

Chapter 23

The Kitchen Table: Mother-Academics Reconfiguring Their Emerging Identities While Aligning Family and Work



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Abstract Mother-academics are disadvantaged by historical and systemic inequalities situated within academia which have been compounded by the pandemic. Through the analytical lens of the theory of practice architectures, we focus on work practices and women's emotional experiences while reconfiguring their identities as online academics and simultaneously their changing home worlds due to the close proximity of their children at the kitchen table. Findings indicate that pre-COVID-19, boundaries between mothering and academia were delineated by the physicality of settings. In contrast, when forced to work from home during the pandemic, skilful navigation was required to obtain a home/work balance. Empathy was required to realign and locate a form of equilibrium in the merging online and home environment at the kitchen table. We contribute to the growing body of literature that advocates for academia to become a less gendered environment in the future.

Keywords Mothers · Academia · Mother-academics · Transformation · Identity · Empathy · Theory of practice architectures · COVID-19

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23.1 Introduction

Literature abounds regarding the prevalence of a neo-liberal and patriarchal culture situated within academia. Although Australian universities promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, and provide agreements as well as policies that reportedly support a work life balance, the historically situated expectations of gender and work are prevalent. These expectations position women as caregivers, good at administrative tasks, while promoting men as leaders, in charge of business directions and finance (Gilbert et al., 2020). This is reflected in studies that indicate workers in academia who identify as women academics are disadvantaged due to historically gendered institutional inequality; for a large proportion of this population, there is limited recognition of maternal roles and responsibilities (Gilbert et al., 2020). It is well known that women and more specifically mothers progress more slowly and accept lesser roles and financial remuneration throughout their academic careers compared with their male counterparts (Allen et al., 2021; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Mothers also continue to navigate the spaces between their role as caregivers and a workplace that does not recognise the complexity of their everyday lives (Eaton & Burns, 2020). The historical and current patriarchal performance model disproportionately affects mothers due to the “pressure of total commitment” (Gaudet et al., 2020, p. 76). The inequity has been more noticeable during the COVID-19 pandemic as women’s contribution to academic journals has decreased, indicating women have been required to interrupt their research more than their male counterparts (Gewin, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 on early and mid-career women and specifically mother-academics seems to be contributing to widening the ongoing inequality in academia. The lockdowns in Melbourne, Australia have compounded the challenges for mother-academics as the boundaries between home and work merged. We examine the blurring of online academic work and life as mother-academics and their children congregated around the kitchen table. We argue that navigating the boundaries of this new space and reconciling historical and emerging tensions have led to reconfiguration of mother-academics’ identities.

Through the analytical lens of the theory of practice architectures (TPA), built environments transform the sayings, doings, and relating of individuals and collectives (Kemmis et al., 2014a; MacDonald et al., 2022). In this chapter, we aim to add a new dimension to understanding practice architectures, where the online work and home spaces merged and were reconfigured into “new hybrid geographies and architectures of practice” (Variyan & Reimer, 2022, p. 3). In the hybrid space (online and face to face) there were few physical boundaries between family and work, and the needs and wants of established and new actors (family, students, and work colleagues) collided. By presenting five narrative accounts of everyday life during the pandemic, nuanced insights into mother-academics’ lives will contribute to a better understanding of a mother’s positioning in academia during the pandemic, and the deepening gender divide which has occurred. The evolving ecologies of practice

when working in a hybrid space at the kitchen table, with children of varying ages (6–27-year-olds) created disruptions, and implications for academic practice.

23.2 Working Mothers: Reconfiguring Identities in Hybrid Architectures of Practice

Both historical and current research indicates mother-academics are disadvantaged in academia (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Myers et al., 2020). Longstanding research indicates that mother-academics voice concerns about their emotions, indicating fears and feelings of guilt, which were lived daily when striving to reach their goals of tenure and promotion (Toepell, 2003). During the pandemic the constraints women experienced have been compounded, as was seen in some of the other chapters in this book (see, for example, Chaps. 4 and 13; Patel, 2022; Yip & Maestre, 2022). It seems that mother-academics have experienced a jolt both career-wise and personally. Gilbert et al. (2020) argue that having the prevalent neo-liberal and patriarchal academic culture in higher education works at devaluing motherhood through “the reification of a disembodied masculinised worker” (p. 5). Further, Heilman & Okimoto (2008) found limited recognition of maternal roles and responsibilities, which results in mothers taking lower academic roles and progressing at a much slower pace than those who identify as male. It is interesting to note that child-free female academics progress on career paths similar to their male colleagues (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). There is, therefore, a need to understand work-life balance for mother-academics.

A key concept in recent literature concerning mothers’ work in academia is locating a balance between home and work life. Feigon et al. (2018) indicates “a potentially adverse impact on the overall quality of life and overall life satisfaction when work and personal lives conflict” (p. 300). Yet, Huopalainen & Stama (2019), in their autoethnographic study of ways mothers’ balance the demands of contemporary motherhood and academia, found some mothers felt satisfaction with motherhood and their academic careers. A second area that mother-academics found challenging to balance during lockdowns were the role of teaching and research while juggling children’s home learning. In a study by Minello et al. (2021), consisting of in-depth interviews with thirteen academics, it was found that mother-academics prioritised online teaching while giving up their research time to simultaneously cope with their children’s home learning and care. The attention towards working mothers’ work-life balance illustrates the constraints and enablers of mother-academics’ practices in relation to gender equity and identity transformation (Huopalainen & Stama, 2019; Minello et al., 2021).

In a comprehensive literature review by Allen et al. (2021), extensive evidence was noted that concerned institutional gender inequity for females and mother-academics in particular. In essence, mother-academics are *victimised* through patriarchal norms within the academy, constantly needing to negotiate constraints and enablers in order

to survive and thrive in academia (Allen et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a need for a radical shift in this “cultural landscape of academia” (Gilbert et al., 2020, p. 6) which has been brought centre-stage through the lived experiences of mother-academics during the pandemic. As a way forward, there is growing evidence that academia requires consultations with mother-academics in relation to the development of policies that address gender equity (Allen et al., 2021). This will help to support mother-academics in navigating a better work-life balance and progress in their careers at the same rate as their male counterparts.

23.3 Theoretical Approach

Our interest in this chapter is to consider how our practices were influenced by the changes to our physical and social environments during lockdown, and how these changes in conditions blurred our identities of academic and parent. We adopt a site ontological approach where we understand that “it is *through our practices* that our dispositions and our sense of agency form and develop, as we interact amid the practice architectures of the different settings we inhabit” (Kemmis, 2019, p. 36, emphasis in original). In order to examine the influence of our site of practice we employ TPA (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) which considers how practices connect together in specific sites such as a classroom, a faculty office, or in this case, our homes. TPA defines practice as “a form of socially established cooperative human activity that involves characteristic forms of understanding (sayings), modes of action (doings), and ways in which people relate to one another and the world (relatings), that ‘hang together’ in a distinctive project” (Kemmis et al., 2014a, p. 155). An international network of scholars has developed and employed TPA in a range of settings for the purpose of “explor[ing] the forming, self-forming, and transforming nature of educational praxis and explain[ing] its relevance at a time when instrumental, managerialist, and neoliberal rationalities continue to dominate global and local education narratives” (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 15). This has included the use of TPA to investigate practice in higher education (see, for example, MacDonald et al., 2022; Mahon & Galloway, 2017; Santos & Soler, 2021).

TPA puts forward the argument that practices do not “spring forth fully formed” (Kemmis et al., 2017, p. 245) but are enabled and constrained by the arrangements that shape interactions. TPA identifies the assemblages of a distinctive project in terms of three interwoven aspects (Kemmis et al., 2017; Santos & Soler, 2021):

1. Cultural-discursive arrangements which exist within a semantic space mediated by language and are evident in the *sayings* of practices that we experience as ways of speaking and thinking about the world (for example, language, discourse and ideas).
2. Material-economic arrangements which exist within physical space and time and are evident in activities or *doings* that we experience as, for example, our actions and schedules; and.

3. Socio-political arrangements which exist within social space and prefigure how individuals connect with each other. We experience these *relatings* as conditions of solidarity and power, for example, in organisational rules and norms, and expectations of our practices.

TPA enables a framework for examining practices within social sites and importantly assists illumination of the concept of *praxis*. Praxis considers intersections of identity, agency, and practice arrangements, defined as a “kind of educational practice that is informed, reflective, self-consciously moral and political, and oriented towards making positive educational and societal change; it is context-dependent and can therefore take many forms” (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 15). In using TPA to consider our changed practices as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we seek to exhibit praxis that informs and supports our reconfigured identities as academics as we have learnt how to go on (Kemmis, 2019) in ways that value the full scope of our own humanity and contribute the rehumanisation of higher education in the form of gender equity (Kemmis, 2019; Santos & Soler, 2021).

23.4 Methodology

We examine the ways in which the change in physical arrangements of sites (from working in an office to working at home) changed our personal and professional practices. The abrupt changes in the cultural-discursive, material-economic, and social-political arrangements both enabled and constrained each mother-academic and their academic/personal practices in various ways. The five authors are all participants in this chapter. We are early to mid-career mother-academics with each person having under ten years of service at the same university. We decided to narrate and analyse our own stories, as we have a collective desire to understand and share the experiences that encompassed our professional and personal learnings as mother-academics during one of the most extensive lockdowns world-wide, in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia during 2020–2021.

The data originated from informal discussions where some authors were face-to-face on the university site and others joined online, sitting at their kitchen table managing children’s schooling. The time was memorable, as Melbourne was emerging from lockdown only to be informed five days later that we were to go back into a *snap lockdown* for seven days. This *snap* lockdown lasted for 12 weeks. Over the course of six months, we met monthly for two hours. We reflected on our experiences and ways in which our practices had changed across the home and university sites, what our practices used to be, and what they encompassed during lockdown. All of the authors contributed to a shared Google document and, in total, collected ten hours of field notes. We decided to write storied accounts of our experiences to explore the ways that changes to our physical sites initiated changes to our work practices.

The stories presented here are narratives that the authoring academics have shared with families, others, and selves. They provide a glimpse into our lives as mother-academics and, according to Yuval-Davis (2010), these stories provide information about who we are/not and open possibilities of who we could/should be. As the stories are contextualised to draw out our lives in academia, the narratives contribute to our academic identities (Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021). However, we extend this point, as our academic and family lives are intimately intertwined within the hub of our households: *the kitchen table*. The stories presented contribute to understanding our transforming identities as we reconcile becoming mother-academics during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. We recognise the limitations of the current study as it is small-scale and not generalisable. However, the purpose of this study is not generalisability, but rather in-depth explorations of the reflections of our emotional experience as we lived through lockdowns while supporting our children.

23.4.1 Data Analysis

The data analysis followed an iterative approach, beginning with re-reading our own narratives and coming together to discuss ways our narratives outlined constraining and enabling factors within our practices as mother-academics. We then devised a table with sayings, doings, and relating as horizontal headings and our names were placed on the left-hand vertical side of the table. We systematically went through our own writing to examine constraining and enabling dimensions of practice evident in the sayings, doings, and relating of our narratives (see Table 23.1). In the final stage, we came together to discuss similarities and differences of our practices and presented these in relation to our theoretical understanding of TPA and the literature.

Table 23.1 Example of the analysis table

	Sayings	Doings	Relatings
Fiona	Imposter syndrome took some management	Working hours sitting at my kitchen table Messier day as well as having our books, papers and computers, it may also have piles of laundry, craft materials, and mail	Literally next to me at the table, was usually one of my children working on a remote learning task I had been working to reconfigure the other facets of my life to accommodate both this identity and the logistics of my first full-time work in over a decade. The separation of roles that was possible in normal life helped with this

23.5 Shifting Narratives of Work–Life Balance

23.5.1 *Megan: Bigger Kids, Bigger Problems*

As academics we were instructed to provide extra care for students, and to be lenient due to the effect of isolation and working fully online during the pandemic. This resulted in extra-long working hours. I felt constantly exhausted, with strained eyes due to copious hours on zoom. I remember a strong feeling of internal conflict where the personal/professional divide blurred due to the accessibility and proximity of my workstation, to my personal life. Many students were struggling with isolation and concerns about their health, and that of their family, student's work suffered at the 'cost' of caring for their own family and similar to academics, were working jointly together at the kitchen table. Others were in single rooms by themselves with no close contacts day after day. Many requested one on one conversations. In the end I set up a weekly zoom drop in session where we discussed areas of our personal lives and introduced family members, and pets. One student commented 'it's the first time I've met anyone from my university beyond discussions in breakout groups.' Another two students found they were living in the same neighbourhood and met up for walks.

My three sons had chosen various combinations of work and study, and serendipitously, in 2020 they all graduated, and began to apply for graduate positions sitting next to me at the kitchen table. The process was laborious and time consuming. I was conflicted, as although young adults, I felt my sons needed parental support, but I seemed to have little time, and I did not really know how to help them, over the top of my laptop, I watched the toil. Ecstatic when they passed one hurdle the grumbles when they missed out. Over 2020, I was forced to question my own identity as a mother-academic and wondered what had happened to those students without the resilience to continually move on from so-called failure.

23.5.2 *Fiona: The Kitchen Table*

Throughout 2020–2021 I spent most of my working hours sitting at my kitchen table. To my right was the kitchen bench, often littered with dirty dishes and condiments left out by my family of four after mealtimes. To my immediate left, literally next to me at the table, was usually one of my children working on a remote learning task. Our kitchen table is in a constant state of flux as the hub of the house. On a messier day as well as having our books, papers and computers, it may also have piles of laundry, craft materials, and mail. Prior to 2020, I had only been a career academic for 18 months and was new to developing an identity as a bonafide academic. During this time, I had been working to reconfigure the other facets of my life to accommodate both this identity and the logistics of my first full-time work in over a decade. The separation of roles that was possible in normal life helped with this. I keenly took opportunities to work in the faculty and sought to make connections with others to support my learning and develop my knowledge about what the work entailed. As for many women academics, imposter syndrome took some management, but working to develop a sense of belonging in my workplace helped.

These separations evaporated through 2020. My identities of academic and parent collided at my kitchen table and the stakes of both were amplified by the conditions of COVID-19. My children struggled, as so many have, with the isolation and distance both

from the learning and social aspects of school (Longmuir et al., 2021). And whilst I navigated significant changes in my practices of teaching and research, I felt the pressure of the impacts on higher education in Australia, knowing that many in my industry were losing their jobs.

23.5.3 Venesser: All Aboard the Home Starship USS Enterprise

Over 2020 and 2021, the sense that we are living at work or working at home (Creely et al., 2021) highlights the messy busyness of my home being transformed into Starship USS Enterprise of the Star Trek series. Navigating remote learning for my school-aged children and my own work as a full time academic has meant my home becoming a battleground with the office, the school, the starship and its bridge, all in one. I have found life as I previously knew it, has changed completely. This experience is wearisome and exhausting and yet novel and exciting with many opportunities to connect with the learning of my children first-hand and with building meaningful connections with my colleagues and students, online. Technology made communication possible by allowing us to continue surviving through lockdowns, but it has also made it clear that we are just human, even when at our best. As Captain James Kirk, from the Star Trek series suggests, “We make mistakes, but we’re human—and maybe that’s the word that best explains us” (Roddenberry, 1967).

I have now grown to believe strongly that life can be chaotic, messy and uncharted; yet joyful, fulfilling and adventurous. I’ve found that the haphazardness of the last two years has helped me keep work and home-schooling, leisure and rest, spirituality and mortality working side by side in an on-going juggle of days sliding into weeks and weeks into months as the academic mother at home.

As a working academic with school-going children, I now find myself letting go of trying to keep perfection and balance in place with work and home kept in separate spaces. This synergy of work and home provides me with new dreamings into possible future work-life balances while daily living with COVID-normal pressures and realities. It helps me, in multiple ways, to distinguish between what should never be compromised and what can be realigned, reshaped and restructured.

23.5.4 Sylvia: Juggling/Shifting Identities

The pandemic has impacted life in so many tangible and intangible ways. The biggest challenge the pandemic brought to my life is the blurring of personal and professional boundaries. Life as an academic and a single mother has always been a balancing act with long hours of working into the night after completing parental responsibilities. The pandemic meant the added stress of juggling both responsibilities simultaneously. I have often wondered if there was any concern for the wellbeing of parents and academics with the extra work hours and emotional costs of working with anxious children and students. On more than one occasion I have had to reach out to university students who were anxious, dealing with domestic violence and feeling isolated. The nights afterwards were often sleepless wondering if I had done enough or if there was something more, I could do to ease the situation for my students.

Home schooling brought in many challenges especially when working with a special needs child alongside the extra kitchen duties (brought on by a perpetually hungry teenager) and minimal contact with the outside world.

Finally, the pandemic ushered in a need to rethink my teaching approaches. During the first lockdown I had to shift my focus from a mainly outdoor experiential learning approach to an online mode of learning. For example, my first class had to be moved from the botanical gardens to offering a virtual tour of the same gardens. This required a massive amount of out of the box thinking where we participated in activities that involved exploring nature in outdoor spaces to identify nature learning opportunities in backyards and through windows. While in the past I have been critical of teaching 'nature' indoors the forced and swift move to online learning opened up new vistas and possibilities to teaching and learning.

23.5.5 Liang—Tracing My Academic Life Over COVID

What I was challenged to do is to balance my work and home life at the same time. My 6-year-old son first started home learning and needed a lot of parental support with home learning tasks. Simultaneously, it was my first time working at home. The uncertainties were embedded in everyday work and home life.

With regards to the academic teaching, thanks to the technologies, we were still able to connect with our students over the virtual space. Until the first assessment task was nearly due, quite a lot of students asked for extensions towards the due dates of their assignments, to reduce their anxieties and stress during this challenging time. I realised how intense online learning is. Quite a few wonders were around me such as to what extent could we as academics effectively and affectively connect to students' feelings over the virtual space. I completed a professional development module about ways to create a community in the classroom, which supported me to make trusting and harmonious relationships with the students and create an online learning community.

In academic life, what I really missed was the close communication with colleagues as part of the daily practice. Thanks to the technologies, under the support of leaders, the weekly lunch time catch-up and Four Padlet Collective Documentations on the virtual space were arranged, which were a great help to share our feelings, uncertainties, concerns and thoughts. Also, I occasionally sent short text messages to colleagues, which supported my continuing connections.

Due to the long period of lock down, I had to support my son's learning and development. I tried to make life easier for him and myself. My son and I had regular times to relax, with one hour mindfulness time scheduled. This included half an hour walking outside around the neighbourhood and half an hour of children's Yoga. It was amazing to notice that I got to know him more over this period.

23.6 Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to influence each aspect of social, physical, and emotional life. Its impact on those of us working in academia has been profound, changing academia with lockdowns requiring an instant shift to online teaching and learning (Jalongo, 2021). Watermeyer et al.'s (2021) study of academics in the UK shows the majority are *bruised* by the sudden transition to online learning, with most

indicating distrust towards digital pedagogies; considerable *trauma* has also been linked to profound personal and professional disruptions academics experienced during the pandemic.

Our study examined how new arrangements on, at and around the kitchen table prefigured new sayings, doings, and relating as our academic identities and home lives collided while working and mothering. We all learned to perform academic labour in this new space and continued our professional and personal learning journey. The focus rests with ways we integrated working with children and the demands of employment at a Group of Eight university. Kemmis et al., (2014a, p. 2) argues that we participate in “a dance between identity and otherness, a dance between the reproduction of some things alongside the transformation of others”. The authors concentrated on their professional and personal dance while learning new practices at the kitchen table where we created and constantly negotiated conditions that were conducive to professional learning and also accommodated the remote learning our children were required to undertake.

23.6.1 *Juggling Our Voices*

The particular cultural-discursive arrangements in a site prefigures the language we use and make practices visible through sayings. In this home/work hybrid space of online and sitting face to face with children, what we needed to say, and to whom, could change from moment to moment. In our narratives, we see sayings such as “constant state of flux” (Fiona), “juggling” (Sylvia), “balancing” (Ling), and “messy busyness” (Venesser). These phrases describe the moment-by-moment interactions of the personal and professional required due to our changing working situation. Although we made efforts to maintain some separation in our practices, our sayings as mother-academics which can usually be seen in distinct professional and personal language, were often merged. This occurred notably in the virtual meeting spaces, as our homes and lives were existing at the “feathered edges” (Variyan & Reimer, 2022, p. 17) of our screens. While on Zoom calls, we were often simultaneously engaged in dialogue with our children, sometimes in actual conversation (for example, guiding home learning in the brief moments while muted in a meeting), and always internally (as we worried about the ways that our family were coping with their circumstances). This cultural-discursive blur of our personal and professional lives filtered into our sayings as we worked, particularly with students. We came to understand that it was acceptable to share the personal and to have our mother identity more visible, and we encouraged this in others.

The amplification of wellbeing in the semantic space was an ever-present part of our consciousness that was reflected in the cultural-discursive responses of our institution as calls for us to attend to student wellbeing emerged. Discourse around wellbeing became ever present and shaped our practices as noted by Sylvia “a lot of discussion of wellbeing—both as parents ensuring wellbeing of our children and as educators ensuring the wellbeing of our students”. An example of changed practice as

a result of this discourse was shared by Megan in her description of how she purposefully organised a virtual discursive space for her students “where we discussed and introduced family members and pets”. In these ways, our sayings demonstrated authentic caring practices that are naturally associated with mothering, and we note that these became more important, and in some ways valued, in our professional practice.

23.6.2 *Slipping Space and Time*

The TPA (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008) provided us with a second critical lens in reflecting our hybrid situation and resulting in changed practices by focusing on our “doings”. Examining doings reveals practices which are prefigured by material-economic arrangements including the societal ideas of gendered roles in work. In the home/work hybrid space these include the physical space we set up for our working homes, the resources we used for online teaching and home learning for our own children, and virtual space and time over the online teaching. As we examined the evidence of our “doings” from our narratives, it was revealed that our practices were significantly transformed by the abrupt and drastic changes to the spaces, time, and resources for our work. Fiona described space and time factors that characterised her experience and the personal and professional interactions in this material-economic dimension as “working hours sitting at my kitchen table... [while]... literally next to me at the table, was usually one of my children working on a remote learning task”. Our proximity to our children was also noted by Liang who mentioned “I had my own home office set up for the zoom teaching and work meetings while physically placing a table next to my office desk for my six-year old son”. Venessser further highlighted that her “home [was] becoming a battleground between the office, and the school”, illustrating how this was a tension that we navigated in these spaces.

The enmeshed nature of the tasks and attention that we gave to our roles as mother-academics were symbolised in our descriptions of the objects and spaces that surrounded us. Of these, the kitchen table is one that we have selected to capture the collision of home and work. This object became a boundary spanning space for several of us and, as Megan described, was also evident as a symbol of the doings of our students as they navigated the same tensions in their own locked down lives. In physical space and time, we suggest that these material-economic arrangements influenced the different ways of doings as we coped with the COVID-19 situation. Unlike the “solidity of what yesterday seemed to guarantee” our yesterdays seemed quite different as we entered into extended lockdown. We did not have “the security of legitimate social orders, the dependability of family and friends” (Kemmis et al., 2014b, p. 3). Instead, one day merged into another as we toiled in condensed worlds of the online space. Time took on a different pace where the days went slowly but the weeks were gone in an instant as Venessser described “an on-going juggle of days sliding into weeks and weeks into months as the academic mother at home”.

This also explained our feelings of constant juggling as our doings merged across multiple dimensions all at the same time while the COVID-19 situation changed how we worked day and night.

23.6.3 Colliding Connections and Commitments

Within changed social-political arrangements that prefigure relatings in the social space, we became more creative and innovative to manage our relationships and responsibilities across both our mother and academic identities. We noticed that delegating, saying no, setting things up, and letting others complete a task were more prominent in our practices. Although individually as five academic mothers we experienced different ways of social arrangements and relatings, our narratives emphasise a shared acknowledgement of wellbeing and caring and the importance of communication over this challenging period. As Liang mentioned, “I had to seek effective ways to communicate with the students and also help myself and everyone feel a sense of belonging in the community of learners.” This echoes what Venesser explained as she sought to “build meaningful connections with my colleagues and students, online”. During emotional moments, Sylvia described the intensity of concern for her students as the personal at times became critical: “On more than one occasion I have had to reach out to students who were anxious, dealing with domestic violence and feeling isolated”. We realised that feelings of empathy were enhanced in our relatings because of the shared baseline in the socio-political arrangements of experiencing the pandemic together though often separated by time and space. Through this empathy we could anchor ourselves to what others were going through, which supported our innovative doings and, combined with the virtual communicative space, shared new ways of relating to the students and colleagues; we could support one another.

Through consideration of our changed practices that are visible in our sayings, doings, and relatings, one main finding was that our academic identity has been transformed while meeting the challenges and changes. These “sayings” in the semantic space, “doings” in the physical space–time, and “relatings” in the social space, are dynamically intertwined but all three dimensions of arrangements that prefigure practice were significantly disrupted due to the ongoing pandemic. Our example of five academic mothers juggling multiple aspects of our personal and professional identities over the pandemic shows the influence of mother/academic identity on our praxis, which we understand as morally-informed action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008). We found that we agree with Monahan (2002, p. 7) that “identity construction is inseparable from the relationship between individuals, spaces and practices”. We acted in the present moments, in our homes, while considering the various relationships to inform our future practices with the praxis reflection of “what should I do next?”. Variyan and Reimer (2022) suggested in their study of academic practice during the pandemic that “academics were not free to do as they pleased but were faced with a multi-faceted and emerging context that forced on them new practices, new visibilities and new virtualities” (p. 17). We also argue that our new practices

emerged as a result of our complex attempts at morally informed decision making: the collision of needing to make morally important/right decisions and what is best for students and our own family as we work together at the kitchen table. Our transformed practices in these hybrid arrangements support that “practice may be enacted as praxis” (Mahon et al., 2017, p. 14) as it involves moral, ethical, and professional decisions.

23.7 Final Remarks

Overall, this study looked at the ways in which mother-academics’ identities shifted in response to the demands of online academia while supporting their own children in the online learning spaces allowing for new kinds of praxis to take shape. Our emerging identity as lecturers was primarily shaped by our historical past workplace and the hybrid working-from-home space we entered during the pandemic. There was a constant juggling of personal and professional spaces with academic mothers noticing the silos and structures of pre-pandemic life melt away. This was confronting and challenging since we would otherwise ensure that our professional identity was separate and our roles as mothers stayed invisible and not seen to have any impact on our professional lives. There was little control over the *everydayness* becoming visible in our professional lives and with time we adapted and accepted this as part of our new academic identities. As we sought to balance our personal and professional lives, we saw the notions of time, physical space, and emotional availability fade and merge in a never-ending cycle. As the pandemic progressed, we were more accepting of our merging identities and the focus shifted to the centrality of wellbeing for our children, students, colleagues, and ourselves. We found new ways of reaching out to others around us with a clear enhancement of empathy in how we reacted to people and situations around us.

As the world grapples with the pandemic which now seems to be ongoing with new mutations continuing to play havoc with the world order, we consider the implications of what it means to work in these situations. What seemed to be transient, temporary measures to help overcome the pandemic are slowly evolving into a new way of living and working. The implications of this study are far reaching for mother-academics globally who are facing similar demands as they juggle their personal and professional lives. It also holds meaning to all other academics who are impacted by the ongoing pandemic and work with mother-academics as colleagues. The findings of increased empathy and the focus on wellbeing hold meaning beyond the ongoing pandemic. The tensions created by a heavily impacted higher education sector embroiled in a socio-political environment of job losses, loss of loved ones, and increased isolation from family and friends calls for everyone to work with heightened empathy and sensitivity.

The pandemic has also created new vistas for enhancing our professional lives. As academics and mothers there are many examples of how we reimagined and brought creativity to our new work situations. These have ramifications for a larger

audience interested in the lives and works of academic women and mothers. Similar to others, we envisage an academic environment where mother-academics are able to negotiate the blurred lines and collisions between their home and work life and progress within the same timeframe and similar positions as men throughout their careers. Although a small-scale study, we aim to contribute to the growing body of literature that advocates for academia to become a less gendered and more equitable working environment for mother-academics. There is a dire need to revisit and realign policies to support mother-academics; this is an opportune time as we are used to swift changes, which continually occur. Change is necessary as higher education is moving through a crisis.

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