

## ‘Oh. My. God. You’re crazy!’: The Struggle for Validity Whilst Parenting and Doing a PhD

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Over the past year, I have reflected upon the struggle to feel acknowledged as a valid member of the academic world, primarily due to my dual roles as mother and student. The societal pressures placed on parents, especially mothers, when they start a family are felt across the world. Everyone has different values, perceptions, and opinions about how children should be raised. Trying to keep up with the range of varying and sometimes competing expectations can be incredibly stressful, especially in the first few years. In theory, these differences allow for generations of children to be exposed to a diverse set of values as they grow up. However, in practice, this relies on us accepting others’ values, and not assuming that our own way is the only way. Intergenerational pressure is perhaps the most complex issue in this regard. It is almost a guarantee that any new parent will hear the words ‘well, it was fine in my day!’ and ‘they just keep changing the rules!’ And whilst in most cases such comments are well-intended, they can be hard to stomach because we have the power of hindsight. Yes, it was ‘ok’ not to use a car seat or a seatbelt 50 years ago, but we also know that the number of infant mortalities in car accidents has plummeted since the introduction of safety regulations. A divisive issue that certainly has an intergenerational precedent, and one that has more recently become a sticking point for many families, is the dual role of parenting and working. Whilst I speak from my own experience as a woman in a heterosexual relationship, I fully appreciate that others will take on this work-life/family burden in different ways, so when I say mother/woman, I hope readers will assume their own role in the family dynamic.

The expectations placed on parents, particularly mothers, to balance the commitments of work and childrearing are significant, especially in a society where, unfairly, the job of raising children is still very much the woman’s ‘role’. The Office for National Statistics reports that on average women still do 60% more unpaid work than men.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true for women with caring responsibilities. But since the cost of living has become so high now, in contrast to 50 years ago, households cannot always afford to have a stay-at-home parent. The pressure on mothers to work (or indeed to not work) are immense, and there’s an expectation that women can work as if they don’t have children to care for, and parent as if they don’t have to work. The cries of ‘women can have it all!’ are loud, but they are not backed up with societal support. Some women may well be able to have it all, but they will be judged harshly by many for doing so. Additionally, ‘having it all’ can also mean shouldering all or the majority of the invisible, mental, and emotional burdens of caring for a family, where the traditional roles of women as caretakers of the household are still subliminally and subtly reinforced. Doctor’s appointments, birthdays, sorting out clothing sizes for your rapidly growing offspring, ensuring that they eat more than just biscuits, extra-curricular activities... the list is endless. And individually, none of these tasks are particularly taxing, but taken together, on top of work, studies, hobbies, sleep, staying healthy, keeping up with friends and family, life can quickly become incredibly hectic. And unfortunately, such responsibilities are still disproportionately held by women as the traditional caregivers.

So, what does this have to do with validity? Well, I wanted to write this piece because I have noticed an alarming trend in my own personal experiences, which I think needs to be addressed.

Three weeks after my second daughter was born, I received the unbelievable news that I had succeeded in obtaining a full scholarship to do the PhD that I had been dreaming of for almost a decade. In the following months, I heard the words ‘Oh my God, you’re crazy’ so frequently that I started to pre-empt the response by saying ‘Oh yeah, I’m starting a PhD in September, I know, I’m totally crazy!’ But those words wore me down like a voracious earworm. I’m not crazy. I chose to do this. I knew I wanted to start this PhD while our children were young. For our family (my husband is also a student), it was a no-brainer. We have flexibility, childcare grants, and a drive to make the world a better place for our daughters. We’re in a unique position as students where procrastination is a luxury we can’t afford, and this is just one of the many benefits of studying while parenting. Of course, I know that most of the comments were not made with any malicious intent; they came from family, friends, and colleagues who meant well, and who perhaps sympathised with the challenges ahead of me. But it still felt invalidating, and was certainly not something my husband ever heard, who has experienced wonderfully positive responses to the news of his return to education as a mature student. Anecdotal yes, but

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldtheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10>

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painful nonetheless. Why should one parent (regardless of gender) be seen as a superhero, whilst the other one is deemed crazy? We casually use language that refers to mental illness, and I find that problematic. I wonder whether new mothers who decide to, say, run a marathon or start a business also receive similar replies from their well-meaning family and friends. Words like 'crazy', 'insane', 'mental' are frequently used in casual conversation, but the connotations behind those words are powerful.

Despite much progress being made, we are still in need of significant societal change before many working and studying mothers feel that their place in the academic world is valid. So, let's challenge the use of language that refers to mental illness directed towards mothers (or indeed anyone else) taking on some of the most exciting journeys of their lives, and give them validity. I am not crazy. I'm excited. I'm motivated. I'm valid.