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## Proving Our Maternal and Scholarly Worth: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Textual and Visual Storying of MotherScholar Identity Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Journal of the Motherhood Initiative

# Academic Motherhood and COVID-19

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## **Proving Our Maternal and Scholarly Worth: A Collaborative Autoethnographic Textual and Visual Storying of MotherScholar Identity Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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*Pivoting to remote work as female academics and to schooling our children from home as mothers in March 2020 marked a dramatic shift in how we enact our MotherScholar identities. This collaborative autoethnographic study employs a modification of interactive interviewing and photovoice to produce verbal and visual text of COVID-19 MotherScholar identity work for analysis. Thematic analysis results in themes of maternal interruptions, professional interruptions, maternal recognition, and professional recognition. Of note, our MotherScholar interactivity functioned as identity work as we sought and granted legitimacy to one another's' COVID-19 MotherScholar identities. Of particular concern to us is how institutions of higher education are (dis)enabling socially supportive MotherScholar interactivity during COVID-19 conditions that persist at the time of this writing and how they intend to address social support needs sustainably into the future.*

“So, this is me from the other day. I was actually working on some data analysis for a project that I’m doing. It was a moment where I was like, ‘Wow, I haven’t been interrupted for thirty minutes.’ I had gotten so much done, and I miss this.”—Chrissy

We begin with an excerpt from Chrissy’s MotherScholar experience to emphasize COVID-19 and its disruptive consequences to the maternal and professional roles of academic mothers. In nonpandemic conditions, MotherScholar research has drawn attention to the tensions between role expectations and enactment as well as the blurring of their distinction, as one

role informs and, at times, enriches the other (Lapayese 52). Early indicators suggest that pandemic conditions are exacerbating tensions within the MotherScholar role (Kitchner; Minello; Uhereczky), which is why we began this collaborative autoethnographic study. To be a MotherScholar in COVID-19 conditions is a historically significant and consequential moment in our lifetimes, during which the distinction between MotherScholar identities is fractured, as mothering and professoring are accomplished in the same spaces, often simultaneously. The term “MotherScholar” is derived from research on mothers with academic positions in higher education; it was coined by Cheryl Mathias in 2011 and extended by Yvette Lapayese in 2012. This term is consistent with how other scholars use such terms as “faculty moms” (Swanson and Johnston 70) and “academic mothers” (Pillay). Although the early work on MotherScholars hyphenated the term to connote balance as the two identities interact, we choose to unhyphenate the term to connote a blending of identities as well as integration of maternal and scholarly pursuits (Burrow et al.; Pillay; Hirakata and Daniluk).

As MotherScholars ourselves, we experienced the blending of our maternal and professional selves when the coronavirus pandemic caused the closing of our universities in March 2020. Based on our experiences and emerging articles chronicling the challenges of remote academic work during the pandemic (see Kitchner; Uhereczky), our research purpose was to recount and highlight the uniqueness of remote academic work as mothers sheltering in place. To do so, we embarked on a collaborative autoethnographic project to both textually and visually express our maternal and scholarly experiences during the COVID-19 sheltering-in-place orders. In doing so, we extend the MotherScholar literature to include pandemic conditions under which these roles are enacted, and, simultaneously, we underscore the value of MotherScholar support networks to manage maternal and professional challenges.

We use the concept of “identity work” to illustrate the COVID-19-related challenges that we personally and professionally faced, and, to some degree, continue to face as the pandemic extends far beyond what we originally conceived. This study is organized as follows. To begin, we contextualize our study of the COVID-19 MotherScholar identity in social constructionist approaches to identity and identity work. From that work, we introduce the research questions guiding our inquiry. Then, we present the process of data collection and analysis in the methods section by clarifying how we used interactive interviews, photovoice, and thematic analysis. Following the methods section, we turn our focus to the two primary themes related to our maternal and professional identity work: interruptions and recognitions. Interruptions feature how our maternal and professional expectations, goals, and roles were disrupted as a result of COVID-19, and recognitions feature how we sought acknowledgment, appreciation, and respect for how we

overcame maternal and professional interruptions to fulfill our MotherScholar identities. The implications of these themes are explored, especially in relation to the MotherScholar identity work we did ourselves as coauthors. As mothers and scholars, we communicated our maternal and professional worthiness to one another, to our colleagues, to our children, to our partners, and among ourselves, as we both sought and granted MotherScholar legitimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, our conclusions highlight the value of MotherScholar identity work as legitimacy seeking and legitimacy granting. So to begin, we turn our attention to identity work and the context of MotherScholar identity work.

### **Literature Review: Identity Work**

The following section places the study in the larger context of literature on identity and identity work, and we then focus on the relevant MotherScholar literature. Identity scholarship, especially in the social sciences, has “become a popular frame through which to investigate a wide array of phenomenon” (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas 5). Due to its popularity, scholars may take for granted what is meant by identity, identity work, and MotherScholar, which necessitates our clarifying these terms before we begin. With that said, we would like to note that there are not monolithic, singular definitions for any of these terms that would fully encapsulate what we intend as we use them. Identity is a ubiquitous, contemporary term hinting at a sense of self or a collective sense of a group. As social construction scholars (see Creed, Scully, and Austin; Tracy and Trethewey) suggest, how a sense of self or group is formed—through social interaction—is just as interesting as what the sense of self or group is.

### **MotherScholar Individual and Collective Identity**

MotherScholar is simultaneously an individual and collective identity designating academic mothers—those who enact maternal and scholarly roles concurrently. Women academics have made strides in representation in higher education, yet work remains in terms of securing better representation in certain disciplines as well as in upper-level administrative roles and in achieving equal pay (Pickerell). Although women begin academic careers in equal numbers at the assistant professor rank, American women drop to 42 per cent of faculty at the associate professor rank (Ward and Eddy). More recent data collected and reported by global nonprofit Catalyst indicates that in 2018, American women in the academy only made up 39 per cent of tenured positions, which indicates a 10 per cent drop in representation between obtaining a tenure-track position and achieving tenure. Of concern has been

the effect of maternity on the upward mobility of women academics. Mothers in the academy are noted as perceiving their maternal status and role responsibilities as obstacles to professional successes, such as achieving a specified publication record (Hirakata and Daniluk). Debra Swanson and Deirdre Johnston's study, which includes interviews with 95 mothers in the academy, concludes that investment in the maternal identity and internalized expectations of intensive mothering and the good mother are perceived as less valuable in the academy, increase stress related to unrealistic linear career progression, and undermine scholarly goals. Addressing this dilemma, some scholars (e.g., Lapayese; Pillay; Hirakata and Daniluk) suggest that identity integration—that is, avoiding balance and striving to integrate roles and expectations—may alleviate some of the distressing perceptions and outcomes associated with the MotherScholar. Lapayese, a scholar in education, explains it this way: “Mother-scholars expounded the implicit need for space that is ready and willing to integrate motherhood and research” (27). It is this vein of MotherScholar research that captures our attention, especially given that COVID-19 sheltering-in-place conditions likely affected the integration of maternal and scholarly identities, as they resulted in concurrently working and schooling from home.

At the individual level, MotherScholars negotiate and perform their identities from their individualized subject positions, which are uniquely constituted through diverse intersections of identities. For example, an immigrant single mother of two elementary-aged children on a green card with a nontenured faculty job has a different MotherScholar subject position than a minority married mother of two college-aged children with a tenured, full professor faculty job. However, MotherScholars are also a group of females who share maternal and academic roles and struggles associated with the uncertainties of fulfilling both roles (Grenier and Burke), having an outsider status in the academy (Iverson and Seher 63), experiencing double binds (Iverson and Seher 69), and fearing professional penalties for their mothering (Gerten; Ward and Wolf-Wendel). As an individual and collective identity, we recognize that there are institutional, occupational, political, and sociocultural influences (Kreiner et al. 1032) affecting our understandings of what it means to be a mother and scholar and the relevant role expectations associated with each. We also recognize that even collective identities are fragmented and individually negotiated, which is similar to Sarah Tracy and Angela Trethewey's crystallization metaphor describing multifaceted identity. Therefore, we blend the terms “mother” and “scholar” together, unhyphenated, to reflect the blended lived experiences of mother and scholar. Although Lapayese's work with the MotherScholar identity is foundational to our study, as well to other studies, she hyphenates the term. In contrast, we consciously choose to unhyphenate the term to emphasize the concurrent enactment and

mutual constitution of mothers and scholars. Such a linguistic move is in concert with Lauren Burrow et al.'s forthcoming work on the MotherScholar, which discusses unhyphenation and its attempt to transcend the balance metaphor that the hyphen implies.

As MotherScholars communicate maternal and work experiences, they engage in identity work. Identity work is the dynamic, ongoing (re)construction of one's identity (Alvesson and Willmott 625; Watson 126). Our dialogues illuminate how identity work stresses the multifaceted nature of identity, which we constructed not only through our own interactive interviews with one another but also through the internal discourse within ourselves (Tracy and Town) as we discursively worked towards coherent MotherScholar identities during COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, our identity work followed what Arlie Hochschild has called "compartmentalized identities"; during COVID-19, these compartments synthesized, resulting in identity work being both an external and internal process.

At the crux of this study is the MotherScholar identity work that we initiate and sustain through our communication, specifically about our COVID-19 MotherScholar experiences. As tenured and tenure-track faculty at regional universities in the disciplines of communication studies and education, we came together through our interpersonal and professional networks in May 2020 to begin discussing the MotherScholar in the COVID-19 pandemic, leading us to conduct a systematic study of our experiences, which are represented in this work. Guiding this iteration of our research are two fundamental curiosities or lines of inquiry. First, we asked, "How did we use our MotherScholar communication to manage our identities during the COVID-19 pandemic?" Second, we asked, "What were the consequences of our identity work?" Before addressing these questions, we turn our attention to the methods used for data collection and analysis.

## **Methods**

To address our question related to identity work in COVID-19 conditions, we drew on a larger body of research collected through an IRB approved collaborative autoethnographic project, in which we assumed roles as both researcher and participant. Undergirding our collaborative autoethnographic approach is that our MotherScholar identities are both preexisting contexts for the research and performative products of the research interactivity. By "preexisting contexts," we acknowledge that our MotherScholar identities predate our collaborative autoethnographic study and contextualize how we see our maternal and professional selves going into this project. By "performative products," we acknowledge that our MotherScholar identities are produced, reproduced, and transformed through our research interactions. Thus,

“identities are not fixed and constant but rather contextual products of the researcher’s relations” (Jensen, et al. 136). As we relate to one another as researchers in interactive interviews, we are engaged in identity work—(re) producing and transforming our MotherScholar individual and collective identities.

### **Interactive Interviewing as a Collaborative Autoethnographic Approach**

Autoethnography emerges from valuing personal experience, as it is a window into the “cultural beliefs, practices, and identities” of groups (Adams and Hermann 2). When two or more researchers share their experiences linked by a belief, practice, or identity in an autoethnographic study, the study becomes a collaborative venture. As MotherScholars, we bound together to share our collective identity as academic mothers and our COVID-19 experiences. Furthermore, we elected to produce our text for analysis through an interactive process rather than circulate prewritten accounts, which is consistent with Carolyn Ellis, Christine Kiesinger, and Lisa Tillmann-Healey’s interactive interviewing process. These scholars use interviews with one another and a conversation over dinner to create the texts for analysis in their chapter on autoethnography and emotion. We, too, use interviews with one another to produce the text for analysis.

Modifying and further specifying the interactive interview process, we, the authors, met via Zoom in an initial meeting to plan how we would approach the COVID-19 MotherScholar study and enact interactive interviewing. We settled on recorded Zoom video conferencing meetings facilitated by the lead author, Elizabeth Spradley. Prior to all three Zoom interactive interviews, Elizabeth created and circulated an interview guide to garner feedback and elicit preparation for each interactive interview. The interview guide allowed each of us to consider the images we might share and the way we might approach the questions or prompts scheduled in the interview guide. In each of the three interactive interviews, Elizabeth began by clarifying the interactive interview purpose and agenda. In the first interactive interview, Elizabeth asked each MotherScholar to take turns sharing her COVID-19 story; each showed images, including photographs of family time, home schooling, and different iterations of a home office. The second interactive interview focused on work-life issues and coping with COVID-19 conditions, and the third interview invited each MotherScholar to add to their narratives, clarify their experiences, and discuss the methodology. Interactive interviews averaged two hours in length and produced 324 pages of transcript.

In order to practice reflexivity (Berger), we wish to acknowledge some basic information about each of us because we are aware of the multiple influences these aspects of our identity have on our scholarly work. Elizabeth, Heather,

Lauren, and Chrissy are MotherScholars at a regional state university in the Southwest United States and represent two different academic disciplines, and Sarah is a MotherScholar at a Midwest regional university in the United States. Elizabeth is a forty-two-year-old white, cisgender woman, with four children, aged four, ten, twelve, and fourteen, who is tenured and applying for promotion at the time of this writing. Sarah, the second author, is a forty-four-year-old white, cisgender woman, with two children, aged three and six, who is intending to go up for tenure and promotion at the time of this writing. Heather is a forty-seven-year-old white, cisgender woman, with two adult children and one emergent adult child, aged seventeen, twenty, and twenty-three. Heather's children were three months, three, and six when she started her doctoral work; thus, the only professional identity and experience she knows is one in which mothering and scholarship coexist. Lauren, the fourth author, is a thirty-nine-year-old white, cisgender woman, with three children, aged eight, ten, and eleven, and has a tenured faculty position. Finally, Chrissy is a forty-one-year-old white, cisgender woman, with four children, aged nine, eleven, thirteen, and fourteen, with a tenured faculty position. We recognize the privileges inherent in our status as white, cisgender, able-bodied, and neurotypical women, who all currently have fulltime tenure-track positions at public, regional universities.

Additionally, MotherScholar data consisted of images of our COVID-19 experiences. We layered our verbal accounts of MotherScholar during the COVID-19 pandemic with images either captured organically during the pandemic or images staged to reflect our experiences; photos and social media posts comprised an important segment of our data. Moreover, these images function in two ways for us. First, the images function to enhance MotherScholar expressiveness through visual communication channels, as pioneered by Julie Rust (89). Second, the images function to generate social awareness and action for MotherScholars across the academy, as we exert influence on institutions of higher education to be attuned to MotherScholar needs, to adopt better policy, and to interact compassionately with faculty who have inequitable academic and maternal demands on their time and resources. The second functioning of our images is in concert with Caroline Wang and colleagues work with photovoice (Wang 186-87; Wang et al. 79). Following this and other iterations of this study, we make available a curated collection of our COVID-19 MotherScholar images on our blog (see conclusion for link). These images combined with language comprise the totality of texts examined for this study.

## **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis lent an accessible, flexible (Braun and Clarke 58), yet systematic approach to coding data, identifying patterns, and richly describing experience (Scheibling, et al. 54). Following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, we used the six-step iterative process for thematic analysis. First, Elizabeth and Sarah immersed themselves in the data, reading and rereading the interactive interview transcripts. Second, the lead author initiated the process of generating coding categories focusing on maternal and professional identities, which, third, led to emerging themes specific to our language use related to the interruptions and recognitions of maternal and professional identities. Quintessential to moving from step two and three, which we acknowledge is a recursive and active process, is noting the recurrence of codes and relationships between codes (Braun and Clarke 63; Manoliu 52). Fourth, the lead author used Braun and Clarke's (65) set of theme review questions to check the quality, relevancy, and saturation of them. Such questions as "Is this a theme?" and "What are the inclusionary and exclusionary boundaries of this theme?" were considered before settling on interruption and recognition themes (Braun and Clarke 65). Fifth, definition and labels were given to the themes settling on maternal interruptions, professional interruptions, maternal recognitions, and professional recognitions. Sixth, the draft of the findings and implications section was circulated to all authors for feedback and to consider such things as fit or match between themes and data, consistency of thematic reoccurrence in the data, ordering of themes, and selection of exemplary quotes (Braun and Clarke 69). The sixth stage also functioned similarly to member checking in that each of the collaborative coauthors had the opportunity to see themselves represented in the report to provide feedback on representation of their COVID-19 MotherScholar voices.

## **Findings**

The following subsections provide elaboration on the two themes of interruptions and recognition in terms of both maternal and scholarly identities.

### ***Maternal Interruptions***

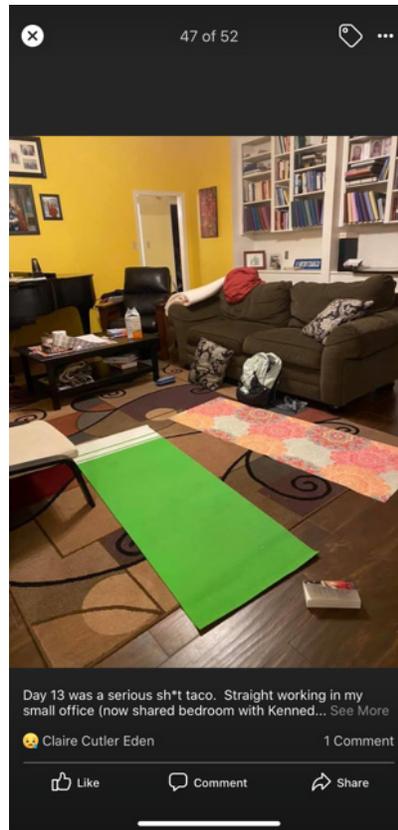
Maternal interruptions were coded in our data as events or descriptions about changes in how we mother from pre-COVID-19 to during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sheltering in place during COVID-19 meant two to three months of caring for children within the home, facilitating or managing children's schoolwork, and working remotely as academics. As Trisalyn Nelson and Jessica Early have pointed out in their *Chronicle of Higher Education* article: "The shift to remote work has been hard on every faculty member, and having

kids at home adds an extra layer of stress. That's true for all engaged parents, but the juggling is especially difficult for academic mothers who tend to bear the burden of home and kids much as they do in nonacademic families" (para. 3). Nelson and Early's point is evident in our visual and textual MotherScholar representations of interruption. Being a mother was wrought with many interruptions challenging our maternal identity work aimed at being a good mother. Homeschooling, or versions thereof, became a reality for us with school-aged children. Chrissy delved into the effect of homeschooling on both her maternal and professional identity: "Because that's what the virus closing has done. It has been a constant interruption. I have all these ideas and goals that I want for myself and it's not going to happen. It's not going to be the way I think it is and letting go of that and creating some live in the now moments has been good."

Chrissy's encapsulation of maternal interruptions was echoed by many of us as we described challenges in managing our work schedules and children's school schedules. We felt the totalizing effects of what Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels describe as the "new momism" or what Sharon Hays terms "total motherhood." That is, we felt the overwhelming pressure to be good mothers by being good homeschoolers, yet our homes and work were not equipped with or arranged to easily accommodate this shift in maternal responsibilities. Our maternal interruptions, subsequently, became increasingly difficult to challenge in our identity work aimed at good mothering.

Although COVID-19 presented interruptions to *good* mothering, not all interruptions were perceived negatively. In fact, we all noted positive outcomes, even if limited, to some COVID-19 maternal interruptions. Heather said the following: "If a disruption can be positive, maybe it can be to my mothering. If this hadn't happened, I would have seen Kennedy twice during the whole semester instead of her being at home for ten weeks." She said the same for her other daughter but noted that her university was closer. Heather's maternal interruptions enabled shared mother-daughter yoga time in their living room and yielded additional conversations in the shared office/sleeping space (see Figures 1 and 2).

For Heather and for all of us, maternal interruptions were also opportunities for new iterations of our mothering. If not for COVID-19, Chrissy may not have unschooled with nature activities outside with her children, and Lauren may not have put down her computer for a family movie night. Overall, maternal interruptions typified COVID-19, but the degree to which we perceived them positively or negatively was, in part, the degree to which we were able to manage them as good mothers.



Figures 1 and 2. Heather's images of her Facebook post of the living room yoga setup and of her three kids all piled into her home office space, which her eldest daughter slept in while home from university.

## Professional Interruptions

Professional interruptions were coded in our data as events or descriptions that demonstrated a difference from pre-COVID-19 to during COVID-19. “Interruptions are continually happening,” Chrissy states. As scholars, we had personal and institutional expectations that were interrupted by COVID-19, which is aptly communicated by Chrissy in this orienting quote from the interviews. At the centre of these expectations were the subthemes of productivity and advancement. Regarding productivity, we often mourned workload versus work execution. At one point in our interactive interviews, Sarah exclaimed, “It was frustrating as hell that I couldn’t get work done.” Productivity did continue, but in several of our estimations, the productivity was so intensely different that we felt overwhelmed by what was not being fulfilled regarding our professional expectations of role performance. On top of mourning our changing productivity, we also experienced the need to justify ourselves through excuses. As Chrissy said, “I’m just going to have to continue making excuses and saying, ‘I’m not going to be able to do that. I’m sorry that I missed your email. I’m sorry I did this. I’m sorry that I did that.’ And this is going to happen as long as I have to be mother that stays home with my kids ... I don’t know the end date for that.”

Our loss of productivity was a professional disruption with implications for our advancement, not just job and personal satisfaction. Furthermore, in most cases, professional interruptions were attributed to our maternal identity and role responsibilities (see Figure 3)



Figure 3. Chrissy with one of her four children in view as she works on her laptop.

Regarding advancement, we each expressed concerns that our professional goals were impeded by the effects of mothering and working from home. Whether advancement concerns were specific to the timing of tenure and promotion or general to our reputations, we shared concerns that COVID-19 interrupted advancement. Speaking about a personal goal to go up for full professor by a certain age, Lauren stated, “That’s not going to happen right now. So, I’m kind of giving myself a little bit of a break and maybe, foolishly, I think I can jump back in.” For Elizabeth, she began the academic year filled with professional goals that would favourably position her for promotion: “This was going to be the first year that all four kids were in school full-time and at the same school. So, for one year I was going to have them at the same place. I was excited about the possibilities of this academic year. For me, this academic year was about renewed interest in my research agenda, having additional time to dedicate to it.” Like her coauthors, COVID-19 interrupted several research projects requiring participant observation in the data collection. Of note, this writing group of coauthors sprung up in the gap left by research interruptions, and we will expand upon the unintentional and positive outcomes associated with that outcome in the implication section.

While specific interruptions to promotion emerged in our talk, more generally concerns emerged related to the short-term and long-term effect that COVID-19 would have on our scholarly reputations as we struggled to maintain workloads and pursue advancement. Bravely, Chrissy claimed that her “reputation will be damaged.” We shuddered to think about the long-term effects of scholarly identity shifts, but for some of us, the forecast did not call for clear skies anytime soon. In sum, we shared maternal and professional interruptions with one another and voiced the perceived threats to our MotherScholar identities.

### **Maternal Recognitions**

Maternal recognitions were coded as events or descriptions of extraordinary maternal activity to enhance family relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mothers, we sought recognition through acknowledgement, appreciation, and respect for our maternal activity during these times. Maternal recognition foregrounded our maternal identity work that sought to both normalize and generate extraordinary pandemic experiences. Normalizing sheltering-in-place conditions with our families manifested in our maternal role performances in several different ways, including facilitating routines in our homes, maintaining family time for mundane activities, such as meals or walks, keeping up with domestic labour, and talking to our children about the pandemic. Out of concern for our children, whose worlds had been turned upside down as well, we strove to generate safe, calm, and happy homes.

In addition to normalizing sheltering-in-place conditions with our families, we also strove to construct extraordinary experiences. From making elaborate food to doing unique family activities, we engaged in maternal identity work that reinforced positive impressions of our maternal roles to ourselves and our families. In terms of food, two of us, unbeknownst to each other, selected images of extravagant dishes we made for our family to show during the interactive interviews describing our desire to be good moms and make our homes special during the pandemic. Elizabeth displays images of food that she made, explaining, “I made us really elaborate meals.” Likewise, Sarah described making two versions of whoopie pies, one for her daughters and the other for her and her spouse (see Figures 4 and 5).



Figures 4 and 5. Images from Elizabeth of an elaborate dessert, (flourless chocolate cake and coffee ice cream) and breakfast (English muffins with eggs, cheese sauce, and bacon).

Food preparation was not the only extraordinary maternal activity; we also described how we spent time with our families doing activities that we did not do before the pandemic. In terms of extraordinary family activities, Lauren expounded upon her commitment to uninterrupted family time by putting technology away to enjoy movie night, and Sarah sat down with her three- and six-year-old to play tea party. Despite maternal and professional interruptions, maternal recognition was transformative and acted as a salve for our COVID-19 wounds.

## Professional Recognitions

The final realm of our identity work was our need to seek professional recognition, or to have our scholarly work and contributions acknowledged either by those in our department, colleagues on social media, or even our respective universities. As reports from issues of higher education magazines (Kitchner; Uherezky) have made clear, article submissions from women academics have declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, we wanted to communicate to others that we weren't the norm and that our universities needed to keep us. Despite our remote working conditions and our enacting maternal and professional identities simultaneously, we all noted various feats we had accomplished and the desire to have our institutions acknowledge and value those accomplishments. Heather put it bluntly, "I need to prove that I'm worth keeping around." At another point in our interactive interviews, Sarah similarly explained how she demonstrated her worthiness to her department as she responded to Lauren's experience with recognition seeking. "That's interesting, Lauren, because I find as one of two junior faculty members in the department that I'm volunteering to do whole lot more than I'm expected to do to prove my worth. And, I say, 'Hey, not only can I advise students for twenty hours a week, but my three- and six-year old are still healthy and thriving.'" Given the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and other news sources reporting about school closures, hiring freezes, and layoffs, we were all too aware of threats to our professional identities (e.g., Kelderman; Redden; and Sultan). Engaging in identity work for professional recognition enabled a sense of active work to address those threats.

Seeking professional recognitions operated on an interpersonal level (e.g., department chair) and organizational level (e.g., department or university community). On an interpersonal level, we described the need for professional recognition. Take, for example, Sarah's familiar ritual with her department chair: "I feel like my professional life is suffering to the point where I was on the phone with my acting chair about something completely different last week. And I said, 'I am afraid I'm going to lose my job because I'm not tenured yet,' and he had to remind me that I had nothing to worry about. And I need to hear that once a month." In addition to interpersonal communication seeking professional recognition, we also voiced the need for our accomplishments to be recognized at organizational levels. Whether it was an email to faculty or an announcement on the university's internal newsletter, we expressed how affirming organizational recognitions were to our scholarly identities. Lauren described organizational level recognition as she discussed how she circulated information about a professional accomplishment:

I was big on making sure that made it into the *SFA Today*.... Well, they cannot fire someone who's been talked about at the board of

regents meeting and president listed by name.... I made sure my name was out there... I'll be really honest. I liked what I did, and it was a really great night. I don't normally shout from the rooftops about what I've done, but I felt like I needed to show everything I'm doing right now and what worth it was to SFA and make sure to copy everybody on it.

By proving our worth by pointing out our accomplishments, we engaged in identity work to counter threats of interruption. In the next section, we expound upon our COVID-19 MotherScholar identity work by turning our attention to how our identity work functioned with one another as a writing team.

### **Implications**

In the implications section, we direct our thoughtfulness to the second question that drove this study: What were the consequences of our identity work? To do so, we explored how our MotherScholar identity work surrounding interruptions and recognitions functioned. We found it functioned as both legitimacy seeking and legitimacy granting, subsequently underscoring the instrumentality of MotherScholar social support.

In many ways, we came to realize through data analysis that we were seeking acknowledgement, affirmation, and praise from others. Legitimizing accounts can work differently across social and relational contexts, but as Douglas Creed, Maureen Scully, and John Austin conclude legitimizing accounts demonstrate the way “social actors use their knowledge of cultural logics and institutional settings to provide the common meanings and identities that mobilize local participation in sustaining or changing institutional arrangements” (476). Our legitimizing accounts drew on cultural and institutional scripts of motherhood and professorship to relate to one another and seek support for COVID-19 MotherScholar identity shifts.

When we began this study, we did not ask questions about or intend to explore how our interactive interviews functioned as identity work, nor did we plan on examining the consequences of the identity work for one another. Our initial focus was to be on the inevitable tensions between maternal and professional roles—that is, work-life tensions. However, as with all communication, there are intentional and unintentional consequences, and as scholars, we had an informed curiosity about the consequences of our interactions. The more we immersed ourselves in one another's COVID-19 MotherScholar experiences, the more we observed how our communication as a MotherScholar writing team functioned as a social support network granting legitimacy to our MotherScholar identity work. In Lauren's words, “I made a choice right now to stay in this work group because it is actually very

therapeutic.” Borrowing Lauren’s phrase, our interactions and MotherScholar identity work were therapeutic.

Just as we sought legitimacy, our identity work granted legitimacy. Legitimacy-granting communication was typically in response to a MotherScholar challenge with which we identified. For example, Lauren offered legitimacy to Sarah’s guilt from competing maternal and professional expectations: “I’m having flashbacks. I don’t know if that’s comforting, Sarah, that they will get older.” Legitimacy granting was orally affirming as in Lauren’s reaction to Sarah’s guilt, but legitimacy granting was also present in our Zoom chat as we listened to one another. In response to Elizabeth’s account of her son’s health condition that predated remote schooling for her family, Lauren wrote: “I was wrapped up in your story so much—lots of love to you too. We are all in this together NOW.” In our struggles to manage maternal and professional interruptions and in our pursuit of maternal and professional recognition, we became relational resources for one another as we used legitimacy-granting communication to affirm one another’s MotherScholar worthiness.

While somewhat surprising to us, the MotherScholar literature provides tentative support for this outcome. Christin Seher and Susan Iverson’s work with academic mothers in a program called Action Read demonstrates how facilitated dialogue about maternal and professional roles in higher education can benefit academic mothers. Their study notes social and professional benefits, such as co-mentoring, joint consciousness raising, and validation, and their study also suggests that meaningful collective action may result to mobilize MotherScholars on their campuses. Our COVID-19 MotherScholar writing team functioned similarly as the women in Action Read, which caused us to wonder what would happen if MotherScholars across the academy formed such writing teams.

Furthermore, one of the MotherScholars stood out in her fulfillment of an informal, emergent role in our MotherScholar research team. The informal, emergent role was that of “affirmer.” We adopt this term, as it describes Lauren’s communication and our perception of Lauren as the affirmer while realizing that group communication scholars (Hare; Moxnes) may classify the role slightly differently. Lauren’s comments in response to our COVID-19 MotherScholar expressions affirmed who we were, the choices we were making as well as our emotional reactions and concerns.

## **Conclusion**

Regardless of our subject positions (e.g. academic rank or family situation), COVID-19 threatened perceptions of our maternal and scholarly worthiness. Subsequently, we voiced our struggles with interruption and our efforts to seek

recognition, which came to function within our group as legitimacy-seeking and granting-identity work. This study suggests that pandemic-related exigencies that dramatically alter work and family arrangements may also dramatically alter identity. As a microcosm of MotherScholar identity work during the COVID-19 pandemic, our research and writing team operated as legitimacy granting in response to the legitimacy-seeking identity work, which underscores the value of even limited interactivity and social support for working mothers, more generally, and MotherScholars, more specifically. Overall, the early findings related to maternal wellbeing show that the physical, financial, and psychological dimensions of wellbeing have suffered during the pandemic (Davenport et al.). With this and early indicators of research of academic mothers during COVID-19, higher education administrators need to take note of how their faculty may be struggling with MotherScholar legitimacy and wellbeing as they teach, serve, and research remotely while simultaneously fulfilling maternal expectations with children at home. Additionally, MotherScholars should take note that they do not need to wait for their respective institutions to implement measures for their wellbeing. Instead, research and writing teams may be initiated and formed from within the MotherScholar community. This writing team focused on COVID-19 and the MotherScholar, but research and writing teams may choose to be primarily sources of feedback on projects or pursue projects related to their disciplines. Regardless, from our anecdotal experience and extant literature on MotherScholar groups (see Seher and Iverson), social support is a promising outcome.

We acknowledge that MotherScholar challenges existed before COVID-19, but in light of the pandemic's exacerbation of existing challenges, attention to MotherScholar identity shifts and social support is critical. Of significance to institutions of higher education, opportunities for MotherScholar interaction are limited in remote work conditions yet are still critical to manage identity shifts and enhance social support. Although a limited number of MotherScholars may fall under the category of disadvantaged populations or resource-poor communities (in the sense that Jewel Gausman and Ana Langer call for a gender lens for COVID-19 research), there are many statuses and differences between these women that place them at varying degrees of risk to their wellbeing. Greater attention is needed to investigate how disparity or minority status affects MotherScholar identity in a pandemic. We see our work as both a critical dialogue about MotherScholars and as a critical practice by modelling a MotherScholar writing team, which will encourage a "praxis of engagement" (Garvey et al. 141) at colleges and universities by MotherScholars. Our own COVID-19 MotherScholar stories can be found in our MotherScholar blog, available at <https://espradley0.wixsite.com/mysite-1>.

In sum, COVID-19 MotherScholar conditions were not of our making or

choosing, and as we textually and visually expressed our identities to one another we produced, reproduced, and transformed individually and collectively, working through the pandemic-induced identity shifts. Through our communication we also experienced affirmation and support that enabled continued productivity leading to this article. In an active attempt to avoid romanticizing COVID-19 MotherScholar identity work, we wrestled with how to frame the positive outcome of legitimacy seeking and granting within our writing team. Yet we confess that maternity can have an “expansive” (Laney et al.) effect on our careers and vice versa, which is further realized in relation to other MotherScholars. So, we leave with a parting quote from our interactive interviews, which, partially, explains this “expansive” perspective: “I think that is the MotherScholar. It’s that I think of things differently.”

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