New Ways of Being and Knowing: Women Ph.D. Students Exploring Embodiment through Feminist Phenomenological Photovoice

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New Ways of Being and Knowing:
Women Ph.D. Students Exploring Embodiment through
Feminist Phenomenological Photovoice

A Dissertation Presented

by

ANNA FOX REILLY

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University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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New Ways of Being and Knowing: 
Women Ph.D. Students Exploring Embodiment through 
Feminist Phenomenological Photovoice

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DEDICATION

For my wonderful husband, my soon-to-arrive daughter, and the strong women who shared their photographs and stories for this project.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for the guidance they have provided for this project and my time as a student in the College of Education. Through this project and my research, I have encountered many horror stories about advisors and committee members. I am fortunate to never have been able to relate to those experiences because of the team dynamic we were able to establish. Sally Campbell Galman has inspired me with her expertise in arts-based research and the passion with which she shares her knowledge. Zeke Kimball is unfailingly kind and an incredibly gifted scholar. Kate Hudson has been my advisor since I was a master’s student, and her support has kept me going since I came to UMass in 2014. I am happy to call her my chair, my supervisor, and my friend.

The College of Education community has been my family now for seven years. It has been my home away from home. I have missed running into colleagues and friends in the hallway during the pandemic while we all worked remotely. Thank you for making school and work so enjoyable for all these years, and I hope to remain part of this community for years to come.

To my project participants, I will forever be grateful for the roles you played in this project and in my life on professional and personal levels. I was touched by the vulnerability and creativity you shared with me throughout data collection. The lessons I learned, especially about perspective and mindfulness, have changed me for the better.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Sean Reilly. There was never a time when I was a Ph.D. student without Sean by my side. He has taught me so much about bravery, perseverance, generosity, and the true measure of intelligence beyond academic degrees. It is a privilege to see our shared name on this dissertation and my diploma.
Being a Ph.D. student is a privilege in many ways, and it is not easy. Mind-body dualist patterns of thought and behavior within academia ignore the embodied experiences of being a woman Ph.D. student. Mental health, sexual harassment, family planning, and social relationships are among the challenges that women are often expected to handle on their own or are ignored altogether. With 20 women Ph.D. student participants, this feminist phenomenological photovoice project answers the questions: *For those who self-identify as women, what is the essence of the embodied Ph.D. experience? To what extent does the experience of being in a Ph.D. program support women’s ability to live a healthy (mind and body) lifestyle?*

Participants completed two interviews, took photographs to illustrate their embodied experiences, and contributed photographs and artist statements for an online gallery. Data support three key findings. First, Ph.D. programs are not designed to support the embodied wellness of women. In these spaces, women Ph.D. students are either just students and brains with no bodies or they are just women with bodies and no brains. Second, it is important to address these inadequacies because there is a strong connection between women’s bodies and
minds and their academic work. Finally, despite existing in spaces that are not necessarily
designed to support their needs, women demonstrate strength and creativity when they step
away from mind-body dualism towards embodiment. Findings from this study, including the
online gallery, can bring these issues to key stakeholders, such as faculty members and
administrators, who can create positive change in academic culture as well as encouragement
and community to other women Ph.D. students in the midst of their academic journeys.
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CHAPTER 1

NEW WAYS OF BEING AND KNOWING:
WOMEN PH.DS. EXPLORING EMBODIMENT THROUGH
FEMINIST PHENOMENOLOGICAL PHOTOVOICE

Introduction

Despite decades of continued efforts to improve access and equity, academia continues to normalize and privilege the experiences of white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle- to upper-middle class, able-bodied men (Bailyn, 2003; Bendix Petersen, 2014; Miller-Bernal, 2011; Misra et al., 2011; Motha & Varghese, 2018). For one, earning a doctorate was originally designed as an apprenticeship that would lead towards a tenure-track position at a university, a lifestyle emphasizing dedication to one’s academic pursuits over all else (Jenkins, 2015; Sallee, 2012; Vaughn, 1998). Many academic hopefuls who do not fit this mold find themselves excluded from graduate education or the academic profession altogether (Ayala, 2019). Those who pursue post-secondary education and academic employment must contend with rigid standards of behavior and success (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; FemPositive, 2018; Fox, 2020; Minkara et al., 2015; Vaccaro, 2012). Some end up leaving academia, many times not entirely by choice (Northcut, 2017; Smith et al., 2006).

Conversations around and resulting interventions aimed at addressing inequality often over-simplify the problem to an issue of numbers. In other words, if schools admit and hire a more diverse pool of students, faculty, and administrators, equality will follow. Although broadening access is key to re-envisioning higher education, increasing diversity alone does little to end sexism, racism, heterosexism, ableism, and a number of other oppressive systems that are embedded within the academic way of life (Fox, 2021; Glazer-Raymo, 2011). People of
all genders, races, socio-economic statuses, abilities, and sexual orientations with different lifestyles are continuing to access higher education in increasing numbers (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Touchton et al., 2008), yet there is ample evidence that they have vastly disparate experiences.

Being a doctoral student is a privilege in so many ways, and it is not easy. There is a growing body of literature on the challenges that Ph.D. students face and the ways in which students holding non-dominant identities may experience these challenges and more in different ways than their peers. For example, graduate school can be an expensive endeavor that places financial constraints on students (June, 2014). The average doctoral degree graduate has between $98,200 to $186,600 in student loan balances including loans for previous degrees (NCES, 2018). Students fortunate enough to have assistantships or funding during school earn an average of $33,700 per year, though these rates vary by field, international status, and other factors (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Beyond paying for tuition, fees, books, and living expenses, success during and after doctoral studies often necessitates travel to conferences, purchasing a business-professional wardrobe, and research-related costs, all of which require funding that is often scarce (Jenks, 2018). While these requirements may be difficult for many doctoral students, graduate school becomes a financial burden if not impossibility for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those with other family members to support, and those who do not have a financial safety net. Attention to the staggeringly high rates of food and housing insecurity among graduate students has resulted in an increase in campus-based food pantries among other financial and basic-needs policies and programs (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Unions have become more common among graduate students, increasing protections for fair wages and other working conditions (Julius & Gumport, 2003; Lafer, 2003; Rhoads & Rhoades, 2005). These
positive steps are evidence that understanding and making these experiences known to wider audiences can effect change in the right direction.

Women face challenges specific to their gender identities in Ph.D. programs (Bank, 2011). Even though women now hold the highest gender representation among doctoral students (Okahana & Zhou, 2018), gender-based discrimination is still rampant. Being a woman is not inherently incompatible with membership in the academy, yet throughout Western history, women’s relationships to education and learning have been limited, precarious, questioned, and problematized (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015). Many of these beliefs stem from the idea that men are superior to women within a gender binary, bolstered by reliance on patriarchal dualism that privileges the mind above the body (Bordo, 2003b; López-Ibor et al., 2011). This system of thought has had a direct impact on how gender is conceptualized and valued within academia in the United States and, subsequently, doctoral education. Few studies aimed at comparing graduate student experiences based on gender move beyond the man/woman binary, making a full picture of gender-based discrimination nearly impossible.

Representation of women beyond doctoral programs alone is evidence that simply increasing the number of women applicants accepted will not address the leaky pipeline for women in academia. The number of women present drastically drops off the further one moves up the academic ranks (Glazer-Raymo, 2011). Despite earning the most doctoral degrees, most women land in non-tenure track faculty positions as lecturers or adjuncts, in alt-ac positions, or outside of academia altogether. Women hold only 36.1% of all full professorships, and of all women faculty fewer than one in 10 women have reached full professor (Finkelstein et al., 2016). Although there is nothing inherently wrong with earning a Ph.D. and taking a non-tenure track position, these career paths can have negative stigmas among certain academic circles and
offer heavy workloads and lower pay (Purcell, 2007). Training and networking for these positions during graduate school is also lacking since many program designs assume a research-intensive, tenure-track position to be every student’s goal (Gumport, 2016; Larson, 2019; Pettit, 2019; Wood, 2019).

Women must also juggle multiple competing roles while pursuing a doctorate. Ph.D. students occupy unique positions in the academic ecosystem. They are simultaneously participating in professional and academic settings, trying to earn formal membership, and discerning whether they want to be there in the first place (Gardner & Willey, 2018; Gonsalves, 2014; Nadelson et al., 2017; Wedemeyer-Strombel, 2019a). In addition to balancing the competing roles of student and professional, women must also contend with the societal expectations of femininity versus what it means to be a serious scholar (Drago et al., 2005). Western, patriarchal conceptions of femininity have specific implications for how women are expected to operate as students and, theoretically, once they become faculty members (Manthey, 2017). If the ideal academic is someone who devotes all his time and energy to work, women who take time to put on makeup, style their hair, and wear jewelry are assumed to be less competent and perhaps have ulterior motives (Gonsalves, 2014). Academics usually adhere to professional dress codes, favoring modest cuts, colors, and prints, reinforcing the notion that dress and appearance can distract from learning (Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

Showing emotion is another feminine display that women Ph.D. students must navigate. Graduate school is an emotional endeavor. To commit to a terminal degree necessitates passion for and emotion invested in one’s field (Gill, 2015). Completing a program, publishing work, and landing a position post-graduation can feel immensely fulfilling and empowering, yet the highs of doctoral education are not achieved without lows. High demands for publication and
few tenure-track positions available upon graduation make rejection a constant reality of doctoral education and academic life beyond (Larson, 2019; Pettit, 2019; Poster, 2005; Wood, 2019). Crying or showing other signs of distress feed into the stereotype that women are emotionally unstable and unfit for rigorous academic work despite growing evidence that graduate students of all genders are experiencing a mental health crisis (Evans et al., 2018; Flaherty, 2018b; Jaschik, 2019; Kafka, 2019). Being too competitive or cold violates society's expectations for women, but being too passive or warm often means being pigeon-holed in positions offering few benefits in the academic rewards system. Women are more likely to contribute to a welcoming departmental culture through such actions as bringing food to meetings and offering emotional support to students and colleagues (Fox, 2020; Motha & Varghese, 2018; Woodham Burge, 2011). While these efforts are invaluable, they are rarely if ever considered for evaluation or promotion purposes (Misra et al., 2011; Woodham Burge, 2011).

Motherhood is another construct that is often placed in opposition to serious scholarship. Higher education is notorious for its unfriendly climate for parents (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Mason et al., 2009; Sallee, 2014; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). More university hiring packages now include offers for parental leave to entice new faculty, but many faculty do not use these programs. Some are simply unaware of these benefits while others choose not to take leave because of the implications time away from work has for one’s career (Drago et al., 2005). For women who plan to have children, graduate school and the tenure track often coincide with prime child-bearing years (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Time to degree for a Ph.D. student in the United States varies by field, but averages rest around six years (National Science Foundation, 2018). Many women Ph.D. students have their own stories to share about
the difficulties of balancing schoolwork with pregnancy or motherhood, and programmatic changes to support their needs have been slow to come (Bresonis McKee, 2019; Fiorini, 2019; Woodham Burge, 2011; Zhang, 2018). Some students report spending up to 75 hours per week on their research and studies, leaving little time for family or other responsibilities (Martinez et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2009). As a result, some women choose to delay having children, decide not to have children, or choose non-tenure track career pathways (Fox, 2020; Mason et al., 2009). Even women with no plans to have children experience the phenomenon of motherhood in academia in other ways (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). Students are inclined to treat women instructors and advisors like mothers in a way that differs from their interactions with men in the same positions (Ford, 2011). The mere fact that many women can get pregnant is enough of a deterrent for many scholars of all genders to avoid working with them (Fox, 2020).

The power dynamics present in the academic hierarchy also pose specific challenges for women. Many women and people of all identities prefer models of collaboration and teamwork, yet competition, independence, and criticism characterize many doctoral programs, particularly those in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields (Misra et al., 2011; Northcut, 2017; Woodham Burge, 2011). Advancing through graduate studies means relying upon an often-political hierarchy of faculty with varying degrees of power and gatekeeping responsibilities (Glance et al., 2012; Pannapacker, 1998; Posselt, 2016). Doctoral students often characterize their time in school as lonely and isolating, especially once they have advanced past coursework and spend less time around colleagues (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Janta et al., 2014; Tang, 2019). Completing a doctoral degree can sometimes mean surviving years of toxic power dynamics between faculty and students (Kerlin, 1995; Punyanunt-Carter & Wrench, 2008; Weidman et al., 2001). At times, women must endure sexual harassment and assault with few
resources to help in order to navigate the politics of their programs (Flaherty, 2019; McClintock, 2018; Paludi, 2011). People of all genders can experience sexual harassment or assault, yet the majority of victims and survivors continue to be women (Fedina et al., 2018; Turchik, 2012).

Even research practices tend to favor men and masculine values (Bailey, 2011). Limited options for existence in academia are intertwined with outdated and sexist notions of rigorous inquiry (Motha & Varghese, 2018). For example, publishing in top-tier academic journals remains a marker of success for faculty and Ph.D. students (Levecque et al., 2017). A preference remains in many social science fields, higher education being no exception, for large quantitative datasets and statistical analysis (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Kelly & Kortegast, 2018; Wells et al., 2015). With shrinking job prospects post-graduation, there is immense pressure for Ph.D. students to conform to the present norms if they hope to publish enough for other faculty to consider their applications during job searches (Evans et al., 2018; Gumport, 2016), so the current structures offer few institutionalized rewards for those who operate on the margins (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2018; Diep, 2019; Motha & Varghese, 2018). Though they offer their own benefits, these methods are limited in many ways and alone cannot offer us a holistic picture of the human experience (Kelly & Kortegast, 2018). Grounding research within feminist and other critical paradigms while pulling from other cultural traditions outside of Western, patriarchal, rationalism can only enhance our methodologies and the knowledge social scientists produce.

Limited conceptions of femininity or other forms of gender expression invalidate many people’s embodied experiences in academia regardless of gender identity (Leigh, 2018). For example, feminine speech patterns carry the stigma of ditziness or insecurity, and advisors or other mentors may discourage graduate students of all genders to adopt a different tone in order
to convey a more serious academic image (Fox, 2020; Grollman, 2016). Normative conceptions of gender and gender expressions vary by field, geography, age, and many other factors, but many graduate students feel pressure to conform to these standards in order to gain acceptance into the academic profession.

One reason why these disparities continue to exist is because we have failed to give enough attention to the embodied experiences of doctoral education. People live their lives and learn about themselves through their bodies (Merriam et al., 2007). Embodiment considers knowledge production to be a synthesis of the kinesthetic, sensory, affective, and spiritual elements of existence rather than reducing it to a purely cognitive function. Many other cultures value embodiment as a way of understanding a person’s life and the meaning she makes of it (Cruz, 2001; DeVault, 1999; Leigh, 2018; Lorde, 1989; Merriam et al., 2007). Ignoring embodiment perpetuates ethnocentrism in higher education and invalidates the lived experiences of many individuals (Leigh, 2018; Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019). Rather than acknowledge the richness that diverse, embodied human existence can bring to a community, academic culture still clings to its exclusive, dualist roots. All members of the academic community deserve a healthier, more equitable environment.

Graduate school is full of ups and downs, yet far too often the stories we hear about success are characterized by students hardening themselves against the system (Wedemeyer-Strombel, 2019a). Conversations about the difficulties of doctoral studies leave little room to explore the benefits, either potential or existing, that graduate students can experience beyond the degree and credentials for a tenure-track position. When they surface, these stories are often colored with an “ends justify the means” mentality. Earning the degree was the goal in and of itself regardless of what individuals had to endure to get there.
New Ph.D. students and faculty entering the academy desire more balance and satisfaction with work and personal lives than previous generations (Mason et al., 2009; Quinn, 2011; Quinn et al., 2007; Sallee, 2014). Doctoral life is sometimes treated as an apprenticeship for the professoriate (Jenkins, 2015; Vaughn, 1998), though this is neither accurate nor appropriate. Doctoral work and a Ph.D. do not automatically lead to a tenure-track position, and there are many Ph.D. hopefuls who do not want or cannot have this career path (Fox, 2020; Mason et al., 2009). Changes in funding structures alone make the vast cohorts of Ph.D. hopefuls trained for disappearing tenure-track positions vulnerable to under- or unemployment while carrying heavy debt burdens (Gumport, 2016; Jenkins, 2015). Challenges to doctoral education and future faculty extend beyond the disappearing availability of jobs into the embodied experiences and ultimately quality of life for those participating in such a troubling system. Research on faculty well-being gives Ph.D. students few reasons to believe conditions will change if they are able to secure a tenure-track position (Mason et al., 2009). Current options for existing within academia are often scripts more fitting for the supposed ideal academic who represents social realities no longer appropriate for the changing demographics and values of the academy (Bailyn, 2003; Bendix Petersen, 2014; Mountz, 2016; Sallee, 2012). These challenges could mean troubling times ahead. Doctoral programs need to account for the many meanings that earning a Ph.D. can take for someone, including the benefits, challenges, and grey area in between.

Women Ph.D. students, especially those who navigate their way to the end of their programs, can and do report positive experiences alongside their struggles (Fox, 2020 & 2021; Sterk Barrett, 2019; Tang, 2019). Positive memories include time spent with supportive colleagues and faculty, earning their place among scholars they admire in fields about which they care greatly, and the opportunity to prove themselves capable of a tremendously difficult
feat (Carter-Veale et al., 2016; Fox, 2020 & 2021; Gammel & Rutstein-Riley, 2016). These accomplishments do not often come without immense personal sacrifice. They survived their programs despite everything they went through along the way. Not only is this rationale for doctoral education a waste of what can be a positively transformative experience, it excludes those whose values systems and identities differ. Producing knowledge, training the next generation of scholars, and advancing our fields of study are activities in which a diverse collection of people can and should be able to partake. Despite a strong reputation internationally, the current models for graduate education and the academic profession in the United States are no longer sustainable (Altbach, 2016; Larson, 2019). An advanced degree should necessitate hard work and dedication, but not at the expense of one’s ability to lead a healthy, well-rounded, and fulfilling life. Academics need new ways of being, and they should take leads from women and those who occupy intersecting identities experiencing oppression on multiple levels (Crenshaw, 1991; Motha & Varghese, 2018).

These issues have numerous implications for the future of the academic profession, but what does that mean for women Ph.D. students who embody this reality on a day-to-day basis? So many women feel as though they become stronger despite so much of what they go through in graduate school. Imagine what it would be like for students to feel as if they became stronger because of graduate school. Not because of the relationships they build with the people who help them through. Not because of the satisfaction they get from pouring their hearts and souls into their work. Not because of the knowledge that their contributions can make the world a better place. But because of graduate school itself.

Through this project, I propose centering embodiment both in graduate education and, consequently, throughout the academic values system. I co-investigated my research questions
with other women Ph.D. students, though findings will ring true in some ways with academics of all genders and ranks.

**Research Questions**

Studying the embodied experience of being a woman Ph.D. student necessitates a thoughtful methodological approach. Explored further in the methods section, this project used feminist phenomenological photovoice methodologies to explore the embodied experience of being a woman Ph.D. student. In particular, I examined their experiences through several constructs 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, and 3) health and wellness.

Together, these directions for inquiry support to the questions:

1) *For those who self-identify as women, what is the essence of the embodied Ph.D. experience?*

   a. *How do women understand the influence of dress and appearance in the Ph.D. and broader academic experiences?*

   b. *How do women understand the influence of reproduction and motherhood in the Ph.D. and broader academic experiences?*

   c. *How do women understand the influence of health and wellness in the Ph.D. and broader academic experiences?*

2) *To what extent does the experience of being in a Ph.D. program support women’s ability to live a healthy (mind and body) lifestyle?*

It is important to clarify that this project is not a phenomenological study on the essence of Ph.D. womanhood. While phenomenology is concerned with discerning the essence of a phenomenon, the phenomenon of study is not Ph.D. womanhood. Feminist phenomenology acknowledges the multiple femininities that exist within the essence of womanhood (Cohen,
2010). I do not wish to create a new model for a singular ideal woman Ph.D. student to serve as a foil to the ideal man. My goal with this project, rather, was to give voice to the essential embodied experience of graduate school according to women.
CHAPTER 2
SIGNIFICANCE: NEW WAYS OF BEING, NEW WAYS OF KNOWING

Introduction

My first aim is to elevate the embodied experience of doctoral work by acknowledging within a formalized, academic platform that there is an embodied experience. Academics are more than just brains, yet much of our environment demands we treat ourselves and each other as such. Traits, values, and behaviors that detract from productivity as scholars, such as a desire for a balanced work schedule and family life, can lead others to view women as weaker or less deserving of membership among the academic elite (Adams, 2015; Bailyn, 2003). A cerebral-only existence is not only an unsustainable model, its Western and patriarchal roots create numerous barriers to full participation for those whose values systems honor attention to the whole person (Bordo, 2003b). This project contributes to the disruption of the current values system perpetuating the oppression of women and other marginalized members of the academy by honoring alternative ways of being.

Participation in this project offered women an opportunity to document and analyze their graduate experiences in new ways, creating the potential for reflective consciousness (Latz, 2012a). To be involved in a photovoice project, participants should have some degree of interest in the topic at hand, including creating change to better the lives of their community (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). Still, many participants have likely neither given such focused attention to the question at hand nor attempted reflection through photography. Self-authorship, an important aspect of the collegiate experience, necessitates attention to one’s own internal values and foundations (Baxter Magolda, 2001). This project was a chance for women to
pause and make meaning of the Ph.D. process in a significant way and perhaps open them up to new levels of motivation to persevere through their academic journeys (Latz, 2012a).

Participants also report enjoying being involved in studies utilizing photo elicitation methods, providing another positive benefit (Branch & Latz, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997).

I employed Amanda Latz’s (2012) reflective consciousness approach to photovoice rather than the more traditional Wang and Burris (1997) goal of raising critical consciousness and affecting policy change. There are many ethical considerations related to promises for policy change resulting from photovoice studies, and researchers emphasizing participatory action above all else rarely document the policy changes that result from their projects (Johnston, 2016; Latz, 2017). It is my hope that findings from this project contribute to change in academic culture through policy change and more. However, I am more concerned with contributing to the quiet yet steadily growing conversations about embodied graduate school while providing participants an opportunity to voice their experiences through their individual lenses. A high demand for commitment to policy change can be a participation barrier for doctoral students who have demanding schedules or who have safety concerns regarding confronting oppression in what they perceive to be an already precarious environment.

Equally important is validating and sharing the embodied experience of being a woman Ph.D. student among women Ph.D. students themselves. Graduate school is often described as an isolating experience (Janta et al., 2014). As students progress further into their academic programs and individual research, they have fewer opportunities for interacting with each other. When they do, sharing experiences outside of what is considered to reflect the ideal academic can be perceived as a sign of weakness or unsuitability for academic life (Motha & Varghese, 2018). Providing women with a space to come together, either anonymously online or in person,
to connect over shared triumphs and concerns can be empowering. It normalizes, validates, and provides support for what can otherwise be internalized as personal shortcomings.

Beyond the benefits of sharing experiences among research participants, women Ph.D. students who also interact with our findings, and myself, this project is an opportunity for faculty and administrators to reacquaint themselves with the experience of graduate school. It provides them with an intimate look at the graduate experience as it is now, perhaps changed or unfamiliar. This project can contribute to the redesign of graduate education, centering embodiment rather than relegating it to the margins. Without examination of our current realities, stakeholders are in danger of stamping out the most creative and beautiful gifts the members of these communities have to offer, if not losing these members altogether. Graduate school can be a positive transformation rather than a feat one must survive or a sentence to endure.

This project also serves as a means of recognizing alternative research paradigms in higher education beyond what is widely accepted in our field. To this day, studies using quantitative methods are published in top tier higher education journals at a higher rate than qualitative methods (Kelly & Kortegast, 2018; Wells et al., 2015). Certain qualitative methods have gained more recognition within niche specialties, yet the methods best suited for studying questions of embodiment remain at the margins (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Woo, 2018). To address my research questions, I employ a feminist phenomenological framework with elements of photovoice. Other scholars have employed phenomenology (Onwuegbuzie et al., 1997; Rossiter, 1999; Shepherd & Nelson, 2012), feminist research (Fraser & Michell, 2015; Heinrich, 2000), and photovoice (Latz, 2012b & 2015; Mulder & Dull, 2014) when studying graduate students, but this is the first project combining all three methods in higher education. Using photography as a primary medium for gathering and analyzing data opens findings from this
project up to non-academic populations. The average person is far more likely to engage with an image on a website or hanging on a wall than they are to read an academic paper or dissertation (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Harper & Howard, 2019). Images alone do pose accessibility issues for those who rely upon verbal rather than visual means of communication, but photovoice paired with in-depth interviews and photo captions offers an inclusive opportunity for a larger audience to engage with study findings.

Other higher education scholars have begun important conversations about the embodied experience of graduate school. Many of these studies, however, are limited to single accounts documented through autoethnography or other self-reflective methods (Day, 2010; Heinrich, 2000; Manthey, 2017; Zhang, 2018), single-field studies (Jokinen & Caretta, 2016; Ong, 2005), non-peer reviewed anecdotes (Samardzic, 2019; Vitale, 2016; Wedemeyer-Strombel, 2018, 2019a & 2019b; Zeiger, 2019), or further divided into other identities or experiences (Bartos & Ives, 2019; Grabarek & Cooper, 2008; Ong, 2005). These findings occupy an important place in what has been a long and arduous process of making visible and changing the biggest barriers for women graduate students. However, they come with their limitations in the context of higher education research. Autoethnographic studies, particularly those related to identity, are not well-received in the top-tier higher education journals (Wells et al., 2015). By expanding the participant pool both in number and in scope, findings from this project elevate the issue of embodiment in a format more widely recognized in higher education studies. Furthermore, my use of phenomenology as one of my primary frameworks and methodologies involves similar self-reflection on the part of participants and researchers used in both phenomenology and autoethnography (Gill, 2015). My methods do not invalidate the use of autoethnography,
anecdote, or other methods of sharing embodied graduate school. Rather, they add nuance to and continue a much-needed conversation on a different platform.

Finally, this project is one of great personal significance. As an in-group member who has felt invested in improving the lived experiences for other women Ph.D. students, I can identify with much of the literature and the resulting findings from this project. Much of my previous research activities have also focused on what it means to be a woman Ph.D. student in various academic contexts (Fox, 2020 & 2021). Findings from previous studies, conversations with colleagues, and my own reflections on embodiment compelled me to dig deeper into how women’s bodies and minds fit into or clash with current notions of value and success in academia. Since beginning my program in 2016, I have gone through significant mental and physical changes including being diagnosed with anxiety and depression and, most recently, becoming pregnant with my first child. I have learned so much about myself through my support systems both within and external to my Ph.D. program, but I continue to draw the most strength and inspiration from the women I encounter through my research.

**Project Overview**

The aim of this project was to explore the embodied experience of women Ph.D. students and the extent to which their current environments support embodied wellness. It has been my intention to highlight the ways in which the connections between the body, mind, and academic self are intertwined in contrast to the current ways in which mind-body dualism is at the center of graduate education and academic culture. I also wanted to uplift women Ph.D. students for the ways in which they incorporate embodiment into their journeys despite the lack of current support. Additionally, I used feminist phenomenological photovoice to explore this topic through somewhat non-traditional methods. Choices around methods and methodology reflect
my intent to advocate for feminist, arts-based research that acknowledges the importance of embodied knowledge within higher education research.

Chapter Two provides an outline for the frameworks and literature supporting this project. Embodiment is at the center of this project’s frameworks and intended goals. I have detailed the relationships between embodiment, feminist phenomenology, and arts-based research as they pertain to the goals of this project. I also provide examples of existing literature that support my three main constructs: dress and appearance, motherhood and reproduction, and health and wellness. These constructs for women’s embodied experiences are not limited to those in Ph.D. programs, but they do have specific implications within this context.

Following the literature, Chapter Three offers an exploration of the methodologies and methods that shaped this project. Here, I further unpack the use of feminist phenomenology and photovoice shaping the project design. There is a step-by-step explanation of how I recruited participants, structured both rounds of interviews, created the online gallery, and analyzed data. I have also provided a table with limited information about each participant as well as a narrative description providing more detail about the overall group of 20 participants.

Within Chapter Four, I represent co-collected and analyzed data as findings. I advance three main arguments. First, Ph.D. programs are not designed to support the embodied wellness of women. In these spaces, women Ph.D. students are either just students and brains with no bodies, or they are just women with bodies and no brains. Second, it is important to address these inadequacies because there is a strong connection between women’s bodies, minds, and their academic work. Finally, despite existing in spaces that are not necessarily designed to support their needs, women demonstrate strength and creativity when they step away from mind-body dualism towards embodiment. There are several visual representations of data to
serve as guideposts throughout the findings. I have also included many photographs that women in this project took as part of data collection to accompany their quotes and my analyses.

The formal written portion of this project concludes with Chapter Five, a discussion of findings and directions for future research. This section includes implications for practice for faculty, implications for programs and institutions, and implications for women Ph.D. students. I also provide implications for research based on my experience using feminist phenomenological photovoice to explore questions of embodiment with women Ph.D. students. I recommend several directions for further research including expanding participant qualifications to other institutions, faculty, and students of all genders. Though this project has a finite and measured written conclusion, it is my sincerest hope that its impact will continue to be embodied within the participants, the audience, and the changes that may result from the dedication of all involved.

**Glossary of Key Terms**

*Arts-Based Inquiry* - "A set of *methodological tools* used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined” (Leavy, 2015, p.3).

*Embodiment* - subjectivity of the individual and lived experience, holistic approach to knowing ourselves and our environments (kinesthetic, sensory, affective, and spiritual) (Merriam et al., 2007).

*Feminist research* - Broad collection of research with shared objectives of bettering conditions for women and eliminating gender-based oppression, making visible those experiences which are normally invisible, and reimagining power dynamics within research
relationships (DeVault, 1999).

*Participatory action research (PAR)* - Approach to research which provides participants with the choice to be more involved in various stages of the process as co-researchers, usually community-based with an aim at effecting policy change, departs from power dynamics of most social science (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017).

*Ph.D. student* - Participants for this study are all pursuing either a Doctorate of Philosophy or a combination of a master’s degree with a Doctorate of Philosophy. Some literature used to support this project refers to graduate students more broadly rather than just those pursuing a Doctorate of Philosophy.

*Phenomenology* - The study of embodiment, seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon or lived experience (Alcoff, 2000; Seidman, 2013; Weiss, 2018).

*Photovoice* - Both a form of participatory action research and arts-based research, a methodology in which participants are invited to document and reflect upon various aspects of their lives through photography and then to provide narrative accounts to accompany the meaning they make of these photographs and reflections, approach to research and policy change which situates participants as co-researchers and experts on their lives (Latz, 2017).

*Woman* - one gender identity among many possibilities, refers to gender rather than birth-assigned sex. Participants in this project self-identify as women (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

**Conceptual Frameworks and Literature**

Conceptual frameworks help support the logic behind and execution of a research project (Latz, 2017; Rallis & Rossman, 2012). Embodiment is the central theme for this project around which all other frameworks are oriented. The feminist paradigm, phenomenology, and arts-based
inquiry all support my exploration of women’s embodied experiences in Ph.D. programs throughout this project. Here, I also offer a synthesis of literature on embodiment within women’s academic identities as well as what literature exists on women’s experiences in Ph.D. programs. The central constructs through which I analyze literature on women’s Ph.D. experiences are 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, and 3) health and wellness. For each construct, I offer a contextualized definition, its connections to embodiment and gender, and examples of these intersections within academic settings for women.

**Embodiment as Central Framework**

Embodiment is the central framework supporting the research methodologies and the content of this project. Theories of embodiment support the notion that all humans are mind, body, and spirit (Merriam et al., 2007). None of these elements takes precedence over any other. This lack of hierarchy contradicts many Western philosophies, including mind-body dualism in which the mind is considered superior to the body (Bordo, 2003b; Kieser, 2017; López-Ibor et al., 2011; Merchant, 2006, 2008; Merriam et al., 2007). As a result, attention to embodiment within Western-dominant cultures, such as higher education in the United States, has been relatively lacking. Fortunately, there has been growing interest in recent years in how embodiment can improve our lives (Merriam et al., 2007). Understanding embodiment is key to making sense of the self (Haynes, 2008). Within embodiment, the lived body is a subject who comes to know the world through bodily perception rather than as an object, machine, or specimen to be examined.

While there are cultures in which embodiment is a central value, academia is not such an environment (Bordo, 2003b; Merriam et al., 2007). One aim of this project is to bring into relief the tension that exists between the embodied experience of being a woman and academia’s
oppression and marginalization of non-normative bodies. Following a greater exploration of embodiment, I offer further context for how and why academic culture as we still experience it to this day is structured in opposition to embodiment. I then offer some possible outcomes for integrating embodiment within academic culture based on a synthesis of literature.

**Embodied Knowledge**

Bodies and their senses are central to how humans interact with environments and gather information (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Merriam et al., 2007; Vacchelli, 2018). In other words, bodies are rich sources of knowledge production. There are four elements of embodied learning and knowing: 1) kinesthetic actions and movements; 2) sensory perceptions such as smell, touch, sight, taste, and sound; 3) affective emotions and feelings; and 4) spiritual synthesis or meaning-making that takes place when making sense of the intersections of the first three (Merriam et al., 2007). Many Western cultures treat knowledge production as a strictly cognitive activity, ignoring the vast amounts of information people receive from their bodies. For instance, a panic attack, a gut instinct, or the feeling of emotional exhaustion are often physically manifested sources of knowledge that minds alone may not be able to comprehend fully. Allowing space for embodied knowledge can also help find connections in unlikely places between ideas or experiences that seem unrelated (Merriam et al., 2007).

Early social scientists tended to refer to a universal or generic body that they claimed held truths for all humans, yet understandings of this body were male-, Euro-, and other dominant identity-centric in nature (Bergoffen, 2000; Freedman & Stoddard Holmes, 2003; Vacchelli, 2018). Reinterpretations of who and what is included in discussions of embodiment open new possibilities for embodied knowledge.
Embodiment and Gender

Feminists have long been concerned with the ways in which embodied knowledge is situated within social contexts (Bordo, 2003b; Cruz, 2001; Lorde, 1989; Merriam et al., 2007). The theory of acts is an explanation of the ways in which people create and shape their social realities through language, gesture, and other symbolic interactions (Butler, 1988). Nuanced explorations of embodiment take into consideration other socially constructed identities, such as race and gender, and the meanings ascribed to these bodies (Bordo, 2003a; Butler, 1989; Cruz, 2001; Lorde, 1989). Gender, like many other social identities, is in many ways a collection of performances that adhere to or diverge from socially agreed upon (though often disputed) norms (Butler, 1988). In this sense, gender is not a stable social identity across time and geography, or even how an individual understands and enacts their own gender. It is a pattern of repeated and stylized acts.

Embodiment and Phenomenology

Phenomenology, later unpacked as an applied methodology, is also central to the framework of this study. In many ways, phenomenology, and in particular feminist phenomenology, is the study of embodiment (Haynes, 2008; Merriam et al., 2007; Shabot & Landry, 2018). Briefly, phenomenology is concerned with exploring the essence of all things (Salamon, 2018). From a phenomenological standpoint, a body has three primary tenets: 1) innate structure, 2) basic general skills, and 3) acquired cultural skills (Dreyfus, 1996; Merleau-Ponty, 2002). Essence is the way in which all three aspects interact in the surrounding world. Innate structure refers to the physical properties of a body, such as arms, legs, a beating heart, or a functioning brain. Basic general skills are those within the capacities of our bodies which we learn as a natural response to coping with our immediate environment, such as walking, bending,
and reaching. Humans acquire cultural skills through interacting with socially-constructed expectations. For example, a cultural skill might be learning how to drive in a culture where cars are necessary for transportation. It is not a skill that all humans acquire by virtue of being alive, but instead it is specific to a time and place and carries unique significance. Modern science and considerations for natural human variation, or what some refer to as impairments or disabilities, challenge our conceptions of the essence of a human (Giorgi, 2005; Mladenov, 2016). If someone loses their ability to walk or was never able to walk in the first place, that does not mean that she is not a human or does not possess a human body.

**Embodiment and the Academy**

Despite the potential for connection, health, joy, creativity, and empowerment, embodiment and embodied knowledge are not central values within many cultures, academia being one of them (Bordo, 2003b; Leigh, 2018). Within such cultures, there is often an assumed normative or neutral body which is anything but neutral (Butler, 1989; Freedman & Stoddard Holmes, 2003). The body is a socially-constructed phenomenon that is influenced by various social and cultural forces (Butler, 1989; Cruz, 2001; Merriam et al., 2007). In academic settings, there are various gender roles inscribed upon and enacted by the individuals who participate in these spaces (Bendix Petersen, 2014; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Transgressing these norms can have serious consequences.

Academia is a complex network of overlapping cultures and subcultures dependent upon functional area, geography, institutional type, organizational level, time, member composition, and many other variables (Becher & Trowler, 2001). Despite the wide variety of governing values, there are some defining characteristics present across most of academia. These characteristics have deep, historical roots in Western culture. They are not specific to academia.
In fact, these philosophies and worldviews are infused into much of Western civilization and the global reaches of its imperialism (Motha & Varghese, 2018).

Historically, ideal faculty members and Ph.D. students have been white, middle- to upper-middle class, heterosexual, able-bodied, men who are either single or have a partner at home to care for the house and family (Bailyn, 2003; Bendix Petersen, 2014; Messner, 2000). Any bodies who do not fit these traits and behaviors are then subject to discrimination. Examples of overt and direct discrimination might include policies forbidding people with certain identities from applying for positions or using derogatory terms. Indirect and more subtle forms of discrimination might include a lack of policies or services to support a need specific to a certain group. For instance, a lack of gender inclusive bathrooms in an academic building would be a form of indirect discrimination against anyone with a gender identity other than cis-man or cis-woman (Singh et al., 2013). Other more hard-to-detect forms of discrimination might include encouraging all students to adopt the behaviors or appearances of a dominant gender, social class, race, or other identity. For instance, students and faculty of color may receive advice from colleagues about the potentially negative implications of limiting their topics of study to those concerned with race or racism because of the perceived threats these research agendas pose to Whiteness (Diep, 2019; Motha & Varghese, 2018). These conflicts leave many academics wondering how to make sense of their roles versus their own sense of self.

Beyond the basic needs of the assumed normative body, academic culture has not given much consideration to embodiment. This dynamic is due in part to the prevalence of mind-body dualism within Western culture. Dualists argue that the mind and body are separate, and the mind is superior to the body (Alcoff, 2000; López-Ibor et al., 2011). Frequently, dualist philosophies are also intertwined with a binary view of gender. Man is associated with the mind,
and woman is associated with the body (Alcoff, 2000; Bordo, 2003b; Merchant, 2006 & 2008). Not only do many dualist philosophers only recognize the two genders of man and woman within the myriad of possible gender identities (Merchant, 2006), they also contend that women are men’s natural subordinates (Alcoff, 2000; Bordo, 2003b; Kieser, 2017; Merchant, 2006 & 2008).

Women are not the only social identity within academia subject to discrimination for transgressing bodily norms, yet they do experience circumstances unique to their gender (Bank, 2011). Each in his own way, influential thinkers throughout history have used such belief systems as mind-body dualism, patriarchy, and rationalism to undermine women’s access to and value within academic settings. Greek philosopher, Plato (2015), believed that men and women were so different in intellect and accomplishment that friendship between the two genders would be impossible. Many Catholic theologians believed that women should be excluded from the priesthood because the mere presence of a woman’s body would result in impurity of mind and distract men (Bordo, 2003b). St. Thomas Aquinas (2017) claimed to use reason and faith to prove men’s natural authority over women, stating that a woman’s weaker physiology and passive role in procreation was evidence of God’s intention (Kieser, 2017). Mechanistic scientists also believed in men’s natural dominance over women. Sir Francis Bacon was an advocate of both mind-body dualism and a woman’s body as a metaphor for the natural world (Merchant, 2006 & 2008). He believed that man could use technology, science, and the rational mind to control nature and extract secrets from her bosom or womb. Mechanistic interpretations of mind-body dualism, patriarchy, and domination are hard-wired into modern Western science as well as our conceptions of academic identity. Due to the lasting influence that these
philosophies have had on our Western conceptions of knowledge, academic environments in our Western context are plagued with gender bias and anti-embodiment sentiments.

Graduate school has never been an easy undertaking, and current graduate students lead more complex lives than those in previous generations (Haynes et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2006). Existing literature in addition to the lack of literature on women graduate students reflects anti-embodiment notions in both methodology and content. Higher education research has not been immune to the influences of patriarchy, mind-body dualism, and rationalism. Women’s accounts of embodied graduate study are few and far between, and those that do exist are typically autoethnography or other self-reports published in books, edited volumes, and non-higher education journals (Ayala, 2019; Bryant & Jaworski, 2015; Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Fatima, 2017; Kannen, 2013; Manthey, 2017; Northcut, 2017; Tang, 2019). Phenomenology includes gathering life stories from participants around a certain subject (Seidman, 2013), therefore broader examinations of gender within academic spaces helps to contextualize the embodied graduate student experience.

**Embodied Academic Environment for Girls and Women**

Academic identity can be a fluid concept with many meanings, but for many within the academic profession it is a combination of who you are as a consumer and producer of knowledge within your academic context (Quigley, 2011; White & Lowenthal, 2010). Our modern conceptions of academic identity are still greatly influenced by philosophers, theologians, and scientists who believed in mind-body dualism and men’s innate superiority over women. As a result, women in academic spaces often learn to distrust both their bodies and their minds. Having a woman’s body is considered a liability to success in the academic profession. Impossible productivity standards around research and publications make caretaking, pregnancy,
and motherhood difficult given the expectations placed on the roles of women and scholars (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Hancock et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2009). Women who do not plan to have children are still subjected to stereotypes that women are less intellectually competent than men and, therefore, less valuable within academic departments beyond their contributions to service work (Gonsalves, 2014; Misra et al., 2011). Though sexual assault is often about power and control, women’s bodies and sexually desirous appearances are often attributed as reasons for victimization (Bordo, 1997). These beliefs have harmful implications for women’s academic identity development, personal safety, and life choices.

Gender socialization and oppression for women in academic settings begins as soon as they enter school (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Hilliard & Liben, 2010). Many people can remember activities or schoolyard games where teachers sorted classmates into the restrictive boy/girl gender binary. Boys were supposed to be good at math, science, and physical education, while girls should be better at language arts and social sciences (Flessati & Jamieson, 1991; Robnett, 2016; Satina et al., 1998; Stephanou, 2008). Differences in performance, interest, and self-confidence by gender only increase as students continue throughout their academic years (Colley & Comber, 2003; Neathery, 1997).

Much of the gender socialization that takes place in academic settings has implications for sexuality lasting beyond childhood, as well (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Our society, which clings frequently to Puritanical roots, often treats sexuality as a private affair, especially in academic settings (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). However, compulsory heterosexuality (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Rich, 1976) is embedded within U.S. school systems. For girls and eventually women, this dynamic means learning gender through the presumed lens of the heterosexual man, including how to dress and mannerisms. Sexual health curriculums are limited to the biological
functions of heterosexual intercourse, laced with implications for how girls and boys supposedly
differ in their sexual drives and levels of subjectivity (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Morris-Roberts, 2004).
Dress codes and the ways in which teachers and administrators enforce them bolster the notion
that all boys are sexually attracted to girls, and all girls are responsible for covering their bodies
and acting in ways that do not distract boys from their learning (Pomerantz, 2008).

Schools are not the only locations for these learned patterns of behavior and beliefs, yet
this setting plays an important role in shaping how women relate to their minds, bodies, gender,
and academic identities (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Messages about gender, sexuality, and what
it means to be a good student can contradict each other, making establishing a strong sense of
self difficult. Three constructs influencing girls’ and women’s sense of embodiment in academic
spaces are 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, and 3) health and wellness.

**Dress and Appearance**

Dress and appearance are distinct yet overlapping categorizations for people’s bodies and
adornments (Roach-Higgins & Eichner, 1992). Dress refers to “a long list of possible direct
modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as
well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories, and other categories of items added
to the body as supplements” (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992, p. 1). Dress is a non-verbal means
of communicating identity (Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).
Dress differs from appearance in that it does not include features of a body without clothing or
dress, such as body shape, color, and expressions communicated through body language and
expression. For example, people with visual impairments can perceive dress because it extends
beyond the sense of sight into other senses.
Roach-Higgins and Eichner (1992) choose the term dress over other terms for its complexity and value-free nature. Clothing, for instance, can have an ethical connotation because clothing is most frequently meant to cover. A lack of covering or clothing implies certain social values depending on the context, such as immodesty (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). In other environments, what some consider too much clothing, can have other implications. For instance, compulsory heterosexuality for women in a Western context can mean discrimination for women or others who identify as conservative and choose to cover their heads, their chests, their legs, or other parts of their bodies (Bordo, 2003b). Body size and shape also factor into appearance and how audiences perceive our dress. Larger bodies, older bodies, or those that do not fit into the image of the ideal heterosexual, Western woman experience discrimination in ways that their younger, thinner counterparts do not (Bordo, 2003b; Cruz, 2001; Freedman & Stoddard Holmes, 2003). Onlookers may consider a knee-length skirt and a button-down shirt appropriate professional dress for one woman but not another depending on her age, status, and how the clothing fits or covers her body (Kiefer, 2018; Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019).

Most cultures have standards for beauty in relation to dress and appearance (Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019). These standards are dependent upon the contextualized understandings of gender and other identities such as race, age, social class, sexual orientation, occupation, and religion (Clarke & Turner, 2007; Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Ford, 2011; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Laberge & Straka, 2005). There is often an inclination for members of a community to adhere to what they understand to be the appropriate dress and appearance standards by altering their bodies, clothing, and related behaviors (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019). These standards are often so well-ingrained within our societies that we assume they are naturally or innately tied to identities like gender (Ford, 2011).
Assumptions about dress and appearance can affect people of all gender identities, but there is far more attention directed at the ways in which this phenomenon plays out for women (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). Women engage in body management physically and behaviorally through their choices around dress, appearance, and the actions they take to negotiate their bodies through their daily environments (Ford, 2011). Dress and appearance can simultaneously function as a form of social control and as a form of self-expression and empowerment for women (Haynes, 2008). Often, women do not have control over how others perceive their choices around dress and appearance. For instance, large breasts can serve as cultural signifiers for a woman’s reproductive and nurturing capacities in relation to breastfeeding or as evidence of questionable sexual morals depending on context and other factors (Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019).

Dress codes, either codified or assumed, can function as a mechanism for appearance management, especially when adhering to the desires of the dominant culture (Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019). Dress codes can exist in any number of contexts as codified documents, as unspoken agreements manifested in practice, or a combination of both. Professional, academic, religious, and other social contexts have their own standards for dress and appearance that change over time and communicate specific values. For example, nurses used to wear white caps, dresses, and tights to symbolize their purity, cleanliness, and feminine subservience to male doctors (Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019). Nowadays, nurses - no longer exclusively women - wear scrubs because they are more comfortable and make it easier to perform daily job duties. Consequences for women who transgress expectations for dress are numerous, and sexual harassment and sexual assault are often incorrectly linked to the ways in which women dress and present themselves (Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019).
Academics are supposed to view dress and appearance as trivial and unworthy of attention or analysis (Frith & Gleeson, 2004). Concurrently, dress codes are commonplace in academic settings (Harbach, 2015; Pomerantz, 2008). Often the wording around dress code justifications makes mention of keeping the learning environment free from distractions. The supposed intention is to help students’ focus on academics and develop their inner character (Garot & Katz, 2003; Pomerantz, 2008). However, focus on student dress generally serves to bolster a collective focus on the material self in harmful ways. Furthermore, dress codes tend to target girls more so than boys within a gender binary and erase other possibilities for gender identities (Chattanooga Times Free Press, 2018; Glickman, 2015; Harbach, 2015; Sausa, 2005).

Monitoring and controlling women’s dress and appearance in academic settings harkens back to the rationalist, mind-body dualists who labeled the body, particularly women’s bodies, as a distraction to intellectual pursuits (Alcoff, 2000; Bordo, 2003b). There is often a sense of moral panic surrounding adolescent girls and the dangers their bodies can pose to boys and teachers (Pomerantz, 2008). Girls must cover their shoulders, chests, and legs, sending conflicting messages in contrast to what is available for modern fashions or messaging around sexual desire. Modesty is at the core of dress codes, reinforcing a heteronormative gender binary. The time and effort administrators put into monitoring girls’ dress and appearance in addition to the time girls who violate dress policies must take to return home and change serves as more of a distraction than clothing does. These practices also undermine boys’ ability to learn to focus on school rather than objectifying classmates while reinforcing a heterosexual gender binary.

Dress codes are not just specific to gendered and sexualized dress. Depending on the geographic region and the demographic makeup, school administrators may perceive additional threats to learning related to dress and race, socioeconomic status, religion, ethnicity, and other
identities. For instance, certain colors or articles of clothing may be banned in school settings where gang activity is more prominent (Garot & Katz, 2003). Hijabs or yarmulkes are usually considered protected articles of clothing because of provisions for religious freedom, but a cultural headdress not required for religious purposes may not fit the same criteria (Golash, 2010). Conforming to school dress codes often means conforming to Western, middle- to upper-middle class, Christian interpretations of appropriate dress and appearance.

More so than boys, girls will use their dress and appearance to subvert school policies (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). This dynamic exists in part because of the vastly different expectations that exist in gender binary-dominated environments, yet single-gender academic environments experience similar patterns of behavior. Dress code-subversion is far from new, and it is not specific only to gender (Ford, 2013; Garot & Katz, 2003). For example, Black women college students reacting to respectability politics and dress during the Civil Rights Movement abandoned the contemporary collegiate uniform of treated hair, skirts, cardigans, and stockings in favor of the denim jeans and natural hair of working-class sharecroppers (Ford, 2013). Their dress was both an act of rebellion against the White, middle-class norms of gender and a means of community building among Black women activists. Though women of all races engage in dress and appearance subversion, women of color experience different standards and expectations in school settings around dress and appearance than do White women, a dynamic that exists to this day (Morris, 2016; Motha & Varghese, 2018).

Although dress codes in higher education in the United States are not as codified as they are in elementary and secondary education settings, expectations for dress do exist. Students in STEM fields requiring laboratory work or other safety-sensitive activities may need to wear closed-toe shoes, lab coats, safety goggles, or other protective gear. Other fields have dress code
requirements meant to communicate membership in a profession (Naughton et al., 2016). These
dress codes can extend beyond articles of clothing to outline expectations for appearance.

Dress codes in academia can have a positive effect on students in that they help students see themselves as members of a profession (Naughton et al., 2016). Some consider professional dress to be a professional competency that students must master before entering the professional world. Other students, faculty, staff, and administrators report negative effects from having to navigate environments with restrictive dress codes (Naughton et al., 2016). Even within a field, not every student has the same career intentions, and a standardized dress code for all students as a means of professionalization will not fit the needs of all students. For instance, a pharmacology student could end up in a retail setting, pharmaceutical sales, academia, or a hospital. A lab coat with business professional attire underneath might be fitting for the graduate who ends up working in a pharmacy but not for the graduate who wears scrubs to their position at a hospital. Dress codes are difficult to enforce for the added reason that there are many cultural norms around gender or other identities and commenting on another person’s appearance (Naughton et al., 2016). There are also legal issues surrounding dress requirements or restrictions, especially as related to religious expression or gender identity (Naughton et al., 2016). Professional wardrobes can be expensive, and graduate students are often already in precarious financial situations (Martinez et al., 2013). While dress and appearance can communicate membership within a profession, academics are advised to look beyond material signifiers of preparedness.

Beyond codified dress codes more prominent in K-12 settings, there are many unwritten expectations for graduate students around dress and appearance. The hidden curriculum of Ph.D. life includes observing and adapting to dress and appearance patterns of faculty and colleagues further along in their studies (Manthey, 2017). A woman from a Latin American country
studying in the United States may learn that wearing bright colors violates certain cultural norms where most people wear dark and neutral colors (Cruz, 2001; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Adherence to beauty standards can also have an impact on how students and colleagues view academic competency. Some fields, especially STEM fields, are particularly unwelcoming of extreme displays of femininity (Gonsalves, 2014). Dedication to one’s work is often equated with devotion to the point of ignoring everything about one’s appearance and physical needs other than the very basics - food, water, shelter, and clothing. Feminine dress and appearance are viewed as existing in direct opposition to reason and logic, values that prevail within the academy (Bank, 2011; Gonsalves, 2014). Therefore, wearing makeup, jewelry, high heels, or other feminine attire can incorrectly signify a lack of competence.

Women are vulnerable to sexual harassment no matter how they look, but dress and appearance are often associated with risk-factors for unwanted sexual attention (Glasser, 2017; Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019). Sexual harassment is about power rather than desire (Bordo, 1997). Women are conditioned to expect sexual harassment as a normal part of life (Rich, 1976), and the power dynamics of graduate school make them vulnerable to sexual violence. Nobel laureate Tim Hunt infamously stated that women in science labs are disruptive, inspiring the hashtags #distractinglysexy and #toosexyforscience, where women ironically posted images of themselves in lab coats and hazmat suits (Bilefsky, 2017; Young, 2015).

Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields provide a notoriously dangerous climate for women (Northcut, 2017), yet sexual harassment is present across academic disciplines (Glasser, 2017; Manthey, 2017; McClintock, 2018). When Dr. Anne McClintock (2018) was denied a tenure position in Columbia University’s English department, a male colleague told her she was denied because men are intimidated by an attractive feminist writing
about sexuality. However, sexual harassment is motivated by more than physical attraction to a woman’s appearance. Graduate students must navigate the power dynamics of their gender as well as their subordinate student status in relation to the faculty (Ervin, 1995). Contrapower harassment is less common, but women faculty and graduate students report incidences of harassment at the hands of their students (Flaherty, 2018a; Glasser, 2017; Mohipp & Senn, 2008). Late-career faculty and non-traditional-aged graduate students remain at risk (Mangan, 2018), even though younger women report higher incidences of sexual harassment and violence. Gendered dress and appearance standards can have lasting impacts on the ways in which women view themselves and their positions within the academic ecosystem.

Reproduction and Motherhood

Another area where having a woman’s body is considered a liability is reproduction. Here, reproduction includes all aspects of the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, and menopause regardless of intention or desire to have children. As is the case with sexual harassment, reproduction and the associated biological and social functions are not exclusive to women, and not all women share the same desires or physiology for childbearing and motherhood (Kieser, 2017). Regardless of their individual bodies or plans, women share similar experiences in relation to society’s perception of women and motherhood.

Within many Western philosophies, women’s identities are reduced to their reproductive potential (Kieser, 2017; Rich, 1976). Mechanistic scientists treated the body like a machine, and in many cases they considered a woman’s body to be a less efficient machine than a man’s (Bordo, 2003b; Merchant, 2006 & 2008). Furthermore, these same worldviews misrepresent the roles men and women play in traditional heterosexual reproductive pairings, rendering what little contributions women are permitted to make to society even further devalued. In other words, the
most that a woman can offer a man is not all that difficult anyways. In fact, the Roman Catholic theology of Thomas Aquinas posits that men are superior to women in part due to what he perceived to be women’s passive role in procreation (Kieser, 2017). His view overemphasizes the act of intercourse in the effort it takes to conceive and bring a child to term, for women are far from passive in this endeavor. To Aquinas (2017), a man could only be equal to another man because a man is always better aided by another man than he is by a woman.

Reproduction is in and of itself an act of production. However, traditionally Western civilizations place a greater value on contributions related to government, military, science, and manufacturing rather than on reproduction and childrearing (Davis, 1983; Rich, 1976). Patterns of dress often challenge or reflect society’s current views on pregnancy, sometimes emphasizing women’s bellies and reproductive capacities and other times emphasizing modesty (Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019). Though fashion has changed drastically throughout the years, the tension between motherhood and professional identity has been slow to adapt to the times.

Women have historically had fewer opportunities in the workplace because many positions are designed with a man’s lifestyle in mind, one in which there is a wife at home to run the household (Cobble et al., 2014; Davis, 1983; Rich, 1976). Parental leave policies and work hours that accommodate for children’s schedules were unnecessary because workers were rarely if ever responsible for caregiving. Pregnancy represents a specific embodied experience in which women have very little jurisdiction over their appearance and demeanor, and so much of Western culture is designed around the notion that people should always have complete control over their bodies (Haynes, 2008). Therefore, professional settings are often places where women experience tension between their expected roles as women and professionals (Haynes, 2008; Miller-Spillman & Reilly, 2019).
Pregnancy in academic settings is controversial. Unwed mothers carry a stigma of sexual indecency which is in direct conflict with what it means to be a good academic (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Teenage girls who become pregnant while still in school are often shamed, isolated, or not permitted to continue attending classes with their peers (Klein, 2005). Sexual health education is often limited to abstinence-only, clinical, and heterocentric explanations of sexuality, sex, reproduction, and intimacy (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Morris-Roberts, 2004). Those who are married or in committed relationships and become pregnant may not be judged as harshly in a moral sense, but their dedication to their work or value as an employee may be questioned (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Sandler & Hall, 1986). The United States remains one of the only industrialized nations without universal paid maternity leave (Ray et al., 2010; Waldfogel, 2001), a direct reflection on the value we place on pregnant women and mothers as productive employees. Although pregnancy and reproduction are necessary parts of human existence, they are almost always treated as inherently problematic within school settings and, therefore, evidence of women’s natural unsuitability for academic life.

Motherhood is often considered a threat to a woman’s productivity and, consequently, value as a scholar (Nora et al., 2017). Adrienne Rich (1976) noted women would be suffering from “spiritual malnutrition” (p. 252) if it were not for the scholarship of childless women such as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, and Christina Rossetti. Scholarly productivity is the basis for progression through the academic professional ranks, particularly for those at research-intensive universities (Metcalfe & Slaughter, 2011). In both mechanistic and neoliberal senses, a scholar on maternity leave, who requires space for lactation, or who divides time between research and raising children is a less productive machine. Pressure to complete degrees within a specified timeframe means constant attention to work and time away from the
full experience of being a new mother (Tang, 2019). Academic timelines, especially tenure clocks, are notoriously unfriendly to mothers (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Mason et al., 2009; Nora et al., 2017; Zeiger, 2019). Though some women have noted that, with the right support, the elasticity of the graduate school timeline is more conducive to having children (Fox, 2020; Tang, 2019), the constraints and demands of doctoral studies place unnecessary burdens on mothers and caregivers (Kulp, 2016; Sallee, 2014).

Attitudes as well as structural barriers reinforcing these ideas exist throughout academia. Though fathers do suffer professional penalties (Sallee, 2012 & 2014), women suffer the greatest losses throughout their careers whether they have children or not (Nora et al., 2017; Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). Having a body that could potentially become pregnant is considered enough of a risk that all women to some extent suffer from this perception (Fox, 2020; Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). It is far more common for faculty and others to question women than men about their family plans both before and during graduate school (Ramsay & Letherby, 2006; Sandler & Hall, 1986). Fathers also face challenges related to balancing parenthood and their roles as students or faculty (Sallee, 2012 & 2014), but their competence or dedication is not questioned nearly as much and they benefit from their additional reputation as nurturing (Trepal et al., 2014). Women’s reproductive choices themselves are not intrinsically problematic, and many women academics find joy in either having or not having children (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Ramsay & Letherby, 2006). Still, negative stereotypes about motherhood are harmful.

Many faculty and graduate students have stories about the ominous presence of pregnancy among colleagues (Conley & Carey, 2013; Van Duyne, 2016; Wood, 2016). Primary childbearing years typically coincide with graduate school and pre-tenure years (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006), leading some women to believe they must choose
between school or tenure-track positions and the decision to have a family (Anders, 2004; Stockdell-Giesler & Ingalls, 2007). Others delay pregnancy until later in life, putting them at greater risk for complications (Conley & Carey, 2013; Mason et al., 2009). Those who decide to have children may feel the need to keep their pregnancies hidden due to the stigma surrounding motherhood within the academy (Conley & Carey, 2013; Van Duyne, 2016; Wood, 2016).

Structural and attitudinal barriers exist for women after giving birth or assuming parenting responsibilities by other means (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Mason & Goulden, 2004). Flexible work schedules and holiday breaks often give the impression that academia is a parent-friendly environment, and there are certainly advantages (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013). However, the demands of the academic profession place significant strains on those who are trying to balance work and family. Maternity- or family-leave policies for faculty and graduate students vary by institution, but the lack of adequate time-off is a problem across academia (Drago et al., 2005). Even women at institutions with maternity-leave policies are often afraid to take advantage of time off (Bushouse, 2013; Conley & Carey, 2013; Drago et al., 2005). In comparison, fathers who take advantage of family leave policies are often at an advantage. They can dedicate the time that mothers would otherwise spend recovering from the physical demands of pregnancy and giving birth to research (Bushouse, 2013), even though fathers must also balance the demands of work and parenthood (Sallee, 2012 & 2014). Additional challenges to raising children in academia include the lack of appropriate lactation spaces (Mercado-Lopez, 2013) and the perception that mothers are less dedicated to their work (Conley & Carey, 2013).

Due to the pervasive ideology that women are naturally caretakers, women faculty and graduate students are often expected to fulfill nurturing roles whether they have children or not. Women are expected to create a family-like environment for students and play the role of
surrogate mother (Ford, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Students and colleagues are more likely to talk about personal issues with and cry in the offices of women faculty than men (Glasser, 2017). For those faculty and graduate students who are mothers, the dual roles of mothering students and their own children can become exhausting. Whether they have children or not, women often contend with contradicting expectations in the workplace (Drago et al., 2005; Fletcher, 2001; Ford, 2011; Glasser, 2017; Rich, 1976).

**Health and Wellness**

Health and wellness are embodied concerns for everyone, yet within academia these needs often fall by the wayside. In the context of the Ph.D. student world, health refers to physical and mental well-being and the associated coping mechanisms students employ (Martinez et al., 2013). Wellness can have both sociological and medical implications. Sociological wellness refers to items like stress, social support, self-esteem and psychological distress while medical wellness refers to physical condition or illness (Haynes et al., 2012). These factors are not mutually exclusive and often overlap. Mind-body dualism treats most functions of the body as distractions away from the pursuit of knowledge (Plato, 2015). Just as a pregnant body cannot perform to the standards of capitalist economy (Rich, 1976), neither can a body which is sick, disabled, or injured. Values around injury and illness have been adapted to fit into the ideal worker norms of academia where the most valued members are those who can produce the most (Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, 2012; Grigely, 2017).

Ability and disability, though they overlap in some ways, differ from illness and injury. Disability, to those ascribing to ableist worldviews, is an indication of bodily imperfection (Loja et al., 2013). The co-construction of disability and womanhood typically has two major implications. Phenomenologically, disability is often portrayed as a helpless, weak, or dependent
identity - all traits associated with negative views of femininity (Hirschmann, 2013). These traits come into direct conflict with the traditionally idealized academic - someone who is independent and productive. This narrative of the passive woman does, however, feed into the heterosexual, patriarchal culture of academia. At the same time, women with disabilities are also depicted as asexual if their conditions violate the ideal norms of feminine beauty (Hirschmann, 2013). What these contradictions mean for women academics experiencing disability is that they must constantly prove their ability to handle the demands of academia without overstepping the bounds of normative femininity.

Under mind-body dualism, the potential for illness and injury are inherent flaws in the body’s design. Mechanistic scientists considered the body to be a machine, and a sick or injured body does not perform as efficiently as a healthy body. Despite women’s continued association with the body and men’s with the mind, men’s bodies are considered more valuable in dualist hierarchies (Bordo, 2003b; Kieser, 2017; Merchant, 2006, 2008), leading to disparate experiences with healthcare (Gordon, 2012). These disparities are only exaggerated when combined with other minoritized racial, social-class, religious, and sexual identities.

Mental health belongs in discussions about disability, and these experiences depart from typical depictions of physical or visible disabilities that they warrant separate discussion. At the same time, it should be noted that mental health conditions often carry physical, embodied experiences such as loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, episodes of panic attacks, and more (Happell et al., 2012). Physical disabilities can also be accompanied by mental health conditions or emotional side-effects. Still, they have unique characteristics in the context of academia.

For women, mental health carries specific implications. Drawing again from Western notions of gender and rationalism, men have historically been associated with rational thought
and reason while women have been associated with irrational thought and emotion (Bank, 2011). Within this paradigm, logic prevails and feelings and intuition are devalued. Even emotions themselves carry masculine and feminine associations. Expressing emotions such as fear, doubt, and insecurity are generally considered more feminine actions compared to emoting strength or confidence, and are therefore less-desirable behaviors (Ford, 2011). Women must balance the competing cultural expectations for the affective presentations of women and scholars.

Many students do not consider mental health conditions to be disabilities (Fox et al., 2019). Therefore, campus discussions of mental health limited to disability services miss the majority of students in need. Furthermore, the most valuable attribute academics have, under traditional Western worldviews, are their minds. While a physical disability may distort a person’s perception of the world around them, this bodily flaw is acceptable on some levels because to a certain extent all bodies distort perceptions of reality and pursuit of truth. It is up to the mind to make meaning of what the body senses. A mental health condition, again following dualist thinking, no longer enables an academic to use reason or logic to discern truth. A so-called damaged mind governed by some other non-rational force has no place in the academy, for it cannot possibly participate in trustworthy knowledge creation. These modes of thinking are outdated, inaccurate, and dangerous.

Others see mental health conditions not as entirely negative experiences, but instead as “dangerous gifts” (Guidry-Grimes, 2015, p. 491) needing careful attention and consideration. Though many environments, including high-pressure academic situations, can trigger the difficulties of a mental health condition, different sensitivity to one’s surroundings can illuminate new understandings of the world.
The mental health crisis among graduate students is a problem gaining attention internationally. Worldwide, graduate students report experiencing anxiety, depression, and/or other mental illnesses during graduate school at more than six times the rate of the rest of the global population (Evans et al., 2018; Flaherty, 2018b; Levecque et al., 2017). Common attributions to the high incidences of mental health conditions include financial strains, decreased job prospects after graduation, extreme workloads often carried out in isolation, and immense pressure to conform (Evans et al., 2018; Gumport, 2016; Oswalt & Riddock, 2007). Doctoral students often receive little support from advisors or other campus services. There is a learned culture of silence around mental health because of the implications they have for one’s ability to handle the academic environment (Stecker, 2004). Some students enter doctoral programs already aware of their mental health conditions, and others do not experience onset until entering post-graduate education (Rosebraugh, 2000; Tso, 2017). Having been high-achieving students for most of their lives, the sudden shift in academic culture and expectations in combination with other stressors can bring to surface previously unnoticed conditions.

Crying or otherwise expressing distress is frowned upon, a sign of weakness, and generally a red flag that someone is not cut out to handle the pressures of an academic career. Failure to participate in behaviors in alignment with hegemonic masculinity can have dire consequences for all genders (Cohen, 2010). Simultaneously, women must navigate the cultural expectations for their own gender performance. If women do not express the appropriate amount of empathy or emotion in certain contexts, they may be violating the gender expectations others have of them, risking labels like bitch or worse (Northcut, 2017).

While stress and emotional management are certainly related to physical health, graduate students must also contend with illness and disability not related to anxiety or depression. Illness
and disability can be temporary experiences, or they can be more permanent in nature. At times, students identify graduate school as being the source of or trigger for certain conditions like migraines or physical strain related to long hours spent working (Moyer et al., 1999). For those who identify as having a mental or physical impairment before coming to graduate school, managing stigma has likely been part of their lives for some time (Shifrer, 2013). Due to the perception that those with impairments are less capable as students and employees (Collinson & Penketh, 2010; Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013; May & Stone, 2010), ableism can be present in the admissions processes for graduate programs (Santen et al., 2010). Sometimes, onset of illness or disability does not occur until after beginning graduate school, and students are left feeling vulnerable or unsupported (Rosebraugh, 2000).

These worldviews are embedded within our modern cultures. Women learn from a young age to distrust their minds and their bodies. Mind-body dualism and the construction of the ideal scholar spill into academic culture and how women Ph.D. students are able to exist in a contradictory environment. A shift towards embodiment has the potential to better the lives and work of all academics, not just women Ph.D. students.

**Moving Towards Embodiment**

Though philosophers have problematized the body in general, men’s bodies retain privilege within this paradigm because a man’s body is considered better designed (Aquinas, 2017; Bordo, 2003b). Furthermore, women’s bodies are treated as a detriment to both men and women’s pursuit of knowledge (Bordo, 2003b; Plato, 2015). Women are then sexually objectified and reduced to the potential gratification they can offer men (Bordo, 2003b; Lorde, 1989; Merchant, 2006 & 2008). As a result, women are often taught to mistrust and separate their minds and their bodies (Lorde, 1989).
Rather than segmenting the self into unequal parts, academics should consider their whole beings as important aspects of their embodied academic identities. This mindset is helpful for counteracting objectification that has been infused into one’s sense of self. Through oppression, women have “come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (Lorde, 1989, p. 53). For Audre Lorde (1989), that power was the erotic or erotic knowledge. The erotic is “the lifeforce of women… that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (p. 55). Empowered women are often considered dangerous, so women are taught to separate the erotic from all aspects of life except for sex and only when used in service of men (Lorde, 1989). Lorde advocated for decoupling the erotic from the confines of the bedroom and reawakening that energy all throughout the self. Though her intended readers were Black lesbians, all academics can benefit from Lorde’s conceptualization of erotic knowledge because at its core the erotic is meant to be liberatory.

Denying the erotic within work removes passion from what we do and changes it into something that simply generates income (Lorde, 1989). Academics need the space and ability to fully feel what brings them satisfaction, yet this is impossible if they despise parts of themselves. Embracing the body and the mind throughout academia has the potential to improve sexual safety for academics of all genders. Within this feminist paradigm bodies are not separate from the people who inhabit them, and all people deserve to feel the full capacity of their joy.

Beyond sexual safety, reaffirming the body and uniting it with the mind can restore dignity to all bodies because all bodies are considered whole. Bodies that transgress the norms tend to be monitored more heavily (Cruz, 2001). For faculty, the idealized academic body according to the dualist patriarchal paradigm, is a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-aged
man (Bailyn, 2003; Messner, 2000), and the ideal graduate student is his younger protégé. Feminist academic identity rooted in embodiment makes space for scholars of color, who are pregnant, sick, experiencing disability, fat, old, wear religious garments, and/or have presentations that do not conform to gender stereotypes. This paradigm also moves away from mechanistically valuing people for their productivity potential and recenters the purpose of academic work on passion for creating and sharing knowledge.

Much of academic identity is rooted in men’s assumed rightful dominance over women (Bordo, 2003), yet it also places man in isolation. Particularly within Western science, the lone, rational scientist is considered an unbiased conduit (Merchant, 2006 & 2008). Women in this paradigm were considered irrational, again reinforcing the binary view of gender. Ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant (2006 & 2008) developed a feminist approach to science in response to Bacon’s violent and patriarchal assertion that man has the right to dominate nature’s body. Merchant refers to nature only in gender inclusive terms, rather than feminine terms like mother and bosom. This approach to science and the world more generally decouples women’s minds and bodies from patriarchy and removes the mind, body, nature, science, technology, and researchers themselves from the binary view of gender. If certain values are no longer considered purely masculine or feminine, a gender inclusive approach can also bring change to gender imbalances in fields or reaffirm the value of those fields that remain more popular with women.

Furthermore, Merchant’s attitude towards partnership has significant implications for feminist academic identity development. She used the gender inclusive term partner for nature (2008). Bacon preferred violent images of domination over nature, but Merchant viewed her relationship with nature as reciprocal. For faculty and graduate students, approaching the entire research process as an equal partner lends itself to better feminist practice (Bailey, 2011;
DeVault, 1999; Merchant, 2006 & 2008). Partnership is important beyond research. Reaffirming the importance of partnership within the academic identity over working in isolation can create more supportive environments for graduate students and faculty. Typically, women and other marginalized people bear the brunt of service and care-work while being excluded from research opportunities within their institutions (Danowitz & Agans, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006), but partnership can alleviate some of these burdens.

Feminist alternatives to mind-body dualism have the potential to improve disproportionate power relations for many marginalized faculty and graduate students. Erotic power (Lorde, 1989) is a fully embodied knowledge of the self that can be shared with others. Gender inclusive approaches to research (Merchant, 2006 & 2008) and academic identity more broadly provide spaces for more diverse ways of thinking and being. These feminist paradigms have revolutionary potential for creating a safer and more inclusive academic community for all if academics can learn to embrace the body and the mind fully within themselves and each other.

To this day, numerically quantifiable data take precedence over data rooted in emotion, creativity, or intuition (Bryant & Jaworski, 2015; Kelly & Kortegast, 2018). Merleau-Ponty took issue with academia’s devotion to the scientific method as the purest form of inquiry, thus his advocacy for phenomenology (Vachelli, 2018). The combination of preferred methods of inquiry and preferred subjects of inquiry, in addition to social bias, limit the opportunities that women and other non-dominant social groups have when participating in formally recognized scholarship. Women tend to write about gender and other subjects considered less mainstream, subsequently limiting their publication options in the most prestigious academic journals and their career options in research-heavy positions (Bryant & Jarowski, 2015). A push for
embodiment within research methods can open possibilities for more diversity among researchers, their methods, and their subjects for exploration.
CHAPTER 3

PROJECT METHODS

Introduction

In conjunction with new ways of being, I propose new ways of knowing within academia. Mainstream scholars value certain kinds of knowledge and certain methods of collecting knowledge, yet these approaches have their limitations. They do not encompass the variety of ways people see and experience the world (DeVault, 1999). A call for new ways of knowing does not necessitate a complete departure from the roots of social science inquiry. Borrowing, reshaping, and reimagining more traditional methods of inquiry for modern purposes can provide a solid theoretical and methodological framework for projects aiming to create change within and beyond academic spaces (DeVault, 1999).

It is important to note that my methods of inquiry are not new in the sense that they have no historic origins. Many cultures outside of Western academia have valued embodiment within their conceptions of knowledge for centuries and continue to do so (Cruz, 2001; DeVault, 1999; Lorde, 1989). Academics should look to their traditions when seeking to disrupt and diversify what is considered scholarly inquiry.

I disrupt some traditional methods of study within higher education with the hopes of better addressing the following:

1) Studying embodiment: Embodiment is rarely a topic of concern for higher education scholars, but embodiment is key to reorganizing our culture, these methods are well-suited for questions of embodiment.

2) Partnership with participants: Treat participants as partners in a project rather than subjects to be studied.
3) Working with women: Use methods that honor alternative values systems (emotion, embodiment, reciprocity).

4) Sensitive topic: Provide non-verbal ways of sharing what may be difficult experiences to recount.

5) New audiences: Collect and share data in a way that can reach non-academic audiences.

Using feminist phenomenological photovoice for my design helped achieve these goals. Below is a further explanation of these methods, their connection to studying embodiment with women Ph.D. students, and how these methods address the above concerns.

**Examining Embodiment with Women Ph.D. Students: New Ways of Knowing**

Frameworks shaping one’s approach to an issue and subsequent research design provide the support necessary to connect the content of inquiry with the method of inquiry (Latz, 2017; Rallis & Rossman, 2012; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). The overarching theme of embodiment relates to the need for new ways of being and new ways of knowing. Anti-embodiment culture in academia affects not only our day-to-day lives, but it also influences what scholars study and how it is studied. Examining questions of embodiment is in itself advocacy for new ways of knowing because of the emphasis placed on knowledge gained from lived experiences, a stark contrast to the rationalist tendencies of the academy (Merriam et al., 2007). Academics tend to place the most emphasis on what people say and think rather than what they do or feel.

Additionally, methodologies to explore new ways of knowing deserve attention. Most traditional social science methodologies originate from the same patriarchal, mind-body dualist, and rationalist traditions. Particularly within higher education scholarship, there remains a preference for quantitative studies analyzing large datasets among the top-tier academic journals
However, the aims of my project extend beyond the capacity of what the most common higher education scholarship methodologies can offer. Borrowing from traditional social science methodologies and those that exist within the margins of academic research, I combined elements of multiple methodologies to create a project that is interesting, intentional, and impactful. These methodological innovations contribute, as well, to my push for new ways of knowing within higher education scholarship.

My overarching frameworks are the feminist paradigm, phenomenology, and photovoice. Each of these overarching frameworks are frequently used in conjunction with another framework, for instance feminist phenomenology (Fielding, 2017; Fisher & Embree, 2000; Shabot & Landry, 2018), feminist photovoice (Higgins, 2016; Latz, 2017), and phenomenological photovoice (Plunkett et al., 2013; Vagle, 2016). Other scholars have also used each of these overarching frameworks to study questions of embodiment, though not necessarily all three together or with women Ph.D. students (Chmielewski & Yost, 2013; Desyllas, 2014; Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Sandhu et al., 2013).

**Feminist Research Paradigm**

Many scholars have come to understand social science research as a gendered practice (Bergoffen, 2000; DeVault, 1999) In response, feminist social scientists have developed alternative methodologies better suited for studying gender, power, or other forces shaping understandings of the world. Just as there are many different branches and iterations of feminism, there are many different interpretations of feminist research. However, most feminist researchers tend to agree on the following goals: 1) allowing space for multiple truths, not one overarching truth; 2) making visible the invisible and creating positive change; 3) redefining the researcher/participant relationship as reciprocal to minimize harm and control; and 4)
contextualizing research within the social constructions of gender (Bergoffen, 2000; DeVault, 1999; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Rossman & Rallis, 2012).

Not all feminisms are created equal, and many rely on essentialism when attempting to advocate for women’s rights (Beasley, 1999; Cobble et al., 2014; Greer, 2000; Salamon, 2018). Because phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of a lived experience or existence, it is easy for this methodology to reinforce essentialist gender conceptions, particularly in relation to body parts (Salamon, 2018). In other words, a woman must have breasts and a uterus whereas a man cannot. However, feminist phenomenologists have worked to reinterpret phenomenology with more attention to gender, bodies, and power within the research process (Fielding, 2017; Fisher & Embree, 2000; Shabot & Landry, 2018).

**Phenomenology**

For this project focused on embodiment, phenomenology offers numerous advantages in addition to challenges worthy of examination. Phenomenology in social science has taken various shapes over the years, and most phenomenologists identify in some way with the Cartesian notion of the self as the best philosophical departure point (Bergoffen, 2000; Weiss, 2018). Phenomenologists also noted that human understanding of reason is embedded within and characterized by the time and place from which it comes (Alcoff, 2000; Fielding, 2017; Weiss, 2018). In other words, understanding reason and knowledge is contextual.

Most researchers are phenomenologists in some sense because they are concerned with perception rather than concrete reality (Patton, 2014). Origins of phenomenology as a more formalized method of inquiry are often associated with Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Alcoff, 2000; Bergoffen, 2000; Garko, 1999; Salamon, 2018; Wertz et al., 2011). Many phenomenologists trace their methodological and theoretical leanings back to the traditions of
either Husserl or Heidegger depending on their views of subjectivity and context within the research process. Despite theoretical departures among phenomenologists, most agree on four central themes: 1) the human experience is temporal and transitory in nature, 2) an emphasis on subjective understanding, 3) the lived experienced is the foundation of what we know as phenomena, and 4) an emphasis on meaning in its context (Seidman, 2013). Phenomenology is also concerned with subjectivity and objectivity in relation to individuals. In many methods of inquiry, researchers treat people as objects to be studied rather than perceiving subjects (Bergoffen, 2000; Haraway, 1978). Phenomenologists seek to relocate people as subjects within the research process (Bergoffen, 2000; Seidman, 2013; Vagle, 2016).

**Feminist Phenomenology**

At the intersections of phenomenology and the feminist research paradigm is feminist phenomenology. This methodology departs from mainstream phenomenology in several ways: 1) the approach to essentialism and constructivism, 2) central focus on embodied knowledge, 3) making visible the invisible for social change, 4) critiquing power relations, and 5) placing the individual in social context (Bergoffen, 2000; Fielding, 2017; Fisher & Embree, 2000; Olkowski, 2017).

A clear understanding of how essentialism and constructivism engage within phenomenology is one area where feminist scholars depart from mainstream phenomenologists (Salamon, 2018). Essence is at the core of phenomenology, yet misinterpretations or strict applications of the term can be harmful. At any moment in time, there exist multiple truths of essence that become apparent when all else is stripped away (Salamon, 2018). For instance, the essence of a cat seems simple when one envisions a four-legged creature with whiskers, fur, and a long tail. At the same time, employing phenomenology only works when one also considers the
temporality and contextuality of the meaning we make of these essences (Salamon, 2018). Is a cat still a cat if it was born with three legs or hairless? Or does it lose its cat essence if someone chops off its tail? These questions become more complicated when humans become the subject of interest. While phenomenology is concerned with essence, it is also concerned with context and fluidity. Salamon (2018) refers to this nuanced understanding of essence in relation to gender by characterizing “woman as an open unity” (p. 46). There is space for multiple existences among the commonalities women share.

I have engaged with the concept of essentialism and women as open unity through making clear that my intention was not to seek an understanding of the essence of womanhood or even Ph.D. student womanhood. There is room for multiple, perhaps unlimited, versions of masculinity, femininity, and all other forms of gender expression once one departs from gender essentialism (Cohen, 2010). This project made room for all participant-defined versions of what it means to be a woman. My intention was to examine closely what some women Ph.D. students, as self-defined, collectively may consider to be the essence of life in a doctoral program with attention to embodiment. In other words, I examined the specific, co-constructed understanding of lived graduate school and how women make meaning of it here and now, not what it means to be a woman. I unpack how I addressed essentialism in relation to gender further in my discussion of the project design.

A task of feminist theory should be developing a better understanding of the relationship between reason, theory, and the subjective bodily experience (Alcoff, 2000; Fielding, 2017; Olkowski, 2017). Feminist phenomenology is positioned to do just that, to make meaning of embodied existence within the context of a world characterized by patriarchy and other oppressive systems. Audre Lorde’s (1989) “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” is a
phenomenological exploration of embodied Black womanhood and the joy she experiences in her understanding of this essence (Mali Mason, 2018). She understands the erotic to be a source of embodied power and knowledge that is essential to her sense of Black womanhood, or a “kernel within [her]self,” (Lorde, 1989, p. 57).

Terms like kernel, essence, and embodied knowledge resonate with phenomenology, yet Lorde (1989) also touches on an important point - women, through their various interactions with society, often learn to distrust their embodied knowledge. Feminist phenomenology seeks to center embodied knowledge for all genders and their intersections with other identities outside the skewed lens of white, Western men (Fielding, 2017; Mali Mason, 2018; Salamon, 2018).

Another task of feminist phenomenology is making visible the invisible. Husserl supported the concept of essence being equally available for all to perceive, though perceptions are specific to contexts (Weiss, 2018). Feminist scholars have reinterpreted Husserl’s take on access, noting that people have different access to certain worlds and no access to others. This dynamic exists for those within and outside of dominant social groups. Feminist phenomenology can help make visible the stories of those who find themselves occupying worlds that others in more dominant social positions cannot see for themselves because of their differing degrees of access (Schües, 2018; Weiss, 2018). Furthermore, entering a new context can change how individuals perceive their own essence, particularly when facing a new set of barriers and challenges (Weiss, 2018). Women in doctoral programs may need to renegotiate how they understand their embodied existence when transitioning from a powerful position in the professional world into a subordinate student identity within the typical advising relationship or when developing a new routine for work-life balance. Feminist phenomenology provides a platform to make known experiences for those who share them and with differing experiences.
Feminist phenomenology also aims at critiquing power relations within and beyond the research process as they relate to gender, sexuality, and other identities (Schües, 2018). Feminist phenomenology is not concerned only with questions of gender, nor is it meant for investigating questions that relate only to women. Rather, it is a critical philosophy and orientation to research. Traditional phenomenologists assert the rational individual is the central point of departure (Alcoff, 2000; Nilsson Folke, 2016). Many feminist phenomenologists depart from this line of thought in that they have reimagined the central point of departure as occupying a space between the internal realm of thought and feeling and the external social, political, and moral forces surrounding us (Fielding, 2017). Phenomenologists must also consider their stance on impartiality within the research process. Some phenomenologists believe the best approach to studying the essence of something is to approach the question at hand with impartiality, or to bracket one’s prior knowledge so as not to interfere with fresh observations (Schües, 2018). Feminist scholars tend to agree that all perspectives are necessarily partial and interested, therefore impartiality is an impossible and unnecessary standard to maintain.

**Arts-Based Inquiry and Photovoice**

Scholarly inquiry and the creative arts may seem to be at odds with each other. Recognizing the need for new ways of knowing, both in terms of how we conceptualize knowledge and how we define social science inquiry, opens possibilities within arts-based inquiry. Like feminist research, arts-based inquiry pushes for new ways of knowing and new understandings of knowledge (Leavy, 2009). There is an emphasis on not eliminating but moving beyond the written word in all aspects of the research process.
Some scholars still debate whether arts-based research (ABR) is a method or methodology, what constitutes as ABR, and where the lines between art and research should exist (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2009). ABR refers to a set of methodological tools used by qualitative researchers across the disciplines during all phases of social research, including data collection, analysis, interpretation, and representation. These emerging tools adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined. (Leavy, 2015, p. 3)

Exploring the limits of a broad definition rooted in systematic inquiry is one way that ABR can disrupt more traditional research paradigms (Linder, 2018; Springgay et al., 2005). Scholarartists and ABR arose out of a desire to change our approach to research by addressing power imbalances and using alternative ways to gather, interpret, and present data (Denton et al., 2018; Springgay et al., 2005). Overall, ABR aims to create research that is engaging, holistic, and directly connects lived experiences to theory, helping us make meaning of what we and our participants gather through our senses (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Leavy, 2015; Springgay et al., 2005). Art has long been part of human existence, and ABR uses this notion for the benefit of researchers, participants, and consumers. Though ABR can include language-based media, such as poetry and creative nonfiction (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2018; Champney, 2018; Daly Thompson, 2017), scholarartists also use drawing, painting, collage, or graphic elicitation in their work (Denton et al., 2018). Photovoice is one such method worthy of further exploration.

**Photo Elicitation**

Broadly speaking, photo elicitation in ABR uses images during participant interviews to direct conversation around targeted topics, often for the purpose of triggering participants’
memories (Denton et al., 2018). These photos can be researcher generated, participant generated, archival images, or even clippings from magazines. Using photography in social science research is perhaps as old as photography itself (Latz, 2017). Researchers would take photographs to document their ethnographic findings while immersed in a particular setting. Eventually, researchers gave cameras to participants and had them capture images as part of the data collection process.

**Photovoice**

Photovoice moves beyond photo elicitation in several ways because it is rooted in participatory action research values (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017). It is a means of engaging with participants throughout the research process using photo elicitation techniques where participants themselves take the photographs (Latz, 2012 & 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Typically, participants meet with researchers in either independent or group settings to become familiar with the research project. After receiving prompts, participants are provided with cameras or encouraged to use a device of their own to take photographs of their lifeworlds. After a predetermined period, participants return to the researchers to discuss their photographs. Furthermore, the project should have an aim for political advocacy or improving the situations of participants and their communities by making the marginalized visible (Capous-Desyllas & Forro, 2014; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice techniques align with constructivist frameworks that decentralize the researcher and emphasize the multiplicity of perspectives participants, researchers, and audiences bring to inquiry (Latz, 2012; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997) established the photovoice methodology, linking their technique to *photo novella* photo elicitation techniques used to teach language and
literacy. They identified three main goals of photovoice. First, it enables people to document and reflect upon the strengths and concerns of their communities. Second, it promotes critical dialogue and awareness of these concerns. Finally, it aims to bring concerns to policymakers for the purpose of creating positive change. This methodology is rooted in critical consciousness in education, feminism, and documentary photography. Central to Wang and Burris’ (1997) application of photovoice is the incorporation of small and large group discussions about photographs among participants and researchers. While the term voice is itself indicative of the narrative elements of photovoice, Wang and Burris (1997) elaborate further to explain that VOICE also serves as an acronym for “voicing our individual and collective experience” (p. 381). Photographs alone without participant voices included would contradict the essence of photovoice. They also emphasize the importance of group discussions because participants analyze each other’s photographs, participating in the codifying stage of the analysis process.

Written and spoken language dominate our communication systems (Branch & Latz, 2018). Common quantitative and qualitative methods for collecting and disseminating data often rely upon verbal forms of communication. In-depth interviews offer researchers and participants a chance to work directly together and share interest in a common topic (DeVault, 1999; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Standard texts, such as books and journal articles, can be powerful and persuasive and occupy important roles in the academy (DeVault, 1999). At the same time, there are limits to verbal communication. Memory is multi-sensory, and we obtain knowledge through our senses when we interact with the world (Cruz, 2001; Öster et al., 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Contemporary life is highly visual, particularly with the increased usage of social media and camera phones (Branch & Latz, 2018). Photovoice can overcome some limitations of exclusively verbal research methods in multi-sensory ways.
Photovoice is a useful approach to studying topics that are potentially sensitive or uncomfortable (Wang & Burris, 1997). Sometimes participants can be uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss everything a researcher hopes to explore (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), particularly if a topic is usually considered taboo. Conversely, overly familiar topics also lend themselves well to photovoice studies. Participants may be so accustomed to certain aspects of their lives that they are unaware of recurring patterns that may exist (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Using images to explore everyday experiences in a new way can help express what participants have not yet thought through (Nguyen, 2018), spark new understandings, and represent relationships they cannot verbalize (Denton, et al., 2018). Even if a researcher develops a good rapport, participants may not have the words to describe their experiences. Research methods emphasizing objectivity and distance between researchers and participants tend to be characterized by hierarchical relationships. Researchers can use participants, mining them for data according to their own research agendas without establishing a reciprocal relationship (Mohanty, 2003; Wolf, 1992). By design, photovoice challenges the typical researcher-participant dynamic.

Photovoice methods vary slightly from one study to the next, but typically participants are highly involved in data collection. Participants may be tasked with taking photographs of their worlds based around a set of questions or a broad prompt. Some researchers will ask for a set number of photographs and discuss each during an interview. Others will ask participants to organize their photos in order of their preference for which ones they would like to discuss first (Branch & Latz, 2018). Usually, researchers will ask participants to analyze their own photos, and researchers limit their own analyses to interview transcripts (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). In these ways, participants set the agenda for what gets discussed during interviews.
(Desyllas, 2014). Depending on the intended outcome of the project, some researchers may also find it helpful to analyze elements of photos that participants do not talk about, such as body language (Linder, 2018). Participants can also be involved in sharing data through public art galleries, blogs, and any number of publication media (Desyllas, 2014; Latz, 2017; Latz et al., 2016; Lu & Yuen, 2012). The added visual element along with the partnership between researchers and participants contributes to deeper meaning-making for both parties. Participants also report enjoying photo elicitation projects (Branch & Latz, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997), an added benefit to the reciprocal researcher-participant relationship.

Marginalized groups can benefit from photovoice research because of its image-heavy nature (Wang & Burris, 1997). Many cultures have a history of using arts-based media to communicate values and process experiences (Cruz, 2001; Oster et al., 2009). Participants who are language learners may be limited in what they can communicate in the researchers’ language, but sharing photographs can bridge that gap. Anyone can learn to use a camera even if other communication barriers exist (Wang & Burris, 1997). Cellphones with cameras and image-driven social media are now commonplace. Taking pictures to document one’s experiences is a natural part of many people’s days. Students and younger populations are usually excellent participants for photovoice because of their familiarity with photos in their day-to-day lives. College students especially experience life in visual ways because of their widespread use of social media and camera phones (Branch & Latz, 2018; Springgay et al., 2005). Researchers are not only taking advantage of a familiar tool when asking participants to use their phones to capture images of their worlds. They are also allowing youth to communicate in a language already familiar to them, facilitating living inquiry that is already part of who they are (Springgay et al., 2005).
Written and spoken language are often reflective of the experiences of dominant groups (DeVault, 1999; Wang & Burris, 1997). Exploring experiences of oppression using the language of oppressors can limit the shape a conversation is permitted to take. For instance, common ways of speaking about women’s bodies are more reflective of the objectifying experiences of heterosexual men, potentially stifling researchers’ and participants’ abilities to participate in deeper reflection with women participants around conversations of embodiment. Art can be a powerful way to counteract sexual objectification within one’s sense of self (Stanhope, 2013), providing benefits to participants, researchers, and consumers. Photographs can also facilitate circular or non-linear reflection on non-Western cultural understandings of life (Lu & Yuen, 2012).

Another benefit of photovoice is the opportunity to advocate in solidarity with marginalized populations. Research aiming for social change should make visible the invisible (DeVault, 1999), and photovoice does just that (Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Photovoice projects with intentional dissemination can allow hidden communities to communicate their values and concerns to key stakeholders for the purpose of creating change or bringing attention to issues. For instance, Desyllas’ (2014) photovoice study with women involved in sex work resulted in several years of art galleries with participant photographs in local cafes, libraries, universities, bookstores, and social service agencies in addition to being covered by local media outlets. Even if no major policy changes came from the study as of publication, participants were able to share their stories to a wider audience with dignity.

Studies employing photovoice elicit far richer data than interviews alone (Denton et al., 2018). Cameras can travel with participants in ways researchers cannot, providing different access to their lives. Photographs and their accompanying reflective and analytical practices
contribute to data crystallization when paired with other qualitative methods. Audiences with the opportunity to engage with findings also benefit from the multimedia nature of photovoice.

Typically in qualitative studies, researchers are limited in what they can see of participants’ worlds. Ethnographic researchers and those who conduct research in the field can observe their surroundings for data collection in ways that researchers who conduct interviews in offices or other removed locations cannot (Denton et al., 2018). Gaining access to field sites can be challenging. Even if researchers gain access to a field through one participant, other people in their worlds may not be receptive to an outsider’s presence, limiting access to information (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). By relying on participant-generated photographs, photovoice gives researchers access to spaces that may not be accessible for geographic, cultural, or other reasons (Kelly & Kortegast, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). Additionally, participants can have several reasons for withholding information from researchers in interviews (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), and photographs provide another form of access. Researchers can probe for or analyze patterns they observe in images that participants might not mention (Linder, 2018).

Triangulation or data crystallization means making data richer through multiple forms of data collection, multiple times of data collection, multiple investigators, or a variety of methods (Linder, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Interviews alone can generate rich data, but the added elements of photovoice help researchers dig deeper into the full complexity of a given research question. Data crystallization increases the credibility and rigor of a study (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), an advantage of combining multiple interviews with participant-generated photographs.

In addition to changing the experience for researchers and participants, audiences are also provided with a richer experience with photovoice (Nguyen, 2018). Images are exciting and have
a different visual impact than words alone. Participant-generated photographs lend themselves well to many dissemination pathways that are more accessible to multiple audiences (Desyllas, 2014, Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Academic journals are typically accessible to small audiences because of paid access requirements or confusing jargon (Woo, 2018). Sharing images in a public cafe or social service agency allows participants and researchers to share their stories to a wider and more diverse audience (Desyllas, 2014). Additionally, images can be easier to process than words alone for language learners, people with certain disabilities, children, and other groups excluded from spaces dominated by written communication.

**Feminist Phenomenological Photovoice**

The resulting combination of the above methodologies is feminist phenomenological photovoice. At the core of each of these methodologies is a respect for embodied knowledge to be understood through specific contexts (Fielding, 2017; Olkowski, 2017). These understandings are not meant to be generalizable. Rather, their purpose is to make known a set of possibilities for the embodied existence of women Ph.D. students, using creative media for new audiences. In the previous section, I have outlined the overarching theories that support these methodological frameworks. Here, I make specific connections between these methodologies and the purposes of my project.

**Studying Embodiment**

Academics tend to distance themselves from questions of embodiment, with obvious exceptions being fields such as gender studies, the arts, and medicine (Baird & Mitchell, 2014; Berwick & Humble, 2017; Silver & Farrants, 2016; Sumelius-Lindblom, 2019). This distancing is due in part to the absence of embodiment within academic culture - matters of the body and embodied knowledge are not as important as data that can be measured numerically. Embodied
knowledge is especially important to study in relation to women because of our socialization patterns in relation to gender and language (DeVault, 1999; Lorde, 1989; Olkowski, 2017).

In higher education scholarship, the embodied experience is a rarely examined aspect of life for women in graduate school or in faculty positions. Studies about women’s embodied experiences are typically solo participant studies in autoethnographic formats. Fatima (2017) documented what it is like to navigate the complicated identities of women of color and academics. Glasser (2017) discussed setting boundaries with students around gender and sexuality. Lapayese (2017) discussed the changes in her life and identity as a mother and scholar. Manthey (2017) narrated several job interviews she attended and the gendered decisions she made about clothing. Zhang (2018) created a poetic autoethnography to explain her experience of being pregnant while pursuing her Ph.D. as an international student. Adams (2015) discussed the unrecognized care work in which she engaged alongside her Ph.D.

Other scholars have conducted studies on embodiment with larger groups of women, though the focus is usually narrower than women Ph.D. students. For instance, Jokinen and Caretta (2016) conducted a duo-autoethnography on post-graduate fieldwork as recent graduates from a geography Ph.D. program. Ong (2005) conducted a longitudinal qualitative study on women of color in STEM fields. Bartos and Ives (2019) looked at emotional labor for women graduate students who were also teaching assistants. Grabarek and Cooper (2008) worked with graduate students who also had eating disorders.

Non-peer reviewed, anecdotal accounts of embodied graduate school appear in higher education tabloids and other news sources. Samardzic (2019) wrote about the distance she feels between herself and her friends and family as a Ph.D. student. Vitale (2016) shared recommendations for coping with stress, isolation, and despair while in graduate school.
Wedemeyer-Strombel (2018) considered the stress that graduate school places on marriages and other relationships. Zeiger (2019) remembered how uncomfortable and unsupported she felt after telling her advisor that she was pregnant. These autoethnographic, narrow focus, and anecdotal pieces are valuable contributions to the literature on the embodied Ph.D. experience for women. With my project, I have created a powerful collection of stories and images gathered through empirical research methods that contributes to the already existing literature.

Bacon’s approach to research - one of domination and extraction - is embedded within our modern conceptions of inquiry (Merchant, 2006). We take what we want from our subjects because as scholars it is our duty to do so, to uncover truth. Feminist phenomenology and photovoice aim to change the power dynamics within the researcher/participant relationship by sharing control with participants. Detailed further in the Design section, I built in the following elements of shared power into this project: 1) data collection through photographs, 2) data analysis in interviews, and 3) data dissemination. This whole project centers the participant point of view throughout.

Feminist research and photovoice projects have the shared goal of making visible the invisible for the purpose of creating positive change (Denton et al., 2018; DeVault, 1999; Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017). This goal is only made possible by gathering shareable data and disseminating it to appropriate audiences in ways that they can consume. Other members of the academic community and those outside should be able to interact with photographs and narratives from participants, bringing their stories to new audiences.

While Wang and Burris (1997) are often cited as the creators of the photovoice technique, Amanda O. Latz (2012 & 2017) has made valuable contributions. A key tenet of the Wang and Burris (1997) approach is the emphasis on critical consciousness development. In her
use of photovoice with community college students, Latz (2012) proposed a bifurcated understanding of photovoice outcomes. She established reflective consciousness as an alternative and valuable outcome where participants did not seem to undergo deep changes in their critical consciousness, in other words their ability to connect their experiences and actions to larger patterns in society. She noted that participants in her study were far more inwardly than outwardly focused, experiencing changes in reflective consciousness rather than critical consciousness. Latz (2012) also branched out from the strict group interview structure of Wang and Burris’ (1997) photovoice methodology, employing multiple individual interviews with each participant. Latz (2012) does not advocate for her methodology over that of Wang and Burris (1997). Rather she acknowledged that both methodologies can provide different and equally valuable outcomes.

Like the considerations I made for policy change outcomes, I allowed space for reflective consciousness rather than only critical consciousness. Reflective consciousness takes repeated and ongoing intentional exposure to a topic (Latz, 2012). Women participating in this study had ongoing exposure but not to the extent that a community group meeting together weekly for a participatory action research project might. Reflective consciousness on the embodied experience of graduate school was still a valuable takeaway for participants because of the potential it has to renew participants’ motivation and self-confidence (Latz, 2012).

**Design and Timeline of Feminist Photovoice Phenomenology Project**

Selecting photovoice as a methodology requires intention and careful planning as well as a willingness to allow the process to become messy and unpredictable (Linder, 2018; Springgay et al., 2005). Researchers considering photovoice studies should practice reflection during design phases, participant engagement, and data analysis that are specific to this methodology.
After determining one’s topic, researchers should carefully consider whether their population and intended questions are suitable for photovoice. As is the case with most studies, an analytical plan should begin to take shape before engaging with participants. Researchers should determine how they will ask participants about their photos and where they will draw their analytical boundaries (Siegesmund, 2018). For instance, will researchers rely on participant interpretation of their own photos and only analyze the interview transcripts, or will researchers also revisit photographs without participants present to explore further details of the images that may reveal additional insights? One of the main goals of photovoice is to allow participants to record what they see and experience (Desyllas, 2014; Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997), and applying one’s own interpretation to participant-generated photos changes that dynamic. Each strategy has its own benefits and implications worthy of careful consideration.

Project Setting and Participant Sample

The project setting was Research University. I chose this location for several reasons. First, I had easy access to members of this community. There were some limitations around who could participate based on existing relationships I had at the institution, but I factored those into my design. For instance, I did not include anyone from the College of Education because of the potential for them to cross paths with myself or my dissertation audience. I also screened for anyone with whom I had previously had professional or social connections including women who have participated in a previous study. I wanted to have as clean a slate as possible with the participants of this project. This institution, while unique in its own ways, is reflective of the large, public, R1 institution around which much of the Ph.D. world is centered.

Blending several different methodologies means taking into consideration several
approaches to project design. My aim was to gather a sample of 16-21 participants borrowing from the mean samples for qualitative education studies and phenomenology studies (Guetterman, 2015). Purposive sampling is preferable for photovoice studies because of the specific research question at hand and the demands the projects place on participants (Latz, 2017). Creating change for a community is a direct aim of photovoice, so to a certain extent participants needed to want to be involved in activism as part of this project. Conclusions can be drawn from analyzing photovoice and phenomenological datasets limited to six to eight, or slightly more participants (Latz, 2017; Martin, 2018; Sandhu et al., 2013; Vagle, 2016), but I was fortunate to retain 20 participants throughout the entire project.

I used institutional research data to make contact via email with all women-identified Ph.D. students at Research University. Interested participants completed a short demographic form. To address gender essentialism within phenomenological design (Salamon, 2018), I asked participants to self-identify as women rather than provide a definition of my own. As discussed in the Research Questions section, the purpose of this project was not to determine the essence of womanhood. Rather, I examined what meaning those who identify as women make of the embodied Ph.D. journey. Other qualifying demographics included having completed at least four semesters of graduate study at this institution, currently pursuing a Ph.D. or combined master’s/Ph.D. program, availability to complete at least the first and second interviews, and in a non-performance arts or education field. I had too many connections in the College of Education to include these women. I also excluded women in music, dance, or theater because most of their academic work is already intentionally focused on embodiment.

Pilot Explorations

Prior to engaging in phenomenological research, it is recommended that researchers
explore their own thoughts or experiences on the given research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Sometimes, this activity is referred to as bracketing, harkening back to Husserlian phenomenology (Seidman, 2013; Wertz, 2011). Phenomenologists debate the extent to which an individual can set aside their prior experiences to view a phenomenon entirely through the eyes of participants, and this has caused rifts among researchers regarding methodological approaches (Vagle, 2018). Phenomenology stemming from Heideggerian dasein, instead, relies on meaning situated in the context of the human world, including the historical, social, and political conditions that contribute to the meaning we make of our existence (Vagle, 2018).

Rather than conduct a full pilot study with one or two participants, I used myself as a pilot participant to test the extent to which my initial constructs would hold up in a photovoice exploration. Throughout project development, data collection, and analysis phases, I wrote memos to reflect on my own experiences as a graduate student and how they match or depart from the constructs I have created from the literature, previous experiences working with women graduate students, and emerging findings from this project. Wanting to test my protocol for first round interviews, I wrote my own life histories about who I have been as a student and how my relationship with my body has changed over the years, paying careful attention to where they overlapped. For three weeks, I also took photos of my surroundings when a situation seemed to illustrate what I considered to be my embodied experience in graduate school. I was able to provide some structure to my reflections through assignments for my Arts Based Research class.

I found that I was able to write about all three of my intended constructs: 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, and 3) mental health and wellness. The final construct, mental health and wellness, was by far the most salient category for my reflections. One image that stands out to me is a photograph I took of all the medications, failed and
successful, I have tried since starting my Ph.D. program to manage my new mental health diagnoses and their side effects.

In addition to my own mini-pilot study, I had informal conversations with my colleagues about what they might photograph if they were to participate in my study. Overwhelmingly, their responses were also centered around mental health and wellness. One colleague said she would photograph the drop ceiling and fluorescent lights in her office and then compare that to a photograph of a hiking trail up a mountain. She explained that both photographs represented challenges in graduate school. The hiking trail represented a real and organic challenge that she felt she had chosen, something that motivated her and felt like her journey. The photograph of the lights in her office, however, would represent the artificiality she associated with much of her program. The imposed barriers and the resulting discomfort she felt caused her to feel separation from and resentment towards her doctoral process rather than pure feelings of accomplishment she might experience when reaching the top of a mountain. Other images colleagues mentioned included a pond where one woman would sit and reflect on family she missed back home, visible body odor, and a dark cave with no light at all.

Earlier conversations with women Ph.D. students, both informal with colleagues and formal as part of another research study, also supported the constructs I chose to explore. Informally, a colleague shared her experiences with health, fertility, and changes in her appearance. A recent medical diagnosis helped shed some light on the mental and physical changes she had been experiencing since starting graduate school, many of which were related to stress. The medical treatment she has needed to undergo as a result had made conceiving children temporarily impossible for her and her husband. Her embodied experience in graduate school has been colored by all three constructs and the interactions they created.
Finally, I did some practice concept coding (Saldaña, 2016) on interview transcripts from a previous study with women doctoral students to see how well my constructs would hold without any direct interview prompts. This previous study focused on the question “What do women doctoral students learn about success from their women advisors?” My interview protocol did not involve any direct questions about 1) dress and appearance, 2) motherhood and reproduction, or 3) health and wellness. Interview questions focused on work-life balance, conflicts encountered in graduate school, and conversations held with advisors around success. Below are several excerpt quotes for each construct with participant pseudonyms attached.

**Dress and Appearance**

CJ: “And so I can be like... ‘What do I do? Do I wear my hair up? Do I wear my hair down? Do I do a dress? Do I do pants?’ That I can talk to [my advisor] about. I don’t think I would ask... I mean I know I wouldn’t ask a male advisor like how to dress and what to do with my boobs. Or like how to sit…”

Linda: “She used to make us wear blazers to conferences. Like the women had to wear blazers. And I'm a pretty tall woman with broad shoulders. I don't need a blazer to look authoritative.”

**Reproduction and Motherhood**

Rose: “My first year I think [my advisor] may have lost a couple advisees that dropped out after they got pregnant and um... my first year she kind of mentioned a couple times, actually I didn't really like that she kind of implied that she knew that I was married...I had this kind of timeline and she would say something like ‘Oh that will take less time, or more time if you get pregnant.’ She was testing me if I had this idea that I was going to get pregnant during school.”
Sarah: “I think from outside of the department I have certainly had people not in [my field], but when I explain what I do like they're like ‘Oh, of course. You're doing [that] and working with kids.’ Something that's sort of a softer science, you know? Or ‘there must be a lot of women in that field’ and things like that.”

**Health and Wellness**

Lucy: “I got very sick after my first year of graduate school. A lot of recurring mental health issues, very much came to the surface... pretty bad depression...and then anxiety. I was very anxious and I also met the criteria for anorexia.”

Sarah: “I've had back problems for over a year. It's not horrendous, but it’s just generally bad and has been causing a lot of problems with nerves. It's been hard to find the time and do a lot of treatment...I am actually going to take off some time this summer to... do a lot of physical therapy and be really active... Instead of work/life balance I'm going to stop work and do the whole life thing and have a better balance. And my advisor has been completely supportive of that.”

My concept coding exercise with these interview transcripts gave me confidence that participants in this new embodiment project will have plenty to discuss and photograph in relation to my proposed constructs.

I purposely resisted moving reflections with myself and the other informal pilotees beyond surface-level observations to meaning-making conversations. At that stage, I wanted to remain open to the meaning-making that takes place for actual participants. My self-reflection and conversations I had with other women Ph.D. students helped to reinforce that my proposed constructs were flexible enough to accommodate many different women. Feminist phenomenology acknowledges the impossibility of remaining entirely neutral as a researcher,
and neutrality is also not a goal of feminist phenomenology (Bergoffen, 2000; Embree, 2000; Fielding, 2017; Fisher, 2000; Olkowski, 2017). Furthermore, photovoice projects are politically motivated in nature (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). I had a hunch that this project would help illustrate that women’s bodies are not naturally incompatible with Ph.D. programs, but my intention was to allow the voices and photographs of the project participants to bring that story fully to life.

**Constructs for Interviews**

Typical phenomenological studies involve a series of three interviews for each participant (Seidman, 2013). Each interview has a specific purpose: 1) a focused participant life history 2) details of the experience, and 3) reflection on the process. Interviews usually follow an unstructured pattern, allowing each participant to shape the phenomenon in their own way (Vagle, 2018). The unstructured nature of each interview blends well with photovoice design because of the emphasis placed on participants and what they want to discuss as well as multiple phases of interviews (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Vagle, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). Furthermore, a goal of feminist phenomenology is to address gender essentialism (Salamon, 2018). Strict interview protocols run the risk of overly dictating the content of interviews. Broad constructs create space for multiple versions of Ph.D. womanhood while drawing attention to phenomena that hold true for many women. This project was an opportunity for women to respond to their current public narratives and bring to light new phenomena. Needing to balance the fluid nature of these methodologies with the more structured demands of the dissertation, I prepared several constructs to discuss with participants throughout the research process.
Drawing from current literature on women’s bodies in academia, informal pilots, and previous studies with women Ph.D. students, the constructs for interviews were 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, and 3) health and wellness.

**Institutional Review Board and Funding**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) must review all human subjects research before recruitment and data collection begin (Rallis & Rossman, 2012; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Seidman, 2013). This project received full IRB approval. Expenses for this project were not exorbitant. I received funding from my faculty for participant gift cards, and I contributed the remaining balance. I also used my own funds to print photographs during my data analysis phase. Because of the pandemic, I was limited to sharing photographs in the online gallery, and I did not need to purchase frames or larger prints.

**Project Stages with Participants**

By design, photovoice is participatory in nature (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). The amount of involvement participants have in a photovoice project depends on several factors including the research question at hand, participants’ interest and availability, and aims of the final products (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017). Typically, a photovoice project leaning heavily on participatory action research will involve participants in developing the initial research question and subtopics to be explored (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). Given that Ph.D. students already have demanding schedules and that I needed a complete enough project to satisfy the demands of a dissertation, I was cautious and intentional about where I built in participant involvement. Following is a description of stages involving participants and how I blended my aims with their needs.
**Participant Recruitment**

The recruitment phase of this project began in mid-December 2019. The beginning and end of the semester can be busy times for Ph.D. students, so I planned carefully to account for missed communications or forgotten asks. After having identified all women Ph.D. students at Research University within each department through a public information request, I reached out in mid-December via email to these women with information about the project and an ask to share the information with other qualifying students. I had enough responses from my first email that there was no need to send out a second request. Each respondent completed a brief screening survey in Qualtrics, and I contacted qualifying women to set up first interviews. Several women did not qualify or did not respond enough to establish a first interview, but by late February 2020 I had 20 confirmed participants.

**Participant Demographics**

The following table offers descriptions of the women who participated in this project. Because of the sensitive nature of the data shared through interviews and photographs, limited demographic information is attached to each participant. They are individually identified by their chosen pseudonym, age, and broad area of study. I allowed participant responses to shape the broad areas of study. Initially, I had a few other categories in mind based on which specific departments women had identified in their intake forms. However, women did not always identify with these categories as I had anticipated. They all chose to identify as social science, humanities, or STEM. International students all wanted to be identified as such, so that information is also included. Other group demographics follow in a narrative.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Area of Study</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Domestic or International Status</th>
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<td>58</td>
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<td>Jui</td>
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<td>Loann</td>
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<td>Malala Michele</td>
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I asked each woman at the end of her second interview several demographic questions in addition to the information provided above including race and/or ethnicity (whichever was most important to participants), socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, number of children, and marital status. Some of these demographics were salient enough for individual women that they become apparent during the Findings section, such as marital status, sexual orientation, or number of children. However, I let the salience of those demographics speak for themselves in the Findings rather than attaching them to all individuals in a table.

Of the 20 women in this study, 12 identified as White or Caucasian. One of these 12 said that as an international student, she was considered White in the United States but had been categorized in other ways depending on where she lived. Four women identified as biracial or mixed race. The women who specified their races or ethnicities within this category included European and Middle Eastern and White and Native American, but two women did not specify beyond mixed or biracial. The other four women identified as Latina/Latin American, South Asian, Asian/Korean, and Hispanic.

Women had nuanced responses to the question about socioeconomic status. Three women identified as poor in relation to their income and eligibility for government assistance. Three identified as working class or lower middle class. Seven women identified as middle class and one as upper class because she received financial assistance from her family for school and her housing. The remaining six women mentioned that they grew up identifying with a certain socioeconomic status but had a hard time distinguishing where they were at this point because of their status as graduate students. Most said they grew up middle class but now struggled financially, and one woman said she had grown up working class but now felt more middle class.
Their nuanced responses took into consideration their income as well as the social capital they had as being members of an elite and privileged academic community.

In terms of sexual orientation, 13 of the 20 women identified as heterosexual or straight. Four women identified as bisexual, one as queer, and one as a lesbian. The final participant said she identified as “straightish” because she had at times in her life when she was single considered dating women. However, she was currently married to a man and identified more with a heterosexual lifestyle at this point in her life.

Fourteen women did not have any children. Three women had one child, and three women had two children. Some of these women had younger children living at home, and other women had grown children who no longer lived at home. One participant had one child of her own but was dating and living with someone who had shared custody of his daughter. At times, she shared her living space with her partner’s daughter.

As for marital status, four women were unmarried and did not have a current romantic partner. Six women were not married but had long-term partners. Four of these women lived with their long-term partners. Six women were currently married. Four women had been married at one time but were now divorced. Of these four women, two identified more as “single mothers” than as divorced.

**Meeting One: Life History Interviews and Photo Prompts**

Photovoice and phenomenological interviews can be conducted in group or individual settings depending on the intended purpose of the study, scheduling logistics, the nature of the topic discussed, and the comfort level of participants (Desyllas, 2014; Latz, 2012 & 2017; Vagle, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). Individual interviews made sense for this project, especially given the sensitive topic and the complications associated with scheduling a large group of Ph.D.
students to meet at the same time more than once. There are benefits to facilitating arts-based inquiry groups of women for the purpose of discussing sensitive topics, such as bodies or trauma (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Lu & Yuen, 2012; Vacchelli, 2018). At the same time, photovoice projects can be impactful for audiences, researchers, and participants when participants’ can be involved without having to meet other participants (Desyllas, 2014). This arrangement can be preferable if there are too many risks or complications associated with gathering all participants together at the same time. As fate would have it, data collection for the project ended just as the pandemic forced our move to remote work and learning. Data collection would have been far more difficult if I had relied upon larger groups of women meeting together given the fact that we were no longer able to meet in person.

Traditional phenomenological and photovoice studies involve interviewing participants in multiple interviews that take place several weeks apart (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Latz, 2017; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Seidman, 2013). This time frame gives participants enough time to reflect on the contents of each interview without forgetting the content discussed. Life history interviews, the first in the series, took place during mid-January to early March. These initial, audio-recorded interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Life history interviews focus on questions related to experience and action, those concerned with how rather than why (Seidman, 2013). After going over consent forms, resources, and any questions about the study, I began the interview by asking the participants to talk about the following prompts:

1) How did you come to be a Ph.D. student? What has been your relationship with school up until this point?

2) How did you come into your current relationship with your body? What has been your relationship with your body up until this point?
I adapted my questioning to each interviewee, keeping in mind the constructs I was using to examine the phenomenon at hand (Vagle, 2018), women’s embodied Ph.D. journey - 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, 3) and health and wellness.

After discussing life histories for approximately 40-50 minutes, the interviews then shifted to questions about their current experiences as Ph.D. students. These were the questions I asked participants to build upon during their time taking photographs between this first interview and the second interview. These questions included

1) What is your average daily/weekly schedule? How do you get ready for your day? How do you end your day?

2) How do you organize your space (work, school, home)? How would you describe your work/school/home environment?

3) How would you describe your health? Generally speaking, how do you feel on a day-to-day basis?

The purpose of these questions was to have participants reconstruct (Seidman, 2013) the actions and feelings they encountered on a regular basis within the context of being women graduate students. During the initial interview, we were establishing the what, but not yet the why or how. Questions remained relatively surface level for the purpose of illustrating a context, and meaning-making occurred in later interviews. Usually, the initial interview in phenomenology does not touch on the present at all, only the past (Seidman, 2013). However, because of the blended design with photovoice, I needed to introduce these prompts for the photos with participants during the first interview and continued discussing during the second interview.
Participant Individual Phase: Taking Photos

Following the initial life history interview, participants had two to three weeks to take photographs of their environments according to the provided prompts. In photovoice studies, participants are either provided with a camera or allowed to take photographs with their own devices (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Harper & Howard, 2019; Latz, 2017). All participants used the phones on their cameras for this phase of the project.

Before leaving the first interview, I provided participants with a list of guidelines for the photographs. My purpose was not to dictate the contents of photos for aesthetic purposes (Wang & Burris, 1997). The goal of photovoice projects is not to produce good photography in any sort of professional sense. The value of photographs comes from the meaning participants ascribe to them. Rather, guidelines helped keep the focus of photographs on project goals as well as protecting confidentiality to the extent possible (Harper & Howard, 2019). Guidelines included the prompt questions and constructs to help direct participants, tips for taking photos on camera phones, and directions for archiving and sharing photos.

One guideline was a request for participants to refrain from taking any images that revealed personally identifying information. Often there is a temptation for participants to want to take photographs of people, although these images can compromise confidentiality (Harper & Howard, 2019). Other personally identifying information might include addresses or names. Rather than direct participants away from all images concerning other human subjects, minor adjustments can be made to help participants capture the same message. For example, during my self-pilot, the image I initially took of my medication had my name and names of my prescriptions written on the bottles. To adjust this composition, I would turn the bottles in a way that the viewer would not be able to see this text. The important aspect of the photograph was
the overabundance of medication, not necessarily what they were or who I am. Another adjustment might include taking pictures of hands instead of people’s faces. If the photograph helps spark conversation during interviews and communicates something to the participant, other aesthetics are less important.

To help participants organize their photographs, I provided each of them with a protected folder in Box where they could upload their images. Before the second interview, I asked participants to organize their photographs in the order in which they would like to discuss them. I discussed with participants the difference between favorite and most important. Favorite may indicate an aesthetically pleasing composition in the photograph, but most important should indicate that the content and the meaning attached are significant (Harper & Howard, 2019). I let participants know that we would likely be able to discuss 10-15 photographs during their second interview, so they should prioritize their photographs accordingly. Some women had specific orders. Others just discussed the photographs in the order they appeared in Box without sorting.

**Meeting Two: Photo Interviews**

In phenomenology, the purpose of the second interview is usually to capture the details of the experience under examination (Seidman, 2013). A third interview usually follows where participants are asked to assign meaning to their reflections and experiences. Due to the blended nature of this project, participants began reconstructing their current contexts at the end of their first interview, continued while they were taking photographs, and then again into the second interview. They also engaged in reflection and meaning-making while sharing their photographs.

The photo interview timeframe took place in a semi-structured wave two to three weeks after the initial life history interviews. After having several weeks to take photographs on their own, participants returned for photo interviews during mid-February to late-March. Like the first
round, these interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. I offered to meet participants where they were most comfortable. Most interviews took place in my advisor’s office where we had privacy. Some interviews took place over Zoom if women were working remotely and once the campus closed due to the pandemic. One participant invited me to her apartment for both interviews.

Like the life history interviews, the protocol for the audio-recorded photo interviews was unstructured. I discussed the importance of participant involvement in data analysis and how each woman set the agenda for our interview by virtue of taking photographs for data collection. With each photograph, I asked probing questions such as

1) Why did you take this photograph?
2) What do you see in this photograph? What stands out to you?
3) How does this photograph make you feel?
4) How might you caption this photograph?

I then followed up with questions that connected their responses to the embodiment constructs and their life histories.

At the end of the photo interview, I asked participants to select one or two photos that they would feel comfortable sharing in the project gallery. I also asked them if I had their permission to use each of their other photos for publications, conferences, and other academic projects. Participants were able to give permission for each photograph rather than having to give blanket permission. Some women chose to keep several photographs private and only used them for the context of our discussion if the photographs contained people’s faces, names, or other identifying information.
Showpiece Photo Display

Ethical considerations for sharing participant-generated photographs assumed, there are many options for disseminating photovoice findings. Acceptance of photovoice studies in academic journals is increasing as the methodology gains popularity and recognition (Liebenberg, 2018). However, findings should also be shared in ways that are meaningful to participants and reach intended audiences, not just academic communities (Latz, 2017; Liebenberg, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants and researchers can take advantage of social media, public art galleries, local news outlets, blogs, and more to present images and their accompanying stories (Capous-Desyllas & Forro, 2014; Desyllas, 2014; Latz, 2017; Liebenberg, 2018).

In addition to my formal dissertation manuscript, I disseminated photographs and emerging findings in ways that are meaningful beyond my immediate academic context. A virtual gallery offers the most promise for being able to share this project and its messages to the widest audience. Each participant was invited to select one or two photographs from their collection and write an accompanying artist statement that also served as their third and final phase of reflection in the phenomenological design. I uploaded the photographs and artist statements to a WordPress gallery. From the very beginning, I had intentional conversations with participants about the nature of this project, the potential risks, and the goal of being able to share widely the photographs and messages we create together. A huge benefit of creating a shareable digital gallery was the fact that participants and other interested parties were able to share these stories with non-academic audiences. I shared the online gallery through my social media channels and whenever I was asked to present findings or lessons from working on my
dissertation with other students. The online gallery had over 1,200 visitors between now and when it first launched in April of 2020.

At one point during data collection, I had discussed with women the possibility of creating an exhibit for the College of Education’s annual Research and Practice Showcase. Women had the option to attend, not attend but share photographs, or to request exclusion from any in-person gallery since that had not been an initial piece of the research design. There was a lot of interest in sharing their photographs in person, especially since that provided the women an opportunity to meet each other in person after they had seen each other’s photographs in the online gallery. Again, because of the pandemic, all in-person events were cancelled, and we did not have the opportunity to create that in-person experience. That loss was the most disappointing aspect of this project because I had been so pleasantly surprised by the overwhelming enthusiasm the women had for being able to participate in that event. I am sad that I was not able to facilitate that kind of experience for them. I have since had to let that go after gauging everyone’s energy levels in the months of social isolation that followed.

Data Analysis

Analyzing feminist phenomenological photovoice data is a complex undertaking. While an analytical plan should begin developing before data collection or analysis (Siegesmund, 2018), researchers should expect ambiguity and messiness within their data in a way that other methods do not, releasing strict preconceptions about positivism and rigor (Springgay et al. 2005). Participants are involved in multiple stages of analysis (Gubrium & Harper, 2013; Harper & Howard, 2019; Latz, 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). During this project, they decide what to photograph, select the photographs to discuss, contextualize photographs through storytelling,
and identify patterns around issues or themes through reflective interviews. There are also additional phases of data analysis I undertook alone as the researcher.

All interview transcripts were audio recorded and auto transcribed using Otter.ai. Over the summer and into the fall, I cleaned the interview transcripts while re-listening to audio recordings to fix any auto-transcribed inaccuracies. I shared cleaned transcripts with participants for member checking and asked if there were any parts of their transcripts they wished to keep private. No participants asked to redact or change any parts of their transcripts.

**Participant-Generated Photographs**

Photovoice studies differ from participant-generated photo studies in many ways, but one way is the approach to analyzing photos. In photovoice studies, researchers typically do not analyze photographs, only the interview transcripts or observations they make from the discussions participants have about their photos (Harper & Howard, 2019; Latz, 2017). Photographs are considered data for this project, but only participants assigned meaning to them during interviews. My analyses were limited to our conversations during interviews and coding interview transcripts. I used Tropy software to organize photographs in a digital space outside of separate Box folders. This method enabled me to assign codes to each photograph and attach quotes to them from participant interviews for context. My codes came only from the associated participant discussions about each photograph and not from my analysis of photograph contents. Initially, I had printed each photograph and sorted them into themed piles, but I quickly realized that I was imposing my own interpretations based on contents such as photographs of food, pets, or workspaces. These broad categories alone did not allow for interview context, and Tropy helped provide the necessary nuance.
Interview Transcripts

Qualitative researchers engage in data analysis both formally and informally throughout the entire research process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). As one of the instruments through which data analysis takes place, I began analysis of participant-generated data as soon as data collection began. As I cleaned transcripts, I saved some favorite quotes that spoke to my constructs, and I generated a large list of possible themes with examples. I used these memos to narrow my focus for more structured coding. Once cleaning the transcripts was completed, I conducted a more thorough analysis of interview transcripts. I coded transcripts several times by hand using different colored highlighters.

Saldaña (2016) recommends qualitative researchers use a multi-phase design that includes a first cycle, a transition cycle, and a second cycle. The embodied phenomenon of being a woman Ph.D. student was the focus of this project, so my first cycle of coding was largely affect- and element-centered (Saldaña, 2016). Affective coding examined the emotions and values participants discussed during interviews - how they felt and judgements they made. Elemental coding involves processes and concepts. Processes are actions, typically in the form of gerunds - what they do and how they do it. This method of coding is useful for examinations of routine and daily life, a concern of phenomenological research. I used concept coding for initial mentions of the three embodiment constructs - 1) dress and appearance 2) reproduction and motherhood and 3) health and wellness.

Another key data analysis activity for phenomenological studies is theming the data (Saldaña, 2016). Sometimes used as a coding strategy itself, theming is also a reflective activity that can be used for grouping codes. I used a theme coding strategy during the initial cleaning reads. Using this combination of coding strategies is referred to as eclectic coding (Saldaña,
Eclectic coding differs from open coding or exploratory coding because it is an intentional first cycle followed by memo-writing and a narrowed second cycle re-coding rather than simultaneous coding and developing properties and dimensions of categories.

The transition cycle during eclectic coding bridges the gap between the first and second cycles of data analysis (Saldaña, 2016). Transition strategies can help identify emerging categories and determine which coding strategies with which to proceed during second cycle coding. After consulting with my advisor, I decided to narrow my coding focus from all embodied aspects of being a Ph.D. student to looking at structures and attitudes within their experiences that impacted my proposed constructs of dress and appearance, motherhood and reproduction, and health and wellness.

I used pattern coding as my second cycle strategy, a way of grouping first cycle codes into clusters by themes or concepts (Saldaña, 2016). Here, I used Tropy to join photographs with key passages from interviews and created broader themes like “experiencing loss,” “receiving feedback,” and “feeling supported.” I wrote analytic memos to help determine which categories were most significant and how they related to each other. A strategy I used for this activity was codeweaving - writing and rewriting codes, themes, and categories into narrative using as few sentences as possible (Saldaña, 2016). I began to separate main arguments I wanted to make from the supporting themes through an outline for findings. Then, I pulled photographs and accompanying quotes from the data to use as examples.

**Data Quality**

Many researchers have concerns about the value of data collected through photovoice studies. Generally, data is considered trustworthy if there is truth to what the researcher claims, there is evidence of rigor in the methods, and the findings are applicable to other situations.
Authenticity was my main concern for data quality. I wanted to ensure that my interpretations of participants’ stories were true to what they wanted to express, that my findings represented a wide array of voices, and this process provided opportunities for change (Shannon & Hambacher, 2014). Participants were able to take part in the consensus building process through discussing emerging themes during final interviews and artist statements that I had noted in my memo writing. Many women in this project expressed a deeper understanding of themselves and their contexts as Ph.D. students because of participating, an aim of photovoice projects and qualitative research more broadly (Latz, 2012a; Shannon & Hambacher, 2014).

Interpretation of data, especially images, can be subjective and contradictory at times (Denton, et al., 2018). Researchers also must grapple with what is depicted in photographs versus the meaning the person who took the photograph ascribes to it. These interpretations can also differ from those of the audience, causing some people to doubt the value of data collected from photovoice studies. That being said, a photovoice study grounded in feminist phenomenology should embrace the shared power aspect. Sharing power does not automatically detract from the quality of data. In fact, sharing power can contribute to data quality while adding some complications.

**Project Limitations**

While there are many benefits to using photovoice, there are also limits that researchers should carefully consider when designing their projects. Time requirements, additional ethical considerations, and data value concerns are legitimate. At the same time, these limitations can also provide benefits when critically examined.
**Broad Demographics**

One limitation of this project is the broad demographic net I had cast when recruiting participants. I was not focused on a specific department or area of study. I was most interested in the shared phenomenon of being a woman Ph.D. student regardless of program, but there is room for future research to narrow by department or subject. I recommend other areas for future study in the Discussion.

**Ethical Considerations**

There are also ethical considerations for a project of this nature. Research is always a value-laden practice that demands attention to ethics no matter what the design may be (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rallis & Rossman, 2012; Rossman & Rallis, 2012; Seidman, 2013). As a researcher, every decision I make has an impact on participants and their communities. Ethically, research should be designed in a way that benefits participants instead of causing them harm (DeVault, 1999; Rallis & Rossman, 2012). Since we were discussing a sensitive topic, I wanted to be as explicit as possible about the nature of the study and let participants know I would be asking them questions that relate to their relationship with their bodies. I was also sure to support participants and provide them with resources as necessary.

Specific to photovoice, I needed to be careful when publishing participant-generated photos. Considerations for consent and privacy are paramount (Linder, 2018). Photovoice participants may be at risk for retaliation from others for exposing issues. Some people have a harder time setting their own boundaries around discomfort and privacy (Öster at al., 2009), but participants may engage in self-censorship when deciding what to share (Wang & Burris, 1997). I was careful not to mine participants for data without investing in a reciprocal relationship first. The purpose of ethical research is to amplify the voices of participants, not
to overpower them (Mohanty, 2003). Therefore, participants were involved in all decisions about what happens to the art they produce for the purpose of this project.

In many ways, this project felt intimidating due to the complexity of the topic at hand and the amount of participant involvement I wanted to have. At the same time, I very much enjoyed opening this project up to the participants about which I had been reading and writing for some time. My informal conversations with colleagues of all ages and ranks within the academic hierarchy led me to believe that there were enlightening conversations to be had and eye-opening photographs to be shared, and participants did not disappoint.
CHAPTER 4

PROJECT FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this project is to explore the embodied experience of graduate school according to women Ph.D. students. Embodiment supports the notion that the self is composed of mind, body, and spirit and the subjectivity of the individual in understanding how these aspects are interconnected. Embodiment contrasts with mind-body dualism that divides the body from the mind into a bifurcated hierarchy in which the mind is superior to the body. In mind-body dualism, men are associated with the superior mind and women are associated with the inferior body. Embodiment also allows for existences beyond a binary and prescribed understanding of gender. This project investigates the following questions:

1. For those who self-identify as women, what is the essence of the embodied Ph.D. experience?

   a. How do women understand the influence of dress and appearance in the Ph.D. and broader academic experiences?

   b. How do women understand the influence of reproduction and motherhood in the Ph.D. and broader academic experiences?

   c. How do women understand the influence of health and wellness in the Ph.D. and broader academic experiences?

2. To what extent does the experience of being in a Ph.D. program support women’s ability to live a healthy (mind and body) lifestyle?

In this chapter, I advance three interconnected arguments grounded in the data from this project. First, Ph.D. programs are not designed to support the embodied wellness of women. In
these spaces, women Ph.D. students are either just students and brains with no bodies or they are just women with bodies and no brains. Second, it is important to address these inadequacies because there is a strong connection between women’s bodies and minds and their academic work. Finally, despite existing in spaces that are not necessarily designed to support their needs, women demonstrate strength and creativity when they step away from mind-body dualism towards embodiment.

Figure 1: Project framework

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the project framework leading to project findings. The initial triangle represents the three constructs I used to examine the embodied experience of being a woman Ph.D. student: 1) dress and appearance, 2) motherhood and reproduction, and 3) health and wellness. These constructs are examined through the lens of feminist phenomenological photovoice and shape project findings. The resulting circle is composed of my three main arguments: 1) Ph.D. programs do not support women’s embodied wellness; 2) there are strong connections between the body, mind, and academic work; and 3) despite the lack of support for embodiment, women step outside of mind-body dualism towards embodiment to
support their own embodied wellness. The resulting circle reappears several times throughout
the findings section with each main argument to serve as a guidepost. The section of the circle
that correlates with the section of the findings is highlighted in green. Each main argument
section then has a more detailed illustration to accompany the supporting details. When the
needs of their bodies and minds are unmet, women experience challenges as students and in
other areas of their lives. Women who participated in this project were not always sure which
began first – challenges outside of school impacting their academic lives or their academic lives
impacting them outside of school. No matter the order, there are ways that institutions can better
support the overall wellness of women Ph.D. students as well as ways for women to continue to
support themselves and each other.

In the following sections, I argue that institutional and departmental structures and the
individual attitudes and behaviors of faculty, administrators, and other students that uphold these
structures do not support the embodied wellness of women Ph.D. students. Rather than
empowering women to exist holistically in all their beautiful and complex realities, faculty,
administrators, and academic program structures often reinforce a distinct separation between
bodies and minds. Too often, women Ph.D. students are seen as either just students with brains
and no bodies, or they are just women with bodies and no brains. This way of thinking reinforces
unhealthy environments and patterns of behavior that have negative implications for women.

There is, in fact, a strong connection between women’s bodies, minds, their academic
selves, and embodied wellness whether the Ph.D. program environment is equipped to recognize
it or not. Some aspects of Ph.D. programs impact all students regardless of gender, and others are
specific to students who identify as women. Despite many shortcomings in their environments,
women Ph.D. students can and do demonstrate strength, resiliency, and creativity when adapting
to and challenging the norms of their programs. Changes to program structures and the attitudes which uphold them are needed, but while change may be slow to come there are many ways in which women Ph.D. students and their support communities help each other succeed.

**Ph.D. Programs Do Not Support Holistic Embodied Wellness of Women**

Ph.D. programs, by design, tend to treat all students regardless of gender as if they are just brains with no bodies, emphasizing the importance of intelligence and academic productivity above wellness. Students are expected to study and produce research within a timely fashion before moving to a career, preferably as a tenure-track faculty member at a research-intensive university. These structures ignore individual preferences for working in industry or alternative academic positions in addition to the limited number of available tenure-track positions for new Ph.D. graduates. The way women experience their gender complicates this design since there are many circumstances in our society in which women are treated only as bodies, particularly for the pleasure of heterosexual men and their assumed innate caretaking abilities.

Academic work is not exclusively a cerebral activity, even though many individuals and program structures treat it as such. Students can experience changes to their overall sense of physical and mental wellness due in part to the expectations to work long hours in isolation while sitting in front of a computer screen. The role of grades and evaluation combined with changing and unclear expectations may be different than how they experienced them at other times in their academic careers, impacting mental health and sense of self-worth.

Women themselves often must learn how to acknowledge their full embodied experiences and needs during graduate school because so much of their identities have been closely tied to being successful students. That is who many have been for most of their childhoods and into their adult lives and where they derive much of their sense of self-worth,
especially in relation to receiving positive feedback from teachers or parents. As women, they may also be accustomed to placing the needs of others before their own which makes recognizing their own embodied experiences even more challenging.

When I asked project participants about their relationships with school from as far back as they could remember up until this point, most women shared some variants of “I’ve always loved school,” “I’ve always been a good student,” “School has always been a big part of my life,” and “I still love school.” When I asked them the same question about their relationships with their bodies, most women had much more complicated responses. Some said that their relationship with their bodies was better when they were younger but has changed as they have aged. Others described recently having started to develop a more positive relationship with their bodies, but it was one that still fluctuated. Some women, like Yoly, even said “I don’t think I worried a lot about my body or anything as a kid” until they reached puberty or beyond.

Similarly to school, women’s conceptions of their bodies had a lot to do with feedback they received from others, yet the feedback or how they internalized it tended to be more negative than their relationships with school. They were too skinny, too fat, too muscular, too sexy, too weird, or too sick. Sage remembered family members “being very concerned about my weight,” comparing her to her two sisters who were thinner than she was. This feedback had a negative impact on her body image over the years. Most participants had to actively work on rebuilding their relationships with their bodies throughout their lives, whereas their relationships with school had only become more complicated during post-secondary years. Still, the overall impressions they gave were that they loved school and they were working on that same kind of relationship with their bodies.
Many faculty, administrators, and even Ph.D. students believe that time spent in a Ph.D. program should be dedicated only to schoolwork and nothing else. As Malala Michele’s graduate program director insisted, “every spare minute you have, you should be in the library.” This pattern of thinking is incongruent with the complex lives women Ph.D. students have today. It creates an unhealthy sense of guilt for many women whenever they choose to or are otherwise forced to prioritize other needs ahead of school.

Figure 2: Argument 1

Figure 2 illustrates the first main argument and the focus of this section: Ph.D. programs do not support women’s embodied wellness. Rather, they bifurcate women through mind-body dualism. The result is two conflicting notions with which women Ph.D. students must contend; students are just walking brains with no bodies, and women are just bodies without brains.

**They Just Care What’s in Your Head:**

**Reducing Students to Walking Brains with No Bodies**

The current environments in which Ph.D. students must exist support the mind-body dualist notion that students are just walking brains with no bodies. Their sole purpose while in graduate school is to be an academic. They must complete coursework, publish, make progress
towards degree milestones, and secure a tenure-track faculty position after graduation. Program structures, such as graduation timelines or lack of community building, and individual attitudes left little room for cultivating positive relationships with their bodies. Linear program pathways may differ from the individual journeys women take while working towards their degrees and other life priorities. Coco had spent a lot of time thinking about the disembodied experience of being a graduate student. Reflecting on her experience in her Ph.D. program, she said “We're just these heads bopping along because nobody cares about your body … Your body can be falling apart, and they just care what's in your head.”

Brain and Body - Coco

She shared these reflections on the lack of attention to the whole self in Ph.D. programs.

This clay torso of a female body was just begging for a brain … Not perfection. Not all one thing and not another. A messy realness that academia so often neglects. Or pretends doesn’t exist … It is so easy to lose the self in comparison to others, in striving for the perfect over the good, in trying to do it all even the impossible, that the body falls away one moment at a time until you fail to recognize even yourself. This is not good. We are not academic bobbleheads, we are human beings, being. Bodies and brains.
Coco emphasized that women are more dynamic than the academic environment allows. Their relationships with their selves become strained and distorted because the demands of the Ph.D. program are often in conflict with embodiment.

Similarly, Nadine felt restricted by narrow stereotypes for academics that ignored feelings of empowerment she felt when connecting with her body.

*Everything is Earned, Even at Home* - Nadine

I do not want to be seen as just the walking brain. I think that if you say ‘I’m in academia’ you automatically assume that I can’t run a chainsaw, or I can’t lay a floor or I can’t do these things. It’s like no, I like the hands-on skills and I know how to do them, and I’m not just a walking brain.

It was important to add complexity to the way she is often viewed as a Ph.D. student.

Women in this project expressed feeling like they were just students - brains with no bodies. Participants described feeling pressured to work non-stop. The academic environment with its specific definitions of success and productivity meant that schoolwork should take
precedence over any other needs or responsibilities. Student workspaces on campus reflected the notion that women should be able to complete their work in any environment. If they have a table and a chair, their brains should be able to perform the necessary tasks of completing a doctoral degree. The lack of support women received in these areas did not match the complex realities of the lives they had both within and external to their roles as students.

You’re Punished When You Don’t Buy into It: Constant Pressure to Work

Guilt was a constant companion for many project participants due to the constant pressure to work. They felt guilty if they were not working enough on their dissertations or other publications, yet few were able to articulate what enough would be or an origin of the pressure. Some sense of feeling behind came from the impression that everyone else was always working when they were not.

Sage shared a photograph of a computer in her program’s office that other students and faculty could control remotely.
Sage could enter this office at any time of day and see that the computer was on, indicating that someone else was actively working on their research.

At almost any time of day there's somebody in the office so it gives you this impression that everyone is always working because someone's always working, even though they might be doing it at different shifts. Yeah, but it's, it weighs on you.

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_Focus - Clara_

Clara described feeling pressure from inanimate objects around her, anthropomorphized through her own internalized sense of guilt about her productivity. Looking at her seat in her home workspace, she felt the seat’s eyes judging her every time she got up and stopped working.

For a while, it was the middle of the night, and I was getting up from this terrible seat, it felt like it was looking at me like “why aren’t you still here doing your work?”... Like an almost gravitating force pulling my butt back down on it … Just staring at a blank word document there’s that pressure to just fill it up or to have the perfect content just spill out of your fingers right away.
She acknowledged that the pressure she felt from her chair or from a word document came from her own internalized sense of being behind on her work, even when there was no “force of external pressure like advisors breathing down your back” compelling her to work.

Women also felt guilt about neglecting other aspects of their lives when they prioritized their schoolwork over anything else, including their physical health, mental health, and relationships. Although most expressed overall satisfaction with their lives and their programs, many women also expressed concerns about the balance they had been able to create between their lives as Ph.D. students and attention to basic needs and self-care.

*Basil Plants and Self-Care in Graduate School - Greer*

Greer shared a photograph of a basil plant in her apartment that had withered after not watering it. She described this habit as “a fitting metaphor that the essential tasks tend to bleed over into things that are not essential.” That sparked a conversation about the other basil plants in
her life, like self-care and cleaning her apartment, that get neglected or classified as non-essential in comparison to her schoolwork.

I am barely surviving, and I only have to worry about myself and my dog … I have so much respect for [people with children]. I also have respect for anybody who’s doing this because everybody has their own struggles … I’m also tapped out.

She said she would buy basil plants repeatedly and then forget to water them even though watering would only take a minute.

Other women also described feeling like they needed to be productive, but productivity rarely included taking time for themselves to relax or be with loved ones since those activities rarely had a tangible outcome. Time for themselves ended up in last place. Intentional self-care means taking actions to improve physical and mental wellbeing without creating more stress for oneself, like taking time to eat and getting enough sleep. Recommendations from faculty for self-care activities were rare. When they did exist, they often seemed empty, cliche, or impossible due to the demands of their programs.

Eating, one of the most basic forms of self-care, was an area where some women noticed that they tended to prioritize their work and others over their bodies. Rather than taking time to eat with friends or family or even alone but without other distractions, some women ate at their desks, in their cars, or skipped meals altogether. Helena worked long hours at several jobs outside of her responsibilities as a student and often had little time to eat during the day.
Helena found herself frequently eating on the run.

So, for me, eating in the car could happen at any time. Sometimes it could even just be a snack because working in [my field] you don’t always get a proper break either … And if you have a 12-hour day, you only get to eat once in the day, too. So, you need to snack before you even get dinner. A typical night, I’m running between meetings or teaching.

She said that eating in the car was not ideal. An ideal situation would be eating at a table or on the couch with her boyfriend. Her responsibilities at school and work always took priority over eating to the point where she could skip meals and not eat all day.

Most of the international students who participated in this project noted significant cultural differences between eating behaviors at Research University and what they were used to back home. Yoly consciously held time in her schedule for taking an hour for lunch and often ate alone. When she spent the morning working in the library with other graduate students, they would shame her for taking that much time away from her studies to eat lunch.
Sometimes if I’m with whoever working … and I say “I’m going for lunch” people look at you and they might snap at you like “I don’t have time for lunch.” And I’m like “Well, you should.” In a sense, it is expected of you to buy into that super stress … or you’re punished when you don’t buy into it.

In her case, the pressure that Yoly experienced to work on schoolwork all the time to the point where she was ignoring the basic needs of her body was coming from other graduate students and not faculty or other formalized structures in her program. They had internalized their student responsibilities above the needs of their bodies and pressured other students to do the same. Their attitudes and behaviors created a toxic environment for Yoly.

Yoly compared the tension she felt between the demands of her program and her mind and body to a rubber band pulled tight.

It comes down to the body … Those days in which I feel that my back hurts. I can be clenching my jaw or my shoulders … It’s physical in that sense. It’s not only that you feel it emotionally or psychologically, it becomes a physical thing affecting your sleep.
The more pressure she internalized to keep pace with the expectations of her program, the more embodied stress she experienced.

Constant pressure to work was a prominent source of stress for many women in this project. Even if women had supportive advisors who encouraged them to take breaks after reaching program milestones, there was a distinct lack of conversation and structure around investing in students’ mental and physical health. Women understood far more often that graduate school was a time when they needed to prioritize their identities and responsibilities as students above their own wellbeing, even if no one said those words to them directly.

**Our Spaces Are Disposable: Insufficient Workspaces on Campus**

Women I spoke with believed faculty and administrators viewed them as just a brain without a body. This issue manifested in material ways through the lack of sufficient workspace on campus. Lack of attention to workspaces signaled that all a student needed was a chair and a desk to work. Administrators providing offices did not ensure these spaces met other needs, such as comfort, safety, or equity.

Participants reported that there was a designated office for graduate students in their departments, but most women, especially non-STEM students, found these offices to be uninviting and sometimes hazardous. Yoly said she stopped going to her communal office when they found dead mice and droppings because she was worried about getting sick. Several women stated that there were fewer chairs and desks than graduate students, meaning that not everyone could work in the office together. They noticed that some students, usually men, felt more comfortable taking space in these offices by leaving books or other possessions in spaces meant to be shared or taking up multiple places at a table meaning others could not fit.
When students asked for a second office to accommodate everyone in her program, faculty in Malala Michele’s department said the only space available was in a building across campus and away from everyone else in the department.

They said “But by saying that you’re willing to walk all the way down there, you’re telling facilities that you don’t require the room [in our building], that you don’t need to be in that physical space of the department that you can be across campus and still function.”… It’s the worst fucking logic I’ve ever heard.

Malala Michele explained that the lack of care faculty and administrators put into providing comfortable offices made her feel devalued as a graduate student. She said “I think [the university] just hates us as graduate students, just think we’re absolutely disposable, or our spaces are disposable. Just blows my mind every time.”

Paula shared a photograph of her shared office full of mismatched chairs. She explained that it had felt like a small victory when faculty provided a communal office for graduate students that was not tied to assistantships after students had organized their proposal for one. However, the physical workspace was uninviting and indicated their place within the hierarchy.
At one point, Paula had entered the office to find a chair in the middle of the room that was broken and coming apart at the seams.

I was so pissed because … most of these are super uncomfortable which is fine … But now you have the gall to give us something that was trash, literal trash. I rolled it out of the room and left it in front of the elevator. I was like “No, you will not be putting this in our space.”

Even though Paula was happy that she and her colleagues were able to secure an office space, her overall impression of the space was not positive.

Insufficient workspace took physical and mental tolls on the women in this project. They had to contend with offices infested with mice that potentially carried diseases. Faculty members used their offices as places to dispose of unwanted and broken furniture. These office characteristics furthered the notion that students are there to do work without attention to embodiment. They experienced themselves and the perceptions others had of them as just brains without bodies.

**It Still Comes Down to Your Body: Reducing Women to Bodies with No Brains**

Students of all genders may experience the phenomenon of feeling like just a body in the context of academia, a conversation Coco had explored with a colleague in her program through her “bobblehead” analogy. Cultural conceptions of womanhood created an added complication for how women Ph.D. students experienced embodiment. As much as women came to understand that they were students or brains first and then humans with bodies second, that messaging conflicted at times with how others perceived their role as women. Gender further complicated the disembodied experience of graduate school because of the stereotype that the ideal graduate student is a man (Bailyn, 2003; Bendix Petersen, 2014; Messner, 2000).
Some women in this project described feeling like their dress and appearance as women impacted the way their students, faculty, and peers treated them. Appearing too feminine could detract from the way others interpreted their intelligence or value in their fields. They also experienced conflicting messages about motherhood and caregiving. There was an assumption that caring for children of one’s own was a distraction. Women who had plans for children, already had children, or even were at an age where they could become pregnant were liabilities to their own success or the success of others. At the same time, several women also described the assumption that all women are innately caretakers, and members of the academic community expected women to use those caring and nurturing qualities for the benefit of their programs.

**Hiding A Feminine Part of Yourself: Dress and Appearance in the Academic Environment**

Gender presentation and assumed sexuality through dress and appearance were issues of concern for many participants in this study. Some women worried how their clothing or figures might negatively impact the way others perceived their intelligence. This hesitation was due to the mind-body dualist reduction of women to bodies with no brains. They altered their dress and appearance to fit into how they understood professionalism, often imitating masculine, Western interpretations of professionalism.

Wanting to minimize femininity and emphasize professionalism was a motivation for some women when considering how to dress in academic spaces. Minerva was concerned about how her dress and appearance would impact the way other scientists viewed her while she was doing fieldwork.
I wouldn't want any sort of situation of sexual tension, because it is often six weeks of working with other graduate students who are men who are my age … I want to match them in some way, like be taken as a serious scientist.

As a result, she avoided wearing tight-fitting clothing while in the field which usually meant she needed to shop for outdoor clothes in the men’s section. Her clothing choices were meant to keep her safe from the natural environment, but she also wanted to deemphasize her femininity in order to be taken more seriously as an academic by her peers, most of whom were men.

Other women had questions about the style of clothing they should wear, especially when presenting their academic work, interviewing for jobs, or attending conferences. Geneva wondered if wearing skirts to conferences was appropriate or if they would make her look “less professional” even if they were designed as business professional attire. She understood her field to be more conservative and masculine than other social sciences and worried that feminine colors or feminine styles of dress would indicate to others that she did not belong. She observed that women especially tended to avoid wearing bright colors in professional settings. “I try to hide a feminine or whimsical part of myself. I do it deliberately but almost unconsciously.”

*Fitting into a Professional Mold - Geneva*
To preserve her personal affinity for whimsy and color in her style of dress, she always wore socks that were “really colorful. So that is the whimsical part of myself, but they show minimally.” Dressing more conservatively helped Geneva feel like she fit in among the other academics in her conservative field.

Consideration around bright colors and certain articles of clothing were also a concern for Florecita although for different reasons. She shared a photograph of her favorite poncho, an article of clothing that was distinctive and often identified her as an international student, and she was “very proud of that.”

However, she found that other students were not always receptive to her cultural differences or her race in the university setting.

Once I was entering the library [on campus] and there were two White guys, like really big … I still don’t know if they just recognized that I was Latina or if they listened to me speaking Spanish because I don’t remember speaking because I was alone … One of them pushed me just with his shoulder as he said ‘Oh, perdón’ in Spanish in a very
American accent … Very very racist way. And I remember that awful feeling of being discovered like “Oh they realize that I don’t belong here.”... I was so scared. She identified her accent as something she was targeted for more than her skin color or her clothing, but her experiences with racism led her to embrace her identity differently through her clothing choices. “After processing a lot of those thoughts about being racialized, being discovered and all that, wearing that poncho is like yes, that’s who I am and I’m so proud and I’m so happy.” The way that her gender presentation impacted the way others perceived her on campus overlapped with her identity as an international student, a phenomenon that several other international students articulated, as well.

Coco described situations during both undergrad and graduate school when those in power treated her academic achievements as less important than what her body could offer heterosexual men. At one point during her Ph.D. program, she had been responsible for organizing an event with visiting speakers. One of the men who was speaking at the event propositioned her for sex in exchange for getting her a job after she graduated.

I was being very nice and then he wants me to go up to his bedroom and have sex with him, so suddenly there again is your body … And he was married, and it was all kind of boundary busting … He was like “I can get you a job in exchange for this” kind of stuff. So, you do have a body and you don’t have a body … [It] really upset me because I thought after all these years of trying to be taken seriously and getting all the credentials and doing everything right it still comes down to your body.

Women often struggle with imposter syndrome in graduate school and wonder at times if they belong in the company of other academics whom they view as intelligent and accomplished. Aside from violating personal boundaries, this incident shook Coco’s sense of self and her
understanding of her academic achievements and how much or little value they had to others in relation to her physical appearance.

Jui noticed that her program faculty tried to recruit women to their traditionally masculine field. The specific support systems for women, however, were lacking and made her feel like she was a token meant to represent diversity. She said, “the women in my department, we have seen that we need different kinds of systems to thrive.” For Jui and other women in her department, their bodies were meant to showcase their faculty’s commitment to diversifying the field without much attention to who they were beyond that physical representation.

Dress and appearance contributed to the ways in which people in their academic circles perceived how women in this project were suited or not suited for academic work. Because of the pervasiveness of mind-body dualist thought in academia, participants were conscious of the ways in which their choices around clothing, their feminine bodies, and other aspects of their physical presentation impacted their ability to operate on an equal plane as their peers. They understood that, in academic spaces, masculine, Western approaches to professionalism had implications and carried power for their dress and appearance.

**Presumptuous on Many Levels: Mixed Messages About Motherhood and Caregiving**

Women encounter mixed messages about motherhood and reproduction during their Ph.D. programs. Mind-body dualism reduces women to their reproductive capacities for childbearing (Kieser, 2017; Rich, 1976). This reductionism has implications for the roles that women are expected to play in academic spaces, typically that of caretaker. Caretaking is typically only valued when it is done in service of the academic community. Having children or other caretaking responsibilities outside of school is treated as a distraction and evidence of
women’s bodies being less efficient and not as well suited for productivity in academic spaces (Bordo, 2003b; Merchant, 2006, 2008).

Some faculty openly support finding ways to balance a Ph.D. program with already being a mother. Some even encourage their students to have children, if that is in their plans, during graduate school or a post-doc placement in part because these timelines tend to be more flexible than the tenure clock (Fox, 2020). However, there are still many challenges to motherhood and reproduction during graduate school. The lack of sufficient funding to support a family, inflexible leave policies, heavy workloads, and unsupportive advisors can all be deterrents (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Mason et al., 2009; Sallee, 2014; Sandler & Hall, 1986; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Expecting women to put motherhood on hold can be incompatible with women’s personal desires, plans with their partners, expectations from family, and the biological realities of childbearing and aging (Mason & Goulden, 2004). Some women do not plan to have children and never have. Others alter their plans for graduate school and tenure-track lifestyles.

**Plans for Reproduction**

Plans for having children are personal while also impacting women in Ph.D. programs in public ways because their bodies are on public display. Women, especially those of childbearing age, may face suspicion from their peers and faculty about plans for having children and how they might affect their roles as students Sometimes women are asked directly about their plans, even by people who are not close friends.

Several women mentioned that they had intentionally decided not to have children during their Ph.D. programs because they did not believe they would have the necessary time and resources to be students and mothers simultaneously. Sage thought she wanted to have children with her husband at some point in the future but saw graduate school and having a baby as
incompatible for her, especially since her advisor had made numerous comments about how “it would be ridiculous” to have children while in graduate school. When Sage got married, a student in her cohort asked her at a student dinner about when she was having children. She described his comments as “inappropriate” and “very presumptuous on a number of levels.” Sage ignored his question in the moment, especially since he was a student with whom she had already experienced several gender-related issues, such as talking over women in classes or meetings.

Sage’s plans to put having children on hold caused tension for some members of her family.

There is this expectation in my family that we should be already pregnant a month and a half after the wedding… But that was always the expectation for women in my family was that no matter what education level you got to was that you were going to stop working pretty much as soon as you got married or had kids and that for some reason, they still have that expectation for the next generation.

Her family’s understanding of womanhood and what it meant to be a married woman conflicted with her own desires for career and childbearing. That tension was often a topic of discussion during Sage’s therapy sessions.

Like Sage, Reian also did not want to have children during graduate school. She was grateful that the union insurance plan allowed her to have an IUD, something she would not have been able to afford on her own. Reian, however, was less sure about future plans for having children.

I’m not all that trusting that I can have it all sort of situation because I know we have so many barriers and that if I were to have kids, I would want to make sure that I’m taking
care of them and my partner which might mean that I’d lose my career opportunity.

Reian was more cautious about the possibility of having a demanding career with a balanced family life, especially since there were so few examples of women in her field who were successfully able to have the career and the family.

**Challenges of Being Pregnant**

Many challenges exist for those women who do become pregnant during their Ph.D. programs. Pregnancy can be demanding physically, mentally, and financially while impacting relationships and available time. Women may need more sleep than normal, take time away from work in order to attend doctors’ appointments, and then physically and mentally recover from giving birth with little support from their faculty or program policies.

Preparing for comprehensive exams is a daunting task for any student, but this time becomes especially difficult for pregnant students. Patricia said that her preparation time overlapped with the first few months of her pregnancy, a time where she was especially fatigued. She and her husband had timed her pregnancy so that she would be able to have the entire summer off from teaching and not need to take a leave of absence. Spending all day on campus was difficult, so she found ways to sleep in her library carrel.

I had a little pillow and my blanket. The space is so small, but it’s just enough where my body just fit perfectly underneath the desk. And so I’d put on my little white noise app, and I would take out my tiny pillow, I would just sleep in my tiny carrel in the library whenever I could. And that really got me through.

One day, she found a note on her carrel asking her to remove her pillow and blanket. Even though keeping a pillow and blanket in her carrel was considered “contraband,” Patricia needed this outlet in order to care for herself during pregnancy and continue her work as a Ph.D.
Being a Mother and a Ph.D. Student

Some women entered their Ph.D. programs with children who still lived at home with them. While their children helped these women put the stress of their Ph.D. programs into perspective, that did not come without challenges. Mothers in this project felt pulled in too many directions. They did not always feel that they could give the time and attention they wanted to dedicate to their families and their academics.

As a single mother, Tess felt guilty if she was not available enough physically, emotionally, and even financially for her daughter. Tess was pulled in opposite directions and often had to choose between “Do I get to be the bad student or the bad parent?” Her roles became particularly difficult to juggle when her advisor was inflexible with deadlines or if instructors ran late and Tess needed to leave before they dismissed class to pick up her daughter.

Malala Michele, another single parent, encountered mixed messaging within her department about having children. Malala Michele also went through a divorce during her time as a Ph.D. student, and she had two young sons who also experienced that lifestyle change with her. Her then husband was working on his bachelor’s degree when she started her Ph.D. program, and she often found herself needing to put her studies on hold to care for their sons while he was doing his schoolwork. Her husband believed that Malala Michele had already had her time in school since she already had a college degree, resulting in tension and competition in their relationship.

I felt like my studies were put on the back burner for a solid year after I had our second child, and that was fighting tooth and nail to have any time to get any work done. I wouldn’t be working until 3:00 in the morning … because he won’t help me on any given
day. So my whole studies have been extended so much from him.

Needing to spend time caring for her children did not end after the divorce, especially because her now ex-husband was not very involved. Although she did have some supportive colleagues and faculty, the faculty in Malala Michele’s program were not all understanding of her need to extend her time to degree. The head of her department told her that if she was not prepared to commit all her time to graduate school, she should quit and come back when she was ready. Malala Michele knew that her “timeline is not going to look like other people's timelines,” but some faculty in her program did not support this kind of flexibility.

Some faculty and administrators are supportive of students in graduate school who are mothers. Nadine purposely chose her advisor because she knew he was a “family-oriented guy.” Both her advisor and the graduate program director encouraged her to begin her program in the spring semester rather than trying to start in the fall after having given birth to her son that August. Normally, her department only admitted students for the fall semester, but they made an exception for her so that she could have time at home to bond with her son and to recover from pregnancy without needing to jump right into being a Ph.D. student at the same time.

It's always been a thing. There's kids and babies in the department sometimes, which you wouldn't think … My son actually fell asleep on my advisor’s shoulder one time as an infant because I had to do a presentation and he watched him for me. I came in and he's in his office with my son on him doing his work.

Nadine knew how fortunate she was to find a department that was supportive of caring for children while also being a Ph.D. student.

Mind-body dualism both reduces women to their reproductive abilities and penalizes women for the physical and mental tolls that pregnancy takes on their bodies. This paradigm and
the perception that the ideal academic is a man both contribute to the notion that pregnancy or the potential to become pregnant indicate that women’s bodies are less efficient (Bordo, 2003b; Merchant, 2006, 2008). Especially while academic productivity is the measure of value within current Ph.D. environments, women are penalized for their reproductive abilities.

**Expected and Unrewarded Caretaking in Ph.D. Programs**

While caring for one’s own children often came with little support and plenty of judgement, structures and attitudes in academia often expected women to be caretakers (Gonsalves, 2014; Misra et al., 2011). The power structures of Ph.D. programs often lend themselves well to unhealthy expectations around caretaking for women due in part to the assumption that women are naturally organizers and nurturers. Sometimes women are in positions where they are caretakers for other students or faculty members in their programs.

Many women in this project shared concerns about the caretaking expectations they experienced within the context of being Ph.D. students. They often enjoyed friendships or mentoring roles they formed with their students or colleagues, but at times these expectations became overwhelming. They noticed that women in their programs were responsible for most of the caretaking, such as emotional support for students who were struggling personally or academically by providing advice or a listening ear. They were also responsible for developing a sense of community by planning social events for students and faculty. Much of this work was expected without recognition or compensation.

Fieldwork for data collection necessitated a lot of preparation and labor for Minerva and her colleagues. She appreciated that men and women seemed to divide tasks like cooking and cleaning evenly, but she noticed that she was the only person who volunteered to create schedules to ensure the labor was shared.
I think women can also sometimes be associated with these organizational tasks. I was wondering if it was just my personality, that sort of wanting to formalize some of these things. I was the one who was like “this is a schedule of who will cook and clean.”

Even on campus, Minerva found that as one of few women in her department, faculty appointed her responsible for organizing social activities, including the department’s social hours and annual holiday party. These additional responsibilities made her wonder if she had taken on too much that semester and if, as a woman, she could appoint a man to do that labor in the future.

Jui noticed that the four women in her cohort were responsible for much of the community development and graduate student advocacy in her program. She and her women colleagues had been responsible for addressing workspace and graduation timeline issues.

Although men participated in meetings with faculty, women were the only ones planning meetings, setting up agendas, taking notes, and following through with action items.

I think for men, they’re used to not offering help … It’s never a man offering like ‘Hey, do you need some help?’ That’s never been the case … There’s not that sense of community with men as much … I feel like it’s okay for men to never offer help.
Jui wished that men in her department would offer to help advocating for improvements that would benefit all students. As a graduate student, she also had the same demands on her time as everyone else. She saw improving her community as an important task and was happy to give her time, but she wanted more support.

Malala Michele organized educational and social coffee hours for her department as part of her assistantship. She was paid for this work, but she also believed she had gone above and beyond her job description because the faculty members who had previously overseen coffee hours had neglected this responsibility and done very little to develop the program. Over the summer, faculty members had combined this task with Malala Michele’s other assistantship so they would no longer have to do it. She noticed a pattern of faculty members using graduate students to perform what she referred to as “domestic labor.” She was resentful that many of them, especially men in leadership positions, put graduate students, the majority of whom were women, in positions where they needed to organize events and develop community.

Stop unloading your domestic labor on all of us and planning and organizing, these hard skills which we magically have to fucking cultivate as humans, but you think it’s innate and inbred and I just fucking pour organization and planning and emails out my ass. Fuck you guys. Cultivate it your damn self.

Being responsible for the social lives and academic development of everyone in the program were heavy demands that took a toll on Malala Michele’s wellbeing. The gendered dynamics of how faculty appropriated tasks was also of huge concern.

Yoly experienced caretaking in her program as an instructor and as a student. It took her time to learn that playing a motherly role was not a requirement. She said “I understand now that it’s not a given. It’s not inherent or natural. You have a choice.” She also noticed that other
students in her program expected her to provide a lot of emotional support. To a certain extent, she was happy to care for others because she valued creating community and she knew that previous students had done the same for her. Yoly also knew that she had to maintain certain boundaries for her own wellness, especially when certain men in her program were “too entitled and too demanding” of her time. They often came to her for help with assignments or course selection even though there were other resources available to them.

Caretaking for members of their academic communities seemed to be the exception to a general aversion to motherhood. Caring for one’s own children was treated as a distraction away from academics, and there were seldom support structures to accommodate this aspect of women’s current families or future plans. However, women in this project were expected to use their assumed natural abilities as caretakers to benefit the students and faculty in their programs, many times without pay or other recognition.

**Strong Connections Exist Between Body, Mind, and Academic Work**

Connections between bodies, minds, and academic work are important to examine because there are many consequences and outside pressures that exist for women Ph.D. students. Although the structures of the university, faculty, and administrators treat Ph.D. students as if they are just brains without bodies, findings from this study demonstrate that academic work is an embodied endeavor.
Figure 3 represents the second main argument within my findings: There are strong connections between the mind, body, and academic work. The smaller circles surrounding the woman’s figure indicate the many pressures women face, especially when embodiment is not at the core of their Ph.D. environments. At the very least, the physical demands of academic work involved learning hands-on skills needed for lab work and data collection. Other women described how the nature of their work impacted their physical and mental health in negative ways. The academic environment tends to be individualistic and isolating. Women in this project found the Ph.D. process to be emotional at times, and they required more community support than the structures of their programs allowed. Additionally, many women felt stuck between the constant demands to put life on hold to work towards their degrees while life still happened. They were not able to put all aspects of their lives, like medical emergencies or family deaths, on hold during those years spent at Research University. Some women described feeling disembodied when these pressures did not allow them to be fully present in all aspects of their
lives. Women experienced strong connections between their bodies, minds, and academic work even if their programs did not provide space to support their embodied existences.

You Just Have to Immerse Yourself in It:

Physical Skills Required for Doing Academic Work

Women used their bodies, not just their brains, in many ways while doing academic work. They needed to put physical skills into practice when running experiments, collecting data, reading, and writing. Sometimes, they had to learn these skills for the first time or alter ways they were used to using their bodies to meet the demands of their academic work.

Those whose academic work took place in a lab setting described the physical skills they needed to learn to do research. Greer demonstrated what it was like to work with a fume hood and potentially dangerous pathogens. Although she did some lab work as an undergraduate, there were a lot of physical skills she had to learn.
It’s a little uncomfortable to work in the cabinet because it’s an awkward height and you have to keep your hands here and you have to spray everything down … There’s just little things that you learn how to do more efficiently. But you can’t really teach somebody how to do it. You just have to immerse yourself in it.

There were also many safety precautions she needed to take in terms of wearing personal protective gear. The process of learning these physical skills was overwhelming at first, but she felt proud of the progress she had made throughout her years as a scientist.

Outside of skills needed to work in a lab, women described physical skills they needed for fieldwork. Reian described the burnout she felt at the end of her field seasons which were “incredibly physically, mentally exhausting.” She loved her work, and the balance between field season and off seasons spent at her computer was necessary for maintaining her physical and mental wellness. Minerva’s area of study also involved data collection outside of the campus environment. Her fieldwork often brought her to climates and terrains that demanded physical skills like hiking and boating which made her wonder how accessible her field was to anyone who had not spent time outdoors prior to graduate school or had physical limitations.

Attaining physical skills for work was not limited to women in STEM labs or fieldwork. Helena explained the difficulties she had with typing because she “never took an actual typing class, so I still mangle through with my pinkies.” She developed the embodied practice of using a voice-to-text software to help her manage writing. “I would just walk around my apartment and speak my papers out and then sit down and edit.” Proper posture for sitting while reading or typing was also a learned physical skill for some women. Several women said they received help from professional development experts or physical therapists to learn about how to position their bodies and structure their work environments to support physical wellness.
Participants varied in their approaches to physical skills and which skills they needed to master. Some women used their bodies for physical skills in lab or fieldwork, and others spent more time figuring out the best ways to incorporate their bodies in their practices around reading and writing. Despite the lack of formalized attention to embodiment in their programs, women in this project understood that incorporating their bodies into their academic work was essential for the physical skills necessary for success.

**Shared Trauma: Academic Work is Intertwined with Physical and Mental Health**

Findings from this project indicate that academic work is intertwined with physical and mental health for women Ph.D. students. Even though academic successes have the potential to positively impact wellness, women in this project discussed the negative impact that being a Ph.D. student had on their physical and mental health. Several women discussed prioritizing school to the point where they had experienced drastic negative impacts to their physical and mental health. Often, the constant pressure to work influenced the amount of stress women felt in relation to their productivity and the time they spent on work that detracted from the time they had for healthier activities. At times, the negative physical and mental impacts from school influenced how women considered their career pathways because they were unsure that the academic environment could offer them a healthy lifestyle.

Some women in this project described the Ph.D. environment as a “cesspool of anxiety” (Reian) or a “pressure cooker environment” of “shared trauma” (Greer). Neither phrase suggests a healthy environment in which women can exist for five or more years while completing their Ph.D.s. However, these sentiments were often shared and normalized for participants as what a Ph.D. program is by nature. The direct and indirect messaging in their programs about needing to push through to publish, graduate, and find jobs became internalized for participants.
Most women did not need a specific person constantly reminding them about their need to move forward. They adopted their own mantras of pressure and pushed themselves to working beyond what was healthy, seeing themselves as students above all else.

Almost all the women discussed the anxiety they experience around starting and completing academic work. Most women’s school identities were rooted in successful primary and secondary school experiences. Maria said she and grades were “not best friends” in graduate school even though she had previously internalized that “grades are everything … the currency [you] have as an undergrad.” The uncertainty and learning-through-mistakes approach to graduate school shook their sense of self since their perceptions of their own self-worth were often attached to high academic achievement. When their mental health suffered, their ability to do schoolwork or maintain other aspects of their lives suffered and vice versa.

Honest discussions with colleagues about the mental health challenges women experienced were rare. Participants mentioned sharing news of successful publications or grants, and they also shared fears about future job prospects or anxiety around completing dissertations. Jui said one of her friends would post exaggerated images on social media about “what grad school is supposed to look like versus what grad school really looks like” attached to a meme of students putting their heads down on their desks and sleeping from exhaustion. There were few conversations around the lived realities of making mistakes or experiencing what some might classify as failure in the academic world, such as receiving publication rejections or negative feedback from an advisor even though many Ph.D. students and faculty experience rejection on a regular basis.

Because supporting mental and physical health were rarely topics of discussion built into the structures of their Ph.D. programs, women were often on their own to recognize what was
needed to support a healthy lifestyle. Far too often, they came to these realizations after experiencing extreme physical illness or mental anguish. Their bodies responded with very real pain and illnesses that impacted their bodies due in part to the pressures they felt to push through their academic work at the expense of their own health.

Paula recalled a time of stress due to the pressures of working on her dissertation while tending to other responsibilities including wedding planning.

Brushing Away the Stress - Paula

Her hair came out in clumps whenever she brushed it. Her advisor was “mentally checked out” and inaccessible; the lack of support from her advisor was part of the reason for this change in her mental and physical health. Not having access to her advisor and the stress she experienced around her work became “its own piece of hair that comes out of your head as you’re brushing.” Even though her colleagues told her that her committee would not let her defend if she was not ready, Paula knew that her advisor had not yet read two of her papers. She felt alone and
unprepared for both her dissertation defense and whatever career she would have following graduation.

After completing her comprehensive exams, Geneva felt lost with her schoolwork. She suffered a herniated disc because she would often sit at a desk and work eight to nine hours each day. For six months, she was unable to walk because of her injury. She also experienced an episode of depression. Geneva described these mental and physical illnesses as “the first moment that I realized about this organic relationship between what I do and how my body responds to that.” She was unable to move forward with her dissertation and she gave up many activities which brought her joy, including baking.

When I was really really depressed, I didn’t cook at all. I wasn’t really eating very well. I lost [my] appetite … There was almost a few months that I didn’t cook at all, baked at all. For a person like me who is constantly cooking and baking and sharing foods, those are my biggest passions. But when I was really depressed I didn’t do any of that.
Sharing a photograph of baking symbolized a gradual return to her normal life, even though Geneva knew she was still capable of experiencing depression or other negative changes to her mental and physical health in the future.

Loann discussed several embodied ways she experienced anxiety as a Ph.D. student. Using her Apple watch, she noticed her heart rate increase every time she sat down to write.

That’s where a ton of my anxiety comes from, too, wanting to write it perfectly the first time, wanting it to be finished in four hours. I think I should be able to write my prospectus in four hours. It’s crazy, weird deadlines that I set myself kind of out of nowhere and then if I don’t hit them I get down on myself and create more anxiety is kind of a snowball. Perfectionism is probably my number one reason.

During the time of her interviews, Loann was still contemplating whether completing her degree would be worth the toll it was taking on her wellbeing. Part of the stresses she experienced stemmed from a lack of support around her multiple diagnoses including ADHD, dyslexia, and major depressive disorder. At one point, she had considered reaching out to disability services on
campus, but her advisor had discouraged her from doing so because “in the real world” people cannot get accommodations for the type of career she wanted.

Loann noticed that her anxiety around her work performance became a physical practice of sitting in front of her mirror for up to two hours at a time and picking at the skin on her face until she would bleed. It was a habit she was actively working through with her therapist, and she struggled with whether to classify this behavior as self-harm.

![Image]( Untitled - Loann)

It’s a pretty vicious cycle of doing it and then feeling guilty about it and continuing to do it because I feel guilty and I’m going to make it better, like my face looks like shit right now, but I can fix it if I just do this one more thing.

Picking at her skin created a lot of guilt for Loann, and she had begun covering her mirror at home on days when she knew she was feeling more anxiety than others.

Loann had tried several prescription medications to help her manage her multiple diagnoses, but she often felt like their effects would weaken over time. Smoking cigarettes was one way she said she tried to manage ADHD and anxiety.
She described graduate school as “the most intense stress” that she had ever experienced in her life. The “pressure to be constantly productive and constantly working and constantly attentive and always reading” had contributed to her starting and then increasing her smoking.

Maybe if it’s getting late and my Adderall’s wearing off, I can go outside and smoke and work for another hour, so it allows me to continue working longer which maybe is not always a good thing either. Because maybe at this point I need to stop …

Loann found herself wondering if graduate school was worth the physical toll it took. Previously, she had used exercise as a stress outlet and a way to support her physical health, but she found that smoking a cigarette was faster and more convenient than carving out time in her busy schedule to work out. She said she did not blame graduate school for her smoking, but she questioned at times if graduate school was worth it. “I just always think about putting in all this time and effort that’ll hopefully pay off later. But is it going to matter if I kill myself in the process of doing it?” Loann struggled consistently with measuring the harm to her health and wellbeing with the end goal, especially if her lifestyle would not improve even if she got the
career she wanted. She worried that her career would just be an extension of the stress from graduate school.

Several women in this project also mentioned using marijuana to treat any physical or mental challenges they experienced during graduate school. Because of the legal issues and existing stigma surrounding marijuana, I informed participants that I would not be associating their pseudonyms with this piece of the project if they wanted to discuss marijuana usage.

All these women said they used marijuana as a way to relax and destress. Sometimes marijuana would also help them clear their heads and focus more on schoolwork. The women who did discuss marijuana in the context of this project said they rarely spoke to anyone in their academic circles about it because of the associated stigma. While they might know a colleague who also smoked marijuana, they were careful not to disclose this information to their advisors or anyone else who was able to write them letters of recommendation did not know.
Alcohol and sleep aids were other substances that some women mentioned in relation to coping with the stress of their lives as Ph.D. students. Geneva used both as part of her nightly routine. She felt a lot of shame about her increased alcohol consumption. When she was younger, she would enjoy alcohol socially. During her time as a Ph.D. student, she began drinking more at home. She referred to the space where she kept empties as the “darkest corner” in her kitchen.

Describing the role of alcohol in her life, Geneva said

It only has [a] negative effect on me. But sometimes it is really difficult to forget about, get rid of bad feeling[s] after spending a day, so then alcohol doesn't solve any of my problems, but it helps me forget about those things, at least until I go to bed.

Like many other women in this project, Geneva said that stress from school and other aspects of her life affected sleep. Routines around sleep were not something she had to focus on previously.
Who knew that you have to teach yourself how to sleep or you need this kind of gadgets to teach you. When you’re young, you don’t really have to think about, you just go to sleep. But now you have to, it’s like teaching a baby how to sleep and build a healthy habit to fall asleep and wake up in the mornings.

Alcohol and melatonin were both substances that she used on a nightly basis. Otherwise, her anxiety would keep her up in the middle of the night. The volume of work, the high standards, the high stakes, and the lack of clarity around the content and structure of their programs all contributed to their increased stress which manifested as depression, anxiety, and trouble sleeping.

Menstruation impacted women beyond making decisions about having children. Menstruation tends to be a taboo subject in Western culture, and many women do not have the necessary space to attend to these needs in the campus context. Several women said that the pain they encountered with polycystic ovarian syndrome took a mental and physical toll on their bodies. If they needed to take time away from school, this was a difficult topic for them to share with others, especially if their advisors were men. Yoly said that menstruating was uncomfortable at times, and it changed the way she felt in her body.
Sometimes menstruation required taking time away from school because of the pain. At other times, it changed the way she was able to perform as a student on campus; for example, she did not want to interact with other people as much or would not be comfortable sitting to work for the same hours.

Jui shared her experiences with menstruation and how this affected her as a student. Ever since puberty, her periods had been exceptionally painful.
Every month, Jui found herself needing to take two days off to tend to the physical and mental changes. She had a difficult time discussing this need with instructors because she had gotten the impression that menstruation was “never a valid excuse” for missing class or other deadlines.

I have pushed myself at times to do a lot more than I probably should have. But right now, I think my body just needs space to rest. I'm all for doing everything, but I think you have to find that balance for yourself … I'm not gonna learn anything, even if I go up taking a bunch of painkillers, I'm just sitting there stressing out. It's not helpful.

Like how a migraine is more than just a headache, some women’s experience of menstruation involved severe pain.

Even for women with supportive advisors who encouraged them to take breaks, there was a distinct lack of conversation and structure around investing in students’ mental and physical health before problems arose. These women understood that graduate school was a time when they needed to prioritize their role as students above their own wellbeing.

**It’s Hard to Find People Who Are Open: Desire for More Community in Ph.D. Programs**

Ph.D. programs tend to be individualistic environments. There are few formal opportunities for students to receive support inside the school environment including social and emotional ways to bond with other students or faculty. Especially after completing coursework, students are expected to work independently much of the time (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Janta et al., 2014; Tang, 2019). Community support is an essential part of having a balanced and healthy experience in graduate school, particularly for women. Even though it takes years of being a successful student before entering a Ph.D. program, many women found they did not have adequate prior experiences or current resources to adapt smoothly to the mental and physical
changes they experienced in this new academic environment. As Reian noted, “the Ph.D. system, it’s not easy for people to go through … we tend to be a group of people who have severe mental health issues.”

Most women in this project described positive relationships with their peers and faculty, although much of the community they had established was independent of formal structures in their Ph.D. programs. In fact, some women said that they were able to form strong communities with the other students despite the lack of support they received from faculty or administration. They recognized that faculty had many priorities outside of supporting graduate students, and not all women blamed faculty directly for the lack of structured support. However, many women did point to women graduate students as the source of the sense of community they felt.

Even though much of Patricia’s support system was composed of other students in her program, she did not want to attribute the sense of community to any efforts from faculty.

That is not because our program cultivates that community. It’s very much grassroots and built from itself but a few of my friends have been really instrumental and that has very little to do with the administration or the way the program is structured, so I’m just not going to give credit to them for that.

She wished her faculty were more transparent about how funding got assigned to students, but she also noted that there was no formal reward for faculty to build community. Faculty have their own funding to secure, teaching responsibilities, and publication deadlines to meet. She was not angry with her faculty members because she understood they were overworked, but she did wish the structures of her program allowed for more intentional partnerships.

Women wanted support adjusting to the expectations of being a Ph.D. student. Many participants said that school had always come easy to them in the past, but Ph.D. work was more
demanding and often came with vague or confusing expectations. Rita was fortunate enough to work with a hands-on advisor and helpful lab mates when she first began working in her lab at Research University. She had some experience from her time as an undergrad, but her new program was different enough that she needed to learn new physical skills, such as how to view specimens in a microscope or how to use a pipette.

Let’s Get a Closer Look ... - Rita

Some skills she taught herself how to do, but she also received help from her lab mates.

I had a lot of imposter syndrome, and so I would watch videos on the bus to and from [campus] in my hour-long commute. I would watch videos and teach myself science concepts, so that helped. It was intimidating in that I knew I needed to learn a lot of things, but the people weren’t intimidating.

Luckily, Rita found herself among a group of other students and an advisor who were all supportive and willing to help each other learn as they went. She did a lot of independent work to catch up with her peers, but she always felt comfortable asking for help when she needed it. She acknowledged that this kind of environment was rare for Ph.D. students.
As a first-generation student, Greer often felt out of place in her Ph.D. program, especially when she first started. At first, she experienced imposter syndrome because she knew her pathway from homeschooling was not one that many other Ph.D. students shared. She noticed a lack of formalized structure for supporting first generation students at the Ph.D. level or even an acknowledgement that these students existed at Research University.

Although she did not know who had posted the sticker on their office door, it made Greer feel a sense of pride when she learned that someone else was also a first-generation student.

It’s nice to see that there are other people because there’s not a high percentage of first gen people [here]. And it’s not something that people talk about that much. I don’t know if it’s because of fear or a sense of shame or what the issue is. But it was just nice to see someone identifying with that and being proud of it.

Other unique identity groups included being an international student, experiencing disability, belonging to a religious group, and being older than traditional Ph.D. students. They lacked formalized support for these identities. Some women were actively discouraged from seeking
support, like Loann when faculty persuaded her not to register with disability services. Most women had to find their own support systems or try to hide or ignore these identities.

Many women pointed to professional development opportunities offered through the graduate school at Research University as being huge sources of support. Especially if they wanted to pursue careers outside of tenure-track faculty positions, these workshops were often their only outlets for advice and training. Some of their advisors were open to supporting alternative career trajectories, but many women were not able to go to their programs for help when training or searching for teaching-centered jobs, administrative jobs, or jobs outside of academia.

Although she was able to discuss her plans with her advisor, Nadine still felt a lack of support structures to explore alternative career pathways. She worried about providing a financially stable lifestyle for her family as well as finding a career that would allow her to be present for them and for herself in healthy ways.

Road Closed Ahead? - Nadine

My advisor, he knows pretty well. He keeps trying to subtly convince me to go into research, but he knows pretty well I don’t want to be him. I think it’s not well accepted and that people don’t know a lot about it. I’m the only one in my department that
regularly goes to career fairs and the [Graduate School professional development] stuff.

It’s not the norm. It’s not accepted. There’s not a lot of support for it.

Nadine wondered if the road ahead in academia would provide her with the lifestyle she wanted or if the road was in fact closed ahead.

Other support structures in the context of Research University included the graduate employee union and other advocacy groups. The union was especially important when it came to establishing maternity leave and insurance funds for mental health and other medical needs, without which many would not have been able to remain in their degree programs. Many women pointed to the financial support the union established as being a key part of their success in their Ph.D. programs. Without these formalized groups, women would have to advocate for support on individual levels with little impact. Unity across the university was key to their needs being met.

Honest discussions with peers about vulnerability as Ph.D. students were usually exclusive to the small support communities women formed with other women. Yoly said that when she found a friend who was receptive to these kinds of conversations, “I hold on to her … It's hard to find people who are open about it.” Geneva and Jui especially noted the gendered differences between their peers and the kinds of conversations around vulnerability in graduate school. Compared to men in her program, Geneva felt that she and other women experienced more anxiety and imposter syndrome. She believed that she “was surrounded by male students who never really experienced this kind of syndrome, imposter. They never have doubts in their ability … They don't have any doubts in their heart.” Similarly, Jui said “men have an easier time. I don't think it's true. I think they portray it as true. They're always like ‘yeah, I'm okay.’”
Ph.D. programs often have reputations for being competitive (Misra et al., 2011; Northcut, 2017; Woodham Burge, 2011). Students may fight one another for limited funding and job opportunities or compare their publication numbers, often resulting in a toxic environment. Jui noted that as a traditionally masculine field, her department lacked emotional support structures for students.

I feel we need different things, and our department is completely unaware of this. Again, positions of power are all with men. Graduate Program Director, or our chair of the department, etc. And they're really nice, but they don't know what we need. Sometimes we need a little more emotional support. I don't think it's because we're emotionally weak. I just think we acknowledge that we're having a hard time.

Jui described an interesting tension between being nice and being supportive. Of her male colleagues and the faculty, she did not identify anyone who was malicious, but she did say that women in her department were far more likely to be vulnerable with each other and offer emotional support within the context of being Ph.D. students. She sensed that faculty and some students still bought into the outdated masculine notions of keeping to yourself and pushing through in order to graduate, but for her “that doesn't work anymore, change with the times.”

Time constraints with few or inaccessible resources make living an authentic and holistic life difficult for many women. Many programs devote little attention to building community even though women often prefer to be in supportive communities. Participants in this project indicated that they would benefit from more attention to building community in their Ph.D. programs.
Life is a Little on Hold:

Life Still Happens Outside of School While Working Towards a Ph.D.

Faculty and administrators may pressure women to place other aspects of their lives on hold to dedicate all of their time and attention to school. Ph.D. programs typically span an average of six years of full-time study, and many students take more time to complete their degrees (National Science Foundation, 2018). Six or more years is a significant amount of time to ignore the demands of life, especially those that are not within students’ control. Time still passes and life still happens no matter how little time women must attend to these changes. Many students are in their late 20s to mid-30s when they begin their Ph.D. programs (Quinn, 2011), a time that usually coincides with many of life’s milestones including marriage, having children, and buying a house. Even Ph.D. students who are older experience big changes outside of school. Bodies continue to age. Family and friend dynamics change. World events impact feelings of safety and security. Many women find that being in a Ph.D. program can leave little space to fully experience these changes despite the impacts they have.

This Is How It’s Supposed to Be: Financial Limitations of Ph.D. Life.

Financial instability is a concern for many graduate students (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; June, 2014; NCES, 2018). Students at Research University were fortunate to belong to a union that advocated for fair wages, health insurance, and other support for life’s necessities. Many women in this project were grateful for this organization. However, living in the geographic region of Research University was expensive. Housing costs and other essentials were burdensome for most women, particularly those with children or without family to share costs.
Owning a house had always been one of Coco’s biggest aspirations. She had spent years living in poverty while she was raising her son as a single mom and relied on food stamps to make ends meet. She had always believed that education was the best way for her to secure a better life for herself and her family. Now, her son was grown and had children of his own, but she still found that financial stability had never materialized.

Coco shared a photograph of the front of a model house representing the unattainable dream of being able to own her own home. She found that her desire to own a house had not yet happened.

I wanted to do a PhD and I was going to get a house. And I was gonna make him and I stable. And here I am 20 some years later and I’m not close to that house yet. So it’s a phony house … You can see that there’s nothing there … It’s just a facade.

She was still waiting to have a second child but was unsure that that would happen at this point in her life. She said she “wanted to do it the right way the second time, and the right way never materialized. Never had the money, never had the house, never had the dream.” She was grateful for some of the opportunities she had gotten as a graduate student, but education had not yet turned out to be the financial stabilizer she had anticipated.

Tess also struggled with financial limitations despite having a job outside of school in addition to her teaching assistantship. She described her socioeconomic status as “poor” because
she was in “the bracket that is eligible for assistance because we are at or near the poverty level.”

There were many times when Tess and her daughter had to go without because of financial difficulties, but one instance stood out to her. Tess’ daughter had needed sneakers for her gym class at school, but Tess needed to wait until her next paycheck because she did not have the funds at the moment. Her daughter’s gym teacher ended up giving her a pair of his daughter’s old shoes so that Tess’ daughter could participate in class. She said she “felt appreciative, but I also felt really bad. I’m like, ‘oh I don't want that to be her experiences’ like ‘well I'm the kid in class that has to say I can't get [shoes].’” Tess said that not having enough money was a new experience for her having grown up in a two-parent household and now being a single mother. Not being able to provide for her daughter the way she wanted had a heavy impact on Tess, but she had few choices given her current situation as a Ph.D. student.

After switching from a teaching assistantship to a 75% lecturer, Patricia found that her financial situation greatly improved. She and her husband were able to afford more childcare hours for their son, and that helped her increase her own research and publication productivity. She noted the material differences between being a lecturer and a graduate student and resented those who normalized the financial struggles of students, like the senior administrator at Research University who made a “horrible, horrible joke” at orientation about living in poverty.

It’s just so miserable because that’s your lived reality, and the thing is when you’re new dealing with that you don’t really feel like anybody does take you seriously even though you’re teaching a full load. You’re teaching the same courses that other people are. You’re doing research. You’re getting published in the same journals that other people are, yet you’re sitting in a room with mismatched chairs and people throwing their trash
at you. And then everybody gaslights you. Basically, they’re like “oh no, this is how it’s supposed to be. You have to go through this.”

Several women also discussed the harmful rhetoric of “I did it. Now it is your turn” that many faculty and administrators shared when it came to crushing workloads and meagre stipends. They noted that the average graduate student is different now than they were 20 or more years ago. Costs of living had escalated, but the structures of graduate programs and the mentalities that upheld them had changed very little.

As a younger Ph.D. student, Minerva found herself “on the brink of being totally financially independent from my parents.” However, she was struggling to declare financial independence while working in a graduate assistantship. Coupled with the dynamics in her advising relationship where she was worried she was “becoming a parrot of what my advisor would say,” and wondered if she was progressing as an independent adult.

Minerva shared a picture she took one day when she felt frustrated that she had to park so far away from her building because she did not want to spend the money on a closer parking lot.

I have money and all this privilege, and I also feel like I don’t at the same time. I’m wearing these relatively expensive boots that are super durable, but then I also didn’t
want to pay the extra $50 to park in a nicer lot and forgot to fill out the schedule in time to park in a nicer lot.

It was difficult for Minerva and some women to acknowledge the financial hardships of graduate school because they knew that being in a Ph.D. program came with a lot of privileges.

Very few people can continue their education to a terminal degree, and being in this elite group meant something to them. At the same time, their positions also came with challenges. Women in this project were not always able to afford basic living essentials with their graduate assistantship stipends alone. Some women were fortunate enough to have additional financial support from parents, significant others, and outside jobs, but these income sources did not always cover necessities. Lacking a financially stable career harmed feelings of self-worth and independence.

**It Could Be Here at Any Moment: Changes in Family and Friend Relationships**

In addition to increasing financial responsibilities, growing older also meant changes to relationships with family and friends for participants. Support systems were essential to women’s wellness, but they could not always rely upon these systems to remain stable throughout the years they spent in their Ph.D. programs. They encountered aging family members, death of loved ones, and people moving away. These changes all had impacts on women’s wellness.

Paula noted that as her parents and other family members aged, her position in the family changed. There were parts of her life that felt stagnant because of the demands of her Ph.D. program, and she was not certain she could fulfill all responsibilities for her family.
Paula shared a picture of the top of her dresser which represented the many changes in her life that she did not always feel she had the time or resources to handle.

My mom gave me this magazine about “No Fuss Holiday Hosting Guide.” Aspirationally I’m at the point where I’m really ready to start hosting holidays. We, in theory, kind of have the space to do it, but we’re not quite there yet. I feel that theme, that sense of life is a little on hold, and life is. There’s still that reason that you feel you can’t take over for my parents’ generation for some of this, but I need to know how… Even if you’re not ready, it could be here at any moment.

Paula alluded to bigger life changes than just hosting holidays for her family. Her parents were getting older, and she felt she needed to step up as an adult in her family. The time and financial restraints of being in a Ph.D. program made it challenging for her to grow with her family in all the ways she wanted.

With aging families also comes loss. During data collection for this project, Patricia’s grandmother passed away.
After returning from the funeral, Patricia had to “jump right back into my work week pretty much that night and the following morning.” She needed to do lesson planning, respond to emails, and grade student work. These demands did not leave much time for unpacking her suitcase or processing the emotions of the events over the weekend.

Loann found herself saying goodbye to her best friend who was starting a graduate program on the other side of the country. This friendship had been a “safe spot” for Loann, especially in an environment where she constantly faced evaluation, rejection, and criticism through her classwork and research.

Before she left, Loann was able to have one final coffee date with her friend where she reflected on the role this relationship had played for her during graduate school.
I’m definitely not gonna lie. I’m super freaked out about her moving because I’m like damn I feel so lonely … I’m really really scared. I’m somebody who also is not great at maintaining long distance friendships, and this is one that I really don’t want to let go of.

Loann knew that she would need to find ways to establish that sense of community elsewhere, something she was actively working on in therapy.

Maintaining relationships during Ph.D. programs can be difficult, and starting new relationships is not any easier. Having supportive communities was a source of comfort for women in this project. Changes to these communities, including aging parents, death of loved ones, and friends moving away all impacted women’s wellness within and external to their lives as Ph.D. students.

**I Ran Away from Him: Changes in Romantic Relationships**

Romantic relationships also changed, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. Some women, like Paula and Sage, got married during their time in graduate school. Some women met their current partners while in school. Other women went through breakups and divorce. Whether the changes to their romantic relationships were positive or negative, they all impacted how women functioned as individuals and as students.

Helena left an abusive relationship shortly after beginning her program, and she found refuge within her academic community.

I ran away from him and came here running, crying to my advisor. And she was like, “it can be a common thing like once you're back in school and with people who support you and realize you don't have to be in this controlling environment anymore. It can be a bit of a common thing that happens in school.”
Fortunately, Helena had a supportive advisor who normalized this kind of relationship upheaval and provided her with a safe space to process her feelings. Helena later found a healthy relationship with a partner who supported her goals. Finding time to be together was still a challenge given her workload, but he was understanding.

Florecita divorced her husband during her time as a Ph.D. student which affected her mental and physical health. While she was going through the divorce, she experienced severe headaches from stress. One headache lasted for 21 days.

I wasn't being able to read or write or sometimes even talk. So that was like that was very stressful because you know there's still a lot of things going on and I still had to read. I still had to go to classes. I still had to teach. I still had to write.

This experience helped Florecita realize that “your mind and your body are the same. So, like if you're in pain, if you're not eating well, it’s not going to work no matter how smart you are.”

The time spent as Ph.D. students often coincides with changes in romantic relationships. Some women in this project found new partners, continued existing relationships, or ended unhealthy relationships. These upheavals, whether they were ultimately positive or negative, impacted participants’ mental and physical wellness.

**Pitted Against Your Own Body: Experiencing Personal Illness and Other Body Changes**

As women age, their bodies and minds change in many ways. Most women in this study discussed gaining or losing weight, sometimes because of stress and time for eating or exercising changing. Thinking about how to add new routines to their schedules usually posed some challenges and did not come without guilt because they knew they would need to take time away from being in the lab or writing.
At 51, Tess often weighed the impact of being a Ph.D. student against the value she felt she could contribute to society after she completed her degree.

Like Loann, Tess wondered if the Ph.D. program was worth completing at this point in her life because she worried so much about damaging her health.

I have times sometimes in terms of my embodied experience in the PhD program where I really feel my age. I will say to myself “is this really worth doing at this point in time?” … I saw the branches and I was in the midst of that physical feeling, and I looked at them and I was like “yeah, that’s how I feel.” Kind of withered and frail and I don’t have a whole lot left to contribute here in terms of energy-wise. Just the word that comes to mind when I look at it is “depleted.”

She saw friends her age who were “coasting” in their careers and envied their stability. In addition to feeling like she was in a constant state of exhaustion, Tess noticed other changes. She had gained weight over the past few years, something an ex-boyfriend had criticized her for before they ended their relationship during her Ph.D. program. Although she was no longer in that abusive relationship, Tess still felt the impact of those words on how she perceived her body.
and self-worth. She had high blood pressure and struggled with her medication regimen. She worried that she was pushing her body to perform the same way that she would have been able to do when she was 20 or 30 years younger. At this point, she felt like she was not giving her body the rest that it needed. She felt “pitted against your own body” at her age because of the demands of the Ph.D. program on top of everything else she needed to manage.

Women’s bodies change as they age. Whether women in this project began their programs when they were in their 20s or in their 50s, they described changes to their physical and mental health. They attributed some of these changes, such as shifting routines around eating, exercising, and self-care, directly to the challenges they encountered as Ph.D. students. Other changes did not directly result from being Ph.D. students, but they still had impacts on physical and mental wellness and who they were as students.

**Exposing Yourself to Something That Could Have Ramifications: Environmental Challenges Outside of Ph.D. Programs.**

The academic world and personal lives were not the only influences on women’s embodied experiences in graduate school. Political climates here and abroad created stress and distraction that impacted women in this project physically and mentally. Racism and xenophobia were challenges on personal levels as well as concerns when experiencing the broader world around them. Data collection for this project ended just as the pandemic forced business closures and the move to remote work environments on top of concerns for safety. Environmental influences such as these are always present in the lives of women Ph.D. students, and they cannot put these forces on hold.
The political climate in her home country was of huge concern to Jui, and activism had always “played a big role” in her life. It was very important for her to be involved in activism at Research University to bring awareness to these issues that were happening abroad.

Jui said that not being able to be back home in order to be more involved in activism was “very stressful” and gave her a “hopeless feeling.”

I really want to be there. But I also know I don’t have money to fly back for a protest …

It wasn’t a possibility because it was really really expensive. I still considered it, but I had random stuff I had to do and not solid time.

She did appreciate the community of international and domestic students at Research University who were also interested in political activism. She made new friends who she had never encountered on campus before, and it gave her something to look forward to outside of her responsibilities towards her schoolwork.

As an international student, Florecita found many differences between her home country and living in the community around Research University. At times, she was the target of racism and xenophobia, such as her encounter outside the library on campus. An incident that had a huge impact on wellbeing was when she was the victim of a scam call. Someone had called her
phone with information about her name, her age, her degree program, and said she made a mistake on her taxes. At the same time, she got a call on her phone from “911.” The second caller asked if she had spoken to anyone from the IRS and to follow their instructions to correct her taxes or she would be deported, and her degree would be cancelled. Because these callers knew so much of her personal information, Florecita was convinced they were real. Only after calling a friend to borrow more money to repay the IRS did she finally realize that she had been the victim of a scam call that targeted international students.

Florecita compared the fear during this moment to what she felt in her degree program at times in relation to grades and being evaluated. Just like she was afraid of being arrested and deported, she had felt at times that failing an assignment would be the end of the world.

I need to be very aware of my life and my body and my well-being and understand what is really essential … It’s only me who can really tell what is real and what is not and what is important for me to be alive and to be fine.

Florecita found that even though the scam call had been a traumatic incident, the change in perspective she had afterwards helped her as a student and as a person more generally.

Several women discussed the impacts on COVID-19 on their lives even as the pandemic was just beginning to impact this area of the world. Geneva had plans for her mother to visit from abroad, but those plans had to be cancelled because traveling internationally was no longer safe. She only got to see her family once a year, and she would have to spend the entire year or more without seeing them.

Clara had a conference a few weeks after our final interview, and she was weighing her options and what it would mean to attend or not attend because of the pandemic.
I may be exposing myself to something that could have ramifications. And if it does, what are my risks of essentially dying from this and how am I weighing that against my work obligations and presenting at this conference?

She did not know what kind of support she would have from her department around lost funds or what their reaction would be to a student backing out of a professional development obligation.

I don’t know if my department would reimburse me if the conference would not be able to, which would suck a whole lot because not only am I paying money to do something for my professional development, but I’m losing an opportunity to do something for my professional development and then I’m also out hundreds of dollars.

Financial difficulties and pressure to push through no matter the consequences had Clara considering risking her health and potentially her life in order to attend this conference.

Loann believed she had fallen ill because of COVID-19, but since Research University did not yet have tests, they could not confirm a diagnosis.

Based on what she knew about the virus and the symptoms, Loann was certain she had it.
I’ve had respiratory symptoms up until this weekend, and that’s when they finally cleared up the most. Very strange fever, rash, breathing difficulty. I’ve been in and out of [the campus health center] like 100 times and now they’re telling me “don’t come back because we can’t test you, and you might have it.”

Luckily, Loann was feeling much better by the time we had our second interview, but the novelty and uncertainty around the coronavirus was stressful. Normally she would see a therapist on campus, but her appointments had been suspended while the office figured out if and how they would deliver remote therapy. Unable to return to the campus health center or her therapist's office, Loann had to cope physically and mentally with the virus on her own. She was grateful that such a serious illness gave her a legitimate excuse to take a break from school for a short time, but even COVID-19 did not stop her from feeling guilty about stalling her progress.

Environmental influences external to Ph.D. programs are beyond the control of individuals. At the same time, they can have a significant impact on wellbeing. The current racial climate as well as the pandemic impacted the mental and physical wellness of women in this project. They did not have the appropriate acknowledgement or support from faculty or administrators in their programs around these influences.

**Many Roles and Many Shoes: Little Time for Oneself.**

In addition to their identities as women and as students, many Ph.D. students hold other demanding roles in life which leave little room for attention to their own needs. These roles included being mothers, romantic partners, daughters, pet owners, homeowners, team members, employees, and teachers. Sometimes women were able to combine these roles with their lives as Ph.D. students with ease, but most of the time they experienced some conflict with how to balance everything demanded of them.
Nadine shared a photograph representative of the many roles that she had in her life. Her shoes included work boots for the labor she performed around the house, her son’s shoes for her role as a mother, dress shoes for professional events, sneakers for being an athlete, slippers for relaxing, and her wedding boots and husband’s shoes for her role as a wife.

Still Figuring Out How to Juggle All of My Different Selves - Nadine

With multiple roles, Nadine found that she had very little time for herself. She spent a lot of time on campus, and when she came home, she wanted to be available for her husband and son.

Being a mother and a Ph.D. student did not come without complications. It was difficult for Nadine to find adequate time to work from home when her son also needed her attention.
Once after waking up from a nap, Nadine’s son came to her home office and sat on her lap. As she continued to type, he began to cry.

I don’t know if he knew it or not, but he really wanted my undivided attention and I wasn’t giving it to him. And so I just stopped. I closed my laptop and I just spent some time hugging him. And that helped.

There were other times when motherhood and her Ph.D. work were in competition. She made a point of not working at home in the evenings so that she could spend time with her husband and son, but she often got home after they had eaten dinner. She also struggled to be fully present for them because of the stress she felt about her lack of progress towards her degree.

Pets offer companionship, but they also come with their own set of demands. During data collection for this project, Tess, Helena, and Sage all had emergencies with their pets. Tess’ dog was ill and needed to go to the vet. Additionally, her neighbor had complained about her dog barking during the day when Tess was not home. On top of other worries, Tess was concerned that her neighbor would call the police if she was not able to find a solution. She had tried obedience classes and different training collars, but the problem persisted.

Sage’s cat had some respiratory issues that also warranted a visit to the vet. These issues had been ongoing for several weeks, and Sage had to take time off from school to bring her cat to the necessary appointments.
Sage identified her cat as a source of “emotional support,” but caring for her could also be a source of stress. Her husband was able to share the responsibility of coordinating trips to the vet while he was on vacation from work, but Sage had taken their cat to most of the trips to the vet. Worrying about her cat’s health also caused stress, especially while doctors were still trying to figure out the source of her health problems and how to treat them. Luckily, Sage’s schedule was relatively flexible at Research University, but juggling school and rearranging her appointments had been a “significant stressor.”

Helena’s dog was diagnosed with cancer during data collection for this project. She and her boyfriend had noticed that their dog was having issues with swallowing, so they took him to the vet where they found a large tumor on the back of his tongue.
Helena felt empathy for her dog who had been suffering for a while and unable to articulate exactly what was wrong. “My heart was broken for him … This is my life and what’s happening. I felt bad. I don’t want to ruin your study, but this was my life.” Luckily, they were able to take their dog in for surgery and remove the tumor. She and her boyfriend had experienced a lot of stress and emotions related to their dog’s illness, but now that doctors were able to provide him with a few more years of life, they were doing their best to enjoy it while they could.

In addition to caring for pets, some women needed to care for friends. One of Clara’s friends outside of Research University had an unexpected and life-threatening stroke during data collection. Clara described it as a “wake up call” to have someone she cared about have such a near-death experience.
Once she had recovered, the two friends went shopping to celebrate. Clara’s friend bought her a sweater as a gift, and Clara appreciated the reminder that everything was okay again. Even though she needed to drop everything and take time away from working on her dissertation, she knew her friend needed her more. Clara said her friend’s health was “the most important thing to me right now. School means nothing because this is my family.” Caring for loved ones can take many forms for women in Ph.D. programs whether they have their own children or not.

People are complex beings, and women often juggle many roles throughout their lives. They are mothers, romantic partners, daughters, pet owners, homeowners, team members, employees, and teachers. Many of these roles require them to prioritize the needs of others before their own needs. Participants in this project felt at times that they did not have the necessary time or capacity to embody these roles fully.

**I’m Not Always Present: Experiencing Disembodiment**

When women are unable to give attention to themselves on top of the multiple competing priorities in their lives, they can feel disconnected from themselves and their surroundings. So much of their time is dictated by the needs of others that they begin to lose their sense of self. They may struggle to be fully present in their relationships or during other activities.
Several women described feelings of disembodiment when these stresses became too much to handle. Nadine had noticed recently that her time for self-care and attention to mental health had been lacking. Her husband had been working through PTSD since leaving the army, and Nadine also had PTSD because of having been a military wife. Her photograph of her desk showed all of the competing priorities with items representing self-care on the periphery.

A Taste of My Life on My Home Work Space - Nadine

Sometimes I have really bad days, and I don't get time to deal with it … I get now what people are saying when they say all the mental battles people don't see … So, yeah, Ph.D. doesn't give you time to deal with those things as much as you should because your brain’s just tired and you don't want to think.

Her husband had been out of the army for several years, but Nadine had struggled to find time to unpack the effects of their experiences because of the demands of being Ph.D. student, mother, wife, and everything else.
Out of Body - Nadine

Maybe I’m not always the most present wife and mother that I could be, and that weighs heavily on me. Maybe I’m not always present with my work and move too slow with my publications.

After formal data collection ended, Nadine emailed me during member checks to say that she had decided to leave her Ph.D. program. She was happy with her new path, but ultimately, she had decided that the academic lifestyle was not conducive to the healthy balance she wanted.

Tess also found balancing PhD life with her outside job and responsibilities as a single mother to be difficult.
Whirlwind - Tess

During data collection, Tess needed to figure out how to fix her washing machine, take her laundry to a laundromat, take her dog to the vet, read for class, and go to work. As a single mother, she had to manage these responsibilities on her own while also caring for her daughter.

It’s not like I think that that’s super unique, but sometimes I think the parenting part, there’s a little bit of an extra guilt twist to it that says ‘I haven’t vacuumed it X amount because I’ve been so busy with school.’ But then once it affects [my daughter] because she needs clean clothes, then it becomes a different thing.

Sometimes, Tess was able to work on her class assignments while her daughter also completed her own schoolwork at home, and she appreciated when these roles coincided. Most of the time, she found her many responsibilities to conflict with each other. Sometimes Tess was so exhausted by the end of classes that she wondered if she could drive home without falling asleep.

Like Nadine, Tess also expressed feelings of disembodiment when she knew she was not fully present or available for whatever was demanding her time at any given moment.
Fun House Trio - Tess

It’s more about how I experience myself. It’s like a disconnection from myself, and so if there was a visual representation that was the opposite of that it would be solid me looking like me.

She visualized her responsibilities as various “realms” including the student realm, the work realm, and the mom realm. When I asked her about where she saw time for herself fitting into any realm, Tess said she often did not include time for herself, a shared experience among most women in this project whether they had children or not.

Some women expressed a need for closing off other aspects of their lives to a certain extent to devote the time and energy they needed to complete their dissertations. Clara had been responsible for caring for her terminally ill mother during her time as an undergraduate. She felt that she still had not given herself the space to process that experience. That had been painful, and there were many other responsibilities demanding her time as a Ph.D. student.
Clara shared a photograph of a self-sealing jar, representing her need to close herself off to distractions. Subsequently, she gave up “relationships, different introspective feelings or concerns about the outside world, just my own hobbies” to push through to her degree.

Women in this project had some control over where they focused their attention, but many other factors impacted the way they were able to participate in their programs and other demands. Women are not, however, powerless when it comes to determining how they exist. While many barriers are present, there are ways in which they can and do redirect their focus back towards their own bodies and minds as well as supporting others around them.

**Stepping Outside of Mind-Body Dualism Towards Embodiment**

Despite existing in an environment that was not necessarily structured to support their needs, women demonstrated strength and creativity when they moved away from mind-body dualism towards embodiment. The challenges and lack of adequate support that women encountered in their Ph.D. programs did not transform them into strong and resilient people. They were strong and resilient to begin. The barriers they faced as women Ph.D. students made it necessary for them to draw upon and enhance the strength and resiliency they already possessed.
Clara had spent her senior year of college as a caretaker for her terminally ill mother. Coco had made it through her undergraduate program as a single mother living on food stamps. Greer and Yoly had been managing chronic illnesses throughout their lives. Many women had successful careers before and in addition to working towards their degrees. In other words, going through a Ph.D. program the way many are currently structured is not the healthiest way to develop strong women. Rather, women demonstrate their strength and resiliency in this context, one of many contexts where they have already done so.

Figure 4: Argument 3

Figure 4 represents my third main argument supported by findings from this project: women demonstrate creativity and resilience when they step outside of mind-body dualism towards embodiment. Mind-body dualism is a pervasive force within academic culture even though embodiment is at the core of women Ph.D. students’ experiences. Women recognized the connections between their minds, bodies, and academic work. Despite the lack of existing support for embodiment, women adapted their approaches to their work and the wellness through creative embodied work habits, developing their communities of support, and reframing and
reclaiming their mentalities towards their Ph.D. work.

Without acknowledgement of the embodied realities of being a woman Ph.D. student from their faculty or program structures, many women in this project relied on themselves and communities they developed for support. They shared several creative ways that they have cultivated routines and structures for themselves to support their overall wellness. Some of their activities are exclusive to their identities as Ph.D. students, such as cultivating workspaces and habits. Other activities were incorporated into their lives outside of school that also supported their work as students. Learning to recognize the routines they already had as well as changing their mindsets to better support their needs often resulted in healthier existences.

It’s Not Nothing at All: Creative Embodied Habits

Bodies and minds are strongly interconnected. Without proper support for the whole self, it is difficult for anyone to function at their fullest potential or feel at peace with who they are. One way that women found joy in their everyday lives was to savor moments of positivity. Sometimes these moments happened at random, like noticing a beautiful sunset. Other women were intentional about building peaceful routines in their schedules. As a Ph.D. student with many other demands on one’s time, creating extra time for self-care activities can be challenging. The thought of having to schedule one more thing can be enough to avoid it entirely. Learning to recognize the moments in their days that already brought them happiness was one way for women to reclaim some of the day for themselves without adding extra tasks.

Breakfast time for some women was rushed or even non-existent, but those who took time to cook and eat and either be alone with their thoughts or spend time with a loved one savored these moments. Yoly and her wife who was also a Ph.D. student used their breakfast time together as intentional time to connect.
Yoly was not the kind of person who would grab coffee in the morning and run out the door, so having breakfast was already part of her routine. This routine became a ritual when she and her wife acknowledged the sweetness of their “choreography” in the kitchen together.

It reminds me of all of those good moments. I don’t think I can remember a breakfast time that has been stressful or messy or that has involved something like an argument. I think it’s always a nice part of the day, even if I’m feeling tired.

Without having to create more time or new activities, women like Nadine and Yoly were able to find peace and connection with their spouses through being intentional about the time they had.

Some women preferred to use cooking and eating time as a chance to be alone. Rita purposely avoided distractions first thing in the morning as she prepared her breakfast, got dressed, and stretched her body. Her morning routine was meant to be alone time just for her.
I get up and I don’t put on any music or any news yet or check any email or anything, but usually when I get up in the morning, I guess kind of a morning ritual … It’s like unstructured brain time.”

Unstructured brain time was important for Rita, especially because the rest of her day was likely centered around her research or classes. Her morning routine gave her a break from heavy thinking while still paying attention to the needs of her body and mind.

Savoring moments of positivity could also be as simple as remembering to look up and acknowledge the beauty of their environments. Several women said that some of the pictures they brought to share with me as part of this project were ones they would have taken outside the context of the project anyways because they wanted to remember that moment in time and be able to revisit it later.
Peep - Reian

Reian took a photograph of the sunset she saw while dog sitting. The weather had been unseasonably warm, and she was able to take a moment to sit outside and enjoy the view.

There was a moment where it’s really beautiful and I just wanted to sit and enjoy it and appreciate where I was, and in this moment just sit down, breathe … It reminds me of that peace that I felt in that moment and just enjoying being there and the beauty in nature.

In addition to taking photographs as a part of this project, Reian said that taking photographs of her surroundings helped her acknowledge the beauty of the moment before it slipped away. She could then revisit those images later and remember the feelings she had at the time.

Tess was another woman who used taking photographs to positively disrupt the chaos she experienced on a daily basis.
Tess was intentional about needing to notice her surroundings as a way of “waking myself up.”

I try to really take a minute and notice these things either with or without a camera because I can very easily be like “Oh my gosh, the season changed. When did that happen?” Because I’m so kinda on overload, and it definitely helps me to have these moments where it’s like “Look at the pretty pink-orange the sky is right now.”

Her daughter also helped Tess reframe the way she was taking in her surroundings in a new way.

Because productivity in their lives was so dictated by the expectations around publishing, other school-related milestones, and the societal obsession with productivity, it was difficult for many women to consider self-care or non-academic activities that contributed to their overall wellness as productive and not selfish.
Nadine shared a photograph entitled “I Just Wanna Do Nothing.” Our discussion around this photograph centered on activities she found relaxing, like meditating with a colleague for 5 minutes or watching TV. She felt guilty about “doing nothing” when she engaged in self-care, but Nadine acknowledged that these activities helped her recharge. Upon further reflection, she said “It’s not nothing. I say it out loud and it’s not nothing at all.”

Most women described participating in activities or hobbies that improved their physical and mental wellbeing and helped give them a more mindful perspective on their lives as Ph.D. students. Rita loved going salsa dancing at least once a week.

She described how communicating with a dancing partner supported her work as a scientist.
You’re starting off, you’re listening to the music, you’re getting in the rhythm before you try to do anything fancy, or you need to give some feedback to the person that you’re working with on a project and try to figure out a way where everything can work well like a good dance.

Going salsa dancing was not a distraction for Rita. It supported her overall wellness in addition to helping her understand the nature of communication in her field.

Most women shared their passion for cooking or baking through photographs for this project. Completing calming and creative activities with tangible outcomes felt satisfying, especially compared to long term projects like dissertations or working on publications.

Sage described how relaxing cooking could be because it was free from evaluation.

It does feel super different. It feels like it’s using different parts of my brain… It isn’t something that’s going to be judged in some way, evaluated. This is not evaluated. It’s something that is just for fun, just for me or just for me and other people and friends or family, but it’s not evaluative. It’s not graded. It’s not being peer reviewed.

It was difficult for many women to adapt to the kind of feedback they received in their Ph.D. programs, especially if they had always been successful students. Creative outlets helped them exercise their brains in different ways and take risks in a low-stakes environment.
When Geneva had her back injury, her physical therapist recommended that she try Pilates to improve her flexibility. She began to feel a sense of normalcy in her life after taking classes at a local gym. Geneva loved her workout community and the way she felt after taking up this practice. She found her mental health improving, and she was able to return to many activities she had previously enjoyed, including baking and ballet dancing.

Sticking to a routine that was strictly based around schoolwork and nothing else had resulted in physical injury and depression. Incorporating other hobbies into their lives helped many women improve physical and mental health, find community, and feel like themselves again.

Working on home improvement projects was an activity that Nadine could share with her husband and feel a sense of ownership over.
Tangible Work: The Projects Don’t End at School - Nadine

When I tell them I’ve been in school for five years and I still don’t have my degree, I’ll get comments like “Wow, you could have been a doctor” which I’ve clearly internalized … My husband will get comments, not outright, but they’re getting at “Oh, your wife is being selfish. She’s still in school now” kind of thing. So it’s nice to have these tangible things.

Nadine also explained through her photographs the importance of overcoming the common stereotypes associated with women and with academics. She was someone who was capable of doing manual labor and contributing to her family in meaningful ways beyond being a student, a wife, and a mother. Activities such as reflooring her kitchen or chopping firewood were ways she could fight against the stereotype of being an overly cerebral academic or a delicate woman.

Rock climbing was another activity that several women enjoyed outside of their schoolwork that impacted how they operated as students. Maria said that overcoming her
aversion to risk-taking while rock climbing made her a more adventurous scientist. She used to find herself not wanting to try anything new, but the confidence she gained from rock climbing helped her be brave in the lab and not so afraid of making mistakes.

Yoly also participated in rock climbing and saw how this activity improved her flexibility and ability to identify resources when she needed help.

While improving her physical flexibility, Yoly saw that rock climbing also empowered her to be more flexible with her school schedule. “I felt my life was so scheduled, my classes, really realizing that I didn’t have space or flexibility within my own life to make decisions.” She also noticed that rock climbing gave her a place to practice teamwork and relying on other people, something she did not get to work on through her Ph.D. program. Resources for improving her climbing skills were clearly outlined and readily available, and Yoly wished that she had that kind of support through school. For instance, it took her a long time to realize that she would benefit from seeing a counselor to improve her mental health. She wished that resource had been
more visible in her Ph.D. environment the same way that yoga for flexibility and core
strengthening classes were advertised at the rock-climbing gym.

During her time in her Ph.D. program, Florecita started doing yoga with friends. She
found that yoga was necessary for her to balance the physical toll that doing academic work took
on her body. Working alone for long hours felt productive according to the demands of her
program, but yoga became an important mental and physical outlet.

She said that her friends encouraged her to have a more active lifestyle, especially after
experiencing back pain and mental health issues related to schoolwork and other stresses in her
life. Florecita found yoga and other lessons she had learned about body posture and mediation to
be so helpful that she wished faculty and administrators built these resources into her academic
program. She said, “this is such a crucial thing when you’re becoming a scholar and a crucial
thing in general in academic life, and how is it that we don’t talk about this?” She recommended
that someone like a physical therapist come talk to graduate students during their first few weeks
of their programs so they could set themselves up with healthy habits before they ran into issues.

Women in this project found that changing their physical habits around work was one
way to contend with the unfamiliar approaches to learning and producing academic work
associated with Ph.D. programs. They described the importance of personalizing workspaces
either at home or on campus. Often, personalization created an inviting environment, in contrast with the demoralizing workspaces provided for them on campus, that would encourage them to return to their workspaces.

*Inspiration - Helena*

Helena used a salt rock lamp, calming colors, and humorous artwork to remind herself that she could complete the tasks at hand.

It’s a cheap tacky thing… But to me seizing the day, that’s a huge thing. Sort of working at my computer if I don’t feel like being there, I can look at that and be like ‘yes, I’m going to go for it. I’m going to get this kind of thing.

Making a schedule or a to-do list was an anxiety-inducing activity for Loann, so she placed a robot eraser from her father on top of her whiteboard. She said, “I sort of enjoy that there because it is just a nice visual thing for me to look at and smile about.”
Having photos or other mementos that reminded women of friends, family, or past achievements helped them keep their current work anxieties in perspective.

Florecita said that creating mind-maps or other drafts in her notebook by hand was her first step before writing anything on her laptop. A word document made her feel like her work needed to be perfect, so staring at a blank document while trying to type often gave her anxiety.
I will always have my notebook next to my laptop. I'm handwriting, and when I have my idea ready then I type. I organize the words, and writing my notes feels like a more organic connection between my thoughts and like the movement of my body.

Using a notebook for planning helped Florecita acknowledge the embodied experience of writing. She created a routine for her that embraced the physical and mental impact of her work rather than treating it as a cerebral-only activity. Other embodied work habits women used included crafting instrumental playlists to use while writing or reading, wearing noise cancelling headphones, lighting candles, having a warm beverage to drink, using Pomodoro or other timed techniques, and taking advantage of natural light in home workspaces. Most of these routines took time for women to develop through trial and error, especially since learning about embodied work practices were not usually acknowledged in the context of their Ph.D. programs.

Getting up to move served the purpose of attending to the physical needs of their bodies as well to change their mindsets, process thoughts, and shake loose new ideas. Working from home provided Judith with a large degree of freedom to plan her schedule around schoolwork, exercise, and other activities she enjoyed or needed to complete. She made a habit of keeping her running shoes and resistance band near her workspace at home so these items were readily available to her for quick breaks while she was completing assignments for school.
“If I’m stuck I’ll say ‘Okay, time to run around.’ Especially if it’s snowing outside. And so it has that double duty to keep me healthier and also to kind of jiggle things around a little bit.” Whether she was running around inside, doing housework, or going for a walk with her dog, Judith noticed that she had “lost track of the number of times that I’ve had some sort of mental breakthrough when I just got up and left the table.” Moving around helped many women process their thoughts about schoolwork and come back to their workspaces feeling refreshed.

Coco found that physical movement also helped to break through moments of writer’s block. In one instance of feeling stuck, she created a “blob” out of several pieces of clay as a physical representation of her mindset and the problem at hand.
It helped me give words to what was happening or give an image to what was happening and to remember they’re just blobs. You need to pull out the colors or threads or whatever individually and get rid of the overwhelming, which I still struggle with. Creating something tangible to help reframe her writer’s block helped Coco move forward with her work. Other times, Cooc would find herself so energized by her own writing that she would be “running around my apartment. You’re not able to actually sit back down and finish the paragraph because even if it’s good it’s so activating that I can’t contain myself.”

Women also discovered that physically moving their bodies was necessary to counteract the discomfort of sitting at a desk. Coco described a special box she kept near her desk at home so she could periodically get up and stretch tight calf muscles. After experiencing a herniated disc from sitting too much, Geneva made it a habit to change desks or work at a different library every few hours. Florecita found that she could not sleep one night because I had been working so hard. But like only my mind was tired. Like the rest of my body wasn't. So it was 5:30am and I started to like exercise and I started to jog and doing sit-ups and pushups. I needed to balance because I feel exhausted, but my body hasn't moved in six days … I went back to bed again. And I finally could sleep better.

Academic work has a strong impact on the way women experience their own bodies on a day-to-day basis, and physical routines can help improve comfort.

Outside activities and other projects helped many women keep their work in perspective. Of the many hobbies Judith had, her sewing and other work with fabrics were her favorite.
In addition to finding joy in her sewing projects, Judith was very intentional about spending her time on non-academic work.

I’m protecting myself against getting sucked into only doing the academic stuff. At some level, I know that just doing that would not be healthy, and so I’m constantly bringing other things back to my attention.

Even going for a walk in the woods with her dog and feeling the air move around her helped remind Judith that school was not everything. There were always other aspects of the world to enjoy. She loved school and the process of learning, but Judith defined herself in much broader terms than just being a Ph.D. student.

Judith enjoyed the process over the outcome of her schoolwork, and other hobbies outside of school allowed her to fully embrace that passion. She enjoyed the process of planning and planting a garden almost more than having one, a connection she made to her academic work. She noted that finishing a sewing project did not mean she would never sew again. She would soon start another one because of how enjoyable the work was.
Judith marveled at how all of her hobbies supported her ability to do schoolwork and wellbeing. She needed a variety of activities outside of her work as a Ph.D. student to feel whole.

I keep being struck by how I have all these pieces of my life, and they’re all important.

Things don’t function. If you took one of them out the others would all suffer … I know that they’re tied together.

Although few women could articulate exactly where the pressure came from, many felt guilty about taking time away from working on dissertations or other projects for school. However, once they were able to take ownership of their own mental and physical needs and prioritize those over school, they felt healthier, happier, and more complete.

**Developing Communities of Support: Asking for Help is a Sign of Strength**

Many women described the importance of having communities of support. Friends, family, romantic partners, therapists, athletic instructors, and dance groups contributed to the support systems women had. These people provided outlets for socialization as well as sources of help. Some women in this project were initially uncomfortable asking for help because they did not want to impose on others or appear weak, but they ultimately understood asking for help as a sign of strength.
Patricia loved the sense of community she had been able to develop with her fellow graduate students outside of her academic work. Several women in her department organized nights out once a month and stayed in touch through a group text thread. Some friends had also helped watch her son when she and her husband did not have other childcare available. Patricia developed a wonderfully supportive friendship with another student in her program and his wife. This couple frequently invited Patricia and her young family over for dinner, what she described as “a wonderful experience.”

Several women enjoyed working with friends. Yoly once saw another group working at a local bar and decided to invite some colleagues to adapt the same routine.

I’m happy to have found colleagues with whom I can meet and be relaxed, but also don’t feel that I’m wasting my time necessarily. We take breaks, which is nice, and we can get to engage and know more about each other and share things, but we also have work time.
Yoly found that the time spent at the bar doubled as productive time to focus on schoolwork while also socializing with friends, something she had been trying to do more of recently. This routine helped her feel as if she had more ownership over this time rather than feeling like school was dominating all aspects of her life.

After overworking herself early on, Maria learned the importance of taking time away from school to enjoy her friends and the activities she had access to as part of moving to the area around Research University. Having come from a country with a much warmer climate, it took time for her to “learn to love” her new environment for everything it was.
The transition to the Research University area was difficult, especially since that was the first time Maria had lived away from her family. The cold winters made the transition even harder to be away from her support systems, and at first Maria did not like the change. However, her new friends organized opportunities to spend time together away from schoolwork, including painting nights or weekend trips to go skiing and tubing. “It’s just a contrast of where I’m coming from and now where I am. I feel like now I’m also embracing of that ... It took me by surprise the first couple of years I was here.” Some students do not travel far from where they grew up when they begin their Ph.D. programs, but for many students it means living in a new area of the country or the world. They have to create new support structures with friends and adapt to geographical environments and climates on top of figuring out how to be Ph.D. students. Maria mentioned that going to therapy had helped her change her mindset about her new surroundings, but her friends were also instrumental in helping her appreciate the area and all the ways that they could support each other as friends through this time of transition.

Malala Michele’s new romantic relationship offered her some “solace” from the chaos of her everyday life. So much of her time was spent caring for others.
I have two kids. What do I manage? Everything … Diet, eating like a normal person, showering, I still give them both baths so their hygiene. I brush their teeth, change diapers. To care for my own body, menstruating, diets, hormones. And also I’m in charge of all of the activities and programs for the department.

Excursions in Self Exploration - Malala Michele

As a special treat, her new partner planned a romantic weekend just for the two of them. Malala Michele said it felt so nice to have someone else take care of all of the planning. His support gave her a rare opportunity to focus on herself and her own needs. She felt like she was in a “constant stage of managing things.” This trip she did not have to plan felt like a gift.

Malala Michele also cultivated a sense of community in her program for other mothers. Even though she was a single mother, raising two children on her own necessitated getting help from others. Some colleagues were supportive and offered to help with childcare or cover classes if she needed to take her sons to a doctor’s appointment. She made a point of bringing her children to class when she was teaching, sometimes holding class while also holding her baby. It was important for her to advocate for mothers in academia and to normalize in a visible way the
presence of children and mothers on campus. She was also active within the union to create childcare programs for other graduate student parents at Research University.

Similarly, Patricia found that she needed to set firm boundaries with her advisor to advocate for herself when she became a mother. After her son was born, Patricia’s advisor had sent her an email over the summer telling her that she needed to keep “pace” with the program expectations and produce a chapter per semester. Patricia said that email caused her a lot of anxiety. After consulting with a friend, Patricia responded to her advisor saying her email was not helpful. She appreciated the advice, but what she really needed was for someone to say “you're going to be okay. You will do this.”

I do not know how many women would feel comfortable enough to confront an advisor with such direct needs, so I asked Patricia how she knew she could do something like that having never been in that situation before. She said she did not know, but in that moment, she needed to advocate for herself. She also had an understanding that the issue was bigger than just her as a mother. There were generational differences at play.

I think there's this sort of sense that it's like “well I struggled through it. Your turn” kind of thing. So it's not like women helping women … But at the same time, I was also pretty confident in my own sense of what it meant for me to be a parent and a grad student … And she was fine with it. She didn't have a choice anyway.

Like Malala Michele, Patricia encountered outdated policies from faculty. Both women took active roles in advocating for themselves and ultimately other mothers in their programs.

Learning to ask for help in the context of graduate school was a hard lesson for women who were used to operating independently or had learned that asking for help was a sign of weakness. Several women noted the masculine value of toughness in academia associated with
soldiering through on one’s own. Nadine compared this concept to asking for an epidural during her 36-hour labor. After 24 hours of trying on her own, she asked for help.

That’s kind of what I do with my PhD is “No I don’t need anything. I’m tough. I can make it.” And then I go “No pride, be reasonable with yourself. Pace yourself. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.”

Learning to ask for help involves being vulnerable, something that takes strength rather than weakness. Nadine noticed other students who tried to push through would eventually “crack and take a semester off.” Sometimes slowing down, closing her laptop, being with her son, finding time to enjoy a podcast on her own, or reflecting on her mental health with a friend was the best not only valuable in the moment. It also benefited her in the long run.

Many women shared fears about productivity or what might happen to them after graduation. Counseling became a useful resource. Some women started counseling for the first time during school, and others decided to return to counseling after going through stages in their lives when they felt that they did not need that support as much. Several women expressed
disappointment that caring for mental health and seeking help was not normalized within their programs. Instead, they had to find resources on their own after experiencing difficulties managing their mental health within the context of the Ph.D. program.

Asking for help was a “recent thing” for Reian. In her work and in her relationships, she was often the person others would come to for help. She was used to being in a nurturing role and putting her own needs aside.

Reian began therapy several years into her time as a Ph.D. student. She found that much of what she discussed with her counselor was more related to family and life outside of school, but the overall experience of going to counseling helped her wellbeing in all aspects of her life.

I think now I feel much more secure with where I am and what I’m doing. It’s become a good time to actually reach out for help and, again, learning to say I can ask for help or I can find someone who can help me and just focusing on doing this work that’s not academics but something that is going to help the other parts of my life.
In addition to seeing a counselor, Reian learned that her partner was an excellent resource.

I have almost always relied on myself to accomplish anything I’ve wanted to do. That becomes hard and at times unbearable in the context of a PhD. Having a partner and friends to turn to in times of high anxiety or when I need help has been a new part of my life, as I’ve finally blown past the boundaries of what I can accomplish on my own.

Reian had always advocated for her friends and fellow Ph.D. students to do whatever they needed to do in order to take care of their own mental health. Being able to accept her own advice was a hard lesson to learn but ultimately one that she was glad she did.

As a first-generation student, Maria often found herself feeling like she needed to prove her worth by operating independently. Asking for help indicated her inadequacy as a student and that she did not belong in a Ph.D. program at Research University. At first, she struggled with time-management or other skills her peers had developed previously in school. Eventually, Maria also came to understand that she had a habit of “isolating” herself during conflicts because she had learned not to trust other people. Going to therapy helped her learn how to communicate her feelings more effectively and to trust in the intentions of people who cared about her. She
discovered that her advisor also went to therapy as part of her weekly routine, and she wished she had known how common and how helpful therapy could be as a resource.

Maintaining communities of support was key to academic success and overall wellness for women in this project. Friends, family, romantic partners, therapists, athletic instructors, and dance groups offered emotional support and partnerships for participating in wellness activities. Often, women had to cultivate these relationships despite the lack of community they experienced within their academic programs. Participants recognized that getting through a Ph.D. program was not something anyone could do completely on their own without sacrificing their own wellness. They acknowledged that asking for help may have been difficult initially, but they ultimately benefited when aided by their communities of support.

I’ve Learned to Separate: Reframing and Reclaiming Mentality Towards the Ph.D.

One of the most prominent themes in this project is the peace and balance women find when they begin to separate their concept of self-worth from their Ph.D. programs. Much of women’s lives are spent with the understanding that the way others measure them defines who they are. Appearance, particularly through the lens of heterosexual males, has a strong impact on the way many women experience their own bodies. The critiques they have faced throughout their lives and the pressure to conform to a certain feminine image may conflict with their personal feelings and sense of wellbeing. As women in this project have gotten older, many of them have said they learned to listen to themselves for approval about their bodies.

Women in Ph.D. programs are often similarly used to deriving a sense of self-worth from consistent positive feedback in academic spaces. Part of being in graduate school is learning to reassess how one measures self-worth and what they as individuals deserve. This shift in mentality can be difficult to do when programs are designed where students are constantly asked
to perform in certain ways for faculty or other decision makers such as adhering to requirements for comprehensive exams or dissertations. Graduate school has also meant needing to shift approval from faculty for being a good student to self-approval because grades and other forms of evaluation can be nebulous and arbitrary.

Coco’s photograph represented many of the pressures women face both within and outside of the context of academia. She said “the pillars of the academy stand tall as my own self fragments trying to find a way in. To exist even. The objects speak for me and yet I am still missing. Disembodied.” She spoke about the impossibility of being everything that is expected of women, of students, of mothers, of teachers, and of any other roles. Although it is still an ongoing process for her and for many women in this project, Coco believed that “there is still wonder in the world to behold, AND a fully integrated body and mind is one day within reach.”

Mindfulness helped many women in this project separate their sense of self from the Ph.D. process. Letting go of the need for control was a tough but important lesson for Florecita. Many aspects of her program and being in a new country were beyond her control, and learning to listen to herself more than the doubt she encountered around her improved her wellness.
Her “Schrödinger's Cat” mugs served as a material representation of this lesson. When hot liquid was added to the mug, the cat would either appear or not depending on which mug she selected. She never knew which mug she was going to get. She said “you do your best, you do your math, but you never know how the day’s gonna go at the end. That’s just beyond your control.”

Florecita brought this awareness to her schoolwork and the outcomes attached to her actions. Early on in her program, she took a class with a faculty member who was emotionally manipulative. Later, she would learn that this person had a pattern of lulling students, especially women international students, into a false sense of security through praise and would eventually cast them off or become harsh. Florecita was used to seeking approval from teachers, and this experience was jarring. After talking to another international student who had run into the same problems with this faculty member, she learned not to place so much weight on evaluation that came from others. What mattered most was how she felt about herself.

In addition to working through her aversion to risk-taking, rock climbing helped Maria learn that failure and making mistakes were an inevitable part of being in a Ph.D. program and in life. She liked the “feeling when I take ownership of my own performance” rather than basing how she felt about her work on the outcomes of the experiments she ran.
I’ve learned to separate, like “no, that is just a very difficult project.” … And I believe in luck, too … That also helped my sort of imposter syndrome … It’s just complicated. I’m perfectly capable of performing these experiments and getting something out of them.

Having vulnerable conversations with other more experienced researchers also helped Maria put her own work in perspective. If people she admired also made the same mistakes that she did, that meant that she was not an imposter. Everyone made mistakes throughout their career because they were always learning and growing.

Working towards a Ph.D. is an emotional and physical endeavor. Women in this project felt passionately about their academic work, and they associated much of their sense of self with the successes and failures they experienced along the way. Most women were accustomed to measuring parts of their self-worth in relation to feedback they received in academic contexts throughout their lives. Because the process of earning a Ph.D. can be ambiguous and differs from previous academic experiences, women in this project often needed to reevaluate how they understood their own self-worth. Reframing and reclaiming their approaches to the Ph.D. process helped them separate their sense of self from the feedback they received from others. Ultimately, this distance improved their physical and mental wellness.

Final Thoughts on Findings

Ph.D. students are more than just brains, and women are more than just bodies. They have complex and diverse lived realities that can both complicate and enhance who they are in academic spaces. Women in this project identified supportive individuals who were faculty, administrators, and students, but these individuals often stood in stark contrast to the indifference or active discouragement they experienced in the broader context of their programs. Embodied experiences of being a woman Ph.D. student were full of physical maladies, mental health
struggles, and learning how to manage the many demands of the multiple roles they held with little programmatic support. The more women came to understand the connections between their bodies, minds, and academic selves, the happier and healthier they felt.

Caring for women’s bodies and minds cannot be treated as solely the responsibility of women themselves. Doing so only contributes to the already crushing responsibilities that many women in this project articulated. Feeling burned out, invisible, or otherwise mistreated then becomes the fault of individual women. Self-care is not a fix-all solution to the many barriers to holistic existence that women Ph.D. students face. Structural changes within programs and the appropriate adjustments to behaviors and attitudes which normalize these structures are necessary to support the wellness work that many women already do.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

At the outset of this project, my intention was to examine the essence of the embodied Ph.D. experience according to women through three areas of focus: 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, and 3) health and wellness. These constructs were informed both by my informal observations of colleagues and my own experiences in addition to the existing literature about women Ph.D. students.

At the core of these constructs are several notions. First, that the ideal Ph.D. student or ideal faculty member is a White, middle- to upper-middle class, heterosexual, and able-bodied man who either has no outside family responsibilities or a wife at home to accommodate many basic needs (Bailyn, 2003; Bendix Petersen, 2014; Messner, 2000). Mind body dualism, a patriarchal system of beliefs central to structures and behaviors within Ph.D. programs, places men as superior to women within a gender binary and privileges the mind above the body (Bordo, 2003b; López-Ibor, Ortiz, & López-Ibor, 2011). Although these assumptions have harmful implications for Ph.D. students and other members of the academy of all identities, there are dangers specific to women Ph.D. students. These additional harms exist because of the competing notions of what it means to be a successful academic and how these conflict with societal expectations and realities of womanhood (Drago et al., 2005).

Graduate school is historically a taxing process for many students of all identities, but students these days lead more complex lives than they ever have (C. Haynes et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2006). New Ph.D. students and faculty members have expressed a desire and need for more balanced and satisfactory existences in both work and personal lives than previous
generations (Mason et al., 2009; Quinn, 2011; Quinn et al., 2007; Sallee, 2014). These changes necessitate new ways of being, alternative understandings of how Ph.D. students should be able to exist in academia.

Women who participated in this project made clear that they experienced a lack of support around their embodied wellbeing in their Ph.D. programs. Many women struggled to reconcile the disparities between two competing notions, that students are just brains with no bodies and that women are just bodies with no brains. Women contended with constant pressure to prioritize work above other needs, insufficient workspaces on campus, conflicting expectations around motherhood and caretaking, and pressure to modify their dress and appearance. Bodies and minds impact how women function within their Ph.D. programs, and Ph.D. programs impact how women’s bodies and minds function.

Throughout this project, I have been consistently inspired by the resiliency of women Ph.D. students despite existing within academic environments that do not always meet their embodied needs. They develop and refine the physical and mental skills needed to complete their academic work and support their overall wellness often without much guidance from faculty or program structures. Community support and a balance of activities outside of their program demands enhanced who women were on personal and academic levels. Learning how to separate one’s sense of self from the Ph.D. process was a positive way to develop a sense of balance and peace. Findings acknowledge through empirical research that supporting embodiment should be an essential part of Ph.D. programs.

Additionally, this project advocates for new ways of knowing. Bodies and senses are essential to how people interact with their environments and make meaning of the knowledge they gather (Merleau-Ponty, 2002; Merriam et al., 2007; Vacchelli, 2018). Academics tend to
distance themselves from questions about embodied experiences and embodied knowledge production (Baird & Mitchell, 2014; Berwick & Humble, 2017; Silver & Farrants, 2016; Sumelius-Lindblom, 2019). Many people within and external to Ph.D. programs assume that consuming and producing knowledge are strictly cerebral processes, but findings from this project demonstrate otherwise. Alternative research paradigms, such as feminist phenomenology photovoice, provide a successful means for exploring women’s embodied experiences.

**Summary of Discussion**

In the following sections, I tie findings from this study with existing literature and suggestions for how to move forward. I begin with implications for practice. There are ways that faculty and institutions can better support the embodied wellness of women Ph.D. students. I recommend that faculty advocate for embodied wellness through normalizing and making visible the aspects of graduate school that women often contend with on their own out of shame or lack of knowledge about available resources. These aspects include making space for the embodied realities of academic work, mental health support, and recognition for caretaking that women do internal and external to their responsibilities as Ph.D. students. There are also structural supports that should be added to Ph.D. programs individually or to university settings more broadly including adequate workspaces, financial assistance for physical and mental health, professional development opportunities, and policies for parental leave. These suggestions mean stepping away from the outdated notions of how graduate school used to be, the idea that “I suffered through it. Now it is your turn” that too many faculty and administrators endorse.

While faculty and institutional changes may be slow to come, there are also ways that women can continue to advocate for their own wellness and the wellness of their communities. Essential to embodied wellness is the process of separating one’s core self from the Ph.D.
program. Many women Ph.D. students have always been successful academically, and they are accustomed to receiving positive feedback about their schoolwork. Similar to how many women in this project developed more positive relationships with their bodies as they got older, learning to prioritize their own needs and beliefs above the demands of the Ph.D. program helped them reclaim their sense of self in balanced and healthy ways. Rather than devoting all of their time and attention to their Ph.D. work, women can improve their wellbeing by giving more attention to their bodies, their mental health, and their networks of support. All these suggestions can benefit Ph.D. students of any gender even though they have specific implications for women.

Following implications for practice, I examine implications for research. Because of the success we experienced through this project, I advocate for more researchers to use feminist phenomenological photovoice in their work. These methods and methodologies provided valuable new insights into the embodied Ph.D. experience for women Ph.D. students through moving beyond the limits of the written word alone (Latz, 2012a; Leavy, 2009). This project structure was an enjoyable way for participants to document, reflect upon, and share pieces of their embodied experiences (Branch & Latz, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). We experienced reciprocal relationships where participants and researchers benefitted from the process and outcomes while also making visible the invisible aspects of their lives for the purpose of positive change (Latz, 2012a; Schües, 2018; Weiss, 2018).

Finally, I offer directions for future work. Feminist phenomenological photovoice has the potential to illuminate embodied realities for narrower and different populations such as BIPOC, other genders, and women at other institutions outside of Research University. I also recommend a similar project working with women faculty since many of my implications for practice rely on contributions from faculty. Women faculty members may experience many of the same barriers
as Ph.D. students, and they can likely offer new insights for how to improve life for women internal to and external to academic life. There are also opportunities to assess my suggested implications for practice where programs and institutions have made efforts to center embodiment.

**Implications for Practice**

I have divided my implications for practice between faculty on individual levels and broader programmatic or institutional structures as well as what women Ph.D. students can do. Faculty are typically involved in programmatic and institutional structures either directly through creating these structures or more indirectly through supporting beliefs that allow these structures to exist. However, faculty have different degrees of influence at the individual versus structural levels.

**Implications for Faculty**

Faculty are in positions to make space for and model healthy behaviors that can benefit everyone in their academic communities including women Ph.D. students. Even though they occupy positions of power above Ph.D. students within the academic hierarchy, not all faculty have the same access or safety to be vocal advocates for change within their departments. Pre-tenure faculty and those who have historically oppressed identities, such as women, faculty of color, and sexual minorities, face many barriers of their own (Motha & Varghese, 2018). Faculty also have their own pressures for advancing in their careers that do not always align with healthy and balanced lifestyles. Still, there are ways they can advocate for embodiment on individual levels, especially faculty who do hold positions of power through their identities and professional statuses. Modeling positive and healthy behaviors is one way that faculty can incorporate
attention to embodiment within their academic circles. Faculty may need additional training or resources in all these areas because they are also part of many of the same systems.

**Mental Health Advocacy**

Women who participated in this project wished that conversations about mental health were more present within their departments, and faculty can participate in this change. Graduate students worldwide of all identities are six times more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and other mental illnesses than the rest of the global population (Evans et al., 2018; Flaherty, 2018b; Levecque et al., 2017). Students experience these changes in their mental health for the first time or must find new ways to manage preexisting issues in graduate school because of associated mental health onset ages or the unfamiliar demands of the graduate school environment (Moyer et al., 1999; Shifrer, 2013). There is often a learned culture of silence when it comes to discussing mental health needs because of the inaccurate belief that mental illnesses are a sign of weakness and inability to cope with the demands of academia (Stecker, 2004). The pressure to hide or ignore mental health needs is even greater for women due to existing stereotypes that showing emotions or being emotionally unstable detracts from one’s ability to participate in rational academic work (Kafka, 2019). These stereotypes feed into notions about imperfect bodies and minds detracting from academic productivity within mind-body dualism (Grigely, 2017; Plato, 2015; Rich, 1976).

Faculty members who normalized caring for mental health needs during graduate school were excellent resources for women in this project. Maria had been pleasantly surprised when she learned that her advisor also saw a counselor on a weekly basis to support her mental health. She also appreciated how her advisor normalized conversations about making mistakes when working on experiments or having papers rejected from publications. Rejection and failure are
near constant realities for Ph.D. students and faculty (Larson, 2019; Pettit, 2019; Poster, 2005; L. Wood, 2019), but few women in this project could point to times when they had been able to have vulnerable discussions about these challenges. Women like Yoly often wished that faculty had had these conversations at the start of the Ph.D. programs and advising relationships instead of waiting until women had to approach their faculty for advice or to say they were in crisis and needed extra support. Nadine compared asking for help with mental health to trying to give birth without an epidural or other support when you are in pain. Academia tends to support masculine notions of being able to push through towards the degree without displaying emotions or other signs of needing help when in fact it takes a lot of strength to ask for help (Ford, 2011; Northcut, 2017).

Faculty do not need to discuss personal details about their own mental health, but acknowledging that the academic environment can be taxing on mental health is useful, especially for women. They can also help make newer students aware of existing resources on campus in orientations, classes, and advising meetings. Encouraging students and colleagues to reimagine what constitutes productivity to include self-care activities and investing in the wellness of their communities rather than publications alone can also improve everyone’s time in the academy. Whatever guidance faculty can provide should happen early and often within Ph.D. programs rather than waiting until students are in crisis.

**Support for Mothers and Caretaking**

Challenges around childcare and other forms of caretaking were common themes for women in this project. Women who had children discussed the difficulties of balancing academic work with childcare responsibilities, findings that aligned with existing literature about parenting in academia (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Mason et al., 2009; Sallee, 2014; Sandler & Hall, 1986;
Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012). Structural support from programs and institutions is necessary, but individual faculty can also advocate for better conditions for parents.

Normalizing having families while also engaging in academic work is essential for the embodied wellness of women Ph.D. students, and faculty members of all genders can contribute to these efforts. Malala Michele made a point of bringing her children to campus for this very reason, and Nadine appreciated when faculty and students in her department did the same. Faculty play an important role in normalizing the presence of families alongside academic careers when they bring their children to campus or make their presence known in other ways. They can discuss times when they step away from academic work to take their children to appointments or spend quality time together as a family. Women in this project appreciated when faculty members, especially other women, shared their experiences with having children in graduate school, during post-doctoral years, or when they were early-career faculty. Faculty of all genders can and should take advantage of paid parental leave policies. Too many mothers do not feel comfortable taking maternity leave because of the stigma that mothers are less dedicated to their work (Conley & Carey, 2013).

Faculty should also carefully consider the demands they place on graduate students around productivity. Women in this project discussed near constant feelings of guilt around productivity without always being able to pinpoint the origins of this pressure. Faculty and advisors can work collaboratively with students to cocreate reasonable plans for research, publications, or other projects, keeping in mind what each student’s long-term career goals may be. Women with children or other demands outside of school are no less fit for graduate school or academic careers if they are unable to meet impossible productivity standards for research and publications (Castañeda & Isgro, 2013; Hancock et al., 2013; Mason et al., 2009). Having clear
and fair expectations can alleviate unnecessary feelings of guilt and communicate to women that who they are and what they are doing is more than enough.

Service work and caretaking within their academic departments also took a toll on women in this project. Faculty and other students reduced women to bodies without brains who were naturally nurturing because of their gender when they relied on women to organize meetings, host social events, and tend to the emotional needs of the department (Motha & Varghese, 2018; Woodham Burge, 2011). Whether women plan to have children or not, they are often subjected to the stereotype that women are less intellectually competent and less valuable in academic environments beyond their contributions to service work (Gonsalves, 2014; Misra et al., 2011), work that is rarely considered for evaluations or other reward systems (Misra et al., 2011; Woodham Burge, 2011). Faculty should recognize these dynamics within their departments and advocate for equal distribution of service work as well as provide formalized training and rewards for these efforts. If research and teaching are deemed important enough to warrant stipends, service work should also be compensated because of the importance that organizing and community building play for all members of the department.

Faculty should also be mindful about how they allocate funding by gender in terms of research, teaching, and service. As Malala Michele noted, organizing is not an inherent skill for women. It takes time and effort to develop, but faculty men in powerful positions often placed only women graduate students in positions that necessitated planning and organizing skills. Women who are interested in research should have opportunities to develop these skills rather than being pigeonholed in caretaking roles that offer fewer professional rewards (Danowitz & Agans, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Organization and planning skills are important for
students of all genders to develop, and faculty should not hire women only for these kinds of positions.

Faculty can also advocate for healthy boundaries around emotional support. Many women valued the emotional relationships they developed with students, but some women, like Yoly, found these dynamics to be exhausting. Students tend to treat women, especially those in teaching or advising positions, like mothers in ways that differ from their interactions with men in similar positions (K. Ford, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Even though faculty cannot control how other students act, they can have conversations with women Ph.D. students about holding personal boundaries when necessary and directing students to available resources as needed. Actively discouraging women with children, especially single mothers, from pursuing graduate studies is unjust, and it limits the diversity of talent moving through programs who will then be able to share their knowledge with the world.

**Embodied Work Habits**

Several women in this project said they felt at times like their bodies betrayed them or that they dissociated from themselves during moments of high stress. Embodiment acknowledges that bodies are not separate from the people who inhabit them (Merriam et al., 2007). Centering embodiment within academic work can help women consider their whole beings, including their bodies, as important aspects of their academic identities. Segmenting the self only further removes women from the passion they feel for their work and for themselves (Lorde, 1989). Rather than normalizing graduate school as a “cesspool of anxiety” (Reian) or a experience of “shared trauma” (Greer), faculty can help change the conversation through embracing embodiment.
Faculty can structure their classes in ways that acknowledge the ways in which academic work is intertwined with embodiment. They can allow students to take breaks as needed in addition to providing a structured break time. Using elements of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) also acknowledges the various physical and mental differences that all students bring to their work. Assignments can encourage students to step away from books and computers to explore the world around them. They can also have conversations with students about the importance of trying different physical practices around their own work. It took trial and error, but the women in this study shared many embodied work habits that helped them feel healthier and more connected to their work, such as how Florecita would write in her notebook before writing on her laptop or how Helena walked around her apartment and spoke her papers into a voice-to-text program before sitting down to edit and revise. Everyone’s habits may be different, but letting students know early on that it is important to explore the role their bodies play in their academic work is important.

**Implications for Programs and Institutions**

Mind-body dualism is so embedded within academic culture that this philosophy is built into many structures. Faculty can play a role when working with students, but there are larger forces at play, as well. Academic programs and institutions have the power and access to incorporate embodiment into their policies and available resources for Ph.D. students. They often have more resources to share directly with students or to support offices and programs designed for Ph.D. student wellness.

**Opportunities to Build Community**

Communities of support were essential for the wellness of women in this project, but they rarely attributed community development to efforts from their faculty or institution. Many
women formed positive relationships with individual faculty and with their classmates, but they did not feel a sense of community across the department connected to programmatic structures. Many women and people of all identities work well with models of collaboration and teamwork, but program structures rarely provide these opportunities (Misra et al., 2011; Northcut, 2017; Woodham Burge, 2011). Ph.D. students, including the women in this project, often describe their experiences as lonely especially once they complete coursework (Aryan & Guzman, 2010; Janta et al., 2014; Tang, 2019).

Yoly wished that there were more opportunities to work with colleagues in her program, a skill she enjoyed building while rock climbing. Faculty can work together with each other and students to create opportunities for collaboration around research or other projects that emphasize teamwork and community building. They should be careful to note the gender dynamics and expectations around planning and organizing within their departments since many women within and beyond this project describe these activities as ones that become burdens placed on women (Motha & Varghese, 2018; Woodham Burge, 2011).

At the institutional level, many extracurricular activities are designed for undergraduate students and not graduate students. Organizations that do exist for graduate students are typically focused on academics or professional development. Many graduate students have busy lives outside of the campus environment, but they do appreciate when there are opportunities designed with them in mind to build community with other graduate students. Tess said that the women’s support group for graduate students was an essential self-care and community-building structure for her. Administrators can support existing graduate student organizations with funding and marketing resources as well as creating an office dedicated to graduate student community building similar to student activities offices for undergraduates. They can host day or weekend
trips that provide graduate students with the opportunity to explore the area, like Maria did with her friends. Ph.D. students may still be interested in creating these opportunities for themselves within their own social groups, but those with limited funds or no access to transportation may appreciate more structured opportunities through their institutions. Having departmental and institutional opportunities to build community also communicates to students that taking time to socialize with others is an important aspect of a healthy and balanced life.

**Parenting and Childcare**

The United States is one of the only industrialized countries in the world that does not guarantee paid maternity leave for all workers (Ray et al., 2010; Waldfogel, 2001). The lack of institutionalized support for maternity leave impacts graduate student workers who are forced to take unpaid leave or shortened leaves in order to maintain their employment and associated healthcare benefits. Primary childbearing years often fall during the same time that women spend working towards their Ph.D. degrees and pre-tenure years (Mason & Goulden, 2004; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006), but the lack of institutional support for mothers influences many women’s decisions around having children. In addition to paid parental leave, institutions can establish on-campus childcare centers, lactation spaces, and flexible degree timelines that offer extensions for Ph.D. students who take parental leave. Students of all genders with caretaking responsibilities can benefit from these policies, but women are often responsible for most activities around childbirth and caretaking.

Although data collection for this project ended just as the pandemic forced campus closures, findings indicate a need for additional support in areas that the pandemic exacerbated. It has become abundantly clear that childcare is infrastructure. Women in many industries, not just higher education, had to take full responsibility for childcare when schools and daycares
closed, impacting their ability to sustain their work and progress in their careers (Collins et al., 2021). For scholars, women lagged behind men in research productivity during the pandemic due in part to increased time spent on childcare and domestic labor (King & Frederickson, 2021). Some institutions may have had strict policies that did not allow any employees to work remotely before the pandemic, but they quickly changed these policies to continue business as usual once campuses closed. Faculty and administrators should continue to providethis level of flexibility even after operations return to campus to provide options for people with caretaking responsibilities or other reasons they might benefit from occasional or regular remote work.

**Flexible Program Timelines**

Something that became apparent through this project is that a “one size fits all” approach to Ph.D. program design does not support the embodied wellness of women Ph.D. students. Average timeline for Ph.D. completion in the United States is six years meaning that some students take less, and some students take more time (National Science Foundation, 2018). Jui mentioned that her program was trying to initiate a four-year maximum for finishing a Ph.D. that did not align with the realities of completing a degree while also balancing other life demands. Some barriers to completion exist within programs themselves. Some students, like Paula, struggled to get to their dissertation defenses because they had committee members leave the institution or neglect thei responsibilities around providing feedback. Graduate instructors who had to transition to online teaching during the pandemic reported spending more time on teaching and preparation than normal without additional compensation or leeway for time spent away from their own research (Hogan & Ramamurthy, 2020).
Patricia was able to push back against her advisor after being pressured to produce a dissertation chapter immediately after giving birth to her son, but creating space for additional time cannot rest on the individual comfort level of students. At the same time, program policies should not force students to take a leave of absence if they are not making progress according to an ideal timeline. Malala Michele did not want to leave and come back to her program as her graduate program director had suggested, but she did need some flexibility and understanding when it came to balancing her program with her responsibilities as a single mother. Faculty need to make space for time off when their individual students need it, but program policies also need to support this level of flexibility.

**Adequate Workspace**

Another area where institutions can provide more support for the embodied wellness of women Ph.D. students is by providing adequate workspaces on campus. Limitations around space are not just issues for Ph.D. students. Adjunct and community college faculty also struggle with this issue, indicating many inequalities for those who exist on the lower ends of the academic hierarchy, the majority of whom are women (Shaw et al., 2008). Workspaces on campus are important for supporting embodied wellness because they provide a place for students to develop community outside of classes that is not tied to their assistantships. They impart a sense of value and worth for Ph.D. students, but inadequate workspaces communicate the opposite. Malala Michel and Paula took issue with the fact that their workspaces made them feel devalued and disposable as Ph.D. students. Physical spaces on campus impact student health and wellness in many ways. When affinity and identity groups on campus are relegated to dingy basements or buildings on the outskirts of campus, it communicates a lack of value within the greater campus hierarchy (Strange & Banning, 2015).
Campus planning committees should consider the mental impact of space allocations as well as the physical impacts. Yoly stopped going to her shared office when she found mouse droppings on their table because she was concerned for her health. Clean offices should also have enough space for each student. Geneva returned her office key because she did not like competing with other students for a seat at the table designed for fewer students than the amount in her program. Women in this project enjoyed being able to personalize their workspaces, but assigned spaces have benefits beyond personalization. Several women in this project discussed the different comfort levels between men and women in their academic circles when it came to occupying physical space. They noticed that some men felt more comfortable taking up space in offices than women, and it was an added stress for women to have to assert their right to take up space in the same offices. Having assigned spaces for all students eliminates the need for anyone to have to confront other students about equitable space distribution.

**Professional Development Resources**

Women in this project described the importance of existing support resources on campus that other institutions can adopt or strengthen. Several participants reported that professional development offices, often not affiliated with their academic programs, were invaluable resources during their time as Ph.D. students. Some women, like Geneva, enjoyed learning about study skills, networking, and how to publish papers through professional development workshops. Planning for careers after graduate school was also a concern for many women. As a research-intensive university, many program structures at Research University were designed to train students for tenure-track faculty positions. Women, like Nadine, found that there was not much support within her program for students who did not want this career pathway. Pursuing a non-tenure track or non-academic position after earning a Ph.D. can carry negative stigma.
(Purcell, 2007), and training or networking for these kinds of positions may be lacking at research-intensive universities (Gumport, 2016; Larson, 2019; Pettit, 2019; Wood, 2019). The number of students pursuing Ph.D. degrees far outnumbers the available tenure-track faculty positions available to students when they graduate (Gumport, 2016). Especially following the pandemic, hiring freezes continue to reduce employment opportunities for Ph.D. graduates (Hogan & Ramamurthy, 2020). From a logistics and an ethics standpoint, degree programs cannot limit professional development opportunities to tenure-track faculty jobs, leaving anyone who is not interested or unsuccessful when applying for these jobs without any prospects. Professional development offices can help support these alternative career pathways, especially for women or other students who are concerned that tenure-track faculty jobs will not offer the balanced and healthy lifestyles they desire.

Professional development offices can also host workshops and employ coaches to emphasize the importance of supporting embodied wellness for students while they are in graduate school. Florecita said she learned a lot of useful tips from her physical therapist friend when it came to correcting her posture at her desk or learning stretches to help her back pain. Coco designed her workspace at home after working with a coach who helped her realize she preferred working in cozy spaces, nooks, and corners of rooms. These resources can also help Ph.D. students learn the importance of taking time to eat, sleep, exercise, have social time, and incorporate several other healthy activities into their busy schedules. Having structured learning opportunities in addition to the conversations faculty should be having with students around embodied work habits further normalizes mental and physical wellness.
Financial Support for Wellness

Financial limitations within graduate student stipends created challenges for women in this project. They mentioned several resources on campus that alleviated some of these burdens. Research University had an employee union for graduate students that provided advocacy that individuals alone would not be able to sustain. Through the union, women in this project had access to affordable healthcare, funding for wellness activities, and childcare. Reian was grateful that her union healthcare covered the cost of her IUD, something she would not be able to afford alone. Many women also took advantage of the healthcare plan’s mental health benefits to see counselors on or off campus. Another lesson learned from the pandemic is the value of flexible funding for mental health counseling. Institutions may offer on-campus counseling resources, but these offices became inaccessible to students who were forced off-campus and had to relocate out of state due to laws around licensure. Funding for mental health services that can be used off campus benefit students who live out of state or may want to seek support off campus for other reasons.

Activities like rock climbing or going to the gym were also made possible because of wellness reimbursement funds that women had through the union. Malala Michele took advantage of the childcare funding as well as group childcare hours organized through the union. Graduate unions and the financial structures they can protect for Ph.D. students are invaluable resources. When unions exist, administrators should work in cooperation to provide financial support benefits for Ph.D. student wellness. If they do not exist, administrators should not take advantage of the lack of group advocacy for Ph.D. students. They should still ensure that Ph.D. students, especially the most vulnerable populations, have adequate income for basic needs, healthcare funds, resources for activities that support wellness, and childcare. Funding should

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cover all 12 months of the year since life and living expenses do not stop in the summer (Hogan & Ramamurthy, 2020). International students will especially benefit from these protections due to the employment restrictions they face around finding off-campus employment.

**Implications for Women Ph.D. Students**

As demonstrated by participants in this project, women Ph.D. students are not powerless when it comes to carving out authentic and healthy existences. There are many ways that women can improve their day-to-day wellbeing including separating their self-worth from academic outcomes, prioritizing their body and mind wellness above school, and making connections within their communities of support. However, the efforts that women make should not have to take the place of changes that faculty and administrators can make. If women find the demands of their programs to be too taxing to attend to their basic needs, they cannot be blamed for not spending enough time on self-care. Women are not the only students who struggle with current Ph.D. program designs. Ph.D. students of all identities can benefit from these recommendations.

**Separate Self from Academic Outcomes**

Women in this project said they had always been successful students before coming to graduate school. Much of their identities were strengthened by the consistently positive feedback they received for their academic accomplishments. Joining a Ph.D. program meant having to reassess the ways in which they measured their self-worth because of vague expectations around work standards and rejection as part of the research and publication processes. Sometimes women felt strengthened by their feedback relationships with faculty, but women like Florecita, Coco, and Paula found themselves needing to readjust how they valued feedback within their sense of self. Sometimes feedback comes in indirect forms outside of the advising relationship,
such as the constant pressure to work. Women had a hard time measuring what was enough and when they could take breaks without feeling guilty.

Women in this project who put some distance between themselves and their work, like Maria and Yoly, tended to have more positive relationships with school and their bodies. They learned to measure their own self-worth in ways outside of the feedback they received about their schoolwork as well as their bodies. Borrowing techniques from mindfulness, an element of many Eastern spiritualities, can serve as a structured way for women to learn how to detach themselves from academic outcomes (Leland, 2015). Mindfulness focuses on the realities of the here and now while acknowledging feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. An absence of feedback or receiving negative feedback does not mean someone is a bad student or cannot be successful in their Ph.D. programs or academic careers. Producing work according to one’s own timeline is often healthier than pressuring oneself to work non-stop or feel guilt when taking breaks.

Mindfulness emphasizes looking inwardly for self-affirmation rather than relying on external feedback. Looking inwardly for self-affirmation does not mean ignoring feedback from external sources. It means acknowledging feedback without letting it create or shake one’s sense of self.

Mindfulness can be a powerful tool, but not when it is used to push people to be more productive. Self-care and reframing activities one does daily, such as sipping a favorite tea or enjoying a warm shower, cannot and should not take the place of larger systematic changes that women need within their Ph.D. programs. They can, however, serve as nourishing activities in the absence of change or while change may be slow to come.

**Prioritize Body and Mind Wellness**

Participating in this project helped many women reflect on the way they prioritize responsibilities in their lives. Thinking about embodiment helped them realize that at times they
have ignored their mental and physical wellness and prioritized their academic work in unhealthy ways. After her back injury, Geneva built time into her schedule for ballet classes, Pilates teacher training, and cooking healthy foods for herself and her husband. These changes improved her mental and physical wellness without detracting from her feelings about her own academic success. In fact, the embodied habits she embraced improved her relationship with her schoolwork.

Finding time to create new routines or develop new hobbies can be a source of stress that counteracts the intended positive impacts of self-care. Prioritizing body and mind wellness includes listening to oneself and figuring out when activities are beneficial and when they are harmful. Sometimes that may mean sleeping for an extra hour instead of pushing oneself to go to the gym. Women in this project found ways to incorporate wellness practices into their existing routines by finding joy in activities they already did, such as savoring breakfast time with a loved one or stopping to take a picture of a beautiful sunset.

At other times, participants found it empowering to reduce the time they spent on schoolwork to create new routines and embrace new hobbies. Sage frequently felt pressed for time because of her demanding schedule. In addition to improving her physical health, running was a way for Sage to practice acknowledging all the hard work she was doing in and outside of school. It also gave her an opportunity to speak kindly to herself about times when she might need to walk rather than run. These were lessons she could apply literally to running or metaphorically to taking breaks from work without feeling guilty.

Prioritizing body and mind wellness can help improve women’s self-worth, their health, and their ability to perform academically. Embracing embodiment helps move women and other
academics away from mechanistically valuing people for their productivity and provides space for people to feel joy again in relation to their work.

**Reach Out to Communities Of Support**

Many women prefer working collaboratively despite the emphasis on individualism that exists in many academic environments (Misra et al., 2011; Northcut, 2017; Woodham Burge, 2011). Findings from this project made it abundantly clear that communities of support were essential to women’s embodied wellness within and in addition to their identities as students. Graduate students are six times more likely to experience mental health issues than the rest of the global population (Evans et al., 2018; Flaherty, 2018b; Levecque et al., 2017). Seeking help can be difficult when students feel they do not have adequate resources, such as available mental health counselors, time to address mental health needs, or financial support for services.

Additionally, the stigma surrounding mental health issues in academia keeps some people from seeking help because they do not want to be perceived as weak. Too many academic circles adhere to masculine notions of ignoring mental health issues or pushing through on one’s own. Seeking help is interpreted as a sign that someone is not fit for the academic environment because they are too weak. Several participants mentioned having difficulties connecting with men in their departments who seemed unwilling to acknowledge the mental toll that graduate school took on them even though they suspected women were not the only ones who were hurting. Expressing emotions does not fit into traditional masculine conceptions of strength and intelligence in academia (Bank, 2011).

As women in this project acknowledged, being vulnerable and asking for help from communities of support is a sign of strength. Formalized support, such as seeking mental health counseling, was a resource for many women in this project. They were grateful for the financial
support they received from their union health insurance for mental health services. Some women sought counseling through available campus services and others chose to see counselors off campus. Sometimes they discussed school, but many women wanted help managing their stress associated with family, romantic relationships, or other issues outside of school.

Other forms of support for women in this project came from classmates, supportive faculty, friends, significant others, family, and from people they met through their hobbies outside of school. Together, they took trips, shared fears and successes, studied, shared meals, exercised, and relaxed. Supportive people in their lives helped remind them that there were more important priorities outside of school and gave them encouragement to keep going. They also helped alleviate feelings of having to take care of everyone and everything alone. Jui appreciated the support she felt from women in her department when it came to advocating for her fellow students. She also felt connected to other students on campus through her activism. Women are often in caretaking positions (Danowitz & Agans, 2011; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006), and community support can alleviate the stress these demands create.

While there are many aspects of being in a Ph.D. program that are beyond one’s control, women can continue to surround themselves with supportive communities and ask for help whenever they need it. Embodied wellness includes nourishing the need for social support. Academic work is an emotional endeavor because of the passion one needs to feel for the work (Gill, 2015). There are highs associated with academic success as well as lows that accompany rejection and failure. Life happening outside of the Ph.D. context also impacts women as students and as human beings. Mind-body dualism privileges the individual, rational mind, but embodiment makes space for emotion and communities of support. All graduate students,
women in particular, can benefit from connecting with communities of support and reaching out for help as needed.

**Implications for Research**

Feminist phenomenology photovoice was beneficial for this project in many ways, and I recommend this method and methodology combination for other researchers. I had several goals at the outset of this project when I chose feminist phenomenological photovoice including creating a structure through which to explore questions of embodiment, making visible the invisible, and maintaining reciprocal relationships with participants. I was able to achieve these goals, and I have several takeaways for anyone considering questions of embodiment through feminist phenomenological photovoice.

**Exploring Questions of Embodiment**

Feminist phenomenological photovoice was a successful approach for exploring embodied experiences with women Ph.D. students. Embodied knowledge is particularly important for women to study because of the existing socialization patterns around gender, language, and the structures of Ph.D. programs that were not created with women’s wellness in mind (DeVault, 1999; Lorde, 1989; Olkowski, 2017). A central focus on embodied knowledge is at the core of feminist phenomenology (Bergoffen, 2000; Fielding, 2017; Fisher & Embree, 2000; Olkowski, 2017). This framework also provides space for multiple truths by avoiding essentialism. Findings represented here do not outline a singular existence for women Ph.D. students. They are also not generalizations about women Ph.D. students (Vagel, 2018). Rather, findings are pieces that comprise the larger phenomenon of the embodied experiences of women Ph.D. students. The combination of feminist research practices, phenomenology, and photovoice
for these questions of embodiment create a way for anyone who is experiencing the same phenomenon to reasonably recognize the experiences participants have described.

Additionally, this framework helped participants share the full complexity of their embodied experiences and the accompanying emotions. Questions about embodiment can be difficult for participants to discuss because they involve stepping back to examine daily lived experiences. Participants may not always be aware of these actions or beliefs because they are so ingrained in daily routines (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Memory is also multisensory (Cruz, 2001; Öster et al., 2009; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Many people experience their lives in highly visual ways, especially with the increased usage of social media and camera phones (Branch & Latz, 2012). Photovoice provided a structure through which women in this project were able to capture the essence of their lived experiences through a language that was already familiar to them and represent these attitudes and behaviors in ways they may not be able to articulate as powerfully through words alone (Denton, et al., 2018; Leavy, 2009; Nguyen, 2018; Springgay et al., 2015).

**Making Visible the Invisible**

Another aim of feminist phenomenological photovoice is to make visible the invisible to advocate for positive social change (Bergoffen, 2000; Fielding, 2017; Fisher & Embree, 2000; Olkowski, 2017). People in dominant social positions, such as faculty or administrators and especially men, may not be aware of what it means to be a women Ph.D. student because they are too far removed from these experiences (Schües, 2018; Weiss, 2018). The topics we discussed in this project and the means through which we were able to share insights about being a woman Ph.D. student were equally powerful. Few people have explored questions of embodiment for women in Ph.D. programs through empirical research, and this project builds and expands upon existing literature for those who are interested in studying these issues.
Photovoice also provided me with access to spaces I typically would not have seen as a researcher (Kelly & Kortegast, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). Women in this project shared photographs of their homes, their offices, and important relationships in their lives. The photographs provided a way for participants and me to visualize their environments, triggering memories they wanted to discuss and the accompanying emotions (Denton et al., 2018).

Women in this project and I were able to share these images and insights with people beyond the typical academic audiences. Dissertations, journal articles, and book chapters are important ways to share information within academic communities, but they rarely reach other audiences because of paid access limitations, inaccessible language, or targeted readerships (Woo, 2018). Creating an online gallery together provided us with a platform to share findings from this project with people who would not regularly read traditional academic texts (Desyllas, 2014; Latz, 2017; Latz et al., 2016; Lu & Yuen, 2012), such as friends and family, or graduate students and faculty in other disciplines. During the final reflective questions of the second interview, many participants said they wished that other women Ph.D. students, prospective students, faculty, and administrators could see this project, and our online gallery provides a means to do so. So far, over 1,200 people have accessed the online gallery, a much wider audience than those who will likely read this dissertation manuscript. Participants hoped that other women would feel comforted and less alone in their experiences or inspired to persist through their degree programs. They also wanted faculty and administrators to acknowledge the challenges of what it means to be a woman Ph.D. student today. Women hoped that by making themselves vulnerable through this project, faculty and administrators would join them in advocating for structural and attitudinal changes that would better support embodied wellness.
Maintaining Reciprocal Relationships with Participants

Maintaining a reciprocal relationship with participants has always been important to me when conducting research, and feminist phenomenological photovoice allowed me to do so. Principles of feminist research and embodiment do not support domination and extraction when collecting data from participants (Merchant, 2006). I have purposely used the word “project” instead of “study” because the power dynamics allowed for mutual exploration for everyone involved rather than me alone as a researcher mining participants for data for my own academic and professional gain. With this project design, I was mindful about building in opportunities for women to share power. Photovoice allows participants to be involved in data collection through the photographs they take, and their choices around photographs set the agenda for what is discussed in interviews (Desyllas, 2014). I prepared several prompting questions for the second interview such as “Why did you take this photograph?” and “How does this photograph make you feel?” Participants decided which photographs to share in interviews as well as the online gallery. I also limited my analysis to the conversations we had about photographs instead of my interpretations of their photographs. Their contributions to data collection and analysis created a power dynamic that does not normally exist in other research designs.

Women said they personally benefited because of participating in this project. They felt happy to have been able to advocate for wellness for other Ph.D. students, but they also grew as individuals. Many women in this project said they enjoyed taking photographs and discussing their meanings, a common experience for participants in photovoice projects (Branch & Latz, 2018; Wang & Burris, 1997). Despite the time commitment required, all 20 women completed both individual interviews. Eighteen of 20 women participated in the online gallery, and the two who did not submit photographs and artist statements for the gallery completed the final
Qualtrics form enough to contribute their chosen pseudonym and area of study. Attrition can be a huge concern for researchers, especially when they are working with small sample sizes, but feminist phenomenological photovoice was a successful framework for retaining participants.

Some women said that through this process they were reminded that they love being artists and having creative outlets, activities they had dropped since starting graduate school. Being able to view the online gallery and hearing the connections among group insights I shared as interviews progressed helped them feel like they were part of a community without meeting other participants in person. They had the opportunity to reflect intentionally on their day-to-day lives rather than going through the motions (Latz, 2012a). Several times, women in this project said they had never thought about some of the conversations we had had before. Participating in this project gave Nadine the reflective space she needed to realize that wanted to leave her program and pursue another career path to better support her embodied wellness. This project was also a chance for women to document this time in their lives for themselves by capturing memories in photographs. They had tangible takeaways as well as a chance to develop their reflective consciousness (Latz, 2012a).

Exploring this subject using feminist phenomenological photovoice has impacted me on an academic, professional, and personal level. I find myself drawing from the lessons learned from the women who contributed to this project when making decisions about my work, day-to-day existence, and long-term plans. Some findings reinforced what I anticipated, and many findings have also surprised me and deepened my understanding of how the academic environment impacts the embodied experience for women Ph.D. students.
**Future Work**

Findings from this project contribute to the growing body of literature on women’s embodied experience in Ph.D. programs. Future work can contribute to some of the limitations of this study and build upon my findings. Participants in this study were all students at Research University. Findings will likely speak to the embodied experiences of women Ph.D. students at other universities, but there are qualities that are unique to this institution including the support students receive from their union, the heavy emphasis on research productivity, and the geographic area. Future explorations may want to focus on the embodied experiences of women Ph.D. students at universities without union support. They likely have different assistantship funding and contracts, healthcare packages, and supports for childcare. Other non-research-intensive institutions may offer different resources for professional development that offer students career pathways outside of the tenure track. Additionally, the expectations around publishing, productivity, and evaluatory milestones like comprehensive exams and dissertations may be different at other institutions. Finally, the social, political, and economic climates are likely different in other parts of the United States or the world. All these factors have an impact on overall embodied wellness for women Ph.D. students.

Researchers can also consider narrowing their focus to a single area of study or type of academic department at a single institution or across multiple institutions. Even within broad categories, there are gender composition and community cultural differences by specific fields. For instance, STEM fields at Research University, according to institutional data, have fewer women compared to social sciences and humanities, and there are gender imbalances between biological sciences and physical sciences that result in differing embodied experiences.
Comparing among departments was beyond the scope of this project, but researchers will likely find unique characteristics by field.

Especially following the burnout many people are feeling following the additional burdens of existing within higher education during the pandemic, there is growing interest in addressing embodied wellness for everyone in the academic community (Kisitu, 2020; Rodino-Colocino, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021; Sotto-Santiago et al., 2021). This project only explored questions of embodied wellness for women Ph.D. students at Research University, but academic life can impact embodied wellness for others. Exploring similar questions for Ph.D. students of all genders would likely yield some overlap and other unique findings. Faculty also exist in many of the same structures that Ph.D. students do, such as expectations around productivity, lack of support for childcare, and lack of support for physical and mental illness (Motha & Varghese, 2018; Sallee, 2018). Future research can address embodied wellness for faculty of all genders and differing ranks including pre-tenure, adjunct, or tenured faculty.

The current racial and political climate also offers opportunities to further examine how these factors impact academic life and embodied wellness (Kisitu, 2020). Social identities beyond gender are worthy of more attention. International students, students of color, and students experiencing financial insecurity were all included in this study, but their insights unique to these identities deserve more attention outside of or in addition to the context of gender. Perceptions of these identities within academic communities and the lack of support they receive impact embodied wellness and the meaning students make of their Ph.D. journeys.

Finally, there are opportunities to assess the implications for practice I have outlined. At the individual faculty member level, I recommend open conversations and support for mental health, caretaking, and fully exploring embodied work habits. Researchers could evaluate the
effectiveness of training for faculty in these areas or mentoring relationships with these specific focuses. For departments and institutions, I recommend financial and structural support for childcare, adequate workspaces on campus, professional development and wellness resources, and opportunities for Ph.D. students to build community. Future research can assess these programs internally in terms of organization and management as well as the impact for students.  

**Concluding Thoughts**

From the outset of this project, my intention was to explore the embodied experience of graduate school from the perspective of women Ph.D. students and the extent to which women feel supported by their current program communities and structures. I knew that bodies and minds were integral to understanding women Ph.D. students’ journeys both inside and external to school, but I was surprised by the extent to which these elements were connected. I was interested in new ways of being and new ways of knowing, both of which are highlighted throughout this project through my topic and my methods. New ways of being are informed by necessary support for women Ph.D. students, and they have the potential to create better experiences for many members of the academic community. Ph.D. students of all genders as well as faculty can benefit from reframing existing approaches to productivity and wellness to be more inclusive, flexible, and supportive. New ways of knowing provide researchers with suggestions for continuing explorations of embodied wellness for academics using feminist phenomenological photovoice for empirical research. Moving away from mind-body dualism within academic culture and research methodology has the potential to create greater equity and unearth further insights about how best to support a diverse community of academics.

It is my hope that the results from this project bring comfort and inspiration to women Ph.D. students and others within the academic community who feel alone in the discord they feel
between their bodies, minds, and academic identities. Feeling tired, stressed, sick, or isolated are not signs that women are not strong or well-suited for academic work. Rather, they are indications that options for existing within the Ph.D. environment do not take into consideration the very real embodied experiences that women and others continue to experience without proper support. Faculty and administrators cannot continue to rely upon women’s resilience to carry them through their academic programs. I hope that findings from this project encourage those in positions of power to reexamine their priorities and try to incorporate embodiment into their efforts to support wellness for all. Finally, findings and the ways in which data were collected and represented demonstrate the role that alternative ways of knowing can reach new audiences with new insights about embodiment. The pandemic has presented an opportunity to pause and reimagine what higher education can be, and this project contributes to healthier ways forward.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAILS

Initial Email Requesting Participation

When you think about your time as a PhD student, what comes to mind? Could you capture that experience in a photograph? What would it mean to share that photograph with others?

Being a doctoral student is a privilege in many ways, and it is not easy. The focus of doctoral education is usually developing our minds in service of our disciplines. Little attention is given to our bodies despite the impact these lived experiences have on our time here and beyond.

For my dissertation, I am facilitating a photovoice project on the embodied experience of being a woman PhD student. In other words, I would like to better understand what we as women consider to be the head-to-toe PhD student experience. In particular, we will focus on the influence of 1) dress and appearance, 2) reproduction and motherhood, and 3) health and wellness. It is my hope that together we can contribute to changes to the structure of PhD programs and a stronger focus on embodiment and health within academic culture more broadly.

Qualifying participants...
- Self-identify as women;
- Are currently pursuing a PhD or combined master’s/PhD at UMass Amherst;
- Have completed at least 4 semesters of study in their program;
- Are not members of the following departments;
  - Educational Policy, Research, and Administration
  - Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies
  - Student Development
  - Music
- Will have availability for two 60-90 minute, audio-recorded interviews approximately two-three weeks apart sometime between mid-December 2019 and mid-March 2020 according to your availability (can be remote);
- Have access to a digital camera or camera phone.

Participation in this project can take place anytime between mid-December 2019 and mid-March 2020, according to your availability. Interviews can take place in my office or in a place that is comfortable and convenient to you. Participation in this photovoice project involves several phases.

Briefly, if you participate in this project, I will ask the following of you...
- Complete a short screening questionnaire confirming your interest in participation;
- Attend an initial audio-recorded interview lasting 60-90 minutes;
· Over the following two-three weeks, use your phone or other digital camera to **take 10-15 photographs** that reflect your experience as a PhD student (prompts provided);

· Return for a **second audio-recorded interview** lasting 60-90 minutes after the two-three week photography period to discuss the photographs you took;

· Select one photograph with an accompanying artist statement to be displayed in the public digital **project WordPress gallery**.

Benefits of participating in this project include...

· A $10 Amazon gift card upon completion of the first interview

· A $20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the second photo-based interview

· An opportunity to share your story with a wider audience

· An opportunity to reflect upon and document your experience as a PhD student

Minor risks associated with involvement in this project are discussed in more detail within the Informed Consent Form along with appropriate resources.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please fill out this brief **screening questionnaire**. I will follow up shortly to confirm your study participation status. If you are more comfortable completing the screening questionnaire over the phone, please respond to **annafox@umass.edu** and we can arrange a time to do so.

Please feel free to direct any questions about this project to me at **annafox@umass.edu**.

Sincerely,
Anna Fox, PhD Candidate
Educational Policy, Research, & Administration - Higher Education
Second Email Invitation to Schedule First Interview

Hi _______.

Thank you for your interest in this photovoice project on the embodied PhD experience! Based on your responses to the screening questionnaire, you are qualified to be a participant. Our next step is to schedule a time to meet for your first interview.

Before you select a time, I want to make certain that all participants understand the nature of the final project gallery. Each participant will select one of her photos to be displayed in a digital WordPress gallery. The WordPress gallery will be publicly accessible online with a shareable link. Your name and other personally identifying information will not be attached to the project gallery itself, but participants will be invited to share the gallery link through social media and other networks if they choose.

Along with the two informed consent forms (participation and photo release), I have also included the photo guidelines to protect participant identities to the extent possible. We will not be displaying any photos that include people’s faces, geographic locations, or other personally identifying information. Please note the relatively public nature of this project, and take this aspect into careful consideration before scheduling your first interview.

To schedule your first interview, follow the prompts in the Acuity Calendar. Interviews are expected to last roughly 60 to 90 minutes. All interview times are set in blocks of 90 minutes, but we may not need the full time. First interview dates are available between January 8th and February 28th. **Ideally, your first and second interview will take place roughly two to three weeks apart, so please keep this time frame in mind when scheduling your first interview.**

If you know your schedule and you are ready to schedule both interviews now, fantastic! If not, we can pick a time for your second interview when we meet for your first. Please let me know if you are having a hard time finding times that fit your schedule. My schedule is fairly flexible, and I can make other times available including weekends if needed.

Interviews can take place in my office in Furcolo Hall N182. If you prefer to schedule your interview in an alternative location, you can indicate your preference in the Acuity scheduling form. We will need a private, quiet location for confidentiality and audio recording. Let me know where you feel most comfortable, and we will make it work!

If your circumstances have changed and you are no longer able to participate, that is not a problem. Please just let me know as soon as possible. **I can hold your spot as a participant in this project until January 3 before opening the wait list, so please be sure to schedule your first interview before then!**

Schedule your first interview in the Acuity Calendar now!
I am happy to answer any questions you have, and I thank you again for supporting this project!

Be well,
Anna
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

First Interview: Life Story

1. How did you come to be a PhD student? What has been your experience with school up until this point?
2. How did you come into your current relationship with your body? What has been your relationship with your body up until this point?
3. What is your average daily/weekly schedule? How do you get ready for your day? How do you end your day?
4. How do you organize your space (work, school, home)? How would you describe your work/school/home environment?
5. How would you describe your health? Generally speaking, how do you feel on a day-to-day basis?

Second Interview: Photographs

1. Why did you take this photograph?
2. What do you see in this photograph? What stands out to you?
3. How does this photograph make you feel?
4. How might you caption this photograph?
5. Do you notice any themes among the photographs you selected?
6. What will you take away from participating in this project?
7. Who do you hope sees this project? What do you hope others will gain from seeing this project?

Artist Statement

After you select your photograph to be displayed in the project gallery, please take a minute to complete a brief artist statement providing some context for your photograph. Consider including the following…

1. A title and/or caption
2. Why this photo is important to you
3. Your take-aways from participating in this project
4. What you hope this project will do
**Photography Guidelines**

Thank you again for participating in this photovoice project. Over the next two to three weeks, I will be asking you to take 10-15 photographs representing your experiences as a woman Ph.D. student. When deciding what to photograph, consider the following questions and themes:

Questions:
1. What is your average daily/weekly schedule?
2. How do you organize your space (work, school, home)?
3. Generally speaking, how do you feel on a day-to-day basis?

Themes:
1. Dress and appearance
2. Reproduction and motherhood
3. Health and wellness
4. Anything else?

You do not need to answer each question or address each theme if only a few are salient.

Some guidelines to keep in mind:

1. **You do not need to be a professional photographer!** The primary purpose of these photographs will be to raise points for discussion. Aesthetics are less important, but there are some simple tips for creating high-quality photographs with smart phones.
   a. **Pay attention to lighting** and play around with it. Too much light can cause harsh shadows, and not enough light can make objects difficult to see. On the other hand, you may want to convey something with your choices of light!
   b. **Get close to the photographic subject.** Most smartphones have a digital zoom function which allows you to take images from a distance, but this often means a reduction in image resolution and quality.

2. **Please do not include any personally identifying images or information in any photographs.** This might include:
   a. People’s faces
   b. Names or other personal information on documents
   c. Signs indicating the name or location research site

   Consider instead
   a. Photographing a “still life” of an artifact that evokes a concept (ex. yoga mat rather than a person doing yoga)
   b. Taking more abstract or impressionistic photos that evoke a topic or experience (ex. dark room = isolation)
   c. Photographing part of a person other than their face (ex. hand)

3. When you are getting ready for your second interview, **upload your photographs to your Box presentation in the order in which you would like to discuss them.** We may not have time to discuss every photograph, so this way we will be sure to address the ones you feel are most important.

4. **Have fun!** This project is meant to be a chance for you to reflect on your experiences and share your story.
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENTS

Consent Form for Participation in a Research Project
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Researchers: Anna Fox, primary researcher

Dissertation Committee: Kate Hudson
Ezekiel Kimball
Sally Campbell Galman

Project Title: New Ways of Being and Knowing: Women PhDs Exploring Embodiment through Feminist Phenomenological Photovoice

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?
This form is called a Consent Form. It will give you information about the project so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. I encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. WHAT ARE SOME OF THE IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THIS RESEARCH PROJECT THAT I SHOULD BE AWARE OF?
You should be aware of the following aspects of this project discussed in further detail throughout the form:

- Your consent is being sought for this project and your participation is voluntary;
- The purpose of this project is to gain more insight about the embodied experience of being a woman PhD student;
- Participant involvement will likely span two-three weeks involving two audio-recorded interviews and time for photography;
- Participants will be compensated for their involvement;
- Due to the nature of the project and the involvement of a digital WordPress gallery, there are minor risks associated with emotional, social, and economic well-being;
- You may not directly benefit from this research project beyond the opportunity for self-reflection, but findings may contribute to redesigning PhD education programs.

3. WHY ARE WE DOING THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?
The purpose of this project is to gain more insight into the meaning women PhD students make of their embodied graduate school experiences. Being a doctoral student is a privilege in many ways, and it is not easy. The focus of doctoral education has been developing our minds in service of our disciplines. While students of all gender identities have the potential to encounter adversity in doctoral programs, women are positioned to experience unique challenges and
barriers. Little attention is given to the embodied experience of graduate school despite the impact these lived experiences have on our time here and beyond. Much of what we know is based on anecdotes and non-peer reviewed publications.

4. WHO CAN PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?
Qualifying participants…

- Self-identify as women;
- Are currently pursuing a PhD or combined master’s/PhD at UMass Amherst;
- Have completed at least 4 semesters of study in their program;
- Are not members of the following departments;
  - Educational Policy, Research, and Administration
  - Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies
  - Student Development
  - Music
- Will have availability for two 60-90 minute interviews approximately two-three weeks apart;
- Have access to a digital camera or camera phone.

5. WHERE WILL THIS RESEARCH PROJECT TAKE PLACE AND HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL PARTICIPATE?
Interviews can take place at the researcher’s office or in a location that is comfortable and convenient for participants (ex. campus office). Participants will each select one of their own photographs to be displayed in a digital WordPress gallery along with an artist statement. Approximately 16-21 participants are expected to enroll.

6. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO AND HOW MUCH TIME WILL IT TAKE?
Minimum participation in this project involves a two-three week period of data collection on the part of the participant. If you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in the following ways…

- Complete a demographic form confirming interest in participation.
- Attend an initial, individual interview session lasting 60-90 minutes.
  - Interviews will be audio-recorded.
  - You do not have to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. Questions may include…
    - What has been your relationship with school up until this point?
    - What has been your relationship with your body up until this point?
    - How would you describe your average day or week?
- Spend two-three weeks taking photographs according to prompts.
  - You will have the opportunity during the second interview to determine your level of consent for each individual photograph you take.
- Return for a second, individual interview session lasting 60-90 minutes.
  - You will select 10-15 photographs to discuss ahead of the interview.
Interviews will be audio-recorded.
You do not have to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. Questions may include…
- Why did you take this photograph?
- What do you see in this photograph?
- How does this photograph make you feel?
- How might you caption this photograph?
You will have an opportunity to identify your level of consent for each individual photograph.
- Permission to use the photograph in the project gallery
- Permission to use the photograph in other public displays including conference presentations and articles for publication
- Permission to use the photograph during the interview and data analysis only, no permission to publish the photograph anywhere
Select one or two of their photographs to display in the project gallery with an accompanying artist statement
You will be asked to remove any personally identifying information from artist statements and photographs
Suggestions for your artist statement will include…
- What does this photograph mean to you? Why did you take this photo?
- What do you hope people take away from this project?
- What are you taking away from participating in this project?

Please note: This is a project that involves questions related to sensitive topics that may cause distress. As a researcher, I do not provide mental health services, and I will not be following up with you after your involvement with this project ends. However, I want to provide every participant with contact information for available clinical resources, should you decide you need assistance at any time. You can contact the Center for Counseling and Psychological Health (CCPH) at (413) 545-2337 (Mon-Fri from 8-5pm) - on weekends or after 5pm, call (413) 577-5000 and ask for the CCPH clinician on call. You can also contact the Psychological Services Center at 413-545-0041 (Monday-Friday 8am-5pm) or psc@psych.umass.edu. I am providing you with a list of alternative resources in addition to campus counseling. In a serious emergency, remember that you can also call 911 for immediate assistance.

7. WILL BEING IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT HELP ME IN ANY WAY? You may not directly benefit from this research project; however, I hope that your participation may provide you with an opportunity to reflect upon and document your PhD experience in new ways. Knowledge gained from this project can potentially contribute to systemic restructuring of PhD programs to allow for better work-life balance.

8. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT? There are minimal risks associated with participation in this project. There is a minor risk of triggering negative feelings during interviews. Participants will be provided with appropriate mental health resources. Should there be a breach in confidentiality, participants may be at risk for negative repercussions related to job searches, departmental funding, relationships with
colleagues, etc. Every effort will be made to protect participant confidentiality, but risk of breach in confidentiality always exists. I have taken the steps outlined in section 9 to minimize this risk.

9. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?

Your privacy and confidentiality are important to me. The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your project records…

● All electronic files with personally identifying information will be kept in Box and separate from research data.
● All hard copies of informed consent and other project documents with personally identifying information will be stored in the researcher’s office in a locked cabinet.
● All audio recordings will be stored in Box and destroyed within 6 months of transcription. The researcher and participant will agree upon a private location for interviews.
● All transcripts will be stored in Box. Only the researcher and dissertation committee will have access to raw transcript data.
● All photographs will be stored in Box. Only participants and the researcher will have access to participants’ individual Box folders.
● All photographs will undergo individual review for consent to publish. Photographs with minimal permission will not be published in any format and will only be used during interviews and data analysis.
● All publications and presentations resulting from this project will not include personally identifying information.

10. WILL MY INFORMATION BE USED FOR RESEARCH IN THE FUTURE?

Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies even if identifiers are removed.

11. WILL I BE GIVEN ANY MONEY OR OTHER COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Participants will be compensated with a $10 Amazon gift card upon completion of the first interview. Participants will be compensated with an additional $20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the second photo-based interview.

12. WHO CAN I TALK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Take your time to consider all aspects of this project and your potential involvement. I am happy to answer any questions. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher, Anna Fox, annafox@umass.edu. Should you have questions for a faculty sponsor, please contact Ezekiel Kimball, ekimball@educ.umass.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.
13. WHAT HAPPENS IF I SAY YES, BUT I CHANGE MY MIND LATER? You do not have to participate in this project if you do not want to. If you agree to participate in the project, but later change your mind, you may indicate this change to the researcher up until the time of submission for dissertation publication. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

14. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?
The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but project personnel will assist you in getting treatment. There are minimal risks associated with injury.

15. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT
When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this project. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I have been informed that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

I consent to having my interviews audio-recorded. [ ] (check here)

[ ] [ ] [ ]
Participant Signature: Print Name: Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

[ ] [ ] [ ]
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Print Name: Date:
Consent Form for Photo Use in a Research Project  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Researcher(s):** Anna Fox, primary researcher

Dissertation Committee: Kate Hudson, chair  
Zeke Kimball  
Sally Campbell Galman

**Project Title:** New Ways of Being and Knowing: Women PhDs Exploring Embodiment through Feminist Phenomenological Photovoice

1. **WHAT IS THIS FORM?**

This form is called a Consent Form for Photo Use. You have already signed a general Consent Form indicating your willingness to participate in the “New Ways of Being and Knowing: Women PhDs Exploring Embodiment through Feminist Phenomenological Photovoice” project. At this point, you will have the opportunity to indicate your consent for the use of the photographs you have taken as part of your participation in this project. I encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. After reading this Consent Form for Photo Use, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. **WHY ARE WE DOING THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?**

The purpose of this project is to gain more insight into the meaning women PhD students make of their embodied graduate school experiences. Being a doctoral student is a privilege in many ways, and it is not easy. The focus of doctoral education has been developing our minds in service of our disciplines. While students of all gender identities have the potential to encounter adversity in doctoral programs, women are positioned to experience unique challenges and barriers. Little attention is given to the embodied experience of graduate school despite the impact these lived experiences have on our time here and beyond. Much of what we know is based on anecdotes and non-peer reviewed publications.

3. **HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?**

Your privacy and confidentiality are important to me. The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your project records...

- All electronic files with personally identifying information will be kept in Box and separate from research data.
- All hard copies of informed consent and other project documents with personally identifying information will be stored in the researcher’s office in a locked cabinet. 
- All photographs will be stored in Box. Only participants and the researcher will have access to participants’ individual Box folders.
● All photographs will undergo individual review for consent to publish. Photographs with minimal permission will not be published in any format and will only be used during interviews and data analysis.
● All publications and presentations resulting from this project will not include personally identifying information.

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE PHOTOGRAPHS I HAVE TAKEN? You will have the opportunity to indicate your level of permission for each photograph that you have taken as part of your participation in this project. Your personally identifying information will not be associated with your photographs. Photographs may be used for any of the following according to your indicated level of permissions…

● Displayed in the digital WordPress gallery along with your artist statement;
● Included in dissertation presentations, conference presentations, journal publications, and other academic settings;
● Used only during data analysis and not reproduced in any public way.

5. HOW DO I INDICATE MY CONSENT FOR USE OF MY PHOTOGRAPHS?
Below you will have the opportunity to give your permission for use of the photographs you have taken as part of your participation in this project. Together, we will review each of the photographs you have taken and enter the file name into the table. Then, you will initial under the column reflecting your desired level of permission for each photograph.

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<th>Share in academic publications</th>
<th>Do not share, only for data analysis</th>
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6. WHAT HAPPENS IF I SAY YES, BUT I CHANGE MY MIND LATER? You do not have to release any of your photographs if you do not want to. If you agree to participate in the project and/or release photographs, but later change your mind, you may indicate this change to the researcher up until the time of submission for dissertation publication. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate.

7. WILL I BE GIVEN ANY MONEY OR OTHER COMPENSATION FOR BEING IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?
You have already received a $10 Amazon gift card as a thank you for your participation in the initial interview. Participants will be compensated with an additional $20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the second photo-based interview.

8. WHO CAN I TALK TO IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?
Take your time to consider each of your photographs. I am happy to answer any questions. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact the researcher, Anna Fox, annafox@umass.edu. Should you have questions for a faculty sponsor, please contact Ezekiel Kimball, ekimball@educ.umass.edu. If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.
9. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?
The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating subjects for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but project personnel will assist you in getting treatment. There are minimal risks associated with injury.

10. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT
When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily release the photographs I have taken as part of my participation in this project according to the above permissions. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I have been informed that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form for Photo Use has been given to me.

Participant Signature:  Print Name:  Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Signature of Researcher:  Print Name:  Date:
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