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Advancing Women In Leadership

Balancing Parenthood and Academia: The Challenges and Contradictions of Academic Careers

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At the individual level, parent academicians themselves are likely guilty of increasing personal stress by trying to "do it all" rather than setting appropriate limits on both work and family expectations.

Introduction

Balancing career and parenthood is a challenging task for women and men from all career paths. However, there are aspects of academic positions that make balancing career and parenthood uniquely challenging. The balance may be especially difficult when individuals are making the transition into academia and parenthood during the same time period. In addition, there are stresses related to time pressures, multiple roles and incompatible expectations which can create work/family conflict for both tenured and non-tenured faculty striving to cope with competing family demands.

Characteristics of Academia

There are several characteristic aspects of employment in academia that likely impact balancing work and family. Although employment in many vocations requires a six-month or one-year period of probation, non-tenured faculty members remain in a "probationary period" for up to seven years, or until tenure is granted (AAUP, 1997). Thus, academicians are in a position of evaluation, conducted primarily by colleagues, for the first several years of their academic career. Although the specific tenure requirements vary considerably by type of institution, college and department, there are several experiences that non-tenured faculty in general share. For example, individuals facing tenure review are generally in a position in which they are expected to demonstrate high levels of competence and proficiency in the earliest years

of their career. Feelings of ambivalence may exist among young academicians regarding time spent in pursuing tenure as the "requirements" for tenure are often arbitrary, the time required to meet requirements cannot generally be specified, and tenure is not guaranteed. This may be especially difficult for academicians who are also parents, as they may be giving up time with their families, with no guarantee of an eventual "payoff" (e.g. tenure). Furthermore, unlike positions with hourly wages, or specific monthly or yearly goals, academicians may spend a great deal of time which does not always result in an immediate or even long term "product" (e.g. research proposals which are declined, inconsequential committee work), making it difficult to gauge progress and to obtain satisfaction from work completed.

A second aspect, not entirely unique to academic positions, is the multitude of job responsibilities that must be managed on a daily basis. Academicians often wear several different "hats" including, but not limited to: teacher, advisor, consultant, researcher, committee member, editor, and colleague. Unlike professions in which many job responsibilities serve the same overriding purpose (e.g. representing a client in law, improving a client's health in medicine), there may be little overlap in the goals of research, teaching and service obligations in academia. Multiple role responsibilities can create an environment in which academicians are "in demand" in multiple roles simultaneously, and the lack of overlap between roles can create a sense of dissonance while also perpetuating an expectation that one must be "all things to all people."

A third characteristic of academia which is somewhat different from careers requiring a similar level of education, is the degree of independence and flexibility. Although courses may be scheduled at specific times, there is generally freedom in how an individual teaches a course, in the area of research an individual pursues, and in the nature and extent of involvement in campus or community service. This degree of independence can be a double-edged sword for beginning academicians. Without specific guidelines, or the advice of a mentor, new academicians may struggle to establish their teaching style, determine profitable (i.e. publishable) areas of research, and achieve an optimum level of service activities. Although yearly evaluations may provide feedback in these areas, success in teaching and research is often individualistic, as well as field-specific, and requires longer term development of skills and competence. Thus despite positive evaluations, new academicians may continue to doubt their abilities until granted tenure (Mintz, 1992).

The independence and flexibility of academic positions is often misperceived both by individuals drawn to academic careers and by the public. It has been noted that many individuals are likely attracted to the apparent autonomy and flexibility characteristic of academic careers. However, many academicians "find that in the early years...the time required to maintain a balanced life is not available " and thus find themselves "trapped by the contradiction built into the academic career " (Rice, 1996, p. 24). Although flexibility is an option for non-tenured and tenured faculty alike, the cost of less "face time" at work, or in taking summers off is likely much greater for individuals facing tenure review. This contradiction between expectations of flexibility and balance versus the reality of the pre-tenure experience, can be a source of frustration for many beginning academicians and their families.

Individuals outside of academia are also likely to perceive the apparent flexibility of the career as ideal for balancing work and family. A common public perception is that academics have summers "off", can set their own schedules, and have few responsibilities besides teaching a small number of classes. In reality, the demands of an academic position are generally quite demanding, often requiring a 50-60 hour work week during the school year, as well as frequent unpaid summer work. In addition, although there is often greater flexibility in academic positions than in other careers, this flexibility is offset by ambiguity in tenure requirements as well as lack of closure characteristic of many academic tasks (Mintz, 1992). This discrepancy between public perception and the reality of academic career demands can further contribute to lack of support and understanding that parents in academia are likely to experience.

Finally, it has been noted by several women academicians that a woman's biological clock is often running in direct opposition to the typical tenure clock (e.g. Hensel, 1991; Wilson, 1999). Women and men pursuing academic careers typically delay starting families until after they begin their first academic position, placing them in the position of making the decision to have a first or second child, while coping with the demands of a new academic position and working towards tenure. Given that an academic position generally requires a doctoral degree at a minimum, and often additional postdoctoral experience, it is not uncommon for men and women to begin their academic careers at the peak, and sometimes the later end of a woman's reproductive years, thus making the decision regarding the timing of parenthood more difficult. Men and women who become parents early in their academic careers are faced with the compound demands of new work and new family responsibilities, leading to significant role strain which can threaten both personal health and career success. The high level of stress associated with combining parenthood and academia perhaps may help to explain why a study of faculty at a Carnegie I Research University found that 44% of women assistant professors had no children at the time of the study, although one-third of these women were married or in permanent relationships. Thirty-three percent of the childless assistant professors reported a desire to remain childless; a decision they reported was significantly influenced by their academic career goals (Finkel & Olswang, 1996).

The bulk of research which addresses the issue of parenthood and tenure is focused almost exclusively on women. However, as more and more academician men have been involved in dual-career relationships, there has been a corresponding increase in expectations for greater involvement in childcare responsibilities (Hensel, 1991). In addition, consideration of work/family conflict in academia tends to emphasize research productivity among academicians (particularly women) who become parents (e.g. Cole & Zuckerman, 1987; Sonnert & Holton, 1996), and says very little regarding the individual's success in coping with the emotional strain of balancing an academic career with family responsibilities. The types of work/family conflict discussed in the present article, as well as the recommendations for achieving greater balance in meeting career and family demands are not specific to either gender or tenure status. Rather, many of the issues discussed here would likely apply to academician men and women, tenured or non-tenured, who are significantly involved in childcare responsibilities.

Work-family Conflict in Academia

Several types of work-family conflict have been identified (e.g. Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Time-based conflict occurs when time pressures from one role make it impossible to comply with the expectations of another role. Strain-based conflict occurs when the stress of one role impacts on one's performance in another role, and behavior-based conflict occurs when behaviors expected in one role are incompatible with behaviors expected in another role. Overload and stress related to work-family conflict have been found to be associated with a variety of negative outcomes including health risks and depression for individuals, as well as business costs of poor moral, decreased productivity, and greater absenteeism and turnover (Duxbury & Higgins, 1994).

Each of these forms of work-family conflict have relevance for academician parents. Time-based conflict is likely as it has been estimated that an average professor works approximately 55 hours per week (Hensel, 1991). Although academic positions generally have the advantage of a flexible work schedule, the outcome of this flexibility is that work is often accomplished at home in the evening or on weekends. Working at home may create behavior-based conflict, as the focus and energy needed to fulfill work expectations is likely to conflict with demands for attention from children and/or spouses.

Strain-based conflict may be especially relevant for academicians, as job characteristics of academic positions generally involve a high degree of ambiguity and autonomy, as well as tension, worry and frustration related to disappointments, unfulfilled expectations and coping with a multitude of

responsibilities. New academicians may be particularly susceptible to "spillover" as feelings of incompetence, fears of negative evaluation, and anxiety regarding job security are "taken home" on a regular basis. As a means of coping with feelings of job-related anxiety, academicians may work even longer hours, resulting in greater family-based stress as expectations of family members are neglected. Related to both time and strain-based conflict, is the expectation that one will fulfill multiple role demands within the academic position. Thus, individuals in academic positions are likely to be juggling roles within the work setting as well as between work and family roles, increasing the likelihood of work to family interference as well as role overload.

One model of work-family conflict predicts that conflict stemming from family responsibilities can be lessened by gaining greater control over family demands, and that conflict originating from work-role responsibilities should decrease as one gains greater control over work demands (Duxbury & Higgins, 1994). Considering the academic employment setting, this model would predict less job stress among academicians who maintain control over decisions such as taking time off, working overtime, or changing their work schedule. Thus, the ability to maintain control over one's work schedule is clearly a potential asset for academician parents. Likewise, greater control over family demands (e.g. satisfaction with division of household and child care responsibilities), may have the potential to lessen the impact of family-based stress. A supportive spouse or partner can serve as a buffer against role overload by minimizing family demands in periods of time in which work demands are high. However, in dual-career families, which is often the case for academician parents (Sonnert & Holton, 1996), partners who are also engaged in active careers are likely to be less willing and/or able to assume greater household and parenting responsibilities.

Another factor related to family and spouse support, is the degree to which the academician parent and his/her spouse share beliefs and values in regard to parenting, household responsibilities, and work priorities (e.g. short and long term emphasis on career vs. family). It has been suggested that it is not the pattern of sharing parenting and household tasks (e.g. both partners equally involved versus one partner assuming more responsibility) which determines greater satisfaction in dual career families, but rather each partner's perceptions of fairness and support (Gilbert, 1994). Similarly, couples who share a common view of the value or importance of either or both individual's career development as well as family priorities, are also likely to experience a greater sense of support from the relationship.

Gender Differences in Work-family Conflict Among Academicians

Women in academia are paid less than men of similar rank, are promoted more slowly, and receive tenure at lower rates (Manning, 1993; Johnsrud & DesJarlais, 1994). A 1997 survey of more than 2,200 academic institutions revealed a "small but persistent" gap in the salaries of men and women at similar ranks (Bell, 1997). In addition, women continue to be significantly underrepresented among senior faculty. At Category I doctoral-level institutions, 45% of women were tenured as compared with 73% of men (Finkel & Olswang, 1996). Benjamin (1999) reports that a growing number of women academicians are accepting part-time and non-tenure-track appointments and may do so due to constraints imposed by lack of mobility and childcare responsibilities. Women scholars have also suggested that women, more often than men, are shouldering greater household and childcare responsibilities (Wilson, 2000). Whether the constraints for women are institutional, self-imposed through gender role expectations, or both; it appears that woman entering into academic careers may experience greater work-related stress, and lower levels of professional success than men. Thus, for women who are balancing parenthood and academic career demands, levels of both work and family stress may be somewhat higher as compared with men.

Conclusions

The work-family conflicts described above are not unique to gender or to any specific occupation. We are

not suggesting that the strain of balancing work and family responsibilities is significantly greater in academia versus other careers, or that men do not also experience work and family conflict. We recognize that many of the stresses discussed in this article are as relevant for academicians without spouses or children. We are suggesting, however, that support and understanding regarding family issues in academia is lacking at both individual and institutional levels.

At the individual level, parent academicians themselves are likely guilty of increasing personal stress by trying to "do it all" rather than setting appropriate limits on both work and family expectations. At the institutional level, family-friendly policies have only recently come into existence at some Universities. A 1996 survey of 3,343 higher education institutions found that 40% of respondents had stop-the-clock tenure policies (Friedman, Rimsky, & Johnson, 1996). However this study also found that stop-the-clock policies were one of the policies most associated with career penalties and least likely to be used. Thus it appears there exists the need for continued development and modification of family-friendly policies at the Institutional level.

With regard to gender, it appears that women in academia may face greater hurdles than men in the work environment, creating greater potential for work to family interference. The sociocultural expectations regarding women's role in childrearing may also lead to greater guilt and family to work interference among women versus men in academia. Although there are likely many issues impeding the recruitment and promotion of women in academia, issues involving the balance of career and family is likely one important factor. We would argue, however, that exploration of work-family stress is also quite important for men in academia, as it is becoming much more common for men to assume a greater degree of parenting responsibilities. Family leave policies and flexible schedules are equally available to both men and women in academia. However, men in some departments and institutions may experience greater criticism and less support in their endeavors to modify work schedules in order to share child care responsibilities. This may be particularly true in settings in which senior faculty and administrators are men who may have less experience and less understanding of role-sharing dual-career families.

In summary, we believe greater understanding of issues and challenges facing academician parents is crucial to supporting the success of individuals entering academic careers. Just as diversity in gender and ethnicity can contribute to the learning environment in higher education, so too can the experience of parenthood. Raising a child promotes patience, empathy and understanding---all factors which could improve teaching, research and service skills. Thus, rather than overlooking the evident stress and struggles to balance work and family common among many parent academicians, we are proposing that individuals, colleagues and especially institutions take steps to better support academician parents in achieving success in academia, while also striving for balance in work and family roles.

Recommendations for Institutional Support:

1. **Extended tenure:** Although a growing number of higher education institutions have formal or informal policies granting extended tenure for family related reasons (childbirth, adoption, illness in self or significant other), these policies are often not promoted or communicated to faculty members. In addition, there remains a great deal of concern about the possible career penalties associated with making use of such policies. Informal policies may provide flexibility in individual cases, yet the burden of requesting extended tenure or other modifications is placed on the faculty member, who may be hesitant to draw attention to difficulties balancing work and family demands. Formal policies of extended tenure, which are implemented and openly communicated at the administrative level are recommended. In addition, such policies should be viewed as an employee right, similar to the Family Leave Act, rather than a privilege or special circumstance. In developing such policies, educational institutions may attract and retain more high quality individuals who are seeking employment in a family friendly institution.

2. **Quality daycare:** High quality, available, on-campus childcare for both infants and preschool children is a key factor in providing support for faculty parents. However, at many institutions the availability of childcare for children under the age of two is often insufficient. In addition, daycare and school schedules may not coincide with the University schedule, creating the need for supplemental daycare arrangements. Institutions unable to support large childcare facilities could assist parents in locating other reliable daycare in the community. By providing on-campus child care, sensitive to the needs of academician parents, institutions could promote faculty productivity, as on-site child care has been found to be associated with greater worker satisfaction as well as less time spent commuting to and from daycare.

3. **Flexible work schedules:** Parents returning to work following the birth of a child may benefit from a schedule which minimizes early morning classes and high student contact courses, thus allowing greater flexibility in completing work at home and adjusting work schedules to accommodate child care arrangements. Developing technologies, such as on-line teaching, could provide greater flexibility as parents could instruct classes from their home computer.

4. **Event scheduling:** Speakers and other events could be scheduled during daytime hours in addition to evening time slots, allowing parents to attend institution-sponsored events without sacrificing evening family time.

5. **Parent-academician mentors:** New academician parents may benefit from mentoring offered by senior faculty who are effective in balancing work and family responsibilities. Although valuable information and support may be gained from a mentor who does not share parenthood experiences, an academic mentor who is also a parent may allow academician parents to share their work-family stresses more readily.

6. **Sensitivity training:** Academician parents may avoid discussion of family life for fear of being perceived as being on the "mommy track" rather than the tenure track. This issue is relevant for both academician men and women. We encourage institutions to promote greater sensitivity of family issues by initiating discussion of family issues among faculty and administrators, thus facilitating more open discussion and perhaps greater support for individuals striving to balance work and family responsibilities.

Recommendations for Individual Academician Parents:

1. **Make use of your support network.** For individuals with partners or spouses, communication regarding division of family responsibilities as well as career orientation may help to increase support and to lessen family role strain. Supportive friends and family members may also be able to assist during periods of high academic demands (e.g. research deadlines, end of the semester) to lessen family role strain.

2. **Seek out personal and professional mentors.** We suggest that new academicians seek out multiple mentors, both within and outside of their department to gain as much support and information as possible in developing research, teaching, and service agendas. A mentor who has experience as a parent, may provide insight into developing realistic goals and a work schedule conducive to balancing work and family roles.

3. **Network with other parent academicians.** Consider establishing a playgroup, monthly parent-child activity, or babysitting cooperative with colleagues who also have children. Through these types of activities, parents can develop family-based ties with colleagues, providing opportunities to share valuable information (e.g. daycare facilities, leave policies), while establishing support relationships in

the work environment.

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