



Feeling Guilty by Being In-Between Family and Work: The Lived Experience of Female Academics

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Abstract

In higher education, scientists live and breathe their work every single day, providing the conditions for potential conflict between professional and family life. This phenomenological inquiry explores the question: “How do female university academics experience being between the family and work responsibilities in their daily activities?” Twelve male and female academics from different scientific/research fields participated in the study. Phenomenological analysis of the interviews with female academics revealed the challenges they face in reconciling family and work commitments. The emerging themes include experience of feeling guilty by prioritizing their research, aligning family holidays with academic conferences, automating activity, compelling the body and mind to work in a different mode, and doing housework alongside academic activity – all of which reveal the bodily presence of female academics between two important areas of life without having a clear focus on either one of them. This study showed that, while increasing equality in the work sphere has unified the opportunities of men and women, female academics still experience conflict between family and work, as well as a feeling of guilt, when they talk about significant moments in their own experience of the university environment.

Introduction

In the contemporary higher education arena there is a high level of competition due to increasing demands that are overcome only by hard and continuous work. The work of academics has therefore become stressful in the extreme. Academic activities in higher education are closely linked to personality; since the early 20th century, scientific work has been idealized and associated with a strong sense of vocation (Fox, Fonseca, & Bao, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that most academics are not only living, but breathing, their work every single day (Wang et al., 2012). As with any other activity, such devotion to work and academic vocation creates the conditions for potential conflict with non-work domains, like personal life and family. Scientific and knowledge-driven work, which requires creativity, concentration

and diligence, seldom fits into normal working hours, and often clashes with other responsibilities, including the family. Such a tight relationship between work and personal life becomes even more complicated in the case of female academics.

Research conducted by Stack (2004), Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004), and Jijena-Michel and Michel (2012) investigated this topic in order to identify the problems faced by academic staff who combine family and work responsibilities, as well as possible solutions. The findings of these studies point to a more pronounced conflict between work and family responsibilities experienced by females. One possible reason is the stereotypical gender roles that exist in society, which put pressure on working females to perform domestic chores to the same extent as non-working females (Yasin & Naqvi,

2016). The nature of the everyday routine of academics – long working hours, work at night and over weekends, frequent travel – contribute to ever-increasing stress.

Female academics who have children experience even higher levels of conflict in their daily routine, and often feel constantly overwhelmed, along with feeling that none of their priority areas – at work or in the family – provides a fully-fledged role either as a mother or as a professional in their field. Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2010) add to these considerations their own experiences as female academics who have children, and emphasize that it is virtually impossible for a working mother not to feel guilty, for instance when her son refuses to eat all day because he only wants to eat lunch at home. This suggests that female academics who aspire to establish a successful career and, at the same time, desire a stable family life, have to deal with many conflicting experiences in order to reconcile these two areas in a way that does not affect anyone adversely; yet the feeling of guilt becomes a constant presence.

A phenomenological approach to the existence of female academics between family and work responsibilities, accompanied by a feeling of guilt, makes it possible to see this phenomenon not only as circumstantial in origin, or as a topic of research that can be explained in terms of psychological, biological or sociological aspects (van Manen, 1984). This paper describes the experiences of female academics balancing family and work responsibilities as a matter of everyday routine. Research studies substantiate that family/domestic duties interfere with work, and work interferes with family/domestic duties. However, work interferes with family/domestic duties more often than the other way around (Fox et al., 2011). This puts women academics in a position in which they are forced to exist between the two worlds, since society accepts females following their careers in science, but still does not accept men doing household chores or sharing the load of family care. This complicates the lives of women in academic careers and makes them more sensitive to family/work conflicts (Yasin & Naqvi, 2016). In this paper, the experience of female academics working in the context of these challenges is viewed through the lens of one of the phenomenological dimensions – corporeality – as the sensation of being between the two worlds that reveals itself through inferior physical presence in a particular sphere of life, whether in the family or at work. Merleau-Ponty (1945/1962) argued that the body cannot be separated from the mind or internal experiences – there is no dividing line between a person and his or her body, because the body contains all “I am”. In the everyday life of female academics, the body is experiencing all the events, and is “telling” about specific experiences, not only reflecting on them from the current perspective, but also revealing how the moment was experienced. The participants’ sharing of their own experiences has enabled the description of the existential routine of

female academics and their existence between the two worlds of work and family as a unique experience that is formed differently for each, depending not least on their personal points of view and the important moments unique to their own lives.

A Phenomenological Approach to Female Academic Everydayness: Experiencing Body In-Between

The methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology allows the topic selected for study to be any human experience, whether an event, a relationship, a situation, feelings or thoughts (van Manen, 2014). In this study, the daily routine of female university academics is regarded as an exceptional phenomenon: their experiences in the present – being between the family and work – becomes extraordinary when these experiences are elevated from the everyday to the level of a phenomenological research site. The phenomenological research question defines the parameters of this study as focused on what it means for female academics to experience everyday conflict – feeling the personal and professional need to achieve academic heights, while at the same time responding to the needs of the family and children, and often needing to combine attending to both at the same time.

Before formulating the research question, it is important to clarify the essential intention of the research: to look at how this conflict of “being in-between” is manifested in the activities of female academics, and to reveal the uniqueness of this state of “being” in relation to other people and the surrounding world (van Manen, 2014). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to articulate the experiences of female academics. These experiences have their meaningful structure(s) and are narrated in the way they were experienced in that particular moment.

At the very beginning of the study, it was therefore necessary to formulate a research question that was to accompany the researchers throughout the whole study, in order to direct their focus and allow them to gain a deeper insight into the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (van Manen, 1984). The research question of this phenomenological inquiry is “How do university female academics experience being between the family and their work responsibilities in their daily activities?” This question implies seeking to recognize the context in which this conflict manifests itself and what dimension it allows to be revealed. This paper presents one of the themes that emerged as the bodily dimension – *the lived experience of university female academics being in-between the family and work*.

The phenomenological methodology employed in this study allowed the researchers to reveal the experiences of female academics which might otherwise be ignored or obscured by the preconceptions and biases with which the researcher may come into the study field.

The origin of the applied methodology in this study is phenomenological philosophy, which is concerned with the essential nature of human existence. It is based on the premise that the study of a phenomenon must start not from the formation of assumptions or reliance on dogma, but from the purpose of coming to know the phenomenon for what it is in itself, its features and true essence (Husserl, 1907/1970; 1923/1981). The attempt to be separated from pre-existing assumptions raised one of the main challenges in this phenomenological study – to explore and acknowledge our own convictions and preliminary opinions and to “postpone” them: in other words, to bracket them. It means to disregard one’s personal experience as a researcher while working at a university, and to dissociate from one’s own views and opinions about the work of academics and its pressures.

In phenomenology, this process is also known as reduction, and, from the point of view of Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, it is the central requirement for practising the method of phenomenology (van Manen, 2014). However, such a requirement is difficult to reconcile methodologically with the idea that the scientific research is carried out on the basis of the subject under study being of interest to the researcher and his/her enthusiasm in this regard. Therefore, this study follows the approach of Heidegger, who questions the possibility of the total bracketing of consciousness, and raises the question of whether the researcher, being in the world and exploring it, can ever truly dissociate him/herself from his/her beliefs, values and knowledge. Heidegger (1927/1962) emphasizes the need to perceive and interpret human experience in terms of its historicity and culture, and accordingly to create an “incarnation” of knowledge.

The main source for analysis and reflection on the daily routine of female university academics in this study is the recollection by the respective research participants of meaningful moments experienced in their everyday routine. Here, research ethics is an inseparable element of this hermeneutic phenomenological research study. We cannot ask questions about people’s lives without it in some way affecting the very lives of those whom we make the topic of our research (van Manen, 1984). The request to remember illustrative events from their everyday lives as university staff members can evoke not only pleasant memories, but may also frustrate, or engender mistrust in, the research participants, especially when research interviews touch on the domain of the personal, such as family, feelings, or experienced conflicts.

In performing this qualitative research, we applied the necessary principles of research ethics such as the protection of the privacy and identity of the research participants, and the clear presentation of the purpose and procedures of the study. Before the present study proceeded, the premise was that all prospective research participants who may have experience in relation to

the phenomenon under investigation should represent a homogeneous group (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, the main criteria for the selection of the participants for the study were the prior acquisition of an academic title (doctorate/PhD) and current employment at a university. In total, twelve academics from different disciplines participated in the research study, five males and seven females.

This paper presents one of the themes that emerged from the analysis of the narrated experiences of the research participants – the lived experience of female university academics being in-between the family and work. This theme was touched upon by almost all the participant female academics who have children. This suggests that, when remembering significant moments associated with work at a university, the motif of family is inextricable.

Findings

The female university academics who participated in the research study talked about their academic work as a source of great intellectual satisfaction and recognition. In fact, this context reveals the obvious meaning of scientific work as a “vocation” in females’ lives. The phenomenological interviews with female academics nevertheless also highlighted the challenges they face in combining family and work commitments. These experiences have been revealed through empathies in which the close connection between two spheres of human existence gives rise to a physical sensation, as if one were existing between two different worlds. The possibility for a female university academic to reconcile the interaction between these two spheres of her life is an essential aspect of her satisfaction with her academic activity. However, it relates to constant tensions and efforts to meet both academic work demands and family needs.

Being together: The scholarship trips with the family

In the last few years in the summer, when I go to a conference, my family travels with me together. I feel like it’s saving me a little bit of time, as we spend more of it together there and avoid the tension of when I leave the family, going somewhere again and again. And I even noticed that when I choose conferences, I always keep in mind that there would be a possibility to go there with my family. Last year, when I travelled to another continent, I took my husband with me, we went there together, we were together, we communicated. But I remember someone once commented to me: “Are you taking the family with you to conferences? Does it mean that your holiday time is your conferences?” (M.B.)

The reconciliation of family and work commitments is a continuous process, which is also revealed by this young, acclaimed female university academic's story. Although it creates a certain amount of personal tension, maintaining balance is achieved through planning work-related activities in parallel with possibilities for the family. Seeking to meet the needs of an academic on the one hand, and the desire to spend time with close relatives on the other hand, becomes the object of a joint family effort. Family members adapt to the work of a female academic (mother, wife), and she chooses scientific events which may not be the ones that best serve her academic/scientific/research interests, but that are compatible with family opportunities. It is precisely this process of harmonization that enables a female university academic to feel physical relief – to get rid of the feeling of guilt because, as a wife and mother, she devotes too much time to her scientific activities.

However, the story reflects the fact that such a model of reconciliation of family and work commitments may seem unacceptable when viewed from the outside; trips together with family to scientific events show that work requirements are prioritised, and family needs are simply adapted to it. This demonstrates the duality of the situation – on the one hand, in the inner life of the family, and, on the other hand, in the model that it has created for female academics. This combination of the dual responsibilities is acceptable, but the experience of the female academic shows that society regards them as mutually exclusive, with family time and activities excluding, and separate from, work responsibilities.

This approach can be linked to stereotypical gender roles persisting in society, with females expected to play a primary role in housework (Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2010). It becomes a factor influencing scientific productivity and career drivers. However, work-family interaction can be seen not only as a conflict. Jijena-Michel and Michel (2012) investigated the interaction between work and family in the activities of female academics and revealed the relationship between these two spheres of life as enriching. If an academic succeeds in tackling this problem not as a conflict, but rather as conducive to an improvement in her performance, her commitment and dedication to the university in which she is working becomes stronger. This is confirmed by the experience of a female academic research participant: although she is forced to combine family needs with the professional priority of academic work activities, her achievements reveal that, in academic activities, she has effectively approached this work-family interaction in a manner that has made it conducive to enrichment.

Experiencing guilt: Scholarship activities as a personal priority in the family

I remember when one of my close friends ... finished writing and defended her PhD, her

relatives came to greet her. And there's a little girl, her daughter. My friend with tears in her eyes tells her daughter: "You know, now I promise you, I promise that I will no longer lock the door of my room so that you cannot enter". This girl was born to her when she was writing her dissertation, and she had to lock the door to prevent the child entering and disturbing her writing. (M.F.)

This story reveals personal and sensitive experiences, when the emerging incompatibility between scientific work and family needs forces a female to completely dissociate them from each other. Lived experience confirms that, even by constructing a balance between academic scientific aspirations and motherhood in one's life, one of these two spheres still appears in the second place. Closing the door to separate a child from the writing process suggests that the research participant who narrated the story saw it as necessary to physically disengage oneself from one's juvenile daughter while writing a scientific work. However, the result is a feeling of guilt when the role of a mother is demeaned by using devices such as locking the door to cut off access to her academic domain. Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2004), confirm, in their research on maternity and academic work, that there is conflict between these two spheres of responsibility. Female university academics with children are more likely to experience stress and feelings of guilt in pursuing daily routines with several diverse responsibilities – leadership, research work, and family responsibilities. This story tells us that it is at certain times difficult to maintain a positive balance between professional aspirations and the mother's role. When striving to realize the self in several fields at the same time, a feeling of guilt inheres in the discrepancies between the set goals and the lack of opportunities to fulfil all. The balancing of maternal and academic duties creates a sense of existing physically between two worlds, in both of which her role is essential.

Academics are very attentively observed every day by those surrounding them, functioning professionally as if under a magnifying glass from many sides: as teachers they are being monitored by students, as employees they are assessed by university authorities, as academics they are observed by colleagues, and as providers of authoritative opinion they are assessed by the public (Churchman & King, 2009). At the same time, for career achievement, female academics face challenges between home and work commitments. When working full-time while also having family responsibilities to attend to, female academics find themselves caught in a variety of conflicts every day – a constantly stressed daily schedule, lack of time for personal and leisure needs, making perfunctory compromises (Whitmarsh, Brown, Cooper, Hawkins-Rodgers, & Wentworth, 2007). The recollection of a female academic about the process of preparing her dissertation shows that physical existence

between the two spheres of activity starts from the very first scientific activities if interference with family duties and responsibilities also affects them.

Being between two worlds: The family and science

I defended my PhD dissertation thirteen years ago, and every time I meet my PhD supervisor, he reminds me: "Do you remember when we were sitting, we were calculating with SPSS, and next to us on the floor lay a five-month-old child who is teasing and wagging with legs and hands?" This is a moment I remember after many years and it is remembered by not only me, but also by a male academic. I recall him sitting at a computer, explaining to me how to run SPSS, what is an ANOVA, what is a factorial analysis, how to see of what kind the correlation coefficient is. And next to the world of statistics, there is somebody who is wagging with arms and legs. (M.F.)

In this recollection, the role of a scientific leader is given to the PhD supervisor. A female academic's meeting with her PhD supervisor recalls one episode from their co-operation, which reveals the peculiarities of the construction of the relationship between the family and the scientific activity. The story emphasizes the lingering memory of the situation – it is constantly remembered not only by her, academic/female/mother, the one who personally experienced the complexity of the situation, but also by her leader/PhD supervisor/male academic. What do these gender roles mean in terms of the tense relationship between work demands and family responsibilities?

In this story, one can recognize the stereotypical attitude towards the situation of a man and a woman in similar work situations. Separation and different roles in the reconciliation of family and work relations are borne out by research. In families in which scientific work is everyday routine, female academics carry more household responsibilities than their husbands. In combining housework and academic activities, the female academic operates in multi-task mode when her husband and she work as co-workers at home in order for her to have the opportunity to realize herself fully in academic work (Suitor, Mecom, & Feld, 2001).

The story of one female academic confirms the need for multi-mode operation – the pursuit of a commitment to both personal life and work makes the body act in a two-way mode – in order at the same time to be both a scientist and a housewife. This experience reveals the reality of the lived world – where work and caring for babies is referred to as two different worlds whose relationship is in conflict.

Being self-disciplined: When hands and mind work differently

Fifteen years ago, just two years before the defence of my dissertation, I remember having worked out a particular technique. My son was then four months old, and I still remember one moment when I washed him. I had written about half a page of my dissertation when the child started to cry. I removed his nappy, washed him with soap, rinsed and dried him, then applied cream and a clean nappy. But throughout all that activity dissertation sentences were going through my mind. So, in those ten minutes of activity, when I was doing something else with my hands, I came up with three sentences, and after putting the child to bed I wrote it down. The fact is that, while your hands do one thing, something else is going on in your mind – it becomes an automatic activity. (M.F.)

When we are skilled in performing a certain action automatically, we carry it out without much thought, by following the easiest way we know. It allows us to do something efficiently without much effort – our body works as if self-contained. But what if that auto-care occurs when taking care of your newborn baby? This story tells of the experience of a female academic facing a maternal duty in the process of developing a scientific work. In order to reconcile the two spheres, which both require concentration and full attention, it is natural that commitment to both of them becomes complex. A tool used to combine two different processes – “machine technique” – involves movements of hands and body that are stored in the memory. Vivid memories of baby washing and personal hand movements while writing the scientific text continues in the mind indicate the inability to reorient the self from one activity to another and to fully devote to either one of them.

The current reflection on the former situation – the care of the baby as an automatic activity – implies the insecurity of the female academic about her personal actions. The scientific work in this experience appears to require all the attention, so even the duties of the mother do not allow neglect of the text-writing process. This recollection of a female academic suggests that focusing on scientific activity remains the focus of a constructive relationship between family and work commitments. Stack (2004) explains that university academics, no matter the gender, who have small children (up to the age of 10) tend to be more productive than their colleagues who do not have children. This research-based finding suggests that children can be a motivation to encourage academics to work harder in order to ensure a better future for their children through their work rewards.

The phenomenological research findings presented in this paper demonstrate that, in one way or another, the combination of family and work responsibilities affects both, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, the focus of attention on children is as if programmed culturally, and the time allocated for this cannot be used for work. But, at the same time, having children can also boost productivity, given the motivation to ensure the future well-being of the family. The conflict between work and family responsibilities can be determined not only by the individual's internal experiences, but also by the external environment.

Experiencing different roles: Being between the modes of family life and work

I remember my dear colleague was telling a story about how she was going to defend her PhD dissertation the next day. She speaks on the phone to her PhD supervisor, and the supervisor explains to her how tomorrow should look in terms of presentation. She says: "I'm talking to the supervisor on the phone, I keep the mobile phone between my shoulder and my ear, and at the same time I cook a fish for my family. And the supervisor cannot even imagine what I am doing right now". This is already the beginning of that "schizophrenic" condition. Maybe this is not "real" schizophrenia yet, but you become a robot and an insincere mother, an insincere wife, or an unscrupulous partner in life. This is the presence of "In Between". Between household, communication; between being with a child, or communicating with other people, and at the same time being in the text. (M.F.)

The being "in between" implies incapability to be either anywhere or everywhere completely. The experience of the female academic shows that the pressure to carry out several tasks simultaneously leads to the lack of being in any, and results in robotic activities. This implies an ambiguous assessment – on the one hand, a female is making an effort to properly fulfil her duties in both areas – housekeeping and scientific work – but, on the other hand, it causes artificiality, not focusing on one's actions in any one activity. The presence of the responsibility for a household even at one of the most crucial stages of the researcher's professional academic life – preparation for PhD defence – reveals that what the academic is doing at that time is hidden from the supervisor, since such a combination of activities is unacceptable in a university work environment. The situation this female academic terms "the beginning of a schizophrenic condition" suggests that the life of a female academic simultaneously combining different responsibilities may negatively influence the working processes in her environment and disrupt her functioning in the academic professional sphere.

The essence of this narrative is revealed by the view expressed at the end about what a "good academic" is: this is the person who can devote herself/himself to scientific work and writing for a certain number of hours a day. But the essence of the narrated story in fact reveals itself as being that a female academic does not feel like a *good academic* in combining family life and work. The tense relationship between work and family responsibilities in the everyday life of female academics becomes a reason to consider their identity and gender roles in this professional activity.

Being in a dilemma: Preparing a meal – or doing academic work?

One day I heard a professor say that, while the male writer holds a pen, the female writer holds a potato peeler. Today, for example, I saw what my computer looks like ... it is covered in flour, sugar and grease. That is because, when I was making pancakes yesterday, I wrote a few sentences while they're baking. After writing, I will come back to the pancakes. So the text is created within such individual parts. And I understand that it cannot be otherwise. (M.F.)

Cinamon and Rich (2002), who investigated gender differences by taking into account the challenges posed by work and family responsibilities, showed that females tend to work at home more often than males, and that females try to combine these two spheres. However, this leads to females being more likely than males to encounter internal conflicts, trying to meet both work and family obligations. The same study confirmed that female maternity values are high and that females accord more importance to work activities than males. The fact that, in this narrated story, a female academic perceives herself in the story she heard about the male writer's tool being a pen and the female's a potato peeler, implies a conflict between a female and a person who wants to be an academic professional/expert and at the same time must meet the needs of the household. The research participant describes her experience through the prism of the household: her computer as a tool for the academic is marked by "clues" of domestic intervention in the work process – flour, sugar and fat. Talking about writing a scientific text while making pancakes, a female academic discovers that it is a natural process, and this manifests her identification with the generally accepted model where females are responsible for the family, albeit in parallel with the pursuit of their ambitions in the professional sphere. As observed by De Beauvoir (1949/2012) seventy years ago, the position of a female in society is still viewed stereotypically: regardless of whether the female is a secretary or a student, when she returns home in the evening, she will always look for the socks that she needs to wash, for the blouse to be laundered or the skirt to be ironed.

Concluding Thoughts

This phenomenological research study, the results of which emanate from the lived experience of the research participants themselves, revealed a corporeal dimension in the experiences of female academics. Corporeality in phenomenology does not denote physical action as such, but a context in which the body is involved. In many situations, we are not conscious of being directly affected by it. However, a person cannot be completely indifferent to physical sensations, nor oblivious to the experiencing of certain experiences through the body. This study, in taking a closer look at the contexts in which the different dimensions of the work routine of female university academics are manifested and the moments shared by the female academics as significantly “telling” of their personal experience, has shown that the corporeality dimension has been very clearly revealed in the experiences of female academics striving to combine family and work responsibilities. The motive for family responsibility is inseparable from the work commitments of female academics who have children. It is clearly expressed through a corporeal sensation – the presence of two important areas of life without undivided concentration on at least one of them. The sensation, as if the body is divided into several parts, becomes inseparable when, as a female academic, it must devote attention and time to the production of scientific outputs while at the same time needing to pay attention to the neighbouring world in order to respond to the needs of the child or children, or the entire family. Tension, tears, automatic activity, writing while cooking food for the family – all these experiences that emerged in the interviews show that scientific work and maternity divide the female’s academic’s world into two spheres,

and both require them to fulfil their obligations. In the modern global and capitalist society, where equality in the work environment has united the opportunities of males and females, female scientists, while talking about significant moments in the university environment, still highlight the family and work intersection.

All the female participants in the research have merited significant professional achievements and are recognized both nationally and internationally for their scholarly contribution. Nevertheless, the body, as a participant in everyday processes, finds itself between two worlds – work and family – in relation to the narrated moments, but at the same time it becomes a “helper” in bringing together these worlds. The body is able to do housework in almost automatic mode, as long as the scientific text is wrapped in the mind; the body allows one to participate in an important conversation and produce food at the same time. Equally, the body becomes a trail-blazer of conflict between two intersecting spheres of responsibility – reinforced physical separation from dependent family members and, as a result, the physical difficulty of experiencing tension which appears as tears.

The corporeality dimension in the everyday routine of female academics made it possible to see the experiences of representatives of scientific activities in another light, revealing moments which generally might be mentioned only incidentally. The research findings suggest that a phenomenological approach – meaning an open and profoundly attentive attitude to lived experience of the phenomena of human life – can contribute significantly to future studies on the perception and interpretation of the everyday routine of female university academics, and in particular those with family responsibilities.

Referencing Format

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