# The Joy of Combining Librarianship and Motherhood

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A B S T R A C T

While there is a rich literature about how academic faculty manage to balance work and family life, there is a surprising paucity of research centered on academic librarianship and motherhood. In this phenomenological study based on interviews, the lived experiences of 21 librarians who are also mothers of young children are explored. Six themes focused on the benefits and rewards of combining librarianship and motherhood emerge.

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## INTRODUCTION

*"Being a librarian has made me a better mother, and being a mom has actually made me a better librarian."* —Nicole, a research and instruction librarian and mother of one-year-old twins.

In this era of mommy-blogs, mommy-wars, perfect madness, *Mama, PhD*, Professor Mommy, and "do babies matter?,"[1] the question really is, What more can possibly be said about the experiences of women combining work and family? Surprisingly, librarians have remained relatively silent in this conversation, even in academic circles, and so little is known about what librarians' experiences look like. While many academic librarians hold faculty positions and may even be on the tenure-track, librarians' daily responsibilities, schedules, and employment contracts often mean that a librarian has much less flexibility, autonomy, and off-campus time than her teaching faculty colleagues. Many librarians, both those with faculty status and those who are considered administrative staff, find that they are in a unique position in higher education, and so the plethora of studies about how faculty manage their dual roles as professionals and parents does not always resonate. The present study seeks to illuminate the experiences of librarians and to thereby push the investigation of the work–family interface into this less-explored arena.

The research reported in this article represents the first part of a larger study of the experiences of academic librarians who are also mothers of young children. The purpose here is to answer the following question: What are the benefits women experience in combining the

roles of librarian and mother? The above quotation from one of the study participants acts as a springboard into this exploration of role symbiosis. This noticeably positive perspective is a much-needed one, as the popular and scholarly literature is littered with the language of conflict and struggle. This is not to ignore the tension and challenges that all women combining the two roles face; this positive perspective is only one part of the bigger story, yet a frequently ignored one. It is important to note that not all the women interviewed experienced all of the joys described in the following study, and a few women had more negative than positive experiences with combining librarianship and motherhood. All of the women did cite at least one joy derived from managing both roles. Through this article, the intention of the author is not only to share research findings with colleagues, administrators, and graduates considering entering the field of librarianship, but also to inspire an honest conversation about this topic within the profession.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### ACADEMIA AND MOTHERHOOD

Research narratives and academic lore reinforce the incompatibility of developing a successful academic career while investing time, love, and energy into motherhood. By repeating a "narrative of constraint" (O'Meara, Terosky, & Neumann, 2008), the literature suggests that women who want both—a productive career in academia and children—must either concede and choose one to the detriment of the other or must acquire superhuman powers to overcome the endless threats to their success. It is easy to find substantial studies warning early-career faculty about the dangers of mixing the two roles (e.g., Armenti, 2004; Munn-Giddings, 1998), detailing the perceived barriers (e.g., Van Anders, 2004), or highlighting the stresses and lack of support

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[1] This list comprises a mere sliver of the cultural references, popular book titles, and latest salvoes in the discussion of motherhood in the United States over the last decade.

experienced by academic mothers (e.g., O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). In their telling 2004 joint report, "Sleepless in Academia," Acker and Armenti combined their two qualitative studies of female Canadian faculty with children to highlight the challenges, discontents, and daily dilemmas faced by faculty-mothers. The aforementioned studies are invaluable contributions to the understanding of women's role in the workplace, and more specifically, female faculty's relationship with parenthood, but in many ways, they continue the conflict perspective.

Alternatively, there is a current body of research investigating the higher-education policies that affect female faculty, especially regarding work/family issues (e.g., Bird, 2011; Hollenshead, Sullivan, Smith, August, & Hamilton, 2005; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). Although the participants in the present study were asked about the institutional support they received as mothers from their employers' policies (i.e., parental leave, flexible scheduling, access to breastfeeding/pumping rooms), policy and institutional transformation are not the focus of this study.

The present study more-closely follows in the steps of the work done by Raddon in the United Kingdom and Ward and Wolf-Wendel in the United States. Raddon (2002) explores the "lived reality" of women academics positioned in-between the often-contradictory discourses of the "successful academic" and the "good mother." She asserts that despite the tension between a woman's dual roles, there is still potential for empowerment and even fulfillment. The present study builds on this concept of empowerment and agency by highlighting the benefits, joy, and satisfaction experienced by librarians who are mothers of young children.

Additionally, Ward & Wolf-Wendel's (2004) article and subsequent book, *Academic Motherhood: How Faculty Manage Work and Family* (2012) were the inspiration for the present study, because in these works, the authors make an effort to combat the "narrative of constraint" and thereby leave room for what they label the "silver linings" of combining academia with being a mother. The rare glimmer of hope and happiness was a welcome respite from the doom and gloom of much of the scholarly and popular literature on motherhood. It serves as a springboard for the examination of the rewards of dual roles. The present study's positive perspective on combining work and family is intended as a complement to, not a denigration of, the often-challenging and problematic reality of motherhood in the United States. Prior studies exploring the very real hardships faced by full-time-employed mothers of young children play a valuable role in changing our current socio-political system in the U.S., which is characterized by an egregious lack of support for families. This study adds a worthwhile expansion of the discussion about motherhood by focusing on the sometimes-overlooked rewards. The title of the present study, "The Joy of Combining Librarianship and Motherhood," is inspired by a chapter subheading in Ward and Wolf-Wendel's (2004, 2012): "The Joy of Professional and Personal Roles."

### WORK–FAMILY ENRICHMENT

It is worth noting that there is a growing interest at the crossroads between the fields of management and industrial–organizational psychology in the positive effects of combining the dual roles of work life and family life. Research studies in these fields have investigated the concept using terms such as "interrole facilitation," "positive spillover," "enrichment," and "enhancement" and have begun to formulate theoretical frameworks for exploring these positive effects (see Greenhaus & Powell, 2006 for a review). Work–family enrichment is defined as "the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role" (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006, p. 73). This bi-directionality between work and family life is important, and for the purposes of the present study, the author will use the term "work–family enrichment." Several of the "silver linings" referred to by Ward and Wolf-Wendel fit nicely into this concept.

### LIBRARIANSHIP AND MOTHERHOOD

Despite the perennial conversation surrounding faculty and motherhood, academic librarians' voices are noticeably absent. Librarianship is not only a culturally feminized profession, but a female-dominated one: according to the National Center of Education Statistics, women comprise 81% of library school enrollment, and according to the ARL Annual Salary Survey, over 62% of their library professionals are women and women make up the majority of research library directors (58%). Graves, Xiong, and Park (2008) posit that librarians' relative silence on this important topic may stem from the controversial nature of tenure within librarianship; perhaps the sometimes-ambiguous status of librarians is to blame for the professional reticence to tackle these issues. Essays and autobiographical sketches pop up now and then in journals and on professional blogs, often offering a first-person perspective and maybe a call for changes in policy or attitude. Recently, personal anecdotes, useful strategies, and policy recommendations were combined in a practical article about librarians working in technical positions entitled, "How to Hack it as a Working Parent" by Bedoya, Heller, Salazar, and Yan (2015). Connell's addition to the field provides a survey of parental leave policies available to academic librarians (2013).

The small handful of studies discussing librarianship and parenthood over the last 30 years includes three notable studies. Irvine's seminal 1985 study of "the malady known as 'intraoccupational sex segregation'" within academic libraries focused on the differences between male and female library administrators (p. 235). Using a survey of ARL library administrators, she traced the demographic changes and the sex composition of the administrators through the 1970s. Noting the marital and family tradeoffs female administrators seemed to make in efforts to reach the top, she stated, "For women making career decisions regarding executive positions, the prognosis is rather discouraging for combining family and career lives" (p. 253). While Irvine's study is not centered on motherhood, it illuminates the now decades-old position of female academic librarians and potentially a key distinction between men and women advancing in the profession.

Twenty years later, Zemon and Bahr (2005) usher Irvine's work into the twenty-first century and narrow the focus to measure the extent to which female library directors have been able to advance their career and also raise children. Using a survey to collect information, they found that the majority of directors who were also mothers reported that motherhood did not influence their advancement; additionally, female directors without children and female directors with at least one child reported similarly high levels of satisfaction with their career goal attainment, at 74.2% and 74.9% respectively. Female directors with children stated that the most significant factor in managing both a career and motherhood was a supportive spouse (p. 400).

Graves et al. (2008) build on Irvine and Zemon and Bahr by examining the relationship between librarians' tenure achievement and parenthood. Graves et al. used a combination of closed questions, Likert-like scales, and open comments in their anonymous surveys of male and female tenure-track and tenured librarians at ARL libraries. While very few of the librarians they surveyed reported postponing having children because of the promotion and tenure process, the authors noted that, "Female faculty still have more fear than their male colleagues that their personal family choices will negatively impact their career path" (p. 209). This distinction is curious because of the oft-cited feminized nature of the library profession. Graves et al. urged library leaders and administrators to make it clear to tenure-track librarians that they need not choose between tenure and becoming a parent. Their study concluded with a call to action to support and reassure early-career faculty.

All three of the aforementioned studies bolster the present study on academic librarianship and motherhood, but they do not provide ample opportunity to hear the voices and lived experiences of the librarians themselves. What do librarians who are mothers actually experience?