

COMMENTARY

## Making the invisible visible: Recrafting the discourse surrounding women caregivers in academia

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“But unspoken as it may be, the expectation for many women is that at a time when you’re just trying to hold it all together, you must somehow figure out how to pick up where you left off. Some of the pressure is societal: for women fortunate enough to have time off, once you go back to work, you’re right back in it. The fact that your baby is cluster feeding or staging a sleep strike is not really an excuse for missing a deadline. But the haze of new motherhood has a way of warping your own perception of what you should be able to handle. When getting through the day requires a certain amount of autopilot (and coffee), there’s not a ton of time to reflect on what caring for a new life while meeting the demands of your own is doing to you.”

- Fradkin, 2020

As three academic mothers—two of whom are still pretenure—across different universities, with distinct household structures, and at different stages of motherhood, our journeys diverge in many ways. Yet, there is one undeniable truth that has forged our bond as coauthors and friends: academia, alongside the current landscape of childcare in America, is simply not built for caregiving mothers (Allen et al., 2021; Lopez, 2019). To this end, we greatly appreciate the call to action put forth by Gabriel et al. (2023)—a piece that resonated with us, not only because we are in complete agreement with the dire need to support academic mothers but also, because we each have stories and experiences that mimic those described in the focal article.

Importantly, however, conversations surrounding the challenges experienced by academic mothers—and the related recommendations—most frequently focus on the prenatal (pregnancy) and postnatal (postpartum) stages of motherhood. For instance, recommendations such as providing parental leave, easy access to lactation rooms, and course releases are primarily intended to assist women as they recover from childbirth and transition back to work. Other policies are aimed at helping women protect time for childcare demands while also facilitating productivity and success, such as stop-the-clock policies. Although a critical phase, the motherhood role does not cease to exist after mothers reenter the workplace or even after their first year postpartum. Indeed, as

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Brickson (2011) notes, “children don’t grow up in a year. Furthermore, time does not stand still” (p. 199). It is with this perspective in mind that we aim to build on Gabriel and colleagues’ article, bringing to light the often invisible day-to-day demands of navigating motherhood within academia—particularly those that exist beyond the immediate postpartum period. Finally, and grounded in the reality of motherhood as a lifelong identity, we present ideas aimed at crafting a culture of *ongoing* support for academic mothers.

### The relentless and invisible nature of motherhood

Although probably one of the oldest adages, there really doesn’t seem to be a better way to describe motherhood than as an unremitting 24–7 job. But, because it is often difficult to convey in the abstract, we want to share an illustrative example—one of the especially challenging days that a member of our author team recently endured.

It was the morning before cross-country travel for a high-visibility research presentation. I woke up to a frantic husband telling me that not only had one of our dogs vomited but also that our toddler was running a fever. As we tended to our dog, it quickly became apparent that the only place our sick toddler wanted to rest was in my arms. I spent the majority of the workday attending to my son, all the while stressing about the time-sensitive list of tasks waiting for me to finalize my presentation and fulfill my other academic responsibilities, including a review due by midnight for a journal where I serve on the editorial review board. In addition, I was teaching a “custom” special topics class for which I needed to review the assigned readings and finalize slides for the following day while also managing a student conduct issue. I hadn’t yet packed for my trip either—partly out of procrastination as I knew the insecurities that would take over as I began trying on professional dresses that I hadn’t worn since my pre-pregnancy days. With a still-empty suitcase in sight, I finished reviewing my presentation slides and called it a day, knowing that I would only have a short window of uninterrupted sleep before hearing the wails of a sick toddler needing a middle-of-the-night dose of Tylenol.

Although every day is (thankfully) not like the one described above, it wouldn’t be hyperbolic to say that there are several weeks each academic year during which days like this tend to be the norm rather than the exception. Indeed, in the months and years that follow childbirth and the reentry period, children continue to need the care and attention of their primary caregiver (who is often, although not always, their mother) *regardless* of the presence of reliable and high-quality childcare arrangements. These needs often come in varying forms—such as attending to illnesses, dealing with unanticipated loss of childcare (e.g., school closures, nanny resignations, etc.), going to healthcare-related appointments, and being present during school events. In short, motherhood does not stop for anything or anyone and is certainly not a “business hours” or “non-business hours only” responsibility. Indeed, it has only been a handful of years since society began explicitly acknowledging the full-time nature of motherhood with recent research noting that motherhood alone is equivalent to working 2.5 jobs (Marcoux, 2018).

Yet, the incompatibility of motherhood and the nature of academic work (i.e., highly focused and intellectually intense) is often overlooked and/or easily dismissed. Many academics would agree that “stacking” responsibilities to promote greater focus in one area over others (e.g., teaching vs. research) for a given period facilitates the immersive engagement needed for success on the tenure track. However, childcare cannot be shifted to one semester or contained to the summer months. Rather, the incessant caregiving needs are intermingled with faculty responsibilities such that the onset of a child’s illness, for instance, may disrupt one’s dedicated time for focused, deep work on research or even overlap with intensive, compressed teaching.

The unrelenting nature of these demands is also compounded by the fact that a complete and accurate picture of academic mothers' day-to-day reality is rarely discussed. Even when these responsibilities are shared between both parents, mothers tend to take on the lion's share of the *mental* load—both cognitive and emotional—associated with childcare (e.g., anticipating needs, planning ahead; Hogenboom, 2021). There is also little consideration that the best or only faculty positions available to job-seeking academic mothers are often in locations far from family (Brickson, 2011), necessitating significant investments in finding and arranging reliable, high-quality childcare, building a supportive “village,” and even developing trusted relationships with caregivers in the child's social network (e.g., parents of friends). The invisibility of relentless childcare responsibilities exacerbates the toll it takes on mothers, especially as women are implicitly discouraged from discussing their experiences and struggles in a field that actively dissuades women from motherhood—particularly during the pretenure years (Maupin & Chawla, 2022). It arguably also takes a toll on others in the mother's network, as those desiring to offer support can neither provide sufficient help nor validate a struggle that they do not see or understand. Further, enduring solutions that would benefit others who will subsequently face these caregiving challenges are unlikely as most mothers quietly attempt to resolve these challenges independently and idiosyncratically.

### Re-envisioning a culture of support for academic mothers

Gabriel et al.'s (2023) call for a “cultural shift” that no longer renders child caregiving and academic success incompatible deeply resonated with us. To facilitate this shift, the authors provided a number of insightful and important ways for child caregiving allies (e.g., department heads and colleagues) to support academic mothers. Building on their piece, we believe that a true cultural shift cannot occur without acknowledging the fundamental and undeniable truth—motherhood's inherent incompatibilities with work structures, that are so candidly conveyed in the opening quote, transcend the pregnancy, postpartum, and “new mom” periods. Thus, crafting a culture that facilitates academic mothers' success requires ensuring forms of support that are not only limited to these stages of caregiving but, rather, are ever present.

Below, we draw on the “start, stop, continue” model often used in classrooms, with the belief that such self-reflection can spearhead much-needed improvement in academe, and endures beyond any one academic mother's experience, thereby benefitting academic mothers broadly. From the perspective of three academic mothers who outwardly seem to be thriving but are inwardly grappling with the constant conflicting demands of academia and motherhood, we hope that these considerations and associated practices relegate the norms of invisibility to the past and provide women the opportunity to be effective professors *and* mothers.

### Practices to start: Embracing the nonlinearity of mothers' careers

There is often an implicit assumption that faculty are successful in their publishing, teaching, and/or service in a linear fashion across years. However, caregiving responsibilities ebb and flow throughout academic mothers' careers. When children are young, they require significant “hands on” caregiving, often at the expense of a parent's work time. As children grow and develop, they may require more socioemotional support, taking significant amounts of cognitive and emotional energy, in addition to the time demands that are all pervading. Thus, there not only needs to be continued support for academic mothers but also the forms of support offered need to be dynamic and adaptable, mirroring the evolving needs of children over time. We see two practices that could

help ameliorate the disconnect between an assumption of linearity of academic success and the dynamic nonlinearity of “real life” for mothers.

First, universities should create opportunities for substitution in tasks where multiple faculty members could reasonably be interchangeable. Whether or not a mother needs coverage, knowing this is a possibility could allay the looming feelings of guilt for not being able to be in two places at the same time (e.g., with a sick child at home and in a committee meeting). Second, promotion and tenure committees should establish ways of evaluating performance that take a longer term perspective, recognizing that fluctuations in publications are not a signal of failure but rather a nonlinear pattern of effectiveness for women caregivers (González Ramos *et al.*, 2015). Publishing evaluations that take a multiyear rather than a single-year perspective, making video conferencing into some meetings the norm rather than the exception, or thinking about a faculty member’s service as a portfolio over the course of one’s tenure with a given institution rather than during a short time frame, would develop a culture that facilitates academic mothers’ successes and allows the institution to have a more comprehensive view of their contributions.

Finally, the nonlinearity of success can—and should—be embraced and celebrated by colleagues, coauthors, and senior scholars outside of any formal policies when the opportunity arises. As an especially illustrative example, we share the email response that one member of the author team received after emailing a journal editor about a request for a deadline extension during a month-long period of illnesses in her family. The editor said:

HANG IN THERE . . . the parenting stuff is no joke. It’s easy to put ourselves under a lot of pressure with publication numbers, review deadlines, etc., but it’s also easy to lose sight of what is most important. In that regard, I admire your willingness to say “this can wait.” Keep that up!

During a period of extreme stress as deadlines are being missed and little research is progressing due to childcare demands, signals such as these serve as reminders that one challenging month does not negate prior accomplishments nor prevent future successes. Similar to a week of summer family vacation followed by a week at a summer academic conference offsetting one another in terms of family time and career investment, the not-so-predictable periods of time that are heavily focused in one area over the other can coexist in harmony (McMillan *et al.*, 2011), even if it does not feel that way in the moment.

### **Practices to stop: Using outdated proxies for performance**

Although the business world around us seems to be shifting toward more flexible ways of working and utilization of performance evaluations that center on the work product, our experience is that—in many ways—academia is holding steadfastly onto the past. Many academics explicitly or implicitly use outdated proxies for day-to-day performance in academia, such as physical presence in one’s office or at meetings (rather than writing from home or attending via video conference). There is also an assumption that policies previously implemented (e.g., stop the clock) have automatically and effectively paved a pathway to success for women. Yet, for every woman in academia who has earned tenure, we see two who have either removed themselves from the tenure track or left academia altogether. If we are aiming to retain academic mothers, it is best to stop waiting for people to ask for needed accommodations (e.g., asking for a Zoom link to an otherwise in-person meeting). Indeed, in the nonacademic business world, companies now view accommodations as part and parcel of building an inclusive work environment. In academia, however, inclusive considerations seem to be the exception to the rule rather than the norm. This puts the burden on the individual to ask for an accommodation or, perhaps even worse, to accept things as they are and overextend themselves. Relatedly, we urge scholars to stop assuming that

one's own experience as a caregiver, or observations of other caregivers' experiences, matches that of other caregiving colleagues (Gabriel et al., 2023). Every mother's experience is different; we have different family structures, financial means, and childcare demands, needs, and arrangements. Just because one academic mother "made it work" does not mean that the system is set up for success for all academic mothers. And, ultimately, shouldn't we be striving to learn from past experiences and create a future in which academia and motherhood are truly compatible for all?

### Practices to continue: Making nonwork life conversations more of a norm

Building on the momentum of the changes heralded by the COVID-19 pandemic, we are heartened to see progress in recognizing the *full* lives of academic mothers, and the other priorities that are salient to child caregivers as they simultaneously balance research, teaching, and service responsibilities. We sincerely hope that scholars continue to share their nonwork experiences while also leveraging these experiences to develop new recommendations for future generations of academic mothers. Further, given that most academics will at least at one point in their career need to deviate from the "traditional approach" to academic success, we hope that policy makers continue involving men and other nonacademic mothers in the efforts to redesign the conventional approach to academic success—an endeavor we believe is important for caregiving responsibilities that extend beyond child rearing (e.g., eldercare; spousal caregiving).<sup>1</sup>

### Conclusion

The invisibility of child caregiving demands is a key challenge for academic mothers. Gabriel and colleagues' call for greater visibility of the 24–7 demands of motherhood is a step toward a shared understanding of these challenges among academics and an opportunity to shift academic culture in ways that promote not just the personal and professional survival of academic mothers but also the realization of their potential to thrive across roles. It is our hope that the considerations we have outlined represent a starting point to facilitate this culture shift.

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<sup>1</sup>Given that the focal article is specifically focused on child-rearing-related caregiving, we wanted to ensure that our commentary focused on the same phenomenon. Yet, aspects of our piece certainly apply and generalize to non-child-rearing-related caregiving, too.

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