

Normal Wasn't Good: A Collaborative Autoethnography of the Intersectional Experiences of Academic Women of Color Mothering During the Dual Pandemics

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Abstract

Research has shown that women within academia, particularly mothers, continue to endure challenges in their workplaces. For Women of Color (WOC) who are mothers, these demands are exacerbated when there are expectations to take on additional responsibilities related to antiracist practices. This article centers on the experiences of three WOC who are tenure-earning mothers in academia during two ongoing pandemics: COVID-19 and racial injustice. Informed by intersectionality and ecological theory, the following research question is addressed: What were the experiences of WOC who are mothers working in academia during the dual pandemics? A collaborative autoethnography was used to interpret the perspectives, assumptions, and subjectivity of multiple experiences to expand the understanding of this social phenomenon. The authors responded to journal prompts about defining moments during the dual pandemics as tenure-earning mothers of color. Four themes emerged: normal was not good, shifts are necessary, the personal is political, and moments of joy. Recommendations are provided for policies and strategies that social work programs can implement to support tenure-earning women of color who are mothers. Centering our experiences as a site of inquiry opens possibilities of what critical social work and critical feminisms can be in the future.

Keywords

academic mothers, collaborative autoethnography, intersectionality, Women of Color

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic and the United States' reckoning with racial injustice, research studies have consistently shown that women and particularly mothers within academia continue to endure challenges in their workplaces. For Women of Color (WOC) mother-scholars, the inequities and vulnerabilities have been even greater (Fulweiler et al., 2021; Hermann & Neale-McFall, 2020). These demands are exacerbated when we are expected to take on additional teaching and service responsibilities related to antiracist practice and social justice. Academic women with children are also reporting negative consequences intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic not only in their work but in their personal lives because of altered childcare demands, conflicting roles, and relational changes (e.g., Blithe, 2022; CohenMiller & Izenkova, 2022). In one study, academic mothers cited a lack of supportive professional structures, which became more evident during COVID-19, as a barrier to their pursuit of research and scholarship (Bender et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the racial context in academia continues to be that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) faculty are few in number. There is an ongoing exodus of BIPOC colleagues from institutions of higher education due to the various dynamics, including constant microaggressions, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination (Pittman, 2012; Rideau & Robbins, 2020). Compounding these contexts with the racial injustice that we witness in our society; it is imperative to understand how all these things are impacting WOC mother-scholars. This article centers on the experiences of WOC who are tenure-track mothers in academia in the midst of two ongoing pandemics: COVID-19 and racial injustice. The paper's aim is to take a deeper look at how tenure-earning WOC who are mothers experienced the dual pandemics.

Literature Review

Recent estimates have demonstrated that college students are more racially and ethnically diverse than in previous decades, yet most professors continue to be White. The underrepresentation of WOC faculty continues to be tracked by The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac. A recent report found that of all tenure-track faculty positions held by women in four-year public institutions, American Indian women held 0.3%, African American women held 3.7%, Latinas held 2.8%, and Asian American women held 5.3% compared with 29.5% held by White women (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2021). Unsurprisingly, as the academic rank increases (i.e., tenured and full professors), the representation of WOC faculty decreases.

The restructuring of the neoliberal academy has also resulted in a shift in the labor structures within the institutions. Despite an increased number of women obtaining doctorate degrees, they are less likely to enter full-time tenure-track positions because of the increase in temporary jobs (American Association of University Professors, 2018). There are now more full-time nontenure-track faculty members than previously seen, going from 10.1% of all full-time faculty in 2008 to 26.6% in 2018 (Harmon et al., 2019). WOC are overrepresented in these nontenure-track ranks, accounting for 41% of all women in these positions (Boss et al., 2019). Also, there is an overrepresentation of WOC in temporary, part-time lecturer positions within the restructured corporate U.S. academy (Harris & González, 2012; Hivland et al., 2017; Rideau, 2021). The overrepresentation of WOC in these faculty positions creates significant roadblocks to job security (Hart, 2011; Porter et al., 2020).

Research about tenure-track or tenured WOC faculty members has undoubtedly illustrated how they experience forms of gendered racism that lead to being marginalized and experiencing oppressive conditions within the academy (e.g., Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Turner et al., 2011; Zambrana, 2018). This gendered racism is observed when Black women faculty members' research is more likely to be delegitimized by faculty colleagues (Croom et al., 2017), especially for those who

study race and racism (Stanley, 2007). WOC faculty are often burdened with “identity taxation” which includes an increase in service responsibilities due to their race and gender (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012; Porter et al., 2023; Rideau, 2021) to which most of their White and/or male counterparts are not exposed. To add insult to injury, WOC faculty are likely to earn less per dollar than White men (67 cents), White women (81 cents), and Men of Color (72 cents; McChesney, 2018).

Further, within academic spaces, WOC and WOC who are mothers are not always accommodated. For instance, in a qualitative study with 64 WOC faculty members, Turner (2002) found that WOC were confronted with “... the interlocking effects of race and gender bias in the academic workplace” (p. 64). The interlocking effects of race and gender bias was evident in WOC’s belief that being a WOC decreased their chances of success and advancement as faculty members due to five key areas: “feeling isolated and underrepresented, salience of race over gender, being underemployed and overused by departments, being torn between family, community, and career, and being challenged by students” (p. 80). In addition to WOC’s belief that being a WOC decreased their chances of success and advancement as faculty members, there are often racist and sexist assumptions about WOC being hired or promoted because of their race and gender and not because of their credentials (Owusu, 2020).

When WOC race and gender identities intersect with their motherhood identities the disparities are even greater within academia. In fact, Isgro and Castañeda (2015) posit that mothers in academia voices are silenced and they are often trying to find work–life balance amid the limited family friendly policies and prejudice and biases organizations have toward motherhood. Other scholars have noted that motherhood for WOC is seen as an inconvenience, resulting in less research opportunities, less support, and them being seen not as serious about their profession (Pirtle, 2017). For example, Pirtle (2017) shared how having a baby was burdensome because of the stereotypes or the perceptions other people had about her as an unmarried Black woman.

Echoing Isgro and Castañeda’s (2015) and Pirtle’s (2017) findings, Staniscuaski et al. (2021) highlighted how during the COVID-19 pandemic mothers, Black women, and Black women who were mothers faced decreased productivity (submit papers and meet deadlines). What is consistent among the aforementioned studies is that “The motherhood penalty in academia is a worldwide issue, but the acknowledgment of the problem by the academic community is very recent, and the development of effective actions and policies toward solving it is rather scarce” (Staniscuaski et al., 2021, p. 2). Furthermore, the above studies illustrate how WOC mothers experience sexism, and racism, and are impacted by the invisible policies that promote heteropatriarchy and advantage, White, heterosexual men (including those who are fathers) even in a female-dominated profession of social work (Buchmann & McDaniel, 2016). Ultimately, these conditions demonstrate how marginalization, racism, and sexism can be barriers to navigating the tenure process successfully (Diggs et al., 2009).

As tenure-earning scholars and mothers of color, we see another layer of complexity in a work context where women and marginalized identities are underrepresented due to systematic barriers in tenure-track positions that often conflict with family building and caretaking responsibilities (Ferrara, 2020). Far too often, we hear unsolicited advice about waiting until being tenured before having children or not having children at all, timing children to fit the academic calendar, hiding caring responsibilities, sleeping less, and sacrificing our personal lives to attain academic success. Research has demonstrated that the narrow assumptions of full-time academic workloads are ‘unforgiving’ of the time-out that comes with parenting (specifically for mothers) (Crang, 2003). Currently, we see that Black women mother-scholars have faced the additional trauma related to the deaths of George Floyd and many others, taking on additional responsibilities to address the causes and consequences of structural racism (Tevis, 2021).

Racial Injustice

The issues related to racial injustice continue to be societal occurrences that we witness repeatedly. We found one other study that mentions these two pandemics happening (McCallum et al., 2022) concurrently. The authors describe it as “one associated with COVID-19 and the other associated with the killing of unarmed Black men and women in the United States ... and the recognition that anti-Blackness is woven into the fabric of higher education and society” (McCallum et al., 2022, p. 45). At the start of the COVID-19 shutdowns, we were besieged with deadly incidents of unarmed Black people being killed by the police or private citizens. This included the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery (2/23/20), Breonna Taylor (3/13/20), and George Floyd (5/25/20). Elijah McClain (08/30/19) from Aurora, Colorado was killed before the COVID-19 pandemic began in the United States; his case gained national attention in early 2020. All these instances were reminders of the ongoing violence and white supremacist assumptions that are embedded in the structures and institutions in which these killings are justified.

Research related to the effects of racialized police violence has begun to document how the trauma associated with police violence is not limited to those who experience it firsthand (Yazdiha & Boen, 2022). There are more compact video recording devices and social media that expand the lens on police violence and are then going viral, broadcasted to a global audience, and viewed repeatedly, extending the reach of collateral and spillover effects. Yazdiha and Boen (2022) state, “Given racial disparities in the risk of police violence and the sociohistorical context of racism in the United States, the collateral consequences of this violence are especially magnified for Black communities relative to other groups” (p. 82).

For Black mothers, the consequences of police violence have been shown to have significant emotional and mental health consequences. This includes Black mothers experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression. For instance, Jackson et al. (2017) found a significant association between the stress from the potential of a future negative encounter for Black youth with police and the likelihood of pregnant Black being depressed. This example of the emotional and mental health consequences of police violence is similarly noted in studies involving Black mothers and Black women faculty and administrators. For instance, in a phenomenological study, Joe and colleagues (2019) found that Black mothers who were exposed to community and state violence (e.g., police violence) while raising sons experienced psychological distress and physical manifestations of stress which resulted in changes to their parenting approaches, physical responses, and isolation. However, despite these experiences with profound stress, the mothers were able to employ coping strategies and strength to uplift themselves and their sons (Joe et al., 2019). Another study by Njoku and Evans (2022) noted that Black women faculty and administrators had endured invisible burdens, increased work responsibilities, and emotional strain during the COVID-19 pandemic and the United States’ reckoning with police violence. Thus, the consequences of police violence on the emotional and mental health of Black mothers, including those who are in academia, present a threat to their overall well-being and result in emotional and mental health stress that can create experiences of posttraumatic stress and vicarious trauma (Joe et al., 2019; Njoku & Evans, 2022).

In this paper, we bring together the experiences of these dual pandemics to provide a sociocultural perspective of how these things affected our lives as mothers of color in academia who are tenure-earning. Informed by intersectionality and ecological theory, we address the following research question: What are the experiences of women of color who are mothers working in academia during the dual pandemics?

Theoretical Framing

Intersectionality is a framework for analyzing how social identity categories, such as class, gender, race, etc., mirror intersecting systems of privilege and oppression at the macro level (Bowleg, 2012;

Collins & Bilge, 2016). Conceptualized and coined by Black women (Bowleg, 2012), intersectionality posits that inequality is not shaped “by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but many axes that work together and influence each other” (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 2). This allows for the examination of the complexity of lived experiences beyond a single identity category. Further, intersectionality is a contextual, liberatory framework that challenges societal power structures (Jordan-Zachery, 2007).

The reason for engaging intersectionality as a theoretical framework is twofold. One, as researchers, we each engage intersectionality in our work—mental health and intimate partner violence experiences of WOC—interrogating how intersecting privileges and oppressions shape women’s experiences. Second, we each share the social identities of the women we include in our research, and thus “see” the reality of intersectionality in our own experience. Through our narratives, it became evident that our daily lived experiences through the dual pandemics were not removed from the existing, intersecting macro power structures of society.

The ecological systems theory supports intersectionality, specifically the multiple foci of considering how an individual’s identity is influenced by their surrounding environment. Multiple systems at various levels of functioning are considered and the ecological framework specifically examines the interaction between an individual and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, Germain, 1978). The ecological systems theory also provides a lens to better understand our lived experiences which are intersectional and occur within the context of our personal (mothers of color) and professional roles (academic women of color) during a time in which two pandemics have been operating. The systems in which a person operates within, according to Bronfenbrenner (1979), has four interrelated environmental systems: (1) micro, (2) meso, (3) exo, and (4) macro. Levels range from proximal settings that directly interact with the individual to larger distal settings that directly or indirectly influence their functioning and development (Ettelak & Mahoney, 2017).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem is one of the most important systems that affect the individual separately and in tandem with other systems. Thus, for us mothering during the dual pandemics—the microsystem centers critical aspects of our intersecting identities that impact our experiences. Our microsystems include our interpersonal relationships, our roles as mothers and academicians, as well as our interactions with our families, friends, and colleagues. We faced disruptions in our lives (e.g., caregiving responsibilities, family needing support in accessing resources) that required us to be both present and sheltered.

The mesosystem is a system of microsystems that interact with each other and for us influenced our functioning as academic WOC mothering during the dual pandemics. In our roles as both mothers and academicians, our personal and professional lives were quickly interacting with one another. With the increased use of online platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, our colleagues were getting a glimpse into our respective lives and specifically into our homes that were once private. Our mesosystems were interacting with one another so rapidly that we did not have time to process or adjust when our personal lives were becoming more public. With universities quickly making adjustments for faculty to work from home, there were aspects of these changes that worked against each other in our individual lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The exosystem encompasses changes in social structures. During the dual pandemics, our workplace went from the university classroom to our respective homes. During stay-at-home orders, our children were being impacted by our work because our work hours often spilled over into our nonwork hours which then caused stress. Some of us struggled with the impact of the stay-at-home orders and having to care for our children because our support (i.e., daycare) was no longer available. At the macro level, there were ongoing changes in local laws and social norms that impacted our lives. Regulations about social distancing, wearing face masks, and the closures of public and private spaces were and continue to be filtered through the context of various social, political, geographical, and cultural factors. As professors, we were teaching and were expected to include

additional content focused on racial justice. As mothers, we were grappling with (and continue to) the realities of raising Black children during divisive times.

As tenure-earning scholars, and as WOC mothers, we recognize that our intersectional identities influenced how we moved within and between the four different systems of the ecological framework. Our experiences will show how we had defining moments and had to pay attention to what was happening in our respective environments during the dual pandemics.

Method

Autoethnography (AE) is a qualitative methodology where researchers recount personal experiences and then systematically analyze these experiences to understand cultural experiences (Chang, 2016; Ellis et al., 2011). As a narrative method of inquiry, AE is rooted in interpretivism so the researchers' experiences and perspectives are the data; hence, the researchers generate and collect the data and are both the research participants and the researchers. Autoethnographers produce accessible narrative texts that allow a level of engagement that reaches a larger and more diverse audience than traditional research (Jones et al., 2016). According to Ellis et al. (2011), AE as a method recognizes and welcomes subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than concealing them or expecting they do not exist.

Collaborating with others to share autoethnographic accounts expands this method beyond reflection alone and supports the understanding of social and cultural phenomena. Collaborative AE (CAE) is where "two or more researchers pool their autobiographical materials related to an agreed-upon topic or social phenomenon and analyze and interpret the meanings of their personal experiences within their sociocultural contexts" (Chang et al., 2014, p. 376). By allowing researchers to co-construct a narrative, CAE enables a collective understanding of shared experiences. This method centers on nontraditional forms of inquiry to offer unique data that disrupt norms of research representation. CAE incorporates a polyphonic telling, analyzing, and writing approach (Lapadat, 2017). We adapt this method to assess our lives as mothers of color to make sense of these experiences with the dual pandemics.

Procedures

We collected our data through self-observation and audio recordings of the group's analytical discussions and conversations. After initial conversations to select our research question, journal prompts, and guidelines on how we would engage in the process, we held weekly meetings from December 2021 to May 2022. We collaborated in these weekly meetings to review and provide feedback on our individual reflections before reviewing the similarities and differences across our experiences. Our methodology involved mutual, reciprocal, and inclusive processes to draw upon our reflexive autobiographical exchanges with each other. We "connected" during our first meeting and "bridged" personally and professionally by sharing our experiences with the dual pandemics as WOC tenure-track professors and as mothers. We developed comfort, trust, and familiarity with one another which was crucial for the CAE.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Various criteria have been proposed to assess the rigor of AE/CAE (e.g., Le Roux, 2016; Schroeder, 2017). Since AE/CAE research may have different evocative and analytic goals, the criteria to use can lead to numerous considerations. In this article, we used the five criteria that Le Roux (2016) offered and can be applied to both major genres of AE. First, we considered subjectivity (the willingness to re-tell a critical personal relational or institutional experience—usually in search of self-

understanding). We paid attention to the ethical challenges of implicating others in our self-stories and protecting not just ourselves but also unwilling participants in the narratives (Hernandez et al., 2017). Second, self-reflexivity focused on “the researcher’s intense awareness of his or her role in relationship to the research which is situated within a historical and cultural context” (Le Roux, 2016, p. 10). This required our acute involvement in producing our self-reflections via individual introspection and group discussions.

Third, resonance brought into focus how the readers identify with the findings being presented. We considered our cultural, geographical, and career paths in the quotes that were included with hopes that they will interweave with the lives of other social work WOC mother-scholars across regions and countries. Fourth, credibility is considered the trustworthiness of our research. We were transparent in reporting our entire research process, including the development of the research question, the writing of our self-reflections, audio-recording our discussions, and analysis and interpretation steps. Fifth, we plan to contribute to the social work discipline by presenting this work and the CAE process at national and international conferences. Our contribution addresses a gap in the critical feminist literature and may be useful to individuals who themselves have had similar experiences as WOC mother-scholars. These evaluation criteria were developed for AE (Le Roux, 2016), so the collaborative aspect of CAE lends itself to greater rigor by reducing self-indulgence (Chang et al., 2013; Lapadat, 2017). We complemented and contradicted each other with constructive feedback to be rigorous in the meaning-making process of unique and common experiences (Hernandez et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Our written self-reflections were continuously expanded through group discussions via a digital communication platform (Zoom). The self-reflective data were shared with all co-authors via Google docs to allow sufficient time to read and inquire about certain aspects of the data during online group meetings. The 20 audio-recorded group meetings (lasting 60–90 min per session) focused on sharing our responses to the self-reflections and drawing out different issues related to aspects of our experiences. We observed similarities while noting differences in geographical location, children’s gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and institutional settings. Further online exchanges included probing questions about the virtual discussions. The self-reflective data were complemented by data systematically extracted from the transcriptions. We used reflective writing and memos to document the experiences for analysis and interpretation of our sociocultural aspects, which may translate across similar experiences (Chang, 2016).

Data analysis was ongoing in the weekly virtual discussions to make meaning and then interpret these experiences to make sense of them in the larger societal context (Chang, 2016). As noted above, in-depth discussions were held to explore the overarching perception of the dual pandemics as mothers of color in academia and the social practices and experiences that sustain such perceptions. Reading and re-reading our own reflections and those of our co-authors was followed by a collaborative discussion that supported an in-depth analysis and led to the identification of four salient themes (Saldaña, 2012). As researchers, we aimed to gain an understanding of self and others specifically in relation to our experiences during the dual pandemics as mothers of color and the impact this had on our lives.

Positionality Statement

We are mothers to Black children and mixed-race children under the age of five. We had our children after completing our doctorate degrees and while on the tenure track (pretenured). Two of us are Black cisgender mothers with each having one Black child (one has a daughter, and one has a son). One of us is a Xicana cisgender mother to two mixed-race Black children. Two of us are

children of immigrants. We are first-generation scholars/professors, women of faith, raised in a range of family backgrounds: middle-class, working-class, or poor working-class families. We are at three different universities in three geographical locations (Colorado, Texas, and Illinois), and we work at a teaching school and two research-intensive schools (public and private).

Findings

The narratives are presented in a confidential way with no author names attached to protect some of our anonymity since these stories are vulnerable to share in a professional context. We do this intentionally and share these stories since it is necessary to meet the goals of this article. As previously mentioned, we focus on stories where we see similarities across our experiences, which is one approach of CAE (e.g., Belkhir et al., 2019; Datta & Lund, 2018). We demonstrate the complexity of our lives and offer nuances. It may become apparent that our narratives are the juxtaposition of our experiences and the duality of our lives (e.g., joy/sadness).

Normal Wasn't Good

In this theme, we describe the ways in which intersectionality related to what was happening both in our professional lives and societally in our social interactions. Even before these pandemics became the focal point, work was not great. This included the workloads that we carried, the job responsibilities that required after-hours responses, working through “breaks,” the gender pay gap, and the pressures to publish and compete for grant funding. Being mothers of children under the age of five required negotiating how we accomplished our tasks when we were bound by not having reliable childcare during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders. Since our children were not school-aged, we did not experience homeschooling or challenges with schooling during this time.

The following reflection illustrates how one of us navigated the workload, the issues that persisted, and the harsh realities of being a mother, WOC, and in a tenure-track position in a neoliberal system.

I have to prioritize what will get done and forgive myself for what doesn't ... But I do not see academia as forgiving. Yes, allowances were made. But my teaching load didn't reduce. I knew I had to keep up my research if I had any chance of a higher-paying job [in the future]. My committee work [service] has increased. My students need more because they are in a pandemic too, and I try to remember this and operate in a frame of boundaried mercy and grace.

The work may not have needed to be this hard if I focused only on the bounds of my job. But I worked hard because I was also trying to be [marketable]. My life circumstances along with my personal desires for how I want to be fulfilled in my career made [this] necessary. I also wanted more money. I have to provide for ... my child, as well as wanting to be able to give back to my family for all their sacrifices.

The next reflection describes some of the shifts that came with the COVID-19 shutdowns and online teaching changes while also describing the long hours and schedules that were there before the pandemics and continued throughout. Intertwined are also the experiences of having children under the age of five at home to care for while trying to continue the work.

What was “cute” at the beginning of COVID-19 was how my child was jumping in on Zoom calls and disrupting the much-needed flow of things regardless of what I was doing... Where the rubber hit the road was when I had to teach, grade papers, write papers, conduct research team meetings, interview participants for a research study, read articles for the papers I was writing, and attempt to apply for grants. Universities were being kind and encouraging faculty to be flexible and gracious with ourselves as we navigated this new way of teaching and learning. However, there wasn't much conversation about

graciousness or kindness when it came to the racial unrest we were experiencing after the death of Mr. Floyd. The racial unrest, for me, wasn't surprising.

This third reflection similarly conveys the multiple tasks that were required of us and how difficult it can be to slow down when requests continue and being on the tenure-track means you continue to work hard to attempt to reach the expectations placed on us by the institutions. This third reflection also illuminates the tension or even resolve many women of color and particularly Black women who are mothers and are in tenure-earning positions expressed about the dual impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial unrest happening within the United States. For many women of color who were mothers and tenure earning the dual pandemics were stressful and overwhelming, yet not surprising given the United States history with racism.

It is springtime 2021—My schedule continues to be on overload, teaching two new courses, submitting a huge grant application as P.I. (i.e., principal investigator), and working on R&Rs (i.e., revise and resubmit) publications with last-minute revisions to address. There are a lot of deadlines, presentations, working a lot more hours, and doing all this on very little sleep.

September 2021—Wait, where did 2020 go and we are past the halfway point of the calendar year 2021, wait WHAT?!: I need to SLOW Da F**k Down, is the lesson I learned from the spring and summer ... We are all grieving, it is evident, and no one wants to name it—we are not who we were a year ago. Parenting is very hard when working full time. I continue to be challenged to figure out self-care. I am slowing down but I have already been asked to moderate a school event. I cannot overstretch myself.

Shifts are Necessary

As the pandemic raged on, we found it necessary to make adjustments to our lives for our survival. “Shifts are necessary” is a theme that is reflective of the many changes we endured and continued to endure throughout the pandemics. This theme encompassed the personal and professional changes that occurred in our lives, our reflection of these shifts, and our reasons for shifting. In this section, we describe why and how we shifted, including discussing how these shifts helped us re-imagine our futures in the academy, our professional careers, as well as that of our children and families. Further, the pandemics emphasized the gendered, racialized, and class-based shifts that women of color who are mothers often have to make in the academy.

We were made aware of the need to shift in multiple ways. In the following reflection, this mother-scholar describes how and why she shifted to seeking childcare several months into the pandemic. This decision was not an easy one, as she was caught between many factors: working productively, needing personal time, her child's needs, and her family's safety.

I decided to seek childcare. It was not an easy decision—I was terrified of the virus, and I felt guilty because I just couldn't keep up with the routine of the past several months. I was also excited for my child—in [my child] being home, I saw how [my child] was developing and what [my child] needed ... so, I knew [my child] would benefit from being with other kids. I also needed space to work. I hadn't written in so long; I was just barely surviving classes ... I needed to work differently. I also needed some time for me.

Awareness of shifting included our physical bodily responses to the situation. For this mother-scholar, the effects of stressors on her health were a tell-tale sign that things needed to change.

No wonder my health spirals out of control, WTF is happening?! Now I realize I am really stressed and it's not good trying to keep up with a schedule that was unsustainable BEFORE the baby arrived. Why would I possibly think that I could do all of this PLUS recover from giving birth?!

What was also apparent to us was that while we were forced to shift while simultaneously grieving, institutions did not necessarily shift. This mother-scholar described that her shift came from having had enough of constantly being asked to shift when institutions were only partially (if at all) shifting. Specifically, institutions were engaged in “performative allyship.”

The part that got me the most and continues to get me is when Mr. Floyd cried out to his mom before he passed. The soul-wrenching call he made was something that all mothers especially Black mothers felt in the pit of their souls. It was that moment that I was reminded of how shitty things are for Black people in America. I’m tired! I’m tired! I’m tired!!! The performative allyship gets the middle finger. I’ve been having conversations with friends and family members about Blackness and anti-Blackness. Unlike universities where the disconnect is significant. Universities sent out statements that they condemned police brutality but want to have equality. But these folks continue to be some of the most oppressive institutions that we are a part of.

The multiple shifts have landed us in new places in how we view our work. Across our reflections, a similar orientation became clear: we have chosen not to limit ourselves to the confines of the academy, and to do the work that we each do fully and honestly, and boldly without fear. This also includes not sacrificing our well-being for the work.

... [I]t seemed that the lessons from the previous moment offered a place for reflection and redirection. It has also made it necessary to push and ask about inequalities in society that impact our health as well as question how colonialism and capitalism have shaped what we are seeing with the pandemics, and what happens next.

I am willing to give up tenure to create change for those coming after me. If I can make the system a better space for someone else, then I will speak my truth and the truth through the work that I do. I used to be afraid to speak up about issues because I did not want the senior faculty to rule negatively on my tenure portfolio. But then I said screw that ... I’m speaking my truth and dare them to deny me tenure because of some subjective view of what is scholarship and research.

If at some point academia is taking away from my ability to mother and do the work that I want to do, then I will know it will be time to do something else ... Despite the workload that I bear, I know I have been very fortunate in many ways. And the very fact that I haven’t lost my mind tells me that this is the lifestyle I need to continue to fight to maintain. And if it doesn’t work, I trust something better will come.

Taken together, our reflections about shifting and adjusting suggest that shifting and adjusting is nothing new for women, women of color, and mothers. In fact, the shifting and adjusting expressed in the reflections highlight the collective concern and reality of many mother-scholars who are women of color and are tenure-earning in academia are feeling. The stress of having to teach, to be productive, and to simply work through trauma and racial unrest in predominantly White institutions as tenure-earning mother-scholars of color is taxing especially when speaking your truth or pushing back on inequalities in society are not considered the norm in academia and come with consequences, such as not being promoted to associate or full professor (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). Thus, one must consider how gender, race, and motherhood intersect for tenure-earning mother-scholars of color that causes them to shift even sometimes out of the academy during times of great stress.

The Personal is Political

This theme highlights the ways in which many of the things we see happening in society not only impact us individually but are also political to us because they are personal. We knew the confines

of the academy when we entered this profession. Yet through our years of experience, we continue to decipher how social class and privilege play a role, and how we have some shared experiences with colleagues who are also first-generation. In the statement below, we share one of our experiences related to the disconnect between what the institutions prioritize in their messaging during the pandemic times and our lived reality.

Many institutions that say they value diversity still have a white majority on their university boards. Then we wonder why there are so few Black [and other POC] full professors. There are graduate schools of social work whose mission is about racial, economic, and social justice, but miss the boat on the economic part. So, the dual pandemics for me are layered with current experiences and historical context. The dual pandemics maybe did not redefine anything for me but highlighted how disconnected my reality is from the institution in which I work and am supposed to thrive. I guess part of the defining moment is that we stopped talking about the racial unrest and have only focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and for me that's an issue!!!

Our conversations brought up issues about raising Black children in a society that continues to show disregard for Black lives, that continues to defend anti-blackness by blaming communities of color for the structural inequalities we endure. The narratives presented below offer a layered illustration of redefining moments that continue to be political to us because of who we are in our personal lives, outside of the academy, and as mothers.

Then there were the killings. Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and the names of too many other sacred lives that I feel deep guilt and sadness in forgetting. It's heavy. And I am raising a Black [child]. And I want so much for [my child]. I pray for so much for [my child]. Because [my child's] life has so much value; all of our lives do. I think of the mothers who bury their children because of the injustice. The rage they must feel; the deep sadness. Only for us to have a justice system that fails them time and time again ... It is hard to put into words. It is hard to put into words a mother's love for her child. The fighting she does. I sometimes worry that I am working too hard. But I work so that I can have better opportunities, and so that my child can have better opportunities. And yet because of this work, I find myself tired.

Even before the pandemic, we knew that health disparities were present in our communities because of our areas of research and intersectional lives. The implicit biases that play out in various health decisions are evident and sometimes even deadly (e.g., maternal deaths, chronic illness, lack of access to healthcare, and racial profiling). Our conversations often brought us back to the ways in which white supremacy seeps into the systems of oppression that we are in contact with. The quote that follows highlights one instance of these dynamics.

At my child's routine check-up, I already had to file a complaint against the pediatrician who saw us. Our child's pediatrician was not seeing patients during the pandemic. This other doctor, who we had never met, began our doctor visit with a recommendation for sunscreen. He said, "it looks like your child has been getting a lot of sun" ... I give him [the doctor] a pass because he does not know our family. Before we left the doctor's office, another comment was made that I did not find funny. I left the office feeling uneasy, so I filed a complaint. Within hours, I got a call from the medical director apologizing. I got an email from the doctor saying he did not mean anything by his comments and was just making a joke. I sent a copy of a recent peer-reviewed article on microaggressions in medical professions and wrote him, "most families may not say anything, but be mindful of how these messages are received by diverse parents." I am done hearing these excuses. We know from history that the innocence of a Black child does not protect them from the prejudices and stereotypes held by some in society.

Given our combined reflections, the personal and political illustrate the multiple contexts in which what has happening in the world around us was unfolding in our personal lives. First, the disconnect the initial reflection highlighted between universities statements about diversity and schools of social work mission about racial, economic, and social justice often came with little action of increasing the hiring and retaining of women faculty of color (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022), including those who are mothers. Second, the next reflection illuminates how personal the experiences of the dual pandemics—disparities happening to Black and Brown communities because of COVID-19 and the racial unrest—were even in her child’s doctor’s appointment. In fact, this mother-scholar of color had to contend with the very disparate experiences she was witnessing on television. This experience in the doctor’s office became very political for her because it arose from the social conditions caused by racism, sexism, and classism. However, in spite of the frustration this mother-scholar of color felt and the labor she had to do to educate the doctor about the racial jokes that were being made about her Black son was exhausting, she and the other mother-scholars of color agreed that they felt it was their responsibility to protect their children at all times because the innocence of Black children, regardless of gender and class, are not always protected outside of their homes and is shaped by the social and racial context in which they live (Joe et al., 2019).

Moments of Joy

This theme coalesced around our intentional desires to experience joy in spite of the unprecedented impact COVID-19 and the racial unrest was having on us and in our respective communities. For us joy was about the good we were already having in our lives, witnessing our children’s interactions with the world they were learning about, moments of connection, and dreaming about the future as academics and as mothers. Even during our moments of joy, we were aware of the pain COVID-19 and the racial unrest was inflicting on the world around us. Thus, we collectively agreed and discussed how we were committed to finding joy in our lives, especially during times when things were feeling unpredictable.

One way we discussed joy was how we were intentional about centering and witnessing our children’s interactions with the world they were learning about. We also recognized that the joy of having a child under the age of five allowed us to witness many of their first experiences such as first steps. Thus, the statement below illustrates the joy one of us experienced when witnessing our child learning something new.

My child learning to walk. My child took his first few steps around Mother’s Day, surrounded and encouraged by my family. My sibling captured the video of my child walking in to hug me. I do not know if there was a defining moment. There were lots of moments. But as I look back and I think of the ... joy my little one was able to exude in 2020, being at home with [family] as we rode the first waves of the pandemic, I can’t help but feel incredibly blessed for that time.

The dual pandemics led to many changes in how we connected with ourselves by setting boundaries to find balance, how we connected with our friends and started walking, and how we started taking better care of ourselves. Joy was endless as our narratives below demonstrate.

So, I set boundaries. I rarely work after 5:30pm (with the exception of my night class) and weekends. I developed a regular walking regimen because my body and mind were fatigued and aching. I was worried about how little time I would have with my child with him in daycare, and a friend reminded me of building routines and rituals, like reading before bed. I read to my child every night and pray over him before he sleeps. We still take occasional walks. I’ve started going to bed earlier. I am working to strike a balance.

Conversations with my girlfriends and watching/playing with my little one brought me joy ... Joy for me also looked like trying to forge a new path within my personal and professional life. It was and has been in these very moments—COVID-19 and the racial unrest—where my worlds collided and made me redefine what it meant to live!!!!

However, in the end, we all agreed that there were no moments of resolve, but a reminder of the wins we have had thus far and a reminder of what is important. The narratives below sum it up perfectly the many discussions and reflections we had about what we were experiencing.

So, the wins? My child walking, paid off debt, [welcoming new family members], holidays at home, publications, presentations, the launch of a new research project, ..., wrote [a major] grant, took my child and parents [on vacation], reconnected with friends, survived and working to thrive.

There is no moment of resolution per se but each of these moments reinforced the importance of having support, care, and awareness of what I am doing to myself and how I need to slow down! I need to be gentle with myself and know that sometimes I need to speak up to make sure my personal space is being respected.

Collectively, our experiences of joy as tenure-earning mother-scholars of color were about intentionally setting boundaries, our children meeting key developmental milestones, and talking with girlfriends. Ultimately, we recognized that moments of joy during COVID-19 and the racial unrest allowed us to actively redefine our relationships with our work and the institutions we were tied to and become more focused on the moments of joy that we sometimes did not notice in our own homes because of our work.

Discussion

We used CAE to explore how tenure-earning WOC faculty who are also mothers to children under the age of five experienced the dual pandemics. As we continue to hear rhetoric about trying to go back to normal despite the pandemics, our experiences demonstrate our concern and resistance to having that as an ultimate goal. It was not just the pandemics that made it hard, “normal” was problematic to begin with as illustrated with our findings. It is hard for us to endorse anything that encourages us to go back to the starting point pre-pandemics because we would have to continue to assimilate into academia and take it for what it is. If our call to action is for there to be an understanding of this context for WOC in academia who are mothers, we cannot go back to normal because it is to our detriment.

It became evident to us, by using CAE as our method, that viewing the world with a wider lens we can better understand how who we are and what we have experienced influences our ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Working towards tenure, and naming our experiences, contributed to our understanding of these cultural experiences during the dual pandemics. In CAE, researchers use their life histories, situated in a time, culture, and space, to gain a better understanding of society (Chang, 2016). CAE is well suited to situations in which the research requires access to intimate knowledge of sensitive issues. Our method mirrors those of scholars who have centered their narratives as truth (e.g., Samuels, 2022; Valdovinos & Moreno Sandoval, 2021) which is in line with Black women and Chicana epistemologies. We are building on traditions that many WOC use in their work to create change.

The a-ha moments from this research can help our sociocultural understanding of the academy, but there are also a few limitations in this study. First, there are some limitations for the readers. We actively chose what we shared and what we concealed such as protecting our children’s identity. The intention was not to confuse the reader but keeping in mind that we are actively deciding what things about us that the reader is privileged to know in this context. Second, because the dual

pandemics are ongoing (though morphing), it was difficult to have a moment of closure or resolution. These circumstances will continue to change for each of us in ways that we cannot completely predict. Third, with additional resources and time, we could have engaged more WOC mothers on the tenure-track to join us in these reflections and discussions as part of the data collection process.

We provide insights into the ways that these things intersect and redefine our future work in the academy. First, as we plan for the future, we have to recognize that going back to normal cannot be the goal. Institutions need to keep this in mind as policies are developed and use this as an opportunity to make lasting changes rather than trying to place bandages on a system that was already not working. For instance, Stolzenberg et al. (2019) at the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute found that female faculty and faculty of color are disproportionately impacted by stress due to discrimination (e.g., racism and sexism) with Black (49.9%) and Latino/a (51.4%) faculty most likely to feel this way. The scholars also found that female faculty and faculty of color felt that they had to work harder. Thus, we reached an unwavering clarity because of the dual pandemics that going back to normal cannot be the goal when going back to normal seems to be the antithesis of the mission of the social work profession and going back to normal seems to work best for some and not others. When going back to normal works best for some and not others it presents harm for all in the academy especially those who are women or who are BIPOC or who are parents. In fact, it is especially a normative harm for persons who are all three of these statuses. Thus, going back to normal reflects what is the direct opposite of what social workers are trained to do and that is to work with the most marginalized, oppressed, and vulnerable populations. Studies have consistently shown that persons who are women or who are BIPOC or who are parents have been the most marginalized, oppressed, and vulnerable during the time of COVID-19 and racial unrest (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Joe et al., 2019; Njoku & Evans, 2022). As such, going back to normal was never meant for the success of those living on the margins.

Second, it is vitally important that schools of social work make more spaces in critical feminisms where the voices of WOC are centered, and we learn from their experiences. Even though some people would want us to believe that we are in a post-racial society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015) or that Critical Race Theory is an exaggeration of what is enacted on Black and Brown bodies (McGee, 2021), we know different because we ourselves have experienced these disparities. Further, policies must be written with these experiences in mind, not as an afterthought and not replicating an environment where leadership is comfortable with only having one of us at the table (intersectionality is crucial), but where multiple and diverse WOC are at the table helping with making key decisions. Schools of social work must see WOC including those who are mothers as valuable assets (Mogro-Wilson et al., 2022).

Third, the shifts we had to make as tenure-earning WOC mothers in academia were necessary. They were not “pivots” and we have shifted a lot this far into our careers. These shifts are necessary especially in systems that have been created without considering our best interests. We had to *learn* to shift even after we decided to shift. How to shift became its own process. Related to shifts, the parenting process continued to expand, the processes of loss, grief, and gain were happening concurrently. We are mourning and joyful even as we are shifting, even as we are learning to shift. The struggle is learning how to shift under these circumstances and acknowledging that these dual pandemics are not over. Lastly, these shifts reminded us of the places where our privilege exists. We have had the ability to do these things that many may not have had and because of who we are we were able to shift in these ways. We recognize through our reflexive analysis that there are people in our families that did not have those opportunities.

Fourth, making space for joy and community is necessary. As WOC who are tenure-earning mothers, we had to leverage our community and cultural strengths to engage in joyous activities and practices because we knew that joy and community were not always happening within the system in which we work. While that is okay, it is important to note that as WOC who are

tenure-earning mothers, we need spaces where we can be ourselves without consequences. Furthermore, we need spaces that we do not have to constantly fit into a system that was not created for us. In fact, scholars have found that the use of sister circles for Black women and other WOC in academia have been an effective intervention for addressing the unique needs and aiding in the success of this group of women (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2018; Reynolds et al., 2021). Hence, we want to direct our attention to other WOC mother-scholars to say that it is our right to experience joy and community outside of the academy to offer safety for our experiences—everyone does not need to have access to all parts of our lives.

Recommendations

This study provides a glimpse into the lived experiences of three WOC who are tenure-earning mothers. Our experiences are layered, complex, and are influenced by the social, political, and cultural context in which we live. Given that three-quarters (73.2%) of the full-time faculty in academia are White (Espinosa et al., 2019), and schools of social work are seeking ways to not only diversify their faculty, but to retain them, it would be advantageous for leadership to act on behalf of WOC who are tenure-earning mothers in ways that minimize the possibilities of WOC leaving these positions for other opportunities.

In order for schools of social work to diversify and retain their faculty they have to understand that going back to normal is not good. What the dual pandemics—COVID-19 and racial unrest—did was exacerbate existing inequalities in mental health (Panchal et al., 2021), intimate partner violence (Evans et al., 2020), and hunger in the United States. Just as social issues were exacerbated by the dual pandemics, the fact that “normal wasn’t good” in academia was also exacerbated for those marginalized in these spaces. Thus, the recommendations we put forth below would have been helpful for BIPOC tenure-earning mothers before the dual pandemics. As such, our recommendations are grounded in our lived experiences as well as relevant research.

1. Validate the experiences of WOC who are tenure-earning mothers including “supporting and valuing [our] research, creating opportunities for [our] professional recognition and advancement, and implementing corrective action for unjust assessment practices” (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022, p. 1). This validation could be reflected in merit pay, time equity, promotion, time/work release and other systems of reward and recognition that matter in one’s academic career.
2. Invite WOC who are tenure-earning mothers to key meetings to help shape policies and practices at the school. Such invitations could include intentionally including WOC who are tenure-earning mothers to key discussions at the larger university and department levels to ensure policies and practices include flexibility to accommodate those who are parents.
3. Consider partnering with local childcare facilities to provide discounted childcare, especially during times of crisis, for WOC who are tenure-earning mothers. If this is not an option, consider the benefits of financially compensating intergenerational childcare options for WOC who are tenure-earning and living in multigenerational households or who are first-generation academics.
4. Review workload and portfolios. Are people with similar titles at the same level tasked with the same level of responsibility? Are WOC doing more service, emotional labor, and unrewarded housekeeping for the institution than their White and male peers? If so, adjust the workload and shift expectations for staff and faculty that everyone should be engaged in this work and that those doing it will be compensated and rewarded” (Tevis et al., 2020, p. 294).
5. It would be ideal before, during, and after times of crises like COVID-19 and the racial unrest happening in the United States if WOC who are tenure-earning mothers are able to get credit

for the extra service and labor they do with their students, community, etc. in their tenure dossiers to support the success of their tenure and promotion.

6. After crises like COVID-19 and the racial unrest happening in the United States, offer WOC who are tenure-earning mothers semester or quarter-long sabbaticals with full-pay and benefits to recalibrate their productivity given the amount of loss—personally and professionally—they have experienced during these times.
7. During times of racial unrest, it would behoove universities and schools of social work to think beyond writing statements of support or solidarity, but to sit down and truly listen to the needs of WOC who are tenure-earning mothers about the duality of their roles and the additional responsibilities they have to attend to while working towards tenure and promotion.
8. Offer additional financial support/opportunities—fellowships, mini-grants, writing retreats that are family oriented, etc.—to support the productivity efforts of WOC who are tenure-earning mothers.
9. Review, reimagine, and revise tenure and promotion strategies that include equitable practices and pay. Now is the time “... to rethink our established ways of evaluating academic success to acknowledge and ameliorate systemic differences in its enactment” (Oleschuk, 2020, p. 503).

Conclusion

The field of social work has the opportunity to reimagine what it means for tenure-earning WOC who are mothers. Further, the field of social work is at a crossroads in which they can be innovative for many of their faculty who are oppressed and marginalized, but especially for WOC mothers. As such, we shared part of our experiences to illuminate what it meant for us to live at the intersection of our identities during two ongoing pandemics: COVID-19 and racial injustice. Additionally, we put forth several recommendations that incorporate intersectional and justice-oriented practices and that serve as starting points for addressing some of the needs of tenure-earning WOC mothers.

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