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INSIGHTS INTO CHALLENGES OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN ACADEMIA: CASES FROM LITHUANIA, TÜRKİYE AND UNITED KINGDOM***Rūta Latinytė***Vilnius University, Universiteto 3, Vilnius, Lithuania**E-mail: ruta.latinyte@kf.vu.lt**Received 18 June 2025; accepted 26 November 2025; published 30 December 2025*

Abstract. This study examines the lived experiences of mothers and single mothers working in academia, exploring how gendered and institutional structures influence their everyday realities. Through an autoethnographic and phenomenological approach, it analyses three first-person narratives from academic women from three different cultures: the United Kingdom, Türkiye and Lithuania, each negotiating the competing demands of care, research, and teaching within unequal labour conditions. By combining semiotic text analysis and phenomenological anthropology, the study reveals how structural discrimination becomes embodied as guilt, exhaustion, and misrecognition, yet also how women reconfigure these experiences into resilience, creativity, and solidarity. The findings highlight recurring tensions between care and career, voice and silence, belonging and othering – showing that universities, while appearing meritocratic, might indulge hidden discriminating patterns. The research contributes to feminist academic discourse by demonstrating the epistemological value of lived experience as knowledge and by outlining pathways toward inclusive, family-friendly, and intersectionally aware academic environments.

Keywords: motherhood; single mothers; labor discrimination; labor market equality; economic anthropology

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1. Introduction

This study aimed to explore the lived challenges, social meanings, and institutional barriers experienced by academic mothers, with a particular focus on those raising children alone. It is an ethnographic case study using self-reflection and auto-ethnographic writings to collect life stories in the field. Yet, the three selected stories were also presented or published publicly, so they also represent the media content and the discussions ahead. The research questions were focused on reflections that explore: 1) what are women's views on motherhood in the pursuit of academic career; 2) how do institutional structures, gender expectations, and cultural attitudes intersect

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to shape women's professional identities and opportunities; 3) what meanings do academic mothers attribute to their lived experiences of work, care, and belonging with an emphasis on particularly vulnerable social groups, such as being a single mother, a black mother, younger or older than expected in a particular work position and so on. The study provides insights into creating a university as a family-friendly workplace from a mother's perspective, highlighting both the emotional and structural aspects of gender inequality in academia.

2. Theoretical background

The research is grounded in feminist theories of social aspects, including care work, intersectionality, and analytical theories such as French semiotics, phenomenological anthropology, and everyday life studies. Intersectionality provides the view of how race, gender, and class co-constitute multi-layered disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991), while semiotics helps to deconstruct the text itself (Giroud & Panier, 1991; Greimas, 2005), and phenomenology grounds analysis in lived embodiment and perception (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Jackson, 1998, 2012).

Regarding the definition of a single adult household, some historical and sociological explanations are necessary. Until the beginning of the 20th century, European culture was dominated by the joint or extended family, which consisted of representatives of different generations: grandparents, parents, and children, as well as uncles, aunts, cousins, and half-siblings. With industrialisation, the nuclear family (also known as the elementary family, atomic family, snowball family or marital family) became more widespread – a family group consisting of parents and their children (one or more), usually living in the same house. Bronislaw Malinowski first recorded the term in his article “Psycho-Analysis and Anthropology” (1924).

Later, the concept of family itself evolved from the traditional modern concept, based on marriage and blood (or adoption) ties, to a postmodern one, necessitating a reevaluation of the criteria for what constitutes a family. Sociologist Vida Česnuitytė describes the postmodern family as a variety of family models in which the relationships between members are broader than those of the nuclear and extended family, going beyond biological and marital ties, characterised by relationships between two or more generations, and the relationships between family members are more diverse in structural and functional terms, as is the redistribution of roles between men and women in the family (Česnuitytė, 2012). The concept of the postmodern family would also include families of two adults who are not in their first marriage or partnership. Ernesta Platukytė proposed the term “re-created family” for such families as a new model of the “nuclear family” that goes beyond the framework of the “nuclear family,” both in marriage and cohabitation, which could “include all persons living in the family, including children who are growing up in the family and have at least one non-genetically related parent” (Platukytė, 2017: 69).

In my research, the most relevant family type is the single-adult family, which is supported by one adult (usually the mother, less often the father, but also including stepmothers, stepfathers, brothers and/or sisters, grandparents, and other relatives). A single-adult family becomes:

- 1) parents who have separated after a broken marriage or cohabitation (both participate in the child's life);
- 2) parents who have never been married and have never lived together (but both participate more or less in the child's life and support);
- 3) single mothers without established paternity, where the father is not listed on the child's birth certificate (in such cases, the father usually does not participate in the child's life, although he may be known or presumed);
- 4) solo mothers (Psouni, Berg & Persson 2022), where the child was consciously and deliberately conceived through sperm donation and artificial insemination (the father is unknown and does not participate in the child's life);
- 5) widows/widowers.

Another phenomenon that has spread in the popular media in recent years but has not yet been widely described in scientific literature is the “married single mom”. This term refers to a woman who is married or cohabiting but feels lonely, both emotionally due to a sense of isolation and practically because her partner does not contribute equally to household and childcare responsibilities. It is used in popular media and social media content, for example, mocking a husband who left a filthy kitchen for his wife, highlighting how social comments suggest that modern marriages “aren't working” (Scanlan, 2024). In academia, this term first appeared in the personal life stories of researchers, such as University of Miami professor Geri Maples, who spoke about it in the context of the experiences of military wives (Maples, 2016).

The absence of financial resources, education, and social support makes a negative impact on the emotional and social well-being of single mothers (Dharani & Balamurugan, 2024). Single mothers also reported a lower quality of life compared to married mothers (Kim & Kim, 2020; Jansen & Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2023). Although the economic challenges are real, they can also be seen as a stereotype, as the first part of this same research has revealed.

Single motherhood in academia is not a new topic – Mary Ann Mason, Nicholas Wolfinger, and Marc Goulden provided evidence that both gender and family status matter for the career prospects of aspiring academics (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). According to Ann CohenMiller, “the gender gap is particularly enhanced within academia, with academic mothers facing particular challenges” (CohenMiller, 2013). In academia, parenthood explains most of the gender productivity gap by lowering the average short-term productivity of mothers (Morgan et al., 2021; Liebl & Josefson, 2024; Pimentel & Ali, 2025; Ocampo-Penuela, 2025).

Feminist scholars have demonstrated how academic institutions perpetuate hidden discriminatory logics that produce double standards for women and normalise self-disciplining effects, such as guilt and resilience (Lynch, 2010; Ahmed, 2017; McRobbie, 2020). Ea Høg Utoft revealed how the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic affected women's ability to manage issues of academic productivity and work–life balance (Utoft, 2020); however, the pandemic was not the only period with such an imbalance. Other scientist's point, that given the moral imperative on women to do care work, their higher education and further career is more complicated compared to one of men. (Lynch, 2010; Rezk et al., 2022).

Race is another challenge to be faced when pursuing an academic career (Walker, 2020; Showunmi, 2023). And despite all these risks of possible discriminatory practices, the situation worsens in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Boche, 2022). In parallel, theories of recognition explain how respect, esteem, and love underpin the conditions for self-realisation and how their absence yields misrecognition. The intersectional framework posits that “socio-demographic identities should be considered simultaneously to challenge universalist, gender and ethnic neutral assumptions of leadership” (Showunmi, Atewologun, & Bebbington, 2016). American philosopher and phenomenologist Shaun Gallagher notes that agency refers to the subjective first-person experience of being the source and controller of one's actions (Gallagher, 2020: 334). This implies an internal conflict between opposing the public stereotype and regaining self-confidence.

I aim to contribute to this topic through the lens of semiotics and cultural anthropology, which can offer tools to map the figures, cultural value oppositions, and narrative roles through which institutions organise meaning (Greimas, 2005). Bringing semiotics together with phenomenology creates a bridge between structural analysis (value systems such as *career/care*, *voice/silence*) and embodied experience (time pressure, spatial positioning, affect), revealing how symbolic hierarchies are internalised, negotiated, and sometimes resisted (Pereira, 2017). This research could also expand the notion of significant structural and systemic discriminatory practices within the academic profession, as described by Sarah Jane Aiston (Aiston & Jung, 2015). Finally, I would also like to join a call for recognition of the physical and emotional toll of motherhood on women in academia together with other researchers, like Pimentel and Bel Hadj Ali (2025).

3. Research methodology

This research focuses on qualitative data, collected between 2024 and 2025 from 15 in-depth interviews and seven participatory feminist, cultural and/or human rights events with discussions and conversations in Lithuania, France and Poland. This article is a result of both discussions and shared life stories from research participants. Three life stories were selected for an in-depth anthropological analysis. The case study examined the experience of everyday practice (de Certeau 1990; de Certeau, Giard & Mayol 1998) of a mother, particularly a single mother, working in the academic field. The subject of analysis is the lived experience of academic motherhood as reflected in three auto-ethnographic stories. Each story is analysed through two interpretive frameworks: 1) **semiotic analysis** – mapping figurative, narrative and logical-semantic layers of the text from the Greimasian semiotics (Giroud & Panier, 1991), and phenomenological analysis – revealing how those structures are lived through time, space, body, and relations (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Jackson, 1998, 2012). Some examples of phenomenological analysis of personal narratives can be found in the works of Jurga Jonutytė and Giedrė Šmitienė (Jonutyte & Šmitienė, 2021). The combination of these methods enables a holistic understanding of how systemic gender inequalities are embodied and narrated in personal accounts and to link feminist theory to the realities of living and working as a feminist (Ahmed, 2017; Pereira, 2017).

The research was conducted by following three methodological steps common to interpretive ethnography and attentive reading: first, the collection of auto-ethnographic narratives; then, the analysis of each text was conducted by applying the method of attentive reading to identify recurring themes, isotopies, and tensions (Greimas, 2005). Greimasian view on the text structure, identifying the figures, actantial models and logical-semantic oppositions, is also used to reveal emerging cultural value systems. The phenomenological reduction is also incorporated into the process of attentive reading, allowing for the identification of how experiences are lived through temporal, spatial, bodily, and relational dimensions (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Jackson, 1998, 2012). The final step involved a cross-case comparison to highlight patterns and variations in lived motherhood across different contexts.

The combination of semiotic and phenomenological analysis is not commonly used, yet it is possible and deepens the analytical possibilities. The semiotic oppositions map the value fields (voice/silence, belonging/othering), while the phenomenology shows how those values are felt and constituted in lived time/space/body/relations. The semiotic actantial model clarifies structural roles (helpers/opponents), and the phenomenological triad (Self–Other–World) illustrates how particular scenes (such as doors, meetings, and networks) either enable or block recognition. Semiotic reading helps discern the grammar of the story, how lived experience is conveyed; yet, phenomenology reveals how those values are lived – as time pressure, spatial confinement to the back office or home, embodied strain, and intersubjective shaming.

4. Text analysis

4.1. Story No. 1: So, what's it like to be female and black or black and female?

As I sit here on a Sunday evening gathering my thoughts to begin to tackle this ongoing question: “so what's it like to be female and Black or Black and female a sudden surge of tiredness takes over. Is this something I really need to do now, and if so, why bother putting myself through such mental torture?” To give you an indication of where I am coming from, I thought it would be useful to provide a glimpse of who I am. I was raised by upper-middle class German Jewish parents, which makes me very white. I have coined the phrase “socialised as white” as I look black but have been socialised as white. At this stage, you may be asking so what? Let me start from my humble beginning – at the age of six months, I started my journey into whiteness as I was given away by my biological mother in the middle of a busy London station. From there, I took up my place in “the large house” in

North East Devon. I recall when I was first introduced to the importance of being a woman; I felt a deep sense of excitement. It was while working at a local college in Broadstairs, Kent, that I was invited to a women's conference. I was unsure what it was, but I thought it would be a valuable experience for my career and CV. (Can you imagine accepting an invite to a women's conference just as a way to move up the career path in the current climate?). The conference was situated in a great location overlooking the Kentish coast; it was picturesque and the perfect spot for a three-day conference. It would be the first time I had spent three whole days in the company of women. I was young, a mother of two young daughters and teaching in a further education college. For me, the experience I shared was working in education and being a woman. It was a really great three days – I did not have to think about the care of my daughters, and my then husband (who later announced he was actually gay) was excellent with the girls and domestic chores, etc. I learnt a lot and was able to feel at ease with my confidence. We undertook many tasks that delved into our past; however, I skipped around many of these because, even then, I knew there were areas of difference that I was not ready to explore. As I stood in the group, feeling somewhat at ease, I became aware of a notion of difference that I had not previously discussed in a group setting. I was a female who was black surrounded by other women who were White. In normal circumstances, I would not have mentioned this; however, it was something which, for the first time as an adult, I was rather conscious of being Black and female. I do remember a room having the poster of 'Other Women' on the door and wondering if this was where I needed to be. It was upon asking somebody that I was told it was for LGBT – something which I did not understand then. After the conference, I became an active feminist and decided that I needed to stand up for women's rights, especially since I had two daughters. I was able to belong as a woman in the feminist movement, which added to my sense of identity. So, let me move the story along a little further when I was fortunate enough to secure a position in London. Starting with a post in London, coming from Devon, Somerset and then Kent, it was interesting. I straight away became active in as many issues as possible, including gender, race and LGBT issues. My focus was gender, and it was when I became a chair of one of the regional equality groups that I became aware of the difference. I arrived at a meeting as Chair of the Women's Committee and was informed that the Race Committee was next door. I was shocked as it was the first time that I had not been considered a woman. I said, well, I am a woman and the chair of this committee. I could see people were not happy; however, I pressed on with the agenda. It was some years later that I started to realise that there were actual differences in being a feminist and that the core political issues connected to being white or black in the movement were fundamental in how one was seen as a woman. Some people might think I was strange, as they were unable to understand who I was and what I stood for. To me, it was clear I was a woman and the feminist agenda needed to reflect me as a higher-middle-class woman of colour. The challenge I faced was from liberal white women living in London who struggled to understand who I was and wanted to help me. It was then I started to realise I was slowly changing and seeing everything so clearly, I was on the journey of coming to terms with being a female and Black. I find that when I need to unpack my thinking, I post something on my Facebook page and then wait for the responses. Hi, all, I am in so much pain right now. Looking around it is hard. Keeping a job in the academy is challenging you are surrounded by discrimination and people who want peace but do not know what to do. Others do not want to believe that their colleagues could be racist, but instead allow themselves to be drawn into games where they can stand back and say, “oh, I did not really mean to be like that...it was something I needed to think about, this and that, I am so sorry if I hurt you”. It is hard because you want to yell from the rooftop, but you have to stay calm while everything around you is so complicated. We need to stand together and stop trying to be the “model minority”; we need to make some noise. We have the skills; we must connect internationally to become one voice. When it is late at night, and I want to talk to somebody because the world appears to be so off-key, I need to know that we are there for each other. I needed to say how I feel tonight after watching the videos of our USA brothers RIP to all. Love and blessings x (Victoria Lane 8th July 2016).

The text was published online as part of the “Blog Writing with Impact” event in 2017 by “genderandeducation.com”. The author of the text is dr. Victoria Showunmi. Her emerging themes include gender identity and race in the context of leadership, as well as their implications for the experiences of learners and educators. Victoria's research interests include Gender and Leadership in Education, as well as the well-being of

black girls and young black women. She is recognised as a qualitative researcher, conducting research on social justice, intersectionality, and leadership across various sectors and contexts. For me, Victoria is an inspiring scholar who helped me discover intersectionality and the importance of starting every research project with an open introduction that includes the researcher's own identity, environment, and reasons for conducting the research.

The narrative of Showunmi et al. offers a deeply layered reflection on the intersection of race, gender, and professional identity within academic institutions (Showunmi, Atewologun & Bebbington, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). Using Greimasian semiotic and phenomenological frameworks, the story can be read as an unfolding of recognition and misrecognition, expressed through temporal, spatial, and relational structures that define the lived experience of a Black woman in academia.

From a figurative perspective, time progresses from infancy to adulthood, framing identity as an evolving awareness. Late-night social media postings serve as a digital agora of solidarity, where voices are reclaimed against pressures toward decorum and silence. It begins with the image of a six-month-old baby handed over in a crowded London station – a moment of rupture that marks the beginning of a lifelong process of negotiating belonging. Time then expands through stages of early feminism, motherhood, professional engagement, and the late-night reflections shared on social media. The recurring “Sunday evening” exhaustion and the “late at night” calls for solidarity reveal temporality as both biographical and affective – shaped by cycles of fatigue, resistance, and renewed self-awareness. Time becomes a structure of becoming: from an unexamined participation in “women's” spaces toward an embodied understanding of intersectional difference.

The spatial dimensions of the story play an essential role in meaning-making. The London station stands as a primal scene of displacement; the “large house in North-East Devon” implies classed safety and the early experience of whiteness as domestic normality; the conference by the Kentish coast serves as a temporary “haven” for feminist awakening, while committee rooms later in London become gatekeeping spaces, where institutional boundaries sort people into categories – “race” here, “women” there. Spatially, conference sites and committee rooms act as gates of inclusion and exclusion; the “Other Women” door literalises categorical sorting, while online spaces open alternative publics, dramatising the limits of inclusion. This reminds me of researcher Regina Austin, who defies “the black public sphere” that “puts engagement, competition and exchange in the place of resistance, and uses performativity to capture audiences, Black and White, for things fashioned through Black experience” (Austin, 1997). Finally, the Facebook page becomes a digital agora – a nocturnal space of connection and solidarity – transforming isolation into a networked form of collective care.

Within this network of temporal and spatial figures, the narrative identifies key actants. The *Subject* is the narrator herself – a Black academic “socialised as white,” whose hybrid identity challenges categorical boundaries. Her *helpers* include feminist networks, daughters, LGBT allies, and the online communities that give her language and solidarity. Her *opponents* are racism, sexism, and the more subtle forms of paternalism that misrecognise her agency while claiming to support her. The *objects of value* the *Subject* pursues can be seen as recognition of being both Black and a woman, as well as voice, belonging, and justice. These values are situated within the tension between empowerment and exclusion.

At the narrative level, the actantial model reveals a moral and political journey driven by an ethical demand for recognition and justice, a responsibility to her daughters, and a commitment to the broader anti-racist feminist movement. The *sender* of the action can be seen as embodying the lived pain of misrecognition, as well as the structural injustice inherent in the academic environment. The *Subject*, seeking voice and inclusion, mobilises the tools of activism and self-definition as empowering modalities to pursue the *object* of value – intersectional recognition and institutional change. The *helpers* – supportive networks, prior feminist experiences, and the self-reflexive act of naming herself “socialised as white” – equip her to act, while the *opponents* – institutional racism,

sexism, and the “model minority” pressure to remain calm – it means – to continually limit her agency. The narrative concludes with an ambiguous *sanction*: empowerment through clarity and solidarity coexists with persistent exclusion, prompting her call to “connect internationally” and build a transnational community of voices. At the semantic level, the story articulates several recurring isotopies: belonging versus othering, voice versus silence, recognition versus misrecognition, care versus harm, and safety versus exposure. These oppositions form the underlying logic of meaning and can be mapped through Greimasian semiotic squares (Greimas, 2005). The axis of *voice/silence* illustrates how the narrator’s public speaking, whether literal or metaphorical (“yelling from the rooftop,” “making some noise”), resists the imposed calm of institutional decorum. Between these poles lies a complex middle ground – “non-silence” – in which the women speak carefully and strategically, maintaining agency without resorting to self-erasure.

Similarly, the opposition between *belonging and othering* structures the experience of feminist spaces. The storyteller belongs as an “active feminist” and chair of a women’s committee, but is simultaneously redirected to a “race” committee, signalling exclusion from universalised womanhood. The narrative exposes the conditionality of belonging in institutions that treat “woman” as implicitly white. This logic extends into the *woman/not-woman* opposition, where the protagonist’s womanhood is granted or withdrawn depending on whether race is acknowledged within the category. The final opposition, *Black/White*, synthesises the story’s central contradiction: the narrator’s embodied blackness and her “white socialisation” reveal the instability of racial categories. By working the hyphen (“Black-and-woman”) and the slash (“Black/white socialisation”), she exposes the failure of existing identity schemas to accommodate lived complexity.

From a phenomenological perspective, the story reveals how these structural tensions are lived in time, space, body, and relationship. Temporally, her life transitions from childhood displacement to adult clarity, reflecting a continuous process of self-discovery and self-recognition. Spatially, the narrative oscillates between sites of exclusion (the committee room) and refuge (the conference, the online community). The lived body, marked as Black yet socialised white, becomes a site of double consciousness and affective knowledge: exhaustion, pain, courage, and solidarity are all experienced bodily.

In the sphere of intersubjectivity, her relationships range from the intimate (her daughters, her former husband) to the institutional (colleagues and committees) and the imagined global community of “our USA brothers.” These relationships embody both ethical demands and emotional burdens. The self, finally, emerges as a site of intentional resistance. By naming herself as “socialised as white,” she reclaims authorship over her identity and builds a conceptual bridge between contradiction and coherence. Her ethos stands in opposition to the “model minority” script, advocating instead for collective resistance and international solidarity.

We can see that the phenomenological core of the story lies in the strain of *double recognition* – the need to be acknowledged simultaneously as a woman and Black, not sequentially or conditionally. The institutional scenes – doors, committees, social media posts – become lived topographies of (mis)recognition, while bodily fatigue and emotional pain testify to the daily cost of navigating these contradictions. The text thus reveals how academic life, often imagined as meritocratic and neutral, remains structured by invisible hierarchies of visibility, belonging, and value that reproduce the racialised and gendered order of knowledge production.

4.2. Story No. 2. Motherhood as a Guilt

I was called to the office of the director after I applied for the position at the university. He said: “Your CV looks good for the position, but I want to ask a few questions about your marital status and motherhood. You said you have a son; this means you will bear another baby soon. Firstly, I want to warn you beforehand that if you get pregnant, you cannot get extra maternity leave. You have to start working as soon as possible”. I accepted and promised not to have a second baby for some time to get the position. However, surprisingly, after working in a testing office for a year (which required a heavy workload and long working hours, but I had a chance to work at

home), I learned that I was pregnant with my first child. I had to hide my pregnancy to avoid conflict during my first year of academic life. When I told the manager about my pregnancy, the manager told me: “since you are pregnant, you cannot teach, and as a punishment, you have to work in the testing office, and you cannot give you extra maternity leave for the baby”.

Feeling Guilty

Guilt is a feeling that accompanies many women, especially in ITC countries. Guilt, accompanied by fear, is used as a tool to suppress women from talking about anything openly. When it comes to motherhood, all the responsibilities of caring for children and the household are often placed on women, regardless of whether they work or not. As a single mother, I felt guilty for both my work and motherhood. I remember a talk with my friend about a gossip told by a married English teacher: “Fatma blames you for your divorce. She says you started your PhD degree with two small children, and divorce is the result of this. How can a man accept and support such a busy woman? I am at home taking care of my husband, children and house with little effort at work so I am happily married”.

Although such discourse is everyday in my city (Conservative), I reflected on my life and considered whether she was right or not. Not only men, but also women, can be more supportive of the male-dominant society than men. Everything she said was not true; I was an academic who took care of my children perfectly, kept my house clean, and cooked every day. However, the problem was that I was still trying to explain myself to people. It was the feeling of guilt. At university, after working one year at the testing office, every lecturer was invited to attend a conference where all the expenses were covered and near the seaside (like a reward for hard work). I was the only woman in testing office and worked without any holiday and after two years, she came to me and said: “I know you have been working for two years in testing Office and it is your turn and right to attend this conference but you have a small kid and you are married, your husband wont permit you to attend this event so I decided to send your colleagues again. Also, I already decided, and you have no right to object”. This was an essential point in my career. No matter how hard you work, no matter what you succeed, some people will see you as a housewife and make you feel guilty because of motherhood or your marital status.

Single Mother Not Academic Not Woman

As a single mother with two grown children and a busy, passionate, and ambitious academic, I was constantly reminded of my motherhood when it came to mobility, career opportunities, or the choices I made as a woman. I will give a few examples about it: Me: “I am thinking of doing a post-doc in England”. Friend: “You are already 47, you should think about getting retired and settling down”. Me: “I want to get married again”. Friend: “You are crazy, you are a mother, first of all, you should think about them and plan to be a grandmother”. Me: “I am planning to apply for a position and go forward in my career”. Male Colleague: “I think this position is more suitable for you, you are already old, and you have two children. It will be very stressful for you”.

The author of the text preferred to contribute to this study as an anonymous participant. She was the one who inspired me to look deeper into the topic of single academic mothers. The narrative, Motherhood as Guilt, presents the lived experience of a single mother and academic whose professional journey is continuously shadowed by institutionalised forms of gender control. The story traces how motherhood, rather than being recognised as part of human diversity within the academic community, becomes a disciplinary device through which women are judged, restricted, and shamed. A Greimasian semiotic reading reveals how structural oppositions, such as *care versus career*, *mobility versus fixity*, and *dignity versus guilt*, shape the value field of this narrative. Meanwhile, a phenomenological analysis exposes how these contradictions are lived through temporal pressure, spatial confinement, and embodied strain.

Temporality in the story unfolds as a continuum of testing, regulation, and delayed recognition. The early career stage begins with promise – a job interview that quickly turns into an interrogation about marital status and

reproductive plans. The director's question about potential future pregnancies sets the temporal condition for employment: she may work, but only under a suspended threat of disqualification. As time progresses – from the first year of pregnancy concealment, through two years of heavy workload in the testing office, to later reflections at the age of forty-seven – time itself becomes a tool of control. Colleagues and supervisors police temporal boundaries, invoking age and motherhood as reasons to limit ambition (“you are already forty-seven, it's time to retire”). Biographical time thus becomes morally charged: ageing, motherhood, and career progression are framed not as natural rhythms but as normative deviations requiring justification.

Spatially, the story is structured around hierarchies of visibility and access. The director's and manager's offices function as *gatekeeping interiors* – spaces where permissions are granted or denied according to patriarchal codes. The testing office, by contrast, is a backstage area of invisibility, associated with punishment and overwork; it symbolises the relegation of women's labour to hidden, undervalued spaces. The seaside conference, initially imagined as a site of professional recognition and mobility, transforms into a scene of exclusion when she is told she cannot attend because her “husband won't give permission.” Even the domestic sphere – home and motherhood – appears less as a refuge than as a social expectation projected onto her: the world repeatedly “replaces” her into the role of the compliant caretaker. In this spatial logic, every domain that could enable autonomy is reframed as morally suspect or professionally inappropriate.

The actantial configuration clarifies the moral drama at work. The *Subject* is the narrator herself – an ambitious, hardworking academic and single mother – while her *helpers* are competence, perseverance, and a sense of fairness that occasionally finds institutional acknowledgement (for instance, the rule that conference attendance should rotate). The *opponents*, however, are pervasive and structural: managerial practices that question motherhood, colleagues who gossip, and ideological constructs that treat guilt as an instrument of discipline. The *objects of value* she seeks – legitimate recognition, professional mobility, dignity, and the right to embody both motherhood and scholarship – remain under constant negotiation, always partially withheld.

At the narrative level, the *sender* of the action is a blend of ethical and existential imperatives: the belief in fairness and merit, the duty toward her children, and the vocation of academic work. The *subject* strives for recognition and advancement but encounters *opponents* who translate patriarchal norms into institutional procedures: “You cannot teach,” “You won't receive maternity leave,” “Your husband won't permit travel,” or “You are too old and stressed.” These statements collectively form the discourse of exclusion disguised as administrative rationality. The *helpers* – her diligence, her right to recognition, her documented achievements – contrast sharply with the *sanctions* she receives: professional punishments and moral blame. Gossip and moralising by peers function as symbolic sanctions reinforcing institutional ones. The ultimate outcome is not defeat but clarity: an awareness of the structural injustice that governs her academic environment.

The semantic structure of the narrative is organised around several isotopies – recurrent networks of meaning – that oppose each other in the Greimasian semiotic field. The first and most dominant opposition is *care versus career*. The institution ideologically sets these as mutually exclusive, presenting care as the woman's “natural” domain and career as a transgressive ambition. Yet the narrator insists on their coexistence: she embodies both mother and scholar, challenging the binary by performing care and career simultaneously, at high personal cost. The second key opposition, *mobility versus fixity*, maps how professional movement – travel to conferences, postdoctoral plans – is moralised as inappropriate for mothers, while fixity (staying at home or in the “testing office”) is idealised as responsible femininity. This moral geography renders mobility suspect and transforms the desire for advancement into a source of guilt.

The opposition of *recognition versus misrecognition* captures the instability of meritocratic ideals. The narrator is recognised for her hard work only when institutional rules can be selectively ignored; once motherhood becomes visible, rules are suddenly “reinterpreted” to exclude the women. In this sense, procedural fairness is conditional

upon conformity to gender norms. The pair *dignity versus guilt* reveals the psychological mechanism of control: dignity belongs to those who perform without complaint, while guilt is imposed on those who assert rights or aspire beyond prescribed limits. The institutional culture transforms guilt into a disciplinary technology, keeping women silent and compliant. Finally, the tension between *woman-as-mother* and *woman-as-academic* frames the core of the story. The institution constructs these as incompatible identities, forcing women to choose between domestic duty and intellectual autonomy. The narrator resists this dichotomy, asserting the intersection of both roles as her legitimate identity.

From a phenomenological standpoint, these structural tensions are lived through multiple layers of experience – temporal, spatial, bodily, relational, and existential. Temporally, the story captures the rhythm of control: from the interview’s conditional promise to the punitive measures during pregnancy and the later ageist remarks that mark her as “past her prime.” Institutionally defined time – “first year,” “after two years” – becomes the schedule through which power operates, determining when women can be punished or dismissed. Spatially, her world consists of enclosed, hierarchical spaces – the director’s office, the testing office – where she is both physically and symbolically contained. The seaside conference, imagined as a space of recognition, collapses into the same logic of exclusion.

The lived body becomes a site of contradiction and stigma. The pregnant and maternal body is treated as both risk and failure, simultaneously overburdened and erased. Affectively, the body bears the emotional costs of double performance – worker and mother – manifesting in fatigue, anxiety, and shame. Yet within this strain lies resolve and pride: she describes herself as an academic who “takes care of her children perfectly,” sustaining dignity despite systemic devaluation.

The intersubjective dimension further exposes how institutions and peers reproduce patriarchy through everyday interactions. The “others” in her world include superiors who make personal decisions appear bureaucratic, colleagues who moralise her divorce, and friends who enforce normative ageing (“you should settle down”). Even when absent, the figure of “the husband” functions as an imagined regulator invoked to legitimise her exclusion. Against this social field, her children emerge as ethical anchors – sources of both responsibility and purpose – motivating her persistence despite structural discouragement.

At the level of the lived self, the narrator constructs an identity that refuses reduction. She sees herself simultaneously as mother, scholar, and woman seeking both love and recognition. Her intentionality is future-oriented, as evidenced by her applications for postdoctoral positions, plans to remarry, and aspirations for promotion. Yet each of these intentions collides with a socially constructed boundary between what she does and what she is told she can do. This dissonance – between competence and stereotype – produces the core affective conflict of the text: the necessity to continually justify one’s right to exist as both carer and intellectual.

Phenomenologically, the essence of the experience is motherhood rendered as institutionalised guilt. Every legitimate claim – maternity leave, conference travel, promotion, even romantic desire – is reframed as suspect, demanding apology or renunciation. The world of the story operates as a *permission economy*, in which the narrator’s worth must be constantly negotiated through obedience and self-discipline.

The convergence of semiotic and phenomenological frameworks clarifies the intertwining of meaning and experience. Together, they demonstrate that motherhood in academia is not merely a social status but a field of contested meanings through which institutions reproduce gendered hierarchies under the guise of meritocracy.

4.3. Story No. 3. How to survive doctoral studies?

Here is a promised collection of life hacks for everyone who is writing or considering writing a dissertation. It will be helpful or help you feel that you are not alone (in a low voice. Psychologists might want to skip this, as it will cover a whole textbook of diagnoses for many problems.

From the very first year, it seems that all the other doctoral students around you have already written the theoretical part, read all the document archives, and you don't even have a library card. Keep in mind that all the others are just pretending.

- And from the very first (well, maybe more like the second) year, you are hopelessly behind schedule, only artificially embellishing the situation for the certification committees.

- The main feeling that accompanies you throughout your doctoral studies, as my colleague Jurgita aptly noted, is constant self-reproach for everything that is not writing your dissertation. This includes spending time with loved ones, professional work (if you have a job), as well as activities such as eating, sleeping, or using the bathroom. That's right: you brush your teeth and regret that you didn't write (anything) today and that you're not writing now either.

This self-reproach means that no amount of rest, vacation, or spa treatments will help, and eventually, nothing will make you happy because you still haven't written anything, and time is running out. (...)

- Children are not the only ones who interfere with writing. Some cats sleep maliciously (and snore) when you are trying to concentrate. And then there are dates or cosy family dinners that you don't want to give up. But self-doubt creeps in even here.

- Even when writing a dissertation, self-doubt doesn't go away. It nags you that you're working too slowly, wasting time on something that may not be necessary, that you're writing one chapter after another, that you should have written this one a long time ago, and that you left the kids in front of the computer and TV.

- When you go to a psychotherapist for help, you hear the question: "Why is it so important for you to write that dissertation?" and you realise that you are a hopeless case.

- Writing at night is sometimes tempting because it is the time when everyone around you is quiet, no one is writing, calling, running around, or shouting, and at around 2 a.m. you get into the flow of writing. At 4 a.m. you realise that you won't get any sleep and that not only the next day but the whole week will be ruined.

One of the biggest challenges is when you are a doctoral student with a full-time family to support and therefore have a full-time job, and if instead of a salaried job you become a full-time freelancer, it doesn't help, maybe even makes things worse, and if instead of a freelancer you become a full-time lecturer, that doesn't help either, it makes things even worse again. Well, I couldn't survive on a scholarship (which isn't bad at all, because it's even higher than the salary of a research assistant or a beginning lecturer).

There's a trick: you enrol in a doctoral program and try to join the academic community, driven by noble goals, deep interest, a calling to explore, make discoveries, and share knowledge with students. But over time, you realise that you've just signed up for a challenging and very low-paying job – you've become a teacher.

- You then solve the latter problem by increasing your teaching load and full-time position to superhuman levels, which makes writing your dissertation during the semester completely impossible.

Oh, but there are weekends, and you promise yourself that you will definitely write on the weekend, and you don't, and so you agonise twice as much on the weekend.

- My research material was people's stories, all of which were wonderful. I am fascinated by the openness and trust of the contributors; it is something magical. The problem is that I am terrified of people. I am afraid to call, afraid to meet, and fearful throughout the entire conversation. I can't describe how big a hurdle I have to overcome each time.

- Any assessment, from semi-annual evaluations to exams and all deliberations, and, of course, the defence itself, will be a complete disaster. It seems like there's nothing to it, but I can't bring myself to do it.

- It will be very, very embarrassing to send my texts to my supervisor, experts, reviewers, and committee members to read. My colleague gave me some advice – he said it would be embarrassing if you didn't do what you wanted, but you have to close your eyes and send it, then they will tell you what to correct, you will correct it, and everything else will be fine.

When you write something worthless, you know it yourself, and adults (meaning those with a PhD) will confirm it. But when you write something good, you suspect it, but you're still afraid that it's nonsense – here someone must tell you what is really valuable, what is worth continuing.

- I was terrified of my own thoughts and observations, at first I tried to hide behind authorities (I looked for who had already written about it, because someone had probably already written about it, you have to find who), but I got scolded for defending myself – it turns out that what you notice, you have to emphasise it. That feeling of “wow, what a great idea I've had, this is good!” and then “oh no, someone already wrote about this half a century ago, and so did this person, and even this local scientist” – unfortunately, it's always there.

- One of the thoughts that shocked me the most was how this could be – your dream has just come true, you've enrolled in a doctoral program, you've been given the time and even the funds to research what you've been longing for, the fulfillment of your life's goal, meaning, whatever, and now you DON'T WANT TO, you are lazy, you avoid (fill in your own) this noble task. Why? I still don't know the answer to that.

- Not everyone will support you on this path. Someone told me, when I was happy about enrolling, that “it's a useless field of study and the state is just wasting its money.” The most important thing is to be close to ethnic culture. The same person told me that my most important passions – (ethnology and fencing) are just a temporary fascination and I will undoubtedly give up, like everything else I do. Although I don't know what I have already given up, I have been fencing since adolescence (with breaks only during part of my studies, motherhood, and COVID), I became more interested in ethnology around 2005 and have not let go since then, and public relations is my only professional-commercial path, in which I have been working for more than 18 years. I don't know why I said that I do everything. Just keep in mind that some people deliberately want to offend and belittle others, so don't take it to heart.

- Love is support (even when criticism is involved). That's the most important thing to know about relationships.

- How the scientific profession works, with all the points, source search systems, scientific journal searches, Q1, Q2, etc. – no one will explain it to you, you'll have to figure it out for yourself and find a willing mentor. I suspect it's similar to medical residency.

One of the worst habits is to put your dissertation at the bottom of your daily to-do list, because it's not urgent today – your certification is in six months, no one will eat you alive if you do it tomorrow or next week or next month – and so it goes on and on. Don't do that. It's best to set aside not just a day, but a whole week or a few days for your dissertation, when no other tasks, including paying bills and going to the dentist, will get in the way. Some doctoral students complain that they went it alone the whole way. You may feel that way because you are working on your own, but I felt that everyone helped me a lot. First of all, my supervisor. Additionally, the comments from experts and reviewers were sincere and detailed, and the feedback from committee members was remarkably detailed. I have never received so much attention in my life (outside of my family). (By Rūta Latinytė, the text was published in a personal Facebook profile the 11/16/2022)

Since the last narrative is my own, I must be very careful in my analysis, so I will be brief and maintain a methodological distance. The narrative, *How to Survive Doctoral Studies?*, presents a self-reflexive and ironically humorous account of doctoral life that transforms what might appear as an individual struggle into a sociocultural commentary on academic labour, productivity ethics, and the affective economy of knowledge work. While written in a confessional and self-deprecating tone, the text reveals the structures of meaning around *guilt, time, value, and recognition* that shape academic subjectivity. Through a semiotic reading, one can observe how oppositions such as *work versus rest, care versus self, authority versus autonomy, and motivation versus exhaustion* organise the text's value field. At the same time, a phenomenological view shows how these tensions are lived through the temporal, spatial, and bodily experience of an overextended scholar-mother negotiating institutional and familial expectations.

Temporality once again dominates the narrative. From the very first year of doctoral studies, time appears as both promise and punishment – a measure that never suffices, always slipping away. The doctoral candidate inhabits what could be called *chronological guilt*: every moment not spent writing becomes morally charged as wasted.

The text captures this rhythm with ironic precision: even the most ordinary activities – eating, brushing teeth, sleeping – are shadowed by self-reproach for not writing. Temporal experience becomes divided between what phenomenologists call *lived time* (the embodied flow of days and nights) and *institutional time* (the external schedule of deadlines, evaluations, and defence). The narrator oscillates between these two, never able to rest in either. Writing at night, in the stillness of 2 a.m., briefly promises authenticity and flow. Still, it leads to exhaustion the next day – a perfect metaphor for the self-devouring temporality of academic work. Time, in this narrative, functions as both actant and oppressor.

The spatial structure of the story also reveals a dual tension between confinement and escape. The domestic sphere – filled with children, cats, and family dinners – serves as both comfort and distraction, a site of care that competes with intellectual labour. The university or the imagined “academic community” represents the sphere of professional legitimacy, yet it too is described as opaque and isolating, full of unspoken rules (“no one will explain it to you, you have to figure it out”). The absence of accessible mentorship transforms the institution into an abstract labyrinth – an invisible architecture of expectations. Within this geography, the “sea” appears as a liminal and liberating space – associated with creativity, inspiration, and clarity (“all the best pieces are written by the sea”). It contrasts the claustrophobia of everyday life and the bureaucratic opacity of academia, suggesting that meaningful thought requires distance from institutional machinery.

The actantial model recognised in this narrative portrays a subject caught between two modalities: duty and desire. The *subject* is the doctoral student, an academic mother who enters the system with idealism and a sense of calling but gradually becomes trapped in cycles of guilt and overwork. The *sender* of the quest is the intellectual vocation – the inner wish to understand, discover, and contribute meaningfully to knowledge. The *object* of value for the subject is completion and recognition – not merely a degree, but a sense of coherence between self and work. The *helpers* include sporadic moments of support from supervisors, reviewers, and family, as well as their own resilience and humour. The *opponents* are multifold: institutional structures that reward overwork; the moral economy of guilt that equates rest with failure; the self-critical voice that mirrors academic competition; the social milieu that devalues her field and undermines her confidence; and the basic living needs with financial demands. In this moral landscape, every act of care, rest, or hesitation is perceived as a sign of weakness. The *receiver* of women’s effort is both personal and collective: the future self and all those who share the same impossible striving to reconcile creativity, family, and survival in academia.

The semantic logic of the narrative revolves around several key oppositions that construct the doctoral experience as a site of ambivalence. The first is *work versus rest*, which defines the emotional economy of the text. Work is valorised to the point of pathology, while rest is delegitimised as procrastination. The narrator’s self-criticism transforms rest into guilt, and even pleasure into transgression. The second opposition, *autonomy versus dependence*, structures the relation to institutional authority. On the one hand, the narrator seeks independence – owning her ideas, daring to write from herself (“look, I noticed this”). On the other hand, there is a need to hide behind the authority of others (“someone has probably already written about it”). Academic recognition thus becomes conditional: autonomy must first pass through the gate of citation, supervision, and review.

A third key opposition is *inspiration versus exhaustion*. The doctoral journey begins with excitement and purpose but gradually devolves into a battle against fatigue, bureaucratic demands, and self-doubt. Inspiration appears fleetingly – in solitude by the sea, in moments of creative flow, or in the gratitude expressed toward supportive mentors – but exhaustion dominates the embodied experience of writing. A fourth opposition, *community versus isolation*, defines the intersubjective field. The narrator repeatedly claims to be helped by others, yet the doctoral process remains solitary: “You may feel that you went it alone the whole way.” The paradox of academic community is that it is both hyperconnected and emotionally distant – structured by feedback, evaluation, and ranking rather than solidarity.

Phenomenologically, the text offers a vivid account of how the doctoral process is *lived*. In terms of *lived time*, the doctoral student experiences an endless present of unfinished work, where each day repeats the same anxiety of not writing enough. The temporality of guilt replaces the temporality of growth. *Lived space* is fragmented: the home, the office, the imagined beach, and the mental space of writing all coexist but never harmonise. The body – tired, sleepless, self-doubting – becomes the site where institutional and personal demands collide. Through exhaustion and anxiety, the body itself testifies to the violence of academic productivity culture.

In *lived intersubjectivity*, the doctoral student encounters a spectrum of others: supportive supervisors and reviewers, as well as condescending peers and dismissive voices that trivialise her discipline. These interactions reveal the ambivalence of recognition in academia, where validation and belittlement coexist. The *lived self* is shaped by constant oscillation between pride and shame, competence and inadequacy. She knows she is capable – she manages research, teaching, and family – but she is haunted by the feeling of “never enough.” The core affective tonality is *self-reproach*: a moralised exhaustion that substitutes self-care with relentless striving.

At its essence, the phenomenological structure of this story can be summarised as the *normalisation of self-blame*. The doctoral student internalises institutional pressures so profoundly that they become self-administered. The world of the text presents itself as an ethical system where one must constantly earn the right to rest, to feel proud, and even to think one's own thoughts. The dissonance between vocation and exhaustion, creativity and guilt, defines the existential condition of academic motherhood and, more broadly, the neoliberal scholar.

Bringing together the semiotic and phenomenological readings, we see that this narrative illuminates the structural and affective underpinnings of contemporary academic life. Semiotics exposes the logic of values – how productivity, guilt, and recognition interlock to produce compliant academic subjects. Phenomenology shows how these abstractions are lived: as insomnia, self-doubt, bodily fatigue, and fleeting moments of joy. Together, they reveal that the doctoral experience, far from being a purely intellectual journey, is an existential terrain where care, time, and meaning are continually negotiated. The text ultimately suggests that survival in academia depends not on perfect discipline but on recognising that thinking, like living, requires rest, care, and imperfection.

5. Comparative synthesis of the three narratives

Taken together, the three narratives compose a composite ethnography of academic life as lived from the intersection of gender, motherhood, and identity. Each story articulates a distinct modality of constraint and resistance within the structures of higher education, while collectively revealing how institutional power, cultural expectations, and intimate affective worlds intertwine to shape the experiences of women scholars. The first narrative, by Victoria Showunmi, foregrounds intersectionality as the tension between belonging and othering: a Black woman “socialised as white” who must constantly negotiate recognition within spaces that claim inclusivity but remain normatively white and male. The second story turns to institutionalised guilt as the central mechanism through which academic motherhood is regulated – a permission economy where career mobility, dignity, and even emotional fulfilment are conditioned by compliance with patriarchal norms. The third story, my own, written with irony and intimacy, translates these external structures into an internalised economy of self-discipline: the doctoral student, mother, and teacher who polices her own time and body through relentless guilt and self-surveillance.

Across these three accounts, the university emerges not merely as a workplace but as a moral and affective institution. It disciplines through recognition – granting legitimacy selectively while demanding constant performance. Temporal structures, whether probationary years, motherhood calendars, or dissertation deadlines, serve as instruments of control that feminise time as delay, guilt, or exhaustion. Spatially, the recurring images of doors, offices, committees, and testing rooms delineate zones of visibility and exclusion. At the same time, fleeting refuges – such as the seaside, a conference, or an online community – offer temporary relief and a sense

of solidarity. Bodily experience becomes a central epistemic site: fatigue, shame, and self-doubt are not individual weaknesses but embodied testimonies to the violence of meritocratic systems that reward endless productivity and emotional restraint.

Phenomenologically, all three women inhabit a condition of double consciousness: they are constantly aware of how they are seen – as women, as mothers, as racialised subjects – and must translate that gaze into strategies of survival. The semiotic oppositions that structure their stories – voice/silence, belonging/othering, care/career, recognition/misrecognition, dignity/guilt – recur across different contexts and identities, forming a grammar of inequality that traverses race, class, age and family status. Yet within this grammar also lies agency. Each narrator enacts subtle forms of resistance: reclaiming the right to speak, insisting on the coexistence of care and career, transforming fatigue into testimony, and turning isolation into solidarity.

Together, these stories trace the contours of an emotional cartography of academia, where self-worth is negotiated in relation to institutions that promise enlightenment but often reproduce social hierarchies. They demonstrate that what is commonly experienced as personal failure – exhaustion, guilt, or doubt – is, in fact, socially structured and politically meaningful. By articulating their experiences through autoethnography, these women reconfigure vulnerability into critical knowledge. Their narratives collectively call for a reimagining of academic culture – one grounded not in competition or perfection, but in recognition, care, and the ethical interdependence of scholarly and personal life.

Results and insights

The three case studies collectively reveal recurring patterns in how motherhood is lived, represented, and negotiated within academic life. Each narrative – though emerging from different biographical and cultural contexts – illustrates how academic institutions, while outwardly committed to meritocracy and equality, continue to reproduce gendered hierarchies through everyday practices and affective regimes. Across all three stories, several structural and experiential dimensions recur with striking consistency.

Misrecognition and Intersectionality. Women in academia can stay unrecognised in the whole multiplicity of their identities – as mothers, scholars, racialised or culturally specific subjects. Instead, institutions tend to reward conformity to the universalised "academic worker". The experience of a Black woman "socialised as white," a single mother punished for pregnancy, and a doctoral student juggling motherhood and teaching all expose the limits of institutional inclusion: difference is tolerated only when silent or symbolic, not when it demands structural change.

Guilt as a Mechanism of Control. Across the narratives, guilt functions as a disciplinary tool – an emotional technology that regulates behaviour without direct coercion. This can remind us of the perfectionist self-discipline from the "The Burnout Society" by Byung-Chul Han (Han, 2015). Whether imposed through managerial disapproval, peer gossip, or internalised self-reproach, guilt enforces compliance with productivity norms. Women often feel guilty for giving divided attention, desiring mobility, resting, or even dreaming. This normalisation of guilt transforms care into a liability and exhaustion into proof of commitment.

Temporal Pressure. Time works as the structuring element for all three texts and also emerges as a powerful instrument of control. Academic temporality – structured by deadlines, evaluations, and publication cycles – conflicts with maternal and affective time, which is cyclical, unpredictable, and embodied. The result is chronic exhaustion and a sense of "temporal dissonance," where one's life rhythms never align with institutional expectations. In this dissonance, care work is rendered invisible precisely because it operates on a different temporal logic than the accelerated pace of academia.

Spatial Politics. Spaces such as offices, committees, and conferences are not neutral but socially charged. They act as gates of inclusion and exclusion – marking who belongs and who must remain invisible. For the single mother in Turkey, the “testing office” becomes a disciplinary space; for the Black feminist scholar, the “Other Women” door symbolises categorical exclusion; for the doctoral student, the domestic sphere turns into a site of divided attention. Each narrative maps the geography of belonging and the embodied cost of navigating it.

Voice and Silence. Finally, all three stories revolve around the politics of voice – who may speak, how, and at what cost. Women's voices are welcomed when they reproduce institutional discourse (diversity, excellence, resilience) but are resisted when they articulate discomfort, critique, or vulnerability. The recurring movement from silence to speech – from being misrecognised to claiming authorship – marks the process through which lived experience becomes knowledge.

Taken together, these dimensions reveal that universities, despite the applied gender equality policies, are at risk of remaining structured by quite conservative value systems that penalise care, dependency, and embodied difference. The academic ideal continues to reflect a disembodied subject – one who is infinitely available, unencumbered by domestic ties, and emotionally contained. The lived experiences of mothers, racialised scholars, and early-career academics expose the dissonance between institutional ideals of excellence and the real conditions of human life.

Conclusions

The analysis of the narratives, supported by insights from scientific literature, confirms that motherhood in academia remains a structurally disadvantaged position. Institutional cultures mirror broader societal hierarchies, where gender, race, age, family status and class intersect to reproduce inequality. Yet, the personal narratives analysed here – articulated through autoethnographic, phenomenological, and semiotic lenses – reveal an invisible oppression: the micropolitics of resistance, humour, and creativity through which women scholars navigate and re-signify their lived realities.

The novelty of this study lies in combining semiotic and phenomenological anthropology to interpret the lived experience of academic motherhood. This dual framework bridges structural and experiential analysis, showing how discrimination operates simultaneously at two levels: as a system of institutional values and as an embodied, emotional condition. Semiotic analysis exposes the underlying value oppositions – care versus career, belonging versus othering, guilt versus dignity – while phenomenology renders visible how these structures are lived through time, space, and the body. The synthesis of these approaches enables a nuanced understanding of how institutional power is not only enacted but also experienced.

Limitations of the study include the small number of narratives and the autoethnographic nature of the data, which limit generalizability but enhance interpretive richness. The subjectivity of the participant researcher becomes part of the study, aligning with feminist methodologies that treat experience as a legitimate site of knowledge production. Future research could expand into comparative and cross-cultural analyses of academic parenthood, incorporating perspectives from diverse disciplines, institutions, and national contexts to illuminate global patterns of inequality further.

Some implications for policy and practice can be derived from this research. Advancing gender equality in academia requires moving beyond the accommodation of exceptions – individualised fixes for individual mothers – and toward systemic redesign. It would be important to:

1. Align evaluation and promotion with the realities of care, recognising non-linear career trajectories, accounting for caregiving pauses, and ensuring tenure-clock flexibility without stigma. Even, recognise care as an enriching experience that is valuable for the researcher's development and potential.

2. Institutionalise predictable parental leave and re-entry supports, including teaching relief, bridging funds, phased returns, childcare stipends, and emergency care options.
3. Reconfigure the spatial and temporal organisation of work to avoid “care-penalty” scheduling, promote hybrid participation in seminars and committees, and develop partnerships for accessible childcare.
4. Require equity-by-design governance, including transparent workload models, rotation of invisible labour, and formal assessments of the gender and care impacts on institutional policies.
5. Embed intersectional recognition through bias-aware recruitment, mentoring programs for single mothers and scholars of colour, and clear grievance pathways for intersectional harms.
6. Cultivate cultures of voice – through leadership training in bystander intervention and restorative dialogue – and formally value community, teaching, and mentorship labour in academic evaluations.
7. Include children's travel and childcare costs in the eligible costs of projects and missions, as well as travel to conferences, thus enabling mothers to participate equally in all academic activities without incurring additional personal costs for family care.

In conclusion, a family-friendly university is not merely a collection of supportive measures or rhetorical commitments; it is a redefinition of what constitutes academic excellence. From this perspective, excellence must encompass care, continuity, and relational ethics as central academic values. The transformation of academia toward inclusivity and equality thus requires not only structural reform but also a cultural shift in meaning – where human vulnerability, interdependence, and embodiment are recognised as integral to the life of the mind.

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