Stories of Mentoring
Theory and Praxis

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In the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AACU's) forum "On Campus with Women," Beth Burmeister argues that it is important for women academics with children to tell their stories. As Burmeister points out, stories about academic mothering tend "to glorify a few successful women without offering any solutions for "average" women still unsatisfied with unbalanced work and family lives." In this essay, we offer three stories from average women academics still struggling to balance work and family. We also tell our stories as mentees and now mentors who strive to replicate positive mentoring while also working to enact institutional change. Theorizing our experiences in the context of scholarship on academic mothering and mentoring has led us to four conclusions: 1) Pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing can deter academic success. 2) The structure of academic life exacerbates family-work conflict. 3) Academic culture is resistant to changes that would foster a better family-work balance. 4) Effective mentoring contributes to academic success, especially for women with dependent children.

As studies have shown, academic women who have babies are less likely to complete their degrees, take positions at research universities, receive tenure, and achieve the success of women without children or of men with children (Mason and Goulden, August and Waltman). Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden report in "Do Babies Matter? The Effect of Family Formation on the Lifelong Careers of Academic Men and Women," that although the percentage of female doctoral recipients has increased—from 12 percent in 1966 to 42 percent in 2002—there has not been a parallel increase in women's academic success. Relying on data from the National Center for Education Statis-

tics, Mason and Goulden found that the gap between the number of male and female faculty with tenure has remained steady, in spite of the increased number of women holding doctorates, and salary discrepancies between men and women have actually increased. Mason and Goulden believe that "the unbending nature of the American workplace, configured around a male career model established in the nineteenth century... forces women to make choices between work and family."

That none of this is news testifies to the difficulty of the problem. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 2001 "Statement of Principles on Family Responsibilities and Academic Work" recommends that institutions should offer "significantly greater support for faculty members and other academic professionals with family responsibilities" through such policies as extended leave for child-rearing, active service with modified duties, adjustments in the tenure clock, flexible schedules, and better access to child care. This statement, initiated by the AAUP’s Committee on the Status of Women in the Academic Profession, reiterated recommendations made in 1974. As further evidence of the intransigence of the problem, an entire 2004 issue of the AAUP publication Academe was devoted to "Balancing Faculty Careers and Family Work," demonstrating empirically and experientially that the university is not a family-friendly employer. In March 2005, the American Council on Education reported in "An Agenda for Excellence: Creating Flexibility in Tenure-Track Faculty Careers," that "an increasing number of new PhDs are leaving academia or opting for careers outside the traditional tenure-track path." (Hassan). The report notes that "especially women find themselves in adjunct and non-tenure-track positions—despite low pay, minimal or no benefits, and lack of potential job security—for a better balance between personal/family life and professional life" (Hassan).

Given the difficulties women academics face when they choose to have children, mentoring can play an important role in their success. Louise August and Jean Waltman note that finding mentors can be more difficult for women than for men, yet mentors are an oft-cited factor when measuring career satisfaction (180). Elizabeth Ervin's "Power, Frustration, and 'Fierce Negotiation' in Mentoring Relationships: Four Women Tell Their Stores" makes clear the personal costs to women who fail to receive effective mentoring. As Ervin relates, mentors who are unable or unwilling to meet the needs of mentees can
have detrimental effects on mentees' academic identities, even driving them out of academic careers. In "Mentoring and Women in Academia: Reevaluating the Traditional Model," Christie Chandler surveys the scholarship on mentoring women academics and concludes that "there is substantial evidence that mentors can be beneficial to women's careers, yet the most helpful qualities of the relationship have not been thoroughly identified" (83). As Chandler notes, mentoring has both a "career-enhancing" and a "psychosocial" function; mentors help advance their mentees' careers while also helping them gain "a sense of personal identity and competence" (81). Chandler also finds a dearth of data regarding the mentoring of women from marginalized groups (80), though existing research emphasizes that social support is key to these women's success (87). Although not necessarily marginalized by race, class, or sexual orientation, pregnant women and women with children do represent a different cultural norm than that of the university, and they, too, need support from those who have "made it" in similar circumstances.

The fact that mentees tend to seek out mentors with similar life circumstances can pose difficulties when a limited number of such mentors exists. Given that mentoring is typically under-rewarded, the pressure to mentor others can especially threaten the careers of those who already face challenges due to their "outsider" status (Chandler 87), for example the lone faculty member of color who is sought out by a steady stream of students of color. Faculty women with children can be similarly in demand as mentors to those who want both children and an academic career. In an open letter to female graduate students in Profession 2000, Cindy Moore describes the balancing act required of female faculty under pressure to meet the demands of tenure and of mentoring. Moore laments that as faculty look at their growing list of responsibilities, "doors close" to students: "As a senior woman in our department put it, 'every day I have to make a conscious decision between doing something for myself and doing something for someone else.'" (151). Fortunately for us, we had mentors who did not close those doors. Although mentoring can be motivated by altruism, the mentoring we received and now attempt to give is also motivated by the larger goal of changing institutional norms. Research has shown that those who have been mentored well are more likely to mentor others (Chandler 82); mentoring with the goal of changing the academy thus increases the potential for change exponentially.

"Mentor, May I Mother?"

CARRIE'S STORY: "I GUESS I JUST DECIDED I'LL NEVER BE ANDREA LUNSFORD"

I remember the day in 1990 when I told my mentor I was pregnant. I was a first year PhD student, and my mentor had recently asked me to serve as the Director of the Writing Center. I hated to give up that opportunity, but at 30, I had been married 6 years, and being on fellowship had given me the flexibility to manage a pregnancy. Yet, no one had to tell me that having a baby and being an academic were incompatible. Growing up in a working-class community, I hadn't known a single woman with a college degree. Women had babies, and a few of them had jobs, but none had careers that they worked at around the clock. Similarly, I had yet to meet a woman academic with small children.

Lucky for me, instead of a position directing the writing center, Andrea offered to make me her research assistant. I was able to juggle two assistant in her office, working extra hours right up until the week I was due and then later making up the time I missed. It wasn't until my son was born that I fully realized my good fortune. Had I been teaching and due to deliver in the middle of the quarter, I likely would have lost my funding for the entire term.

Sooner after I became pregnant, I remember thinking, "I guess I just decided I'll never be Andrea Lunsford," but Andrea herself never expressed doubt about my academic future. When I returned to work, she told my office manager (who had two small children) and me that we needed to write about managing babies and academic life because so little had been written about it. This recognition that personal experience and intellectual work ought to be connected has shaped my academic career and my mentoring of other women who long for that connection. Although research suggests that mentors overwhelmingly see their most successful protégés as those whose careers were essentially identical to their own (Chandler 84), the fact that my mentor did not have children did not prevent her from being supportive of me or others in the department who became pregnant. She could support us, in part, because she did not keep her own family life separate from her work. But effective mentoring also requires mentors to respect life choices that are different by becoming conscious of assumptions that mentees should want the careers their mentors have. It may mean responding positively to the desire to live close to family or to not upset a spouse's career. At the same time, mentors should push mentees not
to second-guess themselves. Andrea encouraged me to apply for jobs I was afraid to apply for, even as she respected my ruling out locations where my husband would have difficulty finding a job.

As Chandler notes, mentoring provides both career support and psychosocial support. For academic women with children, psychosocial support can extend beyond convincing a mentor that she's smart enough to be successful; it can also involve giving advice about childcare, dealing with unsupportive partners, and managing guilt when she puts her own work ahead of her family's needs. I remember suggesting to Stacia that her husband take their toddler son to visit his family for Thanksgiving, so she could get a dissertation chapter written. Though I later felt guilty for intruding, she did what I suggested, and it became a strategy for writing subsequent chapters. I similarly advised Cathy to arrange full-time childcare even though her husband thought they could manage with part-time care. I rarely give such personal advice to other advisees, but as a woman with children, I knew Stacia and Cathy needed urging to put themselves first, just for a little while.

At the same time, it is important for mentors not just to help individual women, but to work to change the university. Mason and Goulden's survey of ladder-rank faculty in the University of California system found that "women between thirty and fifty with children clock over a hundred hours each week on caregiving, housework, and professional responsibilities, compared with more than eighty-five for men with children. This model is not very attractive for women who hope to succeed in academia" ("Do Babies Matter? Part II"). And yet no one talks about this disparity. It's as though acknowledging that family responsibilities can interfere with work is a sign of individual weakness. As one faculty member with small children commented, "It just doesn't feel like there's enough hours in the day. Part of that's my own personal time management disabilities, but part of it is because there are so many things that I would want to do and it all takes so much time" (Ward and Wolf-Wendel 245). The individualism that characterizes academic culture makes it difficult to see that the challenges women with children face result from oppressive cultural norms rather than individual failure.

When I decided at 37 and in my second year in a tenure-track position to have another child, I knew that my academic future was at stake. I remember saying to my husband: "If I have to choose between my job and having a baby, I choose the baby. I can always get another job." I do not know any male academics who have expressed such a thought, nor have my female friends who work in corporate settings. Even in institutions that allow people to stop their tenure clock or take a maternity leave, research has shown that many faculty are reluctant to do so (Sullivan, Hollenshead, and Smith; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, "Fear Factor"). Policies may not be well publicized, pregnant faculty may fear the perception of not working as hard as others, or there may be subtle discouragement from peers and supervisors. When I decided to get pregnant, I knew that a colleague had established the precedent of a tenure clock stoppage. Nevertheless, when I discussed the option with my chair, a woman with one teenage daughter, she said that confidentially, if it were her, she wouldn't do it because it might be perceived negatively. So I didn't.

Ironically, both the colleague who had delayed her tenure clock and I, who hadn't, were denied tenure the same year. This fact highlights the importance not only of supporting academic women who choose to have kids but of working against the cultural norms that make having babies in academe so difficult. As Mason and Goulden conclude, "Achieving gender equity in terms of careers and families in the academy requires a restructuring of the workplace." Such restructuring "depend[s] on a collective will to change the campus culture. Passive and active resistance on the part of men (and even many women) poses a serious roadblock to cultural change" (Mason and Goulden, "Do Babies Matter? Part II"). When I was denied tenure, I remember telling Andrea that "in the corporate world, people have their positions eliminated all the time," only to hear Andrea say "but we should be better than that." In Mason and Goulden's words, "The academic world [...] in its role as the purveyor of enlightened ideals, is in a position to provide a new model for the successful balance of work and family" (Do Babies Matter?). Mentors are clearly an important part of that model.

**CATHY’S STORY: CELEBRATING COMPETENCE, EMBRACING INCOMPETENCE**

In the scholarship on mentoring, many studies mention competence as a quality of a mentor or as something to be gained in a mentoring relationship (Chandler; Knox and McGovern; Trachsel). As Elizabeth Bell puts it, "Competence, in professional roles, is a constant battle for women in the academy, and is part and parcel of the 'psychoso-
cial support provided by the effective feminist mentor" (307). Here, I want to offer “psychosocial support” by reclaiming competence for female academics who choose to get pregnant. I will tell my own story that runs against the seemingly dominant narrative that pregnancies are the result of incompetence. In addition to recognizing that many pregnancies are the result of competent planning, I also want to carve out some space for the role that the feeling of incompetence plays in a mentoring relationship.

In the academy, pregnancy is often viewed as incompetent. I’m not simply referring to the old idea that pregnancy addles our brains—or the converse, that too much study will render us infertile. Rather, I mean more modern, unspoken versions of women who get pregnant while in graduate school (or as assistant professors) are incompetent—they cannot plan well—or they have let their sexual desires instead of their intellects rule their lives. When my husband and I began talking about having a second child, I told him I did not want to start trying until I had passed my qualifying exams. Using knowledge gained from my first pregnancy, I did not want to risk having morning sickness or back pain during my exams. My husband saw my logic and agreed that we should wait. I passed my exams with honors, and we began trying. In other words, I made a very competent decision about when to get pregnant. (Good thing we did wait until after my exams because I was on bed rest for three months during my pregnancy).

I wouldn’t choose a gynecologist without a vagina or a pediatrician without kids, so, as a child-bearing graduate student, I found a parenting faculty mentor: Carrie. On several occasions, she helped me advance professionally and served as an advocate for me, two characteristics cited in the literature on academic mentoring (Ervin; Flint; Manas, and Serra; Knox and McGovern). First, she asked me to present on a panel with her at a prestigious conference in our field. At the time, I had not yet told her that I was pregnant. Once I did, she wasn’t deterred. She told me to write my proposal, and if I could not go, she’d find someone to read my paper for me. I would not have that line on my CV if Carrie hadn’t shown me a viable way to be both professionally active and pregnant/child-bearing.

A few months later, I met with the Director of Graduate Studies (a man with no children) to ask for a (maternity) leave for one semester. I looked at my funding contract and understood “four years” of funding to be synonymous with eight semesters. He explained that my fund-
I could have agreed that she was incompetent, perhaps too incompetent to rejoin the academy after her pregnancy. I could have told her that she's totally competent and simply willed her to believe that. But I chose a third option. As a mentor, I chose to point to both her competence and her (perceived) incompetence and welcome both; we are working through her options now.

University of Iowa professor Mary Trachsel makes a similar point in her story of moving from mentee to mentor. She lauds her mentor Maxine Hairston and other ground-breaking female scholars for their mentoring, but then goes on to complicate that rosy portrait with the realities of her sometimes incompetent life. She writes that female graduate students sought her out as a mentor: "They knew I had babies and a little girl; they knew I was a tenure-track assistant professor; they wanted to know how I did it. 'I do it badly,' I usually replied" (163). Here Trachsel acknowledges and even embraces the idea that feeling incompetent is a real part of pregnant and parenting academic women's lives. As male and female mentors, we need to demand recognition for the competent pregnancy planning that many women do, at the same time that we embrace the complexities of incompetence that surround birthing and raising children in academia.

**STACIA'S STORY**

"Scrambling, sleep deprived mother who just wants to finish one thing she starts without being interrupted"—Those words do not appear on my vita, but they are a real part of who I am as an assistant professor going up for tenure this year while mothering a three-year-old and an infant. I simply would not have both the job and the children I love if I had not had the active mentoring of those who had gone before me in managing the dual roles of academic and parent.

The PhD program I entered in 1996 had a certain way of thinking about itself: its professors, and thus its students, idealized the solitary scholar who cleared away the clutter of life and focused on the life of the mind. Other assumptions came with that territory—that a low teaching-load, research university position was the reward we graduate students should seek. I remember feeling out of place as a young woman with a rural working-class background who had already been married for four years at age twenty-six. By the time I completed the PhD in 2003, the topography had changed; the department had hired four younger faculty members, including one who brought with her a

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persistent long-term presence, continuing to influence those they mentor after they enter their first position.

Two of the strengths that benefited me the most were my graduate mentor's ability to see past the path she would have drawn for me to the path that I could be happy with and the fact that she has remained a part of my life, inviting me to be on conference panels and showing an interest in my family and my work. Another mentor for whom I worked as a research assistant also enacts a persistent mentoring; she recently mailed me an article she published for which I had done research in its early stages four years ago. The mentoring accomplished through such simple remembering gives those of us who feel the schizophrania of diapers and briefcases a way to have a moment in a mental space of our own.

I am happy today with the choices I have made, but I can write these words because positive mentoring continued for me in the family-friendly culture I entered with my first position. A family-friendly campus culture can recruit and retain women who want to balance teaching and professional development as well as working and parenting. The president of my university played major league baseball, has more than one terminal degree, and has three children. My provost once passed his cell phone around a faculty assembly meeting to show off a photo of his 1-day-old granddaughter. My dean, a woman, has five children, a JD, and a PhD. My department chair has three children and a work ethic that inspires her colleagues campus wide. Add to this faculty culture the average undergraduate student's age of 29, and you can picture a campus where strollers and children are seen regularly.

After four years of infertility in grad school, I became pregnant exactly seven days after signing my contract at this family-friendly campus. When I showed up five months pregnant for my first year on the job, knowing that the university had taken a risk on hiring an ABD with only two dissertation chapters written, I felt I had something to prove. I chafed at the thought of someone covering my classes, so I decided to take the farmer's daughter's approach, having no idea what parenting a helpless newborn was like. Thankfully, my department chair, Beth Battles, took an active mentoring role from day one, knowing what I needed when I didn't. I had the baby, returned to teaching, finished the dissertation, had a second baby during Christmas break two years later, and went back to a new semester when my second son was three weeks old.

On the edges of this "success" story are the fault lines that call for continued activism on the part of mentors. The reality is that I came back to work against medical advice eight days after natural childbirth and a third-degree laceration. I remember a voice whispering inside me as I stood, leaking breast milk and feeling stitches, lecturing to students about the rhetorical situation: "You can't even sit down, and your one-week-old baby is out in the hallway with your husband who had to take off work so that you could be here. Are you crazy?" Like Laura Skanda Trombley, "I was feeling trapped between the imperative[s] of biological necessity, which I could not deny [. . .], and the gender-based pressure on me to demonstrate at every turn that motherhood would not "interfere" with my professionalism" (2). As I look back on my experiences and think, "How did I do that?" I also answer "No one should have to, want to, or feel obligated to choose to." I fell into Ward and Wolf-Wendel's third category of women who enact bias-avoidance strategies, "including not having a baby at all, timing the baby during summer break, or coming back to work as soon after the birth as physically possible without missing any (or very little) work" (4). My own use of the most stubborn "bias-avoidance strategy," in fact, did nothing to help pave the way for change. While once I was so proud of willing myself to perform with no maternity leave, I am now disappointed in my embracing of the superwoman narrative, a narrative of consent to and collaboration with the very assumptions that objectify women and women's experiences.

Conclusions

Hearing more women's stories will enable us to initiate social change in the workplace by advocating for healthy lives inside and outside campus walls. Ward and Wolf-Wendel explain, Biological and tenure clocks have the unfortunate tendency to tick loudly, clearly, and at the same time. [. . .] As more women enter the academic profession as assistant professors, more of them are choosing to combine work and family while on the tenure track. This trend does not mean that women professors are not serious about their careers. What it does mean, however, is
that the landscape and the nuances of the academic labor force are changing. (2)

The first step toward responding to this change is to increase the number of women who can share positive experiences of parenting in the academy. The second step is to establish written policies that offer more choices for parents in academia. As Beth Sullivan and her co-authors report, "Making policies official increases goodwill among faculty. [...] Formalization increases the family-friendliness of an institution by acknowledging that most faculty members will have a family need to manage at some point over their career, whether to care for young children, a dying parent, or an ill spouse or partner" (Sullivan, Hollenshead, and Smith 4). We shape the culture in which we work; as pregnant faculty and as mothers, we can choose to enact the superwoman narrative of "no special treatment needed," or instead advocate by mouth and policy-making a just and equitable belief that faculty who give life to and care for children deserve "special treatment" that will benefit the entire campus in the long run. Setting up the tenure track as a path to success for faculty who will come more easily when we work first for changes in cultural perception and a commitment to diverse choices. As John Curtis argues, "The change required is as much cultural as it is structural. And it is change in which faculty [as mentors] must take a leading role" (4). As mother-mentors, we can tell our stories, share concerns about the limited options for women who mother on the tenure track, and look out for those who deserve to pursue balanced lives, which is ultimately, all of us.

Works Cited


The Minutia of Mentorships: Reflections about Professional Development

Katherine S. Miles and Rebecca E. Burnett

Katherine S. Miles (hereafter KSM): January, 2nd year in PhD program; beginning of administrative internship.

"I don’t need a mentor: someone who will teach me the so-called right way to think and act!" These were my notions about student-teacher relationships when I entered the PhD program. I’d heard horror stories about academic life: (a) professors who submitted students’ work and grant proposals as their own, (b) students who had been brainwashed so they couldn’t return to civilian life, and (c) students who were prohibited from graduating because their professors had left the country. Now I realize that the horror stories were, in fact, urban legends, which explains, in part, why I’m here, beginning a mentoring relationship.

Rebecca E. Burnett (hereafter REB): Reflective Comment

I remember her caution. At that early point, I wasn’t sure whether our relationship would be limited to a four-month internship or whether it would develop into a long-term mentorship. My own very positive experiences—as a mentee during my undergraduate years, in graduate school, and throughout my early professional years in two separate careers—have remarkably enriched my life. I have gained immensely as a mentee and now gain even more as a mentor. I enjoy the process of working with graduate students as they develop their professional persona. By the time they’re ready to graduate, I know I’ll miss them enormously, but I know that I’ll have them as colleagues forever.