

9. “The dishes can wait: a young mother’s reflection post-PhD”.

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I envy full-time doctoral students, privileged to spend most days on campus, focusing solely on their research project. Completing a PhD is not for the faint-hearted; it is mostly a self-inflicted journey paved with many obstacles. While there is much celebration when the title of ‘Doctor’ is finally prefixed to one’s name, there are limited opportunities to reflect on arduous times and share the realities of student-hood.

What does it actually mean to be a research student in this day and age? I was a PhD candidate from 2006 to 2011 at the Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Asmar (1999, p. 267) succinctly describes how ‘[t]he PhD degree which is supposed to open up the magic doors to an academic career is not attained without pain’. During those five years, I worked in the multicultural field, got married, established myself as a newly arrived skilled migrant in Australia, and had a baby. Each of those situations presented specific obstacles to ultimately submitting my thesis, and I experienced them concurrently. Some would say I love a challenge.

My PhD was awarded in April 2011. I thoroughly enjoyed conducting ethnographic research on resilience and wellbeing among a small group

of single refugee women in Brisbane. As a relatively privileged skilled migrant, I learnt tremendously from the lived experiences of women who defy the odds on a daily basis. At thirty-one, I am now an academic in the same institution where I studied as an undergraduate ten years ago. I am the first former student to be appointed in the school. In a way, I have come 'full circle'. There is now an impetus to publish findings from my research endeavours. This is important, as a lot of hard work has gone towards completing my PhD.

However, I carry multiple and enmeshed identities as a young woman-skilled migrant-new citizen-wife-mother-researcher-lecturer. The research aspect of my PhD was only one piece of the puzzle, influenced by other important facets. Similarly, the complexity of identities experienced in social welfare and caring professions warrants reflecting on the inextricable links between personal experiences and practice frameworks. Reflexivity enriches professional identities and implies the 'careful consideration of the self' (Miehls and Moffatt 2000, p.343). Rather than focussing on mastering skills to control anxiety, social welfare practitioners are now encouraged to embrace discomfort and experience the self subjectively, acknowledging the complexity of identities and practice implications.

I decided to candidly share my experiences, not because I want a pat on the back, but because my life was quite complex and I still managed to complete my PhD. I could not find a lot of literature on the subjective experiences of doctoral students, as existing accounts tend to focus on the research process itself (for example, Salmon 1992; Wolstenholme 2008). The meanings attached to attending university have significantly changed over the years, as the demands of caring for dependents and earning an income while studying commonly constitute the realities of many. Such experiences remain largely unexamined. I am hoping that researchers who may be struggling and happen to stumble across this narrative of my experiences may find comfort in knowing that *it can be done*.

MOTHERHOOD: 'PUBLISH OR PERISH' OR 'POPULATE OR PERISH'?

After World War II, there was an impetus to increase the migrant population to reconstruct and industrialise Australia's economy, as well as a precautionary measure should the country have to defend itself against potential invasions (State Library of Western Australia 2001). Australian academics have adapted this phrase to convey the need to publish widely to ensure career advancement, or else face the bleak prospect of having one's research relegated to the *'oubliettes'* of the institution. As a budding academic, I am often asked if I have published articles. I always respond with a smile that I got 'publish or perish' confused with 'populate or perish'.

Publishing in peer-reviewed journals or writing a book is the *sine qua non* of migrating to academia-land. Yet, this pathway is fraught with difficulties, particularly for women. Asmar (1999, p. 256) explored the obstacles hindering academics' swift career progression in diverse contexts and identified the 'biological imperatives of women's childbearing and childcaring functions' as a traditional barrier. The struggle to keep up with research publications while managing a teaching load yielded feelings of guilt as quality time with children was forgone. Taking 'time out' from research careers to have children, and post-thesis submission exhaustion, could delay women's progress. There were clear personal costs associated with being a 'successful' woman with children in academia (Asmar 1999).

At various stages of my candidature, I included the phrase 'Write draft journal article' on my list of aims for the year. I never got to it. It was simply too demanding while juggling work responsibilities with study aspirations. As a new house-owner, earning an income was compulsory, so it was essential that I worked while studying. Weekends and public holidays were a time of productivity. I naively believed that when I got to the writing stage of my PhD, I would have more 'flexibility' with my time for publications. After two years in a part-time study mode, I was awarded a scholarship, which enabled me to study full time from 2008 onwards while keeping a part-time work arrangement.

In the scholarship guidelines, there was a clause about an allowance for three months paid maternity leave. My initial reaction was a sense of pride. I lived in a country that acknowledged gender among its pool of PhD students, including women who have babies! An inevitable question popped into my mind: was I among the women who wanted a baby? I had never given this possibility any serious thought. I was in a committed relationship, a happy dog owner, and a devoted PhD student with travelling plans for many years to come. To my (and my partner's) surprise, the answer to the baby question was yes. Within a year of this moment of self-revelation, I became pregnant.

I apprehended sharing the news with my supervisors. I was blessed with understanding and supportive mentors, and on that occasion too, their positive reactions showed that they both believed in my potential to juggle thesis writing with motherhood. Both academics had supervised another young woman who had two children during her candidature, and was awarded her PhD with flying colours. I turned to this fellow woman for advice and survival tips, as she was the living example of what can be achieved with good time management skills and a strong support network.

I could tick the box for good time management skills. I had it all planned out over the next few months: I would write relentlessly before the baby's arrival, ready to jump back into PhD-mode after my maternity leave lapsed. However, being a new Australian resident with no family members nearby meant that my partner and I would be alone in caring for our baby. This situation represented an additional difficulty for me as the primary-carer-aspiring-doctor. I was hoping I would uncover some outstanding juggling abilities even though I knew maternity leave did not exactly mean 'spare' time for studying.

Ryan (2007) highlights the knowledge gaps on the social worlds of migrant mothers with young children in diverse circumstances. Migrant women's sense of agency in transnational settings has been largely ignored until recently because women were simply seen as men's passive companions (Pessar and Mahler 2003) or in domestic roles (Ryan 2007).

However, migrant women's lived experiences abound with adaptational characteristics in responses to daily challenges, which would be absent if migration had not taken place (Pessar and Mahler 2003). There is therefore a significant 'habitus' of migration embedded in women's everyday lives (Marshall and Foster 2002). Nevertheless, tensions arising from changes in social networks as well as the inextricable links between migration and women's identities are inevitable (Marshall and Foster 2002).

I stopped anticipating what would happen post-pregnancy. All I could do was cross fingers for a 'good' baby. What I had not expected was how unwell I felt during pregnancy, which meant I could not focus on writing. I was producing mediocre drafts despite great research findings, knowing fully well that my writing was sub-standard. My supervisors and I agreed that I should take a period of leave earlier than foreseen.

MY DAUGHTER'S ARRIVAL: AUGUST 2009

Nothing could prepare me for the transition to motherhood. As a young woman who was used to being 'in control' and anticipated change and difficulties, the arrival of my daughter quickly reminded me that there was no user manual or flow-chart diagram on how to be a mother. All areas of my life converged towards the sole purpose of taking care of a newborn during those first few weeks. Books and websites helped, advice and gifts were welcome, but at the end of the day, it was difficult to be at home with a baby. The mundane tasks of this novel life came in sharp contrast with the fast-paced, challenging and stimulating environment I was used to. Some days, I did not know if I was being a neurotic or neglectful mother in this uncharted territory. I was learning what it meant to be in the 'ambiguous position of mothering' (Ryan 2007, p. 303).

Straight after my daughter's grand arrival, I promised myself that I had wasted enough time and energy on the vain pursuit of a higher research degree. After a couple of months spent at home though, I asked my supervisors to meet via *Skype* to plan how I would transition back into study mode as I wanted to finish my PhD. I had perfectly good reasons to interrupt my studies for a longer period of time. Everybody would have understood and supported my decision. However, I had worked

very hard to get this far and I thought it would be foolish to give up so close to the finishing line. More importantly, when I thought about the breadth and richness of information my participants had shared with me, I owed it to these single women to finish writing about their lived experiences, and disseminate new findings on resilience from refugee perspectives. In my privileged position as an articulate skilled migrant and researcher, I was committed to conveying participants' voices in the public domain, and decided I should persevere.

And I had an understanding baby. She hardly cried at all, except when hungry. She slept well at night and enjoyed napping in the daytime. She was independent early on and self-soothed when I could not respond to her little whimpers. My PhD essentials (laptop, books, journal articles, highlighters, post-it notes, cup of tea) moved around the house as she grew up. When she was still a baby, she was happy to lie down on her colourful mat and play with toys in my small study. She was the best research assistant I could ask for. Once she started crawling, we both moved to the living room so I could keep an eye on her bold explorations of the furniture and examination of odd specks of dust on the floor. When she started walking, I changed the times at which I studied, waking up at dawn before her to write (luckily my brain functions best at that time), and reading during her daytime naps.

It all worked out somehow. I progressed, refreshed from my maternity leave 'break'. I did not let myself be discouraged by bouts of guilt that characterise most new parents' experiences. On certain days, it was impossible to put studying on the agenda at all, as my baby required full attention. Meanwhile, she was getting more interesting each day, unwittingly providing some much-needed home-based distraction from my studies. She reminded me to smile each day – she still does. The knowledge that I only had limited time to focus on my thesis motivated me to make each minute count. I hit the ground running each time I had a window of opportunity. I managed to write my entire thesis from home.

THE WORK – (NO) LIFE BALANCE

Amidst all this, there was hardly any time for going to the movies or socialising. Being a PhD student can be all consuming and isolating. It is a real conversation stopper. It is hard to come across people who share similar interests or who are genuinely interested in discussing PhD-related topics. I can count on one hand the friends who supported me along the way and understood why I often had to decline socialising with them. Commiserating with other research students was also rare because I hardly spent any time on campus. At times, my expectations on my partner for support were unrealistic. I went through periods of self-absorption and introversion, resenting anything that would distract me from writing.

House management tasks were relegated to the background. My motto was that if it was not an occupational health and safety hazard for my daughter, it could wait. Time was my enemy when it came to cleaning. The dishes could pile up in the sink. The laundry stayed on the line for a few days, rain, hail or shine. The garden took care of itself and became unsalvageable. The vacuum cleaner was missing in action. Amidst the demands of motherhood, study and work, it became a matter of choosing which house chore could wait another day.

A change in our personal circumstances meant that I went back to work earlier than anticipated, initially for two days a week. For many mothers, paid work is associated with reclaiming a valued sense of identity in the public domain (Ryan 2007), and I was no exception. A lecturing position was advertised at Griffith University. While I had not fully considered academia at that stage, I thought, ‘Why not?’. I applied for the position and was successful. I was back into full time work just before my daughter turned one, while she was happily adjusting to her childcare routine.

With a baby in childcare, we became regulars at the local medical practice. Not only was it hard to take care of a sick baby, but I also did so while being sick myself. I still managed to squeeze in a couple of hours’ study here and there. Being unwell was not a valid reason for taking time off from writing or working. It was tiring. There was no time to rest from being a mother or a researcher.

Things were hectic. I did not always cope. There is only so much one can bend without breaking. I reached a point in 2010 where I could not see the light at the end of the PhD tunnel. I doubted my abilities as a mother, I was anxious about my new job as an academic, and life's inevitable roller coaster of emotions was taking its toll on my relationship. The ongoing race against time to finish my PhD and the constantly shifting demands of parenthood had compromised my wellbeing. It was high time to slow down.

I prepared for the final milestones of my PhD candidature. I presented my findings during a seminar to a panel of academics where I defended my thesis. I polished my draft based on the panel's feedback. I was in disbelief when I submitted my thesis for examination in October 2010. In fact, it was such an uneventful day that it was almost disappointing. I was still up in the early morning, feeling 'bizarre' that I was not writing. It was all a bit surreal. Re-channelling my drive to write towards other activities was a challenge in itself – but not one I complained about.

When my partner and I got married overseas in December 2010, it was not only a celebration of our commitment, but the acknowledgement that we had overcome tough times with a PhD comfortably rooted in our house, a wonderful baby, and the ongoing struggle to make connections as recent migrants in a foreign land. The event was also a reminder of important aspects of life. While being awarded a PhD is a significant milestone, love and family are quintessential elements of a balanced life.

It was with a lot of pride that I received the call from my supervisor advising that my PhD was finalised. He acknowledged my own resilience in the process of finding out about fellow women's resilience. My supervisors both experienced the highs and lows of this roller coaster ride with me over the years. Their support was unwavering. Good supervision is an essential ingredient of a successful PhD.

Nobody trips over mountains. It is the small pebble that causes you to stumble. Pass all the pebbles in your path and you will find you have crossed the mountain (Anonymous).

I am now enjoying writing for publication while teaching. The stress levels I may experience these days do not quite compare with that of the PhD era. The accentuated difficulties of juggling motherhood with work and other commitments still take me by surprise at times. I draw on the intensive period of my life as a PhD student to manage those tensions in everyday life. I often get puzzled looks as people try to make sense of the fact that I had a baby while studying towards my PhD. I am glad that I am not studying anymore, and I enjoy more stress-free and meaningful moments with my husband and daughter. But if I had to do it all over again, I would. It took me a long time to realise that *I* was in fact the privileged one. There are not many contexts where one can be a young woman-skilled migrant-new citizen-wife-mother-researcher-lecturer.

I learnt tremendously from these rich, concurrent experiences. The pursuit of a worthwhile goal means perseverance and sacrifices, and never losing sight of the bigger picture. It also entails recognising the achievements along the way, however small they may seem. Life has opened many doors for me, and I embrace these opportunities fully.

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