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Balancing Acts: Navigating the Complexities of Female Online Doctoral Journeys

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Abstract: This study delves into the experiences of two female online doctoral students who navigate the complexities of motherhood and rural living, aiming to enhance understanding and improve persistence rates in their academic pursuits. By employing a narrative inquiry approach, the research highlights the transformative power of narratives and storytelling in gaining insights into the lives of these students. The findings illuminate systemic barriers that limit their access to research opportunities and collaborative spaces. The study underscores the necessity of creating inclusive environments, fostering effective virtual mentorship, and offering comprehensive support for health and well-being. Through these targeted strategies, educational institutions can play a pivotal role in fostering a more equitable and supportive landscape for all doctoral students, particularly those identifying as female. Such efforts are instrumental in not only enhancing their academic success but also in ensuring their personal well-being and growth.

Keywords: Female online doctoral student, Online learning environments, Work-life balance, Graduate student experiences, Diversity in doctoral journeys, Narrative inquiry, Gender disparities in graduate programs

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Balancing Acts: Navigating the Complexities of Female Online Doctoral Journeys

The growing body of research and public discourse has increasingly highlighted the professional inequities and stigmas that women face in higher education. Seminal works by scholars such as Acker and Armenti (2004), Armenti (2004), and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Council (2001) have laid the groundwork for understanding these challenges, particularly in relation to faculty experiences. More recent analyses by Gardner (2009) and Hirakata and Daniluk (2009) continue this line of inquiry, further exploring the impact of gendered expectations and institutional policies on women's academic careers. Public commentaries by Chenoweth et al. (2016), Gray (2015), and Waxman and Ispa-Landa (2016) broaden the conversation, emphasizing how these challenges extend beyond faculty to include students and staff. Together, these works underscore the importance of acknowledging how life stage changes and family-related circumstances can profoundly affect women's professional trajectories in academia. While much of the literature has focused on faculty, it is important to note that these issues also affect other groups, suggesting a need for institutional policies that provide robust support across different stages and roles in academic life. This context sets the stage for a deeper examination of the unique experiences of the understudied population in this study, as we shift focus to explore these dynamics among students.

Purpose and Positionality

Despite the increasing attention these issues have received from scholars recently, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the specific challenges faced by women enrolled in doctoral programs. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the experiences of two white cisgender women who undertook collaborative roles as graduate research assistants at the same mid-sized research institution in the United States. Notably, our paths to pursuing online doctoral programs were shaped by distinct personal circumstances. Staci's choice to pursue her Ph.D. in Education Foundations was primarily influenced by her geographic isolation in a rural area, highlighting the accessibility and flexibility that online programs can offer. Conversely, McKenzie's decision to pursue an online doctorate degree in Teaching and Learning stemmed from her urban living situation and the demands of motherhood, with three children to care for. This contrast not only illustrates the diverse motivations behind choosing online doctoral studies but also emphasizes the need for academic institutions to consider the varied life situations of their students when designing and implementing support mechanisms.

Our collaboration on various research projects prompted discussions about our experiences as fully online doctoral students. These conversations led us to delve into the complexities of dissertation studies and collaborative work with faculty on research projects. Recognizing the importance of a supportive network, we embarked on a study aimed at exploring our experiences as online doctoral students, with a specific focus on the intersectionality of gender-related challenges within the academic landscape. A key question driving our research is: How can we establish supportive spaces for prospective online women doctoral students? By sharing our stories, this process has allowed us to make sense of and authentically express our lived experiences, identifying the unique challenges that women face in online doctoral studies while also recognizing the opportunities offered by these modes of learning. Our ultimate goal through this study is to support institutions, faculty, and academic

communities in developing evidence-based strategies that can help contribute to the support and success of all online doctoral students, but especially women.

Literature Review

The landscape of higher education, especially within the realm of online doctoral programs, presents a complex array of challenges and opportunities for students and faculty alike. This section delves into the multifaceted experiences of doctoral students in the United States, with a particular focus on gender disparities and the unique hurdles encountered by women in these programs. Drawing upon a wealth of research, we explored the impact of societal norms, gender-specific life events, and the process of graduate student socialization on the academic and personal lives of women doctoral candidates. Through examining the nuances of these experiences, the discussion aims to shed light on the importance of tailored support systems, equitable mentorship models, and the creation of inclusive academic communities.

Cognitive Imperialism

Cognitive imperialism critically impacts individuals and communities subjected to Eurocentric colonialism and imperialism, drawing attention to the adverse psychological and emotional effects of such dominance (Battiste, 2016). This concept is critiqued through various frameworks, including the banking model of education (Freire, 2004), cultural imperialism (Carnoy, 1974), mental colonization (Chinweizu, 1987; Hotep 2003), and encompasses a spectrum of practices such as cultural racism, epistemic violence, cultural genocide, and cognitive assimilation. According to Battiste (2016), unlike related concepts that may also consider cultural dimensions, cognitive imperialism specifically targets the alteration of consciousness and knowledge systems, setting it apart as a distinct form of cultural and intellectual subjugation.

The prevalence of cognitive imperialism is further exemplified in the design of higher education systems, which are predominantly shaped by white Eurocentric norms (Aparicio et al., 2016; Plotts, 2020a, 2020b). These systems are often structured to cater to an idealized archetype, epitomized by a financially secure, highly mobile 25-year-old white man (Carlton, 2020). This narrowly focused educational model risks marginalizing a significant portion of the student population, particularly women and diverse groups, by prioritizing a specific set of cultural and social norms over a more inclusive and representative approach. Such marginalization not only reflects broader societal inequities but also perpetuates them within the academic sphere, underscoring the urgent need for educational reforms that embrace and accommodate the diversity of student experiences and backgrounds.

Moreover, the persistence of gender disparities in graduate program participation, despite overall increases in enrollment, highlights the systemic barriers that women and other historically marginalized groups continue to face in higher education (Posselt & Grodsky, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). These disparities are heavily influenced by societal norms and gender-specific life events that significantly influence individual choices and experiences within the academic environment. The vital role of graduate school socialization with faculty and peers, particularly for women, emphasizes the importance of fostering an inclusive, equitable, and supportive educational landscape. Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort to dismantle cognitive imperialism within academia, ensuring that higher education systems not

only recognize but actively support the unique needs and aspirations of all students, thereby contributing to a more just and equitable academic community.

Societal Norms

Women in graduate education face unique challenges, including societal expectations, geographic limitations, and gender-specific life events (e.g., menopause, pregnancy, breastfeeding). Pasque and Errington-Nicholson (2011) highlighted the struggle women graduate students face in balancing academic demands with work and personal responsibilities. This challenge is exacerbated by the disproportionate burden of household and childcare duties women typically shoulder, often leading them to prioritize their partners' careers over their own educational goals. Global statistics show that women and girls perform about 75% of unpaid care and domestic work daily (United Nations, 2020; Moreira da Silva, 2019). This unequal distribution of labor significantly impacts women's ability to fully engage in and complete graduate education, often causing delays or forcing them to abandon their academic pursuits altogether.

Feminist economists, such as Chung (2020), have highlighted the concept of the 'third shift,' which refers to the often overlooked and unpaid emotional labor predominantly undertaken by women. This labor extends beyond household chores and caregiving duties, encompassing the management of their families' emotional well-being and the maintenance of relationships. Women are expected to perform this emotional labor while also balancing professional and academic commitments. This 'third shift' adds to the already demanding 'second shift' of unpaid domestic work, complicating the societal narrative that women can 'have it all,' as discussed by Slaughter (2015).

An additional factor contributing to the challenges women face in graduate education is the 'trailing spouse' phenomenon, where women often relocate to support their spouse's career or educational goals. This situation has been shown to contribute to higher dropout rates among women in Ph.D. programs (Groenvynck et al., 2013). These overlapping burdens—emotional labor, caregiving responsibilities, and the trailing spouse phenomenon—create significant barriers to women's academic and professional advancement.

Online courses offer a partial solution by providing flexibility and reducing commute times, which can help women manage caregiving responsibilities more effectively (Moreira da Silva, 2019). Similarly, the rise of remote work provides comparable benefits, allowing for better integration of work and family life (Murray, 2023). However, while these solutions alleviate some pressures, they do not fully address the structural inequalities that contribute to the disproportionate emotional and domestic burdens placed on women.

Gender-Specific Life Events

The health-related challenges that disproportionately affect women, particularly those above the age of 40, are crucial to address. This demographic, making up nearly 15% of all female doctoral students (Women In Academia, 2022), often faces the onset of perimenopause and menopause, which can exacerbate the documented impact of mental health issues students experience in PhD study completion (Podsakoff et al., 2007), as these issues have been linked to perimenopause and menopause (Mayo Clinic, 2023). Therefore, educational institutions and faculty must foster inclusive and adaptable environments sensitive to the diverse needs of

women students across generations. This includes support for life events such as pregnancies, maternity leaves, childcare needs, and menopause (Weiss-Wolf, 2023).

Graduate Student Socialization

The role of socialization and fostering a sense of community, essential for student success and persistence in graduate education (Devos et al., 2017; Shepherd & Bollinger, 2023; Weidman & Stein, 2003) and is often facilitated through mentorship, which is vital for developing academic skills and knowledge (Mollica & Nemeth, 2014). While on-site students benefit from direct, face-to-face interactions with faculty in graduate teaching and research (Gardner, 2009), online settings present different challenges. In these environments, mentorship and advisor relationships require alternative approaches (Mollica & Nemeth, 2014; Deshpande, 2017). Jameson and Torres (2019) noted that mentorship in online contexts differs significantly from traditional models in terms of the lack of face-to-face interactions, the need for proactive relationship building strategies to ensure students feel supported, and the increased reliance on virtual communication methods such as phone calls, video meetings, and emails, posing challenges for faculty accustomed to campus-based programs.

The observed disparity in mentorship models between on campus and online modalities undermines the effectiveness of guidance provided to online doctoral students, directly affecting their dissertation success rates and capacity to publish academic works. For example, Gilpin and Azizova (2021) found that a lack of mentorship contributes to a diminished volume of scholarly publications prior to graduation, which is a crucial element for doctoral graduates to advance in academic careers. Beyond mentorship and support for publications in online doctoral programs, gender disparities have also been found in research and teaching opportunities in traditional doctoral programs as male doctoral students in traditional settings are more likely to obtain research assistantships, while their female counterparts are predominantly assigned teaching responsibilities (Lubienski et al., 2018). This imbalance likely has roots extending well before doctoral program entry and implicates faculty. Findings by Milkman et al. (2014) revealed that faculty members are more prone to ignore requests for information from prospective female students than from male students, a trend evident even among female faculty members. This pattern suggests that disparities in faculty support, family commitments, and career goals play a critical role in the gender disparities observed in publication outputs among on-site and online Ph.D. students. Such challenges are potentially more severe for female online doctoral students, impacting not only their immediate academic achievements but also their long-term professional prospects and family responsibilities. Consequently, it is imperative to overhaul and tailor mentorship strategies within online doctoral programs to ensure successful academic and professional outcomes, providing comprehensive support that caters to the diverse career ambitions and personal needs of students.

Theoretical Framing

In our study, we adopted a narrative approach (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin (1985, 2016) to delve into the disparities perpetuated by the cognitive imperialism that permeates higher education, along with the societal norms and gender-specific life events that influence the choices and experiences of women doctoral students. This decision was heavily influenced by the work of Rice (2023), who illuminated the limitations of traditional research methods, such as

surveys and interviews, in fully capturing the complexities of online learning experiences. These methods often fall short in addressing the full depth of individual needs, positionality, and identities, as they offer limited response options or rely on structured interactions, inadequately representing complex identities like race, gender, and disability status.

To address these limitations, we turned to a narrative-based approach, essential for understanding the dynamic interplay of identities and experiences in online learning environments. This approach, informed by social constructionism, feminist theory, and narrative theory, allows for an in-depth exploration of experiences, yielding rich insights into the phenomena of digital learning environments. Narratives provide a unique window into sociocultural understandings and self-construction, offering transformative potential (Byrne & Lentin, 2000; Somekh & Lewin, 2005) From a feminist perspective, narratives serve as a tool for personal and collective expression and agency (Couch et al., 2021; Wright, 2009), particularly relevant in the context of women in online doctoral education programs.

Our research emphasizes the importance of incorporating diverse voices to enhance our understanding of the world, aligning with the perspectives of Clandinin and Caine (2013), Clandinin (1985, 2016), and Rice (2023), who underscored the value of narrative inquiry in unraveling the complexities of online learning. This method illuminated the unique circumstances, motivations, and strategies of learners, providing a more inclusive and comprehensive view of the online learning experience.

Central to our study is the concept of intersectionality, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989). Intersectionality encompasses the idea that individuals possess multiple intersecting identities—such as gender, race, religion, disability, class, and sexual orientation—that together shape their experiences. These identity markers do not exist in isolation; rather, they intersect and interact in ways that can compound systemic marginalization and profoundly impact an individual's lived experiences.

In our exploration, we recognize that our narratives are intertwined with our intersecting identities. This recognition is crucial as it acknowledges the nuanced and evolving nature of identity and experience within the context of online learning. Our approach, therefore, fostered relational research spaces, where individuals can explore how they perceive their identities in relation to others and how these perceptions influence their experiences over time (Josselson, 2006; McAdams, 1988).

Furthermore, our study underscores the interconnectedness of texts and the transformative power of narratives, particularly from a feminist perspective. Anchored in feminist theory and cognizant of the historical, social, professional, and institutional contexts of higher education, our research acknowledges the systemic barriers and entrenched power structures that often disadvantage women (Glazer et al., 1993). Recognizing these barriers is a fundamental step in understanding the challenges faced by women in higher education and is crucial for driving transformative change.

Guided by the central research question, "How can we create supportive spaces for future doctoral students?" Our study seeks to explore how online learning environments can be structured and nurtured to foster inclusivity, equity, and success for all participants. This exploration is particularly focused on addressing the needs and challenges faced by female doctoral students, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive understanding of online learning environments. Through this lens, our study highlights the importance of diverse narratives in shaping both individual experiences and broader educational practices, ultimately advocating for the creation of supportive and transformative spaces in higher education.

Methods

This section describes the methodology employed in our research to explore the experiences of online doctoral students, with a particular focus on the impact of gender-related challenges. Our approach integrated narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin (1985, 2016) with thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Ryan & Bernard, 2003), enabling a comprehensive examination of the complexities inherent in online doctoral education. This approach not only illuminated the diverse experiences of online doctoral students but also underscored the importance of narrative methods in capturing the nuanced realities of higher education.

Participants and Data Collection

Data collection was centered around narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Caine, 2013; Clandinin (1985, 2016). Each author independently composed two narratives, encapsulating their distinct experiences as online doctoral students. Before writing, the authors engaged in a discussion with each other, reflecting on their academic journeys, challenges faced, and how they navigated their responsibilities as online learners. This discussion served as an informal foundation for their narratives, helping to surface key themes and experiences to explore. Afterward, they wrote their narratives without any formal prompts, time limits, or structured guidelines, allowing for a more organic and personal reflection of their unique experiences in an online doctoral program.

Staci, living in a rural area, primarily reflected on the impact of geographic isolation on her educational journey. Conversely, McKenzie, an urban-dwelling mother of three, shared her experiences of balancing family responsibilities with doctoral studies.These initial narratives laid the groundwork for our subsequent data collection, which involved integrating additional narratives from the authors themselves as part of our data analysis. As we progressed through the research, we each composed further reflections to capture evolving insights and experiences, allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of our journeys as online doctoral students. This iterative process helped to deepen our understanding of how our perspectives shifted over time, providing a richer, more nuanced set of data for analysis.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was structured in two main phases, involving both independent analysis and collaborative analysis efforts. See Table 1 for an overview of the data analysis process.

Phase One: Independent Analysis

Initially, each author independently examined their narratives, focusing on identifying key themes and insights. For instance, Staci's narratives highlighted the challenges of geographic isolation, while McKenzie's experiences illuminated the complexities of balancing family responsibilities with academic aspirations. During this phase, we individually coded our narratives, identifying patterns that reflected our unique experiences.

We employed a thematic analysis approach following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). These steps included familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Thematic coding (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) was used to systematically categorize narrative elements, facilitating the extraction of significant patterns. This independent analysis laid the foundation for further exploration of the themes during the collaborative phase.

Phase Two: Collaborative Analysis

In the next phase, we engaged in collaborative discussions to refine and deepen our analysis. We conducted regular discussions, meeting bi-weekly, to reflect on our analyses and refine emerging themes. The purpose of these discussions was to ensure alignment in our approach and to deepen our understanding of each other's narratives through collective reflection.

Throughout this phase, we continued to refine the themes identified in the independent analysis, ensuring that the analysis captured the nuanced intersectionality of challenges such as geographic isolation, work-life balance, and gender-related issues within the academic context. Below we outline our collaborative analysis through the phases of burrowing, broadening, and storying and re-storying.

Burrowing

In this collaborative phase, the authors engaged deeply with the data by employing the 'burrowing' technique as outlined by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). This method allowed us to delve into the specific contexts that shaped our experiences, including the institutional learning environment and broader political issues. The purpose of these discussions was to explore how external factors, such as institutional policies and societal expectations, subtly influenced our experiences as doctoral students. By examining these underlying contexts, we uncovered intricate details and influences that impacted both our personal and academic lives.

Broadening

Following the burrowing phase, we utilized the 'broadening' approach to expand our understanding of the data. This phase involved integrating additional narratives—additional reflections from the authors themselves—enriching the data pool and allowing us to situate our individual experiences within a broader context. These additional narratives were discussed in weekly meetings, during which we refined our thematic categories to encompass both personal and collective experiences. By connecting individual vignettes or stories to wider themes such as geographic isolation, work-life balance, and gender-related challenges, we expanded and evolved the focus of our research.

Storying and Re-storying

To further refine our analysis, we employed the 'storying and re-storying' tool. Drawing on the narrative inquiry techniques described by White (2007), “storying and re-storying” allowed us to reinterpret and reshape our experiences through alternate perspectives. This

process is used to explore different interpretations of life events, helping to reveal overlooked possibilities and shifts in identity. Through continuous discussions and reflections, we traced how our professional identities and personal lives intertwined and evolved over time, revealing crucial patterns in our journeys as online doctoral students.

Table 1
Summary of Data Analysis Phases and Techniques

Phase	Title	Step	Description	Key Reference
1	**Independent Analysis**	Thematic Analysis	Each author independently examines their narratives, identifies key themes and insights.	Braun & Clarke (2006), Ryan & Bernard (2003)
2	**Collaborative Analysis**	Burrowing	Deep dive into specific contexts, uncovering how institutional and societal factors shape experiences.	Connelly & Clandinin (1990)
2	**Collaborative Analysis**	Broadening	Expand the scope of analysis by integrating additional reflections and situating individual experiences within broader contexts.	Connelly & Clandinin (1990)
2	**Collaborative Analysis**	Storying and Re-storying	Reinterpret and reshape experiences through alternate perspectives, revealing evolving professional and personal identities.	White (2007)

Results

In this section, to provide a glimpse into our experiences as female online doctoral students, we invite you to delve into the following vignettes or stories, where we share personal experiences that illuminate our research. But before we embark on this journey, let us introduce ourselves.

Meet Staci

My roots trace back to the farmlands of Northwest Iowa, where my journey began amidst open fields and the solid values of a close-knit community. This geographic backdrop has been both a canvas of natural beauty and a barrier, limiting my access to a wider array of cultural experiences, educational opportunities, and diverse sports and activities.

Fast forward a decade or so and I'm living in Northern Minnesota, another rural area. For years, I nurtured a dream of delving into research and earning a Ph.D., but the constraints of my location, coupled with a deep reluctance to uproot my family again, seemed to narrow my path. This dream felt increasingly out of reach, a distant aspiration that I struggled to align with the realities of my life.

However, just as I was on the brink of sidelining this dream, I encountered a transformative approach to education that reignited my hope. The University of North Dakota extended an incredible opportunity, offering to accommodate my educational pursuits in an online format. Moreover, they generously funded my Ph.D. journey. With their support and a newfound sense of purpose, I did more than just persevere—I thrived. Their gesture was immensely meaningful, embodying a truly humanizing approach to learning and growth, and allowing me to seamlessly integrate my aspirations into the tapestry of my reality.

Meet McKenzie

My story unfolds across the expansive plains of Fargo, North Dakota, where the winds of change whispered of the transient nature of my journey. As a first-grade teacher joyfully anticipating the arrival of my first baby, the impracticality of a traditional Ph.D. program loomed large. My deliberate choice of online learning emerged as a strategic decision. Recognizing the importance of flexibility in navigating the demands of raising a young family, I sought a transformative educational experience that could adapt to the evolving dynamics of my life. The University of North Dakota, with its commitment to online education, became the guiding force, offering not just academic growth but a flexible pathway that aligned seamlessly with my vision.

This intentional choice was driven not only by the current joy of growing my family but also with an eye toward the future. With plans to expand my family and welcome more children in the near future, the flexibility afforded by online learning took on even greater significance. It became a lifeline, allowing me to balance the responsibilities of motherhood with the pursuit of a Ph.D. The University of North Dakota's unwavering support in providing a flexible and supportive learning environment became the linchpin of my academic journey, embodying the power of choice and adaptability in harmonizing personal and academic aspirations.

Theme One: Finding our Footing

Staci, a doctoral student who faced the challenge of living four hours away from her university campus due to her partner's career. This distance was mitigated through online/hybrid course offerings. Meanwhile, McKenzie chose online learning for its flexibility, which was essential for balancing the responsibilities of raising a young family. Yet, for both of us, we were in the "minority" as most students were on-site due to the primarily unspoken, but sometimes spoken, notion among faculty and leadership that on-site is the superior way to learn and research. This notion impacted access for online students to research opportunities and collaboration with faculty and peer research groups. Yet, due to the actions of our advisors, each of us had a different outcome.

Staci shares…

Excitement washed over me, followed swiftly by panic. My advisor, whom I had only spoken to once over the phone, emailed me requesting to assist her on a summer research project. The catch? It was an unpaid opportunity, but I could earn a credit. As a second-semester doctoral student grappling with severe imposter syndrome, I felt entirely out of my lane. I barely knew anything about research. However, the constant refrain from my peers and instructors about the

importance of publishing echoed in my mind. Publish, publish, publish—that seemed to be the key to securing a tenure track position after graduation. Driven by these thoughts, I hastily responded, "I'd love to!" Yet, inside, I was a bundle of nerves.

Two weeks later, a relieving email arrived outlining the specific tasks I would be undertaking for my advisor. They had considered my skill set, assigning me the task of reviewing articles in a Google folder and documenting their attributes in a spreadsheet. This initial phase involved contributing to a meta-analysis—an unfamiliar concept that required a quick Google search. Despite my lack of expertise, I completed the project, and a glimmer of confidence sparked within me. This experience yielded my first publication and presentation, making me believe that perhaps I was capable after all.

As fall arrived, my advisor approached me with a request to write a few paragraphs for a book chapter she was working on. Initially hesitant, I voiced my concerns, but my advisor's response was encouraging: "I know you can do it. Give it a go and send me a draft." Taking their words to heart, I took on the challenge, and once again, they were proven right.

I distinctly remember attending Zoom classes later that year, where my fellow doctoral students proudly shared stories of their publications. Some of my peers were on-site students, relishing their involvement in research work groups and the luxury of lunchtime meetings with their advisors. Intrigued by their experiences, I reached out to the lead of one such work group, hoping to join their ranks. Sadly, my request was declined simply because I was an online student. I couldn't comprehend it. Other requests to be a GRA were also declined for similar reasons. Despite my online status, my advisor treated me no differently; we engaged in various research endeavors throughout my program. Nonetheless, this exclusion from other spaces left me perplexed.

Ultimately, it mattered little, as I accumulated more publications than any of my scholarly peers, including those on-site students, by the time I graduated. However, I could only help but wonder about others who needed an advisor like mine. How did they navigate the realm of research in online spaces?

McKenzie shares…

I remember sitting in my Statistics class via Zoom during the second year of my PhD program. The instructor asked how many pieces we had published at that point. I scoffed. But then, slowly my peers started raising their hands.

Oh shit.

The instructor went on to urge those of us who had not been publishing to start. Our time was now. We needed to build our CV. He went on to share that when he was a part of hiring committees, publications was the first section he looked at. Does the candidate have any published pieces? If not, he writes them off almost instantly.

My mind started racing. I didn't know the first thing about publishing. I started asking around. Much to my surprise, my colleagues were getting these opportunities with their advisor. I called her. Can we publish something together? "Don't worry," she assured me. We would publish at least three articles from my dissertation. The conversation did not ease my anxiety. I needed to publish something before then. I needed to forge alliances with another professor who was actively publishing. But how?

This was not going to be easy as a distance student. I signed up to take a class with a professor I knew was actively publishing. The course was asynchronous. I turned in quality assignments and corresponded with her via email frequently and signed up for the one meeting she offered during the semester that I could speak with her about my final project. At the end of the semester, I shot my shot. I sent her an email that outlined my research interests and how it aligned with her research agenda. I asked if she would be willing to collaborate on a piece together. She skirted my question and instead offered me other articles to look at on the topic.

Sigh. Would this be so difficult in an in-person setting? Would my eagerness to publish and knowledge of the topic be better conveyed in an in-person setting. I have to believe so.

Both narratives in this set of vignettes or stories explore several themes that resonate within academia and online learning. They delve into the experiences of Staci and McKenzie, doctoral students grappling with their multiple identities and the pressure to publish for future career prospects. The stories highlight the challenges online students face in accessing specific research opportunities and spaces (Gilpin & Azizova, 2021) while emphasizing the crucial role of a supportive advisor (Gilpin & Azizova, 2021; Gardner, 2009; Jameson & Torres, 2019; Kumar & Dawson, 2018; Marston & Gopaul, 2020; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016; Zhou & Okahana, 2019).

Through overcoming doubts and stepping outside her comfort zone, Staci experiences both personal and professional growth, achieving publications and accomplishments that surpass many of her on-site peers. This growth is not solely due to resilience but is deeply influenced by her intersecting identities, which shape her experiences in complex ways. Drawing on Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, Staci's journey highlights how multiple identity markers, such as race (white), gender (woman), and online student status, create unique challenges and opportunities.

Staci's racial identity as a white woman significantly influences her academic experiences. As a white individual, she benefits from seeing herself represented among her professors and colleagues, offering a sense of belonging and affirmation. This representation grants her access to spaces and opportunities that students of color may not easily obtain. However, her gender introduces additional challenges. Academia, shaped by white male norms (Aparicio et al., 2016; Plotts, 2020a, 2020b), often marginalizes women's contributions, creating obstacles that Staci must navigate. Her intersectional identity as being white and female places her in a position where she benefits from racial privilege but simultaneously contends with gendered expectations that may limit her visibility and influence in male-dominated fields. This duality allows Staci to reflect on how her racial privilege has shaped her achievements. While she faces challenges related to sexism, her ability to accumulate publications and surpass some of her peers may, in part, be linked to her racial privilege. In this reflection, Staci

acknowledges that her experiences do not fully encompass the broader struggles faced by individuals with different racial identities, particularly women of color.

This self-awareness allows Staci to recognize that, while her journey is marked by resilience and success, it does not represent the full spectrum of academic experiences—particularly for women like McKenzie, whose intersecting identities may present greater barriers to publishing and academic success, despite similar persistence. In contrast, McKenzie, who also navigates complex intersections of identity, successfully completed her doctoral program without a single publication, despite her strong desire, interest, and perseverance.

These narratives bring to light the need for empathy towards online students and underscore the importance of supportive advisors who understand and navigate the multifaceted experiences of students with intersecting identities. Overall, both stories portray the complexities and triumphs of pursuing research in an online learning environment, highlighting the critical role that intersectionality plays in shaping these experiences.

Theme Two: Resilience in the Face of Adversity

In the intimate narratives of McKenzie and Staci, the theme of resilience weaves a compelling tale of navigating personal tribulations within the realms of academia and motherhood. McKenzie, concealing pregnancies and navigating the intricate dance of childbirth and research in the online space, grapples with the choices between familial responsibilities and academic ascent. On the other hand, Staci's story unfolds as a delicate interplay between health challenges and her academic journey, with the transformative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic prompting reflections on the absence of online work and learning options as the norm. Together, their narratives illuminate the strength required to surmount the often-unseen challenges within academia, challenging traditional norms and advocating for a more compassionate and flexible approach in the world of virtual learning.

McKenzie shares…

March. Two pink lines. What a relief. This baby would arrive in mid-December. I could take three weeks over winter break for maternity leave. Even better, I didn't need to tell anyone that I was expecting. My belly could hide under the computer screen. My daughter came 14 days early, throwing my plans off only slightly. Thankfully, I was able to continue my research without anyone knowing about the birth of our second child.

Fast forward, 13 months. January. Two pink lines. I immediately started calculating. Instant dread. September due date. This was the worst-case scenario. I was hoping, no praying, that the ultrasound would tell us an earlier due date in August. Doctor's appointment. The due date was confirmed for mid-September. While I could keep the pregnancy a secret, I wouldn't be able to hide a newborn. I kept thinking about the ways that I could make it work. Continuing my research while raising a newborn and two toddlers. The baby will sleep for the first three months. You can still get your work done. I assured myself.

Thursday, February 17. Blood. Why was I bleeding? I should be 11 weeks. Walk into ultrasound and confirm my worst nightmare. No heartbeat. Tears. Instant feelings of guilt for ever regretting

the timing of this baby. No time for tears. Stop. More tears. Doctor scheduled surgery for that evening. I was sore. I needed to heal: physically and mentally. Could I give myself the time to grieve without telling my colleagues or advisor what had happened? I reluctantly explained I had a family emergency and needed to take the rest of the week off. When I returned, I certainly was not healed. But saw no choice other than to press on. I vowed that I would not make excuses for myself and wouldn't speak about the events.

July 3rd. Two pink lines. Start calculating the due date. Spring of 2023. The same semester I planned on defending my dissertation and graduating. Maybe this baby will arrive around spring break. That could work. Due date of March 4th. As a virtual student, my secret was safe until then. I didn't tell my research advisor until the end of Fall semester. I asked if I could work one week over winter break so that I could take one week off for the birth of my child in spring. She congratulated me and agreed.

During my one-week maternity leave, I received an email from my research advisor. She encouraged me to take all the time I needed and come back when I was ready. Was this a trap? Were my efforts not important? Would I miss out on publishing opportunities? I already felt guilty for missing a week of progress. I couldn't possibly miss more. Even though I could barely walk from the cesarean surgery and was in a sleep deprived fog, I declined. I would be back on Monday morning.

I earned my Ph.D and worked part time as a research assistant while being pregnant three different times and birthing two beautiful babies. I kept my pregnancies a secret because I didn't want my advisor or my colleagues to think of me as less capable. I wanted to be given the most challenging of tasks without pause. In this way, the online environment was as much of a blessing and it was a curse. A blessing because I could hide an entire pregnancy and be given the same opportunities as my male colleagues. A blessing because I could attend work and conduct research, virtually, with a newborn. curse because I needed to choose between being a mother and being a researcher. A curse because I needed to choose between grieving and continuing to climb the academic ladder.

Staci shares…

I vividly recall sitting in my office on-campus, where I balanced roles as a lecturer and an online doctoral student. Suddenly, I felt an alarming sensation, as if blood was pouring from within. Hastily, I made my way to the bathroom and was confronted with the sight of blood. A flurry of questions raced through my mind – was it a tumor or another grave illness? Then, it struck me that this could be perimenopause, considering my age.

The episodes of uncontrolled bleeding persisted. Upon visiting my medical provider, who displayed a concerning lack of concern, tests were conducted, all returning normal results. Notably, my blood pressure was alarmingly high during this visit. Headaches, dry eyes, and severe anxiety had become part of my daily life, which I attributed to the stress of juggling my various responsibilities. I held onto the belief that completing my PhD would restore my health.

Then, in March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped our world. Suddenly, I found myself working from home as the courses I taught were now online and all of my doctoral courses, too, were online. This shift offered a much-needed reprieve, not just from travel but also from the strain of managing health issues while on campus.

The transition to a fully online environment allowed me to attend to my health needs more effectively, without the added pressure of seeking accommodations from my employer or instructors. However, this period was not without its challenges. Despite the convenience, my health concerns continued to escalate, reaching a critical point shortly after I defended my dissertation. Confronted with no other choice, I turned my full attention to addressing my health issues, which I am grateful to say have since been successfully resolved. Reflecting on this journey, I realize how pivotal the pandemic was in facilitating my ability to work and learn online, a circumstance that was instrumental in navigating through these tumultuous times.

Yet, I wonder why online work and learning options are not part of the norm? What if a pandemic hand not hit?

The narratives presented in this vignette delve into multifaceted themes relevant to women in academia and online learning, intricately weaving together the personal and professional challenges faced by McKenzie and Staci. Both women grapple with profound choices concerning their lives, shedding light on the complexities that arise when women must conceal pregnancies, navigate childbirth, and address health concerns while pursuing advanced degrees. These experiences mirror findings in the literature on the struggles women graduate students face in balancing academic demands with personal responsibilities (Pasque & Errington-Nicholson, 2011).

On the other hand, it often reinforces cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2016), as many platforms and courses are designed with Western, Eurocentric biases, privileging certain knowledge systems while marginalizing others. This can perpetuate the dominance of certain ideologies unless actively countered.

The online learning environment serves as a double-edged sword, offering both opportunities and challenges. While it can be a sanctuary that grants access to diverse perspectives, challenging dominant narratives and giving marginalized voices a platform, it can also reinforce cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2016). Many online platforms are shaped by Western, Eurocentric biases, privileging certain knowledge systems and marginalizing others, perpetuating the dominance of particular ideologies.

For women like McKenzie and Staci, this duality extends further. McKenzie's hidden pregnancies highlight the paradox of online flexibility—while it creates opportunities, it also forces tough decisions. Viewed through the lens of intersectionality, as Crenshaw (1989) describes, the interplay of gender, motherhood, and student status shapes their unique, often difficult experiences. Staci's journey, navigating both health challenges and academic life, reveals the transformative potential of online education but also underscores its limitations. These women's intersecting identities—balancing academia, health, and personal life—illustrate the complex layers of discrimination and privilege in the online learning space.

Despite their differing circumstances, both sets of narratives converge on the central theme of resilience, highlighting the shared strength required to navigate the intricate intersectionality of women's experiences in the academic landscape and online education.

Additionally, one critical aspect raised by these narratives is the limited sharing of personal information among faculty and peers. The absence of community, socialization, and in-person relationships can contribute to feelings of isolation, potentially impacting dropout rates among women (Devos et al., 2017; Shepherd & Bolliger, 2023; Weidman & Stein, 2003). This lack of connection underscores the importance of fostering supportive communities and open communication within online educational settings to better address the unique challenges women face, particularly when these challenges are shaped by the intersecting dimensions of their identities.

A Way Forward: Supporting Female Online Doctoral Students

In this section, we present the findings from our study through vignettes and themes, offering insights into the unique challenges female online doctoral students encounter. The narratives of McKenzie and Staci serve as illustrative examples that bring these themes to life and prompt critical discussions on how to bolster support for women in this educational setting. The themes identified include health and well-being, virtual mentorship, and intersectionality.

Health and Well-being

Supporting the health and well-being of female online doctoral students requires institutions and faculty to create inclusive and flexible environments that accommodate the diverse needs of students from various generations—from Boomers to Gen Z (Weiss-Wolf, 2023). This involves addressing life events like pregnancies, maternity leaves, childcare needs, and menopause. For instance, McKenzie's experience highlights the importance of clear maternity leave policies, allowing students to pause their academic journey for childbirth and recovery without jeopardizing their progress or financial aid. These policies need to be widely disseminated and supported through accessible documentation, orientation sessions, and continuous institutional support.

Staci's journey, which involved navigating academic work during perimenopause and the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the profound impact health can have on academic success. Providing access to healthcare and mental health resources is crucial in this context (Podsakoff et al., 2007; Mayo Clinic, 2023). Institutions must recognize these needs through policies that ensure students can continue their studies without feeling pressured to leave academia due to health challenges. Additionally, balancing personal life with academic commitments, especially during pregnancy or motherhood, remains a significant issue. McKenzie's struggle to manage multiple responsibilities points to the need for flexibility, a point supported by scholars like Moreira da Silva (2019) and Johnson (2023), who note that many women juggle work, household responsibilities, and caregiving duties alongside their academic careers.

Virtual Mentorship

Effective mentorship is another critical area for supporting female doctoral students. McKenzie and Staci's outcomes were shaped by the quality of mentorship they received, pointing to the need for formalized training for advisors working with virtual students (Ruben, 2020). Faculty mentorship programs can bridge the gap for online learners, providing them with

equal access to research collaboration, career opportunities, and guidance. These programs also help students feel connected to the academic community, which is essential for their success. Additionally, peer-to-peer connections in online environments are vital. Both McKenzie and Staci benefited from informal support, but relying on chance encounters for such connections is not ideal, especially since online students often seek out peer support more actively than their on-campus counterparts (Berry, 2017; Studebaker & Curtis, 2021). Implementing formal orientation programs that foster student interaction with faculty, staff, and peers (Peacock & Cowman, 2019) and creating student-driven social spaces such as group chats or virtual study halls (Gilpin & Azizova, 2021) can strengthen these connections, leading to greater student success and well-being.

Intersectionality

It is essential to recognize the layered identities of female online doctoral students and the unique challenges they face, particularly those related to race, ethnicity, and gender non-conformity. Our perspectives, informed by our experiences as white cisgender women, do not fully encompass the broader range of experiences faced by women at the intersections of marginalized identities. As Crenshaw (1989) explains, intersectionality highlights how race, gender, and other identity markers converge to create compounded experiences of marginalization. Future research must delve deeper into these intersectional experiences to better understand and support all female doctoral students. Doing so ensures a more inclusive and equitable academic environment where diverse voices are acknowledged and valued.

Conclusion

Delving into narrative inquiry, whether in part or in whole, creates opportunities for uncovering new understandings of the experiences of online doctoral students and their faculty supporters. By bringing to light the distinct challenges women face in their pursuit of doctoral degrees, we take an important step towards creating equitable, inclusive, and just environments within online academic research and education. Our exploration into the stories of two female online doctoral students navigating the pursuit of research opportunities and spaces adds a valuable perspective to this critical dialogue. Through our narratives, we not only highlight the barriers encountered but also showcase the resilience and notable achievements that emerge in the face of these challenges.

In essence, effectively supporting female online doctoral students necessitates a comprehensive strategy that acknowledges the complex interplay of their experiences. This strategy should aim to cultivate inclusive spaces, promote virtual mentorship, and ensure thorough support for their health and well-being. By proactively addressing these factors, academic institutions can play a pivotal role in fostering a more supportive and equitable environment for female online doctoral students, empowering them to excel both academically and personally.

Furthermore, by championing the expansion of diverse online research opportunities for future students and disseminating insights and strategies for success, we contribute to the creation of a more equitable educational landscape in the digital realm. This commitment to enhancing access and opportunity within online higher education paves the way for a richer, more diverse academic community, where all students have the support they need to thrive.

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