. And while I hope that working conditions will continue to improve for all parents, I am also certain that creating a balance between career and motherhood will always remain a challenge.

We hope that our storied experiences and our collaborative analyses of these can serve to turn the spotlight on the recurring problems that face mothers in academia, and that this increased attention will promote plans of action by women and university communities alike, all aimed at ensuring that the ideal of gender equality in university settings is not lost.

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