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# (In)visible Working Mama Drama: From Excellent to ‘Good Enough’ Academia and (M)Others

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The neoliberal, precarious, anatomized and audit-centric academy produces an unfair burden on women academics. Academia, like many other organizational forms, demands unwellness. This paper argues that as well as intensifying the struggles of mothering academics like us, the pandemic also rendered us visible, forcing the body subject into view and, in doing so, offering some (albeit small) resistance to the ‘anatomizing urge’ in academia. Following discussions on agentic visibility, we propose the idea of agentic invisibility and a corresponding discussion of its loss during the pandemic. We argue that we could no longer choose to showcase what was excellent or to deliberately conceal what was not. Engaging in agentic visibility and invisibility tactics became very difficult, and this had many downsides, including the loss of liminal spaces and the difficulties in our private lives that were suddenly on display. What we choose to focus on, though, is a more caring future. Through the work of Donald Winnicott, we suggest that the difficult and sometimes painful spaces created by the pandemic forced us to reject excellence and to accept the ‘good enough’ as a way of being that should be respected. In this paper, we contribute to discussions concerning the reformative mode of ordering used by home-working mothers during the pandemic. Though we cannot and will not speak for others, we use our dual roles as mothering academics to illustrate broader problems for others who continue to be marginalized by academia and for those who simply seek a more balanced engagement with academia. We seek an acceptance of the ‘good enough’ for all people, from those in power and from each other.

*‘Both mother and Other are also increasingly written out as normalisation takes place around an exclusively male norm’*  
(Dale, 2001: 167).

## Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 was unforeseen and unprecedented in how it affected our working lives. The subse-

quent lockdown left many families without childcare or time to plan for alternatives (Drew and Marshall, 2020; Kasymova *et al.*, 2021). This unpredictability raised challenges around how and when to work while maintaining work–life balance (or at least, reducing work–life conflict) (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020). One group disproportionately affected was working mothers (Guy and Arthur, 2020; Zanhour and Sumpter, 2022), particularly those with preschool children with immediate demands and requiring close supervision (Ameen, Hoelscher and Panteli, 2024). The effects of the pandemic are why this paper has come to life so long after it began (more than 4 years ago). We now risk this piece being considered too late or behind the curve. We make no apology. Just for a moment, consider this: our tired, belated, imperfect bodies matter. We belong to the academy as much as anyone else, even if we are late to the party. Our voices speak to a broader truth about

We dedicate this work to the loving memory of Alexander and Isabelle Bowes, our shining stars. Though they died over two and a half years apart, they shared a loving family and many friends bereft at their loss. For Alexander, a beautiful boy with a big heart full of joy, and an adoration of Peter Rabbit and ice cream. Our lives were brighter for your presence. And for Isabelle, who devastatingly died after the completion of this paper. We honour your memory in our efforts to live as you did, fearlessly, joyously and spontaneously. May we never forget what really matters in life.

the need for better representation of women and those minoritized by the academy. Our work is relevant post-pandemic as an ignition to explore how a sector-wide commitment to the 'good enough' can be a central part of the everyday lives of (m)othering academics (mothers and those othered by the academy).

There is a need to recognize and value the 'good enough' for those with additional caring or domestic responsibilities, but also for those who simply wish to decentralize the neoliberal suggestion that work is the only thing that matters (Pereira, 2021). We politely insist, following the work of Pereira (2021), Gao, Sai and Xu (2024) and others, that life outside of work does matter, that it provides crucial respite and recovery, and that we are all entitled to it – whether we are mothers or not. We also know that when childcare responsibilities are shared, women are better able to engage in meaningful work. We therefore emphasize the need to document the pandemic moment of visibility and to support the call for the 'good enough', so that the benefits the pandemic did bring are not lost to history. We play our part here, documenting our academic motherhood and our growing acceptance of the 'good enough'.

In this paper, we join a lively conversation. The *British Journal of Management* (BJM) has published much work concerning women and their employment relationship. Papers have covered women managers (Mavin, Grandy and Williams, 2014), board diversity (Pandey *et al.*, 2023; Poletti-Hughes and Dimungu-Hewage, 2023), career advancement (Arifeen and Gatrell, 2020), femininity (Priola and Chaudhry, 2021), home-working (Adisa *et al.*, 2022; Beech and Ansell, 2020) and motherhood (Ashman *et al.*, 2022). Our paper contributes to this body of research by highlighting the relationship between the 'good enough' and the visibility of the pandemic for mothering academics.

During the lockdowns, the work of many academics continued and intensified (Shankar *et al.*, 2021). The need to simultaneously juggle home and work responsibilities was amplified (Kirk and Rifkiin, 2020). Despite, in many cases, both parents working from home, the bulk of psychological engagement and childcare-induced anxiety rested with women (Clark *et al.*, 2021). The pandemic has increased inequalities (Bapuji *et al.*, 2020); the impact on women academics has been highlighted by the drop in their research activity and submission of journal articles (Fazackerley, 2020; Frederickson, 2020; Pereira, 2021). We personally reflected on the desire to just get through the day; the dreams we held of being able to write, applying for promotion, being more 'productive', dashed by exhaustion.

Plotnikof and Utoft (2022) discuss the toxic demands of the academy and the push for slow academia as introduced by Berg and Seeber (2016). We highlight the excessive pressure for productivity defined by the neoliberal institution's demand for excellence (Plotnikof

and Utoft, 2022). With this knowledge, we posit one way of salving profound feelings of responsibility for excellence in mothering, the academy and exhausted bodies. Acknowledging the guilt frequently associated with mothering (Ashman *et al.*, 2022), we question the demands for 'excellence' in universities. We suggest that the pandemic and the years since have shown us how the academy might begin to move towards better recognition of the embodied lives of mothering academics and others at work. We argue that this raises important questions for the field surrounding the extent to which COVID-19 rendered mothering (and othered) groups visible, and what we intend to do about what was revealed.

Korica (2022) calls for relational action to improve academia. In this vein, we are interested in asking whether we can use the newfound visibility of mothers to challenge the productivity goals that obstruct mothers, those with significant caring responsibilities, those from minoritized groups and those who do not conform from being viewed as 'good enough' at home and work. This work then uses 'mothers' as an illustrative example of the relevance and importance of 'others', of anyone othered by a system designed for a very particular type of White, male, unencumbered, heteronormative employee.

In this paper, we draw then from Donald Winnicott's work to ask how the reduction in available agentic invisibility tactics during the pandemic helped to reconfigure what 'good enough' mothering (Winnicott, 1971) and academia fit for the twenty-first century could look like. We emphasize the need to resist allowing this moment to pass unexamined, and instead, we make attempts to render mothers visible (terrifying though this may be for us).

Through supportive conversations during the pandemic, we discussed and embraced our fallibilities in ways we had not done before. We were strengthened by the admissions of a professor and mother who openly admitted that she had submitted work that she knew was not perfect – there was no time for perfection. We advocate not excellence in mothering or academia but an engagement with 'good enough' practice (not just for mothers). We want to see an acceptance of this as a legitimate way of being, to be accepted and revered. Advocating 'good enough' feels dangerous to us and will no doubt be read by some as speaking to a lack of ambition or effort, or worse, indolence. Instead, we suggest that being 'good enough' should be the expectation of the academy, our families, and ourselves. We critique the discourse of excellence and the myriad ways it can promulgate behaviours that contribute to (physical and mental) ill health. Thus, we offer a healthier mode of engagement with work. This work is personal for us, as mothers and academics, because one of us suffered the most profound and heartbreaking loss – the death of

her eldest child, Alexander. Our work matters; we may love it, but it does not matter more than our children. Though this work was started before Alexander's devastating death, his memory lives on in our commitment to advocate for ourselves as mothers and friends, not merely academics, and to question the all-encompassing demands of the academy that can threaten family lives if left unchecked.

To be 'good enough' in more than one area of our lives, we must embrace imperfection as a part of life. In this paper, we are arguing for a more caring academia, following the work of Askins and Blazek (2017) and Chatzidakis *et al.* (2020). During the pandemic, we have suffered interrupted schedules and the loss of liminal space to recover and recuperate. There was a need to always be 'on' and available. There were no more car, train or bus rides home in which to process the working day before we saw our families. Our homes were no longer protected from the intrusion of work; they were not the safe spaces they had once been, but rather spaces where a video call from our bosses was a frequent event. This suffering has had many downsides (Kasymova *et al.*, 2021; Ashman *et al.*, 2022) and has been disproportionately felt by women. Indeed, we reflected on the political nature of our dining tables during the pandemic. When work consumed all available hours in the day due to childcare pressures, negotiating working spaces in the home was frequently problematic. Who's turn was it to commandeer the dining table?

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows: we first outline the relevant literature concerning the neoliberal academy as positioned within new public management (NPM), highlighting how women, and particularly mothers, are marginalized and silenced (Aiston and Fo, 2021). We then consider the pandemic's impact on working mothers and the various ways mothers struggled to employ agentic invisibility. The hypervisibility of the pandemic rendered the 'good enough' plausible and necessary. We then introduce the work of Donald Winnicott and, in particular, his concept of the 'good enough'. We demonstrate the relevance of Winnicott's work to management and organization studies, before highlighting precisely what is meant by 'good enough' and how this represents a healthy engagement with the world and a necessary response to restrictions in agentic invisibility. We then offer the promotion of the 'good enough' as a form of resistance to the neoliberal academy.

## **(M)Othering and (in)visibility in the neoliberal academy**

This paper explores mothering and visibility in the context of the neoliberal academy and its relationship to NPM. Directed by the tensions arising from

NPM's attempt at ever-increasing efficiency and productivity (Argento, Dobija and Grossi, 2020; Steinþórsdóttir *et al.*, 2019), we career through academia, attempting to salve our fragile selves (Boynton, 2020; Clarke and Knights, 2015), steered towards notions of individualistic, disembodied and meritocratic success within a marketized environment (Lynch, 2014). NPM, frequently associated with the 'masculine ideal' (Ferguson, 1984; Kanter, 1977; Lloyd, 1993; Morgan and Knights, 1997; Rhodes and Pullen, 2018), is grounded in rational and disembodied understandings of production and audit/measurement, a 'culture of dissection' (Sawday, 1995) where the market itself functions as the ethic to be followed. Thus, academic institutions constrain who will be deemed to 'fit in' and who will not (Trinh *et al.*, 2022).

There are now attempts to reconfigure who will be deemed 'fit' and who will not via an increasing push to offer family-friendly and home-working arrangements. Nevertheless, as Aiston and Fo (2021, p. 1) stated, '[t]he academy is positioned as a "carefree workplace" that assumes academics have no other commitments than the devotion of their time to the profession (Morley, 2007, 2013)'. Plotnikof and Utoft (2022) further contend that no matter how hard we work, we are always told that we can and should do more. As such, individual achievements are fetishized, and formally, our performances are compared in numerous metrics. Informally, we learn to compare ourselves with both friends and 'foes' (Ashcraft, 2017). In this space, we hide through need, and our voices become invisible. Hooks (1993) argued that if we cannot speak, we are rendered an 'absent presence without voice' (p. 126). There exists then a conspicuous silence around women's voices, with visibility often only being a 'surface' or 'token' conception (Simpson and Lewis, 2005, 2007). Although employee voice mechanisms are promoted in academia and elsewhere, silence and the compulsion to hide often result from the awareness that voice systems are typically distributed unjustly (Kougiannou, Redman and Dietz, 2015, 2021; Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Despite our struggles, the concept of 'fairness' and a belief in the meritocratic academy leads to a persistent sense of not feeling 'good enough'. We believe that we are deficient (Breeze, 2018). This view fails to acknowledge the gendered nature of family life, 'thereby privileging male academics that may not be shouldering caring responsibilities (Nikunen, 2012)' (Aiston and Fo, 2021, p. 138). Crucially, 'home-working' during the pandemic was a mandatory arrangement for many. As Docka-Filipek and Stone (2021) note in discussing the pressures on academic women to 'mother' the 'academic family' during pandemic times, 'gendered divisions of labor in the home are mirrored in the workplace' (p. 2170). Further, Clark *et al.* (2021, p. 1352) note 'working mothers have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 in relation to their psychological well-being, experiences of negative emotions, and the

redefinition of family dynamics, in which working mothers have adopted an additional and disproportionate care burden'. Indeed, we saw this ourselves with a new need to spend what would ordinarily have been clear work time consoling crying babies, making Easter bonnets, facilitating outdoor activities or practising phonics with our children. This change was accompanied by reduced access to formal support systems such as paid-for childcare and informal, practical support from relatives or friends, leading to the need to 'catch up' on work outside of typical working hours (Pass and Ridgway, 2022). Indeed, many academic mothers did not receive childcare support from their institutions (Drew and Marshall, 2020; Kasymova *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, intensified work and home demands, heightened employer control, social isolation and blurred work-life and personal boundaries diminished working lives by negating possibilities for agentic invisibility. Boncori (2020) noted that she needed to work from her bed to ease her back pain, using a virtual backdrop to conceal this truth. Our private spaces were invaded with cameras, and we often found ourselves trying to hide aspects of our lives that might be deemed inappropriate. There was 'an erosion of the broader, fabricated, artificial divide between "public" and "private"' (Walby, 1990) (Docka-Filipek and Stone, 2021, p. 2162). We were forced to display our identities as working mothers, and though we often tried to avoid this, ultimately, in many instances, we could not. This situation was particularly challenging for those who preferred to keep their work and home lives separate (invisible) to avoid stigmatization (Adisa *et al.*, 2022). We are aware that many cannot merge work and personal boundaries (Adamson and Kelan, 2019; Delaney and Sullivan, 2021), even if they prefer this. Therefore, to some extent, any discussion of the increased visibility of mothering, or the effects of bringing children to work, indicates a privilege many women do not have.

It is important to make clear that we are privileged, and that although we belong to a variety of intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1991), we cannot and do not represent everyone. Women hold varied intersectional identities such as, but not limited to, race/ethnicity, sexuality, disability and class, that will impact their experiences in neoliberal academia in different ways. There are women in insecure non-standard/precarious contracts within (and outside) academia, or who have other pressures. For a variety of women academics, the promotion of 'good enough' may not just be scary but could be actively dangerous to their financial security. We do not and cannot speak for everyone. We do not suggest that this is an individual project, but rather that the 'good enough' should be actively supported by institutions and available to everyone. Before others can ascribe to the 'good enough', they need to be and feel

safe. Nevertheless, the pandemic rendered us visible. Our workplaces were forced to reconcile with the embodied, corporeal identities of mothers, wives, partners and carers, and did so with varying degrees of care. As our children dove into the frame, so did the pieces of our identities that had been (sometimes deliberately) invisible, even excised from the screen.

It is known that workload allocation has been a crucial problem hindering women's development (Aiston and Fo, 2021; Aiston and Jung, 2015; Leberman, Eames and Barnett, 2016). Gender stereotyping leads to academic women being assigned more administrative and pastoral roles (Kjeldal, Rindfleisch and Sheridan, 2005; Morley, 2007; Ropers-Huilman, 2000; Schein, 2007; Turner, 2002). Women receive 'less credit than men for coauthored publications' (Trinh *et al.*, 2022, p. 323). Additionally, gatekeeping in selection processes/resource allocation hinders women's advancement (Husu, 2004; van den Brink, Benschop and Jansen, 2010). Work during the pandemic has continued to emphasize the difficulties faced by women and those with caring responsibilities (Ashman *et al.*, 2022; Bapuji *et al.*, 2020; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020; Fazackerley, 2020; Frederickson, 2020; Kirk and Rifkin, 2020).

Nevertheless, the pandemic has also highlighted acts of micro resistance. We build on the pre-pandemic work of Huopalaainen and Satama (2019, p. 113), who note that it was possible to resist dominant discourses by 'taking our babies with us to informal meetings at the university'. They suggest that to them, 'this was an attempt to make motherhood a more visible part of our academic selves and our academic environments' (2019, p. 113). This work also relates to Ashman *et al.*'s description of the reformatory mode, the merging of family, work and home life, the embracing of "fluidity" and "slow time" (Ashman *et al.*, 2022, p. 1132). This results in children being on view during work meetings, alongside 'emotional undulation' (Ashman *et al.*, 2022, p. 1132) and speaks to Anderson's (2009) work on affective atmospheres in relation to the presence of motherhood being brought into the workplace, alongside empathetic and sensuous femininity (Lewis, 2014). We also build on the work of Smith *et al.* (2019) who, in relation to Black women executives, posited 'agentic visibility' tactics described as 'strategies to gain visibility as credible leaders' (p. 1707), alongside Gatrell's (2013, 2014) work seeking to resist the marginalization of the maternal body in academia. We posit the role of 'agentic invisibility tactics' in relation to our mothering. Agentic invisibility tactics refer, rather than to the willing and visible merging of mothering and life, to the deliberate attempt to hide aspects of the self and life to gain credibility and meet the expectations of the neoliberal academy. We discuss what happens when it becomes impossible to effectively use these tactics, when we are forced to be visible.

Huopalaian and Satama (2019) suggest that within academia, a vision of the 'ideal' mother and the 'ideal' academic exists, each demanding complete devotion.

In our work, we reflect on the contributions of Donald Winnicott to highlight how the pandemic allowed us to begin to accept ourselves as 'good enough' (Winnicott, 1971), through discussion and visibility of each other, though this process is incomplete; it ebbs and flows and entails periods of self-doubt and pain. Acceptance connects well with feminist work concerning more caring academia, where 'care is often used to resist and redo oppressive worldings' (Plotnikof and Utoft, 2022, p. 1261). Following Hawk (2011), we incorporate self-care to reject the temptations of exploitative academia and resist self-destruction through excessive self-sacrifice.

Hay's (2022) work gives attention and legitimacy to the 'adequate', leaving room for nuance, complexity and shifting embodied identities. It is similarly essential to recognize the shame associated with our own sometimes pregnant, maternal, mothering and sexualized bodies and how this contributes to the taboo nature of these identities in society at large and at work (Gatrell, Cooper and Kossek, 2017). We commonly possess multiple images of our bodies concerning self and engage with these differently, centralizing some and shielding others (those that are taboo) from view. In this sense, we are never a completed project; we are only one in a process.

## The 'good enough' mother and the 'good enough' academic

Donald Winnicott is a founder of the 'object relations' tradition of psychotherapy. The influence of psychotherapeutic analysis/inquiry is well documented, particularly in relation to the Tavistock Institute and its relationship with the journal *Human Relations*, beginning in 1939. In several of his writings, he highlighted the relevance of his work beyond the parent-child dyad (Winnicott *et al.*, 1986). The works of Richards (1984), Alexander (2013) and Kellond (2019) are particularly helpful in noting the post-war relevance of Winnicott to welfare and industry. His thinking was considered in the adoption of the welfare state and in works on the 'politics of care' (Kellond, 2019). Richards (1984) captures his influence well here: 'the translation of war-time practices into wide-ranging civil objectives to reform capitalism by applying theoretical insights into the infantile dimension of adult psychology to practices in welfare and industry; in short to humanize capitalism according to psychoanalytic principles' (p. 13).

Within the business and management literature, Petriglieri has drawn from Winnicott's work on facilitative/safe 'holding' environments in the context of or-

ganizations. His work has considered the marketization of the public sector and new managerialism (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010, 2015). Building on these precedents, we use Winnicott's work to engage with conversations on the 'good enough'. Winnicott is known for his discussions of 'good enough mothering' (Winnicott, 1971). Nevertheless, we reject any suggestion that Winnicott's 'maternal' role should be carried out only by someone who identifies as a cis-woman. Rather, this role may be carried out by men (cis or not) or non-binary individuals. Nevertheless, we reflect on our experiences in this paper and discuss 'good enough mothering and academia'. Winnicott is notable for his insistence on the 'good enough' and his rejection of perfection as something belonging to illness (Winnicott, 1971).

'Good enough' mothering for Winnicott necessitates that there be no ego-boundary in the earliest stages of life (a baby and mother [or primary carer] are not then separate entities but rather one). 'Good enough' development requires this early ego-support within what is known as a facilitative environment. A facilitative environment involves 'adaptation, starting almost at 100 per cent and turning in graduated doses towards de-adaptation according to the new developments in the infant which are part of the gradual change towards independence' (Winnicott, 1963, p. 239). 'Good enough' mothering for these purposes begins with the mother being able to take care of the baby physically and emotionally so that the baby, at least at first, has all their needs met very quickly. This nurturance, and crucially merging with the mother, then naturally entails mistakes, and it is precisely these mistakes that are so valuable to health. After a period of co-existence or merging, the baby must experience frustration to begin viewing itself as a unit, a separate person capable of interacting with the world (Winnicott, 1963). Winnicott linked this necessary 'disillusionment' with progress towards healthy living. The value of Winnicott for us is twofold. Firstly, he emphasizes the importance of being 'good enough' and the essential nature of disillusionment for health. He tells us that being perfect is the road to ill health. Secondly, as Taylor (2011, p. 789) notes, dominant notions of well-being 'can fail to analyze the social and the relational nature of those determinants – they become abstractions of the social acting as a neutral backdrop to the individual agency'.

Winnicott helps us to place both the 'good enough' and the importance of working and social environments at the heart of a critique of the pressures we face as mothers and academics. It encourages us to view demands for perfection as unhealthy and deriving from poor environmental/social conditions. Additionally, it reminds us of the interwoven tapestry of our lives, of our bodies as a social phenomenon (Dale, 2001).

In drawing on Winnicott's notion of the 'good enough' and a deliberate conflation of understandings

of boundaries and merging between self and other, we seek to remind ourselves of our limitations and the beauty of our imperfections. We emphasize the connection with our bodies and acknowledge our weaknesses, not to overcome them, but to recognize them as an essential and legitimate part of our being. We embrace weakness or fault as of equal value to what is deemed 'excellent' or 'perfect'. 'That which is soft and yielding is the follower of life' (Lao Tzu, 76, in Lin, 2015: 153).

It is important to say here that we recognize the importance of ensuring that quality standards are met to benefit students and the communities our research touches. In a recent paper drawing on Winnicott, Edwards, Gatrell and Sutton (2024) propose a 'parentalist' ethic of care that seeks to delicately balance care and justice ethics in a school context. It encourages professionals and managers to work together to balance competing demands. This is not a case of calling for no standards, but rather a proposition to reconsider how high our expectations need be. We further acknowledge that attempts to level the playing field often fail. As Kasyanova *et al.* (2021, p. 430) note during a discussion of the extension of time to secure tenure at an American university owing to the pandemic, 'since the tenure clock extension is offered to all academics, it may result in more benefit to childless academics and academics who father rather than to academics who mother'. The pandemic made us more visible as 'mothering academics'; toddlers crawling into shot, crying babies on Zoom calls and nursery closures all rendered our mothering visible in ways it had not been before, despite being more physically distanced than ever from our colleagues. In this context, taking our preschool children to work pre-pandemic was almost impossible because it would have contravened health and safety policy, preventing us from allowing them to experience our workplaces. However, our homes became our new offices during the pandemic, and all the rules changed (Beech and Anseel, 2020). The interruptions we suffered due to working at home were rife. We have reflected on these interruptions, but it is important to say here that we do not wish to minimize them. Women (academic or not) suffered because of the pandemic in many ways, and, as we know, the number of journal articles submitted by women dropped (Fazackerley, 2020).

Nonetheless, this paper gives a glimpse of something to hold onto: visibility. In rendering us visible as mothering academics operating in times of strife, it led to a (sometimes begrudged) acceptance from ourselves and, in some cases, our colleagues and employers, that 'good enough' was good enough. For the first time, we were not always asked what we were aiming to do next or how we could improve our practice, but, for the most part, only that we did what was necessary as well as we could at the time. This argument marks a significant shift and

stands against the push for limitless potential (Costea, Crump and Amiridis, 2007). Moreover, our mistakes, though painful, were received more positively than they might have been during a different time, and we encountered the support of fellow mothering academics. We were more inclined to be open and supportive of each other. Our paper then draws out two key themes: (1) slicing and dicing – the tensions of visibility and invisibility; and (2) tentative acceptance of the 'good enough', and the corresponding knitting together of the body subject.

## Slicing and dicing – the tensions of visibility and invisibility

This paper speaks to the difficulties women face in the academy generally and more particularly during the lockdowns. It focuses on the specific challenges of the COVID-19 lockdowns, bringing the previously hidden lives of mothers sharply into focus by exposing what happened when the usual methods of support and concealment were taken away. In our former pre-pandemic lives, our motherhood could be concealed; we could drop our children off at nursery or preschool, perhaps with a grandparent, and all our work engagements thereafter could carry the impression that we were unencumbered by caring responsibilities. If we had a late appointment or a weekend event, we could 'buy-in' childcare support or rely on extended family. We could engage in agentic invisibility, quite deliberately removing aspects of our lives from view. By theorizing how our ability to engage in agentic invisibility during the pandemic was constrained, we draw attention to raising consciousness and disrupting the system favouring men (Mavin, Grandy and Williams, 2014). When our ability to masquerade as cis-heterosexual men in everything apart from our physicality disappeared, the veil fell. What is clearly emphasized is the vital importance of childcare support and the extreme pressure that arises in its absence. We have collectively reflected on how our research endeavours faltered, our promotion dreams faded and time evaporated as others advanced beyond us. Although pointed out during the pandemic, this disadvantage is not confined to it. Women's increased domestic labour generally is well known (Kasyanova *et al.*, 2021).

Our paper highlights the persistent guilt that plagues mothers, whatever they may be doing (Ashman *et al.*, 2022). The 'ideal' mother is always there for the children, always around to wipe the tears away, always at school drop off and pick up, and always ready with a freshly ironed school uniform. The ideal worker is, by significant contrast, never bothered by such tasks; they are focused, they start work early and finish late. Thus, 'mothers in academia are caught up in between the competing desires of excelling at ideal working and

mothering' (Ghosh and Chaudhuri, 2023, p. 155). Work is their life; it is their meaning, their reason for being. Thus, motherhood is conflicted with the notion of the ideal worker (Arifeen and Gatrell, 2020). The working mother, then, is always a messy construct that mirrors the chaotic nature of life with a child or children and an ever-expanding pile of crumpled washing. Maintaining any separation between our identities as mothers and workers has demanded that we anatomize ourselves, take a knife and separate essential aspects of ourselves from each other artificially (Dale, 2001). Indeed, Dale is instructive in reminding us of the 'pervasive influence of the Cartesian dualism between mind and body, which values the former, especially in the progress of knowledge, and denigrates the latter – The female category is cut out in the culture of dissection as a container of all that is Other to scientific and philosophical rationality: it is associated with the body, nature and emotion, as opposed to and divided from reason, science, culture, and the mind' (Dale, 2001, p. 162). In this context, then, it is hardly surprising that the body and mothering are alienated from our lives as academics, as well as from our academic work. We are not typically encouraged to be vulnerable in academia (Gaudet *et al.*, 2022). The violence done allows others to look only at those bits of us deemed appropriate in particular situations; we become pained but exquisite actors.

During the pandemic, we attempted to hide ourselves (and our children), in one way or another, to engage in agentic invisibility. More than just hiding our bodies and our children's bodies, we also tried to hide the inevitable emotions and visceral feelings that came from the impossible task of slicing off parts of ourselves and our children to create perfect academic images for others. This disfiguring is damaging, as seen in the tears and physical/mental exhaustion that many of us experience. However, though we often tried to hide that we were more visible, it was impossible not to be. Our tactics of agentic invisibility were restricted. In some ways, this unwelcome visibility played a part in knitting the body subject back together (Dale, 2001). The individualized and secretive nature of coping systems vanished – no more nursery, no more grandma to help – and was replaced by a need for openness that we gradually began to accept and that would previously have been avoided. In the years since the pandemic and, indeed, just an hour prior to the time of writing, one of the authors was announcing to a meeting of senior colleagues that an event will need to be rescheduled because that will be the day her son starts primary school. The call ended and she cried. There are some things we now say and some things that remain painful and private. There are no easy answers or feelings, but there is perhaps a little progress.

## Tentative acceptance of the 'good enough'

To deal with our conflicting roles, we crafted our presentation carefully. This is, of course, physical in its manifestation. Our paper emphasizes hiding children from view and the physical and emotional pain in such situations. We experienced exhaustion, crying, running and stumbling as we found ways to survive the days. We have been torn asunder not in thought or body but in the fluid relationship between the two, trying to do the impossible. But there is also a realism about what we can and cannot achieve at such a time of stress. For Winnicott, the body is central – or should we say that bodies in space are central – for Winnicott's work deals in physicality, materiality, imperfection and the spaces between things (Winnicott, 1971).

We are forced to lean into our interrelated, interdependent selves in these new spaces. Though we made vast efforts to preserve our segmented identities, this failed, as it was always fated to. We find that both the nurturing and protective functions of mothering experience frustrations, as they should (Winnicott, 1971). We cannot be perfect, and in our errors lie the potential or creative space (Winnicott, 1967b). In our vulnerability lies this imperfect paper about our flawed, human and natural state. Our productivity is derived from being simply 'good enough' and reflecting on our difficulties. This paper arises out of our comradeship with each other, our solidarity and our shared understanding. In our imperfections, we are exposed to the world's complex realities; we cannot be isolated, therefore this indicates some degree of health (Winnicott, 1963). The 'perfect' human would be an abomination from a dystopian novel; we must find beauty in the broken (Ridgway, Edwards and Oldridge, 2024). What facilitates us as 'good enough' then derives from our relationships with each other and the deepening of these throughout the pandemic. Together, we recreate our academic world (Winnicott, 1971), retaining a sense of control and a way of coping by blurring the boundaries between ourselves and those who support us (Winnicott, 1967a).

For all the worry and stress, we found each other through the pandemic, and though our troubles are not the same, and some have undoubtedly suffered more than others or in different ways, our solidarity has been melded in the fires of a pandemic, and it feels bullet-proof. Someone would always check how we were, how we were coping, someone who could handle hearing the truth that life was very hard. The things we did ourselves were much more helpful than any official help. We felt such strength through talking with colleagues with the same feelings of guilt and worry; we were not alone.

The surveilled home of COVID-19 drew in the nurturing and protective functions of our colleagues and

ourselves as we witnessed the pressures others face. It also exposed us to our limitations; and encouraged us to reframe and accept these. We all err; it is how we learn. Anyone who has watched their child topple multiple times in learning to take their first steps or ride a bike understands this. It is learning; it is natural and necessary. Our mistakes in academia can rewrite the narrative we are caught up within. Following Winnicott, there is a strong case for promoting the ‘good enough’ in mothering and work, not because *we* are weak, but because *we all* are, as this is the human condition (Winnicott, 1971). Skin and bone are imperfect; they wear with time, with the mountains we climb (real and metaphorical) and, in our case, with the children we carry. We are not isolated (Winnicott, 1963); we are profoundly affected by our circumstances and the socio-environmental conditions in which we exist. Perfection is not only unnatural, it is impossible. It is time we – and the academy – stopped pursuing it, and began collectively knitting together the body subject with the love and care it deserves for every fallible and vulnerable human that makes up our academic world.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored responses to COVID-19 and its effect on the (in)visibility of working mothers. We note the many disadvantages imposed upon women but seek to focus on the possibilities of a better future for all who belong to the academy. For all of the pandemic’s bleakness, virtual meetings with colleagues and toddlers forced working mothers to reconcile their identities. This is not to say, of course, that all reactions were supportive. We are all too aware of the many women and carers rendered more vulnerable by their colleagues’ and managers’ adverse reactions and unhelpful approaches. It feels odd to say that expectations were lowered during the pandemic; it suggests a lack of ability or ambition. Instead, it is better to say that expectations were sustainable. Future research could consider how universities may practically begin to address dominant narratives of excellence and move forward in an inclusive way. A linguistic turn in academia seems necessary if we are to move away from labelling anyone who does not fit a cis-male heterosexual ideal as somehow *less than* – less ambitious, less committed, less deserving.

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