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Challenges Experienced By One Academic Mother Transitioning From Maternity Leave Back to Academia

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While many scholars have written about the experience of academic motherhood in higher education, with their research revealing a number of challenges faced by academic mothers, none have presented an in-depth view of the transition of returning to work after maternity leave. For this reason, the authors used a narrative inquiry approach to analyze and interpret the first author’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences as she transitioned from maternity leave to full-time academic work as a tenured, associate professor of education at a research university. During that transition, she faced challenges related to the prioritization and fulfillment of her academic work as well as those associated with childcare and household responsibilities. The authors provide suggestions for new, or soon-to-be-new, academic mothers and recommendations for higher education personnel to support new academic mothers who are transitioning to the full-time workforce.

As we approached the time to leave our house, I had a sick, empty feeling in my stomach. I looked at Dave [my husband], and said, “This is so hard! I feel like I’m shirking my responsibilities.” Then, the tears started to flow. He gave me a tight hug and told me that it would be okay and that Levi [our 3-month old son] would be fine with Lori [our childcare provider]. As I got closer to Lori’s house, I could still feel that emptiness in my stomach. Levi was asleep in his car seat when I got there. I sat him down right inside the door and then broke into tears again. Lori hugged me and said, “You are a good mom.” I know that’s what I needed to hear at that moment. When I got to the parking lot at the university, I broke down for a third time. Thankfully, I managed to pull myself together after that, and I made it through my first day back at work. (Christy, January 19)

The timing seemed perfect. Christy’s pre-tenure days were almost behind her when, at the age of 35, she accepted Dave’s proposal to marry. She was a faculty member at a large research university in the Midwest, and he was a real estate investor in the community in which they lived. Seventeen months after their wedding day, Christy gave birth to Levi, her firstborn son. As she held her beloved Levi in her arms for the first time, Christy could not have imagined how
her future return to academic life, three months later, would result in such intense struggles that she would question her desire and ability to continue her career in academia, a career that she dearly loved. The purpose of this article is to describe the challenges faced by Christy, a tenured associate professor of education, as she returned to academic work the semester after being on maternity leave and to offer some recommendations for new, or soon-to-be new, mothers and their institutions based upon Christy’s experiences.

Many non-academicians believe that the flexible and autonomous nature of the work of academic faculty members allows them to easily balance work and family responsibilities, but that is not necessarily the case. It is true that most faculty members enjoy flexibility and autonomy. Academic mothers are especially grateful for such a work structure because it offers an opportunity to spend time with their children during the daytime hours as needed or desired (Haynie, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). However, while there are obvious advantages to the flexible and autonomous nature of academic work, significant disadvantages also exist. For instance, Comer and Stites-Doe (2006) stated that it is easy for academic mothers to allow their discretionary time to be consumed with the “immediate demands of childcare” (p. 501) rather than with academic-related activities. Because colleges and universities are “greedy institutions” (Coser, 1974) that are highly demanding and assume that faculty will give their work roles highest priority, the nature of academic work results in a workload that is seemingly never-ending (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004).

While a significant amount of research highlights the challenges faced by non-tenured, tenure-track faculty at research universities (e.g., Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011; Mason & Goulden, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), only a few scholars have discussed the unique pressures that impact tenured academicians at such institutions. For instance, faculty members are expected to assume increased service and mentoring responsibilities upon earning tenure, and many do so while lacking mentors of their own (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Research suggests that academic mothers lack role models to assist with challenges related to academic motherhood (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011). Also, while there are no longer research expectations that must be met within a specified time frame, many tenured academic mothers at research universities still experience research-related stress (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) stated that research-related stress is particularly acute for those who are burned out after having gone through the tenure process and/or who desire to eventually be promoted to full professor and for whom research is still an expectation. For these reasons, tenured academic mothers at research institutions, including Christy, face academic challenges even after earning tenure.

While a number of scholars have investigated the experiences of academic mothers in higher education (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011; O’Meara & Campbell, 2011; Philipsen, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2009), a significant amount of work remains to be done in this area. For one, much of the existing research has focused upon pre-tenure academic mothers and the challenges they face related to having babies or very young children while on the tenure track. In contrast, very few studies have highlighted the challenges faced by tenured, academic mothers with very young children. The lack of focus upon tenured academic mothers of young children is fascinating considering that many academics, like Christy, do not have their first child until after they are tenured (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011); thus, a number of tenured academic mothers have babies or preschool-aged children (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Additionally, an in-depth view into academic mothers’ actual transition back to work after maternity leave is absent from the literature. To learn about the experiences of academic mothers, researchers have relied on interviews with those who have
been back at work long enough to clearly articulate their perceived challenges and opportunities (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011; Philipsen, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Academic mothers who are just returning to work after giving birth to a child experience fresh emotions and new expectations from themselves and their institutions based upon their role change, ones that may be overlooked or forgotten if they are not immediately discussed.

In response to the lack of published first-hand experiences about returning to the workforce, the authors used a narrative inquiry approach to explore Christy’s experiences of transitioning into the full-time academic workforce after becoming an academic mother. The guiding research question for this study stemmed from Christy’s situation: What are the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a tenured, associate professor (Christy) during her first semester of full-time academic work after being on maternity leave with her first son?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Similar to others who use a narrative inquiry methodology, the authors did not use a formal \textit{a priori} theoretical framework for this study. They did, however, use a postmodern perspective (Chang, 2008), viewing “self as a ‘fragile’ and interdependent being” (p. 24), to inform both the methodology of the study and their own constructed understandings of academic motherhood. In addition to being postmodern, the perspectives expressed are inherently feminist (although a feminist lens was not used to frame the study or to analyze the data). Christy, while not identifying as a feminist herself, is a woman and, as a working mother in higher education, has expectations of herself and of her higher education institution that have been established by other scholars, many of whom have self-identified as feminists.

METHOD

As mentioned above, the authors used a narrative inquiry methodology to explore Christy’s transition into academic motherhood. The purpose of narrative inquiry is to understand the wholeness of human experience through data collected in the form of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). This methodology was well suited for this study because stories offer revealing glimpses into inner selves (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 2002). The stories collected in this study provide insight into Christy’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences as she transitioned back to full-time faculty work as an associate professor of education at a research university after giving birth to her firstborn son.

Procedure

\textit{Data collection}

From a narrative perspective, stories are said to define our experience; our narratives help to create a coherent, yet subjective, understanding of our life experiences (Sarbin, 1986; Scheibe, 1986). To that end, Christy used writing as the method of inquiry and data collection for this study, since writing is a critical tool for collecting, presenting, and analyzing data (Richardson, 2000).
Christy collected one narrative data set by journaling. After she gave birth to Levi on October 19, 2010, she was at home with him until the Spring 2011 semester began in mid-January. On December 31, 2010, Christy began making entries into a journal; she regularly documented stories that revealed her thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to returning to work after having assumed her new role as an academic mother until the end of the Spring 2011 semester in mid-May.

Christy also compiled personal memory data for this study. One of the types of personal memory data often used in narrative studies is an autobiographical timeline of events and experiences in chronological order (Chang, 2008). Christy chose to include only the events and experiences related to her developing thoughts and feelings concerning mothers in the full-time workforce since that was the focus of this study. Christy also used a second set of personal memory data: her recollection of the perspectives and experiences of her mentors as they related to mothers in the full-time workforce. The perspectives of mentors typically have a significant impact on one’s self-perceptions and worldview (Chang, 2008).

**Data analysis and interpretation**

Data analysis and interpretation are the processes thorough which the data become a cogent account of observed phenomena and involve a “balancing act between fracturing and connecting, between zooming in and zooming out” (Chang, 2008, p. 128). Fracturing, or categorizing, involves two main activities: coding and organizing data (Maxwell, 2005). For this study, the authors independently engaged in this fracturing process before meeting to discuss the emerging findings. Upon meeting, they engaged in the last three components of the data analysis process: connecting, zooming in, and zooming out (Maxwell, 2005). “Connecting” involved their attempts “to understand the data in context, using various methods to identify the relationships among the different elements of the data” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 98). By “zooming in,” they engaged in a microscopic analysis of the data through which they paid attention to details and probed into small segments at a time. Finally, the “zooming out” process involved taking a bird’s-eye view of the data, which enabled them to see how Christy’s case is related to others, to its context, and to the past (Maxwell, 2005, p. 129

**Trustworthiness**

The methodology of this study places Christy in the roles of both researcher and subject; these roles are intertwined and complex. Although the stories reflect Christy’s biased and subjective constructed views of the world, the authors worked to create a sense of authenticity by writing in an open and reflective manner. Rather than judging the rigor of this research by a standard of objectivity, judge instead the authors’ ability to create a rich, authentic, and meaningful context for their interpretations, which allows the reader an intimate view of how they arrived at their constructions.

The trustworthiness of this research was enhanced through analyst triangulation, member checking, and the establishment of an audit trail. Analyst triangulation involves the use of two or more people who independently analyze the same qualitative data and compare their findings (Patton, 2002). While the data reflected only Christy’s experiences, both the authors analyzed and interpreted them. Also, Christy engaged in member checking (Patton, 2002) by providing
this manuscript to the individuals mentioned in her journal so that they could provide feedback about their words and actions and the meaning of them. Furthermore, an audit trail was established as both authors clearly documented all research decisions and activities throughout the course of the project (Whitt, 1991).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Christy faced significant challenges during the semester she returned to full-time academic work after being on maternity leave with Levi. Analysis of the data revealed four themes that summarize these challenges: trying new work strategies while working with a sense of urgency, moving from an “ideal worker” to becoming a “satisficing” academic, shamefully using part-time childcare and reluctantly seeking full-time childcare, and wanting to do it all yet desperately seeking Dave’s [her husband] assistance at home. The first two themes pertain directly to Christy’s role as an academic, and the last two pertain to her roles as mother and wife.

Trying New Work Strategies and Working with a Sense of Urgency

Christy gave very little thought to her post-baby academic life prior to giving birth to Levi. In fact, her only concern was that she might love being a mother so much that she would lose the desire to work full-time outside the home. On the one occasion during maternity leave that she thought through the details of post-baby academic life, Christy anticipated that she would be able to work at home quite often:

I hauled half my office home this evening. Well, it seemed like half of my office. I brought home textbooks and other course-related materials so that I could do more of my work here at the house. I only have one more week until classes start. So, I’ll have to start carving out time at home for work. We’ve set up a workstation for me up in the loft. I’ll be using my old kitchen table. It sits right next to the ping pong table. There’s a ledge next to the kitchen table. That is where I’ll set my course materials. Going up to the loft to do my work will give me a sense of separation from the rest of what’s going on in the house. Since my hearing is poor, I will likely not be able to hear Levi cry when I’m working. This will enable me to concentrate and to trust that Levi is doing well in Dave’s care. I’ve worked up there one time already, and it seemed to go well. An added bonus is that there’s a window close to the table. A window is lacking in my office on campus. (January 8)

Despite her initial optimism, Christy found that she could still hear Levi cry while she was up in the loft, so her plan to work up there immediately fell by the wayside. When she was at home, the demands of childcare superseded her ability to focus for any significant length of time on her academic work. She simply could not overlook the sounds of the Levi’s crying, even though Dave was taking care of him. When she sensed that Dave was struggling, she pushed her academic work aside and went downstairs to assist.

It did not take long for Christy to realize that the time, location, and method of accomplishing her academic work would need to change as a result of her becoming an academic mother. She realized that while attempting to work at home she would need to “fit” her work into “short segments” rather than “long chunks.” Less than two weeks after her trip upstairs to the loft to
work, she wrote the following: “Now my work will be scattered throughout the day in 5, 10, 15—and if I’m lucky—30 minute segments.”

While in the process of trying new work strategies, Christy also questioned the value of receiving e-mails on her Smartphone:

I’m wondering how wise it is to be carrying around a Smartphone on which I receive my e-mails as they come in. Perhaps it would be best to disable that function. Maybe then I can enjoy my time with Levi and only focus on work when I sit down at my computer. On the other hand, I’m able to delete and/or respond to various e-mails quickly throughout the day as they come in. This results in less work to do when I sit down at my desk. I’m not sure which is best. (February 6)

Ultimately, Christy concluded that her ability to manage some of her e-mails using her phone expedited the work that needed to be done while in the office.

Not surprisingly, Christy’s first semester back at work after maternity leave was characterized by her doing her work “as quickly as possible” and with a new “sense of urgency” so that she could “get back to Levi.” At times, she told Dave that she felt like she was running a race from the moment she woke up until the time she went to bed. These thoughts resonate with what others have written about how academic mothers allocate their time, the types of routines in which they engage, and their work habits. For instance, one academic mother in Philipsen’s (2008) study felt like she worked “faster than she ever worked before” and that some days she felt like she was on “fast forward” (p. 114). Also, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004) discussed how the academic mothers in their study had to become more efficient and organized to get their work done. One outcome of Christy’s changing work patterns and concurrent sense of urgency was that she had to change her self-expectations as an academic.

Moving from an “Ideal Worker” to Becoming a “Satisficing” Academic

Prior to having Levi, Christy could have been classified as an “ideal worker” (Williams, 2000) in that she allowed her academic work to take priority in her life, even consuming some weekend hours, in order to meet the demands of tenure. She spent a significant amount of time preparing for and teaching her graduate-level classes, serving on committees, advising and mentoring graduate students, and conducting and publishing research studies. Before becoming a mother, it was not uncommon for Christy to volunteer for extra responsibilities, such as traveling to conferences to represent the department and proctoring weekend comprehensive exams for masters-degree seeking students. While some academicians experience stress when attempting to meet their pre-child expectations at work after becoming mothers (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011), Christy quickly came to the realization that she no longer had the time or energy to do so. Research suggests that, like Christy, other academic mothers question their pre-child ideal worker norms after the birth of their first child (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012).

Throughout her first semester at work after maternity leave, Christy regularly chose to “satisfice” rather than to strive to meet her pre-child ideal worker expectations (partially due to her childcare situation, detailed in the next section). According to Simon (1981), to satisfice is to be content with being good enough rather than the best. One of Christy’s journal entries summarizes her early apprehension about satisficing in all domains of her academic work:

I went to the office today, a Saturday, for a couple of hours so that I could review and rate the Merit Review materials of my [faculty] colleagues. I became increasingly more concerned with each file
that I reviewed. I know that I have three publications coming out in 2011. But, after that, will I have any publications to list before Levi goes to school full-time? My biggest fear is that I’ll just barely have enough time to keep up with teaching, advising, and committee work and that I will have absolutely NO time at all for research. (January 22)

As the previous journal entry reflects, Christy was concerned about her productivity in the area of research; she knew that she would have to devote less time to her scholarly pursuits since her other work commitments (e.g., teaching, advising) were more structured and observable. In fact, about midway through the semester, she briefly considered volunteering for a research opportunity mostly due to the fact that it would provide existing data with which she could work, thus facilitating the research process. While considering that option, she struggled with the idea that she might be trying to “cut corners” in her work and wondered whether or not she should be “ashamed” of that motivation or simply “embrace that fact” for this season in her life.

Christy’s decision to satisfice in the realm of research is not uncommon among academic mothers at research universities (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Research suggests that having children produces a negative effect on research productivity for many women (Sonnert & Holton, 1995; Stack, 2004; Suitor, Mecom, & Feld, 2001). Many academic mothers, including Christy, come to the realization that they must “let go of having to be the absolute top of the heap, the superstar” (Philipsen, 2008, p. 122) where research is concerned. This decision can be difficult for many women at research universities, even those who are tenured, due to the fact that they need continued productivity in their scholarly pursuits if they hope to attain the rank of full professor in the future. Although Christy was already tenured, her need to continue her research coupled with her inability to maintain pre-child ideal worker norms in that area of responsibility resulted in great stress during her first semester back at work.

Similar to many academic mothers (Philipsen, 2008), Christy had to satisfice in other areas of her academic work as well. For instance, she made some course-related decisions that would expedite her class preparation:

My only goal for the teaching portion of my job this year is to revise the “Research Methods” course. Once again, I saw God’s hand at work here in that my SAGE representative sent me an exam copy of a new Research Methods textbook. It turns out that it comes with wonderful resources (including a sample syllabus) for online courses! Not only does it come with PowerPoints, but it also comes with lecture notes. So, I could audio-record lectures to go along with the PowerPoints! Also, it has great assessments and sample research articles. I think I’ll start using it! Again, though, I feel a bit guilty. Am I choosing this book simply because it will result in less work that I need to do to revise the course? Or, is it truly the best book for the course? I think it meets both needs. Is it okay to admit that I am trying to figure out the quickest and easiest way to get my work done right now? To be sure, that’s my motivation. (March 2)

She also decided to temporarily decrease her involvement in committee work:

I’m certain that my colleagues are noticing that I’m not volunteering for as many committees and extra work as I used to. In fact, I opted not to serve an additional 3-year term on a college committee even though others whose terms were up on various committees extended their terms. I’m still not sure that I’ll be able to maintain this type of schedule. (February 6)

Other examples of satisficing were detailed in Christy’s journal on March 2: not volunteering to proctor comprehensive exams for the master’s-degree seeking students and not volunteering
to represent the department at the Oshkosh Placement Exchange, an experience that would have entailed traveling for four days. Despite her previous engagement in these activities and the guilt she felt from not volunteering, Christy knew that if she had to decide whether to put time with her child first or time at her job (away from her child) first, she would choose time with her child whenever possible.

As Christy’s journal entries reflect, guilt was a byproduct of Christy’s decisions to satisfice in her academic work. A similar emotion, shame, plagued Christy the entire first semester as she grappled with the reality that she and Dave were entrusting a portion of Levi’s care to someone else. Prior to and throughout her entire pregnancy, Christy never imagined the challenges, both physical and mental, that she would face concerning childcare.

Shamefully Using Part-Time Childcare and Reluctantly Seeking Full-time Childcare

About three weeks prior to Christy’s return to work, she and Dave revisited the issue of childcare. During Christy’s pregnancy, they had talked about possible childcare options and had placed Levi on numerous waiting lists. However, none of the childcare facilities had openings. They were both relieved when, in late December, Lori, a family friend, agreed to watch Levi in her home for about 15 hours per week. Given the fact that Lori’s son was 18 months old at the time, Christy was encouraged by her recent experience with infants. Even more appealing was the fact that Christy would not be away from Levi for more than 15 hours per week; Christy was convinced that she would only need to spend 15 hours per week in the office and that she could fulfill the rest of her work-responsibilities from home until Levi got a little older. She felt grateful that the unspoken norms in her department allowed for such a flexible work arrangement. Perhaps most important, however, was that Christy and Dave trusted Lori. Little did Christy know that letting go of Levi for even 15 hours per week, however, would be one of the biggest challenges of her new role as a mother. With 11 days of maternity leave left, Christy wrote:

"As I think about dropping Levi off at Lori’s that first morning, I have to wonder how I’ll feel when I drive away from the house. Will Lori give him the same love that Dave and I give him? Will he feel safe at her house? Will he adjust well to being around others? (January 8)"

Her true feelings about childcare emerged when she wrote on January 22: “We want to be the primary caregivers for Levi. Are we asking too much? Can this really be done?”

In spite of her reticence toward even part-time childcare, it took less than a month back at work for Christy to realize that 15 hours of care per week were not enough. She was getting the bare minimum done while in the office and was finding it difficult to allocate other periods of time while at home to finish her work. On February 6, she wrote:

"Last night, I told Dave that we are truly making this harder on ourselves by our decision not to have Levi in full-time childcare. To be sure, if Levi was in full-time childcare, I’d have plenty of time to do my work and would have to do very little of it at home. (February 6)"

The struggle to determine the ideal amount of childcare persisted throughout the first semester and beyond. At times, Christy would try to figure out how to keep Lori as a part-time caregiver by simply asking Dave to watch Levi more regularly during the weekdays. She believed that if Lori was willing to care for Levi for 20 hours per week (which Lori agreed to
do), and if Dave would watch him for 10 hours per week, she would be able to get all of her work done. Christy readily acknowledged that the nature of her academic work coupled with the presence of a supportive spouse granted her the privilege of attempting to piece together a part-time childcare arrangement while continuing to work full-time; many other working women have no choice but to place their children in full-time childcare, Even with that privilege, the structure and inflexibility inherent in the part-time childcare schedule increased Christy’s stress even more.

Christy finally and reluctantly concluded that a full-time childcare situation would ultimately work best:

With full-time childcare, we could drop Levi off and pick him up anytime between the hours of 6:30am and 6:00pm. One thing that’s difficult with having Lori as our babysitter is that the schedule becomes so rigid. There’s a set drop-off and pick-up time. I wouldn’t have that rigidity to worry about if he was in full-time childcare. Maybe I could start off my day going 80 mph rather than 100 mph. I’m sure that I could get my work done in about 30 hours per week, so I wouldn’t keep Levi in childcare longer than necessary. But, I feel so torn about all of this. While my sister has told me about the benefits of group day care for kids, I also know about the downfalls (e.g., more likely that Levi would get sick more often, wouldn’t receive as much individualized attention, would be cared for by people who do not love him as much as we do). (May 12)

Even so, one major problem remained: Christy and Dave were unable to find full-time childcare for Levi. So, Lori continued to care for Levi for about 20 hours per week throughout the remainder of Christy’s first semester at work. At times, Christy felt so much stress due to the lack of time to do her academic work-related tasks that she questioned whether she should continue her full-time work in the academy, a decision with which many other academic mothers grapple as well (Evans & Grant, 2008).

Indeed, decisions related to childcare are significant stressors among many academic mothers (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011; Philipsen, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). First, many simply cannot find the type of childcare they desire. For instance, several of the faculty in Philipsen’s study stated that they needed “high-quality, affordable, nearby childcare with flexible hours” (2008, p. 235) as well as care options for children with special needs, for mildly sick children, and for school-age children. Most of these women reported that when childcare was provided at their higher education institution, there were too few spots and excessively long waiting lists. Christy placed Levi on the waiting list for the on-site childcare at her university shortly after realizing that she was pregnant; as this article was written, a spot still was not available for him.

Moreover, the guilt and shame that many working mothers feel as a result of placing their children in childcare is evident in the literature and is likely due, in part, to cultural norms related to mothering. For instance, Douglas and Michaels (2004) described what U.S. culture deems good mothering as including three key features: motherhood completes a woman; mothers are children’s best caretakers; and mothers must devote themselves fully to their children (physically, intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically). Indeed, a commonly held myth in U.S. society is that childcare is always lower quality care than mother care (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011). Mothers who place their children in childcare might believe that they are falling short of “good mothering” and thus experience “mother guilt” (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011, p. 33). According to Sutherland (2010), guilt is typically thought of as a
negative self-evaluation focusing on specific acts or behaviors. Some women even experience shame, which according to Sutherland “tends to strike at one’s guts, igniting negative self-evaluations about the entirety of one’s self” (2010, p. 214). Christy experienced both guilt and shame as a result of placing Levi in someone else’s care, neither of which are helpful for academic mothers.

Perhaps what was most fascinating was that Christy experienced mother guilt at times even when Dave was watching Levi. Because Christy had to be away from Levi for 15–20 hours per week while she was at the office doing her academic work, she felt guilty about being away from Levi at other times. At the same time, she needed Dave’s assistance and some time away from Levi while she was at home. For these reasons, Christy and Dave experienced some challenges in their marriage.

Wanting to Do It All Yet Desperately Seeking Assistance at Home

Given the stress that Christy experienced related to completing her academic work in the short amount of time that she had available to focus upon it, she desperately needed time to slow down and to take care of her personal needs. However she struggled with mother guilt about leaving Levi with Dave for even short trips away from the house. On January 22, she wrote:

I still find myself rushing when I leave Levi with Dave. For instance, I needed to get my hair cut this evening and told Dave, “I’ll be back as soon as I can.” It’s as if I feel guilty about asking him to care for Levi on his own. Dave told me that I shouldn’t feel like I have to rush. And, I know that Dave is competent and takes good care of Levi. How do I let go of the guilt? How do I relax when others are caring for him?

At the same time that she experienced mother guilt when leaving Levi in Dave’s care, Christy also grew increasingly resentful toward Dave as she regularly observed him enjoying the type of “free time” that she so desperately desired while they were all at home. Early in the semester, she wrote:

I have just come to the realization that I resent the fact that Dave doesn’t feel the same degree of responsibility for Levi as I do. Basically, the unspoken understanding is that I’ll take care of Levi unless I ask Dave to do something with him. So, I find myself taking care of Levi while also trying to do laundry, load the dishwasher, reply to students’ e-mails, make phone calls, etc. All the while, it’s not uncommon for Dave to be doing his own thing—working, taking a nap, talking on the phone —almost oblivious to the stress that I’m experiencing. (January 30)

Other researchers have noted that it is not uncommon for academic mothers to report a lack of assistance from their spouses at home (Hewlett, 2002; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Philipsen, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Indeed, many women who hold full-time employment outside the home are typically expected to work a “second shift” (Hochschild, 1989) at home; they, rather than their spouses, are primarily responsible for taking care of the children and household chores. One of the academic mothers in Philipsen’s study (2008) stated that when she and her husband were both at home, she was the one who felt responsibility for the baby even if they were both sitting in the same room; her husband was able to concentrate on something else while her attention was always “divided” (p. 27). A number of
scholars (e.g., Konrad & Cannings, 1994; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012) pointed to traditional gender role notions about primary parenting as the source of this inequitable workload at home. Likely, these traditional gender role notions subconsciously influenced Dave’s thoughts and actions related to childcare and housework at home; his own father was employed full-time outside of the home while his mother was charged with taking care of the children and other household responsibilities. Such traditional gender role notions likely influenced Christy’s self-expectations as well.

However, Christy eventually learned that Dave was not as bound by gender role expectations as it initially appeared. She gained some insight into Dave’s thoughts and actions when she finally confronted him:

Last night, we went to Dave’s mom’s house for dinner and to watch a basketball game. No sooner had dinner ended than Dave took off by himself to head to the office to surf the Internet for information about the Model T car that his mom is thinking of selling. Meanwhile, I was with Levi and was responsible for engaging in conversations with his [Dave’s] mom. It wasn’t until near the end of the game that Dave came to the TV area and joined us. When I expressed my dissatisfaction about his departure (leaving me with Levi), he said, “Well, it looked like you had everything under control.” The light bulb went off in my mind. In his mind, if things look like they are under control, he just goes on about his business. In my mind, even if things look like they are under control—and even if they are under control—I still get exhausted and need a break from Levi. (January 30)

The issue of control arose in Philipsen’s (2008) study as well. Specifically, one academic mother admitted that she had “difficulty letting her husband take over domestic duties” and that she liked to be “in control” (p. 28). Philipsen commented on the words this professor chose to use when discussing the “division of labor” between she and her husband, saying, “She is clearly the one in charge, in other words, of domestic affairs, either by being ‘hands on’ and doing it herself or delegating, managing, and telling her husband, ‘I need you to do x, y, and z today’” (p. 28). Christy found herself in the same situation. Dave did not have childcare and household responsibilities on his radar unless Christy explicitly discussed them with him. Thankfully, every time Christy brought up her need for Dave’s help with Levi while at home, he eagerly responded that he was willing to do so. Dave simply needed more direction in knowing what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. When Christy started providing direction, Dave rose to the challenge and offered great assistance.

Not surprisingly, research suggests that partners are a factor in the ability of academic mothers to successfully combine career and parenting roles (Jacobs & Gerson, 2001; Philipsen, 2008). Academic women with partners who help with childcare and who provide encouragement for the women’s academic roles are more likely to balance both of these roles (Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006; Crittendon, 2001). Indeed, some academic mothers have partners who choose to stay at home full-time and provide a significant amount of support. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) distinguished between a partner’s help with children and appreciation and respect for one’s career as, respectively, behavioral and emotional support. Academic mothers need both and must be willing to accept both. In Christy’s case, Dave provided a great deal of emotional support but needed assistance in knowing how to provide behavioral support. Christy now describes him as a phenomenal and wholly supportive husband and father.
IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study revealed significant challenges faced by Christy as she returned to full-time academic work after being on maternity leave with Levi. While experiencing a sense of urgency and experimenting with new work strategies, Christy realized her need to “satisfice” (Simon, 1981) in her academic work. Moreover, her perspective on childcare evolved as she realized her need for more assistance with Levi in order to be able to accomplish her academic tasks. In addition, while not at the office, her desire for more assistance from Dave coexisted with her desire to be present and active at home, resulting in some short-term tension in her marriage. It is highly likely that other women face similar challenges as they transition to their academic work after maternity leave. For that reason, the authors offer suggestions for new, or soon-to-be-new, academic mothers as well as recommendations for higher education personnel in general. While the following suggestions and recommendations are specifically focused on new academic mothers, much can be gleaned from them for supporting women who work full-time in other positions in higher education and who are also new, or soon-to-be-new, mothers.

Suggestions for New, or Soon-to-be-New, Academic Mothers

There are several ways that women who are new, or soon-to-be-new, mothers can prepare for the transition to academic work after maternity leave. First, they should prepare to engage in work-related satisficing (or be prepared to sacrifice time with their child). In addition, they should seek to understand and embrace the benefits of quality full-time childcare. Finally, they should regularly communicate their personal needs to the rest of their family.

Prepare to engage in work-related satisficing

New academic mothers should prepare to satisfice in their academic work and should not be surprised if their overall academic productivity suffers during their pregnancy or during the six months after the birth of their child (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011). While some studies have indicated that having children has no effect on the research productivity of academic mothers (Bryson, Bryson, & Johnson, 1978; Fox & Faver, 1985; Helmreich, Spence, Beane, Lucker, & Matthews, 1980), many have suggested that female faculty with children publish less than those who are not mothers (Cole, 1979; Hargens, McCann, & Reskin, 1978; Kyvik, 1990; Long, 1990; Sonnert & Holton, 1995; Stack, 2004). Furthermore, as Christy’s experience demonstrates, research is not the only area that might be negatively affected when female faculty become mothers. New academic mothers might have to satisfice in the areas of teaching and service as well. New, or soon-to-be-new, academic mothers are advised to seek out more seasoned academic mothers and to learn from their experiences related to satisficing in an effort to prepare to do the same.

Understand and embrace the use of quality, full-time childcare

Christy is probably not the only academic mother who has struggled with decisions related to childcare. Controversy surrounds maternal employment when children are infants and toddlers (Brooks-Gunn, Han, & Waldfogel, 2002; Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 1999; Gottfried, Gottfried,
For this reason, it is important for new academic mothers to be aware of the research related to the outcomes of young children in full-time childcare and to realize that the use of such childcare is “not shameful” (Kuhn, Mills, Rowe, & Garrett, 2008, p. 244). Some benefits of quality childcare for children include early socialization to other children, learning independence, and the opportunity to be surrounded by caring adults (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). A recent meta-analysis of 69 studies concluded that, with a few exceptions, early maternal employment accompanied by the use of full-time childcare was not significantly associated with later achievement or behavior problems among the children (Lucas-Thompson, Goldberg, & Prause, 2010). New academic mothers, then, are encouraged to embrace the use of quality, full-time childcare if needed.

**Regularly communicate personal needs to the rest of the family**

Christy experienced personal stress and tension in her marriage as a result of her unmet personal needs (e.g., assistance from Dave with childcare and household responsibilities). Had she clearly identified those needs and communicated them to Dave as they occurred rather than after they had been unmet for a lengthy period of time, much of that stress and tension might have been prevented. In their research, O’Laughlin and Bischoff (2005) concluded that partner support for career is an influence that must be addressed, so “frank discussions between academics and their spouses or partners pertaining to career and family priorities” (p. 103) need to occur among families. New academic mothers are encouraged to initiate these conversations as soon as they are able to clearly identify and articulate their needs.

**Recommendations for Higher Education Personnel**

While the challenges for academic mothers are great, some higher education institutions are beginning to understand the importance of supporting employees who are also parents. Indeed, over the last decade, administrators at many research universities have implemented policies and support mechanisms to help academic parents balance work and family (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Based on Christy’s experiences, some specific steps that institutions can take to assist new academic mothers include: creating temporary part-time tenured or tenure-track positions, supporting the development of mentoring groups for academic mothers, and assisting academic mothers in identifying quality childcare and gaining familial support.

**Create temporary part-time tenured or tenure-track positions**

Allowing new academic mothers the opportunity to work part-time for a period of time and return to full-time employment later is a recommendation made by Connelly and Ghodsee (2011), which seems like a reasonable method of assisting those who want to spend more time at home with their children while they are young without forcing them to opt out of their careers. While tenured or tenure-track part-time options are sometimes available for academic mothers (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), they are rare. Indeed, the opportunity to work part-time as a tenured faculty member would have appealed to Christy during Levi’s first year.
Support the development of mentoring groups for academic mothers

Higher education should support the development of mentoring groups to help new academic mothers, both pre-tenured and tenured (Philipsen, 2008). The lack of role models among academic mothers in higher education implies that many academic mothers have likely determined that they cannot meet the obligations of both career and family (O’Meara & Campbell, 2011). These women have either failed to be successful in both roles or they have left their academic careers. Had Christy been in close contact with other academic mothers who had already experienced the challenges she faced, she might have gained support and encouragement from their success.

Assist academic mothers in identifying quality childcare and in gaining familial support

Colleges and universities could also support new academic mothers by assisting them with the identification of quality childcare services (O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005) as well as by assisting them with gaining familial support. Human resources and academic departments could compile lists of local childcare facilities and provide them to soon-to-be-new academic mothers. Furthermore, human resources departments could provide professional development sessions to new, or soon-to-be-new, academic mothers and their partners in which future challenges can be addressed and plans of action developed. Had Christy been able to anticipate and plan for the challenges that she would eventually face as an academic mother prior to giving birth to Levi, her transition to academic work after maternity leave might have been smoother.

CONCLUSION

Research suggests that faculty women are more likely than faculty men to sacrifice their family aspirations. They are less likely to be married when they want to be and are more likely to report having fewer children than they would like (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Rudd, Morrison, Picciano, & Nerad, 2008). Indeed, some women academics make the decision to not have children at all for fear of incompatibility between academic work and family life (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988; Drago & Colbeck, 2003). Christy’s experience as a wife and mother is valuable for gaining insight into the challenges faced by academic mothers at research universities.

Indeed, as Christy’s experience and other research suggests (Connelly & Ghodsee, 2011; Evans & Grant, 2008; Philipsen, 2008; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), when women in academic professions choose to have a child, they face challenging decisions as they attempt to meet the obligations of both their work and family roles. The use of narrative inquiry for this study was helpful in illuminating the specific thoughts, feelings, and experiences, and depth of emotions that characterized Christy’s transition to work after her maternity leave. The authors are hopeful that the research, suggestions, and recommendations presented in this article may serve to better equip new, or soon-to-be-new, academic mothers and other mothers in full-time professional positions in higher education to handle possible challenges they face as they experience similar transitions. Such women bring a different perspective to the academy and have much to offer.
universities and students on many levels, and efforts should be made to retain them. Hopefully, many more academic mothers, and other mothers in full-time professional positions in higher education, will be able to maintain their careers should they desire to do so.

REFERENCES


