

# Embracing Multiple Roles: What We Learned about Graduate Students' Well-Being in this Pandemic

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*Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted everyone in a significant way. Many graduate students have shifted to work and study remotely, requiring major lifestyle adjustments. An increasing number of studies have explored graduate students' well-being as it relates to their studies from diverse perspectives, including remote learning and loss of peer connections. This article adds the stories of two Ph.D. students' experiences during the pandemic using autobiographical narrative inquiry. Personal tellings and retellings demonstrate the complexity of graduate life and of embracing multiple roles. We encourage a new perception of graduate students as a whole person whose studies are one of many complex factors affecting their well-being. The authors emphasize that graduate student well-being extends beyond academic settings. The study aims to shed light on the wholesomeness of a graduate students' well-being and apply this perspective to the post-pandemic context.*

*Keywords: COVID-19, well-being, graduate student, narrative inquiry*

## Introduction

COVID-19 has impacted people's lives. Due to the lockdown and the shift to work-from-home mode, graduate students in Canadian universities have had to make adjustments to their study, work, and personal life. Within all these changes, it is important to take care of graduate students' well-being. Currently, emerging studies explore graduate students' well-being in the COVID context, focusing on academic life (e.g., Alsandor & Trout, 2020; Guest et al., 2021); however, little research has concentrated on the messiness of graduate students' daily life in this pandemic era and the difficulties regarding balancing multiple roles, such as spouses and parents.

In this article, we aim to unpack our experiences and stories of being graduate students during the pandemic, while managing other roles in our lives – as a newly married wife (Yina) and as a mother of two young children (Emma). We will shed light on understanding graduate students' well-being, which is a complex and multidimensional interconnected notion (Sun et al., 2018) through our telling and retelling of experiences of balancing multiple roles in our remote Ph.D. program in 2019-2021.

Well-being is a significant concept with which to approach graduate students' holistic health and schoolwork, as people with higher levels of well-being could better deal with difficulties and challenges in the academic field and achieve a better quality of life (Henning, 2015). Regarding Ph.D. students' well-being, Marais et al. (2018) reveal that Ph.D. students are generally under high pressure, anxiety, and depression, and have great potential to develop mental health issues. Ph.D. students may worry about their career uncertainty and their relationship with their supervisor (Sverdlik et al., 2018). In addition, many graduate students experience self-questioning of their aptitude and achievement in academia and are likely to conceive themselves as frauds (Krause & Harris, 2019; Parkman, 2016). The imposter phenomenon is increasingly common in graduate students, and especially so among female students (Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008; Long et al., 2000). Students' identities also have a great impact on students' well-being (Turner & Tobbell, 2018).

The sudden arrival of COVID-19 has added another challenging layer to doctoral students' study and lives. It has disrupted the norm and students' usual routines. COVID-19 impacts everyone's life, not only graduate students, but also their families, and the mode and instruction of their universities and their programs. No one has a certain answer and solution for how to cope with the changes and uncertainties. Beyond reflecting solely on our study and research, we, two doctoral students in the field of education at two Canadian universities, use autobiographical narrative inquiry to tell and retell our stories around the complexity of our lives and our experiences in balancing multiple roles during COVID-19. We suggest that exploring and understanding graduate students' complex daily lives may help people understand graduate students' well-being from a holistic perspective.

## Methodology

Building on Dewey's theory of experience (1938), narrative inquiry is the study of experience as story. First and foremost, it is a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the

phenomenon of people's experiences. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt an articular view of experience as a phenomenon under study (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Autobiographical narrative inquiry, as the name suggests, studies the researchers' own experience. In this article, we hope to present a concrete, specific, and lively picture of Ph.D. students' experiences during the pandemic through an autobiographical narrative inquiry, avoiding being too technical, theoretical, or certain. Rather, we present first-hand accounts of personal experiences through storytelling that invite the audience into our space of sharing and evoke resonances, dissonances, and/or other layered feelings. Audience also shapes autobiographical narrative inquiry (Torgovnick, 2008; Zinsser, 1987). We envision our unseen audience in academia and a broader context of personal and social lives, and re-examine ourselves and our lived experiences in the inquiry alongside the audience. In telling and retelling our stories, we come to realize how complex it is to understand our experiences narratively and to see them as narrative phenomena. We thus made visible our commitments to return to our stories again and again in the narratives with conscious examination and new insights.

While examining our stories, we engage in intense and transparent reflection and reflexivity of our own positions, identities, cultural background, and social contexts. Thus we come to "know" something "without claiming to know everything" (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 961), a crucial dimension of self-examination, particularly as we are seeking to understand our experiences in a larger cultural, social, and institutional context during an unprecedented time of a global pandemic. By exploring our experiences during COVID-19 quarantine through individual and collaborative narratives, we begin to understand the institutional embeddedness in individual experiences and how these experiences are "narratively composed, embodied in people and expressed in practice" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 124). Keeping this curious position in mind, we bring forth rich stories that are authentic, resonant, and verisimilitudinous.

The inquiry offers us an invaluable chance to travel backward and forward in time, looking at our experiences through new lenses: the pieces we jotted down in journals on social media; the words we spoke with friends and family; the quiet thinking we never got the chance to organize; the memories we did not realize we have preserved—all become part of the rich field texts. We recall often feeling like we were fighting alone in an unnamed war when we were separated from our peers and mentors and kept away from the professional settings. We recall wondering about how our studying and working experiences could be different if we did not have to pursue a Ph.D. in a global pandemic. We recall our multiple identities and roles bumping against each other when we needed to wear all the different hats in one space at the same time. Our lived experiences of more than a year have been documented in writing, photos, conversations, and unorganized thoughts, out of which we later take resonant threads through reciprocal discussions and analysis.

Narrative inquiry seeks to provide insight that befits the complexity of human lives (Josselson, 2006). This is also the purpose of this collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry article. We hold the sincere hope that our tellings and retellings could contribute a valuable dimension to understanding and supporting Ph.D. students' well-being during challenging times.

## **Telling the Out-of-Balance Stories**

### *Yina's Experience*

On an afternoon of April 2021, we drove to Saskatoon to visit my husband's family. That morning, seeing that his work was not busy, my husband asked for time-off in the afternoon so we could leave early in the afternoon. He texted me around 10 a.m. and told me that he could leave work early around 11 a.m. before lunch break; then he would pick me up from my office on campus at 11:30 a.m. I was frustrated when I saw the text message. What I planned to work on for the rest of the morning and afternoon was totally ruined.

On the road trip to Saskatoon, my husband asked me, "Why do you look unhappy? What happened?" I shared that what I planned for my whole day was ruined. What I planned to write, to do for study and work, could not be done that day and it would be pushed to the next week. My frustration and unhappiness was not just from that Friday. It had accumulated through the past whole year, since the start of the pandemic.

Due to COVID-19, my husband was back in Edmonton from New Brunswick in March 2020, and started to work at home for the first several months. Later, he worked in the Edmonton office from nine to five every day. Even though

it was nice to gather together as a newly married couple, his return to Edmonton and us living together in a small basement suite disrupted my usual daily routine and my personal space was eroded. For example, while having virtual meetings, I had to move to my bedroom and turn on the background. Because of the limited space in the living room, my husband was always shown at the back. I used to study and work from noon till evening. However, since my husband's work schedule was a regular nine-to-five, we had to manage to have dinner together. Additionally, as we are a single vehicle household, if I needed to go to my office to work, he would drop me off on campus on his way to work in the morning and pick me up when he was off work in the afternoon. I felt uncomfortable about this new schedule. While both of us were working from home, I felt the boundary between academic life and personal life was blurred. For example, living in a small suite together, I had to find a specific angle at my desk to have video meetings to make sure he would not appear in my zoom window. As my work schedule seems flexible, my husband sometimes wanted me to spend time together in the afternoon and expected I could push my work to tomorrow. It took quite a bit of time for us to stop fighting about who would be in charge of what and it was hard to spend meaningful quality time together.

I was too stressed to finish my work. Even though my everyday schedule appeared flexible, I still needed to be physically and mentally ready to do writing and my work. Looking back at the past year, from March 2020 until April 2021, my progress on my thesis proposal was slower than I expected. Furthermore, aside from my doctoral research, the manuscript that I was working on was in progress with delay.

### *Emma's Experience*

I stared at the screen. A Zoom meeting was about to start in five minutes. It was not exactly an office, rather a desk next to a king-sized bed in my bedroom. The outline of my laptop was softened by the dim light—again, it was the bedroom lighting, not designed to shine bright. The reason I did not have a home office was that I never thought I would need one. It was certainly beyond my wildest imagination to start a Ph.D. in my bedroom, alone.

Three more minutes before the meeting started. I heard a knock on the door. I had locked it for the meeting. This was another reason why I chose to work in the bedroom. It was the only room in the house that had a lock. Before I could get up and respond, the knock became knocks, a string of unbalanced storms hitting on the wooden panel.

“Mommy! Come help me! Mommy!”

It was my daughter, Molly. She was five and in kindergarten. Like me, Molly was also “working” at home. Her working space was the living room, downstairs. She's in a Zoom meeting with her teacher and all the other kindergartners in her class. I could hear traces of sound, transmitted through the vibration of the house's wood structure, such as music, story reading, and a lot of times, the teacher's voice patiently asking the children to keep their platform muted.

Of course, I could not wear headphones. It would have been a good idea to focus on my task and block out the noises from downstairs. However, I needed to keep my senses open—watchful, even. “Just try to operate in a multithreaded way,” a piece of advice I received online from other parents who also worked at home when schools closed during the pandemic. Am I turning into a computer program? The “Doing A Ph.D. while Parenting During COVID-19 Challenge” does not sound very fun.

“Yes, baby. What do you need?” I shook the random thoughts away and opened the door.

It turned out to be just another troubleshooting task on Zoom, which is an ordinary occurrence nowadays. I helped Molly position herself in front of the screen again, both audio- and video-ready, and returned to my dimmed desk.

I checked the corner of my screen: thirty seconds left before the meeting.

## Retelling Our Stories: A New and Wholesome Perspective of Well-Being

### *Yina: Understanding the Complexity of Graduate Life*

During the road trip to Saskatoon and after sharing my experience with my husband, I started to reflect on my academic and personal life during this pandemic. Due to the pandemic lockdown, people were forced to stay and work from home. In March 2020, the beginning of the breakout of COVID-19 in Canada (Prime Minister of Canada, 2020), I thought theoretically this lockdown would not affect my life too much, since I am a graduate student who just needs a laptop, Wi-Fi, and books to continue my study. Unlike people whose work is required to be done in certain contexts, such as my husband, relatively speaking, I should not complain about work from home, as I am equipped with necessary physical tools. However, the experience was completely different than I expected.

I started to realize the complex web of relationships, events, materials and contexts in my life regarding achieving and maintaining a productive life and mental well-being as a graduate student. Elements of feeling and being well are complexly interconnected with each other (Huppert, 2014; Huppert & So, 2013; Seligman, 2011). For example, working at home has led to the loss of peer support, which has greatly reduced my motivation, and I constantly lose track of my work. I realized that chatting with other graduate students about our work could inspire me with my writing. The past year's experiences have helped me realize that my daily study and work is beyond having necessary physical materials. A productive and healthy study routine must also include other factors, such as balancing and managing personal obligations, having opportunities to be away from the computer to relax, having physical or at least virtual interactions with peers and colleagues, and having options to work in different physical environments (e.g., libraries, cafes).

My husband and I have lived in two different cities in Canada since we were married. However, the COVID-19 lockdown brought my husband back home and we lived together under the same roof in the past year, which broke my life balance in this pandemic era. It took us a long time to find a new balance within our shared lives. The blurred boundary between student life and personal life in the working-from-home context makes me feel overwhelmed and exhausted. I need to accept and react to the emerging needs regarding my family during what previously was my usual academic work time. For example, I feel obligated to have dinner together and spend time together during weekends; I feel guilty for not spending enough time together with my husband in the evenings while I am usually occupied with meetings with other graduate students; and my workspace is extremely limited while we both have video meetings during work-from-home.

All my past year's experiences have made me aware that a graduate student's life is complex. I should see myself as a human being, rather than just a Ph.D. student. Being a graduate student is part of my identity, but I am also a wife, a daughter, and a friend. Being well does not solely mean being productive in my studies, it means being well as a human being from a holistic perspective. The components that constitute each graduate student's life might be different, considering family situations, fundings, additional full-time/part-time work, etc. In addition, I also realize and acknowledge that all these identities are complexly interconnected with each other; as a whole, I am constructed by these identities.

Viewing graduate students' well-being through complexity thinking can offer some spaces of possibility (Cohen & Stewart, 1994). Complexity thinking allows me to recognize and understand the complexity of graduate students' lives and step beyond the simple perspective of a graduate student as only a student. Drawing on complexity perspectives (Davis & Sumara, 2006; Johnson, 2010; Gleick, 2011), it can be seen that graduate students' well-being demonstrates the characteristics of complex systems, including non-linearity, emergence, and unpredictability. In other words, well-being is multidimensional and each dimension collides with each other in complex, interconnected, and unpredictable ways. All the entanglements among diverse facets of a person's life are impacting his or her well-being.

Today, I have started to see graduate students' well-being from a holistic perspective rather than from merely that of the reductive notion of "student". From a traditional view, a graduate's academic study experience is a picture of linear progress, such as taking courses, writing proposals, doing research, and finishing a thesis. However, based on my experiences during the pandemic, nothing in life is developed in a linear way. With the sudden arrival of the pandemic and resulting emerging changes, I realize that I need to have the ability to cope with unpredictable events. COVID made me revisit my thesis topic and switch to a new, more manageable, one. Family life and student life are

mixed together and neither should be viewed separately from each other. These two facets of my life are connected together in a non-linear way and the emergent and unpredictable factors could at any time change what I have already planned. With this recognition, I have accepted the multiple roles in my life and have learned how to balance them.

### *Emma: Embracing Duality as Mother-Scholar*

The opening story painted a vivid picture of my life during the pandemic. Rather than saying that COVID-19 created new challenges, I believed that the quarantine scenario magnified the long-existing predicament. The dual roles “I” have—roles that used to present themselves independently in different contexts—now were forced to appear in the same physical space. The pressure of academic achievements and the responsibilities of mothering kept fighting for my time and energy. I had nowhere to escape and felt exhausted by this endless war. However, even when deeply caught in stress and pressure, like many women and other members of marginalized groups, I still believed that I “must be twice as good to go half as far” (Castañeda & Hames-Garcia, 2014, p. 272). Therefore, I took off my “mothering hat” and hid it when entering a makeshift professional academic space such as that created by the locked bedroom door during Zoom meetings. This was to affirm to myself and others that I was no less a professional than my non-mother colleagues. The internal and external pressure to be a superwoman and “do it all”—attending to all academic and domestic duties without fail; remaining unflappable in crises at work and at home; and exceeding all expectations with high productivity—has reached new peaks under the pandemic.

Finally, these unclimbable new peaks caused me to pause and re-examine my perspectives on the roles I have, to see the interwovenness of the academic and mother in me. Yes, I am aware of how institutional cultures often challenge, if not completely discount, the duality of our lives as mother-scholars. Also, I came to realize that changing the culture in our working space or in society at large is a slow process and sometimes is “far too insurmountable to take on” for an individual in a specific situation (Willey, 2020, p. 204). Therefore, I focused instead on the changes I could make by erasing the false binary line between mothering and being a Ph.D. student, and finding ways to make life more manageable, healthy, and productive. Many mother-academics (Childers, 2015; Gruner, 2008; McDonald Johnson, 2007; Pillay, 2007) have rejected the bifurcation of the two roles—mother and scholar, body and brain. Instead, academic ideologies and personal embodied experiences are so deeply entwined (Smith, 1987) that they together form the whole of a mother-scholar. Their important experiences enlightened and inspired me to inscribe mothering into my scholarship and embrace the positive interactions between the two roles.

Young (2015) pointed out that motherhood can benefit scholars. For mother-scholars, managing time well is a necessity due to the added responsibility of motherhood. In fact, research has suggested academics are much better at time management and finding productivity-boosting strategies after motherhood (Young, 2015). For example, when a mother tucks her child into bed, the hour before bed is a perfect time for dwelling on a research idea. In fact, it was in such moments—lying beside my daughters, humming a soft lullaby in the dark—that many of my research ideas were born. As a Ph.D. student, I often heard the myth that academics need scheduled uninterrupted hours to do any productive writing. My experience suggests that mothers are least likely to believe or practice this myth. As mothers, we understand the importance of scheduling and utilizing time whenever we can, even in short bursts, to get our tasks done—a valuable strength I came to acknowledge, particularly during the pandemic. Certainly, when the situation permits, it is healthy and essential that I allow myself to have some space and time of my own to devote to work for the purposes of productivity and a healthy mental state. Using a home-office for example, as mentioned in the opening story, or sometimes seeking short periods of uninterrupted time in the library with a little help from other family members, enables me to create this space and time.

Taking into account my background as a mother has also added great value and perspective to my research and helped me to re-balance my life amid COVID-19. I found that mothering increased my productivity as a researcher and writer. Not only did I become more organized and efficient, I also found that I had more stories to tell and more perspectives to share. In inscribing my mothering self on, instead of fighting against, my academic self, the professional aspect of my life was enriched by my personal experience as a mother and as a member of a larger community of parents. Often, I wrote while holding my younger daughter in my arms, or sitting with my older daughter when she was doing schoolwork. I pondered my research questions while playing with them on the living room rug. I saw a problem my daughters were having through the lens of my studies. I was inspired by my children and wrote about their stories in my scholarship. Many of my reading materials were covered by their scribbles and drawings. The “messiness” did not bother me at all. In fact, I overcame the previous urge to “hide” the evidence of my motherhood and proudly showed their artwork at professional occasions. With a little humor thrown in, the vibrant

colors on the pages made me and everyone else smile and brighten our days, sometimes even opening space for further discussions and exchanges of parenting experience during the pandemic. Maybe we (mothers or not) all needed to break down the binary of mother-scholar.

Childers (2015) pointed out the opposite poles that mothers and scholars are positioned at. Mothers are stereotyped to be “nature, feminine, bodily, irrational and wild”, while scholars are seen to be “masculine, logical, and rational” (p. 115). My experience, especially during the pandemic, contradicted this binary view. Like many mother-scholars, I am fully a mom to my children and fully a Ph.D. student devoted to my study, intertwining my motherly instincts and scholarly mind, within one body and brain. I was able to become a better scholar, thinker, and writer by embracing motherhood all together. Moreover, I am convinced that I became a better mother because of the knowledge and critical lenses I developed during my scholarship. Such realization released me from the intense pressure I was under in the beginning of the pandemic.

### Forward-Looking Thoughts: Beyond the Pandemic

To better support graduate students in Canadian universities in the post-COVID time, we feel it is significant for graduate students to share their diverse voices and their multiple stories during the pandemic with their peers, faculty members, and policymakers. Emerging studies appear, in terms of discussing and reflecting graduate students’ well-being in academic settings, to include concerns and challenges around remote learning (Damast et al., 2021; Ladha et al., 2021), difficulties for international and Indigenous students (Jenei et al., 2020) and female graduate students (Wu et al., 2021), as well as the disruption of research (Suart et al., 2021). To date, there have been few studies that intimately explore graduate students’ intertwined personal and professional journey, tapping into the difficulties they face beyond the academic context. Our article provides insights which are highly contextualized, which could help our readers and researchers better understand the challenges that some graduate students had or are currently facing.

COVID has exposed norms and magnified challenges faced even before this pandemic. We emphasize the multiple roles that many graduate students are trying to balance in their daily lives in ways that are not easy. While looking at the well-being of this group, we need to pay more attention to conceiving of graduate students as whole persons, rather than just focusing on concerns around their academic performance. Our experiences highlight that a graduate student’s wellbeing is multidimensional and complex. Their academic lives are closely interconnected with other elements in their personal lives, especially their family lives. We encourage people to consider graduate students’ well-being from a holistic perspective and carry on this awareness into the post-COVID era.

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