

From diapers to dissertations: Students' experiences of new motherhood while enrolled in social work doctoral programs

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Abstract

Approximately 13% of doctoral students have children during their studies, and the mothers among them may face particular challenges. These can include time constraints, unsupportive faculty, and a tenure system that often favors women without children and men. As a result, a disproportionate number of young mothers may be leaving doctoral programs prior to completion. The unique perspectives and potential that is lost each time one of these students drops out represents a significant loss to the social work community. The leadership of social work doctoral programs has a responsibility to understand and address experiences and needs of women who are balancing studies and motherhood. This article will use ecological theory and role theory to explore the challenges faced by this group of students. The authors share their own stories, including our struggles and successes in juggling motherhood and our doctoral studies. Suggestions for ways in which social work doctoral programs can become more family-friendly will be offered.

We had conference calls with our dissertation committees while caring for sick babies at home. We pumped breast milk between classes in professors' offices. We worked on our dissertations during nap time, fighting through the fatigue of new motherhood just to put a sentence a together. We struggled to balance the demands of doctoral education, our work as clinical social workers, and the adjustment to life with new babies. We are among the 13% of doctoral students who become parents by the time they graduate (Mason, 2009).

In the United States, the average age of a mother is 27.4 years (National Center for Health Statistics, 2010). This figure roughly overlaps with data about applicants and enrolled students in social work doctoral programs; most applicants are women between 26 and 30 years old, and most enrolled students are also women between 31 and 40 years old (Council on Social Work Education, 2011). While statistics on gender and age are available, few other characteristics about social work doctoral students are known (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009), such as whether or not they identify as parents.

Two studies have explored how long social work doctoral students took to complete their degrees (Crayton, 2005; Liechty, Liao, & Schull, 2009). Both found that family needs and constraints cause a shift in students' priorities and necessitate more time to completion. Nearly 50% of social work doctoral students never graduate (Liechty et al., 2009). While data is not available regarding why students leave, it is plausible that new motherhood may be a reason for some individuals. In addition to retention and completion time, there are a variety of ways in which family-related factors may have an impact on students' experiences in doctoral programs.

The challenges facing mothers who are pursuing their doctorates in social work remains largely unexplored, although much has been written about the broader issue of mothers in academia.

Mothers in Academia

Timing Matters

Family formation can have a powerful impact on the career trajectory of women in academia. Mason and Goulden (2002) shared findings from their ongoing longitudinal study of academics in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. They found a large and persistent “baby gap.” Women who do not have children tend to achieve tenured faculty positions, while those with children “make choices that force them to leave the academy or put them into the second tier of faculty: the lecturers, adjuncts, and part-time faculty” (para. 5).

The timing of babies also plays a role. Mason & Goulden (2004) used the term “early baby” (p.89) to describe one who is born within five years of the academic parent earning a doctorate. Women who have “early babies” do not advance as far as men who have early babies or women who do not have children or who have later babies. Those years, which represent a crucial step on the path to career establishment, may include the completion of graduate studies, assistant professorships, or postdoctoral positions. Such opportunities are generally characterized by long work hours, high productivity demands, and limited job security (Mason & Goulden, 2002, 2004), which often makes these coveted positions unsustainable for new mothers. The current system is not supportive of women who simultaneously have children and pursue a doctorate.

Impact on the Field of Social Work Education

Individual mothers are not the only ones who are affected when their social work careers stall out. While many disciplines are experiencing an abundance of doctoral graduates, social work does not have enough to meet current faculty needs, despite the rapid growth of social work doctoral programs over the past 25 years (Karger & Stoesz, 2003). The number of women with doctorates has increased in all fields over the past fifty years, and social work has conferred more doctorates to women than all other professional fields combined (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009); nevertheless, a gender disparity persists. Five percent of male social workers and only three percent of female social workers have acquired a doctorate, despite the fact that men represent only a quarter to one-third of all social workers (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006). Furthermore, male social workers also earn more than their female counterparts and hold more administrative positions (Britton & Stoller, 1998). Addressing the loss of female faculty members from the career pipeline is a serious concern, as our leadership should be reflective of the overall social work community as well as social work values.

Social Work Values and Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers’ (2008) *Code of Ethics* outlines several core values and ethical principles that directly relate to new mothers pursuing doctorates. By upholding the value of “dignity and worth of the person,” social workers support individual differences and the right to self-determination (Ethical Principles section, para. 4). Similarly, by valuing the “importance of human relationships,” workers enhance the wellbeing of individuals and families (Ethical Principles section, para. 5). When following the *Code*, workers consider the

individual contexts of their clients and colleagues and tailor their professional behavior accordingly.

Doctoral programs can be guided by the *Code* as well by creating a culture that supports the many and varied relationships in students' lives, both personally and professionally. Differences among students should be acknowledged with dignity and respect, and every effort should be made to support the growth and wellbeing of students who are parents and their families, while still maintaining the standards of the doctoral program. The alternatives—addressing students' needs selectively, considering personal relationships irrelevant, or compartmentalizing parts of a student's self—would not reflect the profession's ethical principles or address the documented gender gap in social work education.

Mothers: An Important Source of Diversity

The importance of valuing and respecting diversity is emphasized throughout the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008). Family status needs to be among the forms of diversity that are acknowledged, welcomed, valued, and supported in schools of social work. It is not difficult to imagine the ways in which our profession would suffer if our leadership were composed of individuals of just one gender, race, or sexual orientation; family structure is no different. Having children is a life experience that changes one's worldview. Who we are affects our scholarship and teaching; faculty with children will approach their work differently from those who have never had children. No perspective is more valuable than the other; we need all of them in order to most deeply and accurately explore and address the needs of our clients, research participants, and students. New mothers hold meaningful perspectives by virtue of their current life stage, as well as their other life experiences and social locations. Each time a young mother must leave an unsupportive doctoral program, the potential of her entire career is lost.

Understanding the Challenges: Ecological Theory and Role Theory

Although each mother will face different challenges in her pursuit of a social work doctoral education, the overall experience of balancing two demanding roles in an intense environment can be more fully understood through the lenses of ecological theory and role theory.

The Environment Matters

Doctoral programs provide a rich environment of resources and opportunities for their students. Ecological theory tells us that people and the environment are in a reciprocal relationship in which each acts on and influences the other in order to achieve the best possible fit. When the relationship has a good fit, an individual is able to make a positive impact on the environment while being sustained by available resources (Germain & Gitterman, 1980). This begs the question of whether academic culture is supportive to mothers such that they will be able to succeed. Rosen (1999) offered this critique of the environment for women in academia:

What kind of tenure cycle would a group of female professors create to insure a balance among childbearing, child-rearing, intellectual life, and university responsibilities? Does anyone think that they would come up with the crackpot idea of seven years right in the middle of a woman's prime childbearing years? (p. A48).

Although most tenure-track mothers are equally invested in their careers and their families (Fothergill & Feltey, 2003), doctoral students with new babies may encounter a range of environmental challenges. These include the scheduling of classes and events in the evenings,

non-existent or minimal leave policies, and financial constraints (Mason, 2009; Young & Wright, 2001). Full-time programs may be too demanding, while part-time programs may not offer enough support. Perhaps most concerning, however, is the literature regarding negative attitudes from administrators, faculty, and colleagues (Williams, 2004). New mothers report feeling as though they cannot talk about their children or the challenges of motherhood at school, and that they have to prove themselves to faculty, even if they were exemplary students prior to having children (Mason, 2009).

The challenges facing new mothers in doctoral programs are not unique to social work, nor are they a new problem. In her 1983 memoir, Michelle Harrison, a divorced mother of a young daughter, described her training to become an obstetrician-gynecologist. Despite securing a rare part-time residency, she was still expected to complete 60-hour weeks and was subjected to colleagues' resentment of her "maternal preoccupations" and part-time status (for which she was given half the pay for two-thirds time). Several decades later, the availability of part-time residencies remains the exception, not the norm. Less than 4% of accredited residency programs offer part-time options, despite an increasing demand from medical students and residents for more flexible options (Croasdale, 2006). Part-time residencies tend to be offered at large institutions with supportive hospital administrators who know that attracting and retaining top candidates requires being more accommodating scheduling.

Some training programs have established informal ways of offering support to students. At the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, a student-run group called Families and Non-Traditional Medical Students provides a sense of community to students and their partners who are trying to juggle multiple demanding responsibilities. The group even provides tangible help, such as cooking meals or running errands, to fellow students after the arrival of a new baby (Smith, 2011).

Using their own experiences as research data, Grenier and Burke (2008) explored how new mothers completed their doctoral studies in the field of adult education. They found a discrepancy between individual and institutional support: "although individuals within our university supported our choices, the institution often times expects family responsibilities to be taken care of without interrupting studies and with very little need for institutional adaptation" (p. 597). They attributed the encouragement and assistance that they received to faculty members' deep understanding of adults' needs and their commitment to "practice what they preach" (p. 598). Given our professional values, social work doctoral students should be able to count on a similar supportive and welcoming environment. Faculty members can help set the tone, especially if they can relate to the dilemmas firsthand. Grenier and Burke noted the particular importance of female faculty members who had lived the dual roles of mother and scholar and could provide reassurance that being "squeezed out" of academia was not inevitable. Within male-dominated environments, female mentors are critically important to female students (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004).

Adjusting to New Roles

In addition to environmental factors, these women must adjust to the duties and expectations of two new roles: doctoral student and new mother, each of which requires specific knowledge and skills to be successful. Some of the necessary behaviors may come intuitively or may approximate the knowledge and skills of other roles. Writing a doctoral-level paper may be similar in many ways to writing papers in a Master's program; being attuned to a baby may echo the ways in which clinicians are present and empathic to partners, friends, or clients. Other

behaviors may be new to a doctoral student and mother, and thus require a steep learning curve. How does one analyze data using multivariate statistics? How does one trim the fingernails on a newborn?

There also are behaviors that involve the intersection both roles, such as the challenge of completing dense readings and writing cogent papers after staying up all night with a fussy baby. These challenges can be described as “role discontinuity,” which refers to the lack of integration between roles that arise in sequential—or in this case, simultaneous—stages (Biddle, 1979). By adjusting to more than one new role at once, these students may experience disequilibrium, stress, and confusion. They lack the benefit of having at least one consistent, familiar role to rely on during the all-consuming time of transition into doctoral education and motherhood.

Despite the difficulties, multiple roles can also prove beneficial for one’s mental, physical, and relational health (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Part-time doctoral students, regardless of whether or not they have children, may experience these benefits as they pursue their degrees while engaging in clinical practice, among other meaningful activities and relationships in their lives. For example, academic studies are often enriched by clinical work, and vice versa. Barnett and Hyde (2001) identified several processes that can contribute to the beneficial outcomes and may relate to the dual roles of doctoral student and mother, including buffering effects, opportunities to build self-efficacy, increased self-complexity, and an expanded frame of reference. For example, after being at home all day with a baby, there can be relief and stimulation in putting on professional clothes and teaching an evening course. Conversations with students and colleagues may buffer against the isolation of caring for a newborn. Simultaneously, being a parent can enhance one’s worldview in unexpected ways, such as by providing an expanded frame of reference for relating to students, thinking about social problems, listening to research data, and figuring out one’s place in the field and career trajectory. The demands of work and family can be seen as compatible, not conflicting, and thus, doctoral students need not be forced to choose between the two (Halpern, 2008).

Our Stories

Theories are important for broad understandings of a phenomenon, but as social workers know so well, deep, resonant understanding often lies in the specific details of personal story. Both of the authors became mothers during our doctoral studies. Although we both ultimately completed our degrees, it was not without struggles and ambivalence, as our stories attest.

Carla’s Story

My first daughter was born after I had completed about a year of doctoral coursework, and my second daughter arrived weeks before I passed my comprehensive exams. I took a semester off after the birth of my first child, and I seriously questioned whether or not to return to my studies. As I wanted to remain intimately and consistently involved in the care of my children, I never seriously considered a nanny or full-time childcare. Staying at home full-time or finding a part-time clinical position seemed like viable options. I fantasized about a job that would allow me to leave my work at work, about never again having a paper hanging over my head. I wanted to be fully present with my daughters, but I was also deeply committed to my career as a social worker and academic. I was torn.

Two factors ultimately brought me back to my degree, and sustained me through the challenges of comprehensive examinations and my dissertation: the part-time structure of my program and the support of the faculty. The flexibility of a part-time schedule was crucial as I

balanced my research and writing with trips to the pediatrician and planning toddler birthday parties. When my daughters' ear infections happened to fall on the one day each week I had classes, my faculty members were kind and understanding. Many of my professors and committee members (but not all) were parents themselves, and remembered the sleepless nights, the paralyzing fatigue, and the unpredictability and inconsistency of life with new babies and toddlers. They saw me not just as a doctoral candidate, but as a whole person: a mother, a wife, a social worker, and a student, and they were willing to accept all of my roles, as well as my struggles to balance them. Although I was ultimately able to finish my degree, I am not currently pursuing a tenure-track position. I do not believe it would be possible for me to meet the demands of the work while also remaining fully engaged in the work of raising my daughters.

Ashley's Story

I had it all planned out. I would get pregnant in September of my third—and final—year of doctoral courses. I would give birth in May, take the summer off, and begin my dissertation the following fall. My studies could be planned in a linear fashion, but fertility does not work that way, and parenting most certainly does not either. I ended up taking two semesters off from the program: the first due to all-day “morning” sickness, the second due to infatuation with my newborn. My dissertation committee supported my choice and waited patiently while I was on leave.

When I returned, I powered through my dissertation; I would put my baby to sleep in the evening, brew a pot of coffee, and write until the wee hours. I taught courses on an adjunct basis and opted for the sections that were offered on the weekends. My partner could be home with our son, and the added expense of childcare would not be necessary. Several members of my cohort were not parents or had grown children. I watched with envy as they traveled to national conferences before I was ready to leave my baby and go. They put in extra hours to have publications on their CVs, while I focused solely on maintaining momentum with my dissertation. By the time I defended my dissertation, my partner was pregnant with our second child.

I am now on the tenure track; I accepted a position that was too good to pass up. As I remain in academia, these tensions have not gone away. Being a mother and a faculty member are both intense roles with many responsibilities and few boundaries. I find myself creating lines in the sand, which help me to be more present wherever I am, such as limiting my late nights at work so I do not miss family dinners or the kids' bedtimes more than twice a week. I am the only full-time faculty member in my department with young children, but I am fortunate to work with colleagues and administrators who have not forgotten how consuming motherhood can be. When I go up for tenure, my younger child (who now is a baby) will be able to read. As I marvel at her developmental milestones, I try to have patience and celebrate my own incremental progress.

Recommendations for Social Work Doctoral Programs

Although funding is tight for institutions of higher education across the country, there are several straightforward, inexpensive, and valuable changes which can be implemented in order to make doctoral programs more supportive to new mothers. Our proposed recommendations address both the academic environment and the role discontinuity faced by these students.

Change the Culture, Explicitly and Implicitly

The Council on Social Work Education's (2008) core competency 2.1.4 requires schools of social work to engage diversity and difference in practice, and includes many dimensions of diversity: "age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation" (p.5). Schools of social work can think expansively and add "family status" to the forms of diversity that recognized in their student body and beyond. In their admissions materials and policy manuals, schools can be explicit about their goals to be family-friendly. Furthermore, a zero-tolerance policy for discriminatory and disparaging comments should be adopted. Faculty members should be encouraged to initiate conversations with their students about the challenges inherent in balancing doctoral studies and motherhood.

Create Opportunities for Flexibility in Scheduling

Whenever possible, doctoral programs should offer part-time options. In addition, new mothers need to be given an adequate amount of maternity leave from coursework as well as teaching and research responsibilities, ideally an entire semester. The timing of courses and meetings should take into account that most mothers have greater access to a variety of childcare options during the day. The availability of technology would provide greater convenience and flexibility; whether planned or in a pinch, some meetings could take place via conference call or over Skype. Such technology is already being used in teaching online or hybrid courses, and could be extended to other ways of staying connected and progressing work. Employees who have access to family-friendly practices are late or absent less often, exhibit fewer stress symptoms, and are more committed to their employer (Halpern, 2008); it is likely that the same findings would be true for doctoral students in family-friendly academic programs.

Offer Support in a Variety of Formats

Support is crucial to the educational success of new mothers (Liechty et al., 2009). Interested students could be offered a mentor relationship with faculty members and alumnae who have successfully navigated doctoral studies and child-rearing. Workshops could coach students on how to manage campus interviews, and a support group for new mothers pursuing their doctorates could be created and open to students from a number of disciplines within one school or a variety schools in the area.

Listen to the Voices of New Mothers

Students who are new mothers may have a variety of needs, some significant, others less so. Values from the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2008) mentioned earlier, including respect for colleagues and the dignity and worth of the individual, require everyone to have a voice in the conversation. Faculty members should have informal conversations with their students, and formal questionnaires about scheduling, financial issues, and formal and informal supports should be conducted.

Maintain Appropriate Expectations

Most doctoral students will need additional support for a variety of reasons during the course of their studies, including new mothers. Just as professors should not expect more of new mothers than other students, they should not lower their standards, either. It is possible to offer flexibility and support while still maintaining appropriate expectations.

Conclusion

Pursuing doctoral studies and embarking on motherhood are intentional choices that many women make. Engaging on both paths simultaneously can be incredibly gratifying, but can also lead to a variety of challenges and stressors that are difficult to anticipate beforehand. As a result, many new mothers are choosing to leave school or drop out of the tenure track career path. The social work profession has an obligation to address, whenever possible, the needs of this group of students. A commitment to family-friendly policies based on a strong understanding of the ways in which the environment can support new mothers as they attempt to integrate two different roles would undoubtedly help more new mothers successfully complete their doctoral studies and go on to make important contributions to the social work profession.

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