

Conforming to and resisting imposed identities – an autoethnography on academic motherhood

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Isabella Krysa

Fairleigh Dickinson University–Vancouver, Vancouver, Canada, and

Marke Kivijärvi

University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

Received 12 July 2021
Revised 8 December 2021
8 March 2022
Accepted 31 May 2022

Abstract

Purpose – This research attempts to make sense of the experiences of two academic women who become mothers.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is an autoethnography. Applying the autoethnographic method allows us to discuss cultural phenomena through personal reflections and experiences. Our autoethnographic reflections illustrate our struggles and attempts of resistance within discursive spaces where motherhood and our identity as academics intersect.

Findings – Our personal experiences combined with theoretical elaborations illuminate how the role of the mother continues to be dominated by such gendered discursive practices that conflict with the work role. Once women become mothers, they are othered through societal and organizational practices because they constitute a visible deviation from the masculine norm in the organizational setting, academia included.

Originality/value – This paper explores how contemporary motherhood discourse(s) within academia and the wider society present competing truth claims, embedded in neoliberal and postfeminist cultural sensibility. Our autoethnographic reflections show our struggles and attempts of resistance within such discursive spaces.

Keywords Autoethnography, Academic motherhood, Gendered work practices, Resistance, Neoliberal academia, Postfeminism

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Nothing in my life has hit me with such a force as becoming a mother. Not because I suddenly had to care for a little baby but because I suddenly had become a mother, with new expectations and new ways of being talked to. I suddenly felt branded as a mother, trapped in a role to which existence I was previously completely oblivious to. (Elizabeth) [1]

I sit by my workspace when a senior female colleague enters, looking to speak to my colleague. After discovering that my colleague is not at her desk, she is already on her way out. Yet, she suddenly turns back, as if in realization that we haven't spoken after my return from my parental leave, and asks: "How are you? How has it been with the baby? Surely, you're doing good, this being your second child and everything", she responds to her own question before I really have the chance to reply. I put aside my excitement to talk about the pretty little baby girl who is now already at the daycare, and to share my anxiety over the beginning of my new research project as I realize the chat is over before it really began. (Helena)

This paper, which we write together as early-stage career academic mothers, attempts to make sense of the identity struggles brought about by the birth of our children. It explores contemporary cultural meanings of motherhood and how the current motherhood discourse(s), within and outside academia, affect an individual's identity making. Our becoming as academic mothers entangles with the neoliberal (Rottenberg, 2018) and



Qualitative Research in
Organizations and Management:
An International Journal
Vol. 17 No. 3, 2022
pp. 357-375
© Emerald Publishing Limited
1746-5648
DOI 10.1108/QROM-07-2021-2175

postfeminist cultural sensibilities (Lewis *et al.*, 2017), prescribing multiple and conflicting expectations.

This paper has been purposefully chosen to constitute an autoethnographic account. When I, Elizabeth, originally decided to write a paper on motherhood, I wanted to make sense of what I was experiencing after giving birth and it became very clear that my voice needed to be part of this process. I was eager to capture the relationship between the prevailing discourses surrounding motherhood, and its consequences on me. Writing autoethnography aims at engaging the self (“auto”) with culture (the “ethno”) (Holman Jones *et al.*, 2013; Winkler, 2018). Since culture is an inseparable element of what shapes us (Bochner and Ellis, 1996), autoethnographies can provide valuable reflections and critique of societal phenomena (Holman Jones *et al.*, 2013). Both of us (Elizabeth and Helena) are intrigued to have found a way to create “intellectual” work that at the same time allows us to express ourselves and reflect on our personal experiences.

Through an autoethnographic contemplation we explore the different themes that emerged in our lives once we became mothers and we examine our identity work as academics, as mothers and academic mothers. While previous autoethnographies have addressed the tensions in academic mothers’ experiences (Amsler and Motta, 2019; Huopainen and Satama, 2019; Yoo, 2020), we feel the need to further examine the entanglement of various societal discourses and their implications to negotiating our identities. We want to reflect on and understand our own struggles of motherhood and the othering process where we both self-internalized the need to submit to the masculine academia.

While we want to address our struggles and attempts to change the dominant practices concerning motherhood in academia, we simultaneously want to remind that motherhood, as well as being an academic, should be understood and examined within the various settings which we inhabit (see also Katila, 2019). For example, I, Elizabeth, being a first-time mother, elaborate on the various processes that imposed the identity of a particular role of mother onto me. Not being used to uninvited advice and statements such as “I assume you will want to spend more time with other mothers now to chat about raising children” really exemplified that I was now a different person to the world. My personal experiences and contemplations lead me to believe that despite normative and societal commitments to gender equality, the role of the mother continues to be dominated by gendered discourses making claims to women’s bodies, time and experiences. “My experiences are the same” (Helena). However, I have been extremely puzzled by the contradictory expectations held by society and academia. Whereas the societal discourses assume us to take on entirely new identities as we become mothers, my experience with academia is almost the contrary; it is as if we are expected to carry out as normal (Low and Damian Martin, 2019). This seems to be in line with the neoliberal ideology which incites women to foster a happy work–life balance and views us personally responsible for organizing the competing demands (Rottenberg, 2018; Yoong, 2020).

Indeed, identity work discusses the interplay of our understanding of the self within the larger societal context (Haynes, 2008, 2011). Just like the debate within management and organization studies (MOS) engages in the various ontological and epistemological frameworks of what constitutes the individual (e.g. Alvesson, 2010; Knights and Clarke, 2017), we both observed that we feel a similar tension within ourselves. What is it exactly that makes “me”? For example, I, Elizabeth, felt completely unfamiliar to myself, as if looking at myself from the outside after my daughter was born. In stable life circumstances our understanding of ourselves is mostly unproblematic. It is during times of ruptures that our self-identity is questioned and becomes a point of re-examination (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Is this what is happening to me due to the changing personal and social context since becoming a mother? Giddens (1991) describes self-identity in terms of “the self

as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (p. 53). Becoming a mother became a challenge in the coherent construction of my biography. It is only through the intellectual deconstruction of my experiences that unraveled post-birth that I was finally able to make sense of my identity crisis and as such rebuild my own narrative about who I was.

Alvesson (2010) uses the metaphor of “stencil” to describe the Foucault-inspired approach that views identity as impacted, almost predetermined, by discourses. “The subject copies (or is copied by) a template in the identity construction” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 206). This approach views our identity as “put in place” by the accompanying contextual norms, thus pointing to external powers in identity construction (Alvesson, 2010; Brewis, 2001; Haynes, 2008). We both view societal norms and practices as important mechanisms that negotiate the perception and the construction of ourselves.

The contributions of this paper are to shed light on the complexities of the various concepts of “motherhood” working mothers encounter in academia. This paper goes beyond a traditional analysis of structural barriers within institutions that women face upon becoming mothers, to include consideration of societal discourses employed in the creation of motherhood norms. This paper discusses the pressures to conform to and ways to resist imposed identity-making of the hegemonic normative societal and organizational (in our case academic) standards affecting women who suddenly become branded as “mothers”. Our narratives will show that much of our experience ties in and is affected by the neoliberal academia (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Lund and Tienari, 2019) as well as the neoliberal and postfeminist cultural discourses surrounding women, motherhood and femininity (Lewis *et al.*, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018).

We first examine how motherhood is constructed in working life and academia. Second, we discuss autoethnography as the research methodology for this work. This method allows us to tell of our personal experiences and elaborate on their relation to the wider social context (Boje and Tyler, 2009; van Amsterdam, 2015). In the further part of this paper, we identify some of the discursive practices that subjugate mothers to conform to particular norms in order to fulfill the role of the “good-mother” as well as feed mothers the discourse of career-denial due to child-rearing. We also reflect how our body played an important role in our struggles within contemporary constructions of motherhood (Foucault, 1995). Finally, we discuss possibilities of resistance to the various imposed roles we experienced as working academics.

Working mothers and academic motherhood

Research indicates that social norms and institutional regulations play an important role in women’s and new mothers’ workforce experiences. For example, there are still notions of women as being less-work oriented than men after having children. This in turn constructs an image of women as less committed to their careers (Ruitenberg, 2014; Stead and Elliott, 2009). Further, women continue to be viewed as the primary care-takers of children and are assumed to reduce their workload once they become a parent. They are assumed not to be able to balance home duties with their work duties (Schnurr *et al.*, 2020). Women continue to be paid less than men and are underrepresented in senior-level positions (Gatrell *et al.*, 2017; Schnurr *et al.*, 2020).

van Amsterdam (2015) speaks of the “othering” process of women who become mothers—the maternal body constitutes an abnormality, an out of the norm element, in the context of the professional organization. Women’s “ability to procreate, their pregnancy, breastfeeding and childcare are treated as ‘suspect’, stigmatized and used as grounds for control and exclusion” (Acker, 2003, p. 56). The maternal body is viewed as a deviation of the norm and as such in inferior terms, as a disruptive element. This leads to stigmatization, hostility and

exclusion of pregnant women and new mothers in organizations (Gatrell, 2011; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019); or in Wolkowitz' (2006) words as the "erasure of the female reproductive body at work" (p. 91). The "maternal body" (Gatrell, 2011) is a very visible site especially during pregnancy and breast feeding and constitutes a deviation from the prevailing masculine organizational standard. It is thus normative gendered ideologies that continue to limit women's opportunities in their careers (Gatrell, 2011; Gatrell *et al.*, 2017; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019; Schnurr *et al.*, 2020).

Within academia, such othering effects affect women and mothers. For example, studies from Finnish business schools evince how neoliberal requirements within the new international and market-oriented realities individuate academic work, futures and identities in ways that purport gendered effects (Lund and Tienari, 2019). Prior research has addressed how academic mothers struggle to combine family with academic career (Thun, 2020; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015). Thun's (2020) study on Norwegian academic mothers illustrates how requirements for international mobility, working outside office hours to make up for time spent with their families, and stereotypes concern women. Academic mothers struggle to combine the multiple roles and responsibilities they have with the academic expectancy of devotion and long work-hours (Lund, 2012). The ideal worker norms embedded in academia are particularly precarious for tenure-track women with children (Armenti, 2004; Gilbert *et al.*, 2021; Huppatz *et al.*, 2019; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015). Academic women feel the pressure to work even on their family leave to portray themselves as good professionals, and secure employability in the future (Ollilainen, 2019). Huppatz *et al.* (2019) also discuss how women's laboring practices during family leaves are produced as self-disciplining responses to the neoliberal expectations of academia. In the context of mothering and being an academic, both family and the academy are viewed as "greedy institutions" (e.g. Currie *et al.*, 2000), reflecting the demands to perform particular roles in each of these domains.

Research from various countries presents similar findings concerning the neoliberal, capitalist academia in which norms such as productivity and competitiveness marginalize women academics with children both ideologically and in practice. Isgro and Castañeda (2015) examine women academics at US colleges and universities which privilege childless organizational members who can better respond to the increased corporatization of the globalized academia. Armenti (2004) discusses childbearing strategies of Canadian women professors who either hide their pregnancies or have children during the summer break so as not to endanger their prospects of being tenured. Academics are viewed as human capital whose value is determined by their ability to produce intellectual work. Such an organization leaves little room for "unproductive" childbearing (Goncalves, 2019). Heijstra *et al.* (2017) discuss academia as a gendered institution in which power positions are held by men seniors while the lower ranking positions are occupied by women who spend their time and productivity on "academic housework", further reinforcing their marginalized position within the institution. Similarly, Knights and Richards (2003) write about the gendered UK academia in which values such as competitiveness and productivity are considered variables of success, reinforcing a masculine normative value system of the "good academic". Such norms are then maintained by men seniors, resulting in occupational segregation where women are overly represented in lower ranking positions.

The ideas of how one is to thrive in academia *and* as a mother are both constituted around powerful sets of discursive ideals. These require women to constantly create themselves within the dominant discourses. Not surprisingly, a great body of literature has focused upon this identity work and everyday struggle of combining academic career and motherhood, using autoethnographic methodology (e.g. Amsler and Motta, 2019; Yoo, 2020; Huopalaainen and Satama, 2019; Schriever, 2021). Amsler and Motta (2019) talk about the challenges of meeting the expected work routines of the neoliberal university, and how the physical

presence of their kids negatively affects their image as professionals. Yoo (2020) describes how she experienced the struggles to meet up the social expectations of a devoted mother, to hide the physical signs of her pregnant body and to keep her foothold in academia. Huopalainen and Satama (2019) similarly discuss how they juggle between the realities and expectations of motherhood and their scholarly endeavors as young PhD students, and mothers. They bring forth the opportunities to resist dominant discourses, illustrated by their habit of bringing their babies along to academic conferences.

Literature has well established the various othering effects of academia's neoliberal, patriarchal culture on women and mothers (e.g. Armenti, 2004; Castañeda and Isgro, 2013; Goncalves, 2019; Heijstra *et al.*, 2017; Knights and Richards, 2003; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015). The othering effects that are especially relevant to our experiences are related to the societal and institutional discourse of the disembodied worker where the maternal body is neither acknowledged nor accommodated. Gilbert *et al.* (2021) speak of academia as an organization that devalues mothering through the "reification of a disembodied masculinised worker" (p. 612). The various experiences and thought processes presented in this paper reflect such internalized othering effects on us as academic mothers.

Autoethnography

The method

Autoethnography is a form of describing socio-cultural phenomena through personal reflections and experiences that allow a deeper, personal perspective of the particular subject matter (Ellis, 2004; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011; Jamjoom, 2021; van Amsterdam, 2015). In an autoethnography, the researcher is also the subject of the study of a particular social context (Boje and Tyler, 2009; Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). In our paper, we, as academic mothers, reflect on our personal experiences and emotional processes of motherhood within the context of academia, illustrating through personal insights some of the discursive structures which academic mothers face within academia, and beyond. Writing an autoethnographic paper became both "process and product" (Ellis *et al.*, 2011, p. 273). Our autoethnography allowed a back and forth between our subjective experiences and concrete societal obstacles, between intellectual engagement with social phenomena and emotional processing of the observed, between the personal and the cultural (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Holman Jones' *et al.* (2013) offer a convincing interpretation of what accounts for autoethnographic work in comparison to other personal accounts, which well resonates with us. First, an autoethnography should purposefully comment on or critique a cultural phenomenon. Second, an autoethnography should make a contribution to existing research on the particular topic. This paper contributes to existing research on working (and academic) mothers by highlighting some of the othering effects we experienced; thus, offering a societal critique of the struggles women face upon becoming mothers. Third, researchers should embrace vulnerability by offering their personal voice; and, fourth, an autoethnography should create a dialogue with readers in the process of writing about the particular phenomenon under study. In this paper, we expose various moments as academic mothers that show our perceived weaknesses, insecurities and frustrations. By showing our emotional vulnerabilities, we wanted to bring our personal experiences to life and connect with readers on an emotional level. It is our hope that our autoethnographic paper encourages readers to continue the conversation on the experiences of working (academic) mothers.

Departing from the "conventional" academic writing style, there are various autoethnographic papers within MOS reflecting personal experiences on various organizational phenomena, such as motherhood and work (e.g. Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; van Amsterdam, 2015); miscarriage and the workplace (e.g. Porschitz and Siler, 2017); or

working in the academia (e.g. [Boje and Tyler, 2009](#); [Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011](#); [Jamjoom, 2021](#); [Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011](#); [Fernando *et al.*, 2020](#)).

Concerning the autoethnographic method, [Doloriert and Sambrook \(2011\)](#) discuss three epistemological approaches. The evocative approach is emotionally laden, expressing heartfelt, painful and often distressing narratives of the subject. The reader is invited to feel the feelings of the authors and to view the world from their perspective ([Winkler, 2018](#)). The analytical approach proposed by [Anderson \(2006\)](#) requires the following of particular analytical conventions to capture objective, observable phenomena, since one of the limitations of evocative autoethnography is the subjective interpretation of the researcher. It is worth mentioning that Anderson's views on clear distinctions of what proper autoethnography constitutes have evolved over time. In [Anderson and Glass-Coffin \(2013\)](#), Anderson writes that he now holds a more nuanced view with regards to clear methodological distinctions of autoethnographies. "I've become convinced that the modes and key features of autoethnographic inquiry are similar no matter where along the spectrum from 'evocative' [...] to 'analytical'" ([Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013](#), p. 64). The third approach is autoethnography with a political agenda addressing some of the power issues within society. Such autoethnographies "democratize the representational sphere of culture by locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of discursive power" ([Neumann, 1996](#), p. 189). An example of such work would be [Jamjoom's \(2021\)](#) account of being othered within the colonialist frameworks of academia. Ultimately, autoethnographies can serve as pieces of social justice and forms of resistance by contesting the status quo ([Jamjoom, 2021](#); [Winkler, 2018](#)). These above outlined approaches are not exclusive to each other and various authors apply a blend of these approaches in their autoethnographies (e.g. [Fernando *et al.*, 2020](#); [Huopalainen and Satama, 2019](#); [Jamjoom, 2021](#)). This paper also incorporates the approaches outlined above. We present our emotional reflections and narratives to capture the drastic event of becoming a mother. It encompasses a theoretically informed analysis to shed light on the discursive practices within the prevailing motherhood discourses. Hence, we made deliberate choices between personal revelations and embedding them within theoretical elaborations ([Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013](#); [Winkler, 2018](#)), thus balancing between the "auto" and the "ethno". Finally, we believe, that by discussing our own vulnerabilities as academic mothers, we can make visible different forms of persisting gender inequalities in academia.

While there is various criticism towards autoethnography as a valid research method, ranging from being "lazy" ([Delamont, 2007](#)), biased, egocentric ([Roth, 2008](#)) and self-indulgent ([Winkler, 2018](#)), we agree with proponents of the autoethnographic method that one's personal experience on a particular cultural phenomenon can shed light on some of the societal phenomena that might appear foreign or abstract to outsiders. For us two, autoethnography offers a way to make our personal experiences visible and engage in dialogue with our readers ([Holman Jones *et al.*, 2013](#)).

Research context

To understand our experiences of becoming and being mothers, it is important to provide some insights about our contexts. We are both female academics in the Global North, both employed by universities in our respective countries. Elizabeth lives in Canada, working as a tenure-track Assistant Professor. Within the academic context, it remains debatable if having a child while on tenure-track was an advisable choice, and certainly a question visible on the faces of some of my colleagues when I told them I would be having a child. The "publish or perish" mentality of the neo-liberal academia contributes to my conflicting feelings of how much contemporary academic structures should impact your personal life choices. In spite of such doubts, I consider my position as privileged. I was able to put my tenure-track on hold

for one year and my decision to take a 12 month maternity leave was met with institutional and collegial support. My work environment combined with Canada's parental leave regulations definitely mitigated the struggles I experienced post-birth as I felt financially secure and institutionally supported. Having talked with various female academic colleagues, I know that many experience serious work-related challenges, such as lack of support and even hostility, when they decide to have children.

Helena lives in Finland, currently working on the final year of her externally funded, three-year postdoctoral project. I have not secured a tenure-track position, and I therefore live under the constant need to prepare new funding applications, or secure employment through other means, such as fixed-time contracts in academia. My first child was born 1.5 years after I had received my doctorate. During my maternity leave I had relocated, and when given the opportunity to take a fixed-term teaching position at my new hometown, I began part-time work after 10 months maternity leave. During my second pregnancy I received competitive funding for three-years. I postponed the beginning of my project until our second child was 11 months. Living in Finland is privileged in many terms; taking a year off from work is financially sustainable, and state-subsidized daycare offers good opportunities for return for work. Yet, I would never have been able to anticipate the new worries that I was forced to deal with, trying to secure an academic career and to live up to the societal expectations of mothering. And nothing could have prepared me for the expectations I put on myself.

Research process

The data for this paper was acquired through note taking, our individual interpretations of our experiences and new insights born out of our joint conversations reflecting on our motherhood experiences. Elizabeth took notes during the first 18 months following the birth of her child, reflecting on the impact of the discursive processes and the identity struggles emerging from the new reality of motherhood. While writing up the first draft of this paper, Elizabeth relied on notes from the journal as "data" for this paper (Chang, 2013; Winkler, 2018) to avoid hindsight biases and distortions. In hindsight, it is evident from my notes that my personal experiences of motherhood are very much intertwined with my convictions (Elizabeth). I observed myself, then tried to make sense of these processes based on the view of the world that I had. My thoughts kept going to Foucault and how reality is discursively constructed. The bodily (and extreme) experiences of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood prompted me to search for answers in Foucault's (1995) elaborations on society and how the body is the field on which societal discourses are enacted. This Foucauldian interpretation of what was happening to me in turn further shaped how I perceived and interpreted my new reality of being a mother. My ideological stance, which became more Foucauldian and more feminist over time, in turn affected my note taking during that process. Ultimately, the data collection process and the theoretical elaborations can be viewed as a circular process, one informing the other.

Helena joined the paper project by Elizabeth's invitation in a phase where Elizabeth had already written the first version of the paper. Prior to this project, we had never written together, but we were connected through an international doctoral consortium and the academic network surrounding this event that was organized on a yearly basis. In addition to having participated in the consortium on a couple of different occasions, we had learnt to know each other on a more personal level when Helena spent six months in Canada, sharing the office space with Elizabeth. During that time, we developed close relations and chatted about our personal lives, which at that time did not involve children. It was 7 years since we last saw each other in Canada, and while the starting point was as simple as Elizabeth reconnecting through a mutual network and history, we soon realized that writing this paper would not be simply a "convenience" of two academic mothers writing about gender, but

immediately seemed to open an array of experiences, that encompassed similar struggles over identity within the neoliberal motherhood ideals, and masculinist academia.

When Helena joined this paper project, we had never discussed our motherhood experiences before. It became quite an eye-opening experience to exchange our experiences of becoming mothers as early-career academics. Indeed, when Elizabeth asked if I wanted to join the project, I was immediately on board, and my mind started buzzing as I started memorizing my own experiences. I decided to write down vignettes of the episodes, events, internal identity struggles and emotions. Thereafter, we further utilized the memory work method (Fraser and Michell, 2015), which allowed us to interpret our individual experiences through collective reflection and theorization. We learnt that some of our experiences were surprisingly similar. Yet, we also wanted to address the individual stories and the unique ways in which we had lived the different themes. In what follows, we depict our experiences through polyvocal narratives (see also Peticca-Harris, 2019) that shows in tandem how our experiences are on one part similar, and yet unique in shedding light on how academic motherhood resonates with our own life paths. Thus, while we found common threads in our journeys, we chose to represent each of our individual vignettes. During our theorization of the findings, we wanted to make visible how our selves as mothers, academics and academic mothers entangle in multiple ways.

Disciplinary practices in the construction of motherhood

The good mother versus the productive academic

I am incapable of leaving my child with anyone, even my closest relatives for longer than 1 or 2 hours. It is not that my child is not doing well, it is me who suffers; even physically. The urge to want to constantly have my child around me is overwhelming. At the same time, I am obsessively counting all the hours I spend on house duties and baby care as hours lost to writing, to getting papers published, to widen my horizons academically. I am horrified; both for not spending all of my time with my baby and at the same time for not sacrificing enough time for my career. (Elizabeth)

Reflecting back at what I wrote, the extract above illustrates the degree to which I was torn between the “good mother” discourse and the “career woman” discourse. The pressure to “publish or perish” within the neoliberal academia (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Knights, 2002), as well as my own career ambitions clash with my expectations of being always available to my child to feel like a good mother. Within contemporary discourses on motherhood, societal pressures are wide-ranged and vary according to the context. For example, women might feel pressured to breastfeed to be perceived as good mothers (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). I personally remember the shame with which I would take out formula bottles to feed my child when I was in public. The mother-identity forces us to conform to some rules to behave “properly” as a mother should behave. For academic mothers, these external expectations seem particularly exacerbating.

The first maternity leave was particularly challenging, I recall. Both in my family, and in my partner’s family, maternity leave was paralleled with total breakaway and absence from work. Family members and friends typically assumed that I would spend a minimum of two years as a stay-at-home mom. In particular, my decision, and one might say obsession to keep working during the leave, was difficult to justify. Especially, when the requirements are more or less faceless. While my academic community gave no such advice that I should work during maternity leave, it was still embedded in the embodied knowledge of the neoliberal university discourse. (Helena)

My narrative above is indicative of my own struggles between the contradicting messages from society and my work context. I felt like I was assumed to quit working full-time (Ruitenberg, 2014), and invited to abandon all other identities besides that of being a mother

(Hager, 2011; Miller, 2005). However, departing from work was at odds with performing my academic identity according to its neoliberal pressures (Huppatz *et al.*, 2019).

To conform to the norms of the productive worker who always performs, we felt we had to compensate for time “lost” to childcare.

My spouse is at work and I am alone with the baby, who, from what I’ve been told, evidently is not like other babies—she sleeps only in small fractions, napping less than an hour. I feel betrayed. I’ve never been much of a sleeper, but I’ve tightened my rhythm. Each morning I rush to my laptop even as early as 5 am. If I’m lucky I can write for an hour. During the day I use every spare minute to continue my text. Each time she cries to call for my attention I feel frustrated. I feel ashamed of the thought that too often passes my mind “Please don’t you wake up just yet”. But when she does, I yell “Mom’s coming”. Sometimes my voice is pretentiously preppy. I wonder if she notices. (Helena)

Living through these experiences, I have come to realize that I had no idea how to be an academic mother. I first became a mother a year and a half after having received my doctorate. I share the experiences of other academic mothers working while their kids are still sleeping or babies napping (Thun, 2020; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015; Schriever, 2021). However, contrary to some of these fellow women academics who describe the academic and home life as “intricately interwoven” (Schriever, 2021, p. 1,968), my “academic time” in these in-between moments of mothering seem never quite enough. I seem to fail in what some Finnish women academics reported in Ollilainen’s (2019) study on how they refused this type of necessity to work and refrained from advancing their research while on family leave. On the other hand, literature on Finnish professionals has indicated how Finnish women’s career aspirations continue to be affected by double strivings, as women try to live up to organizational and social pressures (Niemistö *et al.*, 2021). Even though there were other female academics with children in my organization, it seems that none of them were vocal about how to combine research, career and the baby. I have come to learn that the fine-line of participation, contributing to research and simultaneous expectancy of fully committed to home are an individual effort. I have found the jargon that I also self participate in, rather useless. How often do we let our mothers-to-be colleagues know that they can just relax, be with the baby (while I guess most of us know that it’s an impasse)? Such luxury only exists in our imagination. At the same time, we noticed that we self-internalized the tale of the mother who is now falling behind in her career because of her baby.

I had just begun my three-year project with high expectations and was working full steam with data collection when Covid-19 hit. Just a month before I was about to pack my family on a plane to take care of the international mobility period that was an essential part of my research project, all plans had to be cancelled. All the work I had done—my partner had just taken time off from work to look after the kids, both grandparents had arranged to visit us to help with childcare, and now all had to be cancelled. My family members see no trouble in the situation—rather they greet it with gratitude and relief “You might not have to go at all, if the Pandemic goes on”, they say. They just don’t see the point, I think. “But I want to go, and I NEED to go”. My biggest fear is that I might never find the chance again. My eldest will begin pre-school and it’s taken incredibly much planning to arrange for everything—my list sounds silly, but I worry literally about everything. “What if I won’t be able to find a safe place for the family to live, what if my spouse gets all sick and tired of talking about this (even when he assures that he’s still committed to the trip)”. I’m not sure I have the strength to do that again. I’m afraid we’ll never go. And then I might never become anything. (Helena)

However dark these thoughts may seem, they are my reality. And it’s a reality that rarely gets spoken about when you apply for funding. You don’t hear people say that they are afraid, or that they have difficulty combining work with family. International mobility requirements can be a strain on academic mothers (Thun, 2020). Yet, for me the biggest strain is not even how I find myself keeping up with the neoliberal expectations, taking personal responsibility to organize the competing demands (Huppatz *et al.*, 2019; Rottenberg, 2018; Yoong, 2020), it is

rather the fear of not becoming the academic I want to be. I realize that my momentum may have already passed, the “make it or break it” window of opportunity has closed.

For me, Elizabeth, statements such as “You can forget going to conferences once you have the baby” or “The baby brain is a real thing” messed with my head and created self-fulfilling prophecies. My imaginations of what was possible for me in my career started to shrink. I remember self-censoring to make sure that no one at work attributed any of my “failings” to me now having a baby. Late for a deadline? Sick at home? Missed another meeting? I became paranoid about not committing any of those “sins” mentioned above so that no one could perceive these as due to motherhood. Similarly, the previously discussed lack of entitlement of mothers to career advancement (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016) really struck a nerve with me as it confirmed my self-censoring thoughts about my own career; an inner conflict and an inner dialogue that my equally ambitious male spouse never experienced. These are some of the examples of the self-imposed othering that become self-internalizing.

Butler (1988) discusses how gender is performed through a repetition of stylized acts such as gestures, movements and enactments which “constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (p. 519). Such stylized acts are historically determined, and the actors come to believe in these acts as the appropriate modes of performance. Concerning academic motherhood, the various societal norms discussed above constitute such stylized performative enactments through which the gendered motherhood discourse is deployed.

The maternal body

Ah all the comments I received about my body since becoming pregnant and having my child. From “You look really good for being 7 months pregnant”, the unprovoked “Don’t worry you will lose the baby weight in no time”, to the “You almost look the same as before pregnancy”, it seems that my body is the field on which my motherhood is enacted. It seems that the imposition to self-sensor and to conform to particular beauty standards do not stop for new mothers. Expressions such as “yummy mummy” well reflect the symbolic ideal of the physically appealing mother who has it all together 5 minutes after giving birth. (Elizabeth)

For Foucault (1984), the body is the surface on which power is exercised. The above-mentioned extract well reflects the power of a particular maternal body discourse and how it is exercised on my own body. The body is the primal vehicle through which the external is experienced. For example, the time and place we are born, into which social class, and into which family will have a crucial effect on what our bodies will experience, such as genetic predispositions, particular lifestyle or certain socio-economic and political environment one is subjected to (e.g. Foucault, 1984, 1990, 1995). The image of the “yummy mummy” reflects the discourse of the maternal body subjugated to comply with norms of skinniness and with Western images of a sexualized femininity (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). The yummy mummy’s body is docile and fulfills obligations of skinniness, sexual appeal and youthfulness (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). These societal pressures dominate many of the contemporary discourses surrounding femininity; for example, postfeminist sensibility calls upon women to celebrate their beauty and motherhood (Lewis et al., 2017).

I remember the excruciating fear of going back to work not having achieved my goal of the pre-pregnancy body. How would my colleagues perceive me? What would students think of my new body?

I have turned my own gaze upon myself and obsess over my maternal body. No need to be told anymore how I am doing with “getting back into shape”; I am my own strictest judge. (Elizabeth)

Within the organizational context as well, the motherly body is subjected to discursive organizational practices and turned docile. The concept of “maternal body work” (Gatrell, 2013, p. 622) refers to the process of mothers managing the dual (bodily) duties of maternal

care while at the same time complying with organizational, and masculine, norms of professionalism within the workplace. The maternal body experiences the conflict of two contrasting discourses: the discourse on prioritizing prenatal and infant care to correspond to societal standards of good mothering.

Depending on the social context, the mothering discourse demands of women to prioritize prenatal and infant care by controlling all aspects of the maternal body such as diet, rest, movement and lifestyle (Gatrell, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2015); reflecting Foucault's (1995) elaborations on the control of the body through particular discourses. I remember how I, Elizabeth, was always surprised that my prenatal care physician never asked me about my availability for the next checkup. She just simply told me when to show up again, not caring if I have to commit my time to an employer or not. A more traumatizing bodily experience was when a couple of hours after giving birth, the hospital nurse violently grabbed my breast and pressed my baby against it in an effort to make my daughter eat. Her "professional knowledge" told her to dismiss my objections of pain and my and my baby's cries. She dismissed all of my bodily alerts and sought to control my and my baby's behavior according to her expertise. Even after I insisted on giving my baby formula after 24 h of hardly eating anything, she hesitantly complied only after a higher power, a doctor, gave the ok. It was evident that the current discourse on scientific knowledge and medicalization of the birthing process (Miller, 2005) favored medical experts in "molding" my body rather than allowing me to take control over it.

When Elizabeth first asked me to join this paper project, I decided not to read her text before memorizing my own episodes. Yet, I quickly browsed through the paper and could not help my eyes catch her description of breastfeeding. Those words could have been mine and brought back memories of a nurse grasping my first-born like a pup and throwing her with force on my breast. Or when nurses robbed me of the first eight weeks of happy time with the first child, forcing me to pump milk every other hour through day and night, in hope of a miracle, and most phone calls I would receive would be polite, yet repetitive, inquiries whether I had succeeded to lactate. "Everyone can do it, you just have to believe it'll work" "and drink tea" "stop stressing". We have both seen the controversy of the discourses offered to us as women—while women are invited to be self-assured, and particularly as academics, rely on your own expertise and judgment, as mothers, we suddenly grow small and helpless.

I don't even remember if there ever was a time when I was given so much unsolicited advice as post-birth. Why do I suddenly appear clueless, fragile and lost? It seems that the trust the world previously had into me to figure out my stuff on my own now vanished. The most mundane procedures such as washing a baby's hair, feeding my child or going for a walk seem to provoke a flood of advice, even from complete strangers. (Elizabeth)

The above extract really reminds me how disempowering it felt at the beginning to be viewed in the role of a mother. Living in a society that teaches, values and rewards autonomy and self-determination, is highly individualistic and practices polite social distance between its citizens, the blatant intrusion into a new mother's affairs caught me off-guard. Suddenly, women are viewed as incapable and in need of collective guidance now that they are categorized as mothers. Mothers are perceived primarily as corporeal rather than intellectual due to their deviation from the masculine norm and hence less trust is given in their intellectual capacities (Gatrell, 2013; Witz, 2000). Men constitute "generic individuals" (Lehmann, 1994, p. 85) while women through their ability to give birth constitute the other. "Women are identified with the physical individual, with the organism: with the body, instinct, and nature. Men [...] are identified with the social individual, with the personality: with the triumph of mind over body, morality over instinct, society over nature" (Lehmann, 1994, p. 85). As a result, women self-monitor to comply with the image of the ideal worker. They hide their maternal bodies at work, such as physical discomforts during pregnancy,

sleep deprivation or downplay their exhaustion, in order to enact “a professional employee who comports herself appropriately” (Gatrell, 2013, p. 627). van Amsterdam’s (2015) account of her experiences of breast pumping as an employee of a Dutch university well reflect the struggle and discomfort of bringing one’s maternal body into the organization and the internal struggles and practices of hiding her maternal signs and self-monitoring to negotiate between being a good worker and a good mother. To conform to such organizational norms of the body, new mothers experience their role in organizations as othering upon their return to work (e.g. Gatrell and Cooper, 2016; Haynes, 2008; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019).

Resisting the motherhood discourse

I tell myself many stories about the relationship with my daughter. I jokingly call her “my very bossy roommate”. I look at how other cultures past and present take care of their children, how they think about them and help them grow. I find a lot of solace in Kahlil Gibran’s poem “On Children”. All of these acts help me to step out of my conditioning about the mother-child relationship for at least a moment, help me to question if a particular truth is the right approach to raising my child and living my life. I am well aware that I am still thinking within the box (of a particular discourse), but maybe I am pushing the boundaries of that box at least a little bit. (Elizabeth)

Once I became aware of the fact that motherhood is not a natural state but rather a discursive role dependent on the particular cultural context (Miller, 2005; Smart, 1996), I started questioning the prescribed roles mothers, fathers and children are supposed to take on. I asked myself “why” or “why not” an alternative option, an alternative story was not possible? I became increasingly alert to the social myths of motherhood our society tells and questioned what the discursive effects of such stories might be?

I cherish the memory when I talked to my child’s nurse during one of my daughter’s check-up appointments about how incompatible I felt with the particular role of mother expected of me. She told me about her own experience when she became a mother some 14 years ago: “I know that I might have acted crazy after my child’s birth. But to this day I am convinced that the others around me acted even crazier with regards to how they treated me.” That conversation gave me a lot of strength because it reassured me that maybe I was not completely off with how I perceived my experiences as a mother and my tensions with the world. (Elizabeth)

Analyzing past societal expectations toward motherhood was also important to comprehend why a certain image of the mother was being forced upon us. Foucault (1995) called this the critical ontology of the self; encouraging us to study the past and how it imposed certain limits on us and to experiment how to go beyond those limits (Brewis, 2004; Foucault, 1997). Some of the current tension between expectations to excel as mothers and at the same time women’s otherness within the professional world can be understood in the context of gender changes in the nineteenth century during the industrial revolution. Some of the examples about past practices in relation to women’s productivity outside of the home can be useful in emphasizing the discursive effects of contemporary motherhood. According to Rich (1995), it was not until the industrial revolution during the nineteenth century that women’s role was reduced to the realm of home and primary child-caretaker, particularly within the Anglo-Saxon context. Within one generation, Western Europe had established clear gendered work patterns. The family and home were now viewed as the refuge from the stressors of economic life with the “sanctification of the family” as an emotional haven (Stearns, 2007, p. 75). The wife’s role became that of the guardian of home, expected to fulfill the “Angel in the House” narrative, based on Patmore’s (1854) poem of the same name, which glorifies the image of the dutiful wife and mother. This created the ideal throughout the industrialized world of men as breadwinners, and women as home-takers (Crouse-Dick, 2012; Stearns, 2007). Such gendered division gave rise to the concept of “separate spheres” with women now enacting their duties in the private spheres while men were involved in the public spheres of politics and business (Crouse-Dick, 2012).

Women's labor participation in connection to the socio-cultural, political and economic contexts is too vast and beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to emphasize that patriarchy combined with the dynamics of the industrial revolution played an important part in creating such gendered binary which continues to be present today. This is illustrated by various MOS scholars investigating societal and organizational barriers for women and mothers (e.g. [Gatrell and Cooper, 2016](#); [Haynes, 2008](#); [Hennekam *et al.*, 2019](#); [Huopalainen and Satama, 2019](#); [Ruitenbergh, 2014](#); [Stead and Elliott, 2009](#)).

[Wheatley \(2013\)](#) discusses women's entrapment to household duties and childcare which carries serious career implications. According to the author, women work in closer proximity to their homes in order to fulfill their assumed home duties and as such remain limited in their career choices. Only after reading [Wheatley's \(2013\)](#) research did I realize that the thought of looking for daycare spots close to my spouse's workplace did not even cross my mind; thus confirming to myself to be carrying the residue of the "angel in the house" narrative within me.

Once I genuinely realized that I did not have to conform to all expectations of what society views as a good mother I started subverting my self-imposed constraints and started exploring other forms of being and pushing the limits of maternal practice. My resistance was marked by non-engagement concerning all aspects related to mothering. I became deaf to any conversations that were based on any form of "lecturing" me on childcare. I left phone messages unanswered whenever the topic revolved around unsolicited advice. I sometimes lied about what my child was actually able to do so as not to hear panicky concerns about what my child's expected developmental milestones were. I refused to allow others to come by anytime just because I was on maternity leave. Reflecting on our past, both of our experiences are similar to [Huopalainen and Satama's \(2019\)](#) observations. Becoming a mother can be a transformative experience that allows for growth in various aspects of one's life, including career. In short, motherhood can become an act of empowerment. Taking care of my daughter allowed me to re-evaluate and establish a new relationship with my career and reconcile the various competing expectations of motherhood and academia I felt imposed on me (Elizabeth).

In the last tertiary of my second pregnancy, I was invited to conduct a major revision on a single-authored paper. "Why now?", I sighed when reading the email. For the first time ever, I decided to ask for an extension. This being my second pregnancy, I knew how hard it might be to work during the first weeks of post-birth. I took pride in the decision to speak out about my situation. Yet, as the new deadline I had myself suggested to the Editor was approaching, I again found myself in the situation of allocating every minute of the precious "own" time to work. My eldest child spent some hours at the daycare, and these moments I could have wandered purposelessly at shopping centers or done exercise, I instead invited the granny to take the baby for a walk, and the minute they were out the door I'd jump to my computer and start typing. In the end, I got rejected. So why was I doing this? I couldn't help feeling jealousy toward other moms whom I assumed were choosing otherwise. I never rest. (Helena)

For me, my attempts to resist, to challenge and negotiate the rules of academic work entangle with the neoliberal expectations of fostering a happy work-family relation, my mere awareness of the cultural expectations (and apparently a lived reality for many contemporary moms), to self-care, project alternative realities that are out of my reach. In my attempt to be the academic I want to be, I strive intensely ([Huopalainen and Satama, 2019](#); [Cooley and Spicher Kasdorf, 2008](#)). Yet, it is these discourses that make me so painfully aware of my own failure, and my "choice". The alternative discourses in our society call upon me to rest, to allocate some time for self-care. But are these really choices after all? Reading from other writings on academic mothers' juggling and choosing whether to spend time with their families, or grade assignments, write papers, it seems that the dominant discourse of the

neoliberal university really leaves us with no choice, binding us to the precarious work practices (see also [Amsler and Motta, 2019](#); [Huppatz et al., 2019](#)). Or if we choose otherwise, it'll at least leave us with a bad conscience.

Indeed, as I find, I have attempted to change some of my work practices. The early January deadlines to conferences have typically required extensive writing during holidays. Last year I decided for the first time to unpack my computer as my family and I headed to the Christmas holiday. I told myself, I need to learn thinking that my papers can wait. My happiness at the decision was premature, which I guess I knew already when making the decision. At the dinner table I suddenly envision a scenario: "What if the kids will get sick during the holiday and they can't go back to daycare in the first week of January. How can I think of having a holiday? I need to be rational and use my mother's help to look after the kids over the holiday. It's the only way to ensure I can meet conference deadlines." My spouse, who had work over the holidays assured me, swearing an oath with an exaggerated voice "If the kids were to get sick, I promise I'll stay home to look after them so long that you're done with your papers". There I was, again caught in the neoliberal demands of self-responsibilization ([Huppatz et al., 2019](#)) and desperately seeking to arrange for some balance between my work and family.

Discussion and conclusions

This paper describes some of our reflections and experiences of being academic, mothers and academic mothers. We felt compelled to write an autoethnographic piece about our experiences because we believe that these experiences are not lived by ourselves alone and that the present motherhood ideology is shaped by the various discursive practices that promote a particular role of mothers in society, impacted by the various identities we hold, such as ethnicity, religion or culture. If our identity is molded by power relations of particular discourses in the Foucauldian sense, as we believe it is, then it is worthwhile exploring some of these discursive practices on societal level and within organizations to see how such practices contribute to the problems of the particular images of mothers. Our own personal situation is greatly impacted by the various personal circumstances we find ourselves in, such as family involvement, partner support in raising the children, our financial situation or our satisfaction with our careers before becoming pregnant. For example, research shows that spousal support both emotionally and practically plays a significant role in the success of new mothers' career advancements (e.g. [Bröckel, 2018](#); [Heikkinen et al., 2014](#); [Hennekam et al., 2019](#); [Huopalaainen and Satama, 2019](#)).

There are various othering mechanisms within the contemporary motherhood discourse that reduce women's identity solely to that of a mother ([Hager, 2011](#); [Miller, 2005](#)) and view them as deviations from the masculine norm in the organizational (and academic) setting (e.g. [Haynes, 2008](#); [Hennekam et al., 2019](#); [Schnurr et al., 2020](#); [van Amsterdam, 2015](#)).

It is important to explore opportunities to subvert some of the practices expected of mothers, such as refusing to hide our maternal bodies at work, challenging the newest "knowledge" on child raising, or simply having more trust in our own judgments of what feels right and wrong. Altogether, we have experienced how attempts to perform the ideals of the academy and of motherhood, leave us in struggle and a sense of failure ([Cooley and Spicher Kasdorf, 2008](#)). We would also like to draw attention to the silences that surround academic motherhood. As we have discussed, our own experiences illustrate how academic mothers are expected to live up to the neoliberal ideals of striving academics, while simultaneously expecting them to keep personal injury and difficulty within their private spheres. We would like to see more emphasis on providing mentorship and supervisory support at different stages of the academic career, where academic mothers' stories of the difficulties, and strategies for combining family with academic endeavors would be openly shared, rather than held to oneself. Similar concerns have been raised by others ([Low and Damian Martin, 2019](#)).

Isgro and Castañeda (2015) call for a “culture of care” within academic institutions that accommodates individuals’ caretaking responsibilities and allows them to thrive within the various contexts of their lives. For as long as it is up to each struggling mother to decide how far we are willing to stretch our limits in the pursuit of academic identity, we remain vulnerable within the discourses that incite us to endure, to keep with the pace of academia.

However, it is also important to understand that the sanctions for going against the grain of the various contemporary motherhood discourses might affect different mothers differently. Therefore, one’s own experiences to resist will not have the same consequences and sanctions as that of other mothers who might find themselves in different personal, cultural, social and economic situations (e.g. Dill, 1988; Glenn *et al.*, 1994; Miller, 2005; Silva, 1996). As discussed, autoethnography constitutes a unique opportunity to tell vivid and insightful accounts of contemporary cultural phenomena as experienced by individuals (Winkler, 2018). Writing an autoethnographic piece on motherhood allowed us to capture our personal experiences and how these experiences are shaped by and reflect contemporary cultural practices. The Canadian and Finnish settings shaped our struggles against the expectations and ideals prevalent in the Global North. While our paper has offered a critical perspective on the expectations toward academic mothers in the Western academia and Western family context, the exploration of motherhood in other settings is likely to yield other types of experiences.

Note

1. We chose the names Elizabeth and Helena as our pseudonyms throughout this paper whenever we offer autoethnographic accounts of our experiences.

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Corresponding author

Isabella Krysa can be contacted at: i.krysa@fdu.edu