Fostering a Reimagined Professional Stability: An Autoethnographic Exploration of How Our (Work) Group Found Hope and Healing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Fostering a Reimagined Professional Stability: An Autoethnographic Exploration of How Our (Work) Group Found Hope and Healing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Introduction and Context**

Years ago, before we all landed the ever elusive assistant professor positions, and before we all found ourselves in different departments, we were four graduate students, friends, just trying to survive graduate school: Ashton (AM), Ashley (ADC), Virginia (VSS), and Max (MR). After leaving our common graduate school institution, we found ourselves spread across the country, and because our research interests varied greatly, we rarely found ourselves in the same academic spaces. Yet, we felt in need of friendship and company, so we spontaneously decided to collaborate, which has resulted in us organizing interdisciplinary panels annually for a regional conference. Figure 1 shows our reactions when we found out our first panel had been accepted.

**Figure 1: Origin of the Group Chat**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Chat: November 12, 2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AM: Panel officially accepted for southern! woot!! Go team!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADC: 🙌</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VSS: Yes!!!! 🥳</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR: Yesss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This simple exchange initiated a group text that would become an important space for venting, storytelling, humor, catharsis, and healing; it has become a veritable place of joy over the last two years and an essential point of connection during the pandemic. We have used the group chat to stay in touch, help each other secure jobs, talk about frustrating experiences with family, enliven our personal scholarship, mourn the delay of Rihanna’s music, share teaching ideas, discuss at length the ending of Schitt’s Creek, commiserate over rejected manuscripts, and so much more.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shook the world, and with it our professional organizations and expectations as academics in various disciplines. By March 2020, the world shut down, and with it our universities. Figure 2 highlights a discussion about our universities’ decisions to remain open or to close.
Eventually, all of our universities moved to an online format; when academia restarted over Zoom, so did our group. This time, we started coming together three times per week for three hour sessions of structured Pomodoros for the express purpose of keeping our research alive amidst the excessive unpaid labor we were undertaking. The Pomodoro Technique was useful in helping us break down large goals into smaller, easier to handle tasks using timed work sessions and breaks (Cirillo, n.d.). Each of us would set goals for the work session, and we would report back to the group what was and was not accomplished. We did our best to hold each other accountable because we all want tenure, of course. While we consistently organized this time for the sake of our academic careers, the group dynamic continued to serve personal needs for companionship on the tenure track.

The four of us have struggled through multiple demands in our academic jobs, specifically with balancing research, teaching, and caring for our students—all components of tenure. However, since March we have also experienced a number of personal and professional destabilizations, including stay-at-home orders, separation from and loss of loved ones, isolation, physical and mental health challenges, as well as moments of racial injustice we felt powerless to address. In many ways, what we consider “normal” as academics has been disrupted and we have had to adapt to our changing circumstances. We came to reimagine what it means to be an academic by integrating care for self and others into our professional spaces (Townsley & Broadfoot, 2008). The challenges we have collectively experienced personally and professionally during the pandemic have reinforced our belief that support structures and carework are both essential components to professional success (Tracy, 2008) and to the development of resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). Therefore, it is our intent in this manuscript to share our stories, both academically and creatively, as an illustration of how our work group of four college professors reimagined our professional stability. We hope our experiences may illustrate one avenue of coping, developing resilience, and finding joy for other academics.

However, telling our group’s stories as broadly academic dismisses the importance of care and support in our group dynamic and would belie the interplay
of the personal and professional. It is for this reason that we do not follow the traditional format of an academic journal article. Our framework and analysis are presented more creatively; we write our stories as a bricolage, a presentation and analysis of our stories, with each of us acting as bricoleurs. To reflect on our experiences, our group has written stories about individual experiences and reread our text message exchanges. We reflect on these data sets using collaborative autoethnography (CAE), which allows us to use our own stories to draw broader implications. Our bricolage weaves together various topics including how our group dealt both individually and collectively with struggling to find structure, grieving, finding ways to respond to various crises and pandemics, and solitude. We want to be clear that while we have all experienced (and continue to experience) unique challenges from the pandemic, we have also found an immense amount of joy through our conversations and collaborations. We hope to share our newfound stability in hopes that we may spread the joy.

**Framework**

We intend for our collective story of simultaneous struggle, depression, healing, and joy to be experienced as a bricolage. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain, “the interpretive bricoleur produces a bricolage, that is a pieced together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (p. 4). We are the bricoleurs; our manuscript is meant to be the bricolage; and our intent is to fit it to the evolving and multifaceted complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because our intent is to give readers both a personal and professional view into our lives, we feel it is best to introduce ourselves. Ashton and her husband are parents to two year old Kennet. Ashley and her husband recently moved for her work, and they have a dog named Sampson. Virginia lives alone with her two cats, River and Río. Max is currently sharing an apartment with a roommate and lives in a different state from his job. Professionally, we are all currently assistant professors, and our collective experiences encompass finishing two dissertations, two moves for work, three decisions on whether to stall the clock, three accounts of acclimating to a new job, and more. We are academics making sense of what it means to be academics but also family members, friends, and allies during a global pandemic.

The bricolage concept allows us to capture the complexity of the lived world within our small group dynamic. Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) explain, “the bricolage exists out of respect for the complexity of the lived world and the complications of power. Indeed, it is grounded on an epistemology of complexity. . . . The task of the bricoleur is to attack this complexity, uncovering the invisible artifacts (p. 168).

Additionally, by invoking the terms bricoleur and bricolage, we intentionally name our work as “fictive and imaginative” despite its formal nature (Kincheloe et al., 2011). This intentionality stems from our feeling that creation is important in a time of loss, and imagination is essential for growth. As an antithesis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the message is one of hope, healing, and joy. Finally, bricolage
acknowledges that multiple narratives are needed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As such, we believe “no narrative stands alone and clusters of stories may create an overarching narrative that can best be understood by way of empathetic reflexivity” (Clair et al., 2014, p. 12). COVID-19, as a meta-narrative, will be understood by many people from many different perspectives. In this manuscript, we aim to tell our stories in ways that many will empathize with and perhaps draw from, though our intent is not prescriptive.

We draw connections between the academic, activist, and familial identities to explore how each was impacted and supported within a small group setting. Although we are a group of four, the identities and experiences we invoke can be widely understood and broadly felt. As interpretive bricoleurs, we will use collaborative autoethnographic data (e.g., group chat, Zoom data, narrative reflections) as well as other collaborative autoethnographic methods (e.g., narrative building, biography, self-reflection, montage, theoretical integration, photography). These are discussed in greater depth below.

**Collaborative Autoethnography**

Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) was developed as a multivocal method of qualitative inquiry that combines autobiography and ethnography—that is, CAE utilizes the personal stories and perspectives of multiple researchers to interrogate complex issues (Chang, 2016; Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016; Lapadat, 2017). Autoethnography (AE), a research genre invested in displaying “multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739), paved the way for CAE. Thus, CAE and AE share similar goals of utilizing personal stories to interrogate cultural practices, be in conversation with and contribute to existing research, espouse vulnerability, and invite readers to be active participants who will contribute to the conversation invoked by the work (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2016). However, CAE, although similar to AE, has unique contributions.

Chang et al. (2016) liken CAE to a musical piece where each instrument is necessary for the final composition. Just as there is a time and place for a solo composition, there is also a time and place for a full ensemble. For our work group’s reflection, CAE was a fitting approach because our social locations and academic occupations led to both similar and wildly divergent quarantine experiences. Individually, each of us tells a different story; collectively, we capture a deeper cultural reflection and discussion about how academic lives intersect with other identities throughout the pandemic. In practice, the self-reflection that characterizes CAE is iterative—with the group alternating back and forth between individual and collective reflection as well as meaning making (Chang et al., 2016). Chang (2016) argues that while individual autoethnographies provide authors the autonomy to delve as deeply into their personal experiences and relations as they are able and willing, these individual engagements may also risk “privileging one perspective. . . . CAE, on the other hand, engages multiple authors and multiple, although not always
diverse, perspectives. This means that collaborative autoethnographers need to consider the layer of intersubjectivity, namely among researchers” (p. 111). In other words, CAE demands both iterative reflection and listening amongst researchers and to “each others’ voices, examin[ing] their own assumptions, and challeng[ing] other perspectives” (p. 112). The very strength of collaborative engagement, of additional voices, allows for the benefit of added complexity.

Therefore, we are careful to avoid generalizations and invite readers to continue this conversation by reaching out to their own groups, processing in the same way we have (as many AEs do; Jones et al., 2016). In fact, Clair et al. (2014) “encourage researchers of narrative to approach the stories they study as if they could be told and received from multiple perspectives” (p. 11). As such, we recognize that while our stories are centered in this manuscript, they are not the only ones existing in the narrative cluster of COVID-19.

Additionally, we encourage readers to benefit from our vulnerability. CAE, like AE, is a vulnerable process that benefits from occurring in a group setting because the shared vulnerability may reduce power dynamics, thus, promoting a caring, supportive, and trusting environment (Lapadat, 2017). The processing of experiences and vulnerabilities has certainly helped us. Our work group has become an intimate space—one characterized by joy and support in a world that too often seems bereft of both. It is for that reason we are writing this manuscript; we hope to share our community and the hope we have generated through a collaborative autoethnographic exploration of key data points in our history and stories. Our goal is to explicate the data points with our stories and ground those stories in narrative theory as well as the changing political and cultural atmosphere (Ellingson, 2011).

**Group Chat and Zoom History**

To engage in the process of individual and collective meaning making, we reflect on our group chat and Zoom data history. The group chat contains messages, articles, and photos beginning on November 18, 2018 and continuing, with daily updates, to the present. Zoom work sessions were proposed in early May via the group chat. The Zoom data history contains all of our meetings, log in times, and duration of work time starting with our first meeting on May 18, 2020 and continuing at least three times per week until the present.

**Narrative Reflection and Resilience Building**

Following CAE’s call for both individual and collective meaning making we also self-reflected on our experiences during the pandemic through narrative reflection. From our experiences we developed a set of guiding questions for all of us to answer separately, as a means to generate detailed recallings of experience and meaning. After we each answered questions in isolation, our group came together to share everyone’s answers and to reflect on the importance of our work group. From there, we deliberated themes to discuss, and decided collaboratively which stories best highlighted and explicated our journeys and experiences. The selected stories
were expanded individually, and then collectively incorporated into this manuscript to achieve the principles of narrative reflection.

Fisher (1987) claims, “Humans are essentially storytellers” (p. 64), and the elements of stories represent human life through their “communicative expression of social reality” (p. 65). More than simply representation, Bosticco and Thompson (2008) claim that perhaps at the most basic level, people tell stories to help them understand the world, their daily experiences, and their own identity. While telling these stories about ourselves, to ourselves, and to others, these narratives reflect the “social, organizational, ethnocultural, and familial assumptions and influences” (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003, p 14). Buzzanell (2010) introduces the possibility that narrative reflection can also help in the development of resilience. Thus, stories are “a way of relating a ‘truth’ about the human condition” (Fisher, 1987, p. 63) as they help us understand our own lives as well as the lives of others.

We utilize narrative reflection by invoking the Communicative Theory of Resilience (Buzzanell, 2010) and the narrative outcomes suggested by Sharf and Vanderford (2003). Buzzanell (2010) describes five processes of resilience: crafting normalcy, affirming identity anchors, maintaining and using communication networks, putting alternative logics to work, and legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding positive action. Sharf and Vanderford (2003) explain that narratives allow for five outcomes, specifically related to health, healing, and coping: sense making, asserting control, transforming identity, warranting decisions, and building community. In the next few paragraphs we will focus on the five outcomes described by Sharf and Vanderford and discuss areas where our theoretical frameworks overlap.

First, stories are sense making tools in a health crisis, whether global or personal. Stories function as such powerful tools precisely because they are useful in making sense of life (Bosticco & Thompson, 2008). Much of COVID-19 and the overlapping pandemics have created extreme uncertainty, frustration, and outright bedlam in the lives of many. Narratives are particularly useful for organizing chaos and uncertainty (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003) and help us make sense of health management, healing, coping, and/or death (Bosticco & Thompson, 2008). Sense making in stories is retrospective but also emergent, as narrative must allow a person to reflect back while also allowing room for new and salient experiences (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). Sense making often requires alternative logics to function and, although this process can seem contradictory, it aids in the creation of resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). Both sense making and the use of alternative logic are inherently interactive processes (Buzzanell, 2010; Sharf & Vanderford, 2003); as we share stories with others and listen to others’ stories, we begin to understand the complexity of the pandemic and the variety of experiences it has caused.

Second, telling a story is a form of asserting control and creating a space for agency (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). Due to uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, many people feel like they do not have control over their own lives, whether being
unable to leave the house, socialize with friends and family, or work normally. As individuals, we are also unable to control the longevity of the pandemic. Even the promise and distribution of a vaccine does not curb the uncertainty of when life will return to normal, or if such a thing is even possible. Sharf and Vanderford (2003) argue that the act of organizing and sharing events is an act of agency and control: “In short, narrative form puts the ‘I’ back into a person’s understanding of his or her life. Rather than silently comply with the initiatives and orders of others,” the narrator becomes the agent (p. 21). The work of reconnecting memory fragments by composing stories allows us to reorganize the chaos in our lives and potentially reassert a modicum of control within our environments. Putting this into conversation with resilience, agentic action relates most closely to the crafting of normalcy where new norms are communicatively constructed (Buzzanell, 2010). Specifically, we can examine our own efforts to exert control and create a new sense of normalcy. As such, stories provide not only “an opportunity for catharsis and tension release,” but additionally enable us to make sense and reassert control over our experiences—in this case a global pandemic that overlapped with a contentious election and many social justice concerns (Bosticco & Thompson, 2008). Moreover, stories “can provide a vehicle for linking the experiences of different individuals to a central event” (p. 40), thus allowing us to assert control collectively.

Third, narratives enable the writer to track a transforming identity through self-knowledge (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). The pandemic, as a life-altering event globally, has sparked the need for large-scale alteration and adaptation thereby leading to an evolving identity for many people. Stories allow the author to illustrate “continuity and transformation” and to express “various facets of one’s identity” (p. 23). The same can be said for relationships, an inherent dimension of identity. When people experience changes in their roles, relationships, social circles, and activities, their identities might be altered or threatened, and stories allow the author to assert or affirm a changing identity. Buzzanell (2010) argues that the identities most evoked during hardship are those that become central to building resilience. Discursively, these identities may be transformed individually and collectively. Familial and interpersonal relationships have been altered by the need to close non-essential businesses, maintain a 6-foot distance from others, and reduce or eliminate contact with loved ones. These changes to lifestyle result in changes to identity. In fact, Sharf and Vanderford (2003) argue that storytelling “can reveal a person’s essential character through the struggles to adapt, persist, and thrive” (p. 24).

Fourth, stories warrant the teller’s decisions and decision-making strategies. Sharf and Vanderford (2003) explain, “Narratives reveal the storyteller’s values or reasons for actions” based on “past events, current demands, or future consequences” (p. 25). Decision-making has been an essential point of contention in the COVID-19 pandemic; people have scrutinized each other based on their decisions to stay home, to go out, to wear a mask, to have family over for holiday gatherings, to protest, and so much more. However, a reinterpretation of these
situations could give us a different reading of these occurrences. One process of resilience explains how people might identify a negative emotion and then foreground a productive action. One example of this might be choosing to attend a protest after acknowledging the severity of racism and feelings of helplessness. As such, Buzzanell (2010) prompts us to think about how people’s actions could be seen as contributing to the building of resilience. Although we do not condone actions that put others’ health at risk (e.g., gatherings with people outside of one’s immediate household), we are open to the possibility that some actions (e.g., attending protests) were done out of resilience and responsibility rather than out of selfishness. Point of view and story arc are two components of a story by which people explain, contend with, and justify their decisions. Stories also shed light on where decisions have been co-constructed and/or jointly made (Shard & Vanderford, 2003).

Finally, storytelling helps us connect with others, build community, and find hope (Bosticco & Thompson, 2008). Throughout the pandemic, people have found ways to engage in community, through a variety of mediums, to share their lives and their experiences. Stories might begin with an individual, but through interaction stories are also communal. In this way, narratives can foster “coherent depictions of current reality” (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003, p. 27). Additionally, some groups (like ours) have formed or evolved as a result of the pandemic. In practice, communities grant access to information that one individual may not have in isolation, and through discussion, stories are compiled and become collective. Information as well as other forms of social capital that are shared within communication networks also aid in resilience (Buzzanell, 2010). Sharf and Vanderford (2003) assert “that the most common way of communicating our personally constructed ideas of the realities we experience is through the social sharing of narratives” (p. 14). Importantly, Bosticco and Thompson (2008) contend that stories have implications for readers and listeners as well. Readers and listeners can witness, affirm and reify, gain understanding, and experience empathy from their participation in narratives: “All who participate in the telling or hearing . . . help in creating its significance and act as its interpreters” (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003, p. 16). The act of a story is not simply completed by those who initiate them; stories are initiated by a teller, deepened by a listener, reader, or coauthor, and practiced/extended communally. As Clair et al. (2014) suggest “no story stands alone, that interruptions and digressions occur, that stories exist in clusters, and that perhaps one narrative binds us all” (p. 11). This process of communal engagement is also a cornerstone of autoethnographic methodology (Jones et al., 2016).

**Montage**

To accompany our narrative reflections in each theme, we provide an artistic montage of experiences and cultural references that layer and nuance non-dominant moments and experiences into the narrative reflections and analysis. In the broadest definition, montage “simply implies the joining together of different elements in a variety of combinations, repetitions, and overlaps” (Suhr & Willerslev, 2013, p. 1).
Montage is most often associated with artistic practices like film and photography; yet this concept also plays a role in academic writing (Suhr & Willerslev, 2013). Montage is representative of the fragmentation with which research is presented in contemporary culture; in short, it is an editing strategy (Coover, 2001). Our group, as the bricoleurs, were particularly drawn to the inventiveness of montage and its ability to capture complexity as a strategy for considering and composing our work (see Lyon, 2016). In accordance with the principles of CAE, we invite our readers to reflect on and interpret these montages in light of each theme for the complexity they offer.

Suhr and Willerslev (2013) assert that when montage is used in writing, it should juxtapose with the traditional thereby helping the invisible to show. We build on this idea of visual representation through editing, but in still life rather than film. Montage directs the focus of the viewer or reader to certain fragments of life (or frames). We hope to present frames via text, cultural artifacts, and photographs, which we will weave together in explication. Though edited into a montage, we hope to show that “actions and objects are linked to natural and cultural forces” (Coover, 2001, p. 425). Lyon (2016) asserts that themes can be further explicated with montage, especially “in dialogue with knowledge produced in other ways” (p. 2). As such, we incorporate written and visual montage into each theme in combination with thematic description, narrative, and analysis.

Importantly, montage is also capable of pulling multiple non-dominant storylines into the master narrative (Mookerjea, 2001). In this sense, we share significant stories from our lives during the COVID-19 pandemic, which we call narratives, but the montage text and images are meant to pull snippets of non-dominant stories into the bricolage we present. As such, montage enables us to create multifaceted storytelling with layering (Mookerjea, 2001). Coover (2001) explains this process: “The elements are understood through their relationships to each other . . . The quality of elements is determined by the views we take upon them and by how they hold particular and shifting meanings and importance” (p. 417). As a result, the act of pairing items together in a montage illustrates continual flux and transforms simplicity into complexity (Coover, 2001; Suhr & Willerslev, 2013), hopefully revealing otherwise unseen connections and interwoven invisibilities, much like how constellations are seen relationally, transformed from stars into stellar bodies.

The Bricolage

We present the following bricolage of experience, containing layered group chat excerpts, stories combined with narrative reflection, montage, biography, photos, and cultural references. The bricolage is organized into four themes: (1) Shape, Structure, and Stability; (2) Sharing Grief and Finding Joy; (3) Overlapping Pandemics; and (4) Together Alone. Thematic organization was employed to structurally illustrate individual and collective challenges, the work group dynamic,
our path to joy, and the overlapping of the personal and professional in our reimagined professional stability.

**Shape, Structure, and Stability**

If there is one shared feature of the COVID-19 pandemic across the world, it is the destabilizing nature of this crisis. Whether at the individual, organizational, or global level, and to varying degrees of severity, the pandemic has removed stability from so many lives and experiences. In higher education specifically, the pandemic forced universities to make immediate decisions about modality for classes and to alter long-term schedules to ensure in-person class sizes for social distancing. Debate surrounds the decisions administrators made and continue to make regarding in-person education, with some universities making national news for their decisions (Live Coronavirus Updates, 2021). An evaluation of pre-pandemic necessities may reveal that the university structure will never return to the normal we remember (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020; Marcy, 2021). With some small amount of irony, we present this theme of Shape, Structure, and Stability first by engaging a set of kaleidoscopic discussions of our various fragmentations/fractures/destabilizations in the wake of the pandemic and contending with how our group fostered a reimagined professional stability.

![Figure 3: Shape, Structure, and Stability Montage](image)

The montage above gestures to the ways in which we confronted precarious entanglements throughout the pandemic (ranging from expectations in the academy and new pedagogical strategies to something as simple as scheduling our Zoom work sessions), as well as the productive capacities of collaborative structuring of time.
The excerpts in the montage collectively illustrate how our group needed something stable in place to make progress on work, to brainstorm, and for accountability. Collectively, the excerpts demonstrate how integrating our professional spaces into a space of friendship (group chat and Zoom) helped all of us to be more productive both personally and professionally. The integration of the personal and the professional represents a newly constructed sense of normalcy for our group (Buzzanell, 2010).

Even for the most productive and organized among us, the COVID-19 pandemic has made functioning personally and professionally challenging. Virginia discussed the surprise for her in negotiating professional expectations and the organizational inconsistencies brought about by the pandemic. As an early career scholar, developing and maintaining a successful research agenda is challenging and at this year’s National Communication Association Convention, Virginia received a top paper award and a national dissertation award, in addition to having a journal article accepted earlier in the semester. She reflects, “Compared to my previous years in academia, this was a successful year.” Virginia recognized the successful nature of the year while also considering the unique experience of the conference, subsequent award ceremonies, and recognition among colleagues, which had all moved online: “I agreed with conferences being moved to an online format because I wouldn’t be comfortable attending in person anyway. However, I knew things wouldn’t be the same.” The excitement and celebratory nature of receiving this recognition from the field was somewhat tempered by a disconnect between expectation and actuality.

Certainly there was still a ceremony. It was over Zoom and offered a semblance of what would have happened at the conference, but Virginia recounts, The conference was underwhelming. When I normally would have gone out to dinner and drinks with my friends to celebrate, I instead went back to work on the day of the ceremony. I was appreciative of the ceremony being over Zoom, however. My parents and sisters were able to watch me receive an award for a dissertation that is literally titled *Dando Las Gracias a Mis Papas* (Thanking my Parents).

The contradistinction between typical or in person expectations and the reality of this recognition/celebration was jarring although not altogether negative. Virginia reframed this experience (Buzzanell, 2010) to focus on sharing this moment with her family—something that would not have been possible without a virtual conference. For a project deeply invested in family and community, this was a unique, special surprise. In the overarching narrative of attending conferences during a pandemic stood a narrative cluster that contained familial stories not often seen in academic settings (see Clair et al., 2014).

However, the professional importance of the moment was, in some ways, diminished or lost in this online academic venue. Certainly colleagues recognized her achievements, but having the ability to celebrate and engage with the field at the conference as a recipient of a prestigious award matters; the recognition and
opportunity offer formal validation for one as a scholar. Virginia notes this apprehension and writes of the importance of the work group: “My work group congratulated me! They used it as an opportunity to reaffirm me and wouldn’t let me question the validity of my work.” She describes this ability to discuss and reify confidence related to research and academic identity as vital since that is much of what was lost in this shifting circumstance. The changing nature of our professional lives was a challenge to contend with, but in many ways with the shaping and support of the group, that difficulty was mitigated.

Grappling with expectations through fluctuating tides was a consistent refrain in each of our experiences. Similar to Virginia, Max was experiencing a variety of positive outcomes in June 2020 having finished his dissertation and accepted a tenure track position in New York. Things were going quite well and at the time, his new institution was still planning to primarily have some in-person instruction and Max needed to be on campus for the Fall semester. Housing became a precarious, evolving challenge for Max. He notes,

The prospect of moving to a new state for a new position was, as I think it always is, exhilarating and nerve wracking. I had never lived in NYC or even a major metro city, so I asked a few colleagues and friends who had about where would be exciting places to live with a feasible commute. One colleague actually had a lease in an apartment building in Brooklyn running through August… so he offered for me to take over the lease for the last two months.

Max ended up taking the lease and after securing temporary housing for the last few weeks of June due to a gap in leases, he moved up to New York in July.

Shortly after moving, his institution made the announcement that it would primarily be online. Max wrote,

It was undoubtedly the best decision for safety, but I was in a bit of a predicament… not just the move, but experiencing a new city in the midst of a pandemic was challenging. I couldn’t tour any apartments due to quarantine restrictions in NYC, and I couldn’t explore the city or neighborhoods particularly effectively.

What began as an exciting new opportunity soon became a complex issue with a series of starts and stops, always with the uncertainty of whether infection rates would get worse or better. For several weeks of time in NYC, the apartment he secured flooded whenever it rained. Eventually, after discussing options at length with the work group and receiving somewhat cacophonous, but extremely valid professional advice, at the end of the lease, Max made the decision to return to North Carolina, where he completed his Ph.D., in order to save money and secure housing more effectively.

Upon reflection, Max notes that these shifting housing circumstances were neither particularly unique, nor overly problematic compared to some:
After a few weeks of moving back to NC, I found a more permanent housing option, moving in with a friend who needed a roommate. I certainly know that my experience in the pandemic with housing, although unique in our group, has been quite a common one in the grand scheme. Like many people, given the tumultuous housing market, I have opted for finding cheaper, although more tumultuous/temporary housing prospects over expensive/more permanent housing options in the uncertainty of the economy; particularly since it is uncertain when my work, like so many people’s will transition back from being remote and I cannot even go onto campus if I was there.

Precarity in relation to housing was a problem that so many people face and this shifting set of expectations professionally became a serious challenge personally. Although Max had several options pre-COVID-19 that would have helped him locate housing, he ultimately relied on his communication network for assistance in locating the first apartment and subsequently when deciding where to live. Thus, Max's communication networks allowed him access to material resources and valuable information (Buzzanell, 2010). Similarly, Ashton describes how personal and professional instabilities culminated for her while trying to balance many responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ashton had to attend three conferences in the Fall of 2020, all of which had transitioned to an online format. She discovered,

When I am attending a conference while at home, there is no accountability. I have more distractions, and it is harder to attend panels because the rest of your work is all on the same exact screen as the conference.

Weighing and attending to competing professional priorities is a balancing act that is rarely easy, but typically with conferences you are in a physical setting where you are able to wholly immerse yourself in that professional set of activities and mindset. Budgeting and dedicating that time is more complicated with virtual modalities, particularly as semesters progress. Ashton recalls jokingly, “The first conference was early in the semester, and I was able to put the panels and networking sessions on my calendar and block time for them. Three more days not grading couldn’t hurt, right?” The range of professional obligations to choose from, which to tackle first, and which can be put off, was draining.

Even professional activities designed specifically for relaxing and networking, although potentially important, can be taxing. Ashton discusses looking forward to these kinds of events:

I did sign up for wine and chocolate networking sessions in the evenings every day, and I even had my husband purchase two bottles of wine and a giant box of chocolates so I could fully engage in those sessions. But by the end of the day, I had Zoom fatigue, and I just couldn’t be on the computer anymore. I still had my wine and chocolate, but with my husband and child instead of people on a computer screen.
In spite of the more relaxed and engaging nature of this format of networking event, the reality of the virtual conference destabilizes the personal and professional choices in our lives. Before making the choice to skip the event, Ashton consulted with others in our group, who legitimized her decision to relax with family. At times there were choices that were discrete and easy to make, but at other times, there were simply too many competing choices and obligations. The group helped her engage in the resilience process of legitimizing negative feelings and foregrounding productive action (Buzzanell, 2010). In a communal setting Ashton was able to recognize her exhaustion and opt for a more restorative action: having wine and chocolate with family.

These negative feelings became exacerbated during later conferences. Ashton described the pressure related to competing professional needs and obligations to a loss.

By the end of the semester, the pile of grading was almost unconquerable before grades were due, and I just could not prioritize an online conference. I built my schedule for the conference, but in the end, I only went to the panels that I had to attend synchronously for my research or service obligations. I missed out on essential networking that I needed for my career. I wasn’t able to attend panels that would help advance my research because they were canceled or asynchronous, which I wasn’t able to prioritize.

Because of the platform, there was less natural engagement with others. There was definitely lost opportunity here.

In some ways these losses are tangible. Ashton discussed the lost opportunities related to advancing her research, networking with potential collaborators in her field, and the degradation of engaged discussion among peers with no small amount of regret and nostalgia. In many ways, the tangibility of these losses became greater due to their cumulative and intertwined nature; these concrete losses were haunting.

Admittedly, this loss was the result of choices. Yet simply discussing these losses as a result of individual or even organizational decisions diminishes both the importance of and contextual nature of these instabilities in everyday life. Ashton poignantly reminds us,

While these were definitely choices, I would like to be explicit that blaming a woman’s choices to skip wine and chocolates or some panels explicitly ignores structural issues associated with childcare at home, women’s opposing care and career work, and a pandemic that increased workload and slowed progress.

The instabilities resulting from this pandemic, the lack of structure, and the losses endured all impact individuals differently. These structural slippages, whether in terms of unscheduled time, work productivity, or professional resources/institutional knowledges, are with us all and directly correlate to privileges across individual identities (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation).
While our original intent for our work sessions was about shape and structure for our professional trajectories, we realized in reflection that allowing the professional to seep into our personal spaces has been rewarding. Virginia’s and Ashton’s stories about conferences illustrate how the pandemic shifted professional structures to non-traditional spaces, spaces where their families occupied. While these are usually separate (and some even advocate that professional conferences are not spaces for families), both Virginia and Ashton felt comforted to have their families present (through sharing an award or simple relaxation). At the same time, Max’s story of housing illustrates how the changes to our professional lives altered personal plans both for good and bad.

In our newfound professional stability, we have acknowledged that the personal and professional are no longer separable in the same ways as before, and perhaps there is danger inherent in this separation. Townsley and Broadfoot (2008) called for us to reimagine the professoriate through an integration of care and career; rather than try to achieve balance, which separates the personal and professional, integration challenges us to fully embrace the personal and professional as interwoven and concurrent, constantly influencing each other. While the work of an academic often bleeds into personal spaces in destructive ways, the interplay between the personal and professional for our group has been a positive experience because we have allowed integration; the personal bleeds into the professional just as often.

**Sharing Grief and Finding Joy**

While the need for stability academically and personally was separable early on, they have since become interdependent and indistinguishable. On good days, we log into Zoom, and we work on the trifecta for tenure, but many days, we chat or share stories about our pets, kids, significant others, and personal lives. Oversharing occurs… often. In particular, this sharing has brought to bear the complicated nature of our newfound and exacerbated precarities and instabilities. Wendig (2020) captures our overwhelming feelings, “I feel like I’m sitting in a living room and in the middle of the room there’s a toilet on fire, and nobody else will claim to see the toilet, or the fire” (para. 2). Just as we stared into the very real, but metaphorical, burning toilet, the very nature of the metaphor brought joy into our lives. We were amongst good company—we all acknowledged the fire. Although the toilet and the fire were fictive, the realities they represented were not.

Over the past year, these realities brought our group shared grief and joy. In a seemingly contradictory way, we also share moments where the two converged and aid us in becoming more resilient (Buzzanell, 2010). Embracing grief, joy, and a myriad of other emotions throughout the pandemic has opened space within our work group specifically for care-related tasks. While care work is often relegated to the realm of the personal and devalued in professional academic spaces, our newfound professional stability acknowledges that care should be a common good between academics (Tracy, 2008). In this section, we share a few of the “fires” we experienced and contrast them with the moments that brought us joy and the
moments where the two converged. Our intent in this section is to begin with grief and grieving but to end with joy and hope.

Figure 4: Sharing Grief and Finding Joy Montage

The montage above exemplifies how we have put alternative logics to work (Buzzanell, 2010) by echoing the grief and joy we have all experienced since the start of the pandemic (e.g., finding a way to enjoy work compared with work existing in quarantine) as well as moments when we found joy in grieving (e.g., Wendig’s article and the coffee cup which capture the humor in the humorless). There has been a lot to grieve during the last year. Globally, over 2.5 million lives have been lost to COVID-19 (World Health Organization, 2021). We are all fortunate not to have lost close relatives to COVID-19. However, the pandemic made other losses more salient for Ashley and Virginia. Ashley recounts in our montage the passing of her grandparents prior to the pandemic and the peace she feels knowing that they did not have to experience this strain. In an extended narrative, Virginia recounts what it was like losing her grandfather living in another country during a pandemic:

I thought a lot about him as the shutdowns began mid-March. The relatives who lived with him were limiting visits to him and making sure those who had to visit used hand sanitizer. No one told him there was a pandemic. When my grandfather became sick towards the end of October of 2020, my family was unsure what to expect. He had suffered some sort of neurological event a week prior and our family was spread across two countries, the US and Mexico, so I was only receiving updates, but I wasn’t there to see how he had declined. Several of our family members traveled to Mexico and my
younger sister and I convinced ourselves he would survive. He died on November 5th. I had made a promise to myself not to miss his funeral after my grandmother’s passing in 2019, but the weight of the 250,000+ COVID-19 deaths was heavy on my mind—over 1,000 people also died of COVID-19 the same day in the United States. I spent the day grieving and pondering my options.

Ultimately, Virginia decided to travel after testing negative for COVID-19, purchasing extra masks and hand sanitizer, and researching the airline’s protocols. Despite going through with the trip and testing negative upon return, Virginia faced indecision about her choice: “Even as I write this, it doesn’t feel like I made the right decision.” Contributing to her discomfort was the memory of “seeing a funeral broadcast over Facebook Live in the earlier days of the pandemic.” Although the two are very different experiences, and the funeral broadcast over Facebook Live was not a loved one, losing her grandfather provided a small glimpse into the loss faced by others—or, as Clair et al. (2014) puts it, the stories of loss allow for extended narrative empathy to occur, providing a fuller picture of loss during the pandemic.

While Ashley and Virginia focused directly on the loss of family members, grief was also shared within our group in different ways related to health and illness. Ashley shares the following from a recent emergency vet visit:

I was to park in front of the door and call the hospital to let them know we arrived. Afterward, I was instructed to park and all business would be conducted over the phone. I watched my dog disappear inside, dazed from lack of sleep and fear. A tech gathered information over the phone and not long after the vet called to give me a diagnosis. I could take a deep breath as it seemed to be an easy fix that would require little to no intervention. Then, the tech called again. Because I was not able to go inside, and they were giving him medications, I had to make a decision regarding what they should do if my dog’s heart stopped. The tech calmly explained three options ranging from surgical intervention that cost around $1400 to comfort care costing $600. I was silent and tears just started pouring.

Ashley’s anxiety during this situation was heightened by many things; she hadn’t slept, was in the midst of finishing her dissertation, and the possibility of losing her dog was sudden and unexpected. She reflected on the mundane nature in which she transferred him over to the vet. “There was no goodbye or sentimental words said before he left my car. I just passed him through the window and he was on his way,” and her narrative continues, “I couldn’t be there to comfort him.” COVID-19 brought with it the need to socially distance, but on a normal trip, Ashley would have been with her dog when this news was received, allowing her to comfort him and, possibly, receive comfort herself.

The need to maintain distance has impacted others in our group as well. Ashton and her husband had been taking their infant (now toddler) son for all routine doctor visits. The pandemic brought with it enhanced medical protocols
prohibiting both parents from entering or requiring them to opt for an e-visit. The e-visit was both comforting and discouraging. Ashton explains how “it didn’t change the course of his care, so I did not feel like we actually had help.” This is contrasted with some sense of security: “It was comforting to know that the doctor wasn’t worried.” Disappointing medical visits like this discouraged Ashton from seeking help when she became sick shortly after. She writes, “I just didn’t schedule anything for myself. I just rode out the symptoms.” For her son’s one year visit, Ashton was able to secure an in person visit but only one person was allowed to accompany Kennet. She recalls the experience:

During his one year visit, I had to wait in the car, and my husband was sending me pictures of them waiting. Then he texted me and said Kennet would need a blood draw, and I remembered the blood draw from when he was two weeks old, and I felt physically hot and uncomfortable being in the car and not being in the room with him. There was this overwhelming urge for me to do something. My son NEEDED me, and I couldn't protect or comfort him.

To make up for her absence during the visit, Ashton describes how “when they got back to the car, I just held him for like five minutes, and wiped the tears off his face. I stayed with him for the rest of the day!” Ashton, as well as Ashley, grieve for the loss of an experience that would have allowed them to bring comfort to those they love. This loss, although miniscule in comparison to the stories of people saying their last goodbyes over a video call facilitated by a medical professional, contribute to the narrative cluster of COVID-19 (see Clair et al., 2014).

As many have learned over the past year, grieving is not solely reserved for the loss of loved ones or health related concerns. Hurst (2009) notes that although death “could be considered the ultimate loss . . . loss is connected and includes a variety of experiences” (p. 35). Our group has grieved the death of loved ones, but we have also mourned a lack of normalcy. Although not being able to go about our daily activities is a trivial sacrifice compared to the losses endured by others, the lack of normalcy has been difficult to overcome. Ashley mourned the canceled house-hunting trip she and her husband had planned. There were, of course, the practical challenges of not being able to get a feel for neighborhoods or the house itself. However, Ashley also recognized interpersonal consequences:

It would have been my partner’s first time in the city we were about to call home. We were upset, sad we didn’t get the experience of exploring our new city together, but we also knew it was the right decision because so much was unknown.

Since their move was inevitable, Ashley and her husband continued their house search online, ultimately buying a house they could not visit prior to purchasing.

Amongst the group, stories of joy have also been shared. Photos of pets and of Ashton’s son are routinely shared. For Halloween, Ashley shared two photos of her dog, Sampson, in costume. One of these photos is proudly included in the
montage above. Virginia has also shared various photos of her cats, Río and River, fighting, playing, and watching Pets 2. Ashton frequently shares photos of her son, often generating positive and warm responses in others. On Christmas Day, Ashton shared an image of her son playing with a toy truck, prompting Max to respond, “This is so wholesome” and Ashley to reply, “This is everything.” These exchanges were fleeting, but frequent in nature.

Other joyful messages contained more depth. In line with the fifth outcome outlined by Sharf and Vanderford (2003), it was as a collective that silver linings were often found. Intermingled in text threads where the group theorized solutions to teaching concerns, were memes and GIFs that brought humor to the situation. In something as simple as Ashton sharing an image of a mug that comically compares virtual teaching with riding a bike, the group reframed the negative experiences of virtual learning, at least for a moment.

The sense of loss throughout our group has permeated our discussions of work as well. The experiences in the personal always influence and affect experiences in the professional, whether we acknowledge them or not. Ignoring our emotions is what Towsley and Broadfoot (2008) call a “win-lose game based on taken-for-granted assumptions of ideal academic work and the ideal academic worker” (p. 137). Since nothing about the pandemic has made for an ideal work-life, some of this pressure was alleviated in our reimagined professional stability, and our work group embraced care-giving in a new way, fostering an ethic of care amongst the four of us. Every loss and challenge has been discussed in the group chat or in our Zoom work sessions, whether it was related to the professional or not. Similarly, because levity is appreciated, and we all need joy in our lives, we have welcomed moments of joy, even if they presented interruptions to our work. In short, we have tried to be “care-full” with each other, allowing all of us to be “whole human beings” rather than only productive academics (p. 41).

**Overlapping Pandemics**

Many stories of racial violence, the rhetoric surrounding the anti-mask movement, and the threats made against international college students’ visas emerged throughout 2020 (Beer, 2020; Gross, 2020; Hill et al., 2020; Jordan & Hartocollis, 2020). We all felt powerless to enact meaningful change despite our unresounding commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice. Add to that the ever-present and continuous anxiety related to the election, which loomed over us until there was a result, but also continues to be a source of uneasiness given the subsequent Capitol riots. The compounding anxieties were and continue to be enough to break all of us.

The montage below reflects the collective struggles we faced trying to engage with the many pandemics of 2020 (e.g., deciding how to participate in protests, contending with natural disasters during a pandemic, awaiting the results of a contentious election). At some point in the last year, we have all thought, “I should be doing more in the community” to stand as an ally with others actively involved in
change. Activism is something that permeates the personal and professional for all of us. Being an activist is a personal decision and merging activism into our teaching and research, is a professional, if not an ethical, choice. However, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged our activist identities, often relegating activism to either the personal or professional. Since March 2020, we all experienced self-doubt about our activist identities; when one of us became consumed by negativity because we felt unable to enact meaningful change, the rest of us were there to build them back up, whether it was on Zoom or in the group chat. The tensions and doubts we often felt pointed to the importance of activism in our lives. For many of us, resilience was built by relying on these identities and acting in what we believed to be productive ways (Buzzanell, 2010). Through discussion, we were able to bring activism back to the personal and professional by working through avenues for activism together.

In our shared spaces, we processed these intrapersonal challenges along with ongoing structural issues such as systemic racism, the shifting academic institution, political unrest, and the precarity of healthcare. As we reflected on how to “do more” in the community, we considered how to be allies for various social causes. Virginia reflected on her work with local immigrants and how it changed because of the pandemic. After moving for an academic position less than a year prior, she joined an immigrant rights’ group. While beneficial for making connections in the local community, it also allowed her to become embedded in the wider cause:

In May, one of the women from the activism group texted everyone to let us know about the Migrant Trail—an event that usually takes place along the
U.S./Mexico border but would have to take place virtually. In a normal year, the Migrant Trail participants would walk with intention along the U.S./Mexico border in recognition of those who have had to cross without assistance. Although it was sad to see the event modified, I would have likely not been able to participate in the event unless it was virtual. I learned a lot by participating and was able to bring some of that knowledge to my students.

Ultimately, Virginia was able to engage because of modifications made for the pandemic. She shared this experience with the collective, allowing our group to increase understanding of immigrant rights. While she could not physically experience the event, she was able to be an ally and promote awareness for the cause. Virginia participated in this event for both personal and professional reasons. Personally, Virginia grew up in an immigrant community. Professionally, she both researches and teaches about immigration-related topics. Experiences such as a virtual version of the Migrant Trail provide unique opportunities for individuals to gain access to knowledge they may not have been able to access for financial, physical ability, and political reasons. In a time when Virginia was sharing with us her meaningful participation in the Migrant Trail, we all struggled with how to meaningfully and actively support Black Lives Matter.

Another defining characteristic of 2020 was the renewed recognition of systemic racial issues in the United States. Sparked by the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others (who we do not have the space to name) at the hands of police, people across the country and globally began protesting for racial justice. Within our group, we had candid discussions of what participation should look like. The diversity of our responses to this problem point to the multiple factors we had to contend with when considering civic activities in a health crisis. As illustrated in the montage above, Max “felt useless” because he ultimately chose not to physically protest due to serious health concerns, the pandemic, and workload. Virginia noted she had less pandemic anxiety from social justice and political events than from mundane activities such as grocery shopping, and she ultimately participated in protests in her local community (see one of her protest posters in the montage above). Ashton did not feel comfortable in large groups because of her husband’s medical condition and chose to instead integrate race more meaningfully in her scholarship as well as donate money to support protesters. Individually, many times we felt there was/is more we could do to be better and more active allies for social causes; as a collective, we have worked hard to brainstorm ways to meaningfully engage and support each other in this work while also being mindful of the pandemic. In these conversations, we engaged in another process of resilience: legitimizing negative feelings while foregrounding productive action (Buzzanell, 2010). Collectively we acknowledged and identified various structural problems. In doing so, each of us responded in ways that felt safe and productive.
During the summer of 2020, conversations about racial issues were commonplace amongst our group, as they were across the country. When the fall semester began, discussions about racial injustice became integral to our conversations with students and colleagues. After the shooting of Jacob Blake, Ashley recalled,

Protests in Kenosha and surrounding areas increased in number and intensity. While I always try to create a safe space in my classrooms, the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM protests added additional layers to this. We talked about how they were doing and how the protests combined with the pandemic was affecting businesses in our community.

While each student had an individual experience with social justice and COVID-19, the intersection of these experiences allowed Ashley to have critical conversations about ethics and social issues with her students while also providing social support. She sought to show students how racial justice was not separate from the content they were learning in class and how social issues affect students on an individual and community level and as future professionals.

Ashley then reflected on how providing this support is critical to her role as an academic in the context of Alvin Cole’s murder near her university:

In October, the District Attorney announced the police officer would not be charged in the fatal shooting of Alvin Cole, despite it being his third in five years. In preparation for the announcement, I sent an email to students encouraging them to do what was best for their well-being, be it skip class and focus on their mental health, tune in virtually because our campus is on a main road, or come to class for normalcy. In class, we talked about how they were doing, and talked less about course content and more about what everything meant. Several students reached out via email thanking me for acknowledging the weight of the decision and thinking of their safety. While I cannot protect them from COVID-19 or racial discrimination, I can support them and offer my students options to support themselves.

While she did not physically participate in social justice protests herself, Ashley used her role as an academic to encourage students to be civically engaged and socially aware. She focused her activist efforts in the realm of the professional, by providing care for her students and creating a safe space in her academic community. While serving as an ally, it also affected her on a personal level. In group Zoom sessions, we had conversations about how to navigate these intersecting experiences and how to best support our students and, in turn, ourselves.

In the moment, it was hard to make sense of the constellation of crises that were happening around us and to our students. Moments of decision-making are evident above, and as these decisions are intentional, portraying them in a story format demonstrates how each member in our group warrants their decisions but also allows the collective to influence these decisions (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). Yet in sharing our individual stories and in recounting this sharing collectively, we
were able to connect our experiences, name and address the constellation of events, and create meaning from what initially seemed like random occurrences. We were also able to prioritize action that felt conducive to broader, societal change (Buzzanell, 2010). Narrative here, then, highlights the co-constructed nature of decision-making in an environment of overlapping crises.

The complex interrelationship between overlapping pandemics not only affected our roles as allies and academics; the burden of multiple crises also marked our individual experiences. This was especially felt in our experiences with healthcare, which has been traditionally relegated to the realm of the personal. In the montage above, Ashley describes her struggles with mental health and her difficulty finding a new provider in the midst of a pandemic. Despite the need, many mental health providers are not accepting new patients because of the increasing number of people who need support. While Ashley had trouble accessing mental health resources, Max also experienced difficulty with access to care while also experiencing guilt for even seeking care during the pandemic. In late September 2020, he had, what began as, a non-emergent medical issue. Recalling his experience, he wrote,

In an effort not to take up valuable resources, like the time of medical professionals, during a pandemic, I stayed home and hoped my body would recover on its own with some over-the-counter medication and taking it easy. In all honesty, the other main reason I waited was because my health insurance didn’t kick in until the end of September which was only three days away.

While he was dealing with a health issue, institutional barriers like insurance and provider capacity prevented him from acquiring the care he needed. His primary care provider had a week and a half wait because of an increase in patients and de-densification measures. Even after several trips to his primary care provider and urgent care, his symptoms continued to worsen. He continues:

At this point in October, I had just found out that I may need to have surgery imminently; I was incredibly behind in my work since I was for all intents and purposes bedridden for three weeks, and now I needed to schedule a highly specialized surgical consultation. The key problem was that the soonest surgical consultation I could find was for the end of December with that hospital network. After several days of calls and searching, I found a surgical consultation in a city 40 minutes away that was in my health insurance network.

In the end, Max was able to receive the care he needed after a more thorough examination, corrected diagnosis, and carefully prescribed medications. However, the emotional burden of seeking care during a pandemic sustained throughout the process. When dealing with non-emergent health issues, Max had to contend with already existing barriers to care, which have been exacerbated by an overburdened health system and the guilt of seeking medical care amidst depleting community resources.
It was in the space of our work group that we were able to support each other, thereby integrating personal health into a professional space. Relegating health concerns to the personal realm denies the impact those moments have on our work and obfuscates the fact that we all need care (Tracy, 2008). Integrating conversations of health and wellness into our workspace legitimized the necessary time that was needed for self-care for Ashley and Max, but also incentivized compassion and the sharing of care for all four of us. Enabling dialogue about health and well-being in the professional space is part of the reimagined professional stability. We individually managed our personal health, but as a group we were able to watch out for each other to ensure no one was truly alone through this experience, checking in frequently and intentionally. While many universities have emphasized physical and mental health for students, faculty, and staff in recent months, academic institutions should not need a global health crisis to take health and well-being seriously. Tracy (2008) contends that “care and nurturing, like other collective goods, should be treated by organizations as one more facet of corporate/institutional social responsibility” (p. 171; see also Mezzina, Sashidharan, Rosen, Killaspy, & Saraceno, 2020). The compounding health crises noted above and the overburdened healthcare system illustrate yet another narrative cluster (See Clair et al., 2014).

**Together Alone**

In *Alone Together* Turkle (2017) discusses the evolving nature of how technology shapes and constructs community and intimacy in our lives, ultimately arguing that there is a kind of solitude that comes from this heightened entanglement with our technologies. Turkle’s assertion in the inevitability of technology bringing us to new heights of solitude polarizes the power estimation of the relationship between technology and people, both overdetermining the agency of technology and underestimating the agency and ingenuity of people. Certainly technology has the capacity to influence and construct our relationships in important ways, but technology does not solely use us.

In this vein, the Twitter movement #AloneTogether was meant to inspire people to persevere through the pandemic because “we’re all in this together.” The website associated with the hashtag, www.alonetogether.com, has reinforced CDC recommendations for hand washing, social distancing, and mask wearing, but has also provided tips for staying safe when you must gather (e.g., going back to work or school). For those experiencing crisis, the website has information for crisis counseling. The hashtag and the movement were also adopted by many popular television networks, speaking to and in some ways undermining Turkle’s (2017) assertions.

This theme is entitled Together Alone because we consider Turkle’s (2017) claim as a critical point of conversation, as to not overly determine the agency of technology or people. While we invoke the ideas in both Turkle’s book and #AloneTogether, our conception of Together Alone is about the ways in which our work group, through a variety of technological mediums and group ingenuity, has
stayed connected, built community, and overcome/grappled with the isolation we have experienced through this pandemic and other emergent crises. It is the culmination of the personal and professional integration (Townsley & Broadfoot, 2008) and the crafting of normalcy (Buzzanell, 2010).

Figure 6: Together Alone Montage

The montage above illustrates how the struggles we experienced in our own personal (e.g., being an isolated extrovert) and professional lives (e.g., being a mental health counselor to students) were supported and even impacted by the collective. At the onset of businesses and schools closing and the initial stay-at-home mandates, we each individually felt relieved that we did not need to return to classrooms full of possibly infected students coming back from spring break, but also felt frustrated at being isolated from our students, friends, family, support structures, and workplace resources. Isolation impacted both the personal and the professional for each of us, but being part of this collective helped each of us grapple with the multifaceted isolation we felt.

First, in the realm of the personal, some of Ashton’s needs as an extrovert were met with group chat messages, photo sharing, phone calls, and eventually Zoom sessions with this work group. She especially experienced this isolation with each new milestone her son achieved. She recounts this struggle in her narrative about Kenner’s first birthday:

I created photo invitations, and then when it was time to send them out, we were under a stay-at-home order. We stayed in. We had family stay away. I made inserts for the invitations with a new date for the party after the
stay-at-home orders, and packed all the invitations in their envelopes. The night before his birthday, I hung all the decorations (saving some of the balloons just in case we did have a real party later in the year). I took a ton of photos and videos of him playing outside in his 1st birthday t-shirt, eating pizza, mashing his birthday cake into paste, and playing with his new birthday toys. I made sure to document all of the birthday decorations on his high chair and in the house. And the invitations to his first birthday, they remained in a pile on the counter, unsealed, with an unrealistic date inserted. I shared all of it via group chat with photos and videos, and I know they genuinely care about my child and every new milestone he reaches. They can be proud of him with me. I finally did send out those invitations, after replacing the dated insert with a message that read, “We canceled the party due to COVID-19. Consider this a Christmas card in July.”

While the work group was not a replacement for desired social gatherings or family celebrations (there is still a loss here, see Hurst, 2009), it did meet needs for community and support, something she clearly needed. Social support is essential to helping people cope with hardships because it mitigates stress, provides emotional outlets, and additional problem-solving resources (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011). Major stressors, like a global pandemic, “create new demands that prompt support seeking” (p. 341). Isolation and the need to be social through outlets that provide distance and safety are some of these new demands. In our new professional stability, the professional has worked to supplement the personal.

Second, in the realm of the professional, all of us lacked the resources we needed from our universities to complete our instrumental tasks as we were cut off from the physical space of our offices, departments, and classrooms. Some of these struggles are captured in the montage above. Ashley relates what it was like to finish her dissertation cut off from her fellow graduate students and committee members. She finished her dissertation by utilizing accountability structures (e.g., having someone else in the group to work with) and the experience of other members in our work group (e.g., data analysis). Similarly, Max demonstrates the complexity of seeking advice from colleagues as a junior faculty member. Faculty on the tenure track must balance the advice to be visible with the advice not to bother their senior colleagues. By having an open group chat and set times to meet the work group, Max was able to ask questions about interviewing for a new job, brainstorm ideas for his dissertation, and vent about the process of converting classes to online.

The examples above collectively illustrate how our work group provided access to a wider range of resources than any of us had individually (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). By utilizing our work group as a resource of knowledge, we were able to overcome some of our personal and professional challenges together through community and accountability. Buzzanell (2010) theorizes that the presence of communication networks can help develop resilience. Many of us can certainly point to a time when our productivity was improved by the presence of others. One of the
consequences of the shutdown was the disruption of communication networks. While studying the impacts of Hurricane Katrina, Doerfel, Chewning, and Lai (2013) note that successful communication networks can develop during and after a crisis; however, pre-existing networks play a very positive role in enabling resilience to develop. Similarly, our personal relationships with each other bolstered both our personal and professional resilience through the sharing of experiences and occupational knowledge.

The group chat excerpt in the montage illustrates how we collectively discussed the ever increasing burdens of being college professors during a pandemic and the multiple roles, both paid and unpaid, we were expected to fill. In the spring of 2020 we all had to convert our classes to the online setting, which was demanding for those who had never taught their courses online before. In the fall the workload increased with multiple course adaptations to online and hybrid formats, new course preps and for some of us, more students. In addition to that, we had to forge ahead with plans as our universities changed guidelines and urged us not only to have back up plans for our classes if class structure changed, but also to develop contingency plans in the event we “become ill or incapacitated.” The increasing demands from our universities combined with the emotional needs of our students presented limits to what we were able to accomplish in terms of research production, an essential component to succeeding on the tenure track. By providing social support and acting as a sounding board for many of these professional struggles, we worked through each of these moments in the process together alone.

Sharf and Vanderford (2003) contend that ongoing personal struggles related to health and illness impact identity. We are all junior faculty who have at one time or another felt imposter syndrome. COVID-19 exacerbated these feelings because it was literally impossible to accomplish everything at certain moments during the pandemic. Sharing our stories with one another provided insights about the commonality of the struggles, and working through identity threats helped us process changes to our own personal identities as well as the identity of the collective (Sharf & Vanderford, 2003). It is worth noting that these actions to help each other were not taken out of a sense of obligation; rather they were taken because we care for and about one another. We agree with Tracy’s (2008) suggestion that, “Care is important for everyone and therefore should be a shared goal and responsibility among all members” (pp. 170-171). Towsley and Broadfoot (2008) assert that the integration of work and care responsibilities “radically enhances the performance of both” (p. 138).

Third, for academics, and many other professionals, the personal and the professional cannot always be neatly untangled even for explication. While we all struggled through the increasing demands of our jobs, we also worried that we might catch COVID-19 at work and/or bring it home to our families; the strain on all of us was tangible. Ashton’s narrative highlights the anxiety associated with accomplishing professional tasks while also worrying about COVID-19 infection:
Three of Kennet’s grandparents provide childcare while my husband and I work. We planned to put my son in daycare at one year. Yet his first birthday coincided with daycares closing and a stay-at-home order. We continued with the grandparents and made everyone strictly follow CDC guidelines. Sometimes a grandparent couldn’t visit because s/he didn’t follow the rules. At this point we were worried mostly about keeping my husband safe from COVID because of a medical condition. Late in the summer, the reality of the fall semester began to sink in. My husband and I decided I wouldn’t be able to ensure everyone’s safety and might be the one to bring COVID home, not only to him but also to the elderly grandparents. We knew it was going to be very difficult, but after discussion with everyone, we decided that our house would not be safe while I was teaching in person. I remained extremely concerned about what would happen to my husband if I brought COVID home. And I can still feel the delays in my career from simultaneous parenting and professoring.

Ashton expressed throughout the pandemic that just knowing others were going through similar struggles made “walking the tightrope easier.” We all work in the academy, where discussions of productivity often devalue care work, including care for the self, partners, children, pets, and others. Our group came together first as a work group seeking connection, and now the personal and professional are so interwoven that it is impossible to untangle them. We echo Tracy (2008) in our narratives that “organizations can and should critically consider their role in valuing the work of caring for others” (p. 168), as providing care for each other has helped all of us grow both personally and also as academics.

Because of the demands for productivity, the interconnectedness of the personal and the professional can often result in guilt about performing care and the resulting loss to productivity. This is echoed at the end of Ashton’s narrative, but is more fully illustrated by Max’s illness experience:

I was bedridden for the better part of two weeks. I think for those in academia we all understand the omnipresent pressure to be working. I remember being incredibly stressed because I knew my courses were running online, grading was piling up, I couldn’t engage in faculty meetings, or work on any of my research. Another part of the stress was seeing my work group continuing to move forward on their projects without me. Our working group had regularly scheduled meetings throughout the week, but the group text chat is constantly going as well. While I was stressed I also still felt connected to the work everyone else was managing to achieve. In some ways that is one of the strengths of the group, everyone is collaborating on each others’ projects. Not necessarily in the traditional coauthoring sense, but in the sense that we are jointly offering emotional support, bouncing ideas around, and critiquing our work. In that way, I managed to feel like we were still together, even though I was alone.
Connection and support are essential communicative tools to combat isolation and build community. Social support and social relationships are correlated with overall health and well-being, with profound impacts on mental health (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011). Although the topics discussed in our work group weave between the personal, the professional, and the downright sarcastic/comedic, our intention is always to be supportive of each other whether we are communicating in text or on Zoom. Goldsmith and Albrecht explain that “supportive conversations seek to communicate reassurance, validation, and acceptance; offer perspective shifts on cause-effect contingencies; enhance another’s training or skills; coordinate sharing resources and assistance; and enable disclosure of thoughts and emotions.” (pp. 336-337). Our group then has achieved social support by engaging in supportive conversations over a variety of platforms.

Final Reflections and Contributions

Our collaborative autoethnography (CAE) called for us to establish an organized way to individually and collectively reflect. Through this process, we gained a deeper understanding of our group dynamics and a deeper appreciation of the ways we have helped one another. Although perhaps unrecognized at the time, our decisions helped us become more resilient by reimagining our work and contributing to a newly found form of professional stability. Because “resilience is cultivated interactively for the present and for the future, for self and for others” (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 15), it is important for us to use our reflection to create suggestions for others. Additionally, Houston and Buzzanell (2018) call for the development of “resilience cultivation programs that center on social relationships” (p. 27). Although we do not present a fully developed resilience program in this manuscript, our narrative reflections can be used as a stepping stone toward building these initiatives in the future. Thus, our bricolage (1) investigates the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, uncovering some of the invisible artifacts; (2) utilizes the five narrative goals mapped out by Sharf and Vanderford (2003) to show how our narratives contribute to a larger cluster of stories (Clair et al., 2014); (3) illustrates one avenue readers and academics might follow to build supportive communities even in the face of barriers, and (4) emphasizes the development of resilience through the integration of the personal and professional.

First, through the use of bricolage, we investigated the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic and uncovered a fraction of the pandemic’s hidden artifacts (Kincheloe et al., 2011). Through the use of CAE, multiple and layered narratives, and montage, the bricolage showcases the complexity of a global pandemic, specifically for the experiences of four individuals and one collective: the changing work structures of academia, the struggles of Ph.D. candidates and junior faculty, mental and physical health challenges, and the impacts on activism and social justice. As we unfold the complexity of these issues, invisible artifacts from the pandemic and our work group dynamic came to light: allowing academics to be whole human beings, integration of the personal and professional, a more nuanced definition of
loss, and the magnitude of support structures, including supportive conversations and spaces.

Second, the bricolage also achieved and illustrated the five goals of narrative mapped out by Sharf and Vanderford (2003): sense making of multiple stressors in our lives, reasserting control over our lives and community, recording shifts in identity as a result of the stressors, explaining our individual and collective decision-making processes, and fostering community. As we explicate our coping mechanisms and support processes, we hope others will be able to apply our experiences to their own lives as a form of joy, comfort, sense making, and healing. We hope that readers are able to “think with” and “resonate with” fragments of our stories and experiences and may be able to apply the five goals of narratives to their own lives. This is important to us personally, but it is also theoretically sound as autoethnographic methods seek to expand conversations with readers (Jones et al., 2016), and narratives “exist in clusters” where our stories are not the only ones worthy of being shared (Clair et al., 2014, p. 11).

Third, based on the strategies that helped us cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and throughout concurrent personal, regional, and national crises, we suggest that groups and networks consider incorporating supportive conversations and increased vulnerability into their communicative norms. Supportive conversations were helpful to alleviate stress (Goldsmith & Albrecht, 2011). Supportive conversations, for our group, often centered around problem-solving and sought to balance humor with more serious conversation. These conversations inevitably required increased vulnerability amongst group members (Lapadat, 2017) leading us to slowly and collaboratively renegotiate the boundaries of disclosure (Petronio, 2013). Although our disclosures increased over the past year, CAE allowed us to establish a process of individual and collective reflection where we learned more about each other and acknowledged what we thought was important within each other’s stories. Admittedly, being vulnerable with others is difficult. We were lucky to have a group that had already developed trust before the demands of the pandemic became burdensome (Doerfel et al., 2013). Vulnerability can be present in groups without the history that our group has (for an example, see Hurst, 2009); however, vulnerability in an already established group can increase closeness.

Finally, this project was a journey to discover our reimagined professional stability and the development of individual and collective resilience. Townsley and Broadfoot (2008) “remind us of the power of integration and its necessity in terms of retention practices if we are to be humane beings and true professionals in academe” (pp. 140-141). Our bricolage certainly highlights how integration combined with social networks and support structures can develop resilience during a pandemic. While individuals can discover their own professional stability through the utilization of networks, support structures, and technology, Tracy (2008) argues that organizational policy must do its share because as long as care is a burden on the individual, it will remain devalued and under-explored. She argues that organizations
should “(1) motivate and reward care that is practiced by and for all people, and (2) incentivize the sharing of care” (p. 171). While we would like to insist that academic institutions and other organizations do their part to recognize the importance of care, we would at the same time like to caution against the intrusion of institutions within the realm of the personal. We echo scholars who have warned about the incorporation of institutions into our nonwork lives (see Deetz, 1992; Golden, 2009). As a group, we combined the personal and the professional to foster support and discover resilience outside of the authority of our institutions. Therefore, we advocate for organizations to adopt policies enabling these processes to develop without defining what support and resilience might look like for individual employees. We would also like to note that resilience for our group was a collective enterprise, developed through integration and then reflection. It was not an innate trait for any of us or natural in crisis. Houston and Buzzanell (2018) urge us to be critical when thinking about resilience, as notions of resilience as a trait can lead to organizations blaming workers when resilience is not achieved. In short, it is only through the retelling that we discovered we were resilient at all. For us, resilience is constantly constructed in everyday talk about the personal and professional (Houston & Buzzanell, 2018), both on Zoom and through our group chat; it must be nurtured and reified to grow.

**Conclusion**

While academics are typically expected to produce more traditional results and contributions, part of the output for this manuscript was the recounting of our sharing. Engaging in sense making, support, and vulnerability within a friendly, yet professional group, led to our group fostering a reimagined professional stability, one borne out of resilience. Although our group has always been supportive, we often separated the personal from the professional. This, we suspect, is common practice for other academics whose peers are also their friends. However, it was the integration of the personal and the professional (e.g., having our families present at conferences, combining our work and friendship) that has helped us cope at many points during the pandemic. Reimagining the potential of a group, for us, has allowed us to have a space to collectively process and become more resilient. This has also led to joy, healing, and hope.
References


