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Invisible Labor in the Academy

Maintaining the Institution

Understanding the Invisible Labor of Single Moms

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The first time I felt ashamed of being divorced and identifying as a single mother, I was in the office of a graduate school administrator. We were talking about how to better support student parents, and I had left my parental status ambiguous. Towards the end of our conversation, she mentioned a Facebook page for moms who lived in a suburb near my university's city—"I could connect you with them, but they're mostly married, affluent women, so I'm not sure how helpful that would be." It was one sentence, uttered over three years ago that left a lasting impression. Before that, I had never felt ashamed of my parental status, even with the threat of the motherhood penalty (Correll, Benard, and Paik, 2007). This is partially due to my identity—I'm white, able-bodied, and cisgender; my stigma is different than a single Mother-Scholar of Color (Hernández-Johnson et al. 2019). This is partially due to the single mom faculty members in my program who showed me there's nothing to be ashamed of. And this is partially due to a mentor who encouraged me to be open with my graduate program about the limitations that navigating a divorce and single parenthood created. Even though stories of concealing maternal identity as a form of self-protection exist throughout much of the scholarly narratives on mothering experiences in academia (Schell, 2002; Schnitzer and Keahey, 2003; Evans and Grant, 2008; Monosson, 2008; Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2012; Téllez, 2013), I knew maintaining such invisibility came at a cost—a "self-erasure" that is "destructive" to one's sense of self and spirit (Herrera and Mercado, 2019, p. 165). I also knew that maintaining "maternal invisibility" (Lynch, 2008, p. 596) requires invisible labor.

My program was supportive of me as a single parent. They granted me extensions when I couldn't finish seminar papers on time. They didn't penalize me when I had to miss class because I was abruptly moving out of the house I shared with my ex-husband. They helped me apply for fellowships and forwarded me emails about financial support for student parents. They made sure I had a teaching schedule that worked with my personal life. Even so, being open about my parental status involved labor—I had to craft professional emails and conduct one-on-one conversations communicating my needs all the while deciding what to disclose, what to conceal, to who and when. I also found myself connecting with and wanting to offer support to other single moms, in and out of academia.

Through my own experience as well as survey responses and interview conversations¹ with other single moms in academia, I learned that when single moms are open about their parental identity, they find themselves trading one kind of invisible labor for another. They go from

¹ I interviewed seven single moms in academia over the course of a semester.

concealing their own identities, to supporting women who share theirs. Such invisible labor is often necessary for single moms to feel valued, supported, and understood when institutional systems, structures, and policies in higher education fail to consider those with marginalized identities.

In this article, I explore how single moms choose to conceal or disclose their identity, and make visible the invisible labor that comes with being an openly single mom. Using *testimonio*, I share the stories of five single mothers in their voices. Like *testimonio*, the stories these women share are a “crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (Latina Feminist Collective, 2001, p. 2). I use direct quotes from interview participants, as their stories are told to “remove a mask previously used as a survival strategy,” and I urge others to enact social and systemic change (Reyes and Rodríguez, 2012, p. 527). In telling their stories, I use an interactive approach that encourages readers to think and engage critically with these women’s words.

The section “Being Open,” consists of a series of quotes from single moms sharing how they decided to be open about their single mom identity. At the end of each quote is information about the participants (name, academic rank, and brief description of single mom identity) that provides context and also acts as a guide for the analysis that occurs in the “Conclusion” section. After each quote is a section of bolded text, which reveals the invisible labor these single moms engaged in due to their openness. Specifically, this invisible labor often involved supporting others with marginalized identities on their campuses. As readers can see from the women’s voices, this invisible labor is something they embrace but remains unrecognized by their academic institutions. When read in sequence, these quotes move between the decisions these women made and the invisible impacts of those decisions. I encourage readers to explore this article in the way that works best for you, as there is no singular approach to reading these stories.

Being Open

“I’m not ashamed of it [being a single mom]. It’s part of my identity, and it’s also information about how I have to move through the world and the type of decisions I have to make. I feel for people who are in that situation where they have to be quieter about it, and maybe I should be quieter about it. Maybe it won’t serve me well in the long run, but I just don’t, that’s just not how I move through the world.” —Becky, tenure-track faculty, divorced mom with 50/50 custody of two children

My students who have children will often seek me out. I don’t think I have any single parents right now, but we do have folks who have unexpected pregnancies during their time here, and we have folks who have decided to have children, and so I do think that they seek me and our one other faculty member who has children out in ways that they don’t seek out other faculty members. I had a student who had a baby, and I said, “listen, you just let me know, you can use my office to pump, and if I am in there, I will leave.” She’s talked to me a

lot about motherhood and stuff like that. I like being able to offer that to some of our students.

“I’m really open with it [being a single mom]. One of the things I’ve always struggled with in academia and other places is this illusion of having my shit together. Like everything is fine, my path is completely clear, there are no obstacles. I know that I really thrive when I see, especially other women, tell me that their life goes to hell sometimes, this is how it happened, this is how I come back from it, and this is what I learned from it. I’ve been very vocal about the separation, the divorce, circumstances with them, the custody battle.” —Julie, non-tenure track faculty, divorced mom with sole custody of two children

I make myself known on my alma mater’s Facebook page for students. I’ve voluntarily reached out to other students who I know are single parents and have said, “If you want to talk about it, I’ve been through what you’ve gone through. I’d be happy to talk about it again.” I also teach as an exercise instructor at the local community center, and have been open with my students there, about it, and have had some mothers come to me who are on the cusp of a separation asking questions like, “what is it really like, just being you and the kids in the house?”

“I just didn’t think too hard about it [being a single mom], and was just like this is what’s happening, I can’t be at X or Y thing because I’m a single parent now; I was always very up front about that. That may be because I will just say whatever controversial thing I’m thinking, and then afterwards be like, maybe I should have reeled that back in a little bit. I’m also one of a tiny handful of openly queer faculty on this Southern campus. My daughter is trans, and this is a well-known fact.” —Amy, tenure-track faculty, divorced mom with primary custody of one child

I do push back. At the beginning of this year, the Dean of faculty sent an email (or his secretary did) that there was a mandatory meeting for anyone going up for second or fourth year review to meet with the Dean. It was scheduled for a Monday at 4:30 p.m., and I just emailed back to the whole list, “Could we do this not at 4:30? Because that’s not doable for me,” and there were several other parents in the group and one other single mom, and luckily they offered a second meeting time. It was a lack of consideration. All of our faculty meetings used to be at 4:30, and I started a campaign to get that changed, and ultimately it was changed, which felt like a real coup for me, So all of the queer students come to me; all of the trans students come to me, too. I love doing that work, but it’s not something that goes into the service tracker that’s like this shared spreadsheet that we all have; it’s not seen.

“I became open about being a geographically single mom after a really bad experience I had. I took on a contract for a full-time job. My kids were 2 and 4 at the time. It was my first full-time job since getting my Master’s, and I was so excited. I was going to have my own office. It was at a community college, which is 6 and 6. Basically, I had to go and be a geographically single mother. I didn’t tell the chair. I made a friend who really helped me out. I was a newer teacher, a newer professor. I was trying to contain all this because I wanted to be the perfect new faculty member. Towards the end of the second semester, I went to my chair, and I said, ‘This is

where I'm at, this is why I'm falling apart.' He said, 'Why didn't you tell me from the beginning? My experience has been very similar.' That was kind of my lesson learned: I need to say up front what my needs are. I've learned that this community, it takes a village.'" —Katherine, Doctoral candidate transitioned to non-tenure track faculty position, geographically single mom with two children

I was thinking I would plan my work around the days that they were in daycare and do all this. This is just unbearable for faculty. My husband ended up getting a job that was voluntold, and he said he was going to be gone 300 days out of the year. He was gone, deployed. I didn't tell the chair what I was struggling with, what was going on. My friend who helped me was a first-year, didn't have any kids, wasn't married. It was rock bottom for me. I couldn't do it. I wasn't answering student emails. I wasn't getting there. My children were acting out, acting up. My son started biting people in preschool, and I imagine from all of my anxiousness and all of my anxiety. I felt out of control, and I've never felt so out of control. I just remember I was screaming at the kids; it was a horrible, horrible time for them and for me. I was like, "what? What? I've just been barely able to hold myself together." It was awful. I just remember thinking, "I will never do that again." I recently met a widow at my university who was thrown into being a single mom three years ago. She told me, "I never imagined somebody like you would understand where I'm coming from." All we did was talk about our kids and the guilt we feel and what goes on. That was probably the first connection I've made here with someone who I can relate to as a geographically single mom. We both emailed each other afterwards about how great it was to meet someone who we could connect with and to have somebody to just be able to talk about what we're experiencing. I told her, "Call me when I'm on campus for coffee if you feel like you just had a bad day with the kids the day before and weren't the mom you wanted to be, and we'll just have a coffee for half an hour and talk it out." For a single mom, part of this community is just having some sort of connection with someone that understands your position.

"I was very open and candid about being a single mom. I thought, 'This is just who I am. Of course I can talk about this.' I feel like that shouldn't be a mistake, but it was a mistake for me. Now, I do not tell people I'm a single mom until I know them well. I don't even mention I have a kid. When I talked with the director of the program, she asked me what my experience had been like my first year, and I told her about how I almost quit the program and didn't want people to have the same experience I did. When I told her that now I don't talk about being a mom, don't even say I have a kid, she told me, 'Yeah. Don't. Don't say you have a kid. I have two kids. We're in a male dominated field; you can't because they don't have the same respect for mothers that they do for other things, so if you need to leave because you've got to pick up your kid, you say, I have another obligation. I'm leaving now.' She goes, 'You don't talk about your kid. You don't say this. You are firm, and you say that you've got another obligation. It could be work, it could be whatever, but you've gotta go, and it's none of their damn business. That's how you have to be in this field.'" —Kelly, doctoral candidate, divorced mom with primary custody of one child

I was offered half an assistantship, and before I accepted, I told the faculty, "I'm a single mom, I am happy to take on this half of the assistantship. I'm not going to be able to be on campus all of the time. I was told that this was a lot of work from a distance, which I am totally capable of doing." They were like, "oh yeah, of course. We love your little son." They said, "the only requirement is that you bring him in to come visit us." One day, the faculty I was assisting had a meeting. I couldn't be there, and they knew that. On the day of the meeting, I got four emails that I didn't see until later because I do a million things. The emails asked, "where are you?," "why aren't you here?," "when can you get here?" The last email said, "As the wife of a pilot, I understand what it's like to be a single mom because he's gone all the time. If you need help keeping track of your assistantship hours, let me know." When I went to talk to the faculty member who wrote that last email, who was also on my dissertation committee, I told her I was not comfortable with my status as a parent being part of the conversation. I had told her from the beginning my constraints. I did that to protect myself from something like this happening, and I don't know why it was still happening. I told her, I do have my hours. I do have my hours every week. She told me, 'It's like you don't care about your career at all. To be honest, I don't even know if you should be in this program right now.' She told me, 'Maybe you should come back later when you know how to prioritize your career, over, well, sorry, you've already told me that I can't talk about him.'" I definitely don't tell them about my divorce or anything like that.

One semester, the director of my program came up to me, and said "Hey, did you meet the new student?" She said, "You're both also single moms! She's African-American, a speech therapist." I was like, "Okay. You could have just told me she was a speech therapist, and I would have remembered." She goes, "And for obvious reasons, I want her to succeed. I was just wondering if you could reach out to her and talk to her about being a single mom." I was like good intentions are there, but let me unpack this; there are so many things wrong with this. Number one: FERPA; you can't tell me that she's a single mom, that's not your business to tell me. You can come up and say, "Hey, you know, there's another single mom in the cohort, and would you mind me giving her your contact information?" I would be like, "Yeah! Sure! Absolutely, give it to her." I felt like I got to that point where they were asking me to support another student because they're like, we never really believed that you could succeed as a single mom, now that you have, can you teach someone else how to? I would really, honestly prefer to teach them how to better support single moms, rather than teaching her how to navigate all their bullshit.

I actually had another mom who's not a single mom message me, who's in the program, she had a kid since she started the program, and she's like, "I don't know how you do this. I don't feel like I'm supposed to be here," so that seems to be a theme. I told her, "We need moms to be researchers. You're doing qualitative research, and you're talking to people, you're talking to moms, and you're talking to families. You've got to be a person to be able to connect with other people, and if you're only a researcher and nothing else, I don't know that those people are always that great of qualitative researchers. I think that we need different kinds of people doing research, like different kinds of people in academia. Being a mom is part of who you are; it's a good thing, an asset. I know we go into these classes with these

dudes who have done all of these randomized control trials, and everyone talks about how great they are, but their research is not the only research. I know that sometimes in our program we feel that way because that's how they're treated, and our research is treated as not prestigious, not great, but it's really important. I think that being a mom is an asset." She said, "That really changed by perspective on things because I was just basically feeling like I didn't belong here, and I shouldn't be here." I think it's not just single moms that are feeling that way, but I think it's also moms who are married who are feeling that way because another mom who is married said a similar thing. When new students come in, the director says, "Would you mind taking them out to lunch because I really think you'll be able to help them," or "This student's thinking about joining the program and I really think that it would be great for you to talk to them." When people ask me what the program is like, I tell them, here are some experiences I've had because you need to know what it's like, and also if you decide to do it and someone treats you like shit, then it's not because you're a bad person. I'm not negative about it because there are positives about the program, but I am honest with people and realistic about it.

Conclusion

Many single moms in academia experience a sense of isolation and/or loneliness.² They are aware of the absence of single parents in higher education to relate to, the lack of understanding from faculty, administrators, and colleagues, and they recognize their "otherness" because single moms seem few and far between. They feel like those who have no experience with their circumstances do not support them, and that there is a lack of understanding about how it is different to be single with children versus coupled with children. They notice when parented colleagues in relationships avoid talking about children with them, especially when those colleagues are complaining about workload. They feel excluded by colleagues because as single moms, they're not "an intact family." Given the loneliness and isolation single moms face, it's not surprising that some would opt to keep their parental status hidden; however, as evidenced by the single moms whose stories are shared in this article, being open creates the potential for the development of a community and support system that does not exist within institutional systems and structures. It also comes with a fair amount of invisible labor, the kind that is not included on a CV or in a tenure and promotion review letter. But it should be.

The invisible labor that results from single moms being open about their identity benefits the academic institutions these women are a part of; it maintains the institutions. Their "laboring presences make universities legitimate—without them, [universities] can, and do, burn" (Tuck and Yang, 2018). Their invisible labor supports students and colleagues across the university, as well as members of their local communities. We see this in Katherine's connection with and offering support to a colleague at her university, the change Amy made to the faculty meetings on her campus, the support Julie offers to students in her community center exercise classes,

² Based on survey responses from 103 single moms from STEM, Social Sciences, and the Humanities, across academic ranks, and representing five different countries including the U.S.

the listening ear and pumping space Becky offered to a student, and Kelly's emotional and mental support of mother graduate students. The embodied knowledge these single moms have informs the unique type of support they are able to give (Wilcox, 2009). Academia at the university, organizational, department, and programmatic levels needs to validate this work, which means recognizing *and* rewarding it for tenure and promotion, as well as considering this labor in hiring decisions. Including this labor on CVs, as well as in letters for review and application should be viewed as an asset rather than a detriment. Such invisible labor is essential to the retention of students, faculty, and staff of marginalized identities. If academia does not recognize this labor, it risks losing valuable members of the academic community, not only scholars in the present, but also in the future.

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