

A Day in the Life: An Examination of Women's Choices in the Academy

AMY BURNS

BARBARA BROWN

SARAH ELAINE EATON

KATHERINE MUELLER

University of Calgary

ABSTRACT: The choices facing academic women are rooted in expectations around gender roles and career aspirations, and the need to balance their private and professional lives. Through a thematic examination of personal narrative texts, the authors explored the challenges of pre-tenure female academics negotiating complex choices with goals to learn from these challenges and use them to help provide a model of community for other scholars exploring similar issues. Situated within a liberal feminist framework informed by the notion of collective care, action research was used to guide the creation of reflective narrative journals, and the data were examined using a protocol that involved team meetings and collaborative analysis. Five common themes emerged from the data: (a) job satisfaction, (b) time negotiation, (c) attention to others, (d) self-care, and (e) relationship building. Key outcomes point to the need for women to have choices and access to supportive and collaborative learning environments that promote wellness.

Keywords: female academics, wellness, work–life balance, collective care, job satisfaction, collaborative research

RESUMÉ: Les choix auxquels les femmes universitaires font face comportent des attentes sur les rôles reliés au sexe et aux aspirations professionnelles, ainsi que sur le besoin de bien équilibrer les aspects personnels et professionnels de leur vie. Au moyen d'une étude thématique de textes narratifs personnels, les auteurs ont exploré les défis que vivent les femmes qui débutent leur carrière universitaire et qui négocient des choix complexes. Le but était de connaître les défis qu'elles rencontrent afin de développer un modèle de

communauté pour d'autres universitaires explorant des questions semblables. Les auteures se sont servies de la recherche-action située au sein d'un cadre féministe libéral qui informe la notion de soins collectifs afin de créer des journaux de réflexion narrative. Elles ont analysé de façon collaborative leurs données au moyen d'un protocole lors de réunions d'équipe. Cinq thèmes sont ressortis de leur analyse: (a) la satisfaction professionnelle, (b) la négociation du temps, (c) l'attention envers les autres, (d) les soins personnels, et (e) la construction de rapports personnels. Leurs conclusions indiquent l'importance de donner aux femmes des choix ainsi que l'accès à un environnement qui leur fournit du soutien et des occasions de collaborer, et qui encouragent en même temps la santé et le bien-être.

Mots clés : les femmes universitaires, la santé et le bien-être, l'équilibre vie personnelle vie professionnelle, les soins collectifs, la satisfaction au travail, la recherche en collaboration

Women in the academy are faced with many choices that are rooted in expectations around gender roles and career aspirations, and the need to balance their private and professional lives. The need for balance was noted by Stupnisky, Weaver-Hightower, and Kartoshkina (2015), who described the desire of new faculty members to have time not only for their families but also for self-care, including physical, mental, and spiritual wellness. In an attempt to develop these aspects of wellness and a sense of community among ourselves, we (the authors of this article) have chosen to reflect on our own practice using collaborative action research. We represent various academic roles and have a diversity of personal and professional obligations that together represent a wide range of experience. Through a thematic examination of narrative texts, we have intentionally taken a reflective stance to paint a portrait of a day in the life of pre-tenure female academics negotiating complex personal and professional choices, both for our own benefit and for other scholars exploring these issues.

Collective Care of Females in the Academy

A number of authors have examined experiences of females in the academy (Grunert & Bodner, 2011; Newcomb, Beaty, Sanzo, & Peters-Hawkins, 2013; Nikunen, 2012; Wierda-Boer,

Gerris, & Vermulst, 2008). These authors noted common tensions experienced by females. For example, Grunert and Bodner (2011) described that acting as the primary caretaker for one's family is a critical barrier to professional success. In their study of female academics pursuing a career in chemistry, Grunert and Bodner (2011) found that female academics, regardless of their marital or familial status, felt that the decision to delay starting a family due to the caregiving expectations placed on women in particular, created an either-or scenario in which one could have either a family or a successful research career, but not both. Success in the professional lives of their female participants meant working exceptionally long hours that when pursued would mean delaying the start of a family until tenure had been reached. Interestingly, many of the participants in this study were unwilling to make such a sacrifice and felt that only through the collective support of the institution and fellow academics could one consider a family before tenure.

This notion of collective care, where individuals come together to support one another in the pursuit of individual attainment, has been taken up by women in the academy in various ways (Gee & Norton, 2009; Gorman, Durmowicz, Roskes, & Slaterry, 2010; Gutgold & Linse, 2016; Mentkowski & Rogers, 2010; Penney, et al, 2015). One of the most common examples of collective care is mentorship, be it formal mentorship programs designed to acclimate colleagues to the institutional structure, or informal networks of collegiality. Gorman et al. (2010) described a formal mentoring network created to support women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) at Stevenson University. The mentoring network was found to be most successful when done collaboratively and in response to the needs of the participants. According to Gorman et al. (2010), mentoring networks can be extended even to those who intentionally chose a part-time faculty role to accommodate family or child care responsibilities.

Penney et al. (2015), describe an informal network in their study of female academics engaged in the collective support of a writing group. They found that their "writing group was able to informally provide writing supports, relationship supports, and a mechanism for understanding the culture of the province and the university" (462). Several themes emerged for the participants of the writing group including the gender-specific challenges around parenting, the prevalence of academia as a second career, and the difficulty with transitioning into the academic culture. Also noted were several themes dedicated to the need to balance the public

sphere (work) and the private sphere (home) and the challenges and guilt associated with this endeavour. Indeed, Penney et al. (2015) noted that, “As women working in the 21st century, we had expectations of an academic career that were shaped by the misperception that gender equality exists in academia” (p. 470) and yet, were also appreciative of the opportunities academia provided.

Within the literature, arguments are made for formal mentoring (Yun, Baldi, & Sorcinelli, 2016) and informal networks (Newcomb et al., 2013). Also prominent are text-based examples of women sharing their individual stories of tensions between and within the public and private spheres (Gutgold & Linse, 2016). Whether focused on formal programmatic efforts, informal collegial relationships, or the text-based sharing of experiences, the literature is clear. As women in the academy negotiate tensions between the public and private spheres, networks rooted in collective care provide support and understanding. The present research was conducted as a systematic examination of the causes of tension. This adds a critical element to the notion of collective care as a support mechanism for women.

Theoretical Framework

Situating our work in a liberal feminist framework, we acknowledge our privilege while also drawing attention to the results of, and challenges presented by, the choices we have made. This framework is articulated in two ways. First, following the historical tradition of liberal feminism, we examine and highlight the individual experiences of the four authors of this article within the context of equality and choice. This is situated within the work of classical liberal feminist theorists, such as Friedan (1963), who argued for an acknowledgment of the power inherent in individual experiences and the choices made as a result. We examine issues of the private sphere, including tensions resulting from the roles of wife and mother, in relation to their impact on the public sphere.

We nest this individualism within the notion of collective care espoused by Noddings (2013), who warned of the difference between individuality and isolation, cautioning against the use of a rational-cognitive approach to care: “We fail to share with each other the feelings, the conflicts, the hopes and ideas that influence our eventual choices. We share only the justification for our acts and not what motivates and touches us” (p. 8). In the implementation of a liberal feminist framework, influenced by collective care, we examine individual experiences in relation to one another.

We acknowledge the potential critiques of liberal feminism and collective care. Feminist theorists such as hooks (1984) have cautioned against attempting to portray a collective female experience, given the inherent dangers in creating a homogenous, and thereby hegemonic, narrative. Similar critiques can be made of the caring ethic, particularly as it pertains to the public sphere, where attention to the other is seen as feminized behaviour.

As the authors of this paper, we respond to these critiques by making clear our position and our commitments as women in the academy. We fully acknowledge our privileged position and the benefits that we experience as a result of our inclusion in the post-secondary environment. As Western, white, heterosexual women who enjoy equality within our profession and support for our professional goals, we do not deny our access to the power inherent in the academy. However, this does not negate the fact that we still experience challenges in our work, and it is through an examination of those challenges that we intend to put forward a discussion of the ways in which care and mutually supportive networks can mediate them. Through a commitment to collective care we will, by supporting others, support ourselves. For these reasons, we locate ourselves within a liberal feminist framework informed by collective care.

Research Design

Through the implementation of action research (Hendricks, 2016; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; McNiff, 2016), we have explored, compared, and contrasted “a day in the life” journal entries kept for one month by each researcher-participant in the study. The problem of practice that served as a foundation for the work is how female academics negotiate the tensions between an academic professional life and family obligations. This article examines these and other emergent tensions of the four authors, all of whom are female members of the academy. Three are full-time faculty, two of whom are in leadership roles, and the fourth works in an academic contract position. Action research can empower individuals to find ways to improve their practice in collaboration with critically reflexive others (McNiff, 2016).

Action research can involve recruiting others as core searchers rather than participants, and gathering data through the use of reflective journals (McNiff, 2016). The design of our study included each researcher as a full, collaborative participant who engaged in the iterative process of reflexive journaling, dialoguing,

analyzing, and reporting on the data, as is typical of the continual cycle of action research (Dana, 2013).

A key element of action research differentiating it from other forms of research is the notion of the researcher taking responsibility for herself (McNiff, 2016). We contend that within the context of our study, this encompasses taking responsibility not only for oneself as a researcher, but also as a human being. Thus, we study the notion of wellness as female academics who investigate, reflect, and act on our findings as researchers and participants in the study. The present study represents a snapshot of a day in the life of each researcher, intended as a point of departure for reflection and analysis. The research questions that guided the study were as follows: (a) What does a day in the life of each researcher look like? (b) What do the respective days of each researcher-participant have in common? (c) How does reflecting on the lived experience of each researcher impact the collective awareness of personal and professional well-being? McNiff (2016) articulated that the action element of this approach to research “involves taking action ‘in here,’ in your mental world, to improve the quality of your thinking, and ‘out there’ in the social world, to improve the quality of your interactions with others” (p. 9). This study involved a deep examination of how we think about wellness as female academics, and the actions we take by and for ourselves; yet the study is also one of a community of scholars. It is our intention that the results of this work help improve our own wellness and the quality of our interactions and conversations about wellness with colleagues.

Data Sources

The study engaged us in a process of narrative inquiry (Hendricks, 2016) as we maintained detailed journal entries that served as the primary data source. The process of each researcher keeping a journal for one month and then reflexively and collaboratively analyzing the data made the act of observing individual snapshots explicit (McNiff, 2014). McNiff (2016) noted that gathering data from oneself, about one’s actions, can provide a rich and valid source of evidence for an action research project, provided it is systematically monitored and authenticated. In our case, the research design included extensive discussions about how data would be gathered through personal narratives and how this evidence would be authenticated through our analysis.

An additional source of data was team meetings in which collaborative discussions about experiences allowed us to find more commonalities between our experiences. Finally, narrative

reflections about shared experiences allowed us to analyze, then synthesize findings cohesively.

Analysis

We analyzed the data using a sequential three-step process. First, the data were assembled and coded for themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) in a collaborative process focused on discussions and analysis of individual narratives. Secondly, we used a spreadsheet to sort data according to themes. This offered a visual representation of the data through a matrix that allowed us to further refine our analysis and coding process. Table 1 shows a simplified representation of our spreadsheet that highlights how raw data informed the development of the coding matrix, which was further refined into the emergent themes we chose for deeper analysis.

Table 1 Matrix Coding

Matrix Codes of Raw Data	Emergent Themes
Love the job and it is not easy. We truly love what we do, high job satisfaction, mentally (intellectually) stimulating and rewarding but...	Job Satisfaction
Teaching. Brings us deep joy but the tasks such as marking and preparation are often set aside for more immediate and urgent student concerns	
Juggling. Housework, not multi-tasking but task jumping, emotional switching to accommodate the situation, whole days scheduled for catching up	Time Negotiation
Compartmentalizing. Putting a schedule on flexible time, counterpoint to the flexibility, put timetables on our time and then feel guilt if we do not meet that schedule, prioritizing by responsibility to others	
Guilt. “Mom guilt,” sandwich generation guilt, guilt about not working leads to not sleeping, feeling guilty when you are working and guilty when you are not working	Attending to Others
Compulsion to answer emails immediately. Answering email messages immediately, constant connection to email via phone	

Negotiating the tension between saying yes and saying no. Saying yes too much or wanting to help everyone, feeling guilty if you say no	
Working all hours. Boundaries on time, working from home, negotiating weekend time, knowing it should be time off but it is not	Self-care
Self-care. Basic wellness elements do not seem to play a role (sleep, food, exercise for self and others, illness); awareness that there should be a balance	
Boundaries. Walls of the boundaries are fluid, not having kids does not mitigate this as work just takes that time too	
Relationships in the workplace. We value the relationships we build with colleagues, keep doors open, in-the-moment meetings in hallways	Relationship Building
Advocating. Feeling empowered to advocate for oneself, feeling like you have an advocate in other female colleagues	

We triangulated the data as per McNiff's (2016) approach of gathering perspectives on an issue from at least three people and then cross-compared findings through rigorous dialogue and inquiry. Finally, we cross-checked the data for trustworthiness. Cross-checking was conducted through collaborative discourse in which narratives were compared and outlying data points were acknowledged and set aside. Collaborative discourse sessions spanned five sessions, totaling 38 hours of analysis, coding, cross-checking, and interrogation of our process to ensure validity of the qualitative data set.

Findings

Drawing on the reflective journals and ongoing dialogic exchanges grounded in the notion of collective care, five common themes were identified: (a) job satisfaction, (b) time negotiation, (c) attention to others, (d) self-care, and (e) relationship building. In the following section, we describe each theme and include excerpts from our reflective journals, answering the first two research questions about what a day in the life of each researcher looks like and what commonalities exist.

Job Satisfaction

Each journal contains excerpts that describe job satisfaction. For example, one of us described work as “the job I always dreamed of having.” Likewise, one of us expressed a deep sense of career satisfaction:

Someone asked me for career advice the other day, and I told her that she needs to choose a path that brings her joy every day. I said that I enjoy my work so much (despite the hectic pace) that I still can’t believe someone pays me to do this. I do feel a huge amount of job satisfaction.

Supporting student learning seemed to be one of the common elements related to job satisfaction. One of us noted, “I especially love working with the students,” while one of us wrote about the potential for exponential effect we can have on student learning:

I get to make a real impact on the classroom now in an exponential fashion. The undergraduate students that I work with will go out and work with thousands of students in their career. It is really quite humbling, and I get to do this and research and teach and be with great colleagues.

The satisfaction in working with students extended beyond the formal student–instructor relationship to include support following degree completion. In describing an exchange with a former student, one of us noted the joy it brought to help students stay connected to their education:

I love starting the day by meeting with students (former, current, prospective). [I met one student] near campus and discussed her conference proposal. This former student discussed how preparing a proposal for a conference helps her keep connected to literature and research-informed practice.

From the journals, it became clear that working with students and teaching were a large part of the job satisfaction shared by all of us.

Working alongside colleagues was also described as an important aspect of job satisfaction. Journal excerpts commonly described having an open-door policy to encourage professional interactions and communications. One of us said that such encounters were “moments I cherish”:

Those times when I can slip away for a coffee or lunch with a colleague to catch up on each other’s news, bounce ideas off each other and share stories. On days when I can take these kinds of breaks, I feel energized and motivated.

Clearly, our journal entries demonstrate satisfaction with our career choices in the academy. In particular, supporting student learning and engaging in work alongside colleagues was noted as rewarding.

Time Negotiation

A strong theme across all the journal reflections was the challenge of negotiating time to meet professional and personal obligations. Prioritizing and carrying out professional commitments while maintaining a home life was clearly difficult at times. As one of us noted, things could quickly get out of control:

The past two weeks, I've felt like I'm on a runaway train! I've been so busy juggling preparation of the final lectures for the semester, marking papers, working with my students during their first practicum experience, attending meetings, trying to fit in school visits for my research study, responding to student emails and trying to keep my home organized and running smoothly.

The ever-present to-do list was seen as an attempt to juggle these obligations by ordering and classifying tasks. We even scheduled time for task completion, such as a "catch-up day to complete all the tasks that continue to be on my to-do list," as one person put it. All of us included discussion about to-do lists in relation to managing personal and professional obligations.

The term *compartmentalizing* was chosen by our group to describe how we divide work into the categories of professional and personal obligations and into manageable chunks. We discussed scheduling blocks of time for family commitments and blocks of time for professional obligations. Family commitments were typically blocked in for early morning or weekends. As one of us noted, "On week-ends . . . I feel like I have to put work aside and pay attention to family—so cooking, cleaning, errands, dates with my husband, visiting my dad." Professional obligations, such as writing, were scheduled for work days. As one of us noted,

[I] learned to block off chunks of time for writing. Typically, I will block off Friday afternoons, or if I can manage it, an entire Friday as writing time. During this time, I will leave the office and head home. . . . The important thing is that it is focused time, without meetings or other interruptions. Even though I work at my home office during these precious chunks of time, I effectively ignore all household chores during that time. I will usually try to set a scheduled end time for these marathon sessions, after which I'll emerge from my office and realize the counter is once again full of dishes.

Despite attempts to block time for professional obligations, such as writing research articles and contributing to knowledge dissemination, we observed that other professional obligations, such as meetings, email, and requests from colleagues, often took precedence and interfered with dedicated writing time. A common element in the journal entries was the difficulty of negotiating time commitments, particularly with respect to writing.

Attending to Others

We were unanimous in declaring a sense of guilt with respect to how we attended to the needs of others personally and professionally. In particular, the challenges of dealing with children and elderly parents were a common element in the reflections. As one of us revealed,

I think I deal with a lot of Mom guilt—my kids still live at home and can prepare food for themselves, yet I feel like I should be putting a meal on the table every night. . . . [A]lways at the back of my mind is how long it's been since I last visited my dad and the guilt and sense of obligation that I feel. I'm the only one of my siblings in the city, although my husband and kids do help by visiting him if I can't make it. I try to get there twice a week, but that hasn't been possible for the past month or so.

As noted above, the daily needs of family presented challenges. Even parenting issues as crucial as sick children often took a back seat to professional obligations. One of us shared the guilt of dealing with her daughter, who was ill at school:

The poor thing was feverish and sad and couldn't breathe properly and wanted nothing more than to come home but I couldn't go get her because I had a meeting with a student that simply had to happen. These are the moments that I feel serious guilt about.

In situations such as these, we felt that we were forced into difficult choices, but also admitted that some of these choices were self-inflicted.

Likewise, we felt strongly committed to responding to the needs of our students or colleagues in a timely manner and experienced guilt when we were unable to meet our own high levels of expectation. This was particularly true of email communication. As one of us noted, "I always respond to emails immediately.) I think it's respectful to my students and colleagues to respond quickly, and it keeps messages from piling up.) But setting the precedent means you can't suddenly stop." One of us

also reported an urge to continuously check and respond to email during evening hours:

I have this habit, one might say a compulsion, to answer my email immediately. I can't stand to let it sit because I know that someone might really need an answer and at this time of year there are so many immediate and pressing questions. But my husband pointed it out tonight that I look at my phone constantly. In fact . . . he counted. Between 9 and 11 I answered 47 emails and I had to do it immediately. Not because anyone else expects me to, but because I need to.

Although it was noted that an immediate response to an email could be helpful in limiting the intensification of issues, the time required for such an immediate response was seen as problematic. It was also noted, however, that the compulsion to respond immediately and attend to others immediately was self-imposed, most likely the result of being accustomed to working in this particular responsive way.

Self-care

Discussions about healthy practices were limited across the journal entries. One of us characterized exercise as something that could be traded for less sleep or done while watching television. One of us noted:

Some days I have to negotiate with myself as I debate an extra 30 minutes of rest or 30 minutes of exercise. I'm generally able to convince myself that I better rise now or the time for exercise will not happen later in the day. The next half hour is dedicated to walking-jogging on my treadmill situated directly in front of television, so I can continue hearing the news and weather forecast.

It is interesting that when the same author reflected on her journal, she noted that she did not discuss exercise in any other entries, showing the inconsistency with which she undertook this aspect of self-care.

It was also common for us to describe eating lunch while working or missing lunch. "I realized I went the whole day without eating and I also realized I do this a lot. Even if I have brought lunch and it is in my office, I still don't eat," one of us wrote. Another member of our group echoed the low priority given to healthy and mindful eating practices when she noted a propensity to eat over her keyboard and take only washroom breaks: "If I have been organized enough to bring my lunch, I feel grateful that I do not have to spend time to go buy food." It became clear that healthy practices were not priorities in our journal entries.

Another common theme related to a low priority for healthy practices was termed “binge-working.” As one of us noted, “Some people binge-watch Netflix on weekends. I spend weekends binge-grading papers. ... I feel like I work all the time.” In our journals, we often discussed completing an excess amount of work for a lengthy period of time without a break. In the drive for parity and attention to others, one of us spoke of a willingness to sacrifice her evening when she stated, “I received eight proposals to review for a conference. ... I ended up reviewing all the proposal[s] as I wanted to be consistent in using the rubric across all the proposals.” The tendency to deprioritize healthy practices was evidenced by filling scheduled breaks with more work. “If I have a break between classes, I’ve usually planned ahead and brought along something to do during that down-time: marking papers, preparing a lecture, reading an article,” wrote one of our group members. In the discussions that formed part of the data analysis, we recognized that our journal entries demonstrated the deprioritization of healthy practices related to sleep, exercise, food, and taking regular breaks. We considered this awareness to be of critical benefit.

Relationship Building

The data revealed a unanimous desire to build strong relationships in the workplace. This resulted in deliberate choices designed to foster relationships, such as working with the office door open:

I made a decision when I started my job that I would actually go into the office regularly and when I’m there, keep my door open unless I [have] a compelling reason to do otherwise. ... As a result, colleagues who pass by will sometimes stop to say hello or chat. When this happens, I will inevitably stop what I am doing and engage with them. I want to build and maintain these relationships.

This desire for strong collegial relationships was of utmost importance. In fact, at times, even when one of us felt too tired or lacked motivation to follow through on a commitment, she did it anyway knowing that others were counting on her:

I didn’t really feel like going but made a commitment to be there. My colleague reminded me that it’s important not to say yes to every request but I did already volunteer to be there. I’m grateful that this conversation occurred and she encouraged me to go. ... I work with such amazing people!!

The importance of giving time to others so as to build and maintain professional relationships was evidenced in the decision of this

group member who took advice and comfort from her colleague. The time taken to connect with another was seen as valuable.

Having trusting and deep relationships with colleagues and other professional women also resulted in a sense of inspiration and purpose:

Today I taught a class and had in an amazing guest speaker. She is the kind of woman who makes me remember why I do what I do. She talked with passion and with conviction about the real differences teachers make in the lives of students and it absolutely lit a fire under me around everything I do. I listened to this incredibly smart and accomplished woman talk about how she thought all of these people around her had changed the world for so many youngsters.

Reflecting on our journal entries, we became aware that the relationships we fostered with family members, friends, colleagues, and students could have a lasting and positive impact on our own lives, as well as those of others.

Discussion

Maintaining reflective journals over the course of a month provided a large amount of data from which themes emerged. These themes revealed common challenges among us. In particular, the data revealed an important relationship between these challenges and the ethic of care that was identified as part of the study's theoretical framework. Professional responsibilities included teaching, research, writing, leadership duties, and participation in collaborative teamwork; the journal entries showed that for all of us, these responsibilities were accompanied by, and intertwined with, a need to ensure that others (e.g., students, family, and colleagues) were cared for and nurtured. Our shared experiences revealed that as we fulfilled the requirements of our professional roles, the boundaries between personal and professional selves became blurred, resulting in challenges that impacted our personal and professional lives. The journal reflections allowed us to identify these challenges and, more importantly, uncover the motivations and personal traits that contributed to the blurring of our professional and personal identities, including the ways in which our experiences and reflective process caused each of us to reconsider how our professional and personal lives intersect.

The five themes emerging from this study—(a) job satisfaction, (b) time negotiation, (c) attention to others, (d) self-care, and (e) relationship building—serve as a conduit for others to

examine their own experiences. The most significant learning for us as researchers occurred as a result of the community formed in the writing of this work. Together in support of one another and through the resultant discussion and sharing of experiences, there was a true realization as to the import of the themes and the ways in which it is possible to move forward. In writing meetings, we commonly heard two or more of us empathize with one another, sharing similar experiences as a result of the data analysis process. Within this empathic exchange, the real power of a shared examination became apparent. As each researcher was able to compare her experiences to another's and find commonality, feelings of isolation diminished.

In examining our narratives and the resultant themes, we were particularly surprised at the way in which self-care was absent from our daily routines, which was also noted by Gutgold and Linse (2016). To go for an entire day without eating or without exercise was disturbingly common. But also of note was our desire for strong and supportive professional relationships, often seen as a comforting replacement, if not a substitute, for the missing elements of personal wellness. We were active in pursuing strong and supportive relationships with colleagues and, in particular, found inspiration in the experiences of fellow female academics. This was of import as it was through the creation of these strong and supportive relationships, and the resultant discussion, that the missing elements of personal wellness came to light. It is interesting that we felt that without the systematic narrative journaling and discussion, most of us would not have recognized explicitly that elements of personal wellness were being ignored. As a result, through discussion on the themes of self-care, relationship building, and attention to others, we actually enhanced our personal wellness by being more attentive and thoughtful to ourselves and others.

Our narratives also highlighted a reality where professional boundaries were often non-existent. Again, we shared stories highlighting the compulsion to work constantly in order to tend to the needs of students; as a result, we grappled with guilt of various kinds. These were just some of the indicators of the complexities inherent in the lives of the female academics involved in this study. As each of us tried to negotiate our professional boundaries, it led to questions of the public sphere versus the private sphere and the often fluid and changing boundary between them. We often described feelings of guilt, wanting to attend to family yet working during those very times when family was present. Even with the clear advantages that came with a career in the academy, such as a

flexible schedule that could be arranged around the needs of others, each of us struggled with the balance between work and home. It became hard to imagine how those who do not enjoy this flexibility manage to attend to the public and the private, as is the case for many of our students. It also led to discussions imbued with a sense of humility and thankfulness for work in the academy.

Ultimately, through the process of coming together to analyze the data and examine the daily benefits and challenges of working in the academy, the importance of collaborative care became vitally apparent, as supported by other scholars who have seen the value of supportive networks (Gee & Norton, 2009; Gorman et al., 2010). This is of particular importance as it emphasizes the need for women academics to consciously examine their experiences and to support one another by validating and addressing apparent tensions. Highlighted was the need for a collective approach and a reflective stance, meaning the ability to look back on personal experiences objectively in the company of like-minded colleagues acting in a supportive capacity. Although we acknowledged the potential effectiveness of formal mentoring programs, our shared sense of purpose and common narrative, arising organically and authentically, might not have been possible in an orchestrated environment. Indeed, it sprung from a common belief that a career in academia might not be the easiest choice, but it was certainly a rewarding one, even more so when taken up in a supportive community, making research such as the present study important to the public and personal success of females in the academy.

Implications

We conclude with three key outcomes: (a) implications for attending to wellness and increasing work–life balance for female faculty members, (b) recommendations for current and aspiring female scholars and leaders in supporting healthy behaviours, and (c) arguments that women everywhere need to have choices and access to supportive and collaborative learning environments that promote wellness.

Firstly, in this study, female faculty members had less work–life balance and attention to wellness than anticipated at the beginning of the project. The commonalities of our experiences led to a certain level of surprise and an increased awareness of the need to pay explicit attention to self-care and the effects of imbalance on a daily basis. This implication was echoed by Penney et al. (2015) who noted that the imbalance often created by competing obligations at work and at home can “interfere with productivity and create stressors and fears associated with success

in promotion and tenure” (p. 470). These stressors and fears then impact overall health and wellness. Secondly, we came to recognize that we have the opportunity to model a more appropriate work–life balance for other female academics. To that end, we collectively committed to not only being more aware of personal self-care, particularly in terms of eating, sleeping, and exercise, but also encouraging and supporting one another in a judgment-free way. We discussed the fine line that exists between supporting a colleague by providing opportunities for collaboration and discussion and adding more stress by increasing the commitments for someone who already has a high workload. We recognized the need for gentle, forgiving support that is rooted in empathy and care. Penney et al. (2015) also noted the need for gentle support in their writing groups and “their ability to mediate the stressful and competitive nature of the academic environment and to help women manage the border crossings between work and family life” (p. 471). The need for their support, like ours, to remain free of judgment was paramount.

Finally, we remained cognizant of our positions of privilege as four female, white, middle-class professors of European heritage working in a supportive and collaborative environment. A career in the academy offers choices and schedules with high levels of flexibility; from time-to-time, we are able to work independently at home, and at other times, we work on campus and in collaboration with colleagues. However, flexibility with hours may also present challenges as there is no set beginning or end time to each work day (Grunert & Bodner, 2011). We anguished over the idea that not all women enjoy flexibility in work, and advocate for other workplaces to offer similar choices to their employees as a means to promote health and wellness. There remains much work to be done in the area of occupational wellness for women not only in the academy and at a personal level, but also at departmental and institutional levels. Further research is needed to support female academics with self-care and to foster collaborative working environments.

Conclusion

This study informs academics and institutions aiming to improve wellness in the workplace through collaborative knowledge-building communities (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006). We identified a collaborative learning environment as a foundational element of our reflection and growth as academics striving towards healthy and balanced practice. This study highlights the value of collaborative action research, personal

reflection, and a process of writing focused on one's daily practice and purpose in the academy alongside peers. Although the study results are not generalizable, as they capture the perspectives of four middle-class, white female academics working in the same institution, others are encouraged to consider their healthy practices in their daily work.

The findings from this action research study serve to inform female academics and communicate the importance of reflecting on wellness as female scholars engaged in teaching, research, and service. We also found that action research supported our collaborative self-study aimed at improving our practice and through the process of observing, reflecting, and analyzing, we developed a more heightened awareness of our own wellness, as well as the common experiences we shared. This echoes what McNiff (2016) notes about how action research can lead to changes in thinking, which in itself is a form of action. The insights offered through this study might also inform other female scholars and those interested in developing an action research agenda for self-study. Findings from this study suggest female academics need to pay closer attention to healthy practices promoting work-life balance, wellness, and collaborative relationships. Awareness and dialogue about the importance of wellness in the workplace is a growing area of interest for institutions. As such, there is a need for more female academics (and other working women) to share their experiences and for further exploration about ways to support academics with collaboration and healthy practice. Offering viewpoints on these topics may help institutions support academics in attending to wellness and managing a work-life balance in the academy.

REFERENCES

- Dana, N. F. (2013). *Digging deeper: A teacher inquirer's field guide into action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. New York: Penguin.
- Gee, M. V., & Norton, S. M. (2009, Fall). Improving the status of women in the academy. *Thought & Action*, 163–170. Retrieved March 14, 2017, from <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/TA09WomenAcademy.pdf>
- Gorman, S. T., Durmowicz, M. C., Roskes, E. M., & Slattery, S. P. (2010). Women in the academy: Female leadership in STEM education and the evolution of a mentoring web. *Forum on Public Policy Online*, 2010(2), 1–21. Retrieved

- March 14, 2017, from <http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/journals-2/online-journals/volume-2010-no-2>
- Grunert, M. L., & Bodner, G. M. (2011). Underneath it all: Gender role identification and women chemists' career choices. *Science Education International*, 22(4), 292–301. Retrieved March 14, 2017, from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ962817.pdf>
- Gutgold, N. D., & Linse, A. R. (2016). *Women in the academy: Learning from our diverse career pathways*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Hendricks, C. (2016). *Improving schools through action research: A reflective practice approach* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Hooks, b. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Boston: South End Press.
- McNiff, J. (2014). *Writing and doing action research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McNiff, J. (2016). *You and your action research project* (4th ed.). London: Routledge.
- Mentkowski, M., & Rogers, G. (2010). Educating women students in the academy to confront gender discrimination and contribute to equity afterward. *Forum on Public Policy Online*, 2010(2), 1–19. Retrieved March 14, 2017, from <http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/journals-2/online-journals/volume-2010-no-2>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Newcomb, W. S., Beaty, D. M., Sanzo, K., & Peters-Hawkins, A. (2013). Finding our stride: Young women professors of educational leadership. *Journal of School Leadership*, 23(4), 664–685.
- Nikunen, M. (2012). Changing university work, freedom, flexibility, and family. *Studies in Higher Education*, 37(6), 713–729. doi:10.1080/03075079.2010.542453
- Noddings, N. (2013). *Caring: A relational approach to ethics and moral education* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Penney, S., Young, G., Badenhorst, C., Goodnough, K., Hesson, J., Joy, R., McLeod, H., Pickett, S., Stordy, M., Vaandering, D., & Pelech, S. (2015). Faculty writing groups: A support for women balancing family and career on the academic tightrope. *Canadian Journal Of Higher Education*, 45(4),

- 457-479. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/cjhe/index.php/cjhe/article/view/184396>
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). Introduction. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd ed.; pp. 1–10). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (2006). Knowledge building: Theory, pedagogy, and technology. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of the learning sciences* (pp. 97–115). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Stupnisky, R. H., Weaver-Hightower, M. B., & Kartoshkina, Y. (2015). Exploring and testing the predictors of new faculty success: A mixed methods study. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(2), 368–390. doi:10.1080/03075079.2013.842220
- Wierda-Boer, H. H., Gerris, J. R. M., & Vermulst, A. A. (2008). Adaptive strategies, gender ideology, and work-family balance among Dutch dual earners. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70(4), 1004–1014. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00542.x
- Yun, J. H., Baldi, B., & Sorcinelli, M. D. (2016). Mutual mentoring for early-career and underrepresented faculty: Model, research, and practice. *Innovative Higher Education*, 441–451. doi:10.1007/s10755-016-9359-6

Address for Correspondence

Amy Burns, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Alberta;

Barbara Brown, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Alberta;

Sarah Elaine Eaton, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Alberta; &

Katherine Mueller, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Alberta.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amy Burns, Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, EDT 910, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4. Email: amburns@ucalgary.ca