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*Full Length Research Paper*

# Emotional Labor and the Helper Identity: Mothers of Children with Disabilities Who Work in Student Affairs

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**The field of student affairs is considered a helping profession as it requires the provision of assistance and support to others. Likewise, having a child with a disability and/or illness places a burden of help and support on caregivers in the home setting. Through a narrative portraiture lens, this qualitative study examines how women who work in student affairs and who have at least one child with an identified disability, describe emotional labor and strategies they utilize to navigate the aforementioned across work and home environments. Findings suggest that the women interviewed assume a helper identity at both work and in the home, which requires them to use emotional labor frequently in both arenas. For many women, the organizational culture of the workplace coupled with demands associated with parenting a child with a disability drives their need to mask, which ultimately influences overall satisfaction with work performance and home life. We provide higher educational leaders with practical and sustainable recommendations to transform organizational culture, policies, and practices that have the potential to reduce emotional labor for this population of employees.**

**Keywords:** emotional labor, helper identity, higher education, student affairs, mothers of children with disabilities

Women who work in student affairs, a helping profession, and who parent a child with a disability often experience competing work and family responsibilities. At times, this intersection of demands across settings incites emotional and mental labor and can lead to burnout, work-home life conflicts, and women either failing to advance in their careers or leaving their positions (Dean et al., 2022). This review of the literature provides a brief overview of this intersection, including definitions of terminology and the application of concepts to mothers of children with disabilities who are employed by university/college departments of student affairs, a population for whom a dearth of literature exists.

### Student Affairs as a Helping Profession

The caring and service aspects of the student affairs profession designate the field as a helping profession. Helping professions are those that are grounded in the provision of professionally qualified assistance and services to others (Starek, 2022). In the field of student affairs, employees provide students from varied backgrounds academic, social, and emotional support (Tapia-Fuselier, 2023). Being part of a helping profession, such as student affairs, often makes it difficult for employees to set personal limits and boundaries (Burke et al., 2016; Guthrie et al., 2005; Von Bergen & Bressler, 2019); with technologies that enable constant contact (e.g., mobile phones and computers), the demarcations between personal and professional realms continue to blur (Kossek, 2016). In particular, student affairs employees may find it challenging to attain professional/personal balance due to the round-the-clock nature of their work, their participation in the informal life of the college, and the demands associated with being a part of a helping profession across individual student and large group levels (Burke et al., 2016; Guthrie et al., 2005; Mullen et al., 2018). Moreover, recently, there has been an increase in the presence and severity of mental health issues on college campuses (Allen et al., 2024; Deshpande et al., 2024; McCarthy & Horwitz, 2025; Mullen et al., 2018). As a result, student affairs professionals are spending an exorbitant amount of time addressing the needs of distressed students (Lynch, 2022; Mullen et al., 2018; Reynolds, 2013). Literature suggests that students facing high levels of depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies, self-injurious behavior, posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse, and other serious mental health issues, as well as frequent engagement with highly involved parents, place increased demands on student affairs professionals (Elam et al., 2007; Kadison & DiGeronimo, 2004; Mullen et al., 2018; Precht & Olivier, 2023; Soet & Sevig, 2006).

Furthermore, there exists a body of research that suggests that student affairs professionals typically adopt a mindset and work ethic that involves little delegation of tasks, mentoring for all colleagues and students, infrequent use of the word no, and the belief that the concept of accomplishment is synonymous with exhaustion and fatigue (Burke et al., 2016; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Marshall et al., 2016; Raimondi, 2019). In fact, higher education administration consistently has placed among the most stressful occupations, which might impact the level of job satisfaction of student affairs professionals (NASPA, 2022). Managers within student affairs have reported higher levels of job stress and pressure compared to professionals within other higher education divisions (Marshall et al., 2016; Volkwein & Zhou, 2003; Walker et al., 2023).

**Women in Student Affairs Roles**

A primary purpose of the student affairs profession is to connect people who are in need with people who care (Tapia-Fuselier, 2023). Although the field of student affairs has become highly specialized with many functional areas, student affairs practitioners are first and foremost caretakers, educators, and helpers, and are expected to actively assist students with the emotional and academic demands of college life and to encourage their personal development (Creamer et al., 2001; Mullen et al., 2018; Tapia-Fuselier, 2023). Assuming a helper/caring role can at times be challenging for practitioners. Dealing with student's strong emotions, hearing their painful stories, and setting appropriate boundaries can make professionals who take on this helper role feel drained and emotionally overwhelmed (Reynolds, 2011). In addition, individuals can experience self-doubt, perfectionism, emotional exhaustion, and frequently take on too much responsibility for those they are helping (Corey & Corey, 1998; Martinez Hoy & Nguyen, 2020; Perez & Bettencourt, 2023); this can ultimately lead to poor job satisfaction, burnout, or departure from the field (Stoves, 2014).

Gender-role spillover theory suggests that gender-based expectations and behaviors in one area of life often carry over to other areas, creating workplace differences between women and men (Lin & Burgard, 2018). Oftentimes, women are perceived as caregivers in the home environment and this gender-role expectation can carry into the workplace, although it might be irrelevant or, even inappropriate, to specific job-related tasks (Lin & Burgard, 2018; Marshall & Taniguchi, 2012; Song & Wang, 2023). Despite the fact that the percentage of women in the workforce has increased over time (USA Facts, 2024), the ideas around caregiving and optimal worker norms have not changed substantially (Lin & Burgard, 2018; McKinney, 2024). Practices around hiring, pay, and promotion are often biased and lead to gender differences and increased work-life conflict, particularly for working mothers (Addison et al., 2014; Foley & Williamson, 2018; Heilman et al., 2023). The ideal worker norm is often characterized by constant devotion to work and can lead to an environment in which "think leader, think male" is reinforced, as working mothers often have competing responsibilities between home and work (Braun et al., 2017; Miller & Riley, 2022). Moreover, the societal expectation that women should be caring, giving, and communal can influence volunteerism (Babcock et al., 2017; Marshall & Taniguchi, 2012), or work without remuneration, both within and outside the workplace. These competing demands are often cited as barriers to women's career progression and representation, including within institutions of higher education, particularly in the highest leadership positions (Cobb et al., 2024; Kossek et al., 2020; Miller & Riley, 2022).

In a study conducted by Marshall et al. (2016) that focused specifically on women in student affairs roles, participants reported feeling that they do not experience balance between their personal and professional lives and, specifically, noted not having enough time to spend with family and friends due to the high demands of the profession. Additionally, 12% of the individuals sampled left the profession to stay at home to take care of their children. This specific finding from the study is especially important to note, given the long hours that some student affairs professionals work and the expectation that student affairs professionals must sacrifice personal time and put students' needs first (Marshall et al., 2016). This workplace environment can result in burnout, work-life conflicts, and, as denoted throughout the literature, female professionals leaving the field (Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Marshall et al., 2016), contributing to underrepresentation of women in senior positions (Miller & Riley, 2022). Calls to changes in this culture have long been voiced, yet have gone largely unheeded (Miller & Riley, 2022).

**The Ideal Worker and Emotional Labor**

The cultural norms of student affairs often align with the ideal worker notion (Nobbe & Manning, 1997; Marshall, 2021; Wilk, 2016). The idealized worker has minimal personal distractions such as family, health issues, or nonwork interests that could potentially detract from their organizational work (Acker, 1990; Williams et al., 2012). It is in the context of the ideal worker that emotional labor emerges. As a construct, emotional labor pertains to the process of managing feelings and emotional expressions within the workplace to conform to organizational expectations (Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020; Vial & Cowgill, 2022).

Studies have found gender differences in emotional labor in the workplace (Taylor et al., 2022). In many occupations that require care and nurturing, such as health care and social services, women outnumber men, except in positions of leadership (Boniol et al., 2019; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). These helping professions, which include student affairs divisions, often place higher emotional labor demands, intra- and interpersonal, on employees than other occupations due to secondary trauma; secondary trauma results from supporting others, physically, psychologically, and emotionally, and may manifest as decreased job performance and satisfaction, disconnection and social withdrawal, emotional exhaustion, and lowered self-esteem in helpers (Lynch & Glass, 2018; Stoves,

2014). Women, in particular, report more negative impacts of emotional labor on job performance and overall well-being than men. These differences might be attributable to occupational requirements, yet likely also reflect the greater complexity of women's emotional display rules (Brescoll, 2016; Vial & Cowgill, 2022). For example, women who display emotions that are inconsistent with feminine stereotypes (e.g., pride and anger) are often judged more harshly than their male counterparts who display the same emotions (Brescoll, 2016). This mismatch between experienced and expected emotions can lead to early burnout, detrimental effects on health outcomes, and work/family conflict (Taylor et al., 2022). However, it should be noted that emotional labor also is impacted by other individual factors, including affective traits, emotional expressivity, and emotional intelligence (Grandey & Melloy, 2017).

### Increased Challenges Associated with Having a Child with a Disability in the Home

Having a child with a disability in the home can compound these effects, as additional strain is placed on families (Cheng & Lai, 2023). Often, mothers–less frequently fathers–curtail work hours outside the home, take less demanding positions, request leaves, or abandon careers altogether to care for their children (National Alliance for Caregiving, 2009; Stabile & Allin, 2012). Research has suggested that as the severity of the childhood disability increases, the negative effects on maternal employment also increase, given time demands in attending to the child's medical needs, including monitoring the child's condition, scheduling therapies/appointments, providing in-home therapies, and scheduling medical treatments (Brown & Clark, 2017; Cheng & Lai, 2023; Fairfax et al., 2019). In addition, these parents often are responsible for advocating for their children across medical, social services, therapy, and school settings (Beighton & Wills, 2017; Cheng & Lai, 2023; DeRigne & Porterfield, 2010). A reduction in rank and/or working hours to care for a child with disabilities can impact a family's financial picture, affect the mother's own health and sense of well-being, and place a strain upon the marriage (Javalkar, 2017; Lee et al., 2015; Stabile & Allin, 2012). For the mother of a child with a disability who works in student affairs, these impacts may be magnified, as the care-taker role spans both environments.

### Purpose of the Study

Despite myriad research on emotional labor, including differences in experiences by gender, there exists a dearth of research examining how emotional labor impacts the work/family balance of women who have children with disabilities (McKinney, 2024). Because mothers, more often than fathers, assume care-taker roles for offspring (National Alliance for Caregiving, 2009; Stabile & Allin, 2012), it is important to examine how having a child with a disability impacts a woman's emotional labor, particularly in helping professions that also require care-taking. The impacts of the ideal work construct and emotional labor are likely magnified for women who have a child with a disability in the home, as they attempt to curtail or hide the related emotions and fatigue of caregiving. This qualitative study was designed to address the following research question: How do women who work in student affairs and have children with disabilities describe emotional labor within their family and work domains?

## Theoretical Framework

### Hochschild's Emotional Labor Framework

For this study, Arlie Hochschild's (1983) Emotional Labor framework was applied to understand how women who work in student affairs and have children with disabilities describe emotional work. Hochschild first coined the term emotional labor and defined it as managing one's emotions to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display (Hochschild, 1983). Current scholarship on emotional labor exemplifies how emotional labor is performed through surface acting, deep acting, and natural expression (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Cheung & Lun, 2015; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Grandey, 2000; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

#### *Surface Acting, Deep Acting, and Natural Expression*

Emotional regulation occurs through surface acting, deep acting, or natural expression. Surface acting involves modifying outward expressions—suppressing, faking, or amplifying emotions—to align with organizational expectations (Cheung & Lun, 2015; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Yanchus et al., 2010). For instance, a student affairs employee may feign a smile when interacting with students, parents, and faculty despite personal feelings (Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020). Deep acting, by contrast, entails adjusting one's thoughts to elicit genuine emotions (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2000; Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020). Instead of merely displaying happiness, an employee practicing deep acting might recall a positive memory to produce an authentic smile (Yanchus et al., 2010). These strategies are not mutually exclusive, as individuals often employ both to meet organizational emotional display rules (Nguyen & Stinglhamber, 2020). Lastly, natural expression occurs when outward emotions genuinely reflect internal feelings (Diefendorff et al., 2005), signifying authenticity.

#### *Emotional Work in Educational and Family Domains*

Emotional work refers to efforts aimed at improving others' well-being through empathy and support (England & Farkas, 1986). In educational settings, this includes listening to students' concerns, offering guidance, and demonstrating warmth (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006). Emotional work fosters caring relationships but is often invisible or undervalued (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

Although emotional labor research focuses on workplaces, it extends to family life (Zedeck, 1992). Just as professionals perform emotional labor, family members engage in tasks with emotional display expectations (Yanchus et al., 2010). Responsibilities such as childcare, household chores, and emotional support require constant regulation of emotions (Beehr et al., 1995). While family life can be rewarding, it can also be psychologically and physically draining, yet parents are

expected to exhibit care and support despite exhaustion (Yanchus et al., 2010).

Hochschild's (1983) framework can help to understand emotional expression's significance in both work and family domains (Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Salovey et al., 2000), highlighting the pervasive nature of emotional labor across professional and personal spheres.

## Methods

The qualitative methodology used in this study was narrative portraiture which depicts social phenomena through individual's stories of everyday life experiences (Riessman, 2008). It focuses on consciousness and the structure of those conscious experiences from a first-person point of view, allowing for a unique and in-depth experience into the subject's thoughts and emotions (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Through this lens, researchers are able to bridge the gap between individuals and society (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). Portraitures ultimately seek to blend art and science, bridging empiricism and aestheticism (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The five key components of portraiture are context, voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

This methodological approach was appropriate for this study because it minimized the common qualitative practice of privileging the researcher's interpretation and the potential for over-analysis of participants' narratives (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). Narrative portraiture reflects the position of the researcher; however, it aims to produce a product in which the participants are visible and undeniable (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). Another benefit to using this methodology was that it draws from a wide variety of phenomenological and narrative traditions and captures rich data that is often missed through other forms of data analysis. Narrative portraiture minimizes the conventional practice of privileging the researcher's interpretation and over analysis of participant's narratives (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020). While it still considers the standpoint of the researcher, this process works to ensure transparency in the process and present data in a clear and visible way (Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020).

### Sampling and Participants

The purposeful sampling strategy that was utilized was criterion sampling (Patton, 2015). Participants met three criteria: (a) be a full-time employee in student affairs, (b) identify as a mother, and (c) be the mother of at least one school aged child (6-17 years) who is diagnosed with at least one disability. Disability was defined utilizing a list provided by IDEA Partnership (2018) and the child's disability had to be diagnosed through either a doctor or in the child's educational setting. Participants came from 20 different higher education institutions across the United States, and worked in various functional areas within student affairs, in roles that ranged from entry level to mid-management. The majority of the participants worked in student affairs for 10 or more years and reported having one or two children with disabilities, whose ages ranged from 7- to 17-years of age.

### Data Collection

Data collection began with a demographic survey designed to identify participants that met the specific criteria noted above. The 21 individuals who met the sampling criteria participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). These interviews served as the primary method of data collection, lasted between 60-90 minutes, and were recorded via Zoom. The questions we asked our participants focused on how they define emotional labor and what it looks like within their work and family domains. Observation was also used as a method of data collection for this study, as it serves as a fundamental component of all qualitative inquiry, especially portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). Capturing the context is vital to this methodology as context is the best resource for interpreting the verbal communications and actions of individuals (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Throughout the interviews, we observed the participant's office and/or home as well as the participant's body language. Since the data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were also able to observe emotional work as it related to the work domain intersecting with the family domain.

### Data Analysis

In order to analyze the collected data we adopted an analytic tool developed by Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020) to aid us in developing narrative portraits. This can be found in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Analytic tool to aid in developing narrative portraits*

| Codes | Research Question | Key-words: What to look for |
|---|---|---|
| Characters | Who: Important characters; relationships between characters | Names (i.e. spouse, children, supervisor, institution, doctor), pronouns, "I" |
| Time | When: Situational context, sequence of story, experience during a particular time | Dates, years, months, days; utilizing words such as "after", "before", "when" |
| Space | Where: Geographical location; Cultural, political, social, or economic context | Macro-geography (cities, countries, continents), micro space (across the road, in the kitchen, at the work), virtual spaces (online, state of mind, an emotional space) |
| Key events | How/Why: Interactions between internal and external influences | Strong emotions surrounding event; link to important decision that is made; change in narrative after event |
| Phenomena of interest | How/Why: How is phenomena of interest narrated, conceptualized, experienced; Where is phenomena of interest located; Intersection of concepts and context. | Pre-identified themes of interest e.g. ecological perspective, identity, disability… |

*Note:* Adapted from Rodríguez-Dorans, E., & Jacobs, P. (2020). "Making Narrative Portraits: A Methodological Approach to Analysing Qualitative Data." International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 23(6), 611–623.

We began by detailing a descriptive account of what happened for each woman, where it happened, and with whom. We found that it was helpful to write out a holistic description before interpreting and explaining the data. This descriptive insight subsequently informed a deeper exploration of the data, which

ultimately allowed us to explore questions of why (Yin, 2014). It is through this strategy that we were able to provide a detailed description of emotional labor in both the work and family domains (the how) for mothers of children with disabilities who work in student affairs as well as the underlying reasons and influences (the why).

**Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure trustworthiness in this study, we examined the extent to which the study was credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was addressed through member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation. Transferability was established by utilizing thick and rich descriptions with sufficient detail so that the reader is able to obtain a clear picture of the procedures and findings of the research. Dependability was achieved through an inquiry audit as well as the establishment of an interview and documentation protocol. Lastly, audit trails, triangulation, and reflexivity were used to authenticate the confirmability of the study. Within the narrative approach, triangulation is not understood as a means to test for one single event or outcome, but rather the utilization of different data sources resembles the process of piecing together a puzzle (Maxwell, 2012; Rodríguez-Dorans & Jacobs, 2020).

## Findings

To ensure confidentiality, each participant was provided a pseudonym which was used to reference quotations reported in this section. Pseudonyms were also generated for the participant's child(ren) when needed. From the data, two major themes, each with subthemes emerged. The first major theme is "assuming the helper identity" with a subtheme focused on the emotional impact of the helper identity. The second major theme is "masking one's feelings" which has three subthemes: a) masking in the work domain, b) masking in the family domain, and c) the ability to be authentic. Each of these findings are described below.

**The Helper Identity**

The majority of participants in this study view being a helper in their personal and professional roles as an identity (the same way they would utilize other unique sets of characteristics such as race, gender etc.) to describe their sense of self. Eight participants reported that being a helper comes naturally and it just is "who they are". For example, Fran stated, "I've always been a helper, I've always been one to do things for other people. So, it kind of works for me." Elizabeth who is a director of housing stated, "I love what we do. It feels, you know, it feels natural. It feels like the right thing to do." Julia also discussed how being a helper comes naturally noting, "I think that I chose this profession because I am a helper by nature. I'm an empath, and I mean I got my master's degree in counseling. And so, you know, I feel like my natural inclination is to be a helper. And to kind of be in tune to what's going on with people." Participants frequently described their work in student affairs as part of their identity and expressed how their professional work was much more than a job and that they could not see themselves in another professional role. For example, Lauren who works as a sophomore success coach and early alert coordinator noted, "I can't imagine anything else. My kids have asked me before, if you're not doing this, what would you be doing? And I'm a social worker. I can't imagine myself not in a helping profession."

Although many women agreed that the student affairs profession is a helping profession that attracts those who are helpers by nature, some denoted how being a helper can be "all consuming" if one is not careful. Vicky noted, "It's a helping profession, it attracts helpers. And I think in some ways, that's both validating, to sort of be around the same people who are coming at work with the same framework or or [sic] mission, if you will, and also can become, if we're not careful, all consuming." Ashley agreed, stating that she believes that tasks at work are frequently added to her plate because "she'll just do it because she's a helper" and "gets things done".

> It's a slippery slope, because then it becomes more than sort of what I'm being compensated to do. And it's funny to me, and I don't hear this as much anymore, as earlier in my career. But you know, there's so much like, expectation, even amongst peers to give, give, give, because that's who we are as people. And then without a recognition or as much energy put into, I should be paid for that as we paid for my give give [sic] giving, like I gotta pay my bills. (Ashley)

For Mary, she enjoys being a helper, although she feels as though the "definition of being a helper keeps changing, and it's getting harder and harder." She believes that as each year passes it becomes more challenging to feel like she is "helping enough" particularly because she senses that student problems and concerns have shifted and changed drastically. Mary thinks that this leads to burnout and a feeling of being a failure. Sharon had similar thoughts as she shared that the "challenge is giving of yourself in a way that feeds your soul and doesn't empty you and leave you hollow."

For 18 women in this study, the helper identity also carried over into their motherhood role as many of them assumed the primary caretaking responsibilities for their children with disabilities. Helping in the family domain typically presented in the form of doing tasks for their children and family. Women described how they help by cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, helping children with their homework, or taking their children to after-school activities. In addition, these mothers were required to spend additional time beyond these obligations to help and care for their children with disabilities. They needed to regularly monitor their child's condition(s), schedule and/or provide therapies, as well as attend their child's multiple doctor appointments or treatments. For example, Marie described that one of the ways she is a "helper" is by reminding her daughter to take her medicine. In addition, she must "do a lot of coaching on executive functioning" with her daughter, something that she does not have to do with her younger child.

As for Ellie, she spends a great deal of time helping to create structure for her son who has Tourette syndrome, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Now that her son is 14, he strives to be more independent, and believes that he can handle all that he faces with no structure at all, but Ellie understands that he will not be successful without these supports in place. She spends an inordinate amount of time helping him to reflect on the importance of structure and how to maintain it within his daily schedule.

One of the most significant ways in which Julianna helps her daughter is by assisting her with managing her anxiety. She spends much of her time helping her daughter remember her coping mechanisms, which are imperative to her daughter's success.

Lastly, Judy's son is in second grade and not fully potty trained. As a result, she must help her son with his frequent accidents. She also noted that it takes a considerable amount of effort and time to ensure that her son is not exposed to anything that will make him sick both at home and at school.

### *Emotional Impact of the Helper Identity*

In this study, 20 women noted that there were rewards and/or consequences that resulted from assuming the helper identity. Both are discussed below.

**Rewards and Benefits**. Rewards and benefits are found within both their work and family domains. For example, students, staff, colleagues, spouses, children, family, friends, and community members all benefit in some way from the helping nature of these women. This study also suggests that these women personally benefit as well. Lora described how when her children first attended elementary school, no child with special needs was permitted in the school's before-care, aftercare, or summer programs. By the time her children left elementary school, there were numerous children with special needs in these programs. She successfully advocated for the inclusion of all students in these three programs, which resulted in Lora feeling a sense of pride. As an assistant dean of students, Julianna also felt "a lot of pride and accomplishment" whether it was through helping students, their family members, or other constituents on campus. She stated, "It feels good to be able to, you know, help people navigate something that they didn't know how to do."

**Consequences.** It was not uncommon for participants to also mention words like "emotional exhaustion" and "draining" when describing their experiences as a helper. Participants discussed frequently feeling emotionally taxed and drained within both their professional and motherhood roles. Jean stated:

> I also think that, you know, as a person who is a natural helper, you find yourself doing that in your personal life too. And, you know, there are times where you can feel completely drained of [it] all. Like, as a mom, you say sometimes, I've been touched out. I cared for everybody all day long. Nobody touched me, [because] I have to care for myself now. And I feel like it can be the same way with work. Today I cared for a lot of people, and then after work, I cared for my little people, cared for my friends, and I cared for my spouse, and sometimes, that can feel like a lot.

Elizabeth shared a similar sentiment stating, "I think there's an emotional exhaustion with having to be the advocator, the educator, the person who has to stay on top of it, all right?" For Sharon, she struggles trying to give all she can at work and still ensure she has enough to "give" at home at the end of the day. Sharon shared:

> The challenge, though, is giving of yourself in a way that feeds your soul and doesn't empty you and leave you hollow. And that has taken a couple of decades of figuring out how to do [that], so that when I am finished with my workday, I have a little something left to offer my family.

### Masking One's Feelings

Women in this study described times in which they altered their feelings and expressions within their work and home environments. Women described feeling one emotion but had compelling reasons to express a different emotion, or to "mask" their true emotions. There are three findings related to masking that are discussed below: toxic positivity in the work domain leading to masking, masking in the family domain, and the minimization of masking when one can be their authentic self.

### *Masking in the Work Domain*

Women discussed the need to alter or change their emotions more at work than at home, and for some women, masking at work was imperative. Masking at work was required when participants did not want their colleagues to adjust their expectations of what they believed the participant could accomplish. Masking also occurred when participants felt the need to cover up an insecurity or needed to create boundaries between work and family. It also occurred because participants were not permitted to be authentic within their place of employment due to toxic positivity in the work culture. For example, Brittany was unable to share her authentic emotions at work. Brittany described:

> When Ayden was diagnosed, I cried every morning on the way to work. Every morning I cried. A song would come on, a thought would be in my head, I would cry. [I would] pull into the parking lot. I never put makeup on until I got to the parking lot, because I had to fix myself. I would fix myself to go into work, and I put that mask on. I'd be positive, I'd be a go getter, and get shit done…So as soon as I put the makeup on, I stopped crying.

Brittany articulated that toxic positivity was part of their campus culture. It is expected that staff, particularly female staff, are positive, nurturing, and never provide negative feedback or complain. She stated that if she was not positive and did not fall

in line with the cultural expectations "you can really suffer professionally here." As a result, she masks frequently, always trying her hardest to smile and be positive. She said, "I fake it to make it." She continued and described a time when she was authentic with her emotions and wished she would have masked them instead.

> I'm the only woman on the leadership team right now and I feel like a token. When I get angry, I cry…I'm not crying because I'm sad, I'm crying because I'm angry. And I did that in front of my supervisor. I can never go back in time and take that away, and I wish I wouldn't have done that.

Brittany was not the only participant who described needing to "fake it". Juliana said that stating "I'm fine" is part of the mindset in the area she lives. "You say, I'm fine, even when you're incredibly not fine." She said that regardless of what is going on in her life, she has to "stuff it deep" and put on her "fine mask." Not being allowed to be authentic in the workplace was "super tiring," "overwhelming," and made women feel "angry that they were not allowed to have feelings."

Similarly, Lauren also noted that while she was employed at her prior institution, she was not permitted to demonstrate she was having an "off day". She stated:

> I feel like I've literally had to wear a mask…I feel like prior to this working environment, I did have to pretend that everything was fine. I'm good, it's good, everything's fine, I got this. That I wasn't allowed to show that I was having an off day. That expectation to perform trumped my personal feelings, and even my mental health. I don't think mental health was really valued at other institutions, the way it seems to be valued here.

Kenzie felt similarly stating:

> And I just remember crying in my office, like I just got the diagnosis for Frank. And I was really upset…When I worked in the Division of Student Affairs, it, [showing your emotions], was showing weakness. [Some] perceived it as weakness and emotion was not welcomed. You just had to have your stuff together all the time…

For Elizabeth, she learned early to "have a game face" and how to "morph that game face when people don't' care what's going on". She went on and described how she masks most of the time when she is "interfacing with folks who either are so far removed from child rearing or have never been in that experience themselves".

Sharon described a time when one of her child's doctors relocated, and the stress associated with trying to find a new nephrologist. She described how she needed to mask at work during this time period.

> I can't walk into every meeting and be like, you know, well, our pediatric nephrologist decided to take a job in Chicago, so we're looking for a new one. Which is like the whole house of cards comes tumbling down, you know, but that can't be the only thing I talk about, right? You know, you need to be a professional person in this professional place.

***Masking in the Family Domain***

Masking at home was deemed necessary when the participants needed to prioritize their children over their authentic emotions; they attempted not to exacerbate the child's disability, or utilized masking as a mechanism to detach from work and draw a boundary between their two roles. Lora described that when she has a difficult day at work, she tries to ensure her children are not aware of her feelings and she works to "overcome whatever it is." She stated that by the time she gets home from work and picks up her children, they want her to focus on their lives, so that is what she prioritizes over her authentic emotions. She masks the feelings from her difficult day to tend to their needs, listen to their concerns, and respond accordingly. Jean agreed with Lora stating that she masks "100% at home" for her kids' sake. She noted "it's not always great for them to see a mom who's fallen apart".

Similarly, Elizabeth acknowledges that she masks at home as well. She emotionally masks her stress and anxiety because her daughter lives with enough worry, particularly as it relates to her disabilities. She believes that if she did not mask in front of her daughter, she could inadvertently make things more difficult for her daughter.

Participants noted that there was an emotional impact that occurred as a result of masking in the family domain. For example, Juliana described how it can be overwhelming to have something at work that is frustrating her and have to "pull the I'm fine mask on at home." She stated, "It's a heavy load for people to stuff feelings in and not be authentic about where they're truly at." She acknowledged that she may not "need" to mask at home as much as she does, but she chooses to mask there so that there are no negative impacts on her children or on her plans for the evening.

Nettie discussed a time in which there was a student death on campus. The student who passed away was someone who worked for her for a period of time and as a result she knew the student personally. The experience was incredibly taxing on her. She explained, "You know, in the sense of like, could you have done something more? You know, how can you help." She described how working in student conduct, she tries really hard to detach from her work, but that sometimes to do so is incredibly difficult when she knows the student personally. She concluded by talking about how she would put on a mask, pretending to be "fine", when she went home. "And so, when you have to go home and be like, oh, everything's fine, you know?"

***Ability to be Authentic***

When women were able to be their authentic self, masking was not required. Women seemed to be more authentic at work when vulnerability was encouraged and cultivated throughout the institutional culture. This was particularly true when their direct supervisors encouraged employees to be authentic in the workplace. Lauren described moments in which she was supported and not judged when she cried in front of her supervisor. She explained how there is a "genuine invitation to come to the table, come as you are" and that there is nothing that her supervisor has not seen or heard from her or one of her colleagues. Lauren shared:

> And that's really special, because he doesn't expect me to take work home with me. But he expects me to bring my whole self to the job. And it's unique and beautiful…He invites us to be who we are. He wants us to be authentic, and I feel like that has created a culture where we can be real with each other, and we can allow our students to be real with us. It's this authenticity in the workplace I've never experienced elsewhere.

Juliana described how her current leadership encourages and applauds employee's ability to be authentic and vulnerable with their colleagues, being transparent with "where you're at and what you're feeling." Juliana acknowledged that under different leadership she was not permitted to be her authentic self and "what a difference" being authentic makes for her and her experience. Her current leadership is "very grace based" and "applauds one's ability to be vulnerable with their colleagues."

Fran discussed how she is very close with one of her colleagues and she frequently goes to this person to vent or talk. She went on to discuss how being vulnerable at work is helpful for her and noted that she can see how being vulnerable could be a challenge for individuals who are trying to be promoted.

> You know, having somebody there that does get it really helps. And they kind of know the chaos that I have going on at home, and they're very supportive. But I feel like it's a little bit different for me, because I'm not currently trying to move up or trying to do it, you know, I mean, but I can see where it becomes extremely important. If you're trying to, you know, work your way up, you don't want to seem like a liability, or you don't want to seem like you don't have it together.

Vicky finds being authentic about being a mother of a child with disabilities helpful, particularly as she navigates spaces with her students and coworkers. She noted, "It humanizes me. But it also gives them a context in which, you know, if I have an opinion on something, you know, this is where it's coming from."

Being authentic also occurred in the family domain for women in this study. Brianna stated that she can be her authentic self at home and does not mask while at home. "I'm pretty authentic at home. Like, they get what they get…I think my kiddos, my husband would agree with that." When the pandemic hit and she was transitioning to work from home, she struggled significantly with anxiety. This was a difficult time for her but throughout, she was transparent with her family about what she was feeling and what she was experiencing.

Jean feels as though being authentic at home is a necessity for her children. She noted:

> It's good for my kids to see authenticity. Sometimes I feel sad. Sometimes I feel anxious. Sometimes I feel angry. I want my kids to recognize and understand that those emotions are real and human, and they can have them too.

**Limitation and Delimitation**

Limitations were found in the following areas: the participant's marital status, race, the child's disability, and the student affairs functional area within which the women worked. In this study, only three of the 21 participants identified as non-White. Two women identified as separated, two as divorced, and one widowed, while all of the others noted they were married or in a domestic partnership. In addition, the type of disability the child has, or the severity of the disability was not accounted for in this study. Women also had different titles, differing levels of work responsibility, and came from different functional areas within student affairs. While the findings of this study may not be generalizable to all mothers of children with disabilities who work in student affairs, it can still be beneficial to researchers as they identify new areas of inquiry regarding this underrepresented population and can also be valuable to student affairs leaders as they work to better support and retain these women.

## Discussion and Implications for Practice

The findings of our study help to answer the question: How do women who work in student affairs and have children with disabilities describe emotional labor within their family and work domains? This question is answered through the following discussion on how the "helper identity" can lead to increased emotional labor, and how organizations can reduce emotional labor through developing employer-employee relationships and encouraging authenticity in the workplace.

The mothers in this study describe emotional labor within their dual domains as a "helper identity," considering it as integral as other salient identities such as race, gender, or religion. This identity has both internal and external aspects. Not only is it how the participant sees themselves, but it is also how they are seen by those in both their work and family domains.

As we consider the intersectionality of the helper identity in both domains, we find that these women may be more vulnerable to increased amounts of emotional labor compared to other employees, which in turn, can result in an increased chance that they do not advance in the profession or leave the field altogether. Current literature reveals that the ideal worker construct is pervasive in higher education and student affairs work requires intense emotional labor (Sallee, 2021).

Furthermore, care for children with disabilities is still primarily a mother's responsibility, resulting in increased stress and health problems for these mothers (Murphy et al., 2007; Siman-Tov & Kaniel, 2011). It is suggested that supervisors support mothers of children with disabilities in declining service beyond contractual obligations during times of intense emotional labor across home and work settings.

In addition, we found that toxic positivity within an organizational culture often creates the need for mothers of children with disabilities who work in student affairs to alter their authentic emotions. Our findings expand current literature by calling attention to the interconnectedness of emotional labor and toxic positivity in higher education work environments. A study by Roemer and Harris (2018) suggested that toxic positivity can impede workplace performance and contribute to lowered levels of employee well-being. A work environment that fails to acknowledge the well-being of employees often results in reduced job satisfaction, which, in turn, can impact commitment and performance negatively (Roemer & Harris, 2018). When we consider the participants in our study, masking, or engaging in surface and deep acting, was reported in response to the expectation of positivity within their organizations. This need to hide one's authentic self can diminish the sense of well-being and potentially inhibit productivity and advancement in the workplace. Conversely, Roemer and Harris (2018) suggested that organizations that promote healthy levels of well-being through job and personal resources foster self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience among employees (Roemer & Harris, 2018).

Consistent with prior research (Reis et al., 2017), our findings underscore the need for workplace authenticity, achievable through individualized understanding of employees. We propose that colleges prioritize authenticity and relationship-building in employee recruitment and retention, particularly for mothers of children with disabilities. Supervisors play a critical role in fostering authenticity by practicing active and empathetic listening (Kelly et al., 2023). Active listening requires attentiveness to verbal and nonverbal cues while suspending personal biases for accurate interpretation. Empathetic listening, which involves paraphrasing and nonverbal affirmations, enhances understanding and trust. Managerial training in these skills can cultivate a workplace culture that supports authenticity (Kelly et al., 2023).

## Recommendations for Future Research

Mothers of children with disabilities who work in student affairs remain an under-researched population, and we urge scholars to address this gap. While existing literature explores how various identity groups—including LGBTQ professionals (Kortegast, 2021), professionals of color (Boss & Bravo, 2021), class dynamics (Ardoin, 2021), women (Marshall et al., 2016), and fathers (Sallee et al., 2021)—navigate student affairs, mothers of children with disabilities are largely overlooked. This study skims the surface of understanding the impact of emotional labor on these women. Future studies should examine how women navigate the emotional labor they experience in both domains, emotional labor based on severity of child's disability, as well as the specific functional area of student affairs.

We also recognize that women in this study were confined to the dualistic roles of mother and professional. We recommend future studies take into consideration other potentially challenging roles, such as the role of advocate, or any activities outside of work for which the participant assumes responsibility. Bringing awareness to the advocate role and additional nonwork roles and responsibilities may provide a more holistic understanding of emotional labor on this population.

Lastly, although this study focused solely on mothers, we do not intend to suggest that other groups, such as fathers or faculty with children with disabilities, are unaffected by ideal worker norms or emotional labor. Studies should examine the experiences of these populations and any shared or individual support that may be needed for these employees to successfully manage emotional labor.

## Conclusion

We call higher educational leaders to assume responsibility for engaging in practical and sustainable changes to organizational culture, policies, and practice in an effort to reduce emotional labor for mothers of children with disabilities who work in student affairs. While it is challenging enough for a woman to advance in the gendered organization of higher education, when we add the layer of motherhood and the additional layer of being a mother of a child with disabilities, it becomes clearer than ever that appropriate supports of this population are needed if we intend to see these women retained or advance into senior administrative positions. Support might consist of trainings on effective listening, relationship development, development of knowledge pertaining to parenting children with disabilities and the associated grief, instituting physical and virtual spaces for individuals to be authentic, and assisting women in reducing responsibilities outside of contractual obligations when necessary. Empathy and authenticity in the workplace can help to reshape the concept of the ideal worker and result in women who mother children with disabilities advancing in their careers.

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