Exploring Female Academics' Resiliency during the pandemic

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Abstract

Academics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) faced difficulties during the pandemic when moving from face-to-face instruction to online learning and teaching platforms. In particular, female academics were challenged to find unique and innovative methods of merging their professional responsibilities with personal commitments amid COVID-19 restrictions. In response to Harris's (2022) endorsement of the fact that resiliency could be part of the solution in future-proofing education systems, three female academics from different geographic locations question how they maintained their personal and professional resiliency, and how their resiliency compared before and after the pandemic. This collaborative autoethnographical study was based on an epistemological interpretivist paradigm and used in vivo and descriptive coding to place the researchers' narratives into themes and sub-themes including personal issues of blurred work boundaries, isolation from friends and family, concern for others' health and the sacrifice of family time. Professional themes included 'compassion fatigue' when meeting student needs, demands as 'mothering' academics, and a desire for socialisation. It was found that resiliency was maintained both personally and professionally, but as a process rather than being measured in binary terms. Interestingly, it was strengthened when participants cultivated optimistic attitudes whilst taking the opportunity to 'nest' and practice 'self care' leading each participant to be more resilient after the pandemic, than before. Strategies are suggested for future proofing female academics' resiliency as they transition to the new post-pandemic normal. Whilst research is available about how to maintain *personal* self care and *professional* development, this study is unique as it identifies the benefits for professional self care. Also, as an autoethnographic study the findings speak for female academics whose voices are normally heard as researchers, but are not researched themselves.

Keywords: personal resilience, professional resilience, autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, mothering academics, compassion fatigue

Introduction

When the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic in March of 2020 (Mitchell et al., 2021) academics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), whether identifying as male, female or non-binary, were overwhelmed and overworked. They faced high levels of stress when creating technological tools and platforms for the classroom (Martinez-Garces et al., 2020) coinciding with COVID-19 restrictions, but also faced "compassion fatigue (Litam et al., 2021, p. 384)" when alleviating student worry and concern. In this study, three female academics from different geographic locations draw on their experiences of balancing their personal and professional responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this research they question how they maintained their personal and professional resiliency, and how their resiliency compared before and after the pandemic.

Working virtually together for a number of years, the participants came to this research with a joint interest to understand the effects of the pandemic as they adjusted to new normals, prompted by Harris's (2022) endorsement of the fact that resiliency could be part of the solution in future-proofing education systems. As a qualitative collaborative autoethnography (CAE), this research took an inductive approach to data collection and analysis. Each participant responded individually to the research questions by drawing on diary entries, emails, social media posts and journal extracts written during the pandemic. Each account was coded through thematic analysis and then cross referenced between participants (Chang et al., 2013). A number of themes and sub-themes emerged (Braun & Clarke, 2013) which were developed into further concepts and ideas. This approach enabled the researchers to identify overarching trends whilst ensuring that individual voices were not lost. Ethical considerations were taken in accordance with the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) for independent researchers.

As a CAE piece of research, this chapter provides space for the participants to express themselves and use narratives, reflections and thoughts as a form of catharsis when transitioning to the next normal. The results are not expected to be generalisable, but rather to bring light to the resiliency of female academics, particularly of those who 'mother' (CohenMiller & Izekenova, 2022) whilst balancing home and work commitments. The findings in this study are symbolic of female academics whose voices are normally heard as researchers, but are not researched themselves.

Literature Review

Understanding resiliency

Definitions of resiliency often focus on recovery from a threat (Luthar, 2006) or involve the sustainability of purpose, goals, and meaning following adversity (Murray & Zautra, 2012). Whether pertaining to resiliency *outcomes* or *processes*, Isaacs (2018) states that resiliency entails coping with adversity and learning from it. He refers to Masten (2001) who believed that even if people are not naturally resilient, the skill can be learned as an "ordinary magic", as it is the *ordinary*, and not *extraordinary* human adaptive response to tragedy (Masten, 2001, p. 56). He (2018) proposes that the *lack* of resiliency is abnormal, but acknowledges that "some are more naturally resilient than others" (Isaccs, 2018, p. 219). The development of resiliency is explored further by Ungar (2013) who states that "nurture trumps nature when it comes to predicting resilience (Ungar, 2013, p. 258)." He states that Masten's (2001) "ordinary magic (p. 56)" concept requires an environment that optimises the conditions needed for survival and explains that those from chronically disadvantaged environments may appear not to be resilient due to a lack of motivation, low sense of agency, or a genetic predisposition to anxiety but that an "optimal environment will cause the majority… to flourish (Ungar, 2013, p. 258)." This idea that resiliency can be nurtured and developed is defended by Isaacs (2018) who writes that it can be increased if optimism and the human need to hope is practised. This aligns with Ong et al.'s (2006) concept that to be resilient one should approach a crisis through a positive lens. Southwick et al. (2014) suggest that to be resilient is an *active* decision "like sobriety that must be frequently reconfirmed" (Southwick et al., 2014, p. 3).

Similarly, Litam et al. (2021) suggest that resiliency can be cultivated if active decisions are made orienting individuals towards wellness and health. Pietrzak and Southwick (2011) believe that resiliency occurs at differing degrees and could be considered as a trait, process or an outcome, rather than being measured with a "binary approach" of whether it is present or not (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011, p.2). One can, therefore, conclude from this research that rather than agreeing on a single definition of resiliency, it is instead more important to identify how people experience, enhance and re-define it, depending on the context and situation.

The impact of student needs on teacher resiliency

When the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic on March 11, 2020 by the World Health Organisation (Mitchell et al., 2021) HEIs adapted teaching and learning strategies to ensure the continuation of academic standards whilst emphasising the safety of students and faculty members (Universities UK, 2020). Teaching faculty who had experience with altering course materials and assessment for online, digital or small group delivery were encouraged to share good practice (McCauley, 2021) but in addition to gearing lessons towards digital delivery, teacher workloads were greatly impacted by student stresses and concerns (BPS, 2022, para 1).

Besser et al. (2020) researched the experiences of 1,200 Israeli undergraduate students from five universities who abruptly transitioned to online learning during the pandemic. Martin et al.'s (2013) Adaptability Scale and an online questionnaire gauged student adaptability and levels of coping which, when analysed, indicated that traditional face-to-face instruction was preferred to online learning. Besser et al. (2020) found that the sampled students had increased feelings of stress and isolation "as well as negative mood… and lowered levels of concentration and focus, motivation and performance" (Martin et al., 2013, p.12). Unlike Besser et al. (2020), Verawardina et al. (2020) and Liu et al.'s (2020) studies indicated that students responded well to the use of online learning, with their research suggesting that it eased disruptions to education caused by COVID-19. Verawardina et al. (2020) espouse that online learning has economic advantages in Indonesia because students can shorten learning time by engaging directly with academic materials. However, they acknowledge a "digital divide" between university students based in rural areas, as opposed to those in urban locations (Verawardina et al., 2020, p. 391). Moreover, they emphasise that HE teachers need to encourage the socialisation of students.

Faculty at Northwestern University in America noted that students had additional financial worries, time constraints and health concerns during the pandemic and so they implemented a series of mentoring initiatives to ease these concerns (Babcock et al, 2020). Zoom calls were also implemented to help home-schooling parents, in which members of the leadership team read stories to the children, allowing working mothers to have "have thirty minutes of downtime" (Babcock et al., 2020, p. 62). Babcock et al. (2020) found that learners benefited from feeling that faculty members understood their circumstances, however, teaching faculty also needed connection, support, community and resources during the pandemic.

In a 2022 study, The British Psychological Society found that 60% of surveyed university staff either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' that their workload was manageable during the pandemic (BPS, 2022, para 1). Support for HE teaching faculty was also investigated by Martinez-Garces et al. (2020), who believed that many academics faced high levels of stress when creating technological tools and platforms for the classroom. Delgado-Gallegos et al.'s (2021) study evaluated the vulnerability of academics in Mexico during the pandemic. They measured anxiety, preparedness and resilience of 220 participants using online questionnaires and adapted COVID-19 stress scales. The researchers commented that out of the HE teachers who were sampled

> the most affected participants were the ones doing online teaching due to the transformation of in-person teaching to a virtual classroom and the growing demands of the students and schoolwork. (Delgado-Gallegos et al., 2021, p. 7).

This reviewed literature indicates that the stress and anxiety experienced by students and teachers can be minimised if preparations and support are available from HE institutions (Besser et al., 2020; Verawardina et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Babcock et al., 2020). Flexible modes of study are helpful when transitioning away from face-to-face learning (UNESCO, 2020; QAA, 2020) and can potentially have economic advantages if living in urban areas with consistent internet access (Verawardina et al., 2020). However, it is important to prioritise the socialisation of students (Verawardina et al., 2020) through digital means. Furthermore, proper planning and communication are important (Babcock et al., 2020; Liu et al. 2020) which ultimately leads to heavier workloads for teaching faculty (Babcock et al., 2020; Martinez-Garces et al., 2020; Delgado-Gallegos et al., 2021).

Challenges faced by female academics during the COVID-19 pandemic

Stress and Anxiety- Isolation

Stress and anxiety were experienced by many HE academics during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether identifying as male, female or non-binary (Babcock et al., 2020; Martinez-Garces et al., 2020; Delgado-Gallegos et al., 2021) due to the quick need to alter classroom content and delivery whilst struggling with "compassion fatigue" (Litam et al., 2021, p. 384) from offering extensive student support. Gao and Sai (2020) argue that there is a need for research pertaining to the single female response to the pandemic, however, given that they are often dealing with isolation and loneliness as social distancing measures affect

physical and psychological well-being. Inevitably, single female teachers miss out on spontaneous conversation with colleagues if working virtually, but are also isolated from family and community if living alone during the pandemic (Bissessar, 2022; Gao & Sai, 2020).

Blurred boundaries

Kasymova et al. (2021) identify the term *academics who mother* (AWM) as those who have teaching and/or scholarly responsibilities in a HEI and who perform child rearing responsibilities attributable by cultural and social norms to mothers (p. 420). Whilst many fathers took full responsibility for childcare provision during the pandemic, literature suggests that following the closure of schools, mothers took over a larger share of increased childcare and home-based schooling responsibilities (Andrew et al., 2020; Del Boca et al., 2020; Hupkau & Petrongolo, 2020). During the pandemic, AWM found themselves faced with a multitude of professional constraints and limitations as they considered their family's needs (Ali & Ullah, 2021; Azim & Salem, 2022; Gonçalves, 2019) and navigated blurred boundaries between home and work.

CohenMiller and Izekenova (2022) conducted a study using photovoice to capture the lived experiences of 68 mothering academics in nine countries and found that there were six common themes among the participants: blurred boundaries between work and personal life; ingrained gender roles; overwhelming responsibilities and emotional burnout; decrease in research output; and a struggle to balance children's needs. Additional studies have shown that female academics were overwhelmed with increased responsibilities and were unable to publish, complete grant proposals or engage in scientific research as extensively as their male counterparts (Ali & Ullah, 2021; Andersen et al., 2020; Frederickson, 2020; Gabster et al. 2020). To counteract this dearth of academic research output, Motherscholar Collective et al. (2021) conducted action research using focus groups and interviews to determine and meet the needs of AWM. Created by mothers with young children to counteract the constraints faced by mothering scholars during the pandemic, this organisation was able to empower its members through collaboration in meaningful research. The authors suggested that similar groups can be implemented in other HEIs to provide support and allow AWMs to grow and develop academically.

In their study, Kasymova et al. (2021) document how American AWM had to reorganise work commitments and childcare throughout the pandemic. Data was collected through 131 online surveys and 20 qualitative interviews with female-identified academics who were recruited from a social media group. Their findings suggested that during the pandemic the pressure on AWM was immense and discovered that there was an inability to meet institutional expectations and a sense of unsuccessfully juggling work and family life. They proposed that HEI should acknowledge the struggles faced by AWM and offer flexible solutions like additional childcare and leave policies (Kasymova et al., 2021).

Methodology

Auto-ethnography

Autoethnography draws on a researcher's own experience as a basis for scholarly analysis (Poulos, 2021). Collaborative autoethnography extends this study to a group, enabling a broader exploration of a phenomenon (Chang et al., 2013). The universal, communal experience of COVID-19 makes this topic a good fit for an approach explicitly incorporating the lived experience of multiple researchers (Kemp et al., 2015). Research teams, particularly female-identifying, have used CAE to explore experiences during COVID-19 (e.g. Azim & Salem, 2022; Leigh et al., 2022; Vakil et al., 2022).

Participants

Prior to this research, we had been colleagues for several years, although during the pandemic we taught virtually for several HEIs. We all had extensive experience teaching online before the pandemic. We have shared (as academics, women, parents) and divergent (cultural, geographic, parenting/empty-nester) identities that may be illuminated by the comparison and contrasting of accounts.

Table 1: Researcher characteristics

Researcher	Geographical information	Home situation	Age	Academic role
EP	British living in the US	Living with husband, son and dog. Son was	mid-40s	Online postgraduate psychology

		12 years old at the start of the pandemic.		programme: Senior lecturer, programme director for part of the pandemic period
CB	Trinidadian living in Guyana	Living alone. Son is 25 and lives in Trinidad. Does not have any relatives in Guyana.	mid-50s	Senior Lecturer. Director for the Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning and Interim Director Educational Onlining Support Services
KM	British American living in Ireland	Living with two primary school aged children, husband and dog. Family members live in another country.	mid-40s	Lecturer and research supervisor for two British based universities during the pandemic.

Data collection

Data collection began on invitation to the project team and then each member assembled individual accounts, based on prompts created by CB:

1. How did I maintain professional resilience during the pandemic?
2. How did I maintain personal resilience during the pandemic?
3. How does my professional and personal resilience compare before and during the pandemic?

Responses were based on memory and other contemporaneous documentation like photographs, journal entries, social media posts and emails which enabled cross-referencing, elaboration and the establishment of a timeline. Initial accounts varied in structure from a set of bullet pointed recollections to narratives with photos.

Once individual accounts were created, group collaboration began. We read each other's accounts, which inspired reflection and elaboration. Then, we added to the narrative by posing further questions (Chang et al., 2013). For instance, CB asked EP to elaborate on work relationships that she accessed during a challenging period. EP asked CB and KM about the divergence between our previous experience of online teaching and the unexpected difficulties that arose.

Analytic strategy

Chang et al. (2013) recommend blending individual and group analysis and then combining this with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These decisions allowed the emergence of ideas from multiple individual perspectives to develop, reinforce and challenge interpretations between the research team (McDonald et al. 2022). An inductive approach was used, giving the data-driven analysis the potential to reveal new topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Each researcher created her own codes and initial themes based on her personal account regarding notable concepts in the data.

The driving consideration during this stage was 'how does this relate to resilience?' which was a broad question allowing a wide range of concepts to be identified whilst pertaining to the overall research questions. Each researcher used her own strategies within analysis. KM looked for opportunities to apply newly generated codes and assessed their frequency. Although it would be inappropriate to solely conduct a qualitative analysis using frequency (Cohen et al., 2018) this was a useful tool to identify commonly occurring codes, whilst also grouping less frequent codes. EP generated higher-level codes after initial coding and used that to group data to form a basis for themes. CB examined all the narratives, coded the data semantically and latently before creating a conceptual framework of the recurring themes. She used Saldaña's (2021) descriptive and in vivo coding as a means of generating themes which is recommended for ethnographic studies.

Each researcher constructed a brief account of the key themes with excerpts from her narrative. Once our initial ideas were captured, we reviewed each other's accounts, coding and initial writing. This inspired a further round of coding and writing when revisiting our individual analyses with novel ideas. These individual analyses, ideas and codes were shared via Google Documents to identify general themes, with a particular attention to convergences and divergences among accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Whereas CB found three overarching themes with sub-themes, EP and KM found five themes, with overlaps and

recurring ideas. These ideas are reflected in the researchers' responses to the three research questions. We were able to view, comment on and respond to each other's ideas and observations whilst making changes to the shared documents when collaboratively developing ideas.

Ethical considerations

There is a lack of clarity regarding ethical guidelines for collaborative autoethnography. As this research involves human participants, it requires ethical evaluation. We followed the guidelines in the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021) for independent researchers. We reviewed the project carefully, using the proforma provided by the BPS, created information and informed consent sheets to set the terms for the research, which we agreed and signed (see Appendix A). We recognised that as this project relates to a difficult time, we could ask to remove or anonymise text we would rather not share publicly. Additionally, we emphasised that we could withdraw specific data from the publication and edit or change written representations of ourselves in the research. We each completed and signed informed consent to formalise our agreement with the terms of the research.

Data Analysis

Three themes were identified when reviewing researcher coding, reflecting the three research questions. Each theme contained several sub-themes, outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Themes and sub-themes

Theme	**Sub-themes**
Personal challenges	Blurred work boundaries Sacrificing family time Isolation from family and friends Concern for family and friends' health
Professional challenges	Coping with students' needs Desire for socialisation Demands on Mothering Academics
Opportunities	Self-care Nesting

Personal Challenges

Commented [1]: I am reading the quotes to see what we can delete.

Commented [2R1]: Yes, I think the quotes can be reduced with '...' or paraphrasing a little more.

Commented [3R1]: Yes...I was thinking shortened....but I started reading them and do not see where I can cut. Maybe we can leave it and see what the peer-reviewers say. What do you think?

Commented [4R1]: Agree. I just emailed you both- I think we should leave it to the peer reviewer.

This theme reflects how each participant combined work with their social networks. There were blurred boundaries when giving up family time to manage professional demands and workloads. Additionally, we were isolated from family and friends and often worried about their health and well-being. These issues are explored below.

Blurred work boundaries

We all struggled balancing home and work commitments even though this wasn't apparent at the time. CB indicated, "Personally, I let the line between work and home become blurred as I allowed my professional life to not only encroach but control my personal life." KM also shared similar issues, "...it was acceptable to contact teachers on the weekends or during the evening." We allowed this blurring, however, because we were responding to perceived demands from others, without realising the toll this took. The very nature of working from home contributed to this blurring. EP shared:

> The main thing that changed was having the family at home all the time and the adjustments that required, so it's difficult to pry apart the 'professional' from the personal. In fact, at the time, I was intrigued by this blurring of boundaries and did mull over ways to investigate it.

Congruently, EP noted one of her male colleagues demonstrating the blurred of home and work whilst caring for his infant during phone calls. It stood out because previously men were less likely to allow family to encroach upon work (e.g., the viral 'BBC Dad' interview, Chappell, 2017), but now their inability to separate roles due to working from home may have contributed to normalising the merging of personal and professional responsibilities. To minimise this blurring in the future, KM indicated that after the pandemic she worked to set healthy boundaries between home and work. She stated that she was "more resilient… due to my ability to put my work load and private life into perspective" and wrote of "being reluctant to volunteer for extra work as I value being home with my husband and children instead of multi-tasking in the hopes of furthering my professional practice." We all experienced increasing professional demands and the lack of physical distance from our workplace contributed to these difficulties. Managing this blurring required recognition and deliberate action.

Sacrificing family time

Frequently, family time and needs were sacrificed. KM discussed homeschooling her children during the day because of her husband's demanding job, and then teaching online in

the evenings. “Ultimately, I slept in later than normal from staying up late to complete work. This also reflected on the children’s sleeping habits, as our ‘school hours’ started later each day.” KM was happy to shape her day around her husband’s heavy workload. However, her own students were frequently overwhelmed with similar pressures:

> HE students had little time to complete assignments because they struggled with homeschooling their children or they had additional responsibilities due to their own professional settings adjusting to online provision. A number of my students stopped submitting work if they got COVID, too.

The various demands were like dominos, falling onto us, as academics. EP described:

> One of the difficult things I found was a sense of supporting so many other people. We had a lot of students coming to the programme because the lockdowns and work from home had provided more time for them to pursue other life objectives or they’d re-evaluated choices due to the massive disruption, but I think many people also overestimated their own resources to manage.

Moreover, CB found that her work commitments became all-encompassing due to student and faculty demands. However, as a single mother of an adult child and separated from her immediate family during the pandemic, she did not feel the same need to balance her work commitments with her home life as KM and EP.

Isolation from Family and Friends

All researchers were physically distant from some family, but perhaps having partner and child(ren) close helped EP and KM. CB’s sadness and isolation came through very strongly and showed how the differences in individual situations could be critical. CB shared:

> I remember the first Christmas I ever spent away from home was devastating for me. I was upset, depressed, and lonely. I spent a quiet and somewhat sad Christmas in 2020.

KM also stated, “National travel restrictions meant that we were not able to fly to visit family members for two years… I built up anger that my father, who had previously suffered a stroke, may be nearing the end of his life and I was being kept from visiting him because of government restrictions.” EP voiced similar concerns as she lamented:

> We have been unable to see family in person for over 2 ½ years at this point – we live in California and our family is mostly in Europe. However, we, like many people, established new routines and now have a group chat with my husband’s family, which we might not have otherwise done.

These comments exemplify the primacy of human connections and highlight the significant and necessary role that human connection plays in one's life. While technology provided some ways to cope with these changes, it could not address all of them. There was an ongoing emotional burden due to this separation.

Concern for Family and Friends' Health

All researchers experienced concerns about their family and friends' health. KM and CB lamented that they were unable to attend family funerals. CB shared, "The Sisyphean struggle for me was not seeing my family for two years. My father's declining health and my uncle's death made this struggle more poignant." Likewise, KM wrote about three family members who died of COVID-19 related complications. "We were not allowed to attend their funerals but also we were not able to visit my elderly parents for 18 months due to travel restrictions." She stated that the daily restrictions, lack of connection with friends and family and worry of infection were of constant concern. EP was concerned for her son's resilience:

> I have worried about my son's resilience and well-being. He was 12 when the pandemic started and is now 14. Most of his middle school (bar about 6 months at the beginning) has been 'strange'. However, again, I think he's seen positives as well as struggles. I have seen him develop a conscientious attitude to work and both value his time with friends even when he's complained about having to be back at school!

She believes her son was able to positively embrace the changes that COVID-19 brought with it. Being concerned about the well-being of family and friends ranged from worrying about everyday homeschooling challenges to experiencing multiple bereavements. It is noticeable, however, that our concerns were often directed outward and influenced by our relationships with others. As in the previous sub-theme, these were ongoing concerns without an available solution.

<u>Professional Challenges</u>

The pandemic frequently increased our workload and so our professional challenges impacted on our personal lives. This was exacerbated by pressures to cope with demanding and novel student needs whilst feeling a lack of social connection in the workplace. Furthermore, we explored our roles as mothering academics, finding a balance between personal (mothering) and professional (academic) responsibilities.

Coping with Students' Needs

As in our personal accounts, we encountered difficulties meeting the emotional and practical needs of others in our professional lives. EP and KM struggled with new situations but CB described flourishing professionally, and that meeting the needs of others seemed to benefit her. She stated, "As I read my reflection, I realise how much I used my career as a crutch to buttress my need for human contact and my alienation from family and friends." In particular, CB showed concern for teaching colleagues who needed assistance. She said, "It was difficult dealing with the technophobes and their anxiety towards emergency remote education." Overall, there were asymmetries in who gave and received support, and who seemed more entitled to flexibility and help. EP noted:

> Students were 'entitled' to a lot of support, extensions, compensations (such as uncapped re-sits) whereas academics were largely expected to work to pre-pandemic standards AND provide sympathy, understanding, flexibility and support.

In contrast, EP felt limited in *obtaining* help in her new role as programme lead. She spoke of feeling "somewhat guarded" because she was new to the leadership post but also responsible for colleagues' well-being.

We all felt extra pressure on our professional practice when dealing with students' physical, emotional and mental health. Working with teacher trainees, KM commented about students who struggled to meet their course requirements due to restrictions at placement schools. This led to daily student questions that were out of her area of knowledge. In addition, EP shared:

> Many experienced ongoing challenges with work, family, sickness, taking care of children, and I struggled with the need to try to support and help them, even while I was dealing with similar issues (a son at home, for instance).

Blurred boundaries between personal and professional commitments led to a higher degree of connectivity and interactivity than normal. KM felt that her resiliency was aided, at times, by helping students alleviate their workloads. She said, "I took on extra work knowing it would ease some of their strain." She took a positive outlook when framing the demands on her, whereas EP felt unfairly treated in this asymmetrical relationship:

> It was a bizarre situation where everyone was dealing with similar issues, but some people also were still responsible for supporting others at the same time, which I felt increased the burden – probably across all professionals such as teaching, medicine and other 'caring' and service roles.

Often, the challenges caused by the pandemic were novel, which meant we didn't always have solutions at hand, while students tended to look to faculty to solve their difficulties, which were also increased by the various social, medical and work pressures caused by the pandemic.

Desire for Socialisation

Our accounts identified the desire for increased socialisation with peers during lockdowns. For instance, CB stated:

> It was not so much the learning losses but the loss of that physical discussion with our students and peers in the corridors, car parks, by the water coolers, in the ladies room inter alia. The human part of us was being constrained and constricted.

Whilst they could not compensate for face-to-face human interactions, she facilitated virtual professional development workshops which afforded her the opportunity to meet weekly with peers to learn, share, and reflect in a virtual community of practice. Similarly, this was reflected in EP's narrative:

> Because I was in a new role AND an existing online situation, there wasn't the same sense of professional community and sharing of issues, meaning I often felt quite isolated in dealing with them, although online tools like Teams did help somewhat.

EP and CB felt professionally isolated from peers; CB specifically missed face-to-face connections. She shared about her first Christmas away from her family:

> Many days, the only people I came into contact with were taxi drivers, shop attendants and my landlady. I felt socially isolated and longed for more socialisation.

EP had to build relationships with colleagues in her new professional role, relying on technology. Again, this shows the interaction of many factors (changing job roles and the pandemic, and possibly personal preferences for social connection) influenced how we dealt with the situation. CB shared that having returned for her first face-to-face training session, she found herself having to be reacquainted with human interactions. She joked that being in the back of the room she wished she could have increased the volume and the size of the screen so she could hear and read the content better. It was as if she had to, once again, readjust to the next normal.

Demands on Mothering Academics

Through our accounts, we noticed how frequently our *mothering* experiences emerged in our personal and professional lives. With children at home, KM and EP experienced a decrease in research output, unlike CB, a mother of an adult son. While not mothering a child at home, CB saw herself as conducting virtual hand holding with her peers initially, perhaps reflecting a widening of her 'mothering' role to colleagues. She stated:

> Albeit it, my son is 25 years old and lives in Trinidad, I felt that I was still a mothering academic; mothering the technophobes and digital immigrants as they navigated and negotiated the LMS Moodle and Zoom.

EP and KM had the added responsibility of working whilst homeschooling children due to school closures. KM stated, "Schools were closed for months in Ireland so my two children were given self-guided homework to complete and online tutorials…working and homeschooling was time consuming, but we spent more family time together." EP also discussed overseeing her son's school work whilst teaching online, "My son did school at my desk for the first few months of homeschooling (the end of his sixth grade year)..." Both also wrote about instilling the importance of new routines to help children cope during the pandemic. EP said:

> We had family routines, particularly early on, for instance, as a family sitting down and watching various TV series. Our son was lucky that he could do some of his activities, with his music lessons shifting online. He continued his fairly new sport of fencing, which we hosted in our garage.

KM agreed that routine and structure became integral both for her as a AWM, and for her children during the pandemic.

All three researchers experienced increased professional workloads during the pandemic. CB stated that she was "available to colleagues 24/7 via email, WhatsApp and cellular phone"; essentially 'mothering' her colleagues by setting up week-long training sessions to help them understand online pedagogy. KM's workload was impacted by chasing student work for those who failed to submit assignments due to their own work-related stress and pandemic-induced anxieties. Additionally, students were encouraged to schedule live meetings with tutors rather than corresponding via concise emails. "This led to an extra workload out of normal school hours to accommodate meeting student teachers and their mentors." This connects with previous observations about who is permitted to make demands and require flexibility in this timeframe.

Previous experience working in online education impacted the researchers differently during the pandemic. KM mentioned "this helped my reliance when working online as it was very natural for me to interact with students and colleagues as systems were already in place." While familiarity with online modes was potentially a strength, it was also a weakness due to the lack of flexibility to new situations. EP felt it created stress and led to a disconnect between her previous experience and her students' new expectations. Furthermore, CB commented about colleagues being unwilling to accept the new-normal of teaching online instead of face-to-face. EP shared:

> The sense of what online students were seeking also changed. I have taught online for around 10 years.... Students coming into the programme seemed to expect the kind of virtual learning that they were hearing about [and] there seemed a desire to use the programme to replace the social activities that were lacking.

Previous experience provided an experiential resource for all of us, but this interacted with changing student expectations, shaped by the well-publicised switch to synchronous virtual learning, which was incompatible with how online learning has traditionally been offered. On reflection, EP suggests that the benefits of previous online learning experience were potentially unhelpful, when they led to a lack of flexibility in adjusting to new demands, such as increased faculty availability and replacement social experiences for students.

Opportunities

Positive themes emerged during the pandemic for the participants, including an awareness of the need for self-care and a focus on the importance of 'nesting' in the home.

Self-Care

KM and EP frequently referred to personal self-care in their accounts, whilst CB instead focused on finding opportunities for professional development as a way of caring for her professional self. EP mentioned having time to do yoga, reading and walking once other responsibilities, such as school drop-offs, were removed. She said, "My husband set up our guest room as an exercise room, adding my yoga mat and eventually an exercise bike that he managed to get before there was a huge run on equipment!" Similarly, KM shared that she spent time outside walking her dog. She said, "We also purchased second hand gym equipment and exercised at home. I still haven't returned to group exercise for lack of time, but also a fear that the fee will be lost if classes are cancelled due to the ongoing pandemic."

CB found it harder to "balance my professional and personal lives" due to slipping boundaries and perhaps, lack of family in geographical proximity. She indicated that, "The increased professional workload meant that I had little time for myself and self-care." She segued, "I took and still take little time for self-care and to practise positive personal resilience. It is still a struggle for me and one that I am hoping I will be able to overcome by the end of this year." However, she was successful in professional growth, new responsibilities and attendance at various webinars and conferences. She explained:

> Within my professional life, I was able to [virtually] present in South Africa (I had to get up at 3am but it was worth it), present a keynote speech in Jamaica, present at a conference in the USA and many other places which would have taken time, effort, and money. Therefore, during the pandemic the world really became a global village.

CB's account suggests that part of the resilience response is personal meaning-making, where she focused more on gains than losses.

During the pandemic we exhibited growth in either our personal or professional lives, which then related to our home situations. EP proposes that there is potentially an element of 'professional self-care', involving professional development, time for research and engaging with colleagues that both she and KM found difficult to attain. Perhaps this relates to a mothering perspective of putting others first, whether individuals feel entitled to take time for themselves, and what is prioritised in these situations.

Nesting

All three researchers engaged in nesting activities. CB shared:

> I also started building a house in Guyana, close to the Demerara River. I was and still am involved in all aspects of construction. In anticipation of the end of the pandemic and decorating my home, I bought two mint green seahorses to place on my office desk.

KM and EP both wrote of making their home life more eventful by ordering family take-out meals once a week during the pandemic. Additionally, KM made time for home improvements by decorating and painting rooms. She added, "Now that restrictions have been lifted, I continue to take on art projects when I have free time and value the process of creating art more than before the pandemic." By choosing to decorate rooms in her home instead of engaging in additional professional activities she reflects the act of a mothering academic by prioritising the improvement of her family's surroundings. KM also became resourceful when celebrating family events during the pandemic:

> I became much more creative at home during times like my children's birthdays. There was no way to have parties or go shopping for presents, so items were ordered online and delivered weeks in advance. I designed party games to play in the garden and the four family members actively celebrated together since we couldn't go out.

In examining the activities involved in *nesting* according to the narratives, CB perceived symbolic interactionism as evident in the types and meanings of activities in which the researchers engaged during the pandemic. For all three researchers, resilience was perceived to exist along a continuum. In EP's case, for instance, it was a choice to get out cocktail glasses to enjoy margaritas; making family take-out meals more special occasions. For both EP and KM the importance of family time and activities increased and so they made the everyday special, whenever possible.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to determine how the three female academics maintained and/or augmented their personal and professional resilience, both during and after the pandemic. When analysed auto-ethnographically, our personal accounts reflected themes of blurred work boundaries, isolation from friends and family, concern for others' health and the sacrifice of family time. Professionally, researchers struggled with meeting student needs, the perceived demands on them as 'mothering' academics, and their desire for socialisation. The opportunities for self-care and nesting were beneficial to all participants, however. When comparing and contrasting the participants' accounts it becomes apparent how themes intertwined and overlapped across both personal responsibilities and professional commitments. Similar conclusions were drawn by CohenMiller and Izekenova (2022) who found that 68 AWM were challenged with the normalised blending of home and work. There was a lack of clarity about expectations, while managing the needs of many people with calls on the participants' time, energy and attention.

In answering the research questions, these personal and professional blurred boundaries were integral to understanding how the participants maintained their resiliency. Each participant found that resiliency occurred at different degrees as a "process or an outcome" (Pietrzak & Southwick, 2011, p.2) rather than being measured in binary terms. Interestingly, in each case their resiliency was strengthened during the pandemic when they fostered positive and optimistic attitudes; all three participants referring to 'opportunities' within the pandemic taking time to 'nest', whilst KM and EP enjoyed family experiences and CB engaged in professional development as a method of self-care. Isaacs (2018) believes that resiliency can

be developed if optimism and the human need to hope is practised. As in Ong et al. 's (2006) research, the participants approached their experiences through a positive lens and combatted work related stress by taking opportunities to focus on their wellness and health (Litam et al, 2021).

As well as adopting a positive mental attitude, their resiliency was maintained and nurtured during the pandemic through creating welcoming environments. They found ways to 'build' during this time, whether redecorating, embracing their creative sides or reworking/building home spaces. However, there were different interpretations of each participant's need to improve the home environment. When analysing data, CB suggested we were trying to control our emotions and what was happening at the time by using these activities as a crutch, safety net or anchor to allay our anxiety and fears. EP proposed that the reduced options and narrow horizons available increased a focus on what was nearby. What was notable was that we engaged in action rather than stagnation, and all participants derived satisfaction from improving their environments and nesting as decorating, rearranging and building were therapeutic.

CB suggested that through nesting, the participants were attempting to control their home environments as a means of compensating for not being able to control what was happening globally. She stated that a house symbolises shelter, protection, warmth, and family and that the participants subconsciously felt that they needed protection and shelter from the vicissitudes of the pandemic. According to CB, in order to exercise their resilience they needed tangible validation of their desire not to be defeated during the pandemic. Her interpretation suggests that these actions and obvious need to show strength and grit exemplify that these women are forces to be reckoned with personally and professionally. Additionally, it points to components of resilience as a process, trait, and outcome. It reflects their emotional resiliency to build and nurture professionally and personally in tangible and intangible ways.

Viewing the pandemic through a positive lens by identifying personal and professional opportunities was integral to maintaining resiliency for all participants. For example, EP and KM valued spending more quality time with family than had occurred before the pandemic. However, it is important to recognise that whilst being near family members had its benefits, there were also considerable difficulties when integrating home and work demands. In line with other research (e.g. Alli and Ullah, 2021; Hupkau and Petrongolo, 2020; CohenMiller

and Izekenova, 2022), female academics' family responsibilities increased drastically during the pandemic. Also, individual situations played a role, so KM's duties increased more than EPs as her children were younger, as others have identified (Motherscholar Collective et al., 2021; CohenMiller and Izekenova; 2022). Although they valued the opportunity of spending time with their families, like in Kasymova et al. (2021)'s study, as mothering academics they needed to consciously find ways of juggling home and work demands.

CB also aided her resiliency by viewing the pandemic through the lens of opportunity. In the absence of being with family members as single and 'isolated socially', her resiliency was furthered by burying herself in work; using it as a balm to soothe her aching need to see her family and the lack of human contact/connection. This is similar to findings by Gao and Sai (2020) who concluded that single academics faced further issues during the pandemic such as isolation and lack of socialisation. This furthers the concept that while AWM could be considered a homogeneous group, individual situations make a huge difference, meaning it's difficult to generalise about the needs of all. CB had more time to increase her 'professional output' which aided her resiliency, whereas KM and EP had little time for 'professional self-care' as AWM.

The resiliency of the participants was challenged by a number of personal and professional situations. For example, in line with Litam et al. (2021) 'compassion fatigue' occurred when participants *mothered* their students and faculty members in the hopes of alleviating their stress and worry (p. 384). Also, beyond emotional support, the researchers did not always have the knowledge or resources that were required to find solutions when helping in unusual covid-led situations. Participants often bore more responsibility within the home, too. For example, KM's workload increased to enable her partner to meet professional demands. As with EP, ultimately this meant that their professional contributions to academia became less than their male counterparts. Unlike CB whose professional life flourished, they had little time for academic writing during the pandemic. This finding substantiates earlier findings (Ali & Ullah, 2021; Andersen et al., 2020; Frederickson, 2020; Gabster et al. 2020) that mothering academics were not able to engage in publishing, writing grant proposals and scientific research.

All participants identified that their resiliency was furthered when they utilised personal and professional self-care. While the need for personal self-care is commonly shared (NIMH, 2021) and professional development is commonly incorporated in academic life, for example

to maintain programme accreditation (BPS, 2019), the idea of 'professional self-care' is new. In this study 'professional self care' was seen when the academic was able to maintain interest, enthusiasm and motivation for academic life; whether through teaching or research. As this is a less common concept in literature it indicates that there is scope for future studies in this area.

It is evident from the data that each participants' professional and personal resiliency was stronger after the pandemic than before. The pandemic led participants to rise to new challenges even with the grind of an ongoing set of demands. This led to a wearing down over time, rather than a collapse. Literature on resilience mentions it as a process when citing examples of long-lasting events such as war and homelessness (e.g. Southwick et al., 2014). This research seems to differ from previous work, however, in that we are considering our responses within the trauma of COVID-19, rather than adapting afterwards. We asked questions about how we formulate, observe and construct the concepts we are studying. Also, we recognised ways in which we maintained our resilience in hindsight, despite not being specifically focused on resilience during the pandemic. Finally, we noted our own sense-making as ways of shaping our perceptions. Importantly, we asked to what extent resilience exists, versus it being something epistemic that comes into being through observation. This seems key.

Finding time, effort and energy to complete this study proved to be challenging given our personal and professional commitments. However, we capitalised on the benefits of the Internet and used Google Docs to our advantage to revise, share, critique, learn, and touch base with each other. It was a learning curve for each of us as we navigated and negotiated our new roles. However, what the culmination of this chapter has shown is that we have used our inner reserves of resiliency and stayed the course. Two of the researchers are mothering academics with young children, however, for a few months, we pooled our intellectual capital and created a tangible testament showing our dedication to academia. This chapter has proven that we can create a small team of collective mothering scholars to add our voices to the extant literature. As we raise our voices in the communal and individual sharing of our reflections, self-interrogations, and musings, we add this chapter as part of the evidence that we can nurture our professional and personal resiliency and transition to the next normal.

Recommendations for the future

Strategies for future proofing female academics' resiliency

Based on our shared experiences, we feel that there are a number of strategies for future proofing the resiliency of female academics. These are included below.

- It is recommended that *professional self-care* should be prioritised, to complement personal self-care and professional development.
- [Virtual] communities of practice should be formed to lend professional support and the sharing of ideas. Colleagues can initiate and conduct research whilst peer-reviewing each other's work. This will allow for camaraderie and reduce feelings of isolation (Bissessar, 2022; Motherscholar Collective et al., 2021).
- HEIs should continue to provide support for mothering academics who wish to conduct research in the form of paid accessible childcare, leave policies (Kasymova et al., 2021) and reduced work in the form of course and committee release (Azim & Salem, 2022).
- HEIs provide added support for students who are struggling, so that 'compassion fatigue' (Litam et al., 2021, p. 384) is reduced for female academics.

Disclaimer

The views, opinions and/or findings contained in this chapter are those of the authors and should not be construed as an official position, policy or decision by their affiliate institutions.

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