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## We've Come a Long Way Maybe: Reflections of Women in The Academy

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## We've Come a Long Way Maybe: Reflections of Women in The Academy

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This essay provides narratives of five women in academy – specifically within the communication studies professoriate. They share experiences of equity (or lack thereof), motherhood, identity management, work-life balance, youthfulness, and illness. Overall, the stories presented seek to problematize ongoing difficulties for women in the academy with the hopes of sparking discussion and ongoing debate.

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In 2008, *Women's Studies in Communication* donated the entire issue to an analysis of the state of women in the professoriate. In 2014, we were inspired to ask one another: “How far have we come since then, and where are we now?” This paper is a beginning piece of our answer, as Katherine notes:

As I explained in a panel of women discussing just this topic at a recent meeting of the New York State Communication Association, “Because of everything I have gone through, I feel like I can do anything now.” Maybe that glass-half-full attitude will benefit someone else. Mostly it’s to add to the stories of others so that together we can figure out a way to make sure this kind of stuff does not happen anymore in academe.

Mind you, I am purposefully not including the good stuff here. There’s lots and lots of good stuff, otherwise I wouldn’t have hung around this long. I’m not including it here because this is a story about the stuff I encountered that wasn’t good. There is a time and place for everything, and this is the time and place for me to vent, to get it off my chest and into a written narrative, to give others a glimpse of something perhaps they can relate to in an effort to comfort, even inspire.

These sentiments of sharing the narratives, highlighting the battles, and writing, at least in part, for our own sense of relief are shared by the authors. Below, five narratives are presented from women in the communication field, each with their own story, perspective, and position. We start with Katherine’s story to illustrate problematic practices in promotion and negotiating motherhood while in the academy. Similarly, Chris shares her story of completing graduate school while also being a single parent. Maureen’s pivotal role as a mother of a person with Autism shapes her teaching and works in conjunction with her pedagogy despite her concerns at the time of her son’s diagnosis. The challenges of achieving status articulated by Katherine and Chris (rank

and degree respectively), are further problematized by Heather's accounts of working towards tenure while being a mother and cancer patient. As Heather indicates, although support existed, she refused to accept help on account of her need to prove her worth. Cheryl's narrative also points to the need to justify expertise and experience as a youthful woman in the academy.

Subsequent to the narratives, we discuss themes derived from the autoethnographic accounts including difficulty in maintaining work-life balance as well the ongoing work of emotional labor. Although these stories and themes are the voices of the women here, we undoubtedly believe that progress has been made in the academy in terms of the treatment of women, but that there is more work to be done. While solutions are not simple and universal, the first step is identifying what works and what does not (on myriad levels). These issues also go beyond the difficulties women face and impact institutions, our male colleagues, and students.

### ***Katherine's Story***

Recently, standing in the bookstore at the Geneva airport, I spotted the book *Lean In*, by Sheryl Sandberg. I'd heard of the book and knew, basically, what it was about. I was about to take over as Chair of my academic department at Brooklyn College, within the next month because of a rather sudden re-shuffling of positions. The current Chair was moving into a higher ranking administrative job, even if temporarily, and my colleagues had unanimously voted me in to take over for him. So, I was about to become the first female to be voted into that position in the Department of Television and Radio, a department which was established at Brooklyn College in the 1960s. First ever female.

I bought the book. It was tough to get through because as I read I was constantly reminded of all the crap I had put up with in my nearly 23 years working at Brooklyn College—and elsewhere. Writing this will bring all of that up again, too. Part of me is reluctant to tell my particular story of being a woman in academe—in professional life. I really would like to move on and just enjoy the (sometimes sour but adequately ripened) fruits of all my labors. And yet part of me wants to put it all down for others to read.

How did I get here?

I was hired, a newly sprouted Ph.D., on a tenure-track assistant professor line in the Department of Television and Radio at Brooklyn College in fall of 1994. I was, when hired, the youngest person on the faculty, the only woman, married, surrounded by lots of mostly older white men, a number of whom were enjoying their second careers. I was an anomaly and I often felt, especially during faculty meetings, like I had entered a foreign land where I didn't speak the language. This was an arcane bureaucracy of unfathomable rules, unclear terminology, and, well, old white guys. I cried after every faculty meeting and I wasn't sure why.

Actually it was the beginning of a whole new education. The next five years, then the following 15 years, taught me the realities of teaching in this particular public university system. It is unnecessary to detail all of those realities, but I will include some highlights of humiliation.

Well, first, there was the money. About two years into the tenure-track gig I was standing in the department office talking to the administrative assistant with whom I was quite close. It was just the two of us in the room and she took that opportunity to ask me why I made so much less money than my male colleague, who was hired as an assistant professor on the tenure track at exactly the same time I was hired. I stared at her for a moment, then said, quietly, that I didn't know he made more than me. Then I started to cry. She showed me the salary difference on paper. It was nearly a \$10,000 difference. I was enraged. I went to the faculty union rep as soon as I could to report this disparity and to find out what could be done to rectify the situation. He suggested that, instead of filing a grievance, I should write to the college President and ask for a raise of several steps on the contracted pay scale, which, with the union rep's written support, I did. Then I did it again. This took over a year to accomplish. I still wasn't on par with my colleague salary-wise, and I'd lost the additional income to my pension fund because of my lower salary from the start. I hadn't made waves and I was now making more money. I had to fight a bit for it, but I got it. I found out subsequently that a number of my female CUNY colleagues had, just prior to this, waged, and won, a class-action lawsuit against the University for gender-based wage disparity. If I had known about it at the time I would have made a bigger stink. I was untenured and, oddly (or naively), not afraid of the fight. And this was just the first of many fights.

I found out I was pregnant during the summer before I submitted all my materials. I was thrilled and my husband and I were looking forward to the birth of our first child. Early in the fall semester I told the Chair of the department that I was pregnant and that the baby was due the following March. He didn't really know what to say. There had never been a similar circumstance in the department. Fall semester flew by, then came the spring term. I still didn't know what would happen with my classes, and I still was not given much concrete information from anyone. Human resources told me that I had six weeks of paid disability (!) leave for the birth of the baby, but that was all the help they could give me. Apparently there had not been a pregnant professor on the entire campus of Brooklyn College for at least ten years. Again, I was an anomaly.

At the beginning of the term I let all of my students know what was happening and how the semester would roll out. Fortunately for me the pregnancy went well and I was able to teach right up until the week before the baby was due. Then, I had to just leave it up to everyone else to follow through on their promises to cover my classes. This is where it got interesting.

After the baby was born I was home adjusting to parenthood, enjoying my child and not concerning myself too much with my courses that, I assumed, were continuing just fine without me. I was on leave, right? I found out, however, at the end of the term, that not all of my classes had been covered, that at least one of my graduate students was furious, and that he had reported me to not only the Department Chair but also the Provost because I had not been showing up to class. I was in trouble with the administration. One afternoon I got a call at home from the newly-elected Chair. He told me, basically, that I was in big trouble because the Provost had just called him to find out what was going on with me and why I wasn't showing up to my classes. This new Chair was my colleague who had shared an office with me, had been my close friend, and who knew, obviously, that I had just given birth. In fact, he had visited me in the hospital right after the baby

was born. Now he was calling me and telling me I was in trouble? For having a baby? At that moment on the phone I began to yell and to pace. My baby was right there next to me; he sensed my tension and began to cry. In addition to that stress, which no new mother needs, I found out that one of the graduate students was threatening me because he was not getting a good grade in the course (never mind that he didn't turn in any of the assignments prior to my departure). My husband, fearing for my safety, accompanied me with our baby to the office hours at the end of term to make sure I would be safe.

There have been plenty of other fights, other gender-based humiliations, dismissals, and extra projects given to me because of my female status, even though the department has grown to include more female professors over the years (a few gems: "Katherine, are you going to have any more children? I mean, if you're going to be graduate deputy I should probably know that," or "Katherine, you'll be taking the minutes of all of the faculty meetings," or being called Mrs. instead of Doctor or Professor—because I was married, even though my husband had a completely different last name, and so on. You get the picture. It was constant.) There are many annoyances and stresses that I could detail that have affected my female colleagues and me, but I will describe just one more. It's the one that has caused me the most turmoil and that has, perhaps, left a lasting scar. This was the fight for promotion to Full Professor.

Let me begin by saying that the Brooklyn College has a reputation, many years in the making, of not promoting nearly as many women to full professor as it does men. This is not just anecdotal. It is information I received from the union attorney who represented me in my grievance battle with Brooklyn College for being denied promotion to Full Professor for the second time, even as two of my departmental male colleagues sailed through the process in front of me.

In 2006, I went up for Full Professor the first time. I had published a book, many articles and chapters, given quite a number of conference papers and presentations, had served in administrative capacities and on many committees, had great teaching evaluations, and felt I was in good shape for the next step. I'm including all of this because it's true. I had been an active scholar, good departmental workhorse, and all-around good girl. It's who I was, and basically, it's who I still am. My particular area of expertise is in media studies: theory, research and media, and popular culture generally. The committee interviewing me was made up of colleagues in art history, music performance, film, etc. When I sat for the interview I was asked about my research. I had, the summer just prior to the fall interview, given a paper about advertising body tattoos at an international economics conference in Helsinki. It was an exploration of the corporeal body, consumption, and advertising history. In the interview my colleague from the music department looked me straight in the face and asked, with derision, "Who would ever be interested in advertising tattoos?" That was pretty much the tone of the whole interview. I left the interview with a sick feeling in my stomach. About a week or two later I received a letter in my department mailbox telling me that the vote for my promotion was, by a small margin, a "no." I wasn't expecting that. My male colleague who was also up for promotion to full (the same one who had been hired at a higher salary) got a "yes" vote. I was devastated. I had to leave the office I was so emotionally overwhelmed. I called my husband and he spent the rest of the day with me. I felt absolutely betrayed. I was beginning to understand what I had been doing wrong. I was a dutiful worker, I was bad

at politics, and I was even worse at looking out for my own best interests, which meant saying “no” to people who recognized that I would work hard on a project on their behalf and not work hard enough on my own publications. That was the upshot from the President after his final “no” after my written appeal. He told me that I needed to publish another book. After a calming period I decided that is exactly what I would do, and then I would put myself up again for promotion.

In the years between 2006 and 2009, when I went up again for promotion to Full Professor, I was awarded a year-long Humanities Fellowship and I also co-founded and became Education Director of a non-profit, community-based media literacy organization. I had a fellowship year and a sabbatical year to work on growing the media literacy organization and to completing a study on, and publishing an article about, news audiences—the study proposal that won me the Fellowship. During that same period a colleague and I completed an edited volume that we’d begun years earlier. So now I had some new publications, including that book that the President wanted, and had embarked on an exciting, though stressful, venture into community outreach that would benefit my students and would extend my teaching and research into the community. When I went back to full-time teaching in my department in fall, 2009, I was still acting as Education Director of the growing non-profit Media Literacy organization while taking on all my full-time teaching duties again, and becoming Director of the new Communications interdisciplinary major. My children were, at the time, 10 and 7 years old. I was the super-mom, super-worker of the decade. It was time, I thought, to go through this whole promotion to Full Professor process again.

I did it. I submitted everything. I went through the interview. This time I was asked about my publications, but no one asked at all about my non-profit organization. They didn’t seem to care at all about that. That work didn’t fit into any previously prescribed category that they understood. Long story short, the vote was split in the committee, but it was overwhelmingly “yes” at the college-wide level. I got the letter saying it was a “yes” going forward to the President. I was elated. I acted as though it was a done deal and that I could finally breathe a sigh of relief. The President was brand new. I had followed all the advice of the previous President who had now moved on. The new President, who didn’t know me at all and who had been in her job only a few months, decided that her vote for me was a “no.” That was like a death knell to my spirit. I got the certified letter in the mail the day after Thanksgiving. It took me right back to the place I was three years prior. Complete devastation. But this time I was very, very angry. A female departmental colleague had received the same Presidential “no,” while another male colleague of ours, only the year before, had been granted promotion to full. There was now clear evidence that in the Department of Television and Radio men were promoted to full professor and women were not.

The fight was on. She and I both filed grievances. We both received good counsel from the campus union grievance counselor and from the PSC attorney who ended up representing us separately in arbitration hearings that were not held until 2013. In the intervening years it was a matter of going through all of the grievance steps, the life-sucking drudgery that is the bureaucracy of fighting a bureaucracy. It’s designed to wear you down to the nub, and it takes an enormous emotional toll. And all the while you must continue working, doing good work, maintaining your composure. All the while you

are in a fight with your employer. It's a battle that takes more than stamina and if you give up on this fight you are letting yourself down in a way you cannot imagine doing.

By the time I finally "won" my promotion, in the summer of 2013, my marriage was over (no blame assigned here, it was something that happened in my life. Perhaps someday I'll have the benefit of a much longer hindsight to understand what happened). But I am still at Brooklyn College, and now with a loving and supportive partner. Since I won my promotion to Full Professor I still have a few random moments of bitterness. But mostly I have moments of victory, pride, and even joy. I'm considered a troublemaker in some sectors of the administration, but I am proud of my resilience and I hope that I have taught my children a lesson about fighting for what is right, and for not giving up, as cliché as that sounds. Since 2013, I have won a Fulbright teaching award and have lived in Turkey. I have published many more articles, have received awards and recognition, and have embarked on new endeavors in research and within the department. As of this writing I am, with the full support of my departmental colleagues, taking on the role of Chair of the Department. The first woman elected to do so.

Do I think I have it in me? Why am I even asking that question?

### ***Chris's Story***

Many years ago I walked out of an abusive marriage with \$15.00 in my pocket and my greatest treasure: my daughters, who were then not-quite-two, and five years old. I left the girls with my parents and hid at a cousin's house for two days because my husband told me if I left with the girls he would find me and kill me. I was on welfare [Aid to Families with Dependent Children]. I had support from a large and loving family, but knew I needed to reach beyond my BA in English and Communication Arts. I eventually began an MA program in Organizational Communication at Western Michigan University, was a very good student, and, in my mid-40s, finished my MA and fell in love—with teaching.

As long ago as the early 90s the writing was on the wall: If you wanted to make a living as a teacher at the college level, you needed a PhD. Even the community colleges I interviewed at told me that my options would be limited if I didn't have that terminal degree. So, on the advice of trusted mentors, I applied to a research one institution across the country. To everyone's surprise [they only accepted five students that year], I was accepted. I loaded up my then 11- and 14-year-old daughters and drove across the country in my aging Ford Tempo.

It took me 10 years to get my PhD because, well, because being a single mom to teens and living in Boulder, Colorado was not cheap. Even with my stipend, expenses were about \$1,000 per month over my budget. So I worked other jobs: at a bookstore, as an Academic Skills Specialist [I asked NOT to have business cards printed with that acronym]; I became a Resident Manager for Family Housing, was a secretary for the Graduate Student Organization. I accumulated student loan debt that I will never live long enough to pay off—(in my admittedly weak defense, I thought and was told that I could get my degree in four years. Still not laughing at that joke).

Along the way I received well-meaning advice: Do not talk about your daughters—pretend they don't exist because Mom and Scholar don't go well together and you will undermine your position and lose faculty respect. A favorite one, shared by an advisor: "Do not tell anyone that you are working outside your studies and your teaching assistant job—because you are supposed to be a serious student."

I was a serious student, but I was also a mom. And long after the dust settled and the world realizes that no scholar in my cohort or discipline would ever be famous for curing cancer, I would still be a mom. My short-lived webpage [this was the 90s when webpages were everything] was titled "Mom, Scholar, goddess." The department didn't find that amusing, but I figured it was payback for the "degree in four years" joke.

I still believe I was a disappointment to the department. Lord knows I was often made to feel that way [at my comps defense, the committee apparently had to think long and hard about "whether we let someone pass because they are good people or whether we require more."] Not to offer a rationalization, but the comps were three months after my father died, and I spent nights cramming [one committee member provided me with a list of 60+ articles, I had not read and told me I was expected to master them for the upcoming comps question] to wake at 3 a.m. in tears because that was the only time I had to mourn my beloved Dad. And I was now the mom of full-fledged teenagers: when someone flunked a chemistry test in high school, no doctoral studies got done that night. I often went to bed at 9 p.m. and got up at 3 a.m. to study and work, so that I didn't have to spend my evenings yelling at my daughters to "be quiet" so I could study. And I really wanted to be there, to make a home, for my daughters.

Well, I earned my degree, got the first job I applied for and managed to earn tenure. Since I was across the country from my beloved daughters, I set out to create my own family, in the department [20/20 hindsight: not perhaps the brightest move]. I lived in the department [not kidding: one night I slept on a couch because my rented house was so far away and the snow so nasty, and the dissertation so needed to be finished] which meant I was there more than any other faculty member, and so was "available" for all the students, and accessible to other faculty and staff. But I got the Ph.D. so I could be a teacher, and this was part and parcel of teaching, right? Or so I told myself.

I listened, I consoled, I attempted to inspire. I created committees to support faculty as teachers. I initiated potlucks so that new faculty—who don't get their first paycheck for almost six weeks—would have homemade food to eat. And I mentored. I practiced the Golden Rule and treated all those I came into contact with as though they were important and respected and valued. In some ways I became the department "Mom"—certainly to newer and younger faculty.

All along the way I met wonderful people, but also men who have kept reinforcing for me the message that I am only second rate. Hint: No woman ever needs to be made to feel second rate. We already are in many lights. In this case it could have been largely because most of my energy went into teaching and learning and supporting, with little left for publication. I still presented at conferences, (on a top division paper panel at a regional conference), taught short courses, published in *Communication Teacher*, authored a textbook ancillary, and did all the other academic service things that were

required, including acting as department chair to cover a maternity leave. It wasn't enough. While it was billed—and sold—as a “teaching college” when I accepted the position, it wasn't enough. Even though my promotion was supported by my faculty, chair and division, the [male] dean said “The provost denied your promotion because you need one more article published.” That was the day I adopted Judge Judy's famous book title as my own: “Don't pee on my leg and tell me it's raining.”

But I am a survivor. I still love teaching after all these years. And I love research, too, but find that teaching and doing significant emotional labor for the department takes so much of my time that research moves to second place. And even though group and organizational communication research and literature tells us that socio-emotive facilitation is necessary for any group to properly function, I learned that when labeled “service” (and done by women?) it isn't valued.

I'll go up for promotion again one day. The new dean seems very supportive. Not sure how my story will end, but I've had a good life. And I love my job. But I sure wish I felt respected for all that I am and do and bring to the table. Maybe that's just part of being a woman.

### **Maureen's Story**

I have two sons. My younger son Sam is an autistic person. I first wrote about him nearly 10 years ago in the aforementioned special issue of *Women's Studies in Communication*. At that time, Sam was nine years old and the challenges we had experienced were substantial. Autism is a spectrum disorder with a range of characteristics, most often including difficulty with language and communication, rigidity and focus on narrow areas of interest, and significant deficits in social interaction. Many autistic people also have development disabilities, as does my son.

Prior to Sam's birth, I had limited experience with developmentally disabled people and I had never met an autistic person. I did not have the benefit of an inclusive education and did not have a single friend with a physical or developmental disability.

My son was ultimately diagnosed with autism at the age of four. He presented symptoms prior to that time but his diagnosis made it real. I was crushed. I felt unprepared to be a good parent for Sam and I did not want this challenge. I also worried about my career. I could not imagine how I would be able to meet Sam's needs and also perform well on campus. I saw the two demands as separate and in conflict.

When my son was very young he had many fears, rigid needs, and limited language. Some of his behaviors were not conventional, some occasionally dangerous. I ran a lot: to catch my son as he ran down an entire football field to stand under a flag pole (flags were a focus for perseveration); to catch my son to put clothes on (autistic children often find clothes to be unbearable); to retrieve my son when he went in the frigid stream in March. I lived through many major meltdowns whose causes were initially mysterious, but eventually I came to understand. I became a better interpreter. I became more phlegmatic. My empathy deepened, and so did my skills as a teacher.

Today, Sam is 18 years old and getting ready to graduate from high school. Like all children, he has grown and changed a great deal. His goodness and kindness are an inspiration, his differences an integral part of his being. He continues to struggle with understanding other people and relationships, yet he longs for greater connections. His devotion to one particular autistic classmate has helped that person to gain the courage to talk on the phone, to eat in the cafeteria, and to accept a friend.

Because of Sam, I have served as a volunteer with local and state organizations that work with and for people with developmental disabilities. I have joined with self-advocates who seek to improve government policies for people like themselves. Through these activities I have become friends with many developmentally disabled people. My perspective has expanded.

Because of Sam, many of my students have come to know an autistic person. For some this is a first. For most, it is an opportunity to appreciate both difference and common ground.

I have now served in academia for more than 20 years and my initial worries about the ability to meet the needs of my job and the needs of my family have proven to be unfounded. The parent who can work through the autistic meltdowns can work through the anxieties of the student debater. The person who has spent years helping with autistic language development can support student writers of all kinds. My success in my professional life is not despite my role as a parent. Indeed, I have had no richer preparation for my work as a Professor of Communication than my experiences as Sam's mother.

Family experiences of this type do not make us less. The humility of struggle breeds compassion. Our pragmatism makes us more effective. Our attention to detail makes us better observers. Our skill as time managers makes us more efficient. Our empathy makes us better leaders, better mentors, better friends. We need to remember that.

### ***Heather's Story***

I think I may be the only person, ever, to look forward to a colonoscopy. I had been at the hospital for three days, was still quite ill, and growing increasingly annoyed at each passing minute. Desperate to be released from the hospital despite not feeling better, I was assured that I would be able to go home once the colonoscopy was complete. Once the gurney arrived, I hopped on anxiously, hoping to be released that day. My ultimate desire to be released seems silly now. I was missing class, and there were twenty students waiting on me to get back to campus. I knew that a well-qualified, seasoned instructor was covering my class, but I felt adamant about returning to work as soon as possible. Well, and I was rushed to the hospital in the midst of cleaning my floors and the incomplete chore was driving me mad. Through the fuzziness, as I was waking from the colonoscopy, I heard the doctor say tumor.

By the time the doctors informed me that it was either cancer or Crohn's disease an hour later, I was way ahead of them—memorizing statistics regarding age of diagnosis, survival rates for colon cancer, and treatment options. The next day, my primary doctor

accidentally told me it was cancer—a diagnosis that should have come from a specialist. Within a few weeks, I underwent a rather intensive surgery—a lower anterior resection of the colon. While I was recovering in the hospital, I insisted that the college’s technology department send up a computer. I even arranged for student presentations to be videotaped and uploaded to the cloud so I could grade them remotely. I treated each day in the hospital as an opportunity to get work done; I showered every morning, put on decent clothes, did my hair and makeup, and then sat down for a day’s worth of work. I was determined to look just fine, hoping to convince the doctors to release me quickly so that I could return to my duties of professor and mother.

Over seven months later, as remission from Stage III Colon Cancer is on the horizon, I believe that my ability to research and my book smarts have proven to be a crucial factor in my survival to this point. However, the skills learned at the academy were not limited to being an informed patient, but also learning acceptable behavior for a woman in the academy, despite circumstances. Being a 31 year old mother of a toddler, cancer patient, assistant professor, and program director simultaneously has caused significant reflection on the field and my own positionality.

Somewhere along the path I was coached into not asking for help, not showing weakness, moving—some may say plowing—forward despite obstacles. Some of this, assuredly, was passed down from my blue-collar parents and their industrious nature. Much of this was learned behavior through the academy and the competitive graduate school environment. As I reflect back, there is no single statement or female professor who served as the catalyst for this behavior, but rather all enacted this mindset. Taking extra committee work, returning from maternity leave early (or strategically attempting to conceive with an eye on the academic calendar), being a confidant and emotional support system for students, and not allowing emotional displays (even at times when it would have been appropriate) were all commonplace actions I observed and perhaps subsequently adopted throughout my academic career.

So, as far my diagnosis was concerned, I shared the news, but simultaneously found myself assuring my dean, division chair, and students that I would march forward and not be a burden. The administration routinely asked if there was anything I needed. During the semester in which I was recovering from surgery and receiving chemotherapy, I continued to advise students, oversee a student club, bring students to conferences, teach four classes, and work as program director. Not one person asked me to do all of these tasks—in fact, I was strongly encouraged not to take on all of this responsibility. This was, undoubtedly, learned behavior after a lifetime of being taught via models of tenacity emulated by female faculty. This self-victimization was rationalized continuously—“I am fine,” “it is good to be around students,” “chemo is not that bad.” At one point it took the insistence of two senior, male faculty members and the college’s nurse to convince me to go to the hospital—a visit that required a blood transfusion. As I think about that day, I feel guilt that my students saw me in such a terrible state.

My colleagues, and the college as a whole, have been spectacular. I often open my office door to find candy, flowers, and cards. My colleagues and the college even purchased a campus meal plan for my family. This, honestly, encourages my bad behavior; I stay in the office longer knowing that I don’t need to worry about dinner plans. Everything took,

and continues to take, twice as long as a result of the chemotherapy. My brain is always a little fuzzy, my eyes barely produce tears (and when they do, it burns terribly), the numbness and pain in my hands is at times excruciating, and my balance is pretty terrible these days. Learned behavior is dangerous and I realize now that my behavior sets a terrible precedent—I returned from maternity leave after less than four weeks and then fought cancer while refusing to reduce my workload.

I am still sick: I have one more chemo treatment and then a set of tests including another colonoscopy. It is 7:03 on a Thursday evening and I am still in the office. This narrative would have once taken no time at all; now with each letter typed, my hands burn more and more. As I write this, I am tempted to (and even drafted) a comment regarding my inability to meet the demands of my position, but as a colleague pointed out, I am on top of my responsibilities and feeling otherwise just isn't true—more learned behavior and feelings of insecurity. I have no real advice about how to overcome this problem, of how to break from the mold and challenge these learned behaviors, but I feel as though recognizing them and discussing them is an important first step.

### ***Cheryl's Story***

Truth be told, as a successful woman in academia, I've been very fortunate. Maybe it's because I didn't marry until several years after I earned my doctorate. Maybe it's because I still don't have kids as I approach 40. Maybe it's because I've always had access to mentors who always assumed I could be anything I wanted, regardless of my gender. My father was the first feminist I ever knew, and so I learned from an early age that being female had nothing to do with my intelligence, work ethic, abilities, dreams, and ambitions.

That's not to say I haven't been subject to the perils of being a woman in academia. The most perniciously consistent hurdle that I face is a form of ageism. I confess, I look younger than my 39 years. I've always been perceived by others as younger than my actual chronological age. My five-foot-two athletic build, active lifestyle, and dose of incredible genes (my father is nearly 70 and doesn't look a day over 60) have led many people to assume that I could barely be out of college, never mind a seasoned college professor.

It's most unbearable when I'm meeting the parents of my students or academic advisees. I've seen the surprise in their eyes when their son or daughter introduces me, and most of them give voice to that surprise. Their attempts at humor and flattery don't save me from feeling like I have to run through the highlights of my CV to assure them that their kid has really been in expert hands all this time. I expect that kind of treatment from older male colleagues entrenched in a system no longer allowed to make itself explicitly known; I have been subject to that treatment, sometimes in the most unforgivable of ways. However, I always hope for a greater degree of enlightenment from parents, especially as the gap between our ages grows less and less each year. Alas, so far, no such luck.

As I take a moment to reflect on such experiences, I can't help but feel a twinge of guilt. Here I am, lamenting having to deal with these passing annoyances when female friends

and colleagues have experienced career-altering—if not halting—challenges. I said it above, and I'll say it again: I've had it pretty good. But for me to allow that guilt to linger is to concede a little bit of victory to the forces that continue to challenge and thwart women in academia. The issue isn't just about blatantly sexist treatment. It's also about the day-to-day systematic treatment of women, the subtle and insidious ways of forcing us to keep proving, defending, and asserting ourselves in ways men just don't have to do. We're so used to being in those trenches, we hardly see them anymore. It's dangerous to only see the big, bad forest and not the individually diseased trees.

In a media-saturated society where age is equated with expertise and achievement, while women are valued for their abilities to stay young, I'm caught in a web of contradictions. I am an expert in my field, a published author, and an experienced teacher. I am also physically fit and present a youthful appearance. Society tells me I can't have it both ways. Well, I like it both ways, and so I choose to take my youthful looks and my authority, thank you very much. After all, what does one have to do with the other?

### **Reflection on Reflections**

By no means are the narratives previously presented all-encompassing of the experiences and positions of women in academia. We fully acknowledge this, but feel the need to start sharing stories, to break the spiral of silence. Our viewpoints and reflections on our experience—both positive and negative—are not always popular. Perhaps some might see these narratives as whining or unnecessarily complaining, but the themes that emerge from these narratives and from discussions with women in the academy are imperative to start the conversation. Through our reading of the provided narratives as well as discussions at conferences, both in formal presentations and in the hallways of conference hotels, we find two prominent themes including navigating the artificial divide between work and life, and experiencing often intense emotional labor.

### **Work-Life Balance**

Four of the five narratives presented are from women who are mothers. Many women have spoken to us about minutes—finding the time to be both an academic and a mother. Dow (2008) notes that “Academic institutions generally do not do enough to support faculty members as they negotiate the responsibilities of family... such responsibilities fall disproportionately to women is a truism... the lack of such policies [that assist mothers] costs all of us” (p. 158). Chris was told to essentially hide her children, Katherine's institution held no policy for maternity leave, and Heather took an abbreviated maternity leave. These women, in many ways, became agents of their own control. By looking at power as distributed, which is particularly true in many academic institutions as layers of power exist, “agency becomes more nuanced as individuals are seen participating in their own domination” (Weiland, 2011, p. 166). In other words, are women allowing and perpetuating the lack of agency?

Academic work is rarely left in the workplace as witnessed by faculty—both women and men alike—tracking across campuses to their cars with a bag, or sometimes bags, of grading, research materials, and committee work. The balance between work and life, perhaps, is an artificial divide—bringing work home, checking emails, weekend events

on campus, coming across students (who inevitably have questions) at the grocery store. Moreover, the lessons learned through personal experiences enter the classroom. For example, Heather discusses empathy and cancer in her Introduction to Human Communication course, and Maureen integrates content related to disability into her Advanced Topics in Communication course.

The work-life balance not only pertains to mothers, but to all in the professional sphere. Schultz, Hoffman, Fredman, and Bainbridge (2012) report that young professionals see “being healthy, both physically and mentally” as a primary component of work-life balance for those in Generations X and Y who do not have children (p. 47). Such a goal is evident in Cheryl’s reflection of her appearance. Although Cheryl prioritizes exercise as a component of her work-life balance it hampers her ability to seem credible on account of her youthful and fit appearance. Moreover, Favero and Heath (2012) argue that differences in generational divide in the approach to work-life balance causes conflict in the workplace. Perhaps, as the Baby Boomers retire so will regulations and policies from their generation that privilege work over life or the social contract which encourages employer over family.

### ***Emotional Labor***

Arlie Hochschild’s 1983 book *The Managed Heart* marked the first appearance of the term “emotion work,” now seen in academic research and discourse as “emotional labor.” There have been, literally, countless articles published in both academic and popular press about the difficulty and demand for emotional labor, most often linked to the expectation of such labor as simply part of the job requirements of the female professional [or laborer, or wait staff, or support staff, or nursing staff, or mom/wife/mother]. A truncated bibliography includes entries from management, education, health care, and labor professionals, from librarians and salespeople, and from countries across the globe.

In Hackman’s (2015) “Is emotional labor feminism’s next frontier?” she summarizes academic and current understanding:

In a work context, emotional labor refers to the expectation that a worker should manipulate either her actual feelings or the appearance of her feelings in order to satisfy the perceived requirements of her job. Emotional labor also covers the requirement that a worker should modulate her feelings in order to influence the positive experience of a client or a colleague. (para. 13; emphasis in the original)

As Heather notes, throughout her academic career, she witnessed women not showing emotion when it would have been warranted and Chris hid her emotions in her silent denial of her children, previous abusive marriage, and poverty.

In the academic literature, Guy and Newman (2005) ask “What is it about women’s jobs that causes them to pay less?” and asserted,

Emotional labor offers the missing link in the explanation. Tasks that require the emotive work thought natural for women, such as caring, negotiating, empathizing, smoothing troubled relationships, and working behind the scenes to

enable cooperation, are required components of many women's jobs. Excluded from job descriptions and performance evaluations, the work is invisible and uncompensated. (p. 289)

Moreover, Gabriel and Diefendorff (2015) have look more specifically at emotional labor dynamics:

Employees are encouraged to display positive emotions and to suppress negative emotions—what has been collectively referred to as “integrative display rules” (Wharton & Erickson, 1993)... Emotional labor research has primarily focused on two regulation strategies: surface acting, which involves faking required emotions and suppressing felt emotions; and deep acting, which involves exerting effort to feel and express required emotions (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013; Hochschild, 1983). (p. 1804)

Thus, emotional labor can be seen as directly impacting women, and contains expectations of behavior by women for the benefit of the organization. While we do not doubt that our male colleagues find themselves engaged emotional labor, both in the academy and in corporations, emotional labor is largely relegated to the feminine. The academy is an organization [especially when students are described, as they have been in two of the universities Chris taught at, as “consumers” or “clients.” One university even referred to students as “market share”]. Moreover, as highlighted in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article (Green, 2015), the psychological fragility of many of our students presents an even greater burden to female faculty members: “With student mental health issues on the rise and faculty stress running high, there is more and more care-work to do” (para. 15). Who does that care-work?

So what does emotional labor look like in academe? In a word, service. But it also carries the heavy burden of behaving the way we are expected, to enact the academy as a chosen profession. As Katherine shares:

In addition to that stress, which no new mother needs, I found out that one of the graduate students was threatening me because he was not getting a good grade in the course (never mind that he didn't turn in any of the assignments prior to my departure). My husband, fearing for my safety, accompanied me with our baby to the office hours at the end of term to make sure I would be safe.

Emotional labor is also very apparent in the stories of Heather and Chris. From Chris: “even though group and organizational communication research and literature tells us that socio-emotive facilitation is *necessary* for any group to properly function,” she learned that when labeled ‘service’ (and done by women?) it isn't valued. From Heather: “Somewhere along the path I was coached into not asking for help, not showing weakness, moving—*some may say plowing*—forward despite obstacles... Much of this was learned behavior through the academy and the competitive graduate school environment. As I reflect back, there is no single statement or female professor that emulated this behavior, but rather all enacted this mindset.” Academia is not void of emotions, yet emotions appear unaccounted for in academia.

## Concluding Thoughts

Neither the narratives, nor the authors, intend this paper to disparage either the concept of mother/mothering or emotional labor, but rather to illustrate how emotional labor and the work-life balance/challenge shapes our identities as teacher-scholars and as individuals. Indeed, Maureen's story provides a powerful and affirming example of the ways that embracing mother-learned lessons can enrich our lives and perhaps even society: "My success in my professional life is not despite my role as a parent. Indeed, I have had no richer preparation for my work as a Professor of Communication than my experiences as Sam's mother."

While Maureen has beautifully managed to blend her identity as a mother with her work as a professional and professor, motherhood vs. the professoriate is one of several struggles our storytellers shared in terms of their attempts to shape, share, craft and sometimes defend their identity. Katherine engaged in legal battles *because* she was a woman in what could rightfully be labeled a misogynistic culture. The drama she reports around her pregnancy reinforces the burdens women routinely face when their identity includes "mother." Additionally, although she co-founded a successful non-profit media literacy organization, that part of her identity was ignored in her promotion appeal:

When I went back to full-time teaching in my department in fall, 2009, I was still acting as Education Director of the growing non-profit Media Literacy organization while taking on all my full-time teaching duties again, and becoming Director of the new Communications interdisciplinary major. My children were, at the time, 10 and 7 years old. I was the super-mom, super-worker of the decade. It was time, I thought, to go through this whole promotion to Full Professor process again.

Chris was explicitly advised to hide/deny her identity as a mother. Heather has multiple identities: "31 year old mother of a toddler, cancer patient, assistant professor, and program director" that she contends with as she does her job and juggles chemo. Cheryl is in a double bind in a culture that devalues women who age; she is devalued because she is a woman who doesn't look her age; her professional identity is at war with her physical reality.

The stories provided are genuinely meant to encourage discussion, debate, and policy reform. They are also intended to provide a sense of catharsis for those women writing, and a sense of sisterhood through shared experiences for the women reading. We do not have a magic solution nor do we believe that a single solution exists that would work for all disciplines across all institutions. We believe that a conversation must first exist to not only identify problems, but also to see what is working for women in the academy. Lastly, the hope is that others in the academy—including men—might find some solace and resonance with the narratives discussed.

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