


7-27-2018

Creating a Participatory Arts-Based Online Focus Group: Highlighting the Transition from DocMama to Motherscholar

Anna CohenMiller

Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education, anna@cohenmiller.com

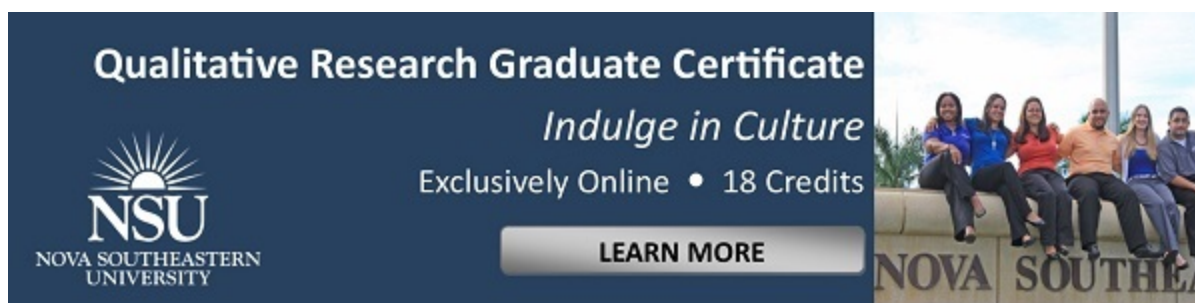
Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

CohenMiller, A. (2018). Creating a Participatory Arts-Based Online Focus Group: Highlighting the Transition from DocMama to Motherscholar. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(7), 1720-1735. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss7/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Creating a Participatory Arts-Based Online Focus Group: Highlighting the Transition from DocMama to Motherscholar

Abstract

Using Facebook to create a participatory, arts-based online focus group, this study had two primary purposes: (1) to examine how mothers in academia present themselves as they transition from doctoral student mother (“DocMama”) to full time position as motherscholars and (2) to explore the use of a participatory, arts-based online focus group on Facebook to facilitate participant description of experiences and feelings. This study adds both to the research on online research by emphasizing a collaborative nature and art to share experiences, and also to the research about motherscholars, examining the oft overlooked transition from doctoral program to academic career as the first step in the academic ladder (CohenMiller, 2014). The four participants participated through a secret Facebook group to post images and text from geographically disperse locations across the US, Central Asia, and New Zealand. In using an arts-based online format, participants were able to continually add to and adjust their responses to best explain their experiences. Using this online dynamic format provided a useful opportunity for participants to share their experiences across time and space. To analyze the data, I used self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) to discover common themes relating to work and family consistent with the literature as well as an unexpected finding regarding the concept of the “ideal” motherscholar. Furthermore, results highlighted the utility of a participatory arts-based online focus group to create a supportive format for ongoing, dynamic communication, interaction, and sharing of experience across geographically distant locations.

Keywords

Arts-Based Research, Online Focus Group, Innovative Research Methods, Participatory Research, Facebook, Graduate Student, Motherscholar, “DocMama,” Mother in Academia, Self-Presentation Theory

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Acknowledgements

This study was originally presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in Dublin, Ireland, in August 2016. Thank you to Dr. Howard Smith for assistance in the first stage of analysis for this study. This feedback along with the insightful comments and support from the editors and reviewers at The Qualitative Report made this article a much richer piece. Lastly and primarily, I would like to thank the

motherscholars for your willingness to engage in a collaborative study and provide insights into your experiences.

Creating a Participatory Arts-Based Online Focus Group: Highlighting the Transition from DocMama to Motherscholar

A. S. CohenMiller

Nazarbayev University, Astana, Kazakhstan

Using Facebook to create a participatory, arts-based online focus group, this study had two primary purposes: (1) to examine how mothers in academia present themselves as they transition from doctoral student mother (“DocMama”) to full time position as motherscholars and (2) to explore the use of a participatory, arts-based online focus group on Facebook to facilitate participant description of experiences and feelings. This study adds both to the research on online research by emphasizing a collaborative nature and art to share experiences, and also to the research about motherscholars, examining the oft overlooked transition from doctoral program to academic career as the first step in the academic ladder (CohenMiller, 2014). The four participants participated through a secret Facebook group to post images and text from geographically disperse locations across the US, Central Asia, and New Zealand. In using an arts-based online format, participants were able to continually add to and adjust their responses to best explain their experiences. Using this online dynamic format provided a useful opportunity for participants to share their experiences across time and space. To analyze the data, I used self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) to discover common themes relating to work and family consistent with the literature as well as an unexpected finding regarding the concept of the “ideal” motherscholar. Furthermore, results highlighted the utility of a participatory arts-based online focus group to create a supportive format for ongoing, dynamic communication, interaction, and sharing of experience across geographically distant locations. Keywords: Arts-Based Research, Online Focus Group, Innovative Research Methods, Participatory Research, Facebook, Graduate Student, Motherscholar, “DocMama,” Mother in Academia, Self-Presentation Theory

When I started my doctoral program, I began focused on gender and popular culture. But by the second semester of my program, I discovered I was pregnant with my first child. Around the same time, two other women in our cohort students also became pregnant with their first child. As a small cohort, we had the chance to see and share about our experiences with one another. Not only did we have varied biological experiences (e.g., my extreme morning sickness that precluded me from driving to campus) but also vast differences in how policies and practices in the department/university affected us. By seeing first-hand the importance of a campus culture supporting mothers in academia, I became interested in the experiences of other doctoral student women across schools and departments and saw from the literature the limited research on the topic. This curiosity led to a study of “DocMama’s” (CohenMiller, 2014) in four different schools at one large Southwestern university in the United States.

The study described in this article creates a longitudinal examination of the three of the four same participants from my dissertation study and incorporates my own participation. Throughout the study, I sought to equalize the power relations in the research study (Leavy, 2017), I aimed to create a participatory, co-produced study (Gonzales & Rincones, 2013; Harper, 2009). One way I attempted to develop a more equal footing with participants was to

become a participant myself and to engage in collaborative research (Harper, 2009). As a collaborative study, the four of us made decisions collectively (e.g., whether to interact synchronously or asynchronously, on which platform, time frame for posting). As suggested by Harper's (2009) participatory digital/visual research processes, I sought to research *with* the motherscholars instead of *at* them. Using collaboration and friendship as method (CohenMiller & Demers, 2018; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) and cornerstone for understanding the lived experiences of the doctoral student mothers as they moved along the academic ladder, the participatory process involved multiple aspects of the research design including data collection, data analysis, and dissemination of results. In researching within friendship, an essential aspect was to develop a caring relationship (CohenMiller, 2017) openly sharing feelings and experiences.

This article describes this subsequent study that followed the lives of "DocMama's" to full time positions. The study explored motherscholar experiences at the beginning of the academic trajectory—the transition from doctoral student to full time position—a topic with limited studies. To that end, I sought to understand participants' experiences and provide as accessible a means of hearing and seeing their stories as possible. In order to bridge our geographic locations across three continents and support a community of sharing, I developed an online space to engage in a dynamic focus group using arts-based data collection to support the participants in sharing their feelings and experiences. The online focus group, offering flexibility in posting, was appropriate to provide a forum for community discussion across large geographic expanses. The internet provided a means to facilitate communication and gather data (Chenail, 2011). Drawing from earlier work in online focus groups (Oren, Mioduser, Nachmias, 2002; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014), the use of Facebook for data collection (Baker, 2013; CohenMiller, 2016a; Dalsgaard, 2016; Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012), and arts-based methods (Leavy, 2015), I sought to facilitate an integrated participatory, arts-based focus group. As we all lived in geographically distant locations from one another, I looked for a way to broach this expanse in daily contact without adding a burden to participate in the study.

Theoretical Framework

Within academia, mothers actively consider the potential negative outcomes of mentioning their status as a mother (Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haiyasoso, 2014). Graduate students in the US have been shown to avoid claiming the status of mother while enrolled in graduate programs because of the potential for being considered less studious (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). To examine the importance of how mothers in academia present themselves in online focus groups, I used self-presentation theory (Goffman, 1959) to understand how participants presented themselves through posted imagery and text.

The idea of presentation of self is likened to that of being on a stage. There is a front stage, when we are on stage, presenting ourselves to our colleagues for instance at a conference, versus behind the stage, when we let our guard down and show who we are in a completely different situation. It is suggested the ways in which we negotiate and navigate our presentations of self and the cultural worlds in which we live is predicated upon our position in society. For women and mothers in academia, there is an expectation of how to present ourselves as an academic—usually by separating the two identities and presenting only being the academic identity while within the walls of the workplace (Trepal, Stinchfield, & Haiyasoso, 2014). These culturally expected ways of being, can present a conflict within individuals. For doctoral student mothers, the presentation of self is interrelated with daily life,

The theory [by Goffman] indicates that in interactions, people often (perhaps always) make an effort to control the way others see them. Women, and mothers in academia, would then be seen as looking to manage their “face” in everyday encounters with professors, staff, colleagues, and friends. (CohenMiller, 2014, pp. 8-9)

To manage one’s presentation of self suggests a continual process of navigation and negotiation. The use of this theory as a framework meant that I analyzed the data posted on our participatory, arts-based online focus group, purposefully examining how participants presented their identities and roles as mothers and scholars within the text and visual data.

Methodology

For this study, I became a participant myself, taking the place of one of the original participants who was unreachable. I wanted to understand the experiences of moving along the beginning stage of the academic pipeline, how did it feel for different women across disciplines living in varied parts of the world? In order to best answer these questions, a qualitative design provided the ideal approach to uncover the depth of experience (Leavy, 2017). As I had seen in my dissertation study, the use of arts-based creations provided nuanced opportunities to better understand participant voice (CohenMiller, 2018). Similarly, the rationale for choosing to integrate arts-based data creations in this study was to support nuance of participant voice, allowing participants to demonstrate their feelings and experiences more easily. While I had interviewed the participants in 2014 and had become “friends” with them on Facebook, the other three participants did not know each other. All participants lived in varied locations, with two located in the Eastern US but in different states, one living in Kazakhstan, and one living in New Zealand.

From the beginning, I sought to incorporate a feminist, collaborative approach in the study (Hesse-Biber, 2012) and consulted with the participants. This meant I spoke with the participants about the development of the study, looking specifically for their feedback and active participation. Through a group discussion, the participants decided to have the study last two weeks, with an intensive format of collecting data on a daily basis. Participants were requested to post a photo(s) every day for 14 days at the end of the summer 2016, onto a secret Facebook page on the topic of being a mother and scholar. We also decided to include a description to accompany all images.

The exact days were negotiated between the participants based upon our work and travel schedule. While the intention was to have one post a day for each person, at times we would post multiple times in one day, or occasionally missed a day and worked to catch-up on another day. During the data collection, we also negotiated the ways in which we interacted. Collaborative discussions ensued throughout the data collection and into the analysis, where member checking was ongoing and iterative. One such discussion about the research focused on how to interact when we each posted on our online focus group—were we to let the post stay without a comment or were we open to comment. I posed the question to the group, letting the other motherscholars decide collectively. The decision was made to allow for comments on one another’s posts, which led to a natural level of discussion, questions, and support.

Initially, I talked with each participant over email, first assessing their interest and willingness to be a part of the study, providing information about the study, the informed consent, and then prompts to begin the study. I collected additional data through online discussion and questions posed over email, both before and after posting to the focus groups. Additionally, I used a reflexive journal and a dialogic method of member checking that allowed for a co-constructed understanding of the findings (Harvey, 2015). The reflexive journal was a

way to reflect on my experiences within the study. I wrote notes to myself about the process and my feelings throughout the study. While I guided the process, posing questions to the group about which format, platform was preferred, the responses from other participants were prioritized. Through this process, I purposely incorporated motherscholars in the participatory, collaborative research process in particular through regular discussion about the process.

As we collectively decided to develop an online, “secret” Facebook group as our primary site of interaction, we engaged primarily in asynchronous interactions. Asynchronous posts were particularly useful for multiple reasons: to allow for posts across up to 18-hour time zone difference, to support consistent posting even while traveling (something I encountered as I traveled from Central Asia to the United States), and to facilitate posting at any time day or night depending on our family and work roles. Occasionally, we did also have a chance to interact at the same time. These synchronous posting occurred at unpredictable times and allowed us to engage in commentary with one another in “real-time.”

Participants

As participants, we were all from different disciplinary backgrounds. Three participants were from the dissertation study conducted in 2014. As acquaintances as participant in my earlier study and then “friends” on Facebook, we had developed rapport face-to-face that supported the research (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2006) and continued to develop a friendship online further supporting the research study (CohenMiller & Demers, 2018). We all graduated before the start of the study, with one of us graduating exactly one day before we started (a choice we collectively made). One participant had graduated two years prior, and the other two of us graduated one year before the start of the study. As we transitioned into new positions, two participants moved abroad with their families - one to New Zealand and one to Kazakhstan. The other two moved more than 1,000 miles across the United States to different cities. Three currently work in academia, with one working in a non-university, academic-related career.

Ethical Considerations of Online Focus Groups

An essential aspect of the ethical practices for this focus group was establishing and maintaining trust and collaboration. As Facebook friends throughout the last couple of years, the other three participants and I have seen one another post about our work and families and interacted online which helped to establish trust. This meant that we were engaging in what Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006) refer to as a form of emergent research method – research within a friendship, or friendship as method (CohenMiller & Demers, 2018).

In order to first demonstrate the collaborative nature of the study to participants, I sent them a recruitment letter detailed in the ethical review board documents approved by Nazarbayev University Graduate School of Education. In the letter, it detailed my aim for collaboration and open questioning to set the tone. The letter encouraged participants to share their thoughts not just on their experiences but also on the research itself,

Your thoughts on the direction of study are important for us to understand the trajectory of mothers moving from doctoral studies to future careers. So while I have presented you all with the idea of taking a photo every day for two weeks and writing a short (VERY short is fine) description, if there are additional aspects or suggestions you have, PLEASE feel free to share those with us all (or me privately). (Excerpt from recruitment letter)

Within the informed consent form, I explained the differences in the safety, privacy, and confidentiality in face-to-face focus groups and online versions. While a traditional focus group can allow a level of confidentiality if desired (e.g., pseudonyms, background information of the participant can be protected), I recognized and had to share with potential participants that the online format on Facebook would mean that each of us involved in the study would be able to see one another's public information on Facebook including photographs and any background information shared. For this study, it was clarified that each person involved would be able to see the identity of the other *and* that this was a follow-up study. This meant that as a follow-up study, the confidentiality of the participants would be revealed to one another both for this study and the study completed in 2014. All participants recruited agreed to participate. Once participants agreed to be a part of the study, I emphasized the collaborative, participatory nature of the study as much as possible, such as in the description of the Facebook group: "A secret Facebook focus group for us to discuss/reflect on our development from docmama to motherscholar. This is a collaborative space, so feel free to suggest, add, tweak 😊."

To help protect participants' safety, privacy, and confidentiality, I set the Facebook groups' setting to "secret" meaning that only those included in the group could see the existence of it. For ethical purposes it was important I emphasize the potential problems of using online formats for data collection such as data breaches or Facebook's policy on use of information. To further protect the participants' confidentiality, I took multiple steps such as detailing how I would maintain the safety of the data offline (i.e., on a password protected personal computer) how each participant would be provided with a pseudonym for future dissemination of research.

Although unlikely, posts on Facebook, even in a private or secret group like the one created for this study, could become public knowledge under extreme circumstances, such as through subpoena. For face-to-face focus groups, there is the potential of passerby's seeing or overhearing the conversation conducted. Within an online focus group, a passerby could both be a person walking past the participant posting online, or it could be someone online hacking into the computer or Facebook site. These considerations were taken into account when developing the study which meant I did not seek private information that could harm participants if shared outside the focus group and the potential confidentiality issues were explained to participants.

The key aspect discussed with each participant individually, through private email or Facebook messenger chat, was that the identity of each of us would become knowledgeable to one another. While this is common for focus groups, to see one another and learn each other's names, through Facebook, we were immediately connected to each other's profiles, which provided much more details about our lives and backgrounds than is typical through a face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, as a follow-up to a previous study, it was important that the participants be made aware that they would be limiting their anonymity from that study by participating in the current one. While all the participants for this study agreed to be known to one another, there are additional ways to conduct online focus group without using Facebook. For this study, Facebook was a way to simplify posting and being notified of one another's posts, since we were all individually active on this platform.

Lastly, we discovered an unexpected ethical consideration as the study commenced. As participants, we took photographs of our lives including pictures of our children, to demonstrate for instance the interaction between work and family. While it was clear in the informed consent that imagery and real names would not be included for dissemination, there was no provision about imagery of children. Instead, I asked participants before I first presented on this topic, not only asking for member checking but also to ensure they agreed with my analysis and accepted the use of imagery I included. The imagery at that point included photos of our children. However, for this article, over time I have reconsidered the ethical nature of internet

use (Association of Internet Researchers, 2012) of including imagery of children (even when the participants have agreed to their use) and have decided to obscure their faces for this article.

Data Analysis

Data analysis started from the moment we, the motherscholar participants, began interacting with one another. I kept a researcher reflexive journal of my thoughts and questions I had about the process. I found myself having to negotiate the two roles, of participant adding my thoughts, feeling, and photographs about my life as a motherscholar and also balancing that with being a researcher, trying to see the larger picture. When I would switch into the role of researcher, examining the data for the common themes, I drew from my research in phenomenology to help become aware of my biases and attempt to set them aside (Moustakas, 1994). In order to do this, I spent time using a reflexive journal and actively articulating my thoughts, concerns and potential biases. I sought to understand the experiences of transitioning from doctoral student mother to a future career—how the participants represented these experiences—using self-presentation theory as a framework. By using a theory as a framework, I was using a deductive type content analysis, allowing categories to inductively emerge (Armat, Assaroudi, Rad, Sharifi, & Heydari, 2018). As the study unfolded, the dynamic nature of human experience became clearer and helped reinforce the need for a participatory research approach. For instance, as participants we learned of the pregnancy of one of our fellow motherscholars in the group, but was this okay information to share with people outside the study? Was it okay to share as part of the data for a presentation I made on the preliminary results of the study? To answer this, I discussed the matter outside of the Facebook focus group via text, to allow as much privacy as possible for her personal experience.

Each day when I posted on our online focus group, I took time to think about my role as a participant, and how best to demonstrate what it was like for me to be a motherscholar on that day. I thought about the ways in which I could describe my feelings during that time, a time in which I was on summer break with my family and extended family, while balancing academic work. At the conclusion of the two weeks, I continued to follow up with participants to check in with everyone to see if there were additional aspects they wanted to discuss beyond the study. (While the secret Facebook group remains “live,” which means that one of us could still choose to post to the group, overall the discussions have stopped.

While I could have attended to analyze the posts solely by examining them online, I found it more practical to have access to the data offline. In order to accomplish this, I took screenshots on my computer of each post. This often meant that multiple screenshots had to be pieced together to show an entire day of posts. To organize the screenshots, I labeled them by day, Day 1 a, Day 1 b, Day 1 c etc. The screenshots included the photograph uploaded as well as the associated explanation, and any related comments from other participants (see the sample posts below). These screenshots were then saved in a folder on my personal password protected computer. Names were removed from the screenshots for presentations, such as to receive feedback from colleagues at an international conference (CohenMiller, 2016b).

Using thematic coding (Leavy, 2017) and constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I used my notes from the beginning of the study and continued to add my thoughts about the similarities and differences noticed across the posts, features that particularly stood out, and questions I had. By looking at these common features and assessing whether they existed for each individual led to the development of themes. I have included a selection of posts from the online focus group to highlight the process of data collection and then analysis. On the first day of the study, I posted to the online group to elicit a photo and description. Because as participants we lived across the world, the date listed is a range of two days as for the

motherscholar who was living in New Zealand would already be in a new day while those living in the United States would still be a day behind (see Image 1):



Image 1: Day 1 photo and description elicitation

After the first day, I shortened the elicitation text to a simpler request and question, “How are you feeling today about being a mother and a scholar?” (see Image 2).

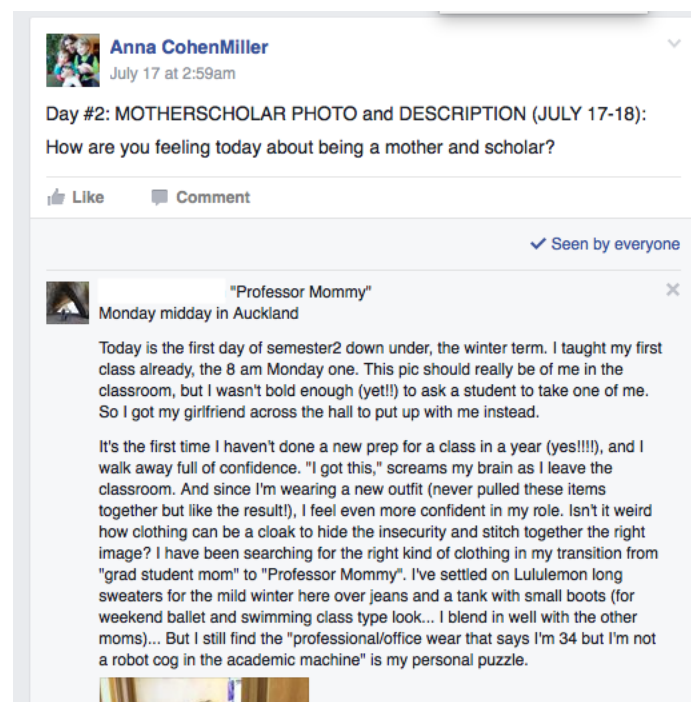


Image 2: Day 2 photo and description elicitation by posing a question

Each day had its own thread of posts and comments. For example, on day 1 of the posts, all four of us posted our own explanation and image to represent our experience/feeling as mother and scholar. Then there were an additional 14 comments we made to one another, primarily encouraging one another or asking a question about how they managed a particular work/family feat. We also “liked” each other’s posts/comments 11 times. Each day varied in the number of comments and likes. In contrast to day 1, on day 2 of the focus group, while all of us posted our experiences, there were only five comments and six likes.



































Day 2: The first motherscholar posted	The second motherscholar posted	The third motherscholar posted	The fourth motherscholar posted
<p> Anna CohenMiller July 17 at 2:59am</p> <p>Day #2: MOTHERSCHOLAR P</p> <p>How are you feeling today about</p> <p> Like  Comment</p> <p> "Professor Monday midday in Auckland</p> <p>Today is the first day of some class already, the 8 am Monday classroom, but I wasn't bold enough. So I got my girlfriend across the</p> <p>It's the first time I haven't done walk away full of confidence. "I classroom. And since I'm wearing together but like the result!), I feel how clothing can be a cloak to image? I have been searching "grad student mom" to "Professor sweaters for the mild winter here weekend ballet and swimming (moms)... But I still find the "prof a robot cog in the academic m</p> <p></p>	<p> Anna CohenMiller Midnight in</p> <p>I'm late to posting as I laid down up falling asleep myself. This felt well today. I feel fortunate that academic world work) but instead Today the littlest one wanted no whining a lot. This meant that I not be able to sit and eat to be perhaps she's teething or just</p> <p>So today I don't really feel like being at the office or actively s doesn't seem to count for me identities which seems sort of being able to be home and "just or while "doing work," I never</p> <p>So today, if I were to title my d</p> <p>The day wasn't about sitting to that's important for me is some visiting family and today we ce few hours to a beach house to one has begun the refrain "how While the day had some parts through the other side having windy beach, in a restaurant, and our kids enjoy their cousins, the work-work:), hear my dad read asleep early.</p> <p></p>	<p> My picture is a little yesterday. I spent most of the toys, picking out clothes to donate. Then I took the items I chose to donate, to a donation center. I stopped at a couple stores and Amelia once she is back next to find myself doing the motherly set up and ready to go for when some overtime today... But in the on the home and relaxing before work can wait one more day.</p> <p></p>	<p> I am also having r scholar day. But we have just spending the day at a friend's myself that, while I am still working enjoy his long-awaited summer one form or another, part of being important to step away from all us likely do even when we are questioning for the afternoon t</p> <p></p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July 18 at</p> <p> This is remember to enjoy it now</p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July</p> <p> Anna CohenMiller Lydia in how you have reminded Silenced the academic q</p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July</p>
<p>It's the first time I haven't done walk away full of confidence. "I classroom. And since I'm wearing together but like the result!), I feel how clothing can be a cloak to image? I have been searching "grad student mom" to "Professor sweaters for the mild winter here weekend ballet and swimming (moms)... But I still find the "prof a robot cog in the academic m</p> <p></p> <p>Unlike · Reply ·  1 · July 17 at</p> <p> Anna CohenMiller Congrats great in class! I completely myself looking for those at as I travel across varied of present</p>	<p>our kids enjoy their cousins, think and share work-work:), hear my dad read an imagine asleep early.</p> <p></p> <p>Like · Reply · July 18 at 3:05am · Edited</p>	<p>set up and ready to go for when some overtime today... But in the on the home and relaxing before work can wait one more day.</p> <p></p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July 18 at</p> <p> Anna CohenMiller I love one more day.</p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July</p> <p> You m carefully practice no-work in general) feel like too much working 5 days a week.</p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July</p> <p> Write a reply...</p>	<p></p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July 18 at</p> <p> Anna CohenMiller I love one more day.</p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July</p> <p> You m carefully practice no-work in general) feel like too much working 5 days a week.</p> <p>Like · Reply ·  1 · July</p> <p> Write a reply...</p>

Image 3: Day 2 sample posts by all motherscholars

In analyzing the posts, I was looking both at the imagery the participants were sharing and also the text. Using constant comparison while keeping in mind self-presentation theory as a guiding framework, I noticed common descriptions about strategizing how to manage both life as a mother and as a scholar. Our posts talked about deciding to have a day focused on being a mother or a scholar, or some combination of the two. These descriptions as noted throughout all texts became a common theme, one I termed "Strategy of work and family." The posted photos show multiple strategies of combining work and family. An example of this can be seen by a motherscholar in New Zealand when she posted a picture of her daughter

practicing ballet. The description that accompanies the post talks not about scholarship but of finding a time to reflect on being with her daughter and finally being able to take the time to rest (see Image 4).

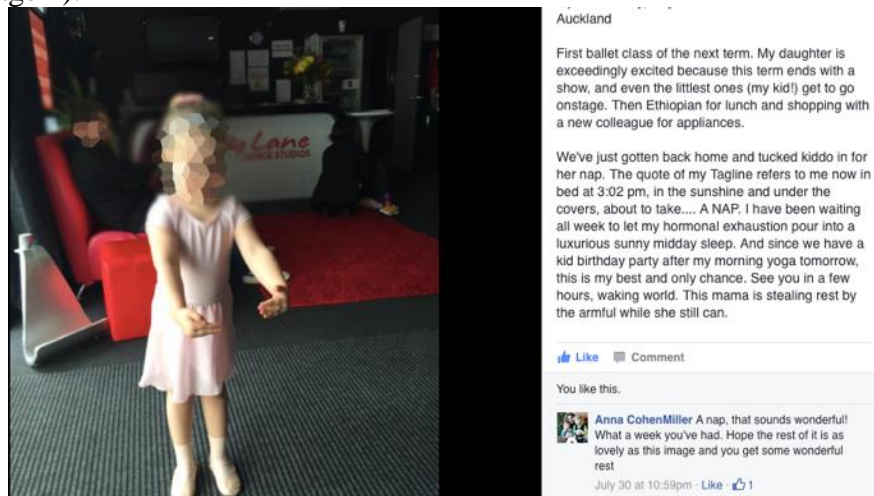


Image 4: *Strategy of work and family, compartmentalization*

Another example of compartmentalization can be seen by a motherscholar living in the US. In this second sample post (see Image 5), we can see a checkered suitcase with a smaller open handbag on top.

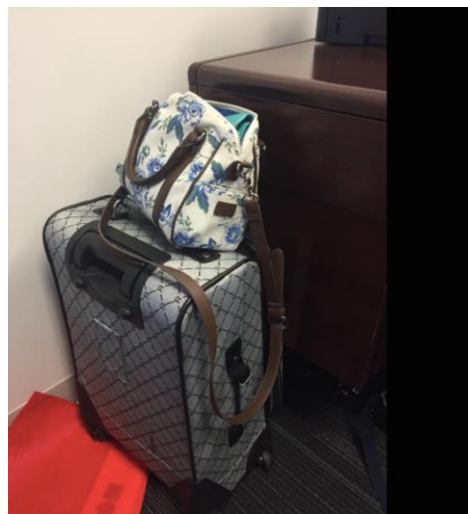


Image 5: *Compartmentalizing motherhood represented by suitcases*

The accompanying description focuses on being a mother and the responsibilities and excitement around that role:

Today I'm barely getting any work done because today I leave to... pick up my baby and bring her back home after a month and a half of her being gone for the summer with her dad. I miss her so much and I'll [all] I can think of today is my internal countdown to her being back with me.

While the two bags appear to be next to a large brown desk, perhaps waiting within an office, the emphasis of the post is not on work but on family.

In using self-presentation theory, I looked across the text and imagery for how we present ourselves as mothers and scholars. The findings showed our willingness to share our

joys in focusing on our family, our conflictual nature of choosing work over family, and then lastly the ways we integrated the two. As one of the participant's explained of her posted picture of a computer at the foreground of a bedroom with a child in the bed, "This is my reality today. I am sitting on the floor, addressing dissertation revisions, while my eight-year-old occupies my bed/office" (see Image 6).



Image 6: Strategy of work and family: Integration

Although the strategy of work and family was seen across all posts, the way in which it was explained and represented in the imagery posted in the participatory online focus group varied. For example, I posted a picture of myself working within a coffee shop, with the laptop in front of me while I held a phone showing a picture of my young daughter swinging (see Image 7).



Image 7: Strategy of work and family, (trying to) compartmentalize

I explained in my post the relief I felt to have a chance to get some time to do some work, yet the conflicted feeling of missing a joyous time in the life of my daughter.

Today I went to a coffee shop to work, the first time in about two weeks [since being on vacation]...Leaving the house, I could hear my youngest...crying....Then I receive a texted video showing my kiddos having a wonderful time...Her little laugh makes me smile and I feel elated...then sad not to be with them. Then I talk myself through it, realizing the reality. That if I had left the coffee shop and gone home, I would be not [sic] have a chance to finish my work, I would still be thinking about and would need to plan additional work days, and I would alter the lovely day the kids were having connecting with their dad...

Using self-presentation theory as a lens, it is possible to see my photograph and description as a means to demonstrate how I present myself – someone who cares about family even while working. Furthermore, other participants demonstrated their presentation of self and the participatory nature of the study through supportive comments made by other participants, “My kids love their Dad-time! And it makes our parenting partnership much stronger” and “Yesss. Must remember this too. That taking time for self allows room for different bonding for the babies. It’s a give-and-take but seems important for them as well as for you.” In commenting on one another’s posts, the online focus group provided a dynamic, supportive interaction space for motherscholars.

These sample posts demonstrated a common set of themes representing our lives as mothers and scholars, one of compartmentalization of work and family as examined through the lens of self-presentation theory. Considering the silence often maintained in the workplace around the existence of family, compartmentalization appears to be a strategy to maintain separation of identities that supports findings from the literature.

Unexpected Finding

One of the unexpected findings I discovered were the ways in which participants discussed being a motherscholar. I came into the study considering our roles as mothers and scholars as the coalesced identity as set forth by Matias (2011), yet I soon saw all four of us did not see ourselves that way. Instead we seemed to have a separation between the two roles and identities, one that varies based upon proximity to work and children. This finding led to questioning whether we each have our own *ideal* of what a motherscholar is/should be. We were all trying to reach an ideal—to beat the “dueling clock” of mothering and reaching tenure (Careless, 2012). If we did have such a concept this would likely mean we hold ourselves up to that ideal and could get a further sense of how well we (and others?) align to improve the recruitment, retention, and ultimately equity for women and mothers throughout the academic pipeline.

In this regard, there appeared to be a concept of what we were “supposed” to be doing from day to day, such as more time at work, or more time with family, or some sort of mix that we weren’t quite achieving. This led to the development of a follow-up question I posed to use all about being an ideal mother and scholar, “If there were such a thing as an ideal “motherscholar,” what would that person look like (which can also mean what they would do, be like, how they would behave, etc.)?” All four of us had different ideals of what the ideal motherscholar looks and acts like. For one participant, she mentioned the way a motherscholar carries herself as well as the way in which she leads and acts as a “role model.” Another participant highlighted flexibility and capacity to focus on her dreams and her children, while willing to change the balance from day to day. The third participant concentrated on the ideal motherscholar as someone who is extremely high achieving and a prime example as a mother and as a scholar. And for the last participant, she related the ideal motherscholar of a high-achieving person and humble mother, someone I saw as comfortable in her own skin and “doing the work we want to do.”

The addition of this final question provided a new insight into what it means to be a motherscholar. Revealing about the responses were the image of success at work and at home, described as joyous or peaceful. While having a set of imagery and descriptions of the ideal motherscholar could support a goal to become the image of that person, the descriptions also reveal the problematic nature of individual versus structural constraints.

Limitations

In using Facebook as a common site of interaction, I had hoped posting would be easy and convenient for everyone to interact daily. However, not only did some people miss a day, needing to catch up, but also some people skipped more than a day in a row. To limit the potential problems of participation, I reached out to participants when they had missed a day. Furthermore, through member checking all participants agreed to the findings, even though some days were missing from the overall data collection. Even though there was missing data, I would argue that the overall findings would have remained the same even with the additional data of a few days. However, the question remains as to whether a longitudinal examination of how motherscholars present their experiences and feelings as mother and scholar would demonstrate a different result is yet to be seen.

Also, as it was collectively decided to comment on each other's online posts, I found myself in a split position as both participant and researcher. As a participant I wanted to encourage and comment on other's posts. However, as a researcher I felt unsure of how my comments might affect the other participants. To minimize this limitation, I sought to be as consistent as possible, which meant I allowed myself my normal behaviors – commenting on a friend's post – and commented on each post in an encouraging way without providing analysis. However, it is possible that my comments on the posts altered the way others posted about their experiences.

Discussion and Implications

This study was an examination into how mothers in academia present themselves as they transition from DocMama to motherscholar full time positions and also into the ways in which a participatory, arts-based online focus group on Facebook. The notion of how to manage work and family is central to the experiences for the participants in this study. It is not a surprising finding yet important to note as it permeated all our posts. Interesting as well is the way in which each of the motherscholars negotiated these roles. In analyzing the data through self-presentation theory, I saw how the motherscholars developed strategies of work and life, in particular through compartmentalization and integration. Although the results of this study drew from the participatory arts-based posts of a limited number of mothers in academia, the findings are consistent with previous literature showing the negotiation and navigation in the world of academia as a mother (Mason, Goulden & Wolfinger, 2006; Sallee, Ward, & Wolf-Wendel, 2016; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Wolfinger, Mason, & Goulden, 2008). Furthermore, the findings of integrating work and family are similar to visual and textual analysis of a Facebook campaign about academic mothers managing both writing and caretaking (CohenMiller, 2016a). While I would not argue that the findings would be identical in other studies, I would suggest similar findings could be found within similar populations. Whether mothers in academia from other backgrounds based upon ethnicity, race, gender, region of the world etc. would indicate similar experiences and feelings about their transitions to full time careers is still to be seen.

Although the findings were generally consistent with previous research, there was a surprising finding not included as the key aspect of the daily posts resulting from the follow-up questions at the end of the study. Participants described the “ideal motherscholar” and revealed the deeply rooted dichotomy between individual and structural constraints mothers in academia experience. In articulating our concept of an “ideal” motherscholar demonstrated deeply held beliefs about mothering and work. Using a participatory, collaboration, arts-based online focus group to understand the transition from DocMama to motherscholar, the study suggests that the four of us move in and out of identities and roles of mother and scholar. Our

sense of who we are as motherscholars and the roles we are “supposed” to embody shift within our sociocultural setting and the way in which we choose to present ourselves (Goffman, 1959). It is useful to see the “ideal” we each hold for becoming/embodying a motherscholar. At times these types of ideals can be hampering if we only see the outside, such as being a great mother (see O’Brien Hallstein & O’Reilly, 2012). At other times they appear to be potentially empowering, such as an achievable ideal of being flexible and mentoring others. Superficially, it may appear that mothers in academia can choose to be content within their positions or to choose to simply utilize different strategies to navigate their positions and roles in successful manners. However, as Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2017) highlight, the concept of choice for mothers in academia misses the necessary structure of family and institutions. Future studies should build upon the examination of the ideal motherscholar, to further understand how women (and men?) view the perfect combination of mother and scholar, and then to contextualize this ideal within the gendered institutional framework of academia.

This study used a feminist research approach to assist in addressing the power imbalance traditionally found in research studies (Hesse-Biber, 2012). I sought to collaborate with the other participants, as a participant myself. The study centered on integrating arts-based data collection (Leavy, 2015) to allow participants to voice their experiences and feelings more easily. When we posted an image that represented ourselves as motherscholars, whether a picture of suitcases, a computer screen or watching our children, the photos provided details and insights into our lives that textual description did not fully encapsulate. This study provides useful emphasis and reminders to researchers about the potential of arts-based research to support nuance and participant voice, in particular for motherscholars (CohenMiller, 2018). Future studies would benefit from exploring the ways in which those transitioning from their doctoral studies to future careers process and learn from this change. What is being learned, in what ways, and how does it apply to motherscholars? How can we continue to unpack the experiences and discover the ways in which we idealize the roles of mother, scholar, and life that hinder us, and how?

Using an arts-based online focus group provided a chance to interact over time and space with participants living in and across multiple continents. It allowed for synchronous and asynchronous interaction, a chance to provide feedback to one another in verbal and nonverbal ways (e.g., using the “like” button), and a simple way to post images representing our experiences. However, there are limitations of online focus groups that need to be considered if considering them for use. These include the potential for providing information about participants that not everyone is comfortable with (e.g., through others having easy access to Facebook profiles). Additionally, conducting work online has ethical limitations such as the potential for others to access the information (e.g., accessing a shared computer or smartphone), through hacking into program, through subpoena or changing of regulations on Facebook. With proper consideration and ethical approval through institutional review boards, participatory, arts-based online focus groups provide rich opportunities to facilitate social research.

References

- Armat, M., Assarroudi, A., Rad, M., Sharifi, H., & Heydari, A. (2018). Inductive and deductive: Ambiguous labels in qualitative content analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(1), 219-221. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss1/16>
- Association of Internet Researchers. (2012). *Ethical decision-making and internet research: Recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee* (Version 2.0). Online publication: Markham, A., & Buchanan, E.
- Baker, S. (2013). Conceptualising the use of Facebook in ethnographic research: As tool, as data and as context. *Ethnography and Education*, 8(2), 131-145. Doi:

- 10.1080/17457823.2013.792504
- Careless, E. J. (2012). Dueling clocks: Mothers on the path to tenure. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, The Entwinement of Learning and Social Structures*, 25(1), 31-46.
- Chenail, R. (2011). Qualitative researchers in the blogosphere: Using blogs as diaries and data. *The Qualitative Report*, 16, 1249-254. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol16/iss1/15>
- CohenMiller, A. (2014). *The phenomenon of doctoral student motherhood/mothering in academia: Cultural construction, presentation of self, and situated learning* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Texas at San Antonio. San Antonio, TX.
- CohenMiller, A. S. (2016a). Artful research approaches in #amwritingwithbaby: Qualitative analysis of academic mothers on Facebook. *LEARNING Landscapes, Special Issue, Artful Inquiry: Transforming Understanding Through Creative Engagement*, 9(2), 181-196.
- CohenMiller, A. S. (2016b). From the inside out: An ethnographic arts-based study of mother-scholars [Presentation]. *Paper presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER)*. Dublin, Ireland.
- CohenMiller, A. (2017). *Caring as an emergent method in qualitative research: A means for moving between research studies and practical support* [Presentation]. Paper presented at the TQR 8th Annual Conference. Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.
- CohenMiller, A. S. (2018). Visual arts as a tool for phenomenology. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 19(1), Article 15.
- CohenMiller, A. S., & Demers, D. (2018). *Friendship as methodology: A multimodal cogenerative study of motherscholar wellbeing* [Presentation]. Paper presented at The 9th Annual Qualitative Report (TQR) conference. Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Retrieved from <https://cpb-us-east-1-juc1ugurlqwqqgo4.stackpathdns.com/sites.nova.edu/dist/a/4/files/2018/01/Friendship-as-a-Methodology-1n5vjw4.pdf>
- Dalsgaard, S. (2016). The ethnographic use of Facebook in everyday life. *Anthropological Forum*, 26(1), 96-114. Doi: 10.1080/00664677.2016.1148011
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *Presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Gonzales, L. D., & Rincones, R. (2013). Using participatory action research and photo methods to explore higher education administration as an emotional endeavor. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(32), 1-17. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol18/iss32/2>
- Harper, K. (2009). *New directions in participatory visual ethnography: Possibilities for public anthropology* [Presentation]. Presented at American Anthropological Association Meetings. Philadelphia, PA.
- Harvey, L. (2015). Beyond member-checking: A dialogic approach to the research interview. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 38(1), 23-38.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N. (Ed.). (2012). *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Hesse-Biber, S. & Leavy, P. (Eds.). (2006). *Emergent methods in social research*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

- Mason, M. A., Goulden, M., & Wolfinger, N. H. (2006). Babies matter: Pushing the gender equity revolution forward. In S. J. Bracken, J. K. Allen, & D. R. Dean (Eds.), *The balancing act: Gendered perspectives in faculty roles and work lives* (pp. 9-29). Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Matias, C. (2011). "Cheryl Matias, PhD and Mother of Twins": Counter storytelling to critically analyze how I navigated the academic application, negotiation, and relocation process. *Division G - Social Context of Education / Section 2*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA), New Orleans, LA.
- Mirick, R. G., & Wladkowski, S. P. (2018). Pregnancy, motherhood, and academic career goals: Doctoral students' perspectives. *Affilia*, 33(2), 253-269. doi: 10.1177/0886109917753835
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- O'Brien Hallstein, L., & O'Reilly, A. (Eds.). (2012). *Academic motherhood in a post-second wave context: Challenges, strategies and possibilities*. Toronto, CA: Demeter Press.
- Oren, A., Mioduser, D., & Nachmias, R. (2002). The development of social climate in virtual learning discussion groups. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 3(1), 1-19.
- Redlich-Amirav, D., & Higginbottom, G. (2014). New emerging technologies in qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(26), 1-14. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss26/3>
- Sallee, M., Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2016). Can anyone have it all? Gendered views on parenting and academic careers. *Innovative Higher Education*, 41(3), 187-202.
- Trepal, H. C., Stinchfield, T. A., & Haiyasoso, M. (2014). Great expectations: Doctoral student mothers in counselor education. *Adultspan*, 13(1), 30-45.
- Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2012). *Academic motherhood: How faculty manage work and family*. Chapel Hill, NC: Rutgers University Press.
- Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2017). Mothering and professing: Critical choices and the academic career. *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education*, 10(3), 1-16. Doi: 10.1080/19407882.2017.1351995
- Wilson, R. E, Gosling, S., D., & Graham, L., T. (2012). A review of Facebook research in the social sciences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7(3), 203-220. Doi: 10.1177/1745691612442904
- Wolfinger, N. H., Mason, M. A., & Goulden, M. (2008). Problems in the pipeline: Gender, marriage, and fertility in the ivory tower. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 79(4), 388-405. Doi: 10.1080/00221546.2008.11772108

Author Note

Dr. A. S. CohenMiller specializes in arts-based research, interdisciplinarity and gender in higher education. Currently, she is conducting research on gender equality in academia; work/life balance; and educational wellbeing. She is also Founder of [The Motherscholar Project](#), Co-Founding Director of [The Consortium of Gender Scholars](#), and Editor in Chief of [Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy](#). Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: anna@cohenmiller.com.

This study was originally presented at the European Conference on Educational Research (ECER) in Dublin, Ireland, in August 2016. Thank you to Dr. Howard Smith from the University of Texas at San Antonio for assistance in the first stage of analysis for this study. This feedback along with the insightful comments and support from the editors and reviewers

at *The Qualitative Report* made this article a richer piece. Lastly and most importantly, I would like to thank the motherscholars for your willingness to engage in a collaborative study and provide insights into your experiences to support mothers in academia.

Copyright 2018: A. S. CohenMiller and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

CohenMiller, A. S. (2018). Creating a participatory arts-based online focus group: Highlighting the transition from docmama to motherscholar. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(7), 1720-1735. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss7/17>
