Creating good knowledge together: heartful-communal storytelling at the intersection of caregiving and academia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore a novel storytelling approach that investigates lived experience at the intersection of motherhood/caregiving and Ph.D. pursuits. The paper contributes to the feminist tradition of writing differently through the process of care that emerges from shared stories.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a process called heartful-communal storytelling, the authors evoke personal and embodied stories and transgressive narratives. The authors present a composite process drawing on heartful-autoethnography, dialogic writing and communal storytelling.

Findings – The paper makes two key contributions: (1) the paper illustrates a novel feminist process in action and (2) the paper contributes six discrete stories of lived experience at the intersection of parenthood and Ph.D. studies. The paper also contributes to the development of the feminist tradition of writing differently. Three themes emerged through the storytelling experience, and these include (1) creating boundaries and transgressing boundaries, (2) giving and receiving care and (3) neoliberal conformity and resistance. These themes, like the stories, also became entangled.

Originality/value – The paper demonstrates how heartful-communal storytelling can lead to individual and collective meaning making. While the Ph.D. is a solitary path, the authors' heartful-communal storytelling experience teaches that holding it separate from other relationships can impoverish what is learnt and constrain the production of good knowledge; the epistemic properties of care became self-evident.

Keywords Care, Autoethnography, Motherhood, Storytelling, Academia, Writing differently

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

"Wouldn't it be cool if we could just say, 'Maybe you don't think you fit into this neoliberal academic model. But think again. We have done it differently – and we are part of the academy too'" (member of the author group, in discussion).

This paper offers the findings from a journey in writing differently. However, it is not the paper we set out to write. As a group of five mothers and one father, we planned to take up the challenge of this special issue by analyzing our experiences of pursuing a Ph.D. while attempting to be engaged parents at home. We expected to identify and problematize the challenges of mixing parenthood with academia, which has been described as a neoliberal site that demands productivity outside the home above all else (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019), and we planned to offer a critique of this tension. Instead, a curious experience unfolded as we shared our stories. Talking about care—the challenges and commitment—led us to see and discuss our experiences differently. Although we started with stories of parenthood, we began to tell stories about care for, and from, partners, colleagues and selves. The more we talked about this different realm of our lives, the more we understood new things about each other and the more we began to offer back (to each other and ourselves). This became an epistemological journey, one that increasingly stood in juxtaposition to the way of knowing and seeing we were taught in the Ph.D. classroom. This paper, then, is a story of how knowledge itself—what we know and how we come to know it—may be constrained by the neoliberal tendencies of academia. Its purpose is to offer our gleanings from this experience as a possible epistemological insight. We have named our process *heartful-communal storytelling,* which we see as a contribution to the emerging feminist tradition of writing differently (Gilmore *et al.*, 2019; Ahonen *et al.*, 2020; Pullen, 2018; Grey and Sinclair, 2006; Valtonen and Pullen, 2021). And while mothers and parents tend to be embroiled in care, you do not need to be either to consider how the relational experience of care can enrich the lens with which you view the world.

We proceed as follows. First, we situate our paper within relevant literature: (1) motherhood and caregiving in the academy, (2) care and (3) the emerging feminist tradition of writing differently. We then explain our storytelling process before we present six stories that resulted from that process. In the discussion, we share insights from our experience with storytelling and meaning making. Three themes emerged through the storytelling experience, including (1) creating boundaries and transgressing boundaries, (2) neoliberal conformity and resistance and (3) care as epistemological practice. Finally, we conclude with remarks about the implications we see for academia.

2. Relevant literature and theory building

2.1 Motherhood and caregiving in the academy

The so-called standards of academic excellence have reified a work-centric model that reinforces masculine norms through the "cultural imperative of total commitment" (Rosa, 2022, p. 62). This neoliberal governance model means that academics are required to act as individuals unencumbered by nonwork demands (Rosa, 2022), thereby partitioning parts of ourselves so we can fit in or better yet, belong. Fleming (2020) describes neoliberal academia as an individualized process, which alienates us from the values, processes and identities that define what we do. Therefore, the neoliberal academic becomes a subject bereft of vulnerability (Fineman, 2008). (It was against this backdrop that we met, as students in the same Ph.D. program working to complete our degrees on different schedules. Not until later, when we became friends, did we learn more than the conversational minimum about each other's lives outside the classroom.)

The neoliberalization of academia must be discussed against the background of gendered organizational structures that expect total dedication to work (Rosa, 2022). More specifically,

an implicit requirement of academia necessitates that Ph.D. students put their academic work ahead of everything else. Therefore, the "academic workplace functions around traditions that follow a male professor's life course" (Ollilainen, 2020, p. 961). According to Amsler *et al.* (2019), academics and mothers inhabit competing worlds and subjectivities. Performing the role of the ideal academic often requires a splitting between the embodied, feeling self and the mental, rational self (Fotaki, 2013). The gendering of institutional structures and practices (Acker, 1990; Fotaki, 2013) prioritizes the male body in academia. Consequently, the ideal academic is constructed as a *productive* self rather than a *reproductive* self, relegating reproductive function as an obstacle to productivity and academic success (Spivak, 1998). Moreover, engagement in researching, writing and publishing have resulted in the encroachment of work into family life (Lynch, 2006), blurring the boundaries between the personal and the professional (Turner and Norwood, 2013).

Additionally, within academia, women continue to have more caregiving responsibilities than men (Mirick and Wladkowski, 2018), resulting in a lack of uninterrupted thinking space required for academic work. Mothers (and by extension, caregivers) continue to juggle between several identity categories, creating ambivalent relationships and contradictions (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Mirick and Wladkowski, 2018). According to Huopalainen and Satama (2019), mothers in academia are required to negotiate between several tension points. For example, mothers negotiate between the neoliberal self-discipline of committing to intellectual work, while being present for the spontaneity and uncertainty that comes with motherhood and caregiving. Huopalainen and Satama (2019) argue, however, that the simultaneous commitment to motherhood and academia could be seen as a form of resistance to prevailing cultural norms and expectations that reify these domains as separate and impenetrable. As a result, we believe our storytelling can illustrate both how mothers and caregivers resist but also fall prey to the pressure of conformity espoused by gendered roles (Williams and Mills, 2019). We wish to note here that while we start from a consideration of motherhood, we have extended our ideas to encompass the overlapping areas of *caregiving at home* (traditionally the role of mothers) and *parenthood* (recognizing that increasingly, fathers—especially our male author—undertake childcare work at home which clashes with traditional norms). To be inclusive of our father, we refer to *parenthood* and *motherhood* somewhat interchangeably.

2.2 Care

Although we all require care to grow and flourish, definitions of care vary, and understanding the nature of care within organizational life has not been extensively studied (Fotaki *et al.*, 2019). The growing field of care ethics has established generally accepted attributes of care: that it is fundamentally relational, based on understanding others' needs and consists of taking action to meet them (e.g. Held, 2006; Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 1993). Of relevance to this paper are aspects of care that have epistemological elements. For example, in studying the moral development of women, the earliest care ethicist, Carol Gilligan (1982) noted how a focus on care transforms the fundamentals of how we think about morality: "the underlying epistemology correspondingly shifts from the Greek ideal of knowledge as a correspondence between mind and form to the Biblical conception of knowing as a process of human relationship" (p. 173). Exploring how care occurs, care ethicist Nel Noddings (2013) advanced the concept of *engrossment*, an extra-rational state where the one-caring opens to and receives the cared-for, becoming able to feel and understand their needs: "The one-caring, in caring, is *present* in her acts of caring . . . sufficiently engrossed in the other to listen to him [or her] and take pleasure or pain in what he recounts" (p. 19, emphasis original). Engrossment, then, is a way of *knowing* that comes through the process of care. Similarly, Tronto (1993) touches on an element of co-created knowledge by including care *receiving* as one of the phases of care:

a feedback loop from care recipient to the caregiver that helps determine the quality of the care and whether personal needs have been met (p. 108). Kittay (2019) puts it thus: "Caring is not about what someone does *to* another person. It is something one does *with and for* someone. That interaction itself is a source of knowledge" (p. 860, emphasis original).

Also notable in terms of care and knowing is the emphasis care ethics places on context. While justice ethics focuses on abstracted rules that ensure consistency of fairness across multiple situations (Gilligan, 1982), care ethicists emphasize that care must be shaped by each situation; to care is to fully understand and meet needs in that particular context (Held, 2006; Hawk, 2011). This implies constant knowledge production; to understand what is needed requires an epistemological attunement that arguably is not required in a one-size-fits-all justice ethics approach.

Finally, we should note that, although care ethics developed from feminist roots, Tronto (1993) (and others since) rejected the idea that care itself is essentially feminine and domestic, tracing care's association with femininity and the private world of home to historical rather than gendered processes. We agree that although discussions of care often use motherhood or domestic life as an illustration, care itself is not gendered.

Despite our dependence on care—not only as infants or elderly but also even to arrive daily at our workplaces fed, rested and clothed—care is not well seen or well regarded in the public world of organizations. Industrial capitalism takes a "free ride" on domestic care work by separating economic production from social reproduction, rewarding the former with financial wages while undervaluing and rendering invisible the latter (Fotaki *et al.*, 2019, pp. 7–8). Meanwhile, within organizational life (and arguably institutions such as the pursuit of a Ph.D.) this undervaluing of care can cause those who have needs or receive care to be perceived as less autonomous (Tronto, 1993, p. 120) — the opposite of the unencumbered academic described by Rosa (2022). Worse, the work-centred ethos in many organizations can cause workers to face conflict between accomplishing their (paid) roles and providing care to colleagues, forcing them to create boundaries between personal and professional selves, friendship and work (Antoni *et al.*, 2020).

These two areas of literature—motherhood in academia, which helped define our classroom experience, and care (from care ethics), which helped us understand the relational epistemology that developed over the course of producing this paper—represent the starting point and journey in writing differently, to which we now turn.

2.3 Writing differently

Though not all of our writers were initially familiar with the emerging tradition of writing differently, it quickly became apparent that our paper and our explorations belonged to this growing paradigm within feminism and critical management studies (Brewis, 2005; Gilmore *et al.*, 2019; Ahonen *et al.*, 2020; Pullen, 2018; Grey and Sinclair, 2006; Valtonen and Pullen, 2021; Vacchani, 2014). This is illustrated in the way we push back against masculinist conventions of the academy and by writing from an embodied place. We intentionally inject the "I" and "we" into our writing for purposes of communal storytelling. We blend between the *I* and the *we*, as we oscillate between personal stories of conformity and resistance and individual and collective resistance (Ahonen *et al.*, 2020).

Writing differently is concerned with expanding what constitutes valid knowledge. It is concerned "with broadening, widening and deepening knowledge and understanding by giving our ideas space in which they can flourish, create new meanings, help us learn and become human" (Gilmore *et al.*, 2019, p. 4). As we will elaborate in our methodology section, our approach draws on similar approaches which are dialogic (Cunliffe, 2002) and require us to insert our body, minds and selves into our scholarship (Spry, 2001; Pullen and Rhodes, 2014). Archibald (2008) suggests that the heart is central to this process, whereby the heart

and spirit are part of the self and that we must acknowledge the interrelatedness of metaphysical values and beliefs with the emotional and the physical.

By writing differently, we are also signalling that we challenge the canonical and conventional ways of doing research (Bell *et al.*, 2020; Ellis *et al.*, 2011) and that we resist a sterilized and objectified way of writing about the self (Jamjoom, 2021). In so doing, we embrace the way that those writing in this tradition seek to overturn exclusionary practices of academia which speak to a privileged few (Grey and Sinclair, 2006).

2.4 Developing a heartful-communal storytelling approach
In this section, we present our approach which we see as a composite process drawing on heartful-autoethnography, dialogic writing and communal storytelling. We begin by disclosing our identities and subjectivities in the context of this writing.

We are a group of five women and one man, from different backgrounds. We share common threads in that we all belong/belonged to the same Ph.D. program in management located in Canada, and we are all parents to children in various age categories who were at home and dependent during the period of our Ph.D. journey. Although we predominantly reflect here on issues of motherhood, our male author brings an important perspective. As a new father, his views on fatherhood/motherhood are pertinent to understanding changing gendered norms and expectations (Tienari and Taylor (2019). Our male co-author understands the collective responsibility of men is to help the feminist project in breaking up unjust and unethical gendered structures to make way for gender egalitarianism (see Prasad *et al.*, 2021).

As Ph.D. students and early career scholars, we were trained to "do research" in the usual way: exposure to paradigms, an appreciation for multiple modes of inquiry and understanding of various methodologies in management and organization studies. The design of our Ph.D. program offered accessibility for nontraditional doctoral students (e.g. working professionals) by condensing coursework into two full-time residencies featuring (and exacerbating) all the challenges of conventional doctoral programs (Prasad, 2016). By virtue of the intense nature of the program, as well as (for many of us) our nontraditional pathways into it, our interest in "doing the Ph.D. differently" bound us together as a social group with some common scholarly interests (e.g. critical viewpoint, feminist approaches, writing differently, etc.). Along the way we uncovered an additional shared experience: struggles of "balancing" parenthood and caregiving while pursuing the Ph.D.

Our feelings of personal conflict in juggling the role of parent and student emerged in conversation on a virtual group chat (i.e. WhatsApp) in the years after our in-person residencies. We often found ourselves confronting feelings of shame or academic guilt for prioritizing family over academia or academia over family. We decided to harness our sense of community and explore our journeys as parent-caregivers and Ph.D. students. Central to our academic interest is a critique of neoliberal organizational forms and practices, particularly the ways in which these prescribe masculinity and we hoped in these motherhood/parenthood stories to contribute to feminist consciousness-raising around academic work: "Struggles to open the academy to people whose lives do not conform to hegemonic models of the bourgeois, entrepreneurial white, male scholar are ongoing" (Amsler *et al.*, 2019, p. 84). We were also driven by the need to tell stories of "the self" (Rodriguez, 2005) to help dismantle the common trope of "having it all" as a mother and caregiver in academia. This means we took to writing our vulnerable, intersectional self in dialogue within the structural pressures of performing as a doctoral student (Fineman, 2008; Johansson and Wickström, 2023).

We drew on autoethnography because we began by writing short memoirs of ourselves (Spry, 2001). We also took inspiration from other autoethnographies that challenge the

neoliberal and hegemonic forces of academia (see Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020). The process formed a collection of autoethnographic stories (Wężniejewska *et al.*, 2020). We followed a dialectic-reflexive research strategy (Hibbert, 2021) of writing and reflection. First, we wrote separately, contributing our stories to establish an initial draft. Then we convened a series of virtual meetings to engage in reflexivity (Archer, 2013; Davies and Gannon, 2006). Our caring praxis began to form in dialogue with each other (Visse and Niemeijer, 2016). Despite our established friendship, reading each other's stories was surprising and enlightening and brought us closer together. Indeed, sharing these stories helped to alleviate the guilt we had sometimes felt, of not being mother/parent enough, of not being academic enough; we began to recognize this as mutual care. Our process unfolded over time, as we took turns prompting each other for deeper insights and holding space to listen and reflect, sharing moments of caregiving and care receiving (Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018). Unknowingly, we had moved from relational reflexivity towards an ethical vulnerability (Johansson and Wickström, 2023; Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018).

Our approach to writing was disciplined and undisciplined (Cunliffe, 2002). We had the usual conventions to consider, including using literature to situate our ideas and the constraint of space, etc. However, it was also an emergent process in that our "social experience [was] constructed through language, that is, language as ontology (as being) [vs as method]" (Cunliffe, 2002). In so doing, our speaking and writing both constituted our sense of our shared experience as well as our individual and shared realities (Ferguson, 1984). By studying our oral and written discourse (our notes from meetings, our virtual meeting speech acts, our WhatsApp comments), we both *destabilized* our sense of the past (our memories and their meaning) as well as *restabilized* the significations of our individual and shared realities through new and reworked text (Cunliffe, 2002).

We distinguish our writing process by highlighting key features (heartful, entanglement, communal and storytelling). What does it mean to be *heartful?* Ellis (1999) describes this as being vulnerable, emotionally engaged and embodied with the purpose of producing evocative stories in intimate detail. Being heartful, allowed us to shed layers of convention and formality we had unconsciously self-imposed in our written accounts. As we allowed boundaries to soften and fall, our process became increasingly intimate and healing (Johansson and Wickström, 2023; Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018). We engaged authentically in hearing each other and honouring the space and dialogue we held for one another. Experiences we had told elsewhere, to ourselves or to no one, became (somehow) more (Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018; Visse and Niemeijer, 2016).

Though still individual, our stories also became *entangled*:

> Entanglement, and the way people and worlds 'emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating', becomes nowhere more apparent perhaps than when we tell stories. In telling stories we invoke a reader, a listener, an audience, even if sometimes that audience is within what we call ourselves. But stories do more. They draw out the complex and ambiguous mutual constitution of selves with others, of present with past, of person with place, and bring into sight worlds that academic argument sometimes seems to function to conceal (Edkins *et al.*, 2021, p. 604).

Here, we note the similarity between Edkins' *entanglement*, and Noddings' (2013) *engrossment* mentioned earlier, the deep engagement that "warms and comforts the cared-for" (p. 19). In revealing our raw, authentic selves through emotive writing, we found we opened ourselves up to *receiving care* from each other.

The next distinguishing aspect of our process is its *communal* nature. Writing differently, writing together, writing alone-together feels meaningful. By developing an intimate dialogic process together, we not only generated insights into experiences that were shared but also gained new insights into our unique individual circumstances. Again, this led us towards care, because at times, our sharing was deeply personal and embodied and emotionally

taxing. The insights led to rewriting, and in some instances, ideas buried within the essence of our text found new voice, "signifying the disruption of accepted boundaries" (Emad, 2006, p. 197). By exercising care, we went from *collective* to *communal* storytelling, whereby our practice not only became more reflexive, situated and existential but also not just of oneself (Emad, 2006). Our explorations together helped to furnish an outside language (Emad, 2006) for our inside worlds. Our communal praxis deepened our connection, our insights and our sense of purpose (Ali, 2019). As we will explore in our discussion, this experience of heartful, entangled, caring, communal storytelling and receiving became an epistemological journey, offering new ways of knowing.

The final *stories* we present below are therefore the result of our process: *heartful-communal storytelling*. It is fair to say that they differ so substantially from our initial drafts that we must credit the transformation to this heartful-communal approach. These stories would not be possible without the safety we created for one another, the care we gave and received and the heartful-communion we experienced in our storytelling and sharing. We offer them here as windows into the experience of parenthood amid academic endeavour.

3. Our stories

3.1 Opportunity cost

In 2014, I had moved to Canada with my husband and almost 2-year-old son. The move represented a space of transition and possibility, a place where I could somehow accomplish the goals I wanted—one of them being to complete a Ph.D.. As a new mother and Ph.D. student, juggling between motherhood and self-aspirations became a daily struggle. I thought of everything I wanted to pursue, but somehow felt constricted by thoughts of motherhood, with all it entails from physical and emotional labor—the positive and tiring sides of new motherhood (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). The competing devotions (Blair-Loy, 2003) between motherhood and academic pursuits often entailed a conflicting relationship between two kinds of idealisms, that of being a good mother and that of being a good Ph.D. student. Prioritising motherhood meant cutting back on writing, reading and academic service. Prioritising Ph.D. pursuits meant taking time away from family, spending isolated thinking time and trying to show up as a capable intellectual and contributor to knowledge. The balancing act was difficult to maintain, and it necessitated that I divide myself into two different kinds of people, the nurturing mother/caregiver and the productive Ph.D. student. The ambivalence between the two different kinds of selves was heightened when I became pregnant with my second child during my second year of the Ph.D. program. The joys of being pregnant were joined by thoughts of "opportunity costs" (Joshi, 1998). What is the cost of this pregnancy on my Ph.D. trajectory? How many months or years need to be added to the process? What do I need to not pursue now that I am pregnant?

In economics, opportunity costs are defined as the loss of potential gain from other alternatives when one alternative is chosen (Buchanan, 1991; Joshi, 1998). It is used to indicate what must be given up to obtain something that is desired. Transcending the economics realm where opportunity costs have been used to study investment options, the opportunity costs of motherhood are complex and include direct losses over career, output and income and other indirect costs that are less easily measured (McIntosh *et al.*, 2012). For me, they included a tension between time, care and (re)production, a tension between leaning in and leaning out. While I took a semester off after having my second child, I was still trying to work on my research papers and somehow remain "relevant." The fear of "post-partum academic erasure" meant feeling compelled to assert my physical and intellectual presence in the early months' postpartum (James *et al.*, 2021). Huopalainen and Satama (2019) beautifully documented this in their autoethnographic piece, where they write of the fear of potentially becoming "othered" as new mothers in academia due to the competing binaries of mother(ing) and

research(ing). This brings me back to the concept of motherhood and opportunity costs. According to Buchanan (1991, p. 520):

> The concept of opportunity cost expresses the basic relationship between scarcity and choice. If no object or activity that is valued by anyone is scarce, all demands for all persons and in all periods can be satisfied. There is no need to choose among separately valued options; there is no need for social coordination processes that will effectively determine which demands have priority. In this fantasized setting without scarcity, there are no opportunities or alternatives that are missed, forgone, or sacrificed.

In reading Buchanan's (1991) work, I understood that I categorized my intersectional identities as a mother and Ph.D. student in terms of a profit-loss ratio. I couldn't just "lean in" (Sandberg, 2013) at every opportunity because I had to be realistic. While I felt the simultaneous joys and blessings of motherhood and I continue to feel an immense sense of pride to have completed a Ph.D. while raising two young children, I was burdened by thinking of what I was missing out on as a result of my "either/or" choices. What if motherhood and Ph.D. experiences weren't bound in a strict set of independent choices, and were more interrelated, embodied and caring. Could a fantasized world that Buchanan (1991) describes exist?

3.2 Msit No'Kmaq—breaking away from academic traditions

If I conform, how am I going to pave a new path for seven generations? My story began on the day I was accepted into the Ph.D. program. It was the day my future husband and I had agreed to our first date. We were sitting in my office when the phone rang. I said, "it's the university, and it's after hours. Do you mind if I pick it up?" The program director was on the other end of the phone, and he started the conversation with "Welcome to Hollywood." Five years after defending my dissertation, I reflect on that pivotal moment. I would begin to appreciate my education through the two lenses, my Western heritage and the Indigenous lens of my blended Mi'kmaq family. As a result, we co-created a new life, drawing on the best of both worlds, Etuaptmumk, which in English is called Two-Eyed Seeing (Bartlett et al., 2012).

As our relationship progressed, I spent a lot of time at our house in Millbrook First Nation, where our blended family of four kids went about their daily teenage lives. I found myself writing daily at the kitchen table so I wouldn't miss the noises of my kids and my other half, laughing, arguing, wrestling or sleeping nearby. Sometimes they just dropped into a chair to chat or yelled from the other room to ask a question. By writing at the kitchen table, I was a part of the day-to-day living, the meals and the drama—and there was a lot of drama. I didn't want to miss out on the social interactions as they were my version of positive mental health, and the fear of missing out on these experiences far outweighed any of the disruptions while writing (Elhai et al., 2020). I didn't need to get fully involved or move. Instead, I could listen to the subtle words and tones and know when it was time for my mom hat to replace my Ph.D. hat. And soon, I became better at wearing both, creating my identity as Dr. Mom (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Koole et al., 2019). I could write in peace while the sounds of daily life bubbled around me, providing comfort and support. The mini disruptions were breaks without breaking my writing rhythm by getting up. Instead, I found myself writing in a communal context where my stories were influenced by my family's presence.

Today, I reflect on how my time at the kitchen table influenced my kids as each has gone on to pursue their education in different fields. My writing practice at the kitchen table had a contagious positive impact on my family. The symbolic interchangeability of the two faces of being a mom was socially constructed at the kitchen table, another irony of traditional female roles, as I didn't cook (Francis and Adams, 2018; Serpe and Stryker, 2011). Education was at the heart of my gift to my family, a form of sustenance nourishing the soul. Unfortunately,

that table is gone but through my studies, I have come to understand the table is socially constructed as a living element to help me weave my family and academic lives together in dance (Burrell and Morgan, 2017). Through my Indigenous learnings, the phrase Msit No'kmaq represents the concept of kinship—"all my relations". In Mi'kmaq, it means the interdependence of humans and non-humans as a key to survival (Battiste, 2016; McMillan and Prosper, 2016). From these teachings, I have come to understand that the journey of Ph.D. is most meaningful when you can involve family. How can I do that from a box inside an institution? Writing at home and in my community is a mutually beneficial gift. My subtle break from tradition gives others the courage to break away from limiting practices and find innovative ways to cultivate new knowledge.

3.3 I really can't do it all

I have a diagnosis. Before my Ph.D., I did not. My Ph.D. forced me to confront past trauma and contend with new anxieties and a new illness. After my second residency in 2016, I found myself in hospital at risk of organ failure. Amid writing "conference-ready" research papers and with comprehensive exams on the horizon, I was also running a high-profile charity, and trying to be a good mom to my two little boys, just 7 and 9 years old at the time. Combining a Ph.D. with motherhood, work and volunteering was a recipe for disaster. There I was, in hospital, with a catastrophic new diagnosis of a life-threatening autoimmune disease. My new constant companions of stress and anxiety had manifested into chronic physical illness. My untreated PTSD could also no longer be ignored. And I was lucky. I was responding well to medication.

I scared the hell out of my family. I had convinced my boys that I could do anything. Sure, I missed soccer practices. Their dad cooked all the meals and did all the shopping. I selfishly took copious time for myself to read and write, sometimes frustrated when their needs usurped my own. I had stopped reading for pleasure because the pressure to constantly read scholarship was so intense. My stay in hospital was a wakeup call, but no relief from the pressures of my life.

The researcher in me started to look for answers and what I found was distressing. First, the relationship between my physical body and my brain chemistry was complex. There is a comorbid relationship between mental illness and physical illness, in that both may worsen associated health outcomes (Moussavi et al., 2007). This, in part, explained the onset of chronic physical illness and how it had adversely affected my mental health. My second finding was that Ph.D. students are at high risk of developing depression (Levecque et al., 2017). The third finding was that Ph.D. students report a higher prevalence of mental illness (González-Betancor and Dorta-González, 2020).

I defended my Ph.D. in April 2020 as the world came to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic. I had none of the usual pomp and circumstance that I had been looking forward to after so much hard work. No pictures with my supervisor or family. No fluffy hat and robes. No ceremony to enjoy with my cohort. My physical and mental health issues are invisible. People don't always see the real me. The question I get asked constantly is: how do you do it all? The truth is, clearly not so well. I have my demons, and I have my brokenness. I have felt my fleeting mortality and the profound immobilization of depression. I really can't do it all.

I have since made major life changes. I have regular infusions to keep my immune system in check. This will never stop, and for now this medication is working. I am taking anxiety and depression medication because my adrenal glands are in constant flight or fight mode. I talk to a therapist regularly to work through my dark thoughts. My near constant migraines are being controlled by monthly injections of a novel medication. And this is better. At least better than before. I am more present. I don't miss soccer practices or games anymore. I read for pleasure. I even read the books my kids are assigned at school so we can talk about them together. Things are simpler. I have learned to slow down and embrace the motherhood

moments. Perhaps more importantly, I have learned that motherhood is not just about giving care, it is also about receiving care (Barnes, 2012). A willingness to receive care is a necessary part of my well-being and being the kind of mom that I want to be.

3.4 Lessons in letting go

Prioritizing a presence in the lives of my children, choosing options that allowed me to focus on their well-being, made my decision to complete a Ph.D. stressful. Specifically, I would not let it happen "at their expense." Those who "knew" me understood that doctoral studies were a long-standing goal which I had chosen to delay. Impatient with life, the doctoral attainment meant freedom for my mind. Nurturing in me different and new ways to understand the somewhat monotonous world, I had explored first as a management consultant, then CPA, and later in management. A world which existed on taken-for-granted ways "to be" and "to do."

Reflecting on motherhood and doctoral education brought a few significant thoughts to mind, foremost because I write from my adopted home, Canada. First, my intersectionality in the academic space was significant, and I entered the space naively. I learned that the identities I wore as, mother, outsider-cultured, aged, raced, gendered and classed, held implications for my journey (Dortch, 2016). Implications that both challenged and privileged my scholarship. Culturally, from Jamaica, my approach to "caring" labor as a mother seemed longer, extending into early adult years. A feature of my culture and socialization saw more oversight, a collaboration of "community with parent" collective approach to child rearing than I saw in my adoptive country. Furthermore, in this new space, my active attention to what my children engaged in was a protective response to experiences our family encountered during the elementary and secondary school years which demanded our active presence in a system that was not always kind in its treatment of the "Other" (Said, 1978).

Second, my lived experience and reflection on the stories of those who are othered in a society by reason of race or ethnic origin, suggested that this late-year protective presence in the lives of early adult children was especially important where the society had embedded stereotypes. In Canada, my children no longer had endless role models of successful people who looked like them. Traditional expectations that included higher education leading to professional studies or leadership in private and public roles were not supported. This, compounded at times by interactions with school personnel whose guidance dictated giving up dreams of careers in areas that their early socialization made normal in favor of other less rewarding pursuits.

Thus, despite my children's support when polled about my intention to return to school, I struggled with the decision. How could I pull it all together and make sense (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) of the challenges to my role as mother in our family where I largely still held the "second shift" (Hochschild and Machung, 2012). Recognizing the opportunity to model representation provided the impetus to embark on my Ph.D. journey. Stimulating discussion, and observing my young adults navigate academic paths of their own, was enlightening. It provided necessary encouragement and inspiration, helping me to stay the course during times when the pressures of a full-time job and "caring" for various family members threatened to capsize the Ph.D. journey.

As I complete my dissertation, I have found a home in critical scholarship (Alvesson and Wilmott, 2003) and an interest in Writing Differently (Grey and Sinclair, 2006; Gilmore et al., 2019). My "children" have thrived and are charting their own paths forward, inspired in part I hope by my leap of faith. As they watched me navigate this academic journey, conversations at home have changed, shifting family relationships through shared experiences, ideas and mutual encouragement.

One never ceases to be a mother. Choices in our lives hold implications for our children at every stage in life and *are always* juxtaposed to the other identities we wear. My foray as a mother, embarking on a Ph.D. journey highlights the importance of recognizing the complexity faced by mothers who choose to pursue an academic path.

3.5 Rejecting the divide: bringing care to work

As a child, I learned to enter my father's study quietly, and stand silently at his desk until he stopped scratching his pencil on a long yellow pad of paper. "Just let me finish this thought," he would say. Then you could ask your question. He was kindly and warm, but it was transactional. You didn't ask him to leave his desk, join an activity or help with time-intensive efforts like homework, hunting for a lost item or solving a problem. His time was privileged in the family, and childcare was not where it was spent.

My father was an academic, with a divide between work and home structured by his gender, era and socialization. I reflect on his approach to care, family life and work in the context of my own Ph.D. journey as a mother with three kids, a journey much longer than the "standard" Ph.D. because I have been so leery of becoming (with apologies to my father) a kindly but absent adult in the house rather than an engaged care-giving parent, a mother.

Care—and life—demand relationship. The Ph.D. and success in academia, demand isolation. The finite nature of time will always put the two in conflict, but to simply seek "balance" overlooks a larger challenge before us. The industrial-era divide between public life, with its justice-based morality and private life focused on relationships and emotional connection in the home (Tronto, 1993) created organizations where rule-based systems replaced historic systems of trust and connection (Smith, 2005). This supports the "impoverished" liberal ideal of the individual as "abstract, unencumbered, rational" (Held, 2006, p. 14) and obscures the reality of interdependence of individuals, groups and our ecological world.

Reflecting the feminism of the 1970s, my mother told me I could "be anything you want," encouraging travel, study, career . . . but never motherhood. In comparing notes with many women my age, it was our fathers' careers that offered us role models. We were encouraged to go "do something", and somehow parenthood would just find us along the way. So even as traditional expectations were loosened, we were not truly free. Access to career and status in the public work-world still meant holding separate the private world of care, interdependence and community.

My father had a rich academic career, achieving widespread recognition in his specialty. But my mother, who used her Harvard master's degree to work at the local library, lit up our childhood, instilled in us a sense of fun, creativity and critical thinking, and became a lifelong friend. In contrast, although my father cared for us fully in the "provider" terms of his era, we never got to know him very well. From a child's point of view, the trade-offs of a successful academic career are tangible.

As I pursue a Ph.D. focused on how care manifests within organizations, I strive to understand the expectations within our neoliberal workplaces, and the frictions these place on relationships and the opportunity to be whole people. Meanwhile, I endure the stress of a fragmented and slow Ph.D. to prioritize time for my kids, who will only be young once and who I hope will be lifelong friends. I question whether, as men engage in fathering at home and women gain full participation in public life, we can liberate "private" care to enrich our organizations and institutions, so they are characterized less by the liberal values of "autonomy, rationality, and reciprocity and increasingly by the "caring" virtues of responsibility, trust, and friendship" (Robinson, 1997, p. 129). I hope this may also help us rekindle connection to the natural world that supports us, from which, clearly, we have

estranged ourselves at our peril (Plumwood, 2002). Holding up care in my academic work has strengthened my resolve to not abandon it in my daily experience, despite the difficulty of fitting it all in.

3.6 Gender scripts in rule breaking

Among the many scripts that maintain a gendered "feel" to doctoral programs is the expectation of new fathers to continue on without interruption. This was my experience while I was still a doctoral student. It all began with a startling question from a supposedly well-intentioned colleague: "When will you finish your Ph.D.?" I had not given it much thought; sure, I had rehearsed my response, but I was not ready to admit it to myself or allow others to hear it: "I would like to finish by this time next year but I have a family to support now." This was the first time I had personally encountered a gender script as a male student. Unfortunately, gender was a well-worn script for my female colleagues. They had already been subject to intrusive assumptions of biological clocks and its bearing on completing a Ph.D. For me, the "rule" (Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991) was to finish my dissertation without the "distractions" of being a husband, father or even having gainful employment outside of the doctoral program.

My wife had been the breadwinner from the beginning of my doctoral work. This was not an uncomfortable space for me as I was raised by a single mother working two jobs to "make ends meet." Motherhood is an important theme in my life and even as I write, I am growing my concept of fatherhood in academia from it. How? Because a young male academic isn't expected to follow the script of father but, instead, working unfettered from his children and responsibilities at home (Knights, 2015). This was not nor is it my experience. When our first child was born, I was unprepared for the struggle of feeling forced to choose between being present as a new parent or financial "provider" for the well-being of my family. This was an epiphany of gender scripts and rule breaking.

I didn't know it but I had a habit of breaking rules as a parent. Rewind as I begin my teaching career in haste. My identity shifts from student to instructor as I cobble together part-time teaching contracts across multiple universities. A modest fellowship barely covered my tuition. This meant teaching part-time became a financial necessity. In this way, I dared to divide my time as a new scholar "doing" research *and* teaching. I had become so accustomed to bending "the rules" around making ends meet that it became the solution to our financial woes as my wife and I started a family.

I dared to be a "modern father" without the example of my own father, while yet a doctoral student and without the security of a successful dissertation defence and trappings of the tenure-track. I forged ahead anyway. The orthodoxy in doctoral studies is that I should have been fully engaged in my dissertation instead of "doing" parenthood but I just couldn't escape my new role as a father and co-parent. I was now responsible for providing for my family. I had trampled over the biggest rule of all: parent at your own risk and to the demise of an academic career. Indeed, these new roles did prompt me to draw on a variety of "cues" (Helms Mills *et al.*, 2010) from my changing environment: maternity leave, family budget, precarious contractual work and program time-to-completion. The gendered script of a "good doctoral student" was seemingly at odds with "present father," each constructed by their own rules and expectations.

What I learned in the process was that there is a space for me to be present: both student and co-parent. Denying myself the gender script with all the rules that follow allows me to "own" my experience. I discovered in the year that followed "*the* question" that the journey should matter more than the final destination. Would I like to have finished my program more quickly sans parenthood? Maybe, but I know now to be content with who and where I am, not defined by expectations of gender or a plan-to-completion.

4. Discussions

With Ph.D.-trained intentions, we initiated this paper to examine our differing experiences as Ph.D. students and parents, and the stresses and conflicts between these roles. We hope our stories will add to the archive of such cases, offering narrative terra firma to validate the experiences of future parent-students, and an affective experience to unite readers in a broader collective (Katila, 2019, p. 139). Setting out, we expected exploring the topic of motherhood would make clear the divide between the world of care and the world of academic craft. What we did not expect, however, was that sharing stories of parenthood and the deeper relationships that resulted would lead us to a different process of knowing, to insights that we feel do not stem from the standard Ph.D. training. We now feel our contribution not only lies in the product of the stories themselves but also in the process—heartful-communal storytelling—that we experienced in their development. We would like to draw attention to three themes that emerged from our storytelling process. These include creating and transgressing boundaries, neoliberal conformity and resistance and care as an epistemological practice (Visse and Niemeijer, 2016).

4.1 Creating and transgressing boundaries

Since the final product of a Ph.D.—the dissertation—is required to be clearly bounded and individually produced, we recognize that this internalizes a sense of bounded and isolated individual identity. We did not immediately or naturally fall into the discussions we present here; nearly all of our discussions during our residencies focused on the intellectual exploration and craft we were engaged in. It was exhilarating (and tiring, being a compressed program), but we also see, looking back, how firmly we experienced, and maintained, boundaries between the classroom and the worlds we returned to at night. There are ways this is described in the workplace: being "professional," "productive," "efficient" (Fleming, 2020). In truth, some of us who shared a cohort barely knew anything about each other's non-academic lives at first, despite spending nearly every day together during residencies. Of course, the delicious escape into the intellectual realm was a welcome step outside the boundary of quotidian tasks and responsibilities. Yet it is somewhat sobering to recognize how powerfully we enacted our own identity partitions in the time-stressed and performative world of the Ph.D. classroom (Fotaki, 2013); "collegial but not connected," as one of us put it. We did not learn the stories of each other's struggles until much later as our group chat started to bring glimpses of our "other lives" into view.

4.2 Neoliberal conformity and resistance

A significant moment for our methodological exploration of writing differently was when we first read each other's work and began to see the influence of neoliberal forces not only on the experiences we had but also on the way we wrote about and made sense of them (Krysa and Kivijärvi, 2022). Our first drafts were constrained, struggling within frames presumed by academia and society (and ourselves) about the roles we were occupying. These frames imposed on the ways we felt we should understand our experience and the way we felt we could write in academic spaces (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). Through discussion we identified elements of that experience (which we dubbed the "worthiness journey"): performance anxiety, imposter syndrome, the need to perform the ideal of being a Ph.D. student. We recognized that we were limited in what we were able to witness even in our own stories, raising questions about the hegemony of traditional (neoliberal) forms of academic knowledge, which privileged the intellect over the body, the rational over the physical/emotional (Rosa, 2022; Ollilainen, 2020). We had imposed on ourselves an element of control, with emotion held in check. The communal storytelling process, by contrast, helped us understand our stories better through listening, questioning and learning. Over time, this

built trust, allowed a more inclusive frame for knowledge-building, and indeed, offered a way of resistance (Ahonen *et al.*, 2020). Rather than, "am I worthy?", one author noted she instead began to ask, "How can I make a difference by speaking?"

4.3 Care as an epistemological practice

Care entered the writing process as we helped each other shed light on what was influencing our stories and particularly, what inhibited our expression and personal insights. Stories of relationship and caregiving compelled us to unleash care from its isolation at home, to share it with each other in our semi-professional "Ph.D. student" space. Discussing and then rewriting allowed us to tap into the practice of writing differently, subverting the constraints of academic writing to be more vulnerable and to resist convention (Ahonen *et al.*, 2020). This caused us to consider our corporeal vulnerability (Fineman, 2008; Johansson and Wickström, 2023) and the potential of embodied writing to be an instrument for inclusion (Bell and Sengupta, 2022). In sharing our stories, disclosing details perhaps not even known to our friends and family, we began to contest institutional hegemony (Prasad, 2016), to identify and deconstruct the norms we saw governing the role of Ph.D. students and to which we had been socialized. We realized that it is hard to unveil these truths in academia, since we are people who are supposed to have it *all figured out*; we elected to be in our positions, so anxiety or stress is considered self-induced (Krysa and Kivijärvi, 2022). We noted how we are trained to ignore the need for care in professional life, despite how essential it is to our human experience, yet we found that sharing stories of perceived "weakness" and uncertainty and allowing others to care for us was empowering. Said one group member, "I'm used to doing everything myself. For me, to receive the care took many iterations. All of a sudden, that day, things changed. I opened up." As we worked together, we began to hear important stories of fellow students who had personified care to their cohort, of Ph.D. classrooms where infants accompanied their mothers to the learning table, where mothers attended soccer practice with books of theory in tow. We became bolder in imagining different ways of being and knowing, of honouring our multiple identities and needs (Johansson and Wickström, 2023; Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018). Says one member of our group, "This sense of trust and belonging has been critical to my academic journey."

Ironically, our venture to undertake an academic examination of a caring practice (parenthood) brought us closer to a caring approach to academia. As we became entangled in each other's caregiving stories, and engrossed in caring interaction, our understanding became clearer. Says Hamington (2004), "Much of our understanding of others is rooted in our bodies and therefore not always available to our consciousness," so that "[t]he more we know about someone, the greater the potential for caring" (p. 5). Through our experience, we would agree, but add: *the more we care about someone, the greater the potential for knowledge.* Thus, parenting and caregiving need not be viewed as an impediment to academic pursuits, but an enrichment. It is through our whole, relational selves that the potential for deep knowing can thrive. Through this experience we now question how the vaunted individuality of neoliberal institutions may impose detrimental boundaries—on relationships, caring, even academic production (Fineman, 2008). As one of our group members said in comparing our process to the Ph.D. classroom, "This experience is very different; everybody is very connected. My cohort would say we were kind to each other, we were respectful. But we didn't create good knowledge together. We created good knowledge separately."

5. Conclusions

We came to realize that witnessing stories is a caring practice. Our unstructured conversations allowed introspection and reflection as we turned over details and asked

each other questions. We became more vulnerable with each other, a situation avoided in the managerial workplace (and by extension, the Ph.D. classroom) (Fineman, 2008; Johansson and Wickström, 2023), where emotion is often conflated with weakness. Through this process, we arrived at a space where we acknowledge the importance of embracing vulnerability as an opening to becoming more well-rounded and potent in our thinking (Jamjoom, 2021; Johansson and Wickström, 2023). Our different but similar experiences allowed us to contrast each other's whole selves—vulnerabilities and all—with the neoliberal expectations of the "Ph.D. identity." Learning from each other increasingly gave us permission to show up as we are (Johansson and Wickström, 2023; Rhodes and Carlsen, 2018). In this way, the caring practice of understanding each other's stories empowered us. While the Ph.D. is a solitary path, our heartful-communal storytelling experience taught us that holding it separate from other relationships can impoverish what we learn. The epistemic properties of care became self-evident (Visse and Niemeijer, 2016).

We offer this now to our reader: you. Like the journey of parenthood, pursuing a Ph.D. is a creative metamorphosis. It changes you. To treat it solely as a productive endeavour—an output to complete, a milestone to mark off—is to miss a part of the *re*productive spirit which informs deep knowing. In our exploration of mothering and caregiving in academia, and particularly in sharing our stories with each other, we have come to realize the value of approaching academia as whole, caring people and knowledge as relational, interconnected and shared. We encourage you to embrace the difficulties and challenges of being whole people together as you work to nurture knowledge, grow insights and give birth to new perspectives. We encourage you also to reflect on what academia could—should—become as a result.

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