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“I’ve Worked Very Hard and Slept Very Little” *Mothers on the Tenure Track in Academia*

It has been well documented over the last several decades that juggling the responsibilities of paid work and home is difficult (Anderson, 2003). With the dramatic increase in the number of women who have entered the paid work force in the U.S. over the past 30 years (from just over 40 percent in 1970 to 60 percent in 2000) (U.S. Department of Labor, 2001) sociologists have sought to understand how this occupational shift affects families. Some research has shown that for families to balance the two spheres of paid work and home, women end up taking on a “second shift” or a “double day” of housework and childcare (Hochschild, 1989). In terms of which sphere is prioritized, working class women are more likely to put family first while professional women see work as more central in their lives (Burriss, 1991). Regardless, one of the most common strategies in coping with the competing demands of paid work and family is for women to reduce their work hours or to limit their careers, especially after the birth of a child (Becker and Moen, 1999).

Despite a growing literature on the intersection of paid work and family and the ways that women balance the two (Hochschild, 1989), little research has been conducted on the experiences of mothers working in professional careers that offer a certain degree of flexibility and autonomy: faculty tenure track positions at a college or university. These positions, requiring years of schooling and preparation, offer—at least in theory—a large amount of flexibility in terms of where and when the work is performed. Unlike many other jobs, such as clerical work, law, or information technology, university faculty usually do not have to be in their offices standard working hours: Monday to Friday, 9 am to 5 pm. If they choose, they can do their work, such as grading papers and working on research projects, at their homes or in the field, and often they do not have teaching responsibilities in the summer.

It would appear that these might represent the ideal conditions for mothers who are attempting to raise children and pursue a professional career. Of course, it has only been in recent years that women have been visibly present in the tenure track; while women constitute 43 percent of all college and university professors, they are half of the instructors and only 20 percent of the full professors (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2001). More telling is the fact that the percentage of all female faculty in tenure track positions *declined* from 46 percent in 1977 to 32 percent in 1995, while the percentage of female non-tenure track full-time faculty and part-time faculty increased from 16 to 18 percent and 38 to 48 percent respectively (Benjamin, 2003). In one survey, 59 percent of married women with children were considering leaving academia (Mason and Goulden, 2002). The experience of balancing career and family on the tenure track needs to be explored.

To fill this knowledge gap, we conducted a survey of women who combined having and raising children with a career in the “Ivory Tower” in the United States. We examined their experiences developing a post-Ph.D. career while raising children, paying particular attention to the challenges they faced and the survival strategies they used both at home and at work. As mothers of young children and professors who study gender and family, we are interested in this topic from professional and personal standpoints. In this paper we present the results from our survey of 24 women who are full-time tenure track university faculty members in the United States and from follow-up, in-depth interviews with two of these women. We begin by discussing the extant literature on mothers and the academy, followed by our findings organized around three themes that emerged from the data: (1) productivity, (2) perceptions, and (3) paradox. Finally, we conclude with some thoughts on what the data mean for women in this profession, and the directions we might take for future research.

Literature review

Surprisingly, the inclusion of women in academia as subjects of research on work and family/parenting has occurred only recently—and only in a limited way. The increase of women in tenure track positions, particularly in disciplines formerly dominated by men, has brought this research question home to academia. The results of these recent studies show some sobering patterns.

Consistent with literature on other types of careers, the career paths of female academics appear to be hampered by family responsibilities. Wilson (2001a) reported that women in academia faced conflicts between the demands of home and the need for concentrated work time, especially for research and writing. Mason and Goulden (2002) argued that one of the reasons that there are fewer female than male professors (in addition to discrimination), is that the workplace follows a male career model. This model, which includes 60-hour work weeks, required travel, and relocation, prohibits participation by women with family responsibilities.

Mason and Goulden (2002) examined work and family conflicts of women and men in academia. Ultimately, they found that "babies matter" in the lives of academics. Notably, they found that women who have "early babies" (a baby who joins the household prior to five years after his or her parent earns a Ph.D.) are much less successful than men in earning tenure. This finding was consistent across disciplines and types of institutions. Men who have early babies achieve tenure at a slightly higher rate than people who do not have early babies. Thus, interestingly, early babies are actually helping new fathers but challenging new mothers in academia. Overall, their study found that women who attain tenure across disciplines are unlikely to have children at home.

University settings have been found to be so hostile to women that the "Ivory Tower" has been called the "Toxic Tower" by some in academia (University of Akron Status of Women Committee, 1997). For example, most universities have no set policy on maternity leave. Often the leave for childbirth is considered "sick leave" or "short term disability" and clearly not designed for women having children. Very few universities give paid maternal and parental leave. Technically, the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) applies to higher education faculty in the academic workplace (Euben and Thornton, 2002), so many are eligible for *unpaid* leave. However, taking a maternity leave may carry some risks. Joan Williams (2002) reported on a federal court case in which an assistant professor was denied tenure after she took two maternity leaves while on the tenure track. She was criticized by the provost for not teaching classes and making conference presentations while on maternity leave. The case was settled when the University agreed to pay \$495,000 to the plaintiff.

In addition, even if faculty are relieved of teaching duties during unpaid leave, they are still expected to publish, and universities vary in their willingness to establish, advertise, and encourage the policy to "stop the tenure clock" for parents. Essentially, this policy is intended to allow parents to take a break from research so they have the time to focus on their children (it can be used while teaching or not) for a semester, year, or longer, and it is not supposed to negatively affect them in terms of tenure. Unfortunately, many faculty members feel that universities actually expect more of them if they come up for tenure later (for example, more articles published in peer-reviewed journals), a situation faced by some female tenure-track professors recently (Wilson, 2001a). Clearly, increased research demands defeats the purpose of "stopping the tenure clock" in the first place.

In addition to challenges with administrative policies, female professors also must deal with students and their perceptions of pregnancy and childrearing. Phyllis Baker and Martha Copp (1997) conducted a study of undergraduate student course evaluations in an effort to understand the changing expectations of students toward a female professor throughout the course of her pregnancy. They found that students attributed negative reactions and a general decline in their professor's effectiveness to the debilitating effects of her pregnancy, even

though the professor standardized her behavior throughout the courses. Graduate students also do not find it “sexy” for professors to be weighed down with the demands of young children at home (Walden, 2002).

Unfortunately, timing is an issue in the academic career. The first five to seven years of a tenure-track job are considered the most demanding. It is similar, perhaps, to a career in law, in the years working toward “partner” status. Moreover, for many women in academia, they have spent a good portion of their 20s in graduate school, so the demanding pre-tenure years will fall during many of their childbearing/childrearing years of their life course. This timing issue presents challenges in many ways, and many female academics struggle with the decision of if and when to have or adopt a child. There seem to be problems associated with having children in graduate school, while job hunting, or (once a position is secured) in pre-tenure jobs. Gale Walden (2002) found that academic job interviews were problematic for women who have children or want to have them in the future. She decided on one interview to “hide the baby,” as she said, and on another she was more open, showing baby pictures and asking about daycare facilities. She was offered a job at the first, but not on the second, although it remains unclear if the baby played a role.

In addition to teaching and research, untenured professors are expected to present papers at major academic conferences. Again, female professors with young children face unique challenges. Robin Wilson (2002) discusses how female professors who bring their young children to conferences must contend with nursing their babies, networking and socializing with limited or no time, and arranging daycare at the conference site. At the Anthropology annual meetings, Wilson notes that the majority of the professors who brought children were women. Unfortunately, only the largest academic organizations offer on-site daycare at their meetings, so female academics in other fields must figure something out on their own—no easy task in a city far from home. Moreover, the women who bring children to the meetings worry that others will perceive them to be less professional and less committed to the profession—which ultimately could hurt their careers.

It is not surprising, therefore, that these pre-tenure years are filled with a fair amount of anxiety and pressure. Mary Deane Sorcinelli (1992) reports that while new and junior faculty have high levels of satisfaction with their careers, they also find their work to be stressful. Not surprising to those in the field, untenured faculty report higher levels of stress than tenured faculty. One of the reasons for their stress—along with not having enough time, inadequate feedback, and unrealistic expectations—is the problem of balancing home and work. Sorcinelli argues that there is evidence that more female junior faculty are now choosing *not* to forgo or deter having children, in contrast to the stereotype of the female professor who is unmarried and childless. She found that junior faculty had more “negative spillover” (their work lives negatively “spilled over” into their personal lives) than tenured faculty, and some of this was due to the time and energy needed for taking care of children. Encourag-

ingly, she reports that by year four most junior faculty members have taken concrete steps to reduce negative spillover into their home lives—yet, unfortunately, at the same time most junior faculty are still unhappy with their work-family balance.

Finally, it may seem safe to assume that women in academia may find some balance in their lives after achieving tenure. Yet, some disappointing observations show that this may not be the case. Once tenured, academics face more pressures on their time and continuing demands for publishing. Wilson (2001b) notes that the responsibilities of home make it difficult for women to find the time to do the amount of writing and research necessary to come up for full professor. Wilson points out that faculty are judged by their research, teaching, and service, and they use most of their time on campus to do the first and second, leaving research for evenings and weekends. Mothers need that time, however, for childrearing duties. Joan Williams (quoted in Wilson 2001b) posits that academic jobs are “oversized” and were designed for men who had wives taking care of the children and all household jobs—ultimately, she argues, this adds up to a type of discrimination against women.

Methods

The current study was designed to explore the issues related to work and family in the lives of academic women on the tenure track. Beginning with our own experiences, we talked together about the ways we juggle competing demands and how departmental structure and culture can shape and change outcomes for faculty. The second author, an associate professor with tenure, recalled her early pre-tenure career when the department chair announced publicly that the department was not a daycare center and children were not welcome. Fast-forward 13 years and the first author’s experience in that same department as a pre-tenure assistant professor stands in stark contrast: she brought her newborn baby to the office with her for a period of six months with the full support of faculty and staff.

Out of these conversations we developed a survey with questions on the work and home life of mothers in full-time tenure track academic positions. The survey was administered at a mid-size university in the Midwestern United States to two colleges, one with disciplines traditionally dominated by men, the other with disciplines traditionally dominated by women. The surveys were sent through campus email; twenty-four surveys were returned. Respondents were encouraged to write comments on their surveys and many did. The majority of the respondents had tenure (62.5 percent), the mean number of years on faculty was 8.5, the majority of the women (54 percent) have two children (one-third have one child and 17 percent have three), and their children range in age from 1 to 35. One-third of the women indicated that they delayed starting a family due to their career, while another third delayed beginning their academic career in order to start a family.

The participants were asked for an interview in addition to completing a

survey. To date seven respondents have agreed to participate in an interview. The findings reported here are based on two completed in-depth interviews: one with a pre-tenure assistant professor with two young children at home (Elizabeth), the other with a full professor with tenure with three adult children (Joann). Both interviews, designed to explore the experiences of tenure track mothers in more detail and depth, lasted approximately one hour.

Results

Preliminary analysis of the survey data revealed three themes consistent with the literature review: productivity in career; concern with perceptions of colleagues; and the paradox of academic work as stressful and demanding at the same time that it provides flexibility and autonomy.

Productivity

Most of the women (71 percent) agreed that they have had (or are having) a less productive career than if they did not have children. One survey respondent, who started her academic career late after raising her children, wrote that her lower productivity is a direct result of this choice “unless I work to (age) 90.” For some, lower productivity is seen as a choice, as another survey respondent wrote, “That’s ok because it was my choice and it was the right one.” Elizabeth, who has two children under the age of five, explains this choice as a strategy:

The only other thing [I do] to maintain my sanity is to just say: “It’s okay if you only publish one or two articles a year and it’s okay if you can only go to one conference a year”... I consciously decided not to live up to the high academic standards that I think I could.... I don’t know if I’m making excuses for myself but I think I am just relieving myself of that pressure.

Another professor wrote that she knew her child would make her less productive in her career, so she decided to stop her tenure clock:

I did not want the undue stress of working on research and worrying about the pipeline while I was home with the baby. With my productivity falling during this period it was best for me to stop the tenure clock.

It should be noted, however, that even though the majority of the women described a career that was *less* productive because they had children, this does not mean that they were or are unproductive faculty members. Indeed, there is evidence that they were successful in their work, produced a lot (based on measures such as publication), and were committed to their students, teaching, service, and research. The children may have slowed them down, but it certainly did not stop them. Elizabeth, for example, described taking her newborn to an academic conference:

There have been years that I have gone to three and four conferences with young children. I have taken Chloe at six weeks [of age]. She was in the newsletter as the youngest participant at the conference. She is this little blob on my shoulder.

The women in the study also seem aware that they are lowering their expectations and experiencing decreased productivity because of their own choices about family, not because they could not handle the demands of the work. As one mother wrote, "I know I'm intelligent enough to be in the big leagues. However, I don't work as long as I should to do so because of family responsibilities."

Perceptions

Perceptions of colleagues and other professionals are important to many of the mothers surveyed. This issue came up at various points in the survey and interviews. Joann's experience of teaching an early morning class with a long commute (thereby not seeing her children during the school year except in the evenings) is instructive. When asked if she had requested a different teaching schedule to accommodate her family schedule, she replied, "One should not ask for special accommodations, one should do their best regardless." She described ways that she managed to keep her "conflicting needs and interests" out of the picture in the department. It may be for this reason that we found in our study that the majority of the women did *not* ask for a reduced teaching load (87.5 percent), parental leave (87.5 percent), or to stop the tenure clock (91.7 percent) when they started their families.

Others echoed Joann's sentiments, feeling that their children should not be too visible in their workplace. For example, Elizabeth discussed how she and another female colleague with young children try to be careful not to discuss their children too much at work. Indeed, they have developed a "high sign" to give to one another in department meetings to remind themselves to avoid the topic of children. Elizabeth stated that it is preferable to simply say that you can not make a certain meeting time and leave it at that, instead of explaining the reason if it involves caregiving responsibilities. Many times she has heard through the grapevine that co-workers in the department are tired of hearing about children. As a result, she is careful to only talk about her children when someone else brings them up first. As she noted, "I just try...to separate (work and children) even though I consider myself in a child family friendly department on a relative scale compared to what I hear with some other departments. I still try to keep family issues out of my professional life and encounters with my colleagues." Indeed, strategies like Elizabeth's may be necessary. Williams (2002) found in her research that female professors felt like valued colleagues until they had children and then they felt that the other faculty members' perceptions of their competence dropped.

Not all the study participants were as concerned with their colleagues'

perceptions and felt that they should not have to hide or downplay their children. One mother wrote on her survey that she often brought her child to work with her since she “cared more about my child than my colleagues’ opinions of me.” Another professor wrote that she did bring her children to the office occasionally because: “It is not like ... my co-workers don’t know I have kids.” Yet, it is because the co-workers know the women have children that they have concerns about how they are perceived. For example, the first author, when explaining that she would be working at home on a certain day, has found that many colleagues do not seem to believe she is really working on those days. In this particular case, the reaction is not hostile, but almost co-conspiratorial in nature: “Yeah, right,” they often say with a smile. Their perception, of course, is based on the knowledge of children at home, and the assumption is that work is done at the office and caregiving is performed at home. Williams (2002) reported this same phenomenon: if a female faculty member with children worked at home for a day, her colleagues assumed she spent the day playing with her child. Williams argued that this is much less likely to happen with a male faculty member who works outside the office.

Paradox

The paradox of academia is the structure of the position relative to the requirements of the department and profession. As Kathryn Feltey (1997) wrote about the benefits of job autonomy and flexibility for a single parent in academia, “I love having some measure of control over my schedule and having the ability to take my work home. On the other hand, without structured divisions, work becomes the organizing principle in our lives and it becomes a challenge to ever really be free of work” (7). In our survey, half of the mothers said that it is very true that there are positive aspects of being a mother and a tenure track professor; another third said that was somewhat true for them. Two thirds (67 percent) responded that being a mother and having a tenure track job is a stressful combination. These statistics reflect the paradox of academia for mothers.

For those women in the study who found positive features to developing careers in academia while also raising children, the reasons usually centered around the notion of flexibility. One woman in our study described her views:

I think that being an academic and a mother is a wonderful combination. I have many friends and family members who have careers outside of academia and as mothers they are completely exhausted with the lack of flexibility in their working conditions. I feel fortunate.

Indeed, our survey showed that the majority of the women (79 percent) felt that it was acceptable in their departments to take care of family needs during working hours. For example, a woman in our study made these observations regarding the job flexibility:

Work hours are self-imposed, self-designated to some degree. I grade late into the night and work on Sunday mornings at the office, so I can pick up my kids after school. There is some useful flexibility here.

The paradox, however, means that the flexibility can also feel, as one mother put it, like “a constant juggling act.” Managing work and home when work can be done at home in “off hours” creates its own kind of stress. One mother wrote: “I feel like everyday needs to be carefully orchestrated and negotiated. I am constantly in danger of a double commitment and sacrifice my own time to avoid disappointing kids and or not carrying my weight at work.” This sacrifice showed up for some mothers with school-age children when they tried to maximize the time spent with their children, particularly in the after-school hours, and also maintain their level of scholarship. One mother indicated that her children had fared well with her academic career: “Because I’ve worked very hard and slept very little to make sure they got what they needed.” Another mother echoed the problem of sleep deprivation:

I leave work by 3:00pm to pick up my sons from school and daycare. Since I lose out on time during the day (so that their evenings are as normal as possible), I sit down to work on my research at about 10 pm and go to bed around 2 am; I am up at 6:30am to get them ready for school. While I do get burnt on both ends, keeping this schedule makes me feel less guilty about sending a kindergartner who has been in school from 8:30 to 3:30 off to after-school care, and an almost 2-year-old from spending more than 8 hours there. So I get all of my teaching commitments taken care of in my office and do my research work at night.

Some also noted that one aspect of flexibility—“summers off”—is an illusion. As Elizabeth stated: “I certainly was delusional in the idea that you get your summers off.... We are not elementary school teachers.” Summers for many faculty members, especially pre-tenure ones, may be a time of teaching for extra money, conducting research, or writing grants and papers. Indeed, summers can be so hectic and consumed with work that the first author was actually told by another pre-tenure colleague: “I can’t wait for Fall.”

Discussion and conclusion

It has been written that the university setting is a “chilly climate” for women in general (Hall and Sandler, 1984). Is it more or less “chilly” for women who are also mothers? Our data reveal a complex picture. Clearly, the job responsibilities are often experienced as stressful, but mothers in academia are often able to take advantage of the unique structure of the jobs to organize their home and work lives in more fluid ways. Ultimately, many

of the women expressed a desire to spend more time with their children and at times the flexibility of the job has made this possible. As one mother said, she is able to reduce the “hours in my office on campus and try to do work at home amid the chaos.” However, as noted above, this can contribute to a situation where academic mothers are “burnt on both ends.” Similarly, Anita Garey (1995) found that night shift nurses who were mothers chose to work at night so they could be engaged in their children’s lives during the day. While this strategy allowed these mothers to be full-time in both worlds, there was clear evidence of the mental and physical health costs of interrupted and minimal sleep.

Mothers in academia, particularly those in the tenure track line, have entered a career where the workload and evaluation criteria assume an open-ended commitment of time, energy, and personal resources. The accommodation of family life to work life happens in the individual choices and compromises that are made about home and family. Some women in our study indicated that they did less at home than they might otherwise, for example lowering their housekeeping standards, or limiting the number of out-of-school activities for their children. Some found that having a “mother substitute” was the only way to have a full-time academic career. Joann, for example, hired a woman who cared for her home and children from early morning into early evening everyday for 20 years; her children viewed her as their second mother. Other women employed the strategy of producing less at work and lowering their own expectations of their careers.

Ultimately, each individual woman makes the compromises in the particular context of her department and discipline. The challenge she faces is to participate (perform) successfully as an academic and be a mother, too. The contradiction and tension lies in the structure of both realms, which requires intensive, fully-focused commitment from the individual. As Sharon Hays (1996) so clearly demonstrated, the cultural contradictions of motherhood are such that to be a good mother you must give yourself completely to the task of child rearing. For academic mothers, the flexibility of their positions may provide the opportunity to actually attempt to be “good mothers” in a culture of intensive mothering ideology (Hays 1996). Thus, women often use the flexibility of the jobs to leave in the afternoon to be with children in the after-school hours—in an effort to meet the cultural expectations that “good mothers” are home with their children.

On the other hand, the institutional pressure to meet faculty performance criteria (publishing, grants, teaching evaluations, participation in the profession) and to appear as unencumbered as possible in terms of commitment to the academic role is a recipe for failure, or feelings of failure and guilt for mothers. As a newly tenured and promoted associate professor, the second author told a colleague she could not make a meeting (in the evening) due to her son’s piano recital. The response from her colleague, a woman who had never had children: “You are living proof that one can not be a good mother

and a good academic.” And herein lies the dilemma for mothers in academia—we want to excel in both realms but there is no structural support for those goals. Perhaps this is why, as we stated in our introduction, the number of women in tenure-track jobs in academia has been declining instead of increasing. More women are earning their doctorates, but the structure of tenure-track jobs has not changed in any real way to accommodate them. There have been some token concessions such as on-campus daycare centers and policies to stop the tenure clock—although there is not much evidence that the clock is often stopped. Overall, the standard is still childless, or at least the invisibility of home life. Ultimately, this adds up to a chilly climate for mothers in academia, with no sign of change in sight. According to Williams (2002), the chilly climate for women at universities illustrates that stereotypes about women, and mothers in particular, prevail in many settings.

To begin to remedy this situation, we believe universities need family friendly policies and that the “tone” of these policies should be visible at the administrative level (and not just as platitudes) and be backed up by action. For example, the Ohio State University proactively recruits academic couples, indicating their support of two-career families, and they offer state-of-the-art childcare with flexible schedules. These types of policies are crucial for women in academia. In addition, academia needs to focus on the attitudes within departments and administrations that make women reluctant to take advantage of policies such as maternal leave and stopping the tenure clock. What other policy and attitude changes could help women in academia who are mothers? These are questions that university administrators need to be asking and addressing.

Finally, we believe there are many directions for future research on this important topic. There are two in particular that deserve attention. First, research needs to be conducted on women in non-tenure track positions in academia. The percentage of women in both full-time and part-time non-tenure track faculty positions at universities has increased, while the numbers of women in tenure track jobs has decreased. We believe that the demands of tenure and the chilly climate for mothers have both contributed to this situation. Surveys and interviews with mothers in these positions would provide valuable insight into the choices they faced and the decisions they made about their academic careers. Second, we recommend that future research on balancing parenting and academic careers examine the lives of fathers. In decades past, the university model assumed that male professors had stay-at-home wives, but this is not always the case. In addition, there is evidence that the role of fathers is changing and many men have become more involved in caring for their children. As a result, many fathers in tenure track positions may be dealing with the same dilemmas as those faced by the mothers in our study: issues of productivity, concern about others’ perceptions, and the paradox of academia.

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