Well-being and work-family balance: Supports for academic mothers

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Introduction

Women’s presence in the paid workforce has increased greatly in the past few decades. Despite this increase, many women struggle with the challenge of balancing paid work with the work and childcare within the home setting (Hartmann, 2004; Correll et al., 2007). Employment and higher education policies are often based on patriarchal life trajectories that assume uninterrupted, full-time commitments. The influence of neoliberal values such as competition and productivity, pervasive in Western society, are no longer bound to political and economic spheres; their influence is widespread in education and the workforce (Gouthro, 2005; Klees, 2008; Davies & Bansel, 2007). Because women remain largely responsible for childcare (Griffith & Smith, 2005), this environment can be a challenge for working mothers faced with childcare concerns, demands on their time and energy, and a competitive workplace.

Lifelong learning and work outside the home can enhance well-being and satisfaction for women (Harknett & Hartnett, 2011). It is important to consider that well-being is a broad term, and Michalos (2007) voices concern that measures of well-being may be “exhausted by measures of how people feel and neglect measures of people’s perceptions about the world and its inhabitants… and, finally, measures of what real-world consequences follow from different combinations of perceptions, beliefs, feelings and actions” (p.353). Although some women may feel content with their situation, they may not perceive workplace policies and practices as supportive of their multiple roles.

A lack of support for women with differing lifestyles, needs and commitments may lead to individual and family stress; opposite to this notion of well-being and happiness. Educators and policy makers must consider the challenges for working mothers and implement policies to provide the supports essential to women and the achievement of equity in society. Based on research conducted for a Masters thesis, this paper draws attention to issues of role balancing.
and well-being for a group of mothers employed as faculty in Eastern Canadian universities. The participants identified barriers that they have encountered, as well as supports that were or should be made available to enhance job and life satisfaction. Providing space for dialogue around areas of inequality is the first step to challenging systemic oppression.

**Literature**

Issues of role-balancing and work-family conflict for women appear frequently in academic literature (Home, 1998; Tripp, 2002). A lack of support can negatively influence well-being for women in academe, making some feel that they should manage their stress privately. Academic mothers in Acker and Armenti’s (2004) study voiced these concerns: “There’s a big portion of our work that we can do between two and three in the morning if we want to and if we can force ourselves to stay awake” (p. 3). As long as women continue sacrificing themselves to adapt to damaging societal values, systems of inequity will persist. The “typical” trajectory of academic tenure requires years of research and publications; productivity is valued over teaching and service work in the university. According to Jacobs and Winslow (2004), many institutions in North America promote a “promotion or exit” structure for tenure in which those who are not promoted are let go from the university completely. Pressure for tenure-track academics is substantial, and the system reflects a typically male life trajectory where one is likely not responsible for childcare (Wolfinger et al., 2009).

As PhD graduates are often in their thirties, some women face the decision of having children early in their career, or waiting until tenure brings job security. Wolfinger et al. (2009) found that “women who are not employed in ladder-rank jobs right out of graduate school may be permanently moving towards a less demanding career course, one that does not require the long hours and rigid probationary period of a tenure-stream academic appointment” (p. 1596). Women hold the majority of contract and part-time positions which carries a different kind of stress; low pay, lack of support and job security. The competitive nature of academe that sees career interruptions as a lack of commitment can leave little room for working mothers. Some women face multiple barriers to participation as other factors can lead to
further marginalization: class, race, sexuality, culture, ability, and socioeconomic status. “All women may be said to be ‘the same’, as distinct from all men with respect to reproductive biology, and yet ‘not the same’, with respect to the variance of gender construction” (Acker, 1987, p. 432). One body of literature does not sufficiently represent all women, their needs and stories. To adequately support women in their multiple roles, diverse voices must be recognized; a key element in conducting feminist research (Alcoff, 1992).

Research Study

This research looks at the experience of academic women as they attempt to combine the demanding roles of two “greedy institutions” (a term originally termed by Rose and Louis Coser): motherhood and academe. Identified in the thesis are several themes related to the notion of role-balancing: the gendered division of childcare and housework, women's experiences in academe, sources of support for women, the influence of neoliberalism in academic institutions, and both tenure and family-friendly policies (Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004; Young & Wright, 2001). Semi-structured interviews with five individuals representing both tenure-track and tenured academics were digitally recorded and analyzed for this narrative inquiry approach. A thematic analysis using a combination of grounded theory and a critical feminist perspective identified pervasive themes and areas for change. It is my hope that the results from this study may assist in the creation or adaptation of supportive, university-based policy for academics who are parents, particularly mothers.

Narrative research is often used in feminist studies as it privileges voice and standpoint. According to Rossiter (1999), central to the narrative perspective “is the idea that the self is not a fixed entity, an autonomous agent, moving through a developmental sequence, but rather, the self is an unfolding story” (p. 62). People tell stories in order to make meaning of themselves and their experiences within their social and cultural contexts. The more these stories are heard, the more those feelings of isolation and individual responsibility may be alleviated and replaced by a sense of well-being and support. Feminist research requires a great deal of researcher reflexivity in order to present the stories of others in a way that respects those stories and experiences. “The role of the researcher is to be an effective
listener and to see the interviewee as a storyteller rather than as a respondent” (Savin-Baden & van Niekerk, 2007, p. 464). As a woman in the academic sphere, it was important to me to draw attention to the experiences of these women as representatives of a wonderfully diverse population.

Findings

The participants in this research study were candid and open about their experiences as mothers and as academics. Their stories were diverse but carried threads of commonality such as an imbalance in time spent on household chores and childcare for those participants who had partners. One participant with an important research position said: “The house is one hundred percent my responsibility and work… I’m not getting anything done because I’m teaching and running the household and trying to find snippets of time for work”. In an environment that places increasing value on productivity and output, these women all spoke about the issue of time. Their lifestyles and responsibilities were not matched by workplace support; all of which had negatively impacted on their sense of security and well-being.

Due to the demands of tenure-track positions, some participants felt pressured to return to work before the end of their maternity leave; they feared being penalized for productivity gaps. One woman who chose to start her family early in her career could not afford to take more than a few months off for fear of losing her part-time appointment and income: “I couldn’t afford to take maternity leave without pay… I couldn’t let go of a course because I wasn’t guaranteed that I’d have it again. They would hire somebody else… so I really had to do it”. This not only shows a lack of support for working mothers, but is a solid barrier placed in front of women academics. It is no surprise then, that well-being and happiness can be affected in these situations. Support from partners was another important part of the interviews conducted in this research study. One married participant claimed that her husband took over most of the household tasks while her focus became their child. This was not explicitly discussed, but rather “happened naturally that way”. She believes that women typically end up in the role of primary caregiver: “I think most of the time the woman does eighty to ninety percent of the childcare. Even now I’m still the one who says, Do your homework. There’s no reason my partner shouldn’t be
the one to say that, but because it’s always been me, then I still do it. It’s not on their
brain to say that, but it’s on yours”. A participant who was tenured before her child
was born discussed shared responsibilities with her husband who had a very
demanding, time consuming job: “I said to him, You have to help; you have to do
half. He said he would, but I knew he was lying at the time, not because he wanted
to lie but because he can’t; because of his job”. Although the reasons differ – more
flexible schedules, natural division of domestic work, breast-feeding babies,
traditional gender roles – all women in this study found themselves in the position of
primary caregiver for their children.

While tenure at least brings a level of job security, there are other issues to consider
when postponing childbirth: age, health, etc. Starting a family at a younger age (in
the beginning stages of an academic career) can leave a woman vulnerable in terms
of promotion. One participant who had her children early in her career found herself
at a financial disadvantage as she “was on fellowship money; soft money”, and there
were no maternity leave guidelines built into the post-doctoral position. Women who
cannot take maternity leave without fear of retribution will feel the effect on their
emotional well-being.

All participants in this research study identified the need for affordable, available, on-
site childcare as a support for academic mothers. Another necessity: visible role
models for women as they climb the academic ladder toward tenure. Being able to
see and speak to others women who have navigated the system can give the next
generation confidence. Policies of support seem to be unclear and many women are
unsure about asking for assistance such as an extended tenure-track: “I know that’s
not built-in. And to be quite frank, I don’t think I would want to ask for that because…I
think most professors evaluating my file would hold that against me. I think they
would see it as a weakness… I don’t think I would want to draw attention to myself in
that way”. The tenure-track becomes a sort of assembly line; if you jump off for any
reason, you will likely never get back on. Another participant stated: “When you’re in
that tenure-track rat race… it’s all about time, and you have to produce”. This system
based on productivity deems motherwork to be unproductive: “Just like the
reproductive labour of women, the reproductive labour of the institution (creating the
next generation of scholars) is not valued”.

As previously stated, on-site childcare services were deemed most important by
participants. However, drop-in rates are essential as academics often have schedules that include morning meetings and evening classes. While some may see this flexibility as a positive aspect of the job, there are always consequences. Many participants reported working late into the night which can lead to burnout: "I can’t do anything between ten o’clock at night and two in the morning anymore; I’m exhausted". Flexibility also means that many women continue working during their maternity leave, or return early to their positions: “I was on a post-doc so you don’t actually get any maternity leave… I worked right up until the week before I was due, and was back in six months… It was extremely stressful". One participant spoke about the demands of the two greedy institutions and how it has affected her sense of self and well-being: “I don’t regret having my children and I really love them and invest a lot of energy in them. But they are demanding; you don’t have your own time… the academic life is not designed for family or parents". Stress and feelings of guilt seemed to be quite common for these women, as voiced by one participant who was not tenured at the time of her child’s birth: “We have to drop our child off at seven-thirty or quarter-to-eight in the morning and pick her up at five. That’s a long day for a small child you know… You do feel guilty because it’s such a long day”. Despite the guilt, she also felt that “career-wise, it’s never going to be a perfect time. So I thought I would do it when I was a good age to have a child; you’re not too old”. The closer one gets to tenure and promotion, the heavier the pressures to produce. So much of the discussions come back to a central issue – timing: “And it’s hard to know – when is the perfect time? When you’re writing a thesis? Or after that when you’re… going to interviews pregnant? That doesn’t work either. And then when you start a job… you’re going for tenure, so how is that going to look”? The fact that there appears to be no “good” time to have a children for academic women suggests that they are not being provided with the support they need on an institutional level.

**Suggestions and Conclusion**

There appears to be a clear link between supports for role-balancing and the well-being of academic mothers. To foster their participation in this increasingly competitive environment, and to ensure equal opportunity for advancement, women need access to supports from the institution – without being made to feel inadequate.
for using them. The future of academe rests in supporting a diverse faculty including working mothers who bring their experiences, perspectives, and mentorship to others. In light of the participant responses, the single most significant change that could be made is the availability and/or improvement of on-site daycare. One woman pointed out that as an academic, “You rarely end up where you started. So many women end up with no family support”. Not having family members who live locally and can provide back-up childcare means that women are at the mercy of whatever support they can find.

For all working mothers, finding adequate care for children can be a significant concern, and academics are no different despite the fact that many universities have daycare facilities. For the one participant whose child was enrolled in the campus childcare centre, her sense of relief was palpable: “The location is so great… Especially when she was younger, that would have been much better”. It is not only the availability of childcare that is important, but it is also the cost. As a single mother states, “I spend between a thousand and fourteen hundred a month on daycare and babysitting costs… Daycare has been a major focus and a major stressor for me in terms of figuring it out; it’s been a challenge”. This support should not be a privilege, but a right. Mothers are performing the most important work of all. Support for women begins at the policy level, and should be a top priority as society as a whole benefits from the work of mothers who raise productive, conscientious citizens. “If a democratic government is to be wise rather than foolish, knowledge relating to existing policies and practices as well as to possible future alternatives must be widely distributed, not kept in the hands of the initiated few” (Martin, 2000, p.38). We must challenge societal structures that keep the power in the hands of the dominant few; that keep women from recognizing their full potential as working mothers. This discussion must be given a public forum if real change is to follow. As Field (2009) states:

“It is most unlikely that collaboration between researchers and policy makers will produce deep-rooted shifts in the balance of power and resources in lifelong learning, or in any other area. But those who advocate radical change as the goal surely have a responsibility to explain firstly what radical change might consist of, and secondly to resolve the problem of agency. Who is going to push such a radical approach on the agenda? In the absence of any easily identifiable and major radical
social forces, are the inevitable trade-offs of policy development worth the effort that researchers put in to them? (p.7)"

This research cannot be limited to a few academic studies published in journals with specific readership. Radical change (which is needed) requires more voices, more stories, more persistence.

Field’s (2009) ideas align with the foundations of feminist ideology which “places gender front and center in its focus on oppressive social structures and the means to challenge and change them. It is grounded in a moral premise that assumes that the inequitable treatment of men and women is unjust” (Schram, 2003, p. 35).

Supporting working mothers involves challenging power structures and systems that continue to hold women at a disadvantage in the workplace and in society: “Critical and feminist scholars produce critiques of the perceived material world in an effort to expose the structures that ensure the maintenance of control by those in power… With the exposure of oppression comes the call for awareness, resistance, solidarity, and revolutionary transformation” (Hatch, 2002, p. 17). The purpose of critical feminist research then is to raise awareness of power imbalances, to question and challenge how knowledge is created as well as who creates it and for what purpose, to create space for voices that are often silenced, because: “Unless you support women in their role as mother, you will never get equality of opportunity” (Hornosty, 1998, p. 180).

References


