WOMEN WITH PhDs SPEAK OUT ABOUT MOTHERHOOD

MAMA PHD: WOMEN WRITE ABOUT MOTHERHOOD AND ACADEMIC LIFE,
EDITED BY ELRENA EVANS AND CAROLINE GRANT
NEW BRUNSWICK: RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008

MOTHERHOOD, THE ELEPHANT IN THE LABORATORY: WOMEN SCIENTISTS SPEAK OUT,
EDITED BY EMILY MONOSSON
ITHACA: ILR PRESS/CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2008

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Both familiar and poignant, the first-person narrative accounts of balancing motherhood and work in these two anthologies continues the feminist tradition of consciousness-raising and demonstrates that the personal is indeed political. *Mama PhD* and *Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory* grapple with the question of why women with PhDs are not succeeding in academia and the sciences at the same rates as men. Both books suggest that the answer is not essentialist gender differences in abilities, but rather the difficulty in combining these types of careers with motherhood, given that women are likely to bear the brunt of child care responsibilities.

Mama PhD is edited by Elrena Evans, a mother and PhD student who is unsure if she will complete her degree, and by Caroline Grant, a mother with a PhD who resigned from a teaching position after the birth of her child. They begin the book with a short discussion of the literature on women in academia and state that "this is the book we needed when we entered graduate school and the job market. We wanted to know that blending family life with life in the ivory tower might be possible; we needed to know that others were attempting this tricky balancing act" (xxiii). This volume includes essays by forty-one women who either have their PhDs, are working on a PhD, or started a PhD and left their program as a result of motherhood. This compilation is divided into four sections. The first, titled "The Conversation," includes accounts of conversations with partners about whether or not to have children, the experience of pregnancy, and thoughts on motherhood by women with PhDs who are not mothers, some of whom are unable to

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become mothers. The second section, "That Mommy Thing," includes accounts of thirteen mothers who successfully balanced motherhood with a career in academia. Included in the third section, "Recovering Academic," are the stories of seven women who left academia; some who left because they could not balance a PhD program or an academic career with motherhood, and some who looked upon childbearing as a convenient time to exit an unsatisfying academic career. Finally, "Momifesto" includes essays in which mothers critically assess the problems in academia, offer suggestions for change, and give advice to future mamas with PhDs.

Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory is edited by Emily Monosson, a mother with a PhD who spent several years as a laboratory scientist before starting to work from home and who "still doesn't know how to categorize [her] life in science" (164). The book starts with an introduction written by Monosson that thoroughly reviews the literature on the sparse number of women in the upper echelons of scientific careers and presents the aim of the book: to "highlight the accomplishments, challenges and choices made by women scientists as they combine motherhood and career" (5). Within this volume are personal accounts of motherhood and scientific careers as written by thirty-four contributors with PhDs in the natural sciences. Authors related their personal life histories and described how they balanced their careers with motherhood. Several women included their own thoughts and observations on general problems of combining family with scientific careers. Essays are organized by the decade in which authors received their PhD (1970s–2000s) and each section is preceded by a short vignette about the editor's life and women's progress in scientific careers during those decades. This method of organization was not particularly enlightening, as there did not seem to be a clear pattern of change over time.

The essays in these books contain several themes that will be familiar to researchers of work-family balance. Several women wrote of the importance of female mentors who had successfully balanced an academic career with a family, while others bemoaned the absence of such mentors. The importance of pregnancy timing loomed over most accounts; women spoke of future pregnancy timing, timing their pregnancy so that they could give birth over the summer or during sabbaticals, and the difficulties they encountered when they were unable to time their births so precisely. A common strategy among mothers was timing childbearing to coincide with graduate education or postdoctorate positions. Several women wrote about an increase in efficiency in their work habits after

having had a child; when they paid for day care and knew that their work time was limited they were more productive than they had been prior to having children.

Horror stories emerged as well. Women wrote of stepping back from their careers because they were unable to meet tenure requirements because of child care responsibilities, working part-time in unstable positions with no job security, and following their husbands' careers to an area in which they were unable to find employment. Several women encountered chilly reactions to their pregnancies from their advisers, co-workers, department chairs, or fellow students. One woman in *Elephant* was fired from her post-doctorate position because she was pregnant—in 2006. Six women in *Elephant* attributed unsuccessful interview outcomes to exhaustion from child care responsibilities, visible pregnancy, or their asking about the availability of part-time options. Feelings of guilt are ever present in these accounts—guilt about being a bad mother and guilt about spending too much time mothering and not working.

These accounts demonstrate the real-life consequences of the "ideal-worker norm" that feminist theorist and lawyer Joan Williams discusses in her book *Unbending Gender* (2000). As Williams describes, the structure of the workplace assumes that the "ideal worker" is one unencumbered by outside interests and who thus is able to put in the long hours necessary to succeed. These workplace structures implicitly assume that ideal workers will have no family, or if they do have a family that they will have a co-parent who will assume full caretaking responsibilities. As one author in *Elephant in the Laboratory* puts it, "The problem is that in the world of science, family *is* considered an outside interest" (101).

The ideal-worker norm would not cause gender inequality on its own if not combined with another—what Williams (2000, 25) describes as the entitlement of men to be ideal workers, and to therefore be lesser participants in child care responsibilities. This problem is never explicitly discussed in these anthologies, but is present in the absence of fathers in most of the accounts. Several women discuss meeting and marrying their husbands, and some had husbands who worked as stay-at-home fathers in periods of unemployment or even who willingly followed their wives' careers. However, in the vast majority of these accounts and especially in the accounts of women who left the traditional academic path, women do not discuss their husbands in their role as father. I frequently went back to the beginning of an essay to check if the mother in question was a single mother (none was)

because the women so often wrote as if they were the sole caretakers of their children. Husbands and gender expectations were also absent from the introduction to these books and in the suggestions for change in *Mama PhD.* Both books would have benefited from an expanded discussion of norms surrounding the gendered division of child care, and the extent to which men's reduced participation in child care and their entitlement to conform to the "ideal worker" norm contributed to their wives' deviation from their intended career path (Stone 2007, Williams 2008).

Although both these books contain similar themes and address the same topic—work/family balance among women with PhDs—there is actually little overlap between the types of mothers included in the anthologies. *Mama PhD* focuses primarily on women with PhDs in the humanities and the social sciences who either stayed in academia or left academic life entirely, with nearly two-thirds of the mothers in the former category. *Elephant* focuses on women with PhDs in the natural sciences, and the accounts include those mothers who worked part-time (nearly half the mothers), those who successfully maintained scientific careers outside the academy, those who cobbled together short-term jobs as they followed their husbands' careers, and those who took time off and came back to their careers at a later date. Only four out of twenty-nine mothers in *Elephant* maintained academic careers without significant (read: beyond maternity leave) interruptions, and three of those received their degrees in the 1970s.

The differences in these portrayals in part reflect very real differences in the success of mothers in the humanities and social sciences versus the natural sciences (Mason and Goulden, 2002). However, I wonder if the numbers also reflect the method through which contributors were recruited. Monosson sent a message to a Listserv of scientists about the difficulty of combining science and family and recruited many contributors from the respondents to that e-mail. This recruitment method may have resulted in an oversampling of women who have had problems with this balance, as such mothers may be more likely to respond to this type of post than those whose work-life balance has been more successful. The recruitment method for *Mama PhD* was not discussed, but this book evinced more balance between those with alternative career paths and those who had uninterrupted academic careers, the type of career that as graduate students we are led to believe is the most successful career path. Perhaps it was this different mixture of career outcomes in these accounts that contributed to the difference

in overall tone between these books; I found *Mama PhD* to be a significantly more optimistic narrative of work-family balance among women with PhDs than *Elephant*.

At this point, I think it appropriate to interject my own standpoint: I am a PhD candidate who is approaching these books through two lenses. The first is my feminist researcher lens; I study work-family balance and wrote my master's thesis on the fertility patterns of women enrolled in graduate school. The second is my potential mother lens: as I read these books and write this review, I have been having a series of conversations with my partner about whether we will start trying to conceive in the near future and how we will balance childbearing and child care with my academic career trajectory.

Through my feminist researcher lens, I found both of these books to be of great academic value. *Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory* demonstrates several of the problems and pathways that lead women to leave the academy. *Mama PhD* does the same and also reveals the problems associated with balancing child care while staying in the academy, providing several models of how women have successfully done so. The books will be of special interest to researchers of work-family balance among high-achieving women, but will also be especially useful to college deans and department chairs who wish to improve the gender ratio of success among their faculty and graduate students.

Through my potential mother lens, I found *Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory* to be singularly depressing. The impression I was left with was that having both children and a successful academic career is improbable, if not impossible. However, *Mama PhD* gave advice about achieving a successful work-family balance in academia, presented several models of success, and left me with a more optimistic view of my chances at balancing child raising with a successful career. I would recommend *Mama PhD* to my sisters in academia who are also contemplating having children and wondering how they will make it all work. As these books plainly show, you are not alone.

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