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Exposing the Mythology of Balance and the Ecology of Graduate Student Mother Resilience in COVID-19

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Abstract

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Keywords

constructivist grounded theory, COVID19, graduate student mother, MotherScholar, phenomenology, resilience

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Exposing the Mythology of Balance and the Ecology of Graduate Student Mother Resilience in COVID-19

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While the COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the once marginalized conversation of academia's gendered imbalance of opportunity, discussion of its impact on graduate student mothers has remained absent. Resilience has been cited as key to overcoming in the pandemic era with little discussion of how its conceptualization continues to marginalize females in the academy. Our phenomenological study explores graduate student mothers' conceptualizations of balance, failure, success, and resilience using a family resilience framework which acknowledges the multiple identities to which they may avow and contexts in which they may operate. Employing an ecological conceptual framework, we engaged nine graduate student mothers and their children in focus groups and analyzed data using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Our research found that many graduate student mothers' definitions of success led them to delay qualifying exams and comps during the pandemic. Our exploration of the ecology of our participants' resilience during quarantine begins the generation of a new graduate student mother resilience theory in which the ability to overcome adversity is rooted in celebration, gratitude, collaborative problem-solving, connection, and flexibility. We recommend continued development of this new theory and provide insight into the supports higher education can offer to address the leaky academic pipeline.

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Introduction

Prompted by COVID-19 narratives, the predominately marginalized conversation of gendered work-life balance norms has been ushered into popular discourse. Parenting issues, once ignored and considered as tantamount with women's issues (Dickson, 2020), have been brought to the fore as seventy-four percent of the 100 largest school districts and almost half (49) of all districts opened fall 2020 with remote learning (*School districts' reopening plans: A snapshot*, 2020). Responding to traditional "caregiver bias" or "second shift" cultural norms in which women are expected to care for the family and home (Hochschild, 1997; Mason et al., 2013), women left the workforce in September 2020 at four times the rate that men did (Hsu, 2020). Others attempted to take on both work and schooling their children. Great Place to Work, a U.S. business consulting group, and healthcare start-up Maven reported that 9.8 million working mothers in the U.S. were suffering from burnout at the onset of the pandemic (2020). According to their survey of 440,000 working parents, including 226,000 mothers, working mothers had a twenty-eight percent greater chance of experiencing burnout than working fathers, and the estimated number of additional cases of burnout due to negotiating the demands of work and home rose above 2.3 million (Maven, 2020). The United Nations' (2020) Policy Brief warned that decades of gains made towards gender equity were at risk,

writing “Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex” (p. 2).

Within academia, the pandemic widened gender disparities, threatening female academics’ research productivity and career advancement (Kibbe, 2020; Minello et al., 2021; Ribarovska et al., 2021). Shallaby, Allam, and Buttorf (2020), write how the increased invisible labor load of mentoring students through the pandemic has fallen disproportionately on female and Black, Indigenous, People of Color faculty, two groups most affected by COVID-19. Nietzel’s (2021) study found that seventy-five percent of female faculty reported feeling stress, compared to fifty-nine percent of male faculty and more than double of what women had reported in 2019. In response to the same survey, seventy-four percent of female faculty relayed that their work-life balance had deteriorated, and eighty-two percent responded that their workloads had increased (Nietzel, 2021). Though largely unexplored, these gendered identities are also carried by graduate student mothers, an identity to which I as the primary author of this paper avowed when engaging in this study. While American manuscripts and media have widely discussed the pandemic’s effect on female faculty, few have featured the experiences of the graduate student mothers behind them in the academic pipeline. Kulp (2020) writes that the underrepresentation of doctoral student mothers in tenure-track positions is a relatively unexplored social justice issue; while they are valuable resources to the institutions they attend, they have had little power in academic contexts.

Due to the gendered nature of work perpetuated by cultural constructs and academic culture, graduate student mothers in doctoral programs are less likely to graduate from top ranked programs, publish in peer-reviewed journals, and to obtain career-related resources and experiences as their classmates who are not parents (Gardner, 2008; Kennelly & Spalter-Roth, 2006; Mason et al., 2013). In contrast to their male counterparts who benefit from their parenting role, graduate student mothers have traditionally experienced caregiver bias, or the assumption that they will spend more time caring for home and family than on their academic pursuits (Hochschild, 1997; Mason et al., 2013). They are also more likely to struggle with institutional barriers and lack of supports such as daycare, transportation, and health insurance, and to leak out of the pipeline entirely (Gibbs et al., 2014; Kelly & Grant, 2012; Mason et al. 2013; Springer et al., 2009). As Lynch (2008) contends, this “imbalance of opportunity” has dire implications for both academia as a profession and the institution of higher education.

The term “resilience” has been ubiquitously employed throughout the pandemic to prescriptively highlight those who have withstood adversity—those who invulnerably maintained balance or quickly rebounded after a fall. This is problematic, as Goodkind et al. (2020) note, because resilience is often circumscribed to individually focused success outcomes defined by dominant (i.e., white, male, heteronormative, middle-class) values. As Allen (2022) argues, the pandemic provides us with an opportunity to reclaim as an intersectional feminist practice both relational and collective forms of resilience.

In this phenomenological study, we explore graduate student mothers’ definitions of and experiences with balance, success, and failure both prior to and during the pandemic. Using the lenses of modern psychological and ecological discourse communities, we also seek to understand how graduate student mothers’ interdependence and interaction with their children engendered resilience during quarantine.

Conceptual Framework

Cultural messages have reinforced the notion that academic mothers must strike balance while teetering among three normed identities: (1) The Motherhood norm – a society-wide belief that women should be mothers, and perform unpaid family care and low-paid care for

others in need; (2) The Ideal Worker norm – a belief among managers and professionals in total commitment to career, and high rewards for this commitment; and (3) The Individualism norm – a society-wide belief that the government should not help those needing care (Drago, 2007). As a product of these normed expectations, graduate student mothers have navigated the pandemic as students, researchers and teaching assistants, carrying the weight of invisible labor and productivity loads with concern for the fate of their finances, graduation plans and future employment in a time of budget cuts (Zahneis & June, 2020). At the same time, they have had to manage the fallout of the pandemic on their children’s education, health, and socio-emotional welfare.

Balance and sustainment of the status quo are also used in imagery of resilience. Materials science defines resilience as an object’s capacity to spring back into its “original shape” after being manipulated. Similarly, biologists refer to resilience as an organism’s restoration or maintenance of “equilibrium” in response to physiological changes. Though modern developmental psychologists ascribe to a more interactional view of resilience, psychology has traditionally perceived it to be “individually centered,” defined by one’s ability to overcome adversity based on their unique traits or characteristics (Kirmayer et al., 2009). While these three dominant definitions of resilience continue to perpetuate the preservation of the status quo, masking and hiding inequities, the pandemic has prompted us to really consider the question Suarez (2020) poses in her op-ed *The Problem with Resilience*: “Who gets to decide what is normative?”

The term “Motherscholar,” first coined by Matias (2011) and further explored as “Mother-Scholar” by Lapayese (2012a), “drive(s) the feminist impulse to dismantle patriarchal binaries – namely, the sharp divide between the intellect and the maternal, the public and the private” (p. 17) while also “[finding] creative ways to insert their maternal identity, specifically in academic spaces and in their scholarship” (Lapayese, 2012b, p. 23). The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated our culture’s inability to conceptualize for women the “integration of a commitment to work and a commitment to family,” highlighting the “disjuncture between the way in which women experience the world and the cultural concepts through which these experiences are filtered (Smith 1987)” (Lynch, 2008, p. 587). The pandemic has also challenged us to counter the normative definition of resilience and to acknowledge its developmental and ecological nature.

Extending Matias’s scholarship, we engage in this research with the position that the graduate student mother’s identity cannot be bifurcated—she is a graduate student mother—who exists at intersections rather than binaries. For this reason, we employ Walsh’s (2016) family resilience theory, which is both developmental and ecological in nature, as our conceptual framework. Walsh defines family resilience through a strengths-based lens as:

The ability of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from adversity. Crucial family processes mediate stressful conditions and can enable families and their member to surmount crises and weather prolonged hardship. Traumatic events and a pileup of stresses can derail these processes. Even members not directly touched by a crisis are affected by the family response, with reverberations throughout the network of relationships (Bowen, 2004). How a family confronts and manages disruptive life challenges, buffers stress, effectively reorganizes, and moves forward with life will influence immediate and long-term adaptation for every family member and for the viability of the family unit. (2016, p. 3)

Family resilience develops and operates from the interaction of three domains: belief systems (e.g., making meaning of adversity, positive outlook, and transcendence and

spirituality), organizational processes (e.g., connectedness, mobilization of social and economic resources and flexibility), and communication processes (e.g., clarity, open emotional expression and collaborative problem solving).

Research Questions

Our study explores graduate student mother perceptions and conceptualizations of success, failure, balance, and resilience prior to, during and as a product of the pandemic. We ask:

- 1) How do graduate student mothers define and experience success, failure, and balance across their identities? Have these definitions changed due to the pandemic?
- 2) What are the graduate student mother's recovery-response strategies and concepts of resilience? How have these been impacted by or affected the family unit?

Both questions, rooted in ecological and feminist epistemologies, acknowledge that phenomena are always in relations of entanglement (Hughes & Lury, 2015) and seeks to transform systems of knowledge and ways of seeing through inquiry with and for women (Haraway, 1988). With this insight, we seek to reclaim conceptualizations of success and resilience from normative patriarchal frameworks which work punitively against the graduate student mother and the ecology of both family and community.

Positionality

In March of 2020 when the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a pandemic and United States schools shut down to prevent its spread. I, the primary author, was a second-year doctoral student as well as a mother of seven-year-old twin boys and an eleven-year-old daughter. Amidst the endless flurry of taking care of my children, directing their remote instruction, striving to fulfill the obligations of my assistantship, researching, and writing with my advisor and engaging in the final year of my doctoral work, I noted the headlines *The Virus Moved Female Faculty to the Brink. Will Universities Help? The Disproportionate Impact of the Pandemic on Women and Caregivers in Academia*, and *Women's Research Plummets during Lockdown - But Articles from Men Increase*. The narratives of graduate student mothers like me remained absent from research and public discourse. No one was amplifying how the additional layer of the pandemic complicated the long-mythologized existential crisis, pains, and trauma of disserting. Despite the new world we found ourselves in, a chaotic collision of all our spheres (mother, graduate assistant, student, etc.) into one, I and my fellow graduate student mothers found ourselves still operating by the normative framework of what it meant to be successful and resilient. The framework was punitively structured against the graduate student mother, while also ignoring her avowed situatedness within her family. Similarly, my secondary author found herself as a Motherscholar and department chair reflecting on her own journey along the academic pipeline as an expecting graduate student and trying to mitigate the pandemic's curbing of her students' pursuits.

Methods

Study Design

To address our research questions, we engaged in a phenomenological study with the goal of documenting and contextualizing the complex interplay of social, cultural, and political factors at play in graduate student mothers' conceptualizations of success and resilience (Shelton et al., 2017). We sought not generalizability but an understanding of (1) the "what" and "how" of what was experienced by participating graduate student mothers as they mothered and engaged in graduate studies both prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (2) the interaction of belief systems, organizational processes, and communication processes within her family framework which engendered family resilience during the pandemic. For these reasons, we collected data through focus groups and invited both graduate student mothers and their children to participate in this study.

Participants

We employed purposive sampling (Spradley, 1979) for this IRB-approved study, recruiting interested graduate student mother participants through an announcement posted on the American Educational Research Association's Survey Research special interest group listserv. Interested graduate student mothers sent us an email communicating their family's interest in participation. We then provided a Q&A session via Zoom for all potential graduate student mothers and their children. If a mother and her child(ren) had communicated their intent to participate during the Q&A session, we garnered verbal assent for children ages 6-11. Graduate student mothers then submitted forms consenting to their participation as well as assent forms for any participating children 12-17 years of age via email. We scheduled focus groups based on the availability of graduate student mothers and children, coordinating groups with attention to children's age.

A total of eight graduate student mother and children sets participated in the study. One additional graduate student mother participated without her child who had elected the day of the focus group to not participate. Graduate student mothers, whose ages ranged from mid-30's to late 40's, and their children, ages 6-16, resided across five states in West, Southwest, and Southeastern regions of the United States. Eight of the nine graduate student mothers were pursuing a doctoral degree. One participant was a single mother of three children aged six and under while one was an international student and English learner. Two graduate student mothers transitioned into graduate work during the pandemic while the other seven had begun studies prior to the COVID outbreak. Graduate student mothers were employed on and off-campus in full and part-time roles. Most children had returned to some sort of face-to-face schooling schedule approximately one month prior to focus group participation.

Focus Groups

We conducted a combined total of twelve semi-structured focus groups via Zoom. Graduate student mother focus groups lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes. Children focus groups were 45 minutes long during which their mothers were present only during the first and last five minutes. Using focus group guides which included topics, we wished to pursue but gave participants the freedom to shape their narrative (Yow, 2015), we began with "open-ended initial questions," transitioned to "intermediate main questions," and then closed with "ending questions" to invite participants to conclude or add something (Charmaz, 2014). We framed and worded children's focus group questions depending on the children's ages. Initial open-

ended questions included invitations for graduate student mothers to share their definitions of failure and balance prior to the pandemic. To their children, we posed open-ended initial questions such as sharing the last time they made a mistake. We then turned to intermediate main questions, asking graduate student mothers, for example, if they encountered any stumbles or failures during the pandemic and how their perceptions of failure changed throughout the course of quarantine. We also invited them to reflect on how their recovery-response strategies changed due to the pandemic. Similarly, we asked their children intermediate main questions such as whether they had a routine during the pandemic and to explain the consequences, emotional and practical, of having to change plans to accommodate the demands on their mothers' time. We then closed focus groups by asking graduate student mothers questions like how their perception of self-changed over the course of the pandemic and how this impacted the way they engaged with academia and/or their children. We ended focus groups with their children by asking their impressions of what the pandemic taught their family about responding to change and how their family's relationship has changed because of quarantine. We recorded and downloaded audio and visual Zoom focus group data onto password protected computers. We then transcribed audio data and uploaded them into Dedoose for analysis.

Data Analysis

We analyzed transcribed data using a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach. Charmaz (2000) writes that in contrast to Straus's grounded theory which derives from objectivist, concrete lines of inquiry, CGT enables the researcher to explore the study participants' subjective experience. While positivist grounded theory methods, as Charmaz argues, "foster externality by invoking procedures that increase complexity at the expense of experience" (p. 525), CGT methods advance phenomenological inquiry by seeking meanings within study participant views, voices, and values. Charmaz, founder of this approach, writes of how CGT differs from the positivist orientation of grounded theory:

My constructivist approach makes the following assumptions: (1) Reality is multiple, processual, and constructed—but constructed under particular conditions¹; (2) the research process emerges from interaction; (3) it takes into account the researcher's positionality, as well as that of the research participants; (4) the researcher and researched co-construct the data—data are a product of the research process, not simply observed objects of it. Researchers are part of the research situation, and their positions, privileges, perspectives, and interactions affect it (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Clarke, 2005, 2006). In this approach, research always reflects value positions. Thus, the problem becomes identifying these positions and weighing their effect on research practice, not denying their existence. Similarly, social constructivists disavow the idea that researchers can or will begin their studies without prior knowledge and theories about their topics. Rather than being a tabula rasa, constructivists advocate recognizing prior knowledge and theoretical preconceptions and subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny. (2008, p. 402)

¹ I [Charmaz] come close to the Marxist view of history here because I acknowledge human agency but assert that it always occurs within a preexisting social frame with its constraints—of which we may be unaware and which may not be of our choosing (see also Charmaz, in press).

CGT also differs from Strauss's grounded theory in that abductive, rather than purely inductive, methods are employed in data analysis for the purpose of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 170). We engaged in constant comparative analysis across data, participants (mother-to-mother, mother-to-child, and child-to-child), time (pre-COVID and during the pandemic), definitions, incidents, and categories. We then engaged in abduction using extant theory on resilience, burnout, and the gendered division of work within academia to build upon inductive findings to build phenomenological understanding.

While "it is humanly impossible for an interviewer or any other researcher to be totally "objective" and entirely removed from the narrative process, just as it is for narrators to be candid about all of the details of their personal lives" (Etter-Lewis, 1993, p. xiii), we pursued credibility using induction and multivocality as well as member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Throughout the analysis, we engaged in reflexivity, rereading and coding the focus group to "scrutinize parts featuring tension, contradictions, or conflicting codes" to ensure legitimate interpretations (Hamberg & Johansson, 1999, p. 458).

Using inductive analysis, we first present our findings in relation to Research Question 1 (How do graduate student mothers define and experience success, failure, and balance across their identities? Have these definitions changed due to the pandemic?). Secondary subheadings organize findings by time reference points (prior to or during the pandemic) while response themes are presented as tertiary subheadings. We then present findings to Research Question 2 (How do graduate student mothers define success, failure, and balance across their identities? Have these definitions changed due to the pandemic?). In pursuit of this question, we employed abductive analysis, analyzing thematic findings through the lens of Walsh's family resilience theory, which naturally springs from our conceptual framework's grounding in the ecology of resilience. These findings are presented with secondary headings using the three domains of Walsh's family resilience framework (belief systems, organizational processes, and communication processes) for the purpose of generating new theory. They are presented with tertiary headings on the ecology of resilience of the graduate student mother.

Findings

Research Question 1: How do Graduate Student Mothers Define and Experience Success, Failure, and Balance Across Their Identities? Have These Definitions Changed Due to the Pandemic?

Prior to the Pandemic

Stumbling over Normative Measures of Success. Graduate student mothers reflected that their pre-pandemic definitions of success were tied to "productivity" in the form of publications, research, teaching, presentations, grades, and/or work and "mothering" in the form of managing children's health, extracurriculars, socio-emotional engagement, schooling, and household responsibilities. Graduate student mothers reflected that these expectations were not necessarily explicit directives but instead driven by cultural discourse on mothering and academic and workplace messaging. As one graduate student mother relayed, "Well, I believe our program is very demanding and people are very productive, so I feel like I have to... Nobody tells me to do more, but I feel like I need to because everybody is doing it." Yet, how to manage publication and workplace productivity expectations with mothering was a quandary:

[Publication] are the part of the academic piece that I just haven't figured out how to fit in... I used to really prepare ahead of time for phone calls and meetings, and I'm just flying by the seat of my pants half the time with work these days...

Reflecting upon their success in these areas, most mothers reported that it was a balancing act in which they were constantly doubting themselves and stumbling to the point of burnout.

Graduate student mothers shared that they felt they were in a constant state of running and juggling. One graduate student mother, who was also employed as a full-time K-12 educator, shared, "I would get home from work and just start crying. And my husband would be like, "What's wrong?" And I'd be like, 'I'm just a terrible mom because I can't do this, or I can't do this.'" Another participant concurred: "just when we're really doing great with this other area, then work starts feeling like it's sliding... that feeling is all the time, to just feel like you're trying to just keep all the balls in the air." Operating within a constant state of anxiety led one mother to share, "Basically, what ends up happening is I feel like I suck at everything. I'm not succeeding anywhere." Others nodded in agreement.

During the Pandemic

While our participants continued to pursue normative expectations of balance, the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 crystallized its implausibility. COVID-19 compounded graduate student mother uneasiness regarding family health and magnified their stress levels. In addition to a new preoccupation with protecting their children from exposure to the COVID-19 virus, graduate student mothers became enveloped by anxiety regarding their children's schooling and socio-emotional welfare during quarantine. Graduate student mothers also communicated concern regarding the navigation of their family unit through spouse job loss, personal income loss, our nation's racial and political divide which fractured extended family and friend relationships, natural disasters, and the loss of family members.

Navigating Home and Academia's Expectations of Unlimited Availability. During the pandemic, graduate student mothers experienced their work, academic and mothering lives compacted into one sphere, with no more demarcation than perhaps the floors in their home. One graduate student mom shared of this change:

Usually, I would drop my son off and I'd have a few minutes getting to campus to just think like, "Okay, it's time for work, I'm at work." And I could work. And then I had that time to get mentally ready for whatever else we had. And one of the biggest things I've realized during [the pandemic] is that there is no end. There is no barrier now to work and home and school... I was saying about a month ago to my husband, I don't remember when all I had to worry about was my work during the workday.

Likewise, during off-the-clock hours, graduate student mothers found that work-life boundaries during the pandemic had become more permeable and that expectations of unlimited availability had increased. As one graduate student mother shared and was echoed by many, "people expect you to be available." Another shared that this expectation of being engaged in work while off-the-clock was also self-imposed:

My job's been very supportive. Nobody's ever been made to feel bad for working from home or staying safe; [in fact,] that's kind of been the expectation. And there's never been a push. I will say though, I actually took today off to make a cake for my son's birthday, but I'm on my computer, so I'm green on [Microsoft] Teams. People have started messaging me... I think that it's like all of a sudden; if I hop on to do a quick search for something or find an email, I will turn green. And then there's a message I need to send for work or something else comes up. And it makes it feel like there's that pressure to go ahead and answer. Why not? You're just right there in the dining room.

Some graduate student mothers shared that their workload had significantly increased during the pandemic due to time spent in virtual meeting spaces. Many had to work longer hours to meet work productivity goals or their own expectations. Focused work hours were practically non-existent during what could be identified as typical work hours.

Facing Limitations to Productivity and Its Potential Impact on Their Career Trajectory. Graduate student mothers reported that managing the demands of work and home during the pandemic impacted their ability to be productive during a seminal stage in forging their academic trajectory. One graduate student mother stressed:

I feel like right now... I'm struggling to try to balance just different tasks, so teaching and childcare, things at home and several manuscripts, and also trying to find a job as well, trying to graduate this semester... And then I'm not too sure about, especially with COVID, what the job market is gonna be like... I feel like I am rushing against this limit and time and trying to get everything done.

Shouldering productivity, mothering, and child(ren) schooling responsibilities led some graduate student mothers to just aim at keeping their "head above water and to doing the bare minimum of what was expected." Some reported that the quality of their work had decreased while others shared with frustration and despair that something had to give. Some regretfully walked away from research and teaching assistantships, jobs, and publication efforts as the pandemic stretched on. A discrepant case, one graduate student mother placed publications before sleep. She shared:

It's like what you put the value on right now, knowing that everybody else is in the same situation with their day-to-day work of just swimming around in circles. I'm just not prioritizing that. I know that publishing, if I stop doing it, it'll be harder to keep going, so that's what I prioritized.

Others regretfully felt they had little choice but to postpone their qualifying exams and comps. Many expressed that no choice seemed like the correct one.

Grappling with the Mythology of Balance. Working from home led graduate student mothers to experience more pointedly and continuously the conflict between ideal worker, mother, and individualism norms. As one graduate student mother relayed, "I used to not worry about anything at home 'cause I was off at work, there was nothing I could do about it... And now I'm home all day. It feels like I should be doing more." While assisting children with their schooling was a shared responsibility between most of the graduate student mothers and their husbands, tending to the home and meals was gendered work. Due to quarantine, some mothers

were unable to rely upon the support networks of parents, extended family and friends which had traditionally assisted them in navigating their family's busy schedule and to-do lists. Trying to focus on work while noting all that had to be done around the home, a graduate student mom lamented:

I'll start one task and then I'll do 15 other tasks before I get back to the original task at hand. I'm working at home, I'm sitting here and I'm like, "Oh my gosh, I might need to do that." "Oh my gosh, I think I threw that load of laundry in?" and, "Oh, I need to go do this. I need to go do this," so it just... It's hard to sit and do my actual work when I have all of this other housework that can be done. So, I've learned to multi-task, I take my computer down to the basement with me sitting on bed while I'm sorting laundry. That kind of thing.

Many graduate student mothers reported that this constant state of distraction led them to become more forgetful and less agile when it came time to refocus to address a task.

Operating at a Deficit as Mothers. While treading academic waters, almost all graduate student mothers felt that they were operating at a deficit when it came to mothering their children during the pandemic. Younger children communicated sadness at seeing their mom distracted with her studies, research, and work. Graduate student mothers felt overwhelmed by guilt. That guilt preoccupied our single graduate student mom:

What I remember feeling and thinking at that point and saying once we got back into classes was that I was operating at 20% brain power. And I felt like I was failing at everything that I did. So, I would like at that point, my desk was in the living room, and I would shove a bowl popcorn in front of my kids and tell them to be quiet for three hours, which is impossible...

Others shared that throwing aside expectations regarding children's bedtimes and routines, home-cooked meals, and screen-time to manage academic productivity demands left them ridden with guilt. Those residing in neighborhoods with predominately stay-at-home moms felt this remorse compounded by concerns that they were not as engaged with their kids during daytime hours as others. As one participant remarked, "I hate to say this, but we're all women, we all know guilt intimately, right?"

Shedding the "Game Face" at Home. The pandemic completely effaced the graduate student mothers' ability to compartmentalize different facets of her MotherScholar identity. This was both a challenge and a reason for gratitude according to one graduate student mother:

I can't compartmentalize anymore. We are—all four of us—on the same floor, and it drives me crazy. But when my kids are stressed with school, they can see that I'm also getting stressed with school. Or, that I was stressed for two days and today I finally turned something in and feel relief. We're all sort of playing the same game now. And I think that's kind of comforting to my kids that they're seeing that I go through some of the same frustration levels. But I'm working and then meeting a goal. Especially for my eighth grader, I think it's been helpful for him to see that.

Another graduate student mother commented, "When I think about my children and what they may have learned about these ideas of balance is that maybe it's not possible to

balance everything and how I'm not always gonna have my game face on." Regardless of her stumbles, one graduate student mother found solace: "my children still hug me and love me, and they saw me struggle a lot, especially in the beginning." Another participant concurred, sharing, "we've gone from very, very low lows to incredible highs of thinking like, 'This is gonna come to an end. We're making it through. And we're gonna be a stronger family for it.'"

At the same time as their children were visibly struggling to transition to online learning and quarantine life, graduate student mothers' anxieties and stumbles also became more evident to those around them. Observing their mothers' graduate student identity was a new phenomenon for some of the children. One child reflected, "I see my mom stress a lot—a lot—and it is just like... I've never seen her do that before. I've never seen her stress and... Not very often anyway." Another child relayed of observing her mother and homelife during quarantine:

She was like, run here, run there to make snack. "Did you do that? Come to me. Tell me an answer." And then back to a meeting. She would come back to me. Have a meeting again. Do something else. Write a paper or something... Sometimes Daddy has to work away and go into work, and she has to cook or... So, it's really, really crazy. So yeah, it's just different, 'cause of COVID, it just feels different for me...

Viewing their mother's load led some children to become, in their words and/or comments made by their mothers, more self-reliant in managing their online schooling and relationships as they observed their mothers managing student and work responsibilities.

Operationalizing Success on Their Own Terms. While most of our study participants ascribed to normative measures of success which tracked them into a continuous loop of feeling inadequate, a few operationalized successes on their own terms. Giving herself space to say, "You know, this is the best that I can do at this point," was transformational for one graduate student mother who realized that she is not in control of all the variables in her pursuit of traditional conceptualizations of success in mothering and academia. To maintain a positive concept of self, another study participant reflected of her operationalization of success:

Success for me just means I keep doing the things. I don't think that there's necessarily [measures of] quality attached... My work is grant-funded: I win the grants, or I don't... So, I guess that's that. Do I still have a job? I guess I'm successful. But I definitely... I can't compare myself to other parents... My kids haven't ever been in sports because I can't... That is not something I have time to do, so I don't base it on like, do my kids get to do all the cool things other kids get to do? But it's more like, do I see them a reasonable amount of time? That's success. Do they understand what I do and think it's neat? That's success. But it's really just about proving people wrong. You said it was too much. And that's probably not the best way to live life. But I do.

Another graduate student mom relayed that success for her was "finishing" a paper, revision, or a report and "showing up" for her children. Success was not one size fits all.

Reoperationalizing Failure. Most graduate student mothers perceived the pandemic as an opportunity to reset and reprioritize. One graduate student mother reflected on how she took it upon herself to reoperationalize what it meant to fail:

I believe these times when not only you get sick, but the whole world does... It has the same concerns. It makes you also check your priorities. So, failure looks a little different than before. And you're more focused on the good things and celebrating every day because you don't know what is going to happen next. Like back in [my home country], we had social political crisis on 2019, so that came with a lot of economic consequences for everybody. So, there's no certainty about the future, and that changes the way you see failure and success. And I believe that's positive. Before that, I was very controlling and also so concerned about what people think about me. And so, I have been changing that mindset of saying, "Whatever people think of me is their business... Their problem, not my problem." So, a lot of things come with this situation. You have a little more time to focus on the most important.

Another shared, "I just feel such a better, more shared humanity with people than when I just see people in their work life." In the comments, it became clear that failure was viewed more in terms of forgiveness. Seeing the struggles of many during quarantine, humanized failure in a way not accepted prior to the pandemic.

Research Question 2: What are the Graduate Student Mother's Recovery-Response Strategies and Concepts of Resilience, and How Have These been Impacted by or Affected the Family Unit?

Seeking to reclaim conceptualizations of resilience, we explored graduate student mothers' definitions as expressed in both their narratives and those of their children through ecological and feminist lenses. We build upon theories of graduate student mother resilience by employing Walsh's three domains of family resilience. Specifically, we sought to understand how they made meaning of the challenges faced during the pandemic as well as how they communicated about and organized in response to the adversity they faced. Before moving on to our discussion, we include *Anticipating the New Normal* findings which communicates graduate student mother concerns regarding a return to the patriarchal status quo.

Beliefs about Resilience

Failure Need Not be Cloaked. Kagan (1984) cites that the meaning parents derive from and communicate about adversity mediates their children's development of resilience. When prompted to consider what their parents had taught them about resilience, most children relayed that they had been taught to perceive failures, mistakes, and/or obstacles as learning opportunities. Whether they had dropped an item due to carrying too much at once, mistakenly stained their comforter with homemade slime or made an error on a math quiz, none of the children with whom we spoke felt discomfort with discussing their mishaps with their parents. Instead, they described the conversations they engaged in with their parents as key to their ability to overcome stress and adversity.

Change and Loss for the Individual can Mean Good for the Collective. Meaning making was integral to processing the change the graduate student mothers and their children encountered due to the pandemic. One child thoughtfully reflected on the concept of change:

What I have learned about change... it's hard to adapt to, but eventually you'll get used to it. Like wearing a mask... That's an example of change. Sometimes

change is bad. Sometimes change is good. This time change is a mix of both because I don't love wearing a mask... but it's also good that we're helping with something that can probably... That have probably saved millions of lives from being [taken] by COVID.

The losses graduate students and their children faced in their falls lead them to learn resilience is “not a simple linear causal process in which an abundance of strength leads directly to a good developmental outcome” but rather “involves tradeoffs, in which something is gained and something lost” (Kirmayer et al., 2009, p. 72). The resilience of the graduate student mother and her family was rooted within the belief systems they cultivated to organize and make sense of their pandemic experience.

Gratitude Engenders Resilience. Despite the internal and external perturbation, they faced during the pandemic, the graduate student mothers with whom we spoke reframed their stumbles and falls within a framework of gratitude for the opportunity to be together more. A “little charm bubble inside the forest fire” is how one mother referenced her experiences during the pandemic:

One thing that I've done a lot of thinking about throughout the pandemic is how lucky I am as a single mother to get that time with my kids that I would not have normally had. And I'm just so thankful for it. And it feels so weird to be thankful for a pandemic that killed half a million people in our country... I've worked for a state school... my job is fairly safe and my health insurance, as long as I've had my job, is very good. And so, I'm very grateful for that. And I'm also really grateful for getting to hang out with my kids this spring in a way that I wouldn't have been able to ordinarily. And I'm grateful that I'm able to continue going to school and continue having a job... I'm like in this little charm bubble inside the forest fire...

Another graduate student mom agreed, commenting on how the togetherness required by pandemic quarantining and lockdowns was reason for gratitude:

I'm so thankful for the chance to watch [my kids] grow this year, but I just wouldn't normally have had [the opportunity]... before the pandemic, the kids were in daycare from 7am to 6pm. and I was in school by 7:20 or 7:30. I would have to run across town to get [to them] by 5:30. And now I get to walk in the school and walk to pick them up at 3:00, because my apprenticeship has changed, and so I'm working from home... In the middle of [this] forest fire, everything is burning down around me and I'm like, “Oh, this is so nice that I get to spend this time with the kids that I just would not have normally had the opportunity to do so.” I'm so thankful. In this really weird stage of life...

One graduate student mother's child shared that despite her mother's stress and busy schedule that she appreciated the time the family spent in the in-betweens and after class. Some graduate student mother families built togetherness around house projects or monthly board game nights—activities they normally could not engage in due to the family being pulled in different directions outside of the home.

Self-Actualization and Pride can be Forged through Struggle. In addition to making meaning of adversity through the lens of gratitude, other mothers commented that they hoped

that the visibility of their work would show their children the importance of self-actualization at any age:

I do want to always be fulfilling who I am as a person for my whole life. And I wanna have a plan. I want to have dreams with my husband and dreams of my own... And as someone who... I was quickly realizing that I either go back to school and make this stuff happen, or I'm going to continue working these kinds of little dead-end jobs that aren't fulfilling. And at some point, you have to... like the rubber meets the road, you have to do something about it or stop complaining and caring about it...

I really do wanna figure out who I am as this consistency through whether I'm a mom or an academic or a professional, like who am I that runs through all of those pieces. And part of it too is just going well, the fact is that I am a mom, I love being a mom, I love my kids, but this is a short-term gig in a way; they're always your kids, but at some point, they are gonna move out and do their own thing, and I don't wanna be left here, I persisted.

Reflections on self-actualization and tenacity also inspired graduate student mothers to realize a new sense of pride. This was expressed by two graduate student mothers:

I feel like moms that are working on their Ph.D. are just wonderful. I feel so proud of being part of that group... It is such a great example for my daughter to become a woman that is more... empowered. So different than I was when I was her age.

Yeah, I agree. That's probably how I felt too. Just showing my girls, it doesn't matter what age you are or where you're at in your walk of life... you have the capability of continuing your education and working hard. And it shows them that Mommy's just not Mommy... I think that was probably one of my most favorite moments was a few weeks ago... [when my daughter] told me that she was proud of me.

This sense of confidence was echoed by another mom: "I felt like a badass coming into a program with two-year-old and a three-year-old. Looking back on it, I kind of wonder what the hell I was thinking with my kids that little... But having lived through this, I feel like I can do anything." This sense of empowerment derived from persistence wove throughout all graduate student mothers' narratives:

I'm hoping my kids have learned not to quit 'cause there have been times during this... I mean, I don't know, on a pretty regular basis where I have been like, "Why the heck did I decide to go back to school at this point in my life? What was I thinking?" And I have these conversations out loud with my kids there. And I don't quit. 'Cause that's part of why I don't quit- I'm like, "Oh well, crap, I can't quit now, because then I'm teaching them that they can quit." So, I really hope that the fact that I don't quit helps them to learn not to quit.

Other graduate student mothers expressed the hope that in watching her recover from her stumbles and her persistence that her children would learn that "we can do hard things" and

develop a growth mindset and learn that “You don’t get better at things by quitting. You get better at things by [persisting], and you learn to do new things by doing hard things.”

Communicating for Resilience

Resilience is Rooted in Empathy and Sharing of Emotions. Cited as key to the development of resilience (Walsh, 2016), graduate student mothers engaged their children in open emotional expression and collaborative problem solving in responding to the adversity faced during the pandemic. Graduate student mothers shared that the visibility of their struggles prompted them to engage in open conversation regarding their feelings. This in turn normalized within the family unit of sharing feelings of anger, worry, frustration, disappointment, and remorse. As one mom shared:

I think my kids have seen my emotions a lot more this semester and then realized maybe that it’s okay to have these emotions... and that even when we explode on one another... that we come back together, and that’s unconditional.

Another graduate student mother relayed that she cultivated empathy with her child’s feelings of frustration and disappointment by expressing, “I understand how you’re feeling. I feel the same way.”

One graduate student mother relayed that her inability to share her emotions due to cultural norms which restrict conversation about feelings in professional spaces recounted how this led her to feel unsupported by her academic advisor:

So, talking to them about feelings, it’s hard because I feel like in the US, it’s not well-seen or received as being professional if you tell your feelings. As a Latina, it’s normal. We talk, we talk, and we express, we cry. That’s why our soap operas are famous. I think it seems like it’s not professional, either talking about your feelings and also saying that you have problems. And so that has been the hard part. I have found people who understand that. And it’s not that I am stressed all of the time or in problems all the time. But I wanna be free to say these things and feel safe when I say them. And that’s part of why I decided to change my advisor, who was my chair as well, because I saw a pattern of the relationship that didn’t allow me to express some things without making me feel guilty.

Celebration is Key. Sharing positive emotions was also cited as key to graduate student mother endurance. One graduate student mother’s sense of resilience was built through moments of celebration:

I feel like quarantine has built resilience, not just in me, but in our family. Because we have been home together for how many months. And you’ve got two of us working from home and one doing virtual school last year... So, the resilience has really shown through... Yeah, I still have my moments of anxiety, but not as bad as they were. Any kind of victory we have, we celebrate, whether it’s finishing an assignment or just celebrating anything about any positive notes that come home from school. Even working with my own students, the ones that don’t show up for days on end, and then they show up- we celebrate... No matter how small, we celebrate it. That way, when something does happen, if it’s not as big of a deal.

Collaborative Problem-Solving Builds Resilience. Another graduate student mother shared that communication in the form of collaborative problem solving built her family's sense of resilience. She reflected:

We've had to make some choices that were not easy. They weren't the choices that we wanted to make, but it's what we felt was necessary. And also, sometimes it's been controversial when we've had to make a choice that family members didn't agree with or something like that, especially at the holidays. Just navigating that sometimes, the right thing, is the hard thing.

Organizing for Resilience

Connecting with Others and Being Seen is Crucial. Our graduate student mothers each shared stories of how efforts by others who acknowledged their struggles and offered supports was essential to their academic journey. As one graduate student mother shared, Ph.D. peers were essential to her well-being as "Ph.D. life per se, it's a lot of isolation." As the ability to meet with others on campus came to a grinding halt with university closures, this mother reached out to her peers and mentors for motivation:

I have some peers with whom I work. I try to make a schedule so we can write at those times together or just check in with them and ask, "how do you feel?" and talk about the Ph.D. So, [this helps keep me] motivated. And then talking to mentors.

Surrounding herself with faculty and administrators with whom she could communicate openly was also crucial to this mother's sense of resilience. Similarly, many graduate student mothers cited their husbands as key:

If it really weren't for [my husband], like I would not be able to do this... because he has really stepped up. Not that he wasn't an active participant with our girls or with the house, but just is just the role that he has taken and helping with the... just the organization—putting all the calendar reminders in Google Calendar... I mean, just that piece of it, that piece of the puzzle has really helped. He has taken over the kitchen duties with doing the dishes and cooking and... All of those little pieces just give me a big sense of relief because it's like "Oh, I don't have to push myself to get to this place and to get to this place." It really has been a team effort.

Our single graduate student mother cited her university as part of her team. She explained that key to her resilience was that her university paid out all the funding for on-campus work study positions despite the campus closing. She also relayed that their recognition of her as a single parent was also key stating, "It isn't that they gave me any special permissions or anything, but I think they recognize that my situation was a little bit different than the others."

Organizing for Flexibility in the Face of Normative Expectations is a Must. Flexibility in the form of extending grace to self and others and recognizing that they were not alone in the adversity they faced was also integral to building graduate student mother resilience. One mother expressed that the shared struggle of graduate student mothers in her cohort helped her reframe conceptualization of failure:

I've tried to extend to myself a lot of grace and my cohort... so, I'm in a cohort of 50, and we were very, very close. We are the largest cohort in my program here. Most of the other cohorts, are two or three, and my cohort is very intentional about lifting each other up and telling each other how proud of each other we are... One thing that really, really helped me in the beginning, in the middle, and now... is realizing that I'm not the only one going through this... And then it has helped me realize everybody is going through some version of this. And so, I think in terms of failure, I feel like that that's not in my vocabulary right now to... I can't think of this as failure. I can't think of my lost productivity as a failure, I just... I can't or I will spiral and be sad, so I'm not allowing myself to.

Our graduate student mother who worked in the college setting remarked of extending grace to others and how that in turn affected her own sense of resilience:

We had a lot of discussions in our in-service at work about how much our students were struggling. And I know in one of my classes, the restaurant [a student] worked at closed and she lost her job. And I know she wasn't the only one, but she specifically mentioned it... And so, I think I was really trying to extend grace to my students and to myself, because I was like, everybody, this is ridiculous for everybody. Everybody's worried about their families.

Anticipating the New Normal

While our graduate student mothers highlighted the personal and family resilience built because of the pandemic, many expressed caution and concern for reentry to pre-pandemic life. One graduate student mother, despite the visibility of her stumbles and anxiety regarding productivity, expressed:

I can't fathom normal being what it was before, I think we've all proved in school as well... we proved that we don't have to be sitting in one spot for hours a day to get our work done. And it's like double-edged sword, feeling very watched, right? Now, but if I need to go run to the store 'cause my kids need milk, I can legitimately do that, right?

She also shared concern regarding her children's reintegration into public schooling:

I think I worry about the same for my kids because they've really thrived with online learning. Like my daughter is in third grade and she really couldn't read... but she's gotten so much better this year because she's not having to sit next to the kids who were doing better than her. So, she can focus on her own pace instead of being worried about herself. And my kindergartener is like, I don't know, he's gonna go run a company or something- like he's got all of his class times on his watch, and he just goes, and he does it, and I don't have to tell him what to do, he just... He gets it done. And I feel like they're gonna lose all that progress in being self-contained, real humans, when they have to go back and sit in a row, desks again.

Another mother expressed a similar anxiety over what the pandemic and a particularly politically divisive year has done to her network and how she will navigate socialization at re-

entry. No one seemed to want to reenter with the same expectations or environment that were in place pre-pandemic shutdown.

Discussion

Prior to quarantine, our graduate student mothers' path through the academic pipeline was tenuously tied to productivity and to higher education's perpetuation of gendered measures of success. This threatened our graduate student mothers' sense of self-efficacy as both scholars and mothers. The illusion of balance led many mothers to potential tipping points at which they questioned if they should tag out of the academic pipeline and its bifurcation of their identities in favor of the focused pursuit of mothering. In some cases, our graduate student mother felt that they had no other option but to delay examinations, dissertations, and defenses during the pandemic and to put aside professional enhancers such as publication, networking, and independent research opportunities.

Just as scientists cited the "herd" as being key to individual and population health, the pandemic challenged our notions of rugged individualism and underscored our interdependence. Clearly, while mothering, studies and work never existed in separate spheres, the intensity of their collision in both time and space during quarantine led many of our graduate student mothers to reconceptualize failure, resilience, and navigation of graduate school. Failure was openly discussed as an opportunity for growth and a path to self-actualization. Resilience was experienced as being rooted in celebration, gratitude, collaborative problem-solving, connection, and flexibility. Our research creates the basis for future development of graduate student mother resilience theory framed by positive psychological and ecological principles.

Just one year before the COVID-19 outbreak, the program of Northeastern University's March 2019 Sixth Annual Women's History Month Symposium entitled *Feminist Resilience: Structures & Strategies for Troubled Times* read:

Resilience Studies is in vogue in the academy, where resilience is promoted as a desirable attainment and positive value. But resilience is often used in ways that reinforce both racialized and gendered representations of the strength expected of marginalized communities and individuals. Ideologies that promote self-empowerment can distract us from identifying institutional harms and seeking structural solutions. (2019)

While positive organizational psychology has led businesses to begin to examine resilience from an ecological, salutogenic perspective (the origins of health) rather than from a pathogenic perspective (meaning the origins of illness; Antonovsky, 1984; van Breda, 2011), higher education has yet to cultivate a culture which integrates these factors which grow and protect the resilience of the graduate student mother.

This research illustrated institutional barriers, practices, perceptions, and even bias which have created invisible labor, unmanageable workloads, unrealistic productivity expectations, and lack of support for graduate student mother needs. We see throughout the literature and this study, graduate student mothers attempting to compartmentalize different facets of her MotherScholar identity. In the end, higher education should not expect, promote, or teach resilience. Instead, we should offer supports and structures to eliminate the need. Obstacles, such as childcare, healthcare, career planning, and fiscal concerns need to be addressed.

Our findings illustrated that the children of these moms had been taught to perceive failures, mistakes, and/or obstacles as learning opportunities. The children described

conversations with their parents as key to their ability to overcome stress and adversity. This should be carried over into the graduate school settings. Graduate student moms should not feel obligated to compartmentalize everything, nor should they feel like mistakes or obstacles are insurmountable. Proper mentorship and peer support should be put in place by the institution. Mentorship practices, such as assigning advisors, need to be done thoughtfully, with a holistic approach, not just a topic or skill set match. Those in mentorship, supervisory, and administration roles should be aware of cultural norms and deconstruct the unwritten expectations around time, participation, and presence. Furthermore, MotherScholars should share their own experiences to humanize the female faculty role and support graduate student mothers in the pipeline.

While we must consider who is making decisions, allocating resources, and leading transformative efforts at colleges and universities, we must also reflect on lessons learned throughout the course of the pandemic. Who gets to voice opinions and what voices are heard? Whose frames of reference are guiding practice and policy? COVID introduced new stress and uncharted challenges, but the quarantine period created a crisis that led to grace – colleagues, classmates, and faculty trying to understand and support each other. In response to the quarantine and pandemic, higher education offered more flexibility, created virtual space in which all could connect, and arguably most important, humanized academia. As the world seeks to return to its pre-pandemic state, these lessons should not be forgotten. Balance remains a myth and institutional culture must cultivate the ecology of graduate student mother resilience.

Limitations

This study had limitations, but those did not outweigh the contribution made to the literature of voices that would otherwise go unheard. Due to burden graduate student mothers faced during the pandemic and the perception of the time we were asking them to commit, only nine participants were recruited. Besides the international students, all participants were white. An additional limitation was the limited yield of child narratives from our focus groups. Many children were distracted by the Zoom experience, unable to verbalize their thoughts about the pandemic and/or used the focus group as an opportunity to socialize due to the isolation they had endured during quarantine. We suggest that the development of graduate student resilience theory continue with the inclusion of additional voices and reflections on/experiences in different adverse experiences.

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