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Lived Experience of Female Faculty Members of Simultaneous Maternal-Occupational Roles: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

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Female faculty members who are mothers experience overwhelming pressures to comply with the standards of their institutions for promotion and at the same time fulfill their responsibilities as parents. One of the most important concerns of working mothers is creating a balance between the simultaneous roles of maternity and employment, which has received attention in recent decades. The present study aimed to examine the experiences of female faculty members who simultaneously play the roles of maternity and employment. The current research is a qualitative study of psychological descriptive phenomenology in which nine participants were selected through purposive sampling method in Ahvaz. In-depth interviews were used to collect data. The interviews continued until the data saturation emerged. The data analysis showed eight constituents, namely disorder and chaos, professional tension, feeling guilty about not being a good mother, demoralization, exhaustion of parenting, increased reactivity towards children's misbehaviors, hope and meaning in the maternal role, and receiving support from the family. The analysis of the obtained results showed that the psychological consequences of playing maternal-occupational roles can seriously damage the mental health of working mothers. Thus, it is appropriate to pay attention to working women and prepare them to accept the roles through mental health programs and family-friendly plans.

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Introduction

Female faculty members all over the world have lower career achievements compared to men, improve slower than men in academic ranks, and are heavily influenced by their family responsibilities (Gallardo, 2021; Lutter & Schröder, 2020; Moratti, 2021). Meanwhile, becoming a mother, more than other events, causes women to distance themselves from the academic context, focus their energy and time more on their role as mothers, and settle for more ordinary situations (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Rivera, 2017) .

The policies of universities emphasizing research outputs are systemically more harmful to women because it is difficult to adapt these expectations to the family obligations of women, especially those with children (Boring et al., 2015; Dickson, 2019; Fritsch, 2015).

Choosing the right time to have a child, taking care of the child, finding an opportunity to focus on academic activities, and continuing a full-time or part-time career are among the common concerns of female faculty members. There is a constant conflict between maternity and occupation (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017). Research shows that when female faculty members have children, if they are not able to balance work and family, their physical and psychological health may be endangered, and they may experience psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, stress, failure, shame, and helplessness (Ysseldyk et al., 2019). During maternity leave, women are expected to produce scientific works. However, family responsibilities prevent it. Although housework is done by both men and women, it is still the responsibility of women to take care of the family and children. On the other hand, when many male academics conduct research studies in the evenings and weekends, mothers are involved in childcare duties (Gallardo, 2021).

In Iran, there has been no qualitative research study on the lived experience of female faculty members of simultaneous maternal-occupational roles. The objective of this study was to investigate the challenges of female faculty members in simultaneously fulfilling maternal and occupational roles. Thus, the current research study tried to answer how female faculty members with children described, understood, and perceived their maternity and occupational experiences.

Methodology

In the current research study, the psychological descriptive phenomenological method was used. The sampling method in the descriptive phenomenological method is goal-oriented. The sample included nine female faculty members who lived in Ahvaz in 2021, had at least one child under six years old, and were teaching at the time of the interviews. One of the important tools of data collection in qualitative research is the researcher himself and the use of in-depth individual interviews .

Phenomenological research studies seek to find out what the structure and nature of the experience of a phenomenon by people is (Swanson, 2004). In this method, the researcher records the descriptions provided by the participants after obtaining their consent, and then analyzes, examines, and classifies them through meaningful statements. These meaningful statements are necessary to express the structure of the phenomenon under investigation; they allow the researcher to describe the structure of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). The reliability and validity of the data were checked through the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Results

During data analysis, 63 codes and eight main themes were obtained.

1. Disorder and chaos: Disorder and chaos refer to the confusion of the order and natural routine of life with the presence of children. This disorder and chaos is perceived in a situation where although an individual needs to allocate time and energy to her career, she needs to devote time to fulfill the needs of

her children. For instance, M.1 (the mother of three children) says, "For years, I was a highly attentive person, and I had free time. Having a child messed up my mind because I almost had to adjust all my plans with it."

2. Professional tension: During the interviews, the participants mentioned different symptoms of tension, including feelings of anxiety, stress, nervous tension, and physiological pains. In psychology, professional tension is a description of a person's reactions and unpleasant feelings in challenging and threatening situations, where job or life expectations are not in harmony with his abilities and facilities. For instance, M.8 (the mother of two children) says, "To be honest, sometimes I even cried because of the intensity of the mental pressure. It was very difficult at the beginning. When I was thinking of university activities, I felt a pressure in my shoulders and chest."

3. Feeling guilty about not being a good mother: In the present study, all participants reported that when job requirements prevented them from taking care of their children based on their desired standards and spending time with them, they felt guilty. For instance, M.4 (a mother of two children under the age of three years old) says, "I have a guilty conscience about my children. I am not a good mother now. What would be the effects of my situation on them?"

4. Demoralization: The participants experienced demoralization in the form of confusion, helplessness, despair, confusion in planning, inability to prioritize tasks, lack of mastery, and feeling trapped. For instance, M.8, who has just returned from maternity leave, says, "I felt a kind of confusion. I mean, I was confused; I was hanging around. I didn't know what to prioritize during the pressure."

5. Exhaustion of parenting: Exhausted parents reported experiences of lack of sleep, irregular sleep, boredom, moodiness and misbehavior, and depression. For instance, M. 1 (the mother of three children under the age of six years old) states, "Another feeling that I experience every morning is fatigue. The fatigue is due to the lack of sleep because academic staffs have to be accountable for their nights; the only time they are free is at night."

6. Increased reactivity towards children's misbehaviors: The participants reported that when they were under pressure, they reacted more quickly and misbehaved by yelling at children, hitting them, or ignoring them. For example, M.4 (the mother of two children under the age of three years old) says, "My son makes a lot of noise, I always ask him to be quiet for two minutes! It bothers me a lot. I shout all the time. I get angry a lot."

7. Hope and meaning in the maternal role: The participants reported hope for the passage of time and the children's older age, the temporary nature of the simultaneous pressure of the roles, and positive self-talk in the transition stage. Meaningful experience of maternity was expressed through believing maternity as a mission, motivation for more effort, God's blessing, the best phenomenon of life, and a noble, sweet, and enjoyable goal. For instance, M.8 (a mother who has just returned from maternity leave) says, "Well, on the other hand, children are a motivation, a motivation to work harder."

8. Receiving support from the family: Receiving support from the husband, mother, and other family members reduces tension and pressure in life. The participants expressed this experience as empathy and verbal expression which facilitated tolerance with the stressful conditions of a working mother. In addition, helping to take care of children or sharing housework had positive consequences. For instance, M.1 (the mother of three children) says "My husband helps me a lot. He is one of the chances in my life. As long as he can, he helps me with taking care of the children."

Conclusion

The interpretative analysis of the findings of the interviews showed eight constituent components, namely disorder and chaos, professional tension, feeling guilty about not being a good mother, demoralization, exhaustion of parenting, increased reactivity towards children's misbehaviors, hope and meaning in the maternal role, and receiving support from the family.

Most of the female faculty members complained about the disruption of the normal routine of life and unexpected plans. This issue disturbed their freedom to plan. Consistent with this finding, Bonache et al. (2022) showed that the maternity of female faculty members disrupted the order and routine of life and work and led to high mental conflict in balancing their occupational and maternity roles. Women's caring responsibilities made it more difficult for them to attend to academic affairs, while they expected themselves to remain active and effective in their professional affairs. However, since being a mother, especially for children under six years old, requires considerable time and energy, achieving this desire in practice would be difficult and far from reach.

In line with Dunn (2020) and Maclean et al.'s (2021) studies, most working mothers felt guilty for not being able to constantly devote time to their children. Because in most cultures, they believed that a good mother spends her time physically, mentally, emotionally, and psychologically on her children. Furthermore, female faculty members who had young children had feelings such as vulnerability, isolation, incompetence, high stress, psychological pressure, and lack of support. They also reported some positive achievements in their experiences (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009). It is challenging and exhausting to balance the constant responsibility of building communication bonds with the child with the responsibilities and commitments of academic professional development. Therefore, the high level of stress perceived by working mothers could have consequences on their parenting performance, including parenting burnout. In line with Branch et al. (2021) and Rosewell's (2022) studies, the majority of the faculty member mothers, while experiencing stress, reported that motherhood was a rewarding and joyful experience which gave them a sense of personal growth and success. In the meantime, the perception of support from the family helped reduce the tension resulting from family-work conflicts and led to the enrichment of family and work.

These data need to be re-examined in other samples. It is suggested that future research studies examine the experiences of the fathers who are faculty members. The results of this research will provide the consolers and experts in this field with the design of specific interventions to reduce the consequences of parental-career role conflicts. It might be possible to get rid of the negative consequences of simultaneous roles through formulating policies that support family-friendly programs or revising flexible work schedules (e.g., flexible working hours and fewer research duties for female faculty members with infants and young children).

Conflict of interest

There was no conflict of interest in this paper.

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