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The ethics of care and academic motherhood amid COVID-19

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of working parents as they strive to meet the conflicting demands of childcare and professional obligations. While growing evidence suggests the extraordinary challenges to time and work brought by the pandemic, this article explores the pandemic as an opportunity for stillness and reflection, a personal and professional recalibration. Through a personal narrative describing my experiences as an academic and mother before and during the pandemic, framed within the ethics of care, this article brings light to the untenable reality of working mothers pre-pandemic, explores the ways in which the pandemic has positively facilitated caring relationships at home as well as the reallocation of time and household responsibilities, and argues for policy and legislative action at the institutional and societal levels that support and value the care work of women and men alike.

KEYWORDS
academic motherhood, COVID-19, ethics of care, policy

> How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.
>
> *Annie Dillard*, The Writing Life

I am in the middle of teaching a class when I pause to punctate my point with a diagram pre-drawn on the whiteboard behind me. As I turn, I find my 5-year-old, having erased the contents of the board, doodling away on his fresh canvas with my dry-erase markers. "I'm being very quiet," he whispers sweetly, his beautiful brown eyes shining. In the background I hear the padding of feet, "Where Mama? Where the Mama? Mama!" shout my twin toddlers as they bang on my door. I look back at my computer screen, to the faces of my graduate students, shrug and smile apologetically. Carry on.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

As schools around the world shuttered their doors in response to COVID-19, and millions of children are home, working parents have found the color, form, and sounds of their days changed dramatically, the hours filled with tending to the needs of others, the doing centered around a life at home. What follows is a reflection, framed within an ethics of care, on the ways in which the relentless struggle to meet the competing demands of “work” and “life,” from the perspective of an academic and mother, is often an exercise in running to stand still. In some ways, the pandemic has brought the running to a standstill, necessarily resetting personal priorities, exposing cracks in the work/life dichotomy for academic parents, and expelling from the shadows a crisis in care, identity, and values that existed long before the pandemic's arrival. In doing so, it has further illuminated the need for institutional and social policies that not only support but encourage caregiving at home and in the broader society.

2 | AN ETHICS OF CARE

Care ethicists describe caring as relational. According to Gilligan (1993), “the ideal of care is thus an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone” (p. 62). Noddings (2002) specifies the roles that two individuals have in a caring relationship, one serves to care-for while the other is the cared-for. In order for the relationship to truly exhibit caring, the individual demonstrating care must be attentive to the needs of the cared-for and must provide care in a way that will be perceived as such by the recipient. In turn, the cared-for must acknowledge in some way that the care has been received (Noddings, 2002).

The home, and the relationship between child and parent, is the first, and most formative, experience of care (Noddings, 2002). Caring relationships in the home require time. Parents need time to observe the disposition and needs of their children, to learn to engage with them, and express care, in the way the child will be most receptive. Time to listen, encourage, and guide. Modern life, with its endless demands on time, is often in conflict with our natural inclination to care for others in this relational way. My experience as an academic mother before the COVID-19 pandemic serves as just one example of the way in which the competing demands on our time can leave us feeling insufficient in multiple aspects of life and unable to prioritize relationships at home. In making visible the struggles that working parents, particularly mothers, confront, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for institutions and society to reconsider the value and allocation of time.

3 | LIFE AS AN ACADEMIC MOTHER, RUNNING TO STAND STILL

In *Academic Motherhood*, Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2012) describe the conflicting expectations of the ideal professor and the good mom, and the ways in which they constrain academic women's personal and professional choices. The competing interests of life and work, and the sense that I am falling short in each arena, are ever-present for me as an academic mom. My desire to be a present parent, the dependable source of what Noddings (2002) refers to as “attentive love,” and to provide my children with the invaluable and increasingly elusive gift of time, has guided my professional decisions in a way that I could not have understood or predicted until I became a mother.

Like many professional women, I had my first child in my mid-30s, when I was a tenure-track assistant professor. Nine months after my son was born, I accepted an administrative position at my university, which represented a significant promotion both in title and salary. I agonized over whether to take the position, knowing it would mean significantly less time spent with my child. My husband was incredibly supportive and willing to take on the bulk of the household responsibilities. Together, we determined that our child would continue to feel loved and cared for despite my increased absence, we would maximize and emphasize the quality of time spent together

rather than the quantity, and I would serve as an example for him of a successful, professional woman in a leadership position. We would find, in other words, a satisfactory work/life balance.

As I found my footing, followed by successes, at work, the tug of life was a persistent companion. Although I pumped breast milk in my office multiple times a day, drove home to hold and nurse my son during every lunch break, and spent each second from the moment I arrived home with my child until he fell asleep, I constantly felt the presence of missed time. And yet, I was absolutely privileged. My supervisor, the president of the university, encouraged my priorities. I had a beautiful, private office in which to pump my milk. My husband would bring my son for visits to my office and light up my day. My working conditions supported my personal, and therefore, professional success. But the desire to be there for all the "firsts," and everything that follows, was unshakeable.

After a year and a half, my husband and I decided to switch roles. There will be other professional opportunities, we surmised, but our child will only be young once. He, a recently tenured professor, took an administrative and faculty position at a new university, in a new city, away from our support network. I left my job, intending to take a short-term hiatus to care for my child. Very soon afterwards, I found out I was expecting. When I rejoined the academic workforce in January 2019 it was as a mom of a 3-year-old and 7-month-old twins, unexpectedly starting my professional career over as a first-year tenure-track faculty member (existing experience and publications having not transferred) and entering into a different sort of world as an academic mother. As the parent with the flexible schedule, I was now responsible for the majority of the household management. Although my oldest son was in preschool, and we had help at home with the twins, the physical demands of caring for two babies around the clock were exhausting. Like many academic moms, my attention was constantly divided between children's needs, the mundane tasks of keeping a household fed, clean, and orderly, learning the explicit and implicit rules of my new institution, and the work of teaching, research, and service.

My department supported me through carefully considered work assignments, but I found myself feeling the immensity of starting over professionally and concern, for the first time, that I would not be able to meet the requirements for tenure and promotion. Although my workload as a mother had increased threefold, it was relegated much more to the shadows in my new professional life. I pumped milk, hidden in tight bathroom stalls, between meetings or during breaks in class. Twice a month, I arrived home close to midnight, having taught a five-and-a-half-hour class, to find my babies screaming for their mother's touch. I prepped my courses, mustered what little performative energy I had for marathon class sessions, and met my service obligations. I could not, and did not, write. Like for many working mothers with young children, there was no time for true rest, attention to the self, an inner recalibration. There was only the doing. The filling of each moment with a response to an immediate need, the relentless pushing onward while the invisible threads of institutional and societal expectations, responsibility and obligation, tug us back, the endless running just to stand still. The enduring sense that our efforts, at work or life, are never quite good enough.

4 | THE STILLNESS

COVID-19 placed the high-octane chaos and struggles and sparkle of life with children on display, making visible the intersection of work and life, exposing the fallacy of the two as diametrically opposed. In the spring of 2020, institutions relaxed their expectations, many offering to delay the tenure clock, as they acknowledged the disruptions to normal life brought by the pandemic. Suddenly, it became acceptable to acknowledge the impossibility of doing it all, all the time. Several of the recommendations to support professional mothers, such as flexible work schedules and family-friendly management (Slaughter, 2012), became de facto policy, at least in the short term, intended to alleviate the personal disturbances brought by the pandemic, but unintentionally supporting those of us whose "normal life" was disrupted long before COVID-19 appeared.

In bringing everyone home, COVID-19 has also brought an unexpected simplicity. My husband and I are reunited again, working together with a single purpose—keeping our family safe and thriving during this frightening

time. For the first time since the birth of my first child, we have time to observe the members of our family more deeply, to identify the needs of each individual family member, parents included, and do our best to accommodate them by demonstrating care appropriately. We are learning to live together in a new way, undisrupted by commutes, school drop-offs and pick-ups, the normal running to and fro. Our focus is laser-sharp and, having been given the gift of flexible schedules, and the luxury of being both still employed and able to work from home, we determine the rhythm of each day.

With both of us home, the work of managing the household is more equitable. Together, we care for our children, tend to our home, pursue our intellectual work, and attend to professional obligations. As Vohra and Taneja (2020) argue, the ethics of care is not the work of women alone. We divide the day and alternate who gets the prime, morning work slot. Our work hours are limited; we each must be as productive as possible in the time that we have. We both write every day. The rest of our days are spent with our children, witnessing many firsts, building shared experiences and lives, and deepening our relationships. Like other academic mothers have described, this time is extraordinarily challenging; work gets disrupted, exhaustion persists (Guy & Arthur, 2020; Motta, 2020). Yet, despite the dreadful conditions that have led to it, and the uncertainty surrounding an unknown future, for this moment, there is a pleasure and internal stillness in this new routine.

As I write this, my 5-year-old is lying on the daybed next to me, listening to a story. I am thinking and working and creating, and he is here too. The sense of a divided self, struggling to achieve an elusive balance, is beginning to fade. In its stead, a softening of expectations, an internal reintegration, the understanding, as Whyte (2009) so eloquently describes, that our need to belong to ourselves, each other, and our work, "are not actually separate commitments but different expressions of the way each individual belongs to the world" (p. 10).

5 | THE TIME TO CARE

When the pandemic passes, will it be a return to business as usual? A return to the internal discord, the division of selves, the impossible struggle to meet competing demands? A grudging acceptance that, despite knowing how vital the caring relationships we build with our children are for their moral development and formation as participants in society, we simply do not have the time that is required to truly observe, listen, and guide? Noddings (2002) observes that, "caring cannot act alone. Indeed, in a society such as ours, it cannot act alone, even at home, since the manifestations of care in the home are, at least, properly influenced by the progress of justice in the larger society" (p. 6). Caring and caregiving, then, must be supported through social policy and legislation.

At the institutional level, at the very least, colleges and universities must be attentive to the reality that, although states have reopened and universities are aggressively pushing forward with the fall semester, cutting budgets and asking faculty and staff to do more with less, for many parents, demands at home remain the same. As COVID-19 cases continue to rise without aggressive mitigation efforts, many children will still be learning remotely from home, will continue to be socially isolated, and will need caring relationships at home more than ever to help them navigate these strange and confusing times. Without explicit guidelines to support academic parents, many of them, particularly mothers, will struggle to meet merit, tenure, and promotion expectations. The social justice implications of this are non-trivial. As Wright, Haastrup, and Guerrina (2020) argue, as care responsibilities reallocate time away from creative endeavors and the production of knowledge, diverse voices in academia, including women's, will be reduced and excluded, now and in the future.

Beyond immediate considerations, academic institutions should use this opportunity to value the contributions academic parents make in both the traditionally evaluated spheres of teaching, research, and service as well as in their caregiving capacities. Doing so entails (i) addressing the "baby-penalty" or "motherhood-tax" in academia, and the fact that gender disparities in professional outcomes are greater for mothers who are less likely to be hired in tenure-track positions, stay in the profession over time, and or join the most senior ranks (Ballenger, 2010; Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013); and (ii) acknowledging that many academic fathers also want to provide "attentive

love" to their children, can uniquely contribute to society through caregiving at home, and need institutional support for that work in the same way mothers do. Specific policies may include "paid family leave for both mothers and fathers, especially for childbirth, a flexible workplace, a flexible career track, a re-entry policy, pay equity reviews, childcare assistance, dual career assistance" (Mason, 2013). Incentivizing, rather than penalizing, caring behavior and relationships benefits us all.

These policies need not, and should not, be limited to academic institutions or private organizations. Raising the value of care work requires new solutions, including legislative action (Ruppanner, Churchill, & Scarborough, 2020; Thomason & Macias-Alonso, 2020). Although the Family and Medical Leave Act provides limited job protection for employees to care for family or their own health, 3 months of unpaid job protection is surely insufficient support for the work of caregiving. Even in countries that provide more social support for caregiving, and childcare in particular, there is concern about the quality of care. According to Noddings (2002), "people long to be cared for by people with a personal interest in them" (p. 29). Citing the model of a Vermont nonprofit's policy of 12 weeks of paid leave which parents can use in hourly increments to support caregiving and children's education at home, Fetters (2020) recently proposed a nationwide compassionate leave policy as an alternative to schools reopening. Social policies like this can help to elevate the status of care and caregiving long after the pandemic ends.

The ethics of care calls for radical social change, a revaluation of what is most meaningful for a happy and productive society, and policies that support employees and families accordingly. In exposing the false dichotomy between work and life, production and care, COVID-19 has presented us with an opportunity to consider how we might forge, "a new path/to the waterfall" (Carver, 1996, p. 13) and place care at the center of our lives and society. For now, at least, the color, form, and sounds of our days have changed and the curtain held up to divide work from life has dropped. There is only Life. And it feels like a relief.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

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