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**Title:** Conforming to and resisting imposed identities : An autoethnography on academic motherhood

**Year:** 2022

**Version:** Accepted version (Final draft)

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**Please cite the original version:**

Krysa, I., & Kivijärvi, M. (2022). Conforming to and resisting imposed identities : An autoethnography on academic motherhood. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, 17(3), 357-375. <https://doi.org/10.1108/qrom-07-2021-2175>



**Conforming to and resisting imposed identities – An autoethnography on academic motherhood**

Journal:	<i>Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management</i>
Manuscript ID	QROM-07-2021-2175.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	autoethnography, academic motherhood, gendered work practices, resistance, neoliberal academia, postfeminism

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## Conforming to and resisting imposed identities – An autoethnography on academic motherhood

### Purpose

This research attempts to make sense of the experiences of two academic women who become mothers.

### Design/methodology/approach

This paper is an autoethnography. Applying the autoethnographic method allows us to discuss cultural phenomena through personal reflections and experiences. Our autoethnographic reflections illustrate our struggles and attempts of resistance within discursive spaces where motherhood and our identity as academics intersect.

### Findings

Our personal experiences combined with theoretical elaborations illuminate how the role of the mother continues to be dominated by such gendered discursive practices that conflict with the work role. Once women become mothers, they are othered through societal and organizational practices because they constitute a visible deviation from the masculine norm in the organizational setting, academia included.

### Originality

This paper explores how contemporary motherhood discourse(s) within academia and the wider society present competing truth claims, embedded in neoliberal and postfeminist cultural sensibility. Our autoethnographic reflections show our struggles and attempts of resistance within such discursive spaces.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, academic motherhood, gendered work practices, resistance, neoliberal academia, postfeminism

## Introduction

*Nothing in my life has hit me with such a force as becoming a mother. Not because I suddenly had to care for a little baby but because I suddenly had become a mother, with new expectations and new ways of being talked to. I suddenly felt branded as a mother, trapped in a role to which existence I was previously completely oblivious to. (Elizabeth)<sup>1</sup>*

*I sit by my workspace when a senior female colleague enters, looking to speak to my colleague. After discovering that my colleague is not at her desk, she is already on her way out. Yet, she suddenly turns back, as if in realization that we haven't spoken after my return from my parental leave, and asks: "How are you? How has it been with the baby? Surely, you're doing good, this being your second child and everything", she responds to her own question before I really have the chance to reply. I put aside my excitement to talk about the pretty little baby girl who is now already at the daycare, and to share my anxiety over the beginning of my new research project as I realize the chat is over before it really began. (Helena)*

This paper, which we write together as early-stage career academic mothers, attempts to make sense of the identity struggles brought about by the birth of our children. It explores contemporary cultural meanings of motherhood and how the current motherhood discourse(s), within and outside academia, affect an individual's identity making. Our becoming as academic

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<sup>1</sup> We chose the names Elizabeth and Helena as our pseudonyms throughout this paper whenever we offer autoethnographic accounts of our experiences.

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3 mothers entangles with the neoliberal (Rottenberg, 2018) and postfeminist cultural sensibilities  
4  
5 (Lewis *et al.*, 2017), prescribing multiple and conflicting expectations.  
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9 This paper has been purposefully chosen to constitute an autoethnographic account.  
10  
11 When I, Elizabeth, originally decided to write a paper on motherhood, I wanted to make sense of  
12  
13 what I was experiencing after giving birth and it became very clear that my voice needed to be  
14  
15 part of this process. I was eager to capture the relationship between the prevailing discourses  
16  
17 surrounding motherhood, and its consequences on me. Writing autoethnography aims at  
18  
19 engaging the self (“auto”) with culture (the “ethno”) (Holman Jones *et al.*, 2013; Winkler, 2018).  
20  
21 Since culture is an inseparable element of what shapes us (Bochner and Ellis, 1996),  
22  
23 autoethnographies can provide valuable reflections and critique of societal phenomena (Holman  
24  
25 Jones *et al.*, 2013). Both of us (Elizabeth and Helena) are intrigued to have found a way to create  
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27 ‘intellectual’ work that at the same time allows us to express ourselves and reflect on our  
28  
29 personal experiences.  
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35 Through an autoethnographic contemplation we explore the different themes that  
36  
37 emerged in our lives once we became mothers and we examine our identity work as academics,  
38  
39 as mothers, and academic mothers. While previous autoethnographies have addressed the  
40  
41 tensions in academic mothers’ experiences (Amsler and Motta, 2019; Huoplainen and Satama  
42  
43 2019; Yoo, 2020), we feel the need to further examine the entanglement of various societal  
44  
45 discourses and their implications to negotiating our identities. We want to reflect on and  
46  
47 understand our own struggles of motherhood and the othering process where we both self-  
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49 internalized the need to submit to the [masculine](#) academia.  
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53 While we want to address our struggles and attempts to change the dominant practices  
54  
55 concerning motherhood in academia, we simultaneously want to remind that motherhood, as well  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

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2  
3 as being an academic, should be understood and examined within the various settings which we  
4 inhabit (see also Katila, 2019). For example, I, Elizabeth, being a first-time mother, elaborate on  
5 the various processes that imposed the identity of a particular role of mother onto me. Not being  
6 used to uninvited advice and statements such as “I assume you will want to spend more time  
7 with other mothers now to chat about raising children” really exemplified that I was now a  
8 different person to the world. My personal experiences and contemplations lead me to believe  
9 that ~~in spite of~~ despite normative and societal commitments to gender equality, the role of the  
10 mother continues to be dominated by gendered discourses making claims to women’s bodies,  
11 time and experiences. “My experiences are the same” (Helena). “However, I have been  
12 extremely puzzled by the contradictory expectations held by society and academia. Whereas the  
13 societal discourses assume us to take on entirely new identities as we become mothers, my  
14 experience with academia is almost the contrary; it is as if we are expected to carry out as normal  
15 (Low and Damian Martin, 2019). This seems to be in line with the neoliberal ideology which  
16 incites women to foster a happy work-life balance and views us personally responsible for  
17 organizing the competing demands (Rottenberg, 2018; Yoong, 2020).

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38 Indeed, identity work discusses the interplay of our understanding of the self within the  
39 larger societal context (Haynes, 2008; 2011). Just like the debate within management and  
40 organization studies (MOS) engages in the various ontological and epistemological frameworks  
41 of what constitutes the individual (e.g. Alvesson, 2010; Knights and Clarke, 2017), we both  
42 observed that we feel a similar tension within ourselves. What is it exactly that makes ‘me’? For  
43 example, I, Elizabeth, felt completely unfamiliar to myself, as if looking at myself from the  
44 outside after my daughter was born. In stable life circumstances our understanding of ourselves  
45 is mostly unproblematic. It is during times of ruptures that our self-identity is questioned and  
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3 becomes a point of re-examination (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Is this what is happening  
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5 to me due to the changing personal and social context since becoming a mother? Giddens (1991)  
6  
7 describes self-identity in terms of “the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of  
8  
9 her or his biography” (p. 53). Becoming a mother became a challenge in the coherent  
10  
11 construction of my biography. It is only through the intellectual deconstruction of my  
12  
13 experiences that unraveled post-birth that I was finally able to make sense of my identity crisis  
14  
15 and as such rebuild my own narrative about who I was.  
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20         Alvesson (2010) uses the metaphor of ‘stencil’ to describe the Foucault-inspired  
21  
22 approach that views identity as impacted, almost predetermined, by discourses. “The subject  
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24 copies (or is copied by) a template in the identity construction” (Alvesson, 2010, p. 206). This  
25  
26 approach views our identity as ‘put in place’ by the accompanying contextual norms, thus  
27  
28 pointing to external powers in identity construction (Alvesson, 2010, Brewis, 2001; Haynes,  
29  
30 2008). We both view societal norms and practices as important mechanisms that negotiate the  
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32 perception and the construction of ourselves.  
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36         The contributions of this paper are to shed light on the complexities of the various  
37  
38 concepts of ‘motherhood’ working mothers encounter in academia. This paper goes beyond a  
39  
40 traditional analysis of structural barriers within institutions that women face upon becoming  
41  
42 mothers, to include consideration of societal discourses employed in the creation of motherhood  
43  
44 norms. This paper discusses the pressures to conform to and ways to resist imposed identity-  
45  
46 making of the hegemonic normative societal and organizational (in our case academic) standards  
47  
48 affecting women who suddenly become branded as ‘mothers’. Our narratives will show that  
49  
50 much of our experience ties in and is affected by the neoliberal academia (Huopalainen and  
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52 Satama, 2019; Lund and Tienari, 2019) as well as the neoliberal and postfeminist cultural  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

discourses surrounding women, motherhood and femininity (Lewis *et al.*, 2017; Rottenberg, 2018).

We first examine how motherhood is constructed in working life and academia. Second, we discuss autoethnography as the research methodology for this work. This method allows us to tell of our personal experiences and elaborate on their relation to the wider social context (Boje and Tyler, 2009; van Amsterdam, 2015). In the further part of this paper, we identify some of the discursive practices that subjugate mothers to conform to particular norms in order to fulfill the role of the ‘good-mother’ as well as feed mothers the discourse of career-denial due to child-rearing. We also reflect how our body played an important role in our struggles within contemporary constructions of motherhood (Foucault, 1995). Finally, we discuss possibilities of resistance to the various imposed roles we experienced as working academics.

**Working mothers and academic motherhood**

Research indicates that social norms and institutional regulations play an important role in women’s and new mothers’ workforce experiences. For example, there are still notions of women as being less-work oriented than men after having children. This in turn constructs an image of women as less committed to their careers (Ruitenbergh, 2014; Stead and Elliott, 2009). Further, women continue to be viewed as the primary care-takers of children and are assumed to reduce their workload once they become a parent. They are assumed not to be able to balance home duties with their work duties (Schnurr *et al.*, 2020). Women continue to be paid less than men and are underrepresented in senior-level positions (Gatrell *et al.*, 2017; Schnurr, 2020).

Van Amsterdam (2015) speaks of the ‘othering’ process of women who become mothers—the maternal body constitutes an abnormality, an out of the norm element, in the



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2  
3 context of the professional organization. Women's "ability to procreate, their pregnancy,  
4 breastfeeding and childcare are treated as 'suspect', stigmatized and used as grounds for control  
5 and exclusion" (Acker, 2003, p. 56). The maternal body is viewed as a deviation of the norm and  
6 as such in inferior terms, as a disruptive element. This leads to stigmatization, hostility and  
7 exclusion of pregnant women and new mothers in organizations (Gatrell, 2011; Hennekam *et al.*,  
8 2019); or in Wolkowitz' (2006) words as the "erasure of the female reproductive body at work"  
9 (p. 91). The 'maternal body' (Gatrell, 2011) is a very visible site especially during pregnancy and  
10 breast feeding and constitutes a deviation from the prevailing masculine organizational standard.  
11 It is thus normative gendered ideologies that continue to limit women's opportunities in their  
12 careers (Gatrell, 2011; Gatrell *et al.*, 2017; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019; Schnurr *et al.*, 2020)  
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27           Within academia, such othering effects affect women and mothers. For example, studies  
28 from Finnish business schools evince how neoliberal requirements within the new international  
29 and market-oriented realities individuate academic work, futures, and identities in ways that  
30 purport gendered effects (Lund and Tienari, 2019). Prior research has addressed how academic  
31 mothers struggle to combine family with academic career (Thun, 2020; Wolf-Wendel and Ward,  
32 2015). Thun's (2020) study on Norwegian academic mothers illustrates how requirements for  
33 international mobility, working outside office hours to make up for time spent with their  
34 families, and stereotypes concern women. Academic mothers struggle to combine the multiple  
35 roles and responsibilities they have with the academic expectancy of devotion and long work-  
36 hours (Lund, 2012). The ideal worker norms embedded in academia are particularly precarious  
37 for tenure-track women with children (Armenti, 2004; Gilbert *et al.*, 2020; Huppatz *et al.*, 2019;  
38 Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015). Academic women feel the pressure to work even on their family  
39 leave to portray themselves as good professionals, and secure employability in the future  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

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3 (Ollilainen, 2019). Huppatz et al. (2019) also discuss how women's laboring practices during  
4 family leaves are produced as self-disciplining responses to the neoliberal expectations of  
5 academia. In the context of mothering and being an academic, both family and the academy are  
6 viewed as 'greedy institutions' (e.g. Currie *et al.*, 2000), reflecting the demands to perform  
7 particular roles in each of these domains.  
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16 Research from various countries present similar findings concerning the neoliberal,  
17 capitalist academia in which norms such as productivity and competitiveness marginalize women  
18 academics with children both ideologically and in practice. Isgro and Castañeda (2015) examine  
19 women academics at US colleges and universities which privilege childless organizational  
20 members who can better respond to the increased corporatization of the globalized academia.  
21  
22 Armenti (2004) discusses childbearing strategies of Canadian women professors who either hide  
23 their pregnancies or have children during the summer break so as not to endanger their prospects  
24 of being tenured. Academics are viewed as human capital whose value is determined by their  
25 ability to produce intellectual work. Such an organization leaves little room for 'unproductive'  
26 childbearing (Goncalves, 2019). Heijstra et al. (2017) discuss academia as a gendered institution  
27 in which power positions are held by men seniors while the lower ranking positions are occupied  
28 by women who spend their time and productivity on 'academic housework', further reinforcing  
29 their marginalized position within the institution. Similarly, Knights and Richards (2003) write  
30 about the gendered UK academia in which values such as competitiveness and productivity are  
31 considered variables of success, reinforcing a masculine normative value system of the 'good  
32 academic'. Such norms are then maintained by men seniors, resulting in occupational  
33 segregation where women are overly represented in lower ranking positions.  
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3 The ideas of how one is to thrive in academia *and* as a mother are both constituted around  
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5 powerful sets of discursive ideals. These require women to constantly create themselves within  
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7 the dominant discourses. Not surprisingly, a great body of literature has focussed upon this  
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9 identity work and everyday struggle of combining academic career and motherhood, using  
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11 autoethnographic methodology (e.g., Amsler and Motta, 2019; Yoo, 2020; Huopainen and  
12  
13 Satama, 2019; Schriever, 2021). Amsler and Motta (2019) talk about the challenges of meeting  
14  
15 the expected work routines of the neoliberal university, and how the physical presence of their  
16  
17 kids negatively affects their image as professionals. Yoo (2020) describes how she experienced  
18  
19 the struggles to meet up the social expectations of a devoted mother, to hide the physical signs of  
20  
21 her pregnant body, and to keep her foothold in academia. Huopainen and Satama (2019)  
22  
23 similarly discuss how they juggle between the realities and expectations of motherhood and their  
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25 scholarly endeavors as young PhD students, and mothers. They bring forth the opportunities to  
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27 resist dominant discourses, illustrated by their habit of bringing their babies along to academic  
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29 conferences.  
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36 Literature has well established the various othering effects of academia's neoliberal,  
37  
38 patriarchal culture on women and mothers (e.g. Armenti, 2004; Castañeda and Isgro, 2013;  
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40 Goncalves, 2019; Heijstra et al., 2017; Knights and Richards, 2003; Wolf-Wendel and Ward,  
41  
42 2015). The othering effects that are especially relevant to our experiences are related to the  
43  
44 societal and institutional discourse of the disembodied worker where the maternal body is neither  
45  
46 acknowledged nor accommodated. Gilbert et al. (2020) speak of academia as an organization  
47  
48 that "devalues mothering through the reification of a disembodied masculinised worker" (p. 5).  
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50 The various experiences and thought processes presented in this paper reflect such internalized  
51  
52 othering effects on us as academic mothers.  
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## Autoethnography

### *The method*

Autoethnography is a form of describing socio-cultural phenomena through personal reflections and experiences that allow a deeper, personal perspective of the particular subject matter (Ellis, 2004; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011; Jamjoom, 2021; van Amsterdam, 2015). In an autoethnography, the researcher is also the subject of the study of a particular social context (Boje and Tyler, 2009; Huopalainen and Satama, 2019). In our paper, we, as academic mothers, reflect on our personal experiences and emotional processes of motherhood within the context of academia, illustrating through personal insights some of the discursive structures which academic mothers face within academia, and beyond. As such, Writing an autoethnographic paper became both “process and product” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 273). ~~This method~~ Our autoethnography allowed ~~eds~~ a back and forth between ~~subjectivity~~ our subjective experiences and ~~obje~~ concrete societal obstacles ~~tivity~~, between intellectual engagement with social phenomena and emotional processing of the observed, between the personal and the cultural (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Holman Jones’ et al. (2013) offer a convincing interpretation of what accounts for autoethnographic work in comparison to other personal accounts, which well resonates with us. First, A ~~an~~ autoethnography should purposefully comment on or critique a cultural phenomenon. Second, ; ~~it~~ an autoethnography should make a contribution to existing research on the particular topic. This paper contributes to exist ~~entting~~ research on working (and academic) mothers by highlighting some of the othering effects we experienced; thus, offering a societal critique of the struggles women face upon becoming mothers. Third, ; ~~the~~ researchers should embrace vulnerability by offering their personal voice; and, fourth, an autoethnography ~~it~~ should create a dialogue with readers in the process of writing about the

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2  
3 particular phenomenon under study. In this paper, we expose various moments as academic  
4 mothers that show our perceived weaknesses, insecurities, and frustrations. By showing our  
5 emotional vulnerabilities, we wanted to bring our personal experiences to life ~~what we~~  
6 experienced and connect with readers on an emotional level. It is our hope that our  
7 autoethnographic paper encourages readers to continue the conversation on the experiences of  
8 working (academic) mothers.  
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17 Departing from the 'conventional' academic writing style, there are various  
18 autoethnographic papers within MOS reflecting personal experiences on various organizational  
19 phenomena, such as motherhood and work (e.g. Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; van  
20 Amsterdam, 2015); miscarriage and the workplace (e.g. Porschitz and Siler, 2017), or working in  
21 the academia (e.g. Boje and Tyler, 2009; Doloriert and Sambrook, 2011; Jamjoom, 2021;  
22 Learmonth and Humphreys, 2011; Fernando, Reveley, and Learmonth, 2020).  
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31 Concerning the ~~particular autoethnographic~~ autoethnographic method, Doloriert and  
32 Sambrook (2011) discuss three epistemological approaches. The evocative approach is  
33 emotionally laden, expressing heartfelt, painful and often distressing narratives of the subject.  
34 The reader is invited to feel the feelings of the authors and to view the world from their  
35 perspective (Ellis and Bochner, 2011; Winkler, 2018). The analytical approach proposed by  
36 Anderson (2006) requires the following of particular analytical conventions to capture objective,  
37 observable phenomena, since one of the limitations of evocative autoethnography is the  
38 subjective interpretation of the researcher. It is worth mentioning that Anderson's views on clear  
39 distinctions of what proper autoethnography constitutes have evolved over time. In Anderson  
40 and Glass-Coffin (2013), Anderson writes that he now holds a more nuanced view with regards  
41 to clear methodological distinctions of autoethnographies. "I've become convinced that the  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

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3 modes and key features of autoethnographic inquiry are similar no matter where along the  
4 spectrum from ‘evocative’ [...] to ‘analytical’” (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 64). The  
5  
6 third approach is autoethnography with a political agenda addressing some of the power issues  
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8 within society. Such autoethnographies “democratize the representational sphere of culture by  
9  
10 locating the particular experiences of individuals in a tension with dominant expressions of  
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12 discursive power” (Neumann, 1996, p.189). An example of such work would be Jamjoom’s  
13  
14 (2021) account of being othered within the colonialist frameworks of academia. Ultimately,  
15  
16 autoethnographies can serve as pieces of social justice and forms of resistance by contesting the  
17  
18 status quo (Jamjoom, 2021; Winkler, 2018). These above outlined approaches are not exclusive  
19  
20 to each other and various authors apply a blend of these approaches in their autoethnographies  
21  
22 (e.g. Fernando *et al.*, 2020; Huopainen and Satama, 2019; Jamjoom, 2021), ~~this work included.~~

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26 This paper also blendsincorporates the approaches outlined above. We present our emotional  
27  
28 reflections and narratives to capture the drastic event of becoming a mother. It encompasses a  
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30 theoretically informed analysis to shed light on the discursive practices within the prevailing  
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32 motherhood discourses. Hence, we made deliberate choices between personal revelations and  
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34 embedding them within theoretical elaborations (Anderson and Glass-Coffin, 2013; Winkler,  
35  
36 2018), thus balancing between the “auto” and the “ethno”. Finally, we believe, that by discussing  
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38 our own vulnerabilities as academic mothers, we can make visible different forms of persisting  
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40 gender inequalities in academia.

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47 While there is various criticism towards autoethnography as a valid research method,  
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49 ranging from being ‘lazy’ (Delamont, 2007), biased, egocentric (Roth, 2008), and self-indulgent  
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51 (Winkler, 2018), we agree with -proponents of the autoethnographic method- that one’s personal  
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53 experience on a particular cultural phenomenon can shed light on some of the societal  
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phenomena that might appear foreign or abstract to outsiders. For us two, autoethnography offers a way to make our personal experiences visible, and visible and engage in dialogue with our readers (Holman Jones et al. ,2013).

~~This paper blends the approaches outlined above. We present our emotional reflections and narratives to capture the drastic event of becoming a mother. It encompasses a theoretically informed analysis to shed light on the discursive practices within the prevailing motherhood discourses. Hence, we made deliberate choices between personal revelations and embedding them within theoretical elaborations (Anderson and Glass Coffin, 2013; Winkler, 2018), thus balancing between the “auto” and the “ethno”.~~

### *Research context*

To understand our experiences of becoming and being mothers, it is important to provide some insights about our contexts. We are both female academics in the Global North, both employed by universities in our respective countries. Elizabeth lives in Canada, working as a tenure-track Assistant Professor. Within the academic context, it remains debatable if having a child while on tenure-track was an advisable choice, and certainly a question visible on the faces of some of my colleagues when I told them I would be having a child. The ‘publish or perish’ mentality of the neo-liberal academia contributes to my conflicting feelings of how much contemporary academic structures should impact your personal life choices. In spite of such doubts, I consider my position as privileged. I was able to put my tenure-track on hold for one year and my decision to take a 12 month maternity leave was met with institutional and collegial support. My work environment combined with Canada’s parental leave regulations definitely mitigated the struggles I experienced post-birth as I felt financially secure and institutionally

## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

1 supported. Having talked with various female academic colleagues, I know that many experience  
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3 serious work-related challenges, such as lack of support and even hostility, when they decide to  
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5 have children.  
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9  
10 Helena lives in Finland, currently working on the final year of her externally funded, three-year  
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12 postdoctoral project. I have not secured a tenure-track position, and I therefore live under the  
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14 constant need to prepare new funding applications, or secure employment through other means,  
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16 such as fixed-time contracts in academia. My first child was born 1.5 years after I had received  
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18 my doctorate. During my maternity leave I had relocated, and when given the opportunity to take  
19  
20 a fixed-term teaching position at my new hometown, I began part-time work after 10 months  
21  
22 maternity leave. During my second pregnancy I received competitive funding for three-years. I  
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24 postponed the beginning of my project until our second child was 11 months. Living in Finland  
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26 is privileged in many terms; taking a year off from work is financially sustainable, and state-  
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28 subsidized daycare offers good opportunities for return for work. Yet, I would never have been  
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30 able to anticipate the new worries that I was forced to deal with, trying to secure an academic  
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32 career, and to live up to the societal expectations of mothering. And nothing could have prepared  
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34 me for the expectations I put on myself.  
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*Research process*

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44 The data for this paper was acquired through note taking, our individual interpretations of  
45  
46 our experiences and new insights born out of our joint conversations reflecting on our  
47  
48 motherhood experiences. Elizabeth took notes during the first 18 months following the birth of  
49  
50 her child, reflecting on the impact of the discursive processes and the identity struggles emerging  
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52 from the new reality of motherhood. While writing up the first draft of this paper, Elizabeth  
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3 relied on notes from the journal as “data” for this paper (Chang, 2013; Winkler, 2018) to avoid  
4  
5 hindsight biases and distortions. In hindsight, it is evident from my notes that my personal  
6  
7 experiences of motherhood are very much intertwined with my convictions (Elizabeth). I  
8  
9 observed myself, then tried to make sense of these processes based on the view of the world that  
10  
11 I had. My thoughts kept going to Foucault and how reality is discursively constructed. The  
12  
13 bodily (and extreme) experiences of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood prompted me to  
14  
15 search for answers in Foucault’s (1995) elaborations on society and how the body is the field on  
16  
17 which societal discourses are enacted. This Foucauldian interpretation of what was happening to  
18  
19 me in turn further shaped how I perceived and interpreted my new reality of being a mother. My  
20  
21 ideological stance, which became more Foucauldian and more feminist over time, in turn  
22  
23 affected my note taking during that process. Ultimately, the data collection process and the  
24  
25 theoretical elaborations can be viewed as a circular process, one informing the other.  
26  
27  
28  
29

30  
31 Helena joined the paper project by Elizabeth’s invitation in a phase where Elizabeth had  
32  
33 already written the first version of the paper. Prior to this project, we had never written together,  
34  
35 but we were connected through an international doctoral consortium and the academic network  
36  
37 surrounding this event that was organized on a yearly basis. In addition to having participated in  
38  
39 the consortium on a couple of different occasions, we had learnt to know each other on a more  
40  
41 personal level when Helena spent six months in Canada, sharing the office space with Elizabeth.  
42  
43 During that time, we developed close relations and chatted about our personal lives, which at that  
44  
45 time did not involve children. It was 7 years since we last saw each other in Canada, and while  
46  
47 the starting point was as simple as Elizabeth reconnecting through a mutual network and history,  
48  
49 we soon realized that writing this paper would not be simply a ‘convenience’ of two academic  
50  
51 mothers writing about gender, but immediately seemed to open an array of experiences, that  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

1  
2  
3 encompassed similar struggles over identity within the neoliberal motherhood ideals, and  
4  
5 masculinist academia.  
6

7  
8 When Helena joined this paper project, we had never discussed our motherhood  
9  
10 experiences before. It became quite an eye-opening experience to exchange our experiences of  
11  
12 becoming mothers as early-career academics. Indeed, when Elizabeth asked if I wanted to join  
13  
14 the project, I was immediately on board, and my mind started buzzing as I started memorizing  
15  
16 my own experiences. I decided to write down vignettes of the episodes, events, internal identity  
17  
18 struggles, and emotions. Thereafter, we further utilized the memory work method (Fraser and  
19  
20 Michell, 2015), which allowed us to interpret our individual experiences through collective  
21  
22 reflection and theorization. We learnt that some of our experiences were surprisingly similar.  
23  
24 Yet, we also wanted to address the individual stories and the unique ways in which we had lived  
25  
26 the different themes. In what follows, we depict our experiences through polyvocal narratives  
27  
28 (see also Peticca-Harris, 2019) that shows in tandem how our experiences are on one part  
29  
30 similar, and yet unique in shedding light on how academic motherhood resonates with our own  
31  
32 life paths. Thus, while we found common threads in our journeys, we chose to represent each of  
33  
34 our individual vignettes. During our theorization of the findings, we wanted to make visible how  
35  
36 our selves as mothers, academics, and academic mothers entangle in multiple ways.  
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### 45 **Disciplinary practices in the construction of motherhood**

#### 46 *The good mother versus the productive academic*

47  
48  
49 *I am incapable of leaving my child with anyone, even my closest relatives for longer than*  
50  
51 *1 or 2 hours. It is not that my child is not doing well, it is me who suffers; even*  
52  
53 *physically. The urge to want to constantly have my child around me is overwhelming. At*  
54  
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1  
2  
3 *the same time, I am obsessively counting all the hours I spend on house duties and baby*  
4 *care as hours lost to writing, to getting papers published, to widen my horizons*  
5  
6 *academically. I am horrified; both for not spending all of my time with my baby and at*  
7  
8 *the same time for not sacrificing enough time for my career. (Elizabeth)*  
9

10  
11  
12 Reflecting back at what I wrote, the extract above illustrates the degree to which I was  
13  
14 torn between the 'good mother' discourse and the 'career woman' discourse. The pressure to  
15  
16 'publish or perish' within the neoliberal academia (Huopainen and Satama, 2019; Knight,  
17  
18 2002), as well as my own career ambitions clash with my expectations of being always available  
19  
20 to my child to feel like a good mother. Within contemporary discourses on motherhood, societal  
21  
22 pressures are wide-ranged and vary according to the context. For example, women might feel  
23  
24 pressured to breastfeed to be perceived as good mothers (Huopainen and Satama, 2019). I  
25  
26 personally remember the shame with which I would take out formula bottles to feed my child  
27  
28 when I was in public. The mother-identity forces us to conform to some rules to behave  
29  
30 'properly' as a mother should behave. For academic mothers, these external expectations seem  
31  
32 particularly exacerbating.  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 *The first maternity leave was particularly challenging, I recall. Both in my family, and in*  
41  
42 *my partner's family, maternity leave was paralleled with total breakaway and absence*  
43  
44 *from work. Family members and friends typically assumed that I would spend a minimum*  
45  
46 *of two years as a stay-at-home mom. In particular, my decision, and one might say*  
47  
48 *obsession to keep working during the leave, was difficult to justify. Especially, when the*  
49  
50 *requirements are more or less faceless. While my academic community gave no such*  
51  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

1  
2  
3 *advice that I should work during maternity leave, it was still embedded in the embodied*  
4  
5 *knowledge of the neoliberal university discourse. (Helena)*  
6

7  
8 My narrative above is indicative of my own struggles between the contradicting messages  
9  
10 from society and my work context. I felt like I was assumed to quit working full-time  
11  
12 (Ruitenbergh, 2014), and invited to abandon all other identities besides that of being a mother  
13  
14 (Hager, 2011; Miller, 2005). However, departing from work was at odds with performing my  
15  
16 academic identity according to its neoliberal pressures (Huppertz et al., 2019).  
17  
18

19 To conform to the norms of the productive worker who always performs, we felt we had  
20  
21 to compensate for time 'lost' to childcare.  
22

23  
24 *My spouse is at work and I am alone with the baby, who, from what I've been told,*  
25  
26 *evidently is not like other babies - she sleeps only in small fractions, napping less than an*  
27  
28 *hour. I feel betrayed. I've never been much of a sleeper, but I've tightened my rhythm.*  
29  
30 *Each morning I rush to my laptop even as early as 5 am. If I'm lucky I can write for an*  
31  
32 *hour. During the day I use every spare minute to continue my text. Each time she cries to*  
33  
34 *call for my attention I feel frustrated. I feel ashamed of the thought that too often passes*  
35  
36 *my mind 'Please don't you wake up just yet'. But when she does, I yell 'Mom's coming'.*  
37  
38 *Sometimes my voice is pretentiously preppy. I wonder if she notices. (Helena)*  
39  
40  
41

42 Living through these experiences, I have come to realize that I had no idea how to be an  
43  
44 academic mother. I first became a mother a year and a half after having received my doctorate. I  
45  
46 share the experiences of other academic mothers working while their kids are still sleeping or  
47  
48 babies napping (Thun, 2020, Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2015; Schriever, 2021). However,  
49  
50 contrary to some of these fellow women academics who describe the academic and home life as  
51  
52 "intricately interwoven" (Schriever, 2021, p. 1968), my 'academic time' in these in-between  
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3 moments of mothering seem never quite enough. I seem to fail in what some Finnish women  
4 academics reported in Ollilainen's (2019) study on how they refused this type of necessity to  
5 work and refrained from advancing their research while on family leave. On the other hand,  
6 literature on Finnish professionals has indicated how Finnish women's career aspirations  
7 continue to be affected by double strivings, as women try to live up to organisational and social  
8 pressures (Niemistö *et al.*, 2021). Even though there were other female academics with children  
9 in my organization, it seems that none of them were vocal about how to combine research,  
10 career, and the baby. I have come to learn that the fine-line of participation, contributing to  
11 research, and simultaneous expectancy of fully committed to home are an individual effort. I  
12 have found the jargon that I also self participate in, rather useless. How often do we let our  
13 mothers-to-be colleagues know that they can just relax, be with the baby (while I guess most of  
14 us know that it's an impasse)? Such luxury only exists in our imagination. At the same time, we  
15 noticed that we self-internalized the tale of the mother who is now falling behind in her career  
16 because of her baby.

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33  
34  
35 *I had just begun my three-year project with high expectations and was working full steam*  
36 *with data collection when Covid-19 hit. Just a month before I was about to pack my*  
37 *family on a plane to take care of the international mobility period that was an essential*  
38 *part of my research project, all plans had to be cancelled. All the work I had done - my*  
39 *partner had just taken time off from work to look after the kids, both grandparents had*  
40 *arranged to visit us to help with childcare, and now all had to be cancelled. My family*  
41 *members see no trouble in the situation - rather they greet it with gratitude and relief*  
42 *'You might not have to go at all, if the Pandemic goes on', they say. They just don't see*  
43 *the point, I think. 'But I want to go, and I NEED to go'. My biggest fear is that I might*  
44  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

1  
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3 *never find the chance again. My eldest will begin pre-school and it's taken incredibly*  
4 *much planning to arrange for everything - my list sounds silly, but I worry literally about*  
5 *everything. 'What if I won't be able to find a safe place for the family to live, what if my*  
6 *spouse gets all sick and tired of talking about this (even when he assures that he's still*  
7 *committed to the trip)'. I'm not sure I have the strength to do that again. I'm afraid we'll*  
8 *never go. And then I might never become anything. (Helena)*  
9

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However dark these thoughts may seem, they are my reality. And it's a reality that rarely gets spoken about when you apply for funding. You don't hear people say that they are afraid, or that they have difficulty combining work with family. International mobility requirements can be a strain on academic mothers (Thun, 2020). Yet, for me the biggest strain is not even how I find myself keeping up with the neoliberal expectations, taking personal responsibility to organize the competing demands (Huppertz et al., 2019; Rottenberg, 2018; Yoong, 2020), it is rather the fear of not becoming the academic I want to be. I realize that my momentum may have already passed, the 'make it or break it' window of opportunity has closed.

For me, Elizabeth, statements such as "You can forget going to conferences once you have the baby" or "The baby brain is a real thing" messed with my head and created self-fulfilling prophecies. My imaginations of what was possible for me in my career started to shrink. I remember self-censoring to make sure that no one at work attributed any of my 'failings' to me now having a baby. Late for a deadline? Sick at home? Missed another meeting? I became paranoid about not committing any of those 'sins' mentioned above so that no one could perceive these as due to motherhood. Similarly, the previously discussed lack of entitlement of mothers to career advancement (Gatrell and Cooper, 2016) really struck a nerve with me as it confirmed my self-censoring thoughts about my own career; an inner conflict and

1  
2  
3 an inner dialogue that my equally ambitious male spouse never experienced. These are some of  
4  
5 the examples of the self-imposed othering that become self-internalizing.  
6

7  
8 Butler (1988) discusses how gender is performed through a repetition of stylized acts  
9  
10 such as gestures, movements and enactments which “constitute the illusion of an abiding  
11  
12 gendered self” (p. 519). Such stylized acts are historically determined, and the actors come to  
13  
14 believe in these acts as the appropriate modes of performance. Concerning academic  
15  
16 motherhood, the various societal norms discussed above constitute such stylized performative  
17  
18 enactments through which the gendered motherhood discourse is deployed.  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

#### 24 *The maternal body*

25  
26 *Ah all the comments I received about my body since becoming pregnant and having my*  
27  
28 *child. From “You look really good for being 7 months pregnant”, the unprovoked “Don’t*  
29  
30 *worry you will lose the baby weight in no time”, to the “You almost look the same as*  
31  
32 *before pregnancy”, it seems that my body is the field on which my motherhood is*  
33  
34 *enacted. It seems that the imposition to self-sensor and to conform to particular beauty*  
35  
36 *standards do not stop for new mothers. Expressions such as “yummy mummy” well*  
37  
38 *reflect the symbolic ideal of the physically appealing mother who has it all together 5*  
39  
40 *minutes after giving birth. (Elizabeth)*  
41  
42  
43

44  
45 For Foucault (1984), the body is the surface on which power is exercised. The above-  
46  
47 mentioned extract well reflects the power of a particular maternal body discourse and how it is  
48  
49 exercised on my own body. The body is the primal vehicle through which the external is  
50  
51 experienced. For example, the time and place we are born, into which social class, and into  
52  
53 which family will have a crucial effect on what our bodies will experience, such as genetic  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

1  
2  
3 predispositions, particular lifestyle or certain socio-economic and political environment one is  
4  
5 subjected to (e.g. Foucault 1984; 1990; 1995). The image of the “yummy mummy” reflects the  
6  
7 discourse of the maternal body subjugated to comply with norms of skinniness and with Western  
8  
9 images of a sexualized femininity (Huopainen and Satama, 2019). The yummy mummy’s body  
10  
11 is docile and fulfills obligations of skinniness, sexual appeal and youthfulness (Huopainen and  
12  
13 Satama, 2019). These societal pressures dominate many of the contemporary discourses  
14  
15 surrounding femininity; for example, postfeminist sensibility calls upon women to celebrate their  
16  
17 beauty and motherhood (Lewis *et al.*, 2017).  
18  
19  
20

21  
22 I remember the excruciating fear of going back to work not having achieved my goal of  
23  
24 the pre-pregnancy body. How would my colleagues perceive me? What would students think of  
25  
26 my new body?  
27

28  
29 *I have turned my own gaze upon myself and obsess over my maternal body. No need to be*  
30  
31 *told anymore how I am doing with ‘getting back into shape’; I am my own strictest judge.*  
32  
33 *(Elizabeth)*  
34

35  
36 Within the organizational context as well, the motherly body is subjected to discursive  
37  
38 organizational practices and turned docile. The concept of “maternal body work” (Gatrell, 2013,  
39  
40 p. 622) refers to the process of mothers managing the dual (bodily) duties of maternal care while  
41  
42 at the same time complying with organizational, and masculine, norms of professionalism within  
43  
44 the workplace. The maternal body experiences the conflict of two contrasting discourses: the  
45  
46 discourse on prioritizing prenatal and infant care to correspond to societal standards of good  
47  
48 mothering.  
49  
50

51  
52 Depending on the social context, the mothering discourse demands of women to  
53  
54 prioritize prenatal and infant care by controlling all aspects of the maternal body such as diet,  
55  
56  
57  
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1  
2  
3 rest, movement and lifestyle (Gatrell, 2013, van Amsterdam, 2015); reflecting Foucault's (1995)  
4  
5 elaborations on the control of the body through particular discourses. I remember how I,  
6  
7 Elizabeth, was always surprised that my prenatal care physician never asked me about my  
8  
9 availability for the next checkup. She just simply told me when to show up again, not caring if I  
10  
11 have to commit my time to an employer or not. A more traumatizing bodily experience was  
12  
13 when a couple of hours after giving birth, the hospital nurse violently grabbed my breast and  
14  
15 pressed my baby against it in an effort to make my daughter eat. Her 'professional knowledge'  
16  
17 told her to dismiss my objections of pain and my and my baby's cries. She dismissed all of my  
18  
19 bodily alerts and sought to control my and my baby's behaviour according to her expertise. Even  
20  
21 after I insisted on giving my baby formula after 24 hours of hardly eating anything, she  
22  
23 hesitantly complied only after a higher power, a doctor, gave the ok. It was evident that the  
24  
25 current discourse on scientific knowledge and medicalization of the birthing process (Miller,  
26  
27 2005) favoured medical experts in 'molding' my body rather than allowing me to take control  
28  
29 over it.  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34

35  
36 When Elizabeth first asked me to join this paper project, I decided not to read her text  
37  
38 before memorizing my own episodes. Yet, I quickly browsed through the paper and could not  
39  
40 help my eyes catch her description of breastfeeding. Those words could have been mine and  
41  
42 brought back memories of a nurse grasping my first-born like a pup and throwing her with force  
43  
44 on my breast. Or when nurses robbed me of the first eight weeks of happy time with the first  
45  
46 child, forcing me to pump milk every other hour through day and night, in hope of a miracle, and  
47  
48 most phone calls I would receive would be polite, yet repetitive, inquiries whether I had  
49  
50 succeeded to lactate. 'Everyone can do it, you just have to believe it'll work' 'and drink tea'  
51  
52 'stop stressing'. We have both seen the controversy of the discourses offered to us as women -  
53  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

1  
2  
3 while women are invited to be self-assured, and particularly as academics, rely on your own  
4 expertise and judgment, as mothers, we suddenly grow small and helpless.  
5  
6

7  
8 *I don't even remember if there ever was a time when I was given so much unsolicited*  
9  
10 *advice as post-birth. Why do I suddenly appear clueless, fragile and lost? It seems that*  
11 *the trust the world previously had into me to figure out my stuff on my own now vanished.*  
12  
13 *The most mundane procedures such as washing a baby's hair, feeding my child or going*  
14 *for a walk seem to provoke a flood of advice, even from complete strangers. (Elizabeth)*  
15  
16  
17  
18

19 The above extract really reminds me how disempowering it felt at the beginning to be  
20 viewed in the role of a mother. Living in a society that teaches, values and rewards autonomy  
21 and self-determination, is highly individualistic and practices polite social distance between its  
22 citizens, the blatant intrusion into a new mother's affairs caught me off-guard. Suddenly, women  
23 are viewed as incapable and in need of collective guidance now that they are categorized as  
24 mothers. Mothers are perceived primarily as corporeal rather than intellectual due to their  
25 deviation from the masculine norm and hence less trust is given in their intellectual capacities  
26 (Gatrell, 2013; Witz, 2000). Men constitute "generic individuals" (Lehmann, 1994, p. 85) while  
27 women through their ability to give birth constitute the other. "Women are identified with the  
28 physical individual, with the organism: with the body, instinct, and nature. Men [...] are  
29 identified with the social individual, with the personality: with the triumph of mind over body,  
30 morality over instinct, society over nature" (Lehmann, 1994, p. 85). As a result, women self-  
31 monitor to comply with the image of the ideal worker. They hide their maternal bodies at work,  
32 such as physical discomforts during pregnancy, sleep deprivation or downplay their exhaustion,  
33 in order to enact "a professional employee who comports herself appropriately" (Gatrell, 2013, p.  
34 627). Van Amseterdam's (2015) account of her experiences of breast pumping as an employee of  
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3 a Dutch university well reflect the struggle and discomfort of bringing one's maternal body into  
4 the organization and the internal struggles and practices of hiding her maternal signs and self-  
5 monitoring to negotiate between being a good worker and a good mother. To conform to such  
6 organizational norms of the body, new mothers experience their role in organizations as othering  
7 upon their return to work (e.g. Gatrell and Cooper, 2016; Haynes, 2008; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019).  
8  
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### 14 15 16 17 *Resisting the motherhood discourse*

18  
19 *I tell myself many stories about the relationship with my daughter. I jokingly call her 'my*  
20 *very bossy roommate'. I look at how other cultures past and present take care of their*  
21 *children, how they think about them and help them grow. I find a lot of solace in Kahlil*  
22 *Gibran's poem 'On Children'. All of these acts help me to step out of my conditioning*  
23 *about the mother-child relationship for at least a moment, help me to question if a*  
24 *particular truth is the right approach to raising my child and living my life. I am well*  
25 *aware that I am still thinking within the box (of a particular discourse), but maybe I am*  
26 *pushing the boundaries of that box at least a little bit. (Elizabeth)*  
27  
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37  
38 Once I became aware of the fact that motherhood is not a natural state but rather a  
39 discursive role dependent on the particular cultural context (Miller, 2005; Smart, 1996), I started  
40 questioning the prescribed roles mothers, fathers and children are supposed to take on. I asked  
41 myself 'why' or 'why not' an alternative option, an alternative story was not possible? I became  
42 increasingly alert to the social myths of motherhood our society tells and questioned what the  
43 discursive effects of such stories might be?  
44  
45  
46  
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50

51 *I cherish the memory when I talked to my child's nurse during one of my daughter's*  
52 *check-up appointments about how incompatible I felt with the particular role of mother*  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

1  
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3 *expected of me. She told me about her own experience when she became a mother some*  
4  
5 *14 years ago: 'I know that I might have acted crazy after my child's birth. But to this day*  
6  
7 *I am convinced that the others around me acted even crazier with regards to how they*  
8  
9 *treated me.' That conversation gave me a lot of strength because it reassured me that*  
10  
11 *maybe I was not completely off with how I perceived my experiences as a mother and my*  
12  
13 *tensions with the world. (Elizabeth)*  
14  
15

16  
17 Analyzing past societal expectations toward motherhood was also important to  
18  
19 comprehend why a certain image of the mother was being forced upon us. Foucault (1995) called  
20  
21 this the critical ontology of the self; encouraging us to study the past and how it imposed certain  
22  
23 limits on us and to experiment how to go beyond those limits (Brewis, 2004; Foucault, 1997).  
24  
25 Some of the current tension between expectations to excel as mothers and at the same time  
26  
27 women's otherness within the professional world can be understood in the context of gender  
28  
29 changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the industrial revolution. Some of the examples about past  
30  
31 practices in relation to women's productivity outside of the home can be useful in emphasizing  
32  
33 the discursive effects of contemporary motherhood. According to Rich (1995), it was not until  
34  
35 the industrial revolution during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that women's role was reduced to the realm of  
36  
37 home and primary child-caretaker, particularly within the Anglo-Saxon context. Within one  
38  
39 generation, Western Europe had established clear gendered work patterns. The family and home  
40  
41 were now viewed as the refuge from the stressors of economic life with the "sanctification of the  
42  
43 family" as an emotional haven (Stearns, 2007, p. 75). The wife's role became that of the  
44  
45 guardian of home, expected to fulfill the "Angel in the House" narrative, based on Patmore's  
46  
47 (1854) poem of the same name, which glorifies the image of the dutiful wife and mother. This  
48  
49 created the ideal throughout the industrialized world of men as breadwinners, and women as  
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1  
2  
3 home-takers (Crouse-Dick, 2012; Stearns, 2007). Such gendered division gave rise to the  
4  
5 concept of 'separate spheres' with women now enacting their duties in the private spheres while  
6  
7 men were involved in the public spheres of politics and business (Crouse-Dick, 2012).  
8  
9

10 Women's labour participation in connection to the socio-cultural, political and economic  
11  
12 contexts is too vast and beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to emphasize  
13  
14 that patriarchy combined with the dynamics of the industrial revolution played an important part  
15  
16 in creating such gendered binary which continues to be present today. This is illustrated by  
17  
18 various MOS scholars investigating societal and organizational barriers for women and mothers  
19  
20 (e.g. Gatrell and Cooper, 2016; Haynes, 2008; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019; Huopalainen and Satama,  
21  
22 2019; Ruitenbergh, 2014; Stead and Elliott, 2009).  
23  
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25

26 Wheatley (2013) discusses women's entrapment to household duties and childcare which  
27  
28 carries serious career implications. According to the author, women work in closer proximity to  
29  
30 their homes in order to fulfill their assumed home duties and as such remain limited in their  
31  
32 career choices. Only after reading Wheatley's (2013) research did I realize that the thought of  
33  
34 looking for daycare spots close to my spouse's workplace did not even cross my mind; thus  
35  
36 confirming to myself to be carrying the residue of the 'angel in the house' narrative within me.  
37  
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40 Once I genuinely realized that I did not have to conform to all expectations of what  
41  
42 society views as a good mother I started subverting my self-imposed constraints and started  
43  
44 exploring other forms of being and pushing the limits of maternal practice. My resistance was  
45  
46 marked by non-engagement concerning all aspects related to mothering. I became deaf to any  
47  
48 conversations that were based on any form of 'lecturing' me on childcare. I left phone messages  
49  
50 unanswered whenever the topic revolved around unsolicited advice. I sometimes lied about what  
51  
52 my child was actually able to do so as not to hear panicky concerns about what my child's  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

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3 expected developmental milestones were. I refused to allow others to come by anytime just  
4  
5 because I was on maternity leave. Reflecting on our past, both of our experiences are similar to  
6  
7 Huopalainen and Satama's (2019) observations. Becoming a mother can be a transformative  
8  
9 experience that allows for growth in various aspects of one's life, including career. In short,  
10  
11 motherhood can become an act of empowerment. Taking care of my daughter allowed me to re-  
12  
13 evaluate and establish a new relationship with my career and reconcile the various competing  
14  
15 expectations of motherhood and academia I felt imposed on me (Elizabeth).  
16  
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18  
19 *In the last tertiary of my second pregnancy, I was invited to conduct a major revision on*  
20  
21 *a single-authored paper. 'Why now?', I sighed when reading the email. For the first time*  
22  
23 *ever, I decided to ask for an extension. This being my second pregnancy, I knew how*  
24  
25 *hard it might be to work during the first weeks of post-birth. I took pride in the decision*  
26  
27 *to speak out about my situation. Yet, as the new deadline I had myself suggested to the*  
28  
29 *Editor was approaching, I again found myself in the situation of allocating every minute*  
30  
31 *of the precious 'own' time to work. My eldest child spent some hours at the daycare, and*  
32  
33 *these moments I could have wandered purposelessly at shopping centers or done*  
34  
35 *exercise, I instead invited the granny to take the baby for a walk, and the minute they*  
36  
37 *were out the door I'd jump to my computer and start typing. In the end, I got rejected. So*  
38  
39 *why was I doing this? I couldn't help feeling jealousy toward other moms whom I*  
40  
41 *assumed were choosing otherwise. I never rest. (Helena)*  
42  
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46  
47 For me, my attempts to resist, to challenge and negotiate the rules of academic work  
48  
49 entangle with the neoliberal expectations of fostering a happy work-family relation, my mere  
50  
51 awareness of the cultural expectations (and apparently a lived reality for many contemporary  
52  
53 moms), to self-care, project alternative realities that are out of my reach. In my attempt to be the  
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3 academic I want to be, I strive intensely (Huopalainen and Satama, 2019; Cooley and Spicher  
4  
5 Kasdorf, 2008). Yet, it is these discourses that make me so painfully aware of my own failure,  
6  
7 and my 'choice'. The alternative discourses in our society call upon me to rest, to allocate some  
8  
9 time for self-care. But are these really choices after all? Reading from other writings on  
10  
11 academic mothers' juggling and choosing whether to spend time with their families, or grade  
12  
13 assignments, write papers, it seems that the dominant discourse of the neoliberal university really  
14  
15 leaves us with no choice, binding us to the precarious work practices (see also Amsler and Motta,  
16  
17 2019; Huppertz et al., 2019). Or if we choose otherwise, it'll at least leave us with a bad  
18  
19 conscience.  
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23  
24         Indeed, as I find, I have attempted to change some of my work practices. The early  
25  
26 January deadlines to conferences have typically required extensive writing during holidays. Last  
27  
28 year I decided for the first time to unpack my computer as my family and I headed to the  
29  
30 Christmas holiday. I told myself, I need to learn thinking that my papers can wait. My happiness  
31  
32 at the decision was premature, which I guess I knew already when making the decision. At the  
33  
34 dinner table I suddenly envision a scenario: "What if the kids will get sick during the holiday  
35  
36 and they can't go back to daycare in the first week of January. How can I think of having a  
37  
38 holiday? I need to be rational and use my mother's help to look after the kids over the holiday.  
39  
40 It's the only way to ensure I can meet conference deadlines." My spouse, who had work over the  
41  
42 holidays assured me, swearing an oath with an exaggerated voice 'If the kids were to get sick, I  
43  
44 promise I'll stay home to look after them so long that you're done with your papers'. There I  
45  
46 was, again caught in the neoliberal demands of self-responsibilization (Huppertz et al., 2019) and  
47  
48 desperately seeking to arrange for some balance between my work and family.  
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## Discussion and conclusions

This paper describes some of our reflections and experiences of being academic, mothers and academic mothers. We felt compelled to write an autoethnographic piece about our experiences because we believe that these experiences are not lived by ourselves alone and that the present motherhood ideology is shaped by the various discursive practices that promote a particular role of mothers in society, impacted by the various identities we hold, such as ethnicity, religion or culture. If our identity is molded by power relations of particular discourses in the Foucauldian sense, as we believe it is, then it is worthwhile exploring some of these discursive practices on societal level and within organizations to see how such practices contribute to the problems of the particular images of mothers. Our own personal situation is greatly impacted by the various personal circumstances we find ourselves in, such as family involvement, partner support in raising the children, our financial situation, or our satisfaction with our careers before becoming pregnant. For example, research shows that spousal support both emotionally and practically plays a significant role in the success of new mothers' career advancements (e.g. Bröckel, 2018; Heikkinen *et al.*, 2014; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019; Huopalainen and Satama, 2019).

There are various othering mechanisms within the contemporary motherhood discourse that reduce women's identity solely to that of a mother (Hager, 2011; Miller, 2005) and view them as deviations from the masculine norm in the organizational (and academic) setting (e.g. Haynes, 2008; Hennekam *et al.*, 2019; Schurr *et al.*, 2020; van Amsterdam, 2015).

It is important to explore opportunities to subvert some of the practices expected of mothers, such as refusing to hide our maternal bodies at work, challenging the newest



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2  
3 ‘knowledge’ on child raising, or simply having more trust in our own judgements of what feels  
4  
5 right and wrong. Altogether, we have experienced how attempts to perform the ideals of the  
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7 academy and of motherhood, leave us in struggle and a sense of failure (Cooley and Spicher  
8  
9 Kasdorf, 2008). We would also like to draw attention to the silences that surround academic  
10  
11 motherhood. As we have discussed, our own experiences illustrate how academic mothers are  
12  
13 expected to live up to the neoliberal ideals of striving academics, while simultaneously expecting  
14  
15 them to keep personal injury and difficulty within their private spheres. We would like to see  
16  
17 more emphasis on providing mentorship and supervisory support at different stages of the  
18  
19 academic career, where academic mothers’ stories of the difficulties, and strategies for  
20  
21 combining family with academic endeavours would be openly shared, rather than held to oneself.  
22  
23 Similar concerns have been raised by others (Low and Damian Martin, 2019). Isgro and  
24  
25 Castañeda (2015) call for a “culture of care” within academic institutions that accommodates  
26  
27 individuals’ caretaking responsibilities and allows them to thrive within the various contexts of  
28  
29 their lives. For as long as it is up to each struggling mother to decide how far we are willing to  
30  
31 stretch our limits in the pursuit of academic identity, we remain vulnerable within the discourses  
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33 that incite us to endure, to keep with the pace of academia.  
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40  
41 However, it is also important to understand that the sanctions for going against the grain  
42  
43 of the various contemporary motherhood discourses might affect different mothers differently.  
44  
45 Therefore, one’s own experiences to resist will not have the same consequences and sanctions as  
46  
47 that of other mothers who might find themselves in different personal, cultural, social and  
48  
49 economic situations (e.g. Dill, 1988; Glenn *et al.*, 1994; Miller, 2005; Silva, 1996). As discussed,  
50  
51 autoethnography constitutes a unique opportunity to tell vivid and insightful accounts of  
52  
53 contemporary cultural phenomena as experienced by individuals (Winkler, 2018). Writing an  
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## Autoethnography on academic motherhood

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2  
3 autoethnographic piece on motherhood allowed us to capture our personal experiences and how  
4 these experiences are shaped by and reflect contemporary cultural practices. The Canadian and  
5 Finnish settings shaped our struggles against the expectations and ideals prevalent in the Global  
6 North. While our paper has offered a critical perspective on the expectations toward academic  
7 mothers in the Western academia and Western family context, the exploration of motherhood in  
8 other settings is likely to yield other types of experiences.  
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