FEMINIST FRONTIERS

WILEY

Academic motherhood during COVID-19: Navigating our dual roles as educators and mothers

Batsheva Guy 🔵 | **Brittany Arthur**

University of Cincinnati

Correspondence
Batsheva Guy, University of Cincinnati, 2600 Clifton Ave, Cincinnati, OH 45221, USA
Email: batsheva.guy@uc.edu

During the COVID-19 crisis, being a working mother has taken on a whole new meaning, as mothers navigate working from home while juggling childcare, as well as coming to terms with their intersecting identities. The current article is a feminist, heartful autoethnographic account, couched in Relational-Cultural Theory, surrounding our authentic experiences working from home and raising children during the worldwide pandemic. We explore academic motherhood, working from home, mental health, and coping during coronavirus and stay-at-home orders through engaged dialogue. We hope that showcasing our vulnerability can lead to change in the expectations we put on mothers in academia, while at the same time connect with readers who may be going through similar challenges.

KEYWORDS
academic motherhood, Relational-Cultural Theory, COVID-19, pandemic, autoethnography

1 | INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that women working at universities face a unique set of challenges. There are stark differences in promotion rates, salary and workload, amongst other factors, between men and women in academia (Baker, 2012). Furthermore, the concept of 'academic motherhood' has been widely studied and addressed. Women academics are inundated with service while at the same time serving as the primary caregiver to their children (Guarino & Borden, 2017; Van Anders, 2004). Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, navigating being a mother and academic has taken on a whole new meaning. Now that a worldwide pandemic is upon us, working mothers, particularly in academia, are struggling to keep up with their male counterparts more than ever before. A recent study suggests that while journal

submissions from men academics have increased as universities have gone virtual, those from women have significantly decreased (Flaherty, 2020).

For working women in general, it has been documented that this worldwide crisis has brought to light a large gap in household work between women and men (Gross, 2020). Studies before the pandemic have demonstrated that even in households where both partners hold full-time positions, including those where women are the primary breadwinners, women are expected to maintain the majority of the household duties and disproportionately do so (Carpenter, 2018; Donner, 2020; Rao, 2019). In fact, the division of labour in housework has not progressed much over the last several decades, despite the increase of women working in professional careers (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). According to Toffoletti and Starr (2016), women in academia see their 'failure' to achieve work–life balance as being a personal rather than a societal issue. This resonates with the authors and will be explored further throughout this article.

The current article examines the experiences of two mothers working in an academic setting — Brittany, a faculty member, and Sheva, a staff member — at a large, research-intensive, Midwestern university. Following our positionality statements, we will engage in a dialogue surrounding our experiences as working mothers in academia during the COVID-19 pandemic. We will explore the topics of academic motherhood and our mental health as working mothers, framed in the context of the current global health crisis.[1]

2 | AUTHORS' POSITIONALITIES

Positionality, a feminist, reflexive practice, is an essential part of the research process (Bourke, 2014). Writing positionalities allows researchers to reflect on their critical stance, and by doing so, develop their identities (Deutsch, 2004). We have a responsibility to acknowledge our unique positionalities in order to fully address the topic at hand as well as remain reflective throughout the entire writing process (Louis & Barton, 2002). Furthermore, ethnographic research requires utilizing feminist voices through an exploration of researchers' positionalities to ensure reflexivity (Nencel, 2014). Although this is not an ethnographic study in the traditional sense, we are, in retrospect, crafting an autoethnographic account of our experience during this worldwide health crisis. In this reflective, dialogue-based piece, positionality is especially important to frame the context of our motherhood and careers as well as set up our perspectives on life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sheva:	*I always wanted to be a mom. When it didn't look like it was going to happen for me in the traditional way, my husband and I became foster parents of two rambunctious school-aged brothers in August 2019. Fast forward to December, and I had a newborn baby girl in my arms. I went from having zero kids to three kids in a matter of months. Then, a week before I was scheduled to go back to work from maternity leave in March, our university announced it was going virtual. I went back to work, but I didn't go 'back' to work.*
Brittany:	*My career is extremely important to me, although not as important to me as family, it is still a very salient aspect of my identity. In October 2019 my world changed as we welcomed our son into the world. For the months leading up to his birth I methodically reflected and planned my maternity leave and my plan for reintegration back to work. During my first semester back on campus after maternity leave I learned to juggle being a mom and a professional, although I did both roles satisfactory I did them SEPARATELY. That is until March 2019 when our university went remote.*
Sheva:	*I currently work as the Program Manager for our university's Faculty Enrichment Center. In this role, I manage our brand-new center through program planning and dissemination as well as the facilitation of our physical space, in a nutshell. Our charge is to provide professional development services to our university's diverse faculty body; through this position, I have taken charge of several faculty*

development initiatives full-force. Needless to say, my career has always been my number one priority until I started building a family. Always ambitious and determined, I completed my PhD in Educational and Community-Based Action Research by the time I was 25, graduating with a presidential medal. My research and teaching practice have always been at the forefront of my career trajectory. Despite working as a full-time staff member in an administrative position under the Office of the Provost, I adjunct part-time teaching Psychology courses as well as conduct participatory action research on the 'side'. Although my research, teaching, and service do not formally 'count' towards any sort of promotion criteria, they are an integral part of my professional identity. Once our children came into my life, I realized that I would have to begin a balancing act between my work and home life. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined the new virtual world we live in, as 'work' and 'home' have merged together to form a huge blur, and any semblance of 'work–life balance' has been eradicated. That said, I am immensely grateful to be able to spend this time with my husband, two young boys, and infant daughter, despite the challenges.

Brittany: *Currently I am an associate professor within the Division of Experience Based Learning and Career Education. As an educator faculty, my main responsibilities include teaching courses and facilitating the co-op program for computer engineering students. My faculty role is unique in that most of my time is spent working directly with students in a one on one capacity, reflecting with them or helping them secure co-op opportunities. In the beginning I was excited for the opportunity to work from home, as it would allow me additional time to spend at home with my son. However, I shortly realized this transition to a remote environment was going to be more challenging than I could have imagined, for more reasons than one. As an individual who is an overachiever in most aspects of my life, I expect excellence in my career and in my role as a mother. Through this experience I've had to learn to accept that my reality will not allow perfection at the moment. As cliché as it sounds, taking it one day at a time, is the best I can do at the moment. As my colleagues continue to remind me, we are all doing the best we can. I am doing the best I can.*

Brittany and Sheva: *We both would like to acknowledge a few things. First of all, we recognize our privilege as white women, and we are aware that we are lucky in the fact that we have retained our jobs during this crisis and have even been afforded the opportunity to continue working in a safe environment. We also would like our readers to understand that we are not trying to generalize our experiences, but we hope that our vulnerability will help the struggles of women to be seen. We also acknowledge that the struggles of women are not monolithic, and we are not assuming that everyone is experiencing the same things we are. We approach this piece with authenticity and vulnerability and hope you will meet us in this space.*

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We are using Relational-Cultural Theory and Feminist Theory as a framework for our exploration of academic motherhood during the COVID-19 pandemic. Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) requires a paradigm shift from what we traditionally understand as development, as laid out by researchers such as Freud and Maslow. RCT is a psychological development model that emphasizes connection and relationships as the basis of development, rather than prior models that promote self-sufficiency and independence as the hallmarks of growth. Miller and Stiver (1997) suggest that the promotion of independence pushes us further out of connection since the underlying principles are separation and individualization.

The key tenets of RCT revolve around 'growth-fostering relationships' through a feminist lens (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 16). Creating connections with others so that our voices are heard is the cornerstone of RCT

(Miller & Stiver, 1997). Connection is not merely just having an exchange with another person that makes you feel good, however, it is the act of being 'heard and understood' (West, 2005, p. 95). This helps us to create a sense of worthiness, where we believe our thoughts and feelings matter and are valid (West, 2005). RCT argues that when an individual shares their feelings with another individual, but those feelings are not recognized, the individual sharing their feelings is left feeling alone (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Therefore, this interaction leaves the individual feeling isolated in their experience and alone with their feelings. This type of experience over a prolonged period of time can have a serious psychological impact on individuals, creating a sense of disconnection and isolation (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Feminist Theory 'allow[s] ambiguity, entertain difference, invite reflection, and encourage investigation into new perspectives without being reductionist, without needing to dismiss, edge out or shout down' (West, 2005). Additionally, Feminist Theory seeks to account for the complexity of experiences that women experience, not just the dominant group, but rather *all* women (West, 2005, p. 97). Further noting, Feminist Theory recognizes that any theory must recognize the diversity of experiences, otherwise it limits its validity and usefulness (Braebeck et al., 1997, p. 25). Theories such as RCT directly go against western values and norms, stating that growth and development happens through relationships, not separation and independence (Banks, 2011). As stated by West (2005), RCT 'is really speaking to a different paradigm entirely, one that appreciates and investigates a relatedness, an interconnectedness-one' (p. 101).

For women, experiencing a sense of connection with others is the central feature of development; 'women's sense of self and of worth is most often grounded in the ability to make and maintain relationships' (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 16). Although it is central to their development, women may find it extremely difficult to develop mutually growth fostering relationships in a culture that views empathy as a weakness. In this article, we are attempting to use our voice as academic mothers to connect with: one another, other academic mothers who are reading and with ourselves. We are hoping to use this opportunity to develop connections, in hopes we create a path out of isolation and disconnection. We share our experiences through vulnerable and authentic dialogue, while at the same time being mindful to not reduce the experiences of all women or suggest that we speak for all women — as this is not our goal. However, we hope that by sharing our truth you may be encouraged to dig into your truth.

4 | METHODOLOGY

For this article, we are utilizing a feminist, heartful autoethnographic approach to explore our experiences as working moms during COVID-19. Autoethnography is a qualitative method in which the researcher/writer and the subject/participant of the study are one and the same (Burnard, 2007). Ultimately, autoethnography involves examining one's individual experience to better understand a larger phenomenon (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). In this article, we are using a combined approach of both feminist and heartful autoethnography.

Feminist autoethnography (Allen & Piercy, 2005) involves reflecting on the researcher/participant experience while at the same time bringing to light societal inequities. This type of autoethnography research requires authors to be both intentional and reflexive (Allen & Piercy, 2005). We are also embracing the process of heartful autoethnography, developed by Ellis (1999), in which narrative and voice are developed in order to examine experiences, engage in dialogue, and find meaning and cope. In the current article, we seek to better understand our experiences as academic mothers during the COVID-19 pandemic through critical dialogue and reflection. With this dialogue, we hope to not only share our experiences during the pandemic but also help provide other working mothers with coping skills and time to reflect on their own personal experiences. Through this, we will be able to point out the burden of women and mothers during inequalities.

5 | ACADEMIC MOTHERHOOD

Much like motherhood, academia brings joy amongst successes and stress amongst demands (Jakubiec, 2015). A study by Trepal and Stinchfield (2012), which examined motherhood amongst both tenured and nontenured faculty members in the field of counsellor education, suggests that women faculty place particular onus on themselves to establish boundaries between their work and their home life. In fact, while mothers place more of an emphasis on work–life balance than men do, they also do the majority of household work than their male counterparts (Baker, 2012). Moreover, 'women are more likely than men to fit their employment around their family's needs' (Baker, 2012, p. 22). Despite rank, field and time in their position, women academics find it difficult to prevent their work life from making its way into their home life, due to the variety of roles that pull on their time (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). According to Martinez, O'Brien, and Hebl (2017), not only is it challenging for women to maintain work–life balance, but this also causes them to leave their positions for family reasons more often than men do. In addition to struggling to balance household responsibilities with their careers, women in academia face inflexible leave policies and discrimination (Phillips, 2002). All of this was found *before* the COVID-19 pandemic hit. During the current health crisis with most academics working from home, maintaining these boundaries is simply not realistic. Baker (2012) indicates that 'gendered living arrangements and unequal workloads at home contribute to the perpetuation of the academic gender gap' (p. 22). How is our current health crisis exacerbating the gap?

5.1 | Navigating dual roles

Brittany: *When I was pregnant I began struggling with all the pressure that is put on women when they plan to have a baby. The turmoil inside of me kept asking, what will people think of a mom who has a career that she is passionate about? What will people think of me as a mother whose career is still extremely important to her? Mommy guilt set in even before my son was here. Societal expectations began to play a role on how I saw myself as both a mother and professional. Fast forward to January 2020, I returned to work in a limited capacity, working three days in the office and the other days were spent at home with my son. Those three days in the office allowed me to get my work done, connect with colleagues, have adult conversations, but more importantly it allowed me to live out my identity of being a professional. As previously mentioned, my career is extremely important to me and my identity as an educator/academic is very salient. Going into work also ensured that on the days I was home with my son, I was both physically and mentally home with him. This was wonderful, I had done it, I had found a balance that worked for me where both my identities of being a mom and a professional could live in harmony. Then COVID-19 happened. In March 2020 my institution went remote, with no return to campus anywhere in sight. I'll be honest, initially I was excited, thinking 'this is perfect, I can work from home and spend more time with my son'. There was no longer an expectation to be in the office, therefore I didn't have to feel guilty about working from home. However, the reality of being a full-time mom and a full-time professional quickly set in. After a few weeks of this 'going remote' quarantine life, the anxiety, sadness, and frustration set in. After much reflection I began to understand where these feelings came from. For me, these overwhelming feelings came from my identities, which previously were allowed to exist separately, but now were being forced to live simultaneously — and I didn't like this! Being a mom is tough, being an educator is tough, but doing them both at the same time was something I wasn't emotionally prepared for.*

Sheva: *I, like Brittany, have struggled with my identity as I navigate what it means to be a mom concurrently with being a professional, compiled with the fact that my family and I are quarantined together. I felt much the same way as Brittany when I found out I could work from home and spend more time with my daughter and the boys. The thought, 'Wow, an extended maternity leave!', crossed my mind many times. And, similarly to*

my colleague, I very quickly realized I was out of my league. How was I supposed to balance it all when my work life and home life were suddenly integrated so deeply, without any time to prepare? I found myself in video calls while bouncing my baby on my knee and muting myself to yell, 'What are you boys up to?!' after hearing a crash coming from their bedroom. I felt like I was failing in all my roles — as a wife, as a mother, as a staff member, and as a professor. How was I supposed to keep everyone — my husband, my kids, my boss, my colleagues, the faculty I serve, and my students — happy and taken care of? Again, like Brittany, I began to feel pangs of guilt for not being able to give my usual 110% to every aspect of my life. Did I also mention I have 6 pets? Sigh. It used to be so much easier! Even though it was still so difficult to manage the balancing act of mommy versus doctor before the pandemic, I had separate spaces. At least I didn't have to do it all at the same time, in the same house, day after day. I swear, I didn't know how good I had it! It is becoming increasingly challenging to maintain work–life boundaries (don't even say work–life balance to me right now!). Finding a way for my identities to coincide without arguing with each other over competing priorities is something I will have to work on every day during this new virtual world. Even now, I am sitting in the only quiet place I can find, my baby's nursery, hooked up like a milk cow, pumping breast milk as I type this ...

Brittany: *One of my colleagues mentioned to me when I was pregnant, stating 'I'm a better mom because I come to work.' Her words confirmed for me what I knew to be true, I could be a great mother AND a great professional. In a 'normal' world I had constructed what that would look like for myself. However, during COVID world the blending of these two roles/identities proved to be a struggle logistically, mentally, and emotionally. Similarly to Sheva, the guilt I feel about not being able to perform my identities on my own terms has been frustrating. But, not being able to perform my responsibilities, as a mother and as a professional, to my high standards has been internally devastating.*

Sheva: *Wow. That takes on a whole new meaning now that 'coming' to work means sitting at the dining room table with a coffee in one hand and a baby in another. I agree with your colleague in that I want to show my daughter that woman can do it all. It helps remind me that I can be a better mom through role modeling, and that my career can help me raise my children more effectively. This quarantine has been a great way to instill in the boys, too, that the lines between 'women's work' and 'men's work' don't exist any more, while their dad bakes bread and their mom goes to meetings. All work is important work.*

Brittany: *I couldn't agree more that we must be intentional in what we model for our children, as well as our colleagues. I want my son to live in a world where he is proud to have been raised by a passionate, working, feminist mommy. At the same time, I want to model for my colleagues that this work, being a mom and a professional, is hard! I won't sugar coat how difficult this is in order to make others more comfortable. So, my son regularly makes an appearance on conference calls and meetings. I hold him as he screams, smacks me, and pulls my hair during a tantrum (he is seven months old and has no idea what he's doing). I want others to see, this is hard, but I'm doing the best I can — and today that means my child is also my most important colleague.*

Sheva: *I love that take on it, Brittany, seeing your baby as your colleague. My daughter, at five months old, frequently joins me during video conferencing, as well. I can't believe she hasn't spit up on my computer yet but I know it is coming! In a way, it is important to me for my colleagues to see this as a reminder of everything we are all juggling right now.*

5.2 | Working from home

Sheva: *There is simply no way I will be productive as I have been in the past. That is a fact that took time (and tears) to accept. To let go of productivity and survive on doing the bare minimum, as an overachiever who has a life-time struggle with obsessions and compulsions, is ridiculously hard to do.*

Brittany: *Similarly to Sheva, I have had to accept the fact that my productivity levels will not be what they once were. Being a recovering perfectionist during a pandemic and quarantine has been something therapy is made of. Each day I have to remind myself to give MYSELF grace. Accepting that every day I may not be as 'put together' as I once was as a professional, and that is OKAY. This constant reminder has been necessary to allow me to stay grounded. Again, I'm doing the best I can.*

Sheva: *I am doing the best I can, as well, to give myself grace as I embrace all these new roles that I have taken on. I am now a mother, an elementary school teacher, a wife, a college professor, a homemaker, a program manager, a chef, a writer, and a doctor, ALL AT THE SAME TIME. Sorry — my daughter is wailing in the background as I type this sentence. Even when my husband is home, as much as we try to be equal partners, my kids want their mommy. My daughter gets fussy when I am upstairs doing work and my husband frequently has to bring her to me to calm her down or to feed her. When the boys are doing their schoolwork, it's mommy this and mommy that 24/7. I can't catch a break in either my work or home life and due to the lockdown there is no real escape from either. We are ALL together ALL the time! I have come up with some techniques to mitigate the issues that arise while working from home (while also homeschooling children and taking care of a household and infant):*

1. ***Set boundaries***. *Working from home can blur the lines between home hours and work hours. I make it a point not to respond to email on the weekends or after 5 pm. I may still be doing work behind the scenes, just because of how much my day is broken up with the kids, but I can make it clear that lines of communication to me are closed during those times*

2. ***Prioritize***. *As I mentioned, we simply cannot be as productive as we used to. To quote Brittany, we need to give ourselves grace. I am a checklist/list person. Take the time out at the beginning of every week and the beginning of every day to write out what you plan on doing, and divide it up — what NEEDS to get done versus what can be put on the back burner if something else arises. It also helps to knock out those pesky five-minutes-or-less tasks, the earlier the better, which leaves more time to focus on bigger projects*

3. ***Chunking***. *In the current state of the working world, it is impossible to sit down for 3, 4 hours at a time and power through a big project. If you have even 15 minutes of time to devote to a larger project, USE IT. It adds up and you will be more productive than you think. Take those small chunks of time that you have and make them worthwhile. Also, to my fellow academics, do the absolute best you can carving out those 30 minutes per day to write!!*

4. ***Multitask***. *This may seem to contradict the above tips, but sometimes multitasking is necessary, as long as it involves parallel processing. For example, I can feed my daughter while I am on a video call — these tasks involve two totally different parts of my brain, making it manageable. Or, I can supervise the children while getting work done if we all do our work together at the dining room table. As mothers and academics, we need to figure out ways to do two things at once, in a manageable way that reduces burnout*

Brittany, do you have any working from home tips and tricks that you swear by??

Brittany: *I also am a list maker, for me the feeling of crossing something off my list is euphoric. Therefore, I typically write as many things down on my to do list as I can, as a way to give myself mental freedom to not have to carry the burden of remembering what needs to be done. My main strategy I've found useful during COVID world is I make two separate 'to do lists', one has tasks on it that will take five minutes or less, the other list has items on it that will take longer and typically more brain power. By focusing on the five minute 'to dos' during the day, while my son plays, I can then focus on the 'to dos' that will take a bit longer when he is napping or after he is in bed for the night. By doing this, I find myself getting less frustrated when I start something and am interrupted by screaming.*

Sheva: *I agree that it is important to break up your day and tasks depending on how much distraction is in the background. I also think that getting in as much of a routine as possible is beneficial for your sanity and productivity as well as for your children's wellbeing. Working from home is never going to be the same as working in the office, but finding your own way to maintain your productivity while also taking care of yourself is essential. Side note, I have also become an expert at typing with one hand while I hold the baby with my other arm, which I am doing right now!!*

6 | MENTAL HEALTH

We live in uncertain times as we patiently await universities' plans to reopen and repopulate their campuses. It is still unclear at our current institution what the extent of virtual operations will be in fall 2020. This uncertainty and fear leads to high levels of stress, heightened anxiety and several mental burdens (Ornell, Schuch, Sordi, & Kessler, 2020; Usher, Bhullar, & Jackson, 2020), especially for us as women and mothers. Researchers anticipate an increase in mental health issues as a result of the pandemic due to factors such as isolation and economic issues (Grover et al., 2020). There is a new underlying fear and anxiety that has appeared in our everyday lives, and for working mothers, specifically, the closure of day cares and schools has particularly caused distress (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Social isolation in itself has caused a fair amount of mental anguish for individuals and families (Wind, Rijkeboer, Andersson, & Riper, 2020), and an overall fear of catching the virus takes its own mental toll (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020). For example, we worry as mothers our children will get sick. This is all compiled with dealing with our uncertain future, which can be considered anticipatory grief, in which we are anticipating future losses such as time spent with family, creating a normal childhood for our children, the ability to travel and engage in summer enrichment, and living in a world that is relatively safe, among others (Wallace, Wladkowski, Gibson, & White, 2020).

6.1 | Mental health challenges

Brittany: *As previously mentioned I am a recovering perfectionist and control freak. Like many of us this desire for control and perfection has served me well professionally, allowing me to develop strong programs, exceed expectations, and earn promotion early. On the outside these traits have allowed me to be seen as a go to colleague, as I'm always full of good ideas, always willing to help, and always overachieving. Internally, this need for control and drive for perfectionism is the main source of my anxiety and loneliness. You may say, 'I understand the anxiety piece, but the loneliness doesn't make sense.' Let me dig into this a bit. The need to 'perform' as a perfectionist is very real, I want others to see my work as outstanding, no no exemplary. As our lives have transitioned to working from home this sense of loneliness has intensified, as the guilt of not being able to 'perform' my responsibilities leaves me feeling ashamed, embarrassed, and angry with myself as I am ashamed by my lack of productivity. The narrative I've come to know, since I was a child, tells me that I have to earn connection, validation, and approval from others. Therefore, my lack of productivity leaves me feeling empty and vulnerable to not earning the respect, validation, and connection of others.*

Sheva: *Brittany, your narrative deeply resonates with me. I have struggled with anxiety surrounding pleasing others and the guilt that comes when I feel that I am not doing enough. Going straight from maternity leave to work without leaving the house has greatly intensified my postpartum anxiety, especially as it is combined with my fear of the coronavirus. I have dealt with Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder for almost my entire life, and being at home for such an extended period of time has reawoken many of these*

symptoms. Furthermore, I have always had control issues surrounding food, and the uncertainty of stock at the grocery compiled with too much time in the house and kitchen has caused these issues to resurface. Like Brittany, I have a need to control everything in my life, and our new situation has caused me to become totally unglued. I no longer can control aspects of my life that I used to have a handle on, and that terrifies me. On top of all that, the adoption process with our two foster children has stalled due to the virus. As a result of this, we have had to keep up with our foster care licensure which involves taking remote courses, among other responsibilities, which just adds to what's already on my overfilled plate. So, in addition to my future work life being unclear, it is also not certain when our family will 'officially' be whole.

Brittany: *I don't want my colleagues to see me as the dreaded 'crazy' woman. However, I am also tired — physically, mentally, and emotionally. But more importantly, I'm tired of pretending I am okay. I'm exhausted from trying to uphold this facade of perfectionism. COVID-19 has forced me to accept my flawed humanity. It has forced me to welcome my weaknesses and my imperfections. Within me it has welcomed an honest and authentic conversation about who I am and what I need. The fear, anger, and loneliness that quarantine life has brought, has also brought me a sense of clarity through deep reflection. It's almost as if I've been forced back to my roots, to dig deep into questioning what is important in my life. Because of social distancing and stay at home orders, my schedule is no longer filled with commitments that don't bring me joy. But rather, I actively choose to use the time I have to do things that bring me happiness. As an educator, this reflection, has reminded me that I love what I do — I love getting to work with students, mentor them, and watch them grow and mature into amazing professionals. I'm reminded that I work with amazing colleagues, who have become my friends, and push me to be better. I'm reminded that I have a lovely home, an amazing supportive husband, and an adorable tiny human that calls me mommy. Although this life is tough, and God can it be tough, I'm also reminded how unbelievably beautiful it can be when we find connection, with ourselves and with others.*

Sheva: *I completely get where you're coming from about now being seen as 'crazy'. Every time I am on a video call I feel like I have to pretend that I am totally put together and that everything is fine. It feels like not many people in my professional life have admitted to struggling with the uncertainty of our future on campus, so I am afraid to mention my fears. I have been throwing a wrap on over my nursing nightgowns, pulling my hair into as clean of a ponytail as I can, putting a background effect over the nursery, and hope nobody will notice what I really look like underneath the surface.*

Brittany: *I find myself role playing or pretending to be a put together professional. Similar to Sheva, in the morning before conference calls I throw on a presentable top (preferably one without spit up on it) and slap on some mascara. Woolah we are ready to go for the day. After the initial enjoyment of working remotely, I began to feel very isolated and disconnected from my colleagues. I didn't feel seen as a mother of an infant who was attempting to figure out this parenting and working from home thing. My colleagues had older kids or no kids, or spouses that were also working from home that they could take shifts playing the caregiver role. This realization caused me to feel even more isolated, which triggered anxiety and sadness. I enjoy my colleagues very much, so how could I feel so isolated all of a sudden, even though I know they are there for me. I didn't feel seen for who I was, for the struggles I was facing, or the exhaustion I was experiencing! I couldn't be open and authentic about what I was feeling and experiencing, because I was ashamed I couldn't 'do it all'.*

Eventually, my colleagues started to be honest about their struggles with remote life, mentioning that they too were struggling with isolation and sadness, feeling disconnected. This shifted my sadness, their authenticity allowed me to feel more connected with them. This sparked a change in the way we were working remotely: we started having weekly meetings to just check in with each other and we developed group chats to bounce ideas off each other and provide support. The feeling of isolation started to fall away, I was starting to feel connection again.

6.2 | Coping with trauma

Sheva: It is no secret that we, as a human race, are experiencing a collective trauma. I have engaged in several ways to promote my own self-care as well as maintain connection with others while social distancing.

Brittany: Although this time of being remote has been tough, it has challenged me to reflect more deeply than ever before. During the months I've spent cooped up at home, playing with my son, I've tried to create my own happiness. Recognizing that connection with others is such an important aspect of my life, I've had to find unique ways to feel this connection. Taking the time to video chat with family members who live in other states regularly, calling friends while I take my daily walks (talking to them on the phone while I walk is almost like they are walking with me), virtual trivia nights, and ensuring I have alone time. I think it is important that through all of this we remember, it is okay to ask for what you need. I need time to be by myself, time to decompress and to not be a mom or a professional — time to just exist as Brittany.

Sheva: I need to do a better job on reflecting, and writing this paper has helped me immensely with that. As an extrovert, I resist being alone with my own thoughts. My self-care during this time has relied much on connecting with others in any way that I can. I have Skyped friends for virtual happy hours and started a feminist book club. I have engaged in socially distanced porch exchanges and even got ordained to host my sister's wedding (six feet apart with masks on!). While none of this has looked like my traditional social life, I am doing as much as I can to maintain the relationships that are most important to me. I am even working on my relationship with myself — I am going to therapy again to address my anxiety and compulsions, which is a huge milestone for me.

Brittany: As an introvert, you would assume that quarantine life would be my happy place. To be honest, the first few weeks were great. I had an excuse to not go to parties or gatherings (I was very happy about this). But, by week six I began going stir crazy. It wasn't the being stuck in the house that got to me, it was the feeling of being out of connection with others. The words of Brene Brown, reminds us, 'we are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives us purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering'. As Sheva mentioned, we are all experiencing a collective trauma, and we are all suffering.

Through all of this, we must find a way back to each other. We must find a way to bring connection and humanity back into our lives. Here are some things that I have done that have allowed me to feel less isolated and gain more connection:

1. **Find ways to share space with others, even virtually**. My colleagues and I developed a group chat where we can brainstorm ideas and provide support for one another. The chat quickly became a place where we'd share our authentic selves and the struggles we were facing with the new 'normal'. This became a space where I could feel seen and show empathy to others. We quickly recognized this connection was something we were all craving, so we went further and added check in meetings and virtual lunches to our weekly schedule, to carve out time for connection

2. **Don't be afraid to ask for what you need**. As previously mentioned, I am an introvert and need alone time to recharge. Having alone time is tough as a mom, even tougher when you are stuck in the house 24/7 with an infant. After I put my son to bed, I often take laps around my yard by myself. I've had to communicate with my husband the sacredness of my alone time. This time alone allows me to recharge and center. If I neglect the need for alone time, I definitely notice a difference in my mental health. Some days my alone time requires that I intentionally carve out a few quiet minutes to myself while my son naps. Don't be ashamed or embarrassed to acknowledge what you need, and ask for it!

3. **Be creative in doing things that you once did**. Our lives look different now, that is the reality. But, that doesn't mean we can't still find joy in the things that we once loved. Get creative. I love getting drinks and food with friends, nothing is better in my opinion than to connect with another person over food. Social distancing put a damper on my weekly lunch dates with friends. However, having virtual happy hours or virtual meals with friends has allowed me to stay

connected with those I love. Although the experience looks different, the essence is still the same, connecting and laughing with friends/familySheva, what have you found helpful in allowing you to stay connected with others?

Sheva: *I think this is a comprehensive list, Brittany, and it aligns with things that I have been doing. I will conclude with a final, general piece of wisdom — it is important that we make it a priority to create both structured and intentional connection with others during isolation.*

7 | CONCLUSIONS AND MOVING FORWARD

Although COVID-19 has turned our worlds upside down, forcing us to bring together our roles as mothers and professionals, it has taught us many things. COVID has brought us clarity about our flawed humanity and the necessity to model this for others, both our colleagues and our children. This experience has given us a unique opportunity to share our authenticity and vulnerability with those around us. Our hope is that although COVID has been tough for so many of us, in the end it has brought us closer to each other and to ourselves. We are trying to use this time to reflect more deeply on who we are and what is important, and encourage other academic mothers to do the same.

Being a working mom is tough, but being a mom during COVID is more difficult than we could have ever imagined. Despite all of the challenges we are facing, we wouldn't trade a second of this time we are able to spend at home with our children for anything. We love being moms and all of the rewards it brings. That said, having tiny humans at our beck and call has made it all the more challenging to do our work and take care of ourselves. We, along with many of you, will continue to strive for 'balance' (whatever the hell that means) and a sense of groundedness through all this chaos. We hope you continue to give yourself grace and find your own unique ways to cope with the pandemic and working from home.

Our identities of being a mother and a professional can be seen as opposites in many respects, creating a paradox within us. The work of Carl Jung (1969) suggests that only through the understanding of a paradox can we be fully whole and states that the paradox is the key to the whole work. We have shared here our vulnerable truths in regard to our experiences of being a mother and professional during a pandemic. The sharing of this has allowed us to more authentically understand and accept our own paradox, while also acknowledging that the work within ourselves is not complete. Working remotely and mothering has challenged us to accept our flaws and messiness as humans, while also teaching us to hold our discomfort and ourselves with compassion.

Moving forward, it is clear that our society needs to do a better collective job being more mindful and realistic of its expectations of working mothers. We are hopeful that this autoethnography has shed light on the experience of academic motherhood during the pandemic, and that from our experience, we can instigate change. We hope that our authenticity and vulnerability will encourage you to find space to reflect deeply and connect with your humanity.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS
We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

ORCID
Batsheva Guy https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1878-6617

ENDNOTE
[1] Content warning: this piece is filled with authentic and vulnerable discussion around topics such as postpartum issues, breastfeeding, isolation and mental health challenges, among other sensitive topics.

REFERENCES

Allen, K. R., & Piercy, F. P. (2005). Feminist autoethnography. *Research Methods in Family Therapy*, 2, 155–169.

Baker, M. (2012). Gendered families, academic work and the 'motherhood penalty'. *Women's Studies Journal*, 26(1), 11–24.

Banks, A. (2011). Developing the capacity to connect. *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science*, 46(1), 168–182.

Bourke, B. (2014). Positionality: Reflecting on the research process. *Qualitative Report*, 19(33), 1–9.

Braebeck, M., Brown, L., Christian, L., Esoin, O., Hare-Mustin, R., Kaplan, A., ... Van Ormer, A. (1997). Feminist theory and psychological practice. In J. Worell & Y. Johnson (Eds.), *Shaping the future of feminist psychology* (pp. 15–35). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Burnard, P. (2007). Seeing the psychiatrist: An autoethnographic account. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 14(8), 808–813.

Carpenter, J. (2018). Millennial women are working more. But they're still doing most of the housework. *CNN Business*, 1–1. https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/26/success/millennial-women-income/index.html

Deutsch, N. L. (2004). Positionality and the pen: Reflections on the process of becoming a feminist researcher and writer. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(6), 885–902.

Donner, F. (2020). The household work men and women do, and why. *New York Times*, 1–1. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/12/us/the-household-work-men-and-women-do-and-why.html

Ellis, C. (1999). Heartful autoethnography. *Qualitative Health Research*, 9(5), 669–683.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 36(4), 273–290.

Fiorillo, A., & Gorwood, P. (2020). The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and implications for clinical practice. *European Psychiatry*, 63(1), 1–2.

Flaherty, C. (2020). No room of one's own. *Inside Higher Ed*, 1–1. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/early-journal-submission-data-suggest-covid-19-tanking-womens-research-productivity

Gross, T. (2020). Pandemic makes evident 'grotesque' gender inequality in household work. In *NPR*, (1–1). https://www.npr.org/2020/05/21/860091230/pandemic-makes-evident-grotesque-gender-inequality-in-household-work

Grover, S., Dua, D., Sahoo, S., Mehra, A., Nehra, R., & Chakrabarti, S. (2020). Why all COVID-19 hospitals should have mental health professionals: The importance of mental health in a worldwide crisis! *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 51, 1–7.

Guarino, C. M., & Borden, V. M. (2017). Faculty service loads and gender: Are women taking care of the academic family? *Research in Higher Education*, 58(6), 672–694.

Jakubiec, B. A. E. (2015). Academic motherhood: 'Silver linings and clouds'. *Antistasis*, 5(2), 42–49.

Jung, C. G. (1969). Answer to job (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). In H. Read, et al. (Eds.), *The collected works of C. G. Jung* (2nd ed., Vol. 11) (pp. 355–470). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1952)

Lachance-Grzela, M., & Bouchard, G. (2010). Why do women do the lion's share of housework? A decade of research. *Sex Roles*, 63(11–12), 767–780.

Louis, K. S., & Barton, A. C. (2002). Tales from the science education crypt: A critical reflection of positionality, subjectivity, and reflexivity in research. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(3), article 19, 1–16.

Martinez, L. R., O'Brien, K. R., & Hebl, M. R. (2017). Fleeing the ivory tower: Gender differences in the turnover experiences of women faculty. *Journal of Women's Health*, 26(5), 580–586.

Miller, J. B., & Stiver, I. (1997). *The healing connection: How women form relationships in therapy and life*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Nencel, L. (2014). Situating reflexivity: Voices, positionalities and representations in feminist ethnographic texts. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 43, 75–83.

Ornell, F., Schuch, J. B., Sordi, A. O., & Kessler, F. H. P. (2020). 'Pandemic fear' and COVID-19: Mental health burden and strategies. *Brazilian Journal of Psychiatry (AHEAD)*, 42, 232–235. https://doi.org/10.1590/1516-4446-2020-0008

Pfefferbaum, B., & North, C. S. (2020). Mental health and the Covid-19 pandemic. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1–3. https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2008017

Phillips, R. (2002). Recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty. *Planning for Higher Education*, 30(4), 32–39.

Rao, A. H. (2019. Even breadwinning wives don't get equality at home. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2019/05/breadwinning-wives-gender-inequality/589237/

Toffoletti, K., & Starr, K. (2016). Women academics and work–life balance: Gendered discourses of work and care. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 23(5), 489–504.

Trepal, H. C., & Stinchfield, T. A. (2012). Experiences of motherhood in counselor education. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 51(2), 112–126.

Usher, K., Bhullar, N., & Jackson, D. (2020). Life in the pandemic: Social isolation and mental health. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 1–2.

Van Anders, S. M. (2004). Why the academic pipeline leaks: Fewer men than women perceive barriers to becoming professors. *Sex Roles*, 51(9–10), 511–521.

Wallace, C. L., Wladkowski, S. P., Gibson, A., & White, P. (2020). Grief during the COVID-19 pandemic: Considerations for palliative care providers. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, *60*(1), e70–e76.

Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2004). Academic motherhood: Managing complex roles in research universities. *The Review of Higher Education*, *27*(2), 233–257.

West, C. (2005). The map of relational-cultural theory. *Women & Therapy*, *28*(3–4), 93–110.

Wind, T. R., Rijkeboer, M., Andersson, G., & Riper, H. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: The 'black swan' for mental health care and a turning point for e-health. *Internet Interventions*, *20*(2020), 1–2.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Batsheva (Sheva Guy) is a participatory action researcher and educator who currently works in the field of faculty development at the University of Cincinnati. Her research interests include equity and inclusion in higher education, particularly using feminist participatory methods to promote the retention of women students and faculty in STEM fields through program development. Dr. Guy, a graduate of University of Cincinnati's Educational and Community-Based Action Research PhD program, has recently published articles on topics such as: using participatory methods to understand women engineering students' experiences during co-op, exploring the 'action' portion of a feminist participatory action research project, and using the listening guide to explore women's experiences with their late-term abortions.

Brittany Arthur currently serves as an associate professor at the University of Cincinnati in the Division of Experience Based Learning and Career Education, where she oversees cooperative education (co-op) experiences for engineering students. Professor Arthur prides herself on being a participatory action researcher, specifically using a feminist approach to ensure the voices of marginalized populations are heard. She has experience utilizing participatory action research methods, more specifically Group Level Assessment (GLA), with experience facilitating GLA virtually. Her research focuses on exploring co-op experiences of women engineering students, using feminist participatory action research. Currently, she is a doctoral candidate in the Education and Community-Based Action Research program at the University of Cincinnati. Professor Arthur is passionate about participatory methods, more specifically utilizing these approaches to strengthen the conversation around equity and inclusion.