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Parenting on the tenure track: Exploring gender differences in perceptions of collegial and supervisor support

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Introduction

The task of gaining a tenured professorship is a demanding one, requiring a wide range of research, teaching, writing and service skills. Faculty members in tenure track professor positions do not work conventional hours and generally report schedules exceeding 50 hours of work per week (Zimble, & Conley, 1997). Many pretenure professors are also parents of children under age 18, thus requiring that they nurture family relationships while also adhering to a demanding work schedule. While women make up over half of doctoral graduates in the United States today, the literature indicates that they are less likely to go on to achieve a tenured professor position when compared to their male counterparts (Leslie, 2006; Rudd, Morrison, Sadrozinski, Nerad & Cerny, 2008). Researchers suggest various explanations for this difference, yet clear reasons for the gender differences found related to tenure achievement remain ambiguous.

A growing body of literature has emerged related to gender and the tenure process. Much of this literature emphasizes the complexities of managing the dual roles of parent and academic, yet few studies focus on how support from colleagues and college administrators influences the tenure process. Women reportedly experience more obstacles while on the tenure track, despite their records of accomplishments that are on par with male counterparts (Cooper & Stevens, 2002; Solem & Foote, 2006). Furthermore, while men and women enter faculty positions at approximately equal rates (Leslie, 2006), gender equality all but disappears in the actual ranks of tenured and tenure track faculty in the United States; this holds true even in disciplines and professions that are predominantly female (Rudd, et al., 2008). Given that many academics enter the tenure process concurrent to peak family formation and childbearing years (Armenti, 2004), it is important to further explore the ways in which parenting impacts career trajectories.

The purpose of this paper is to report the results from a study exploring perceptions of support from colleagues as well as support from deans or department heads/chairs for balancing dual roles as parents and academicians. Conceptually, collegial support was defined by one's own perception of his/her colleagues' support for balancing dual roles. Similarly, supervisor support was also defined by one's own perception of the level of support provided by his/her dean or department head, for balancing dual roles. In addition to examining gender differences and perceived support, whether or not gender and perceived support were predictive of one's perception of success in achieving tenure was also examined.

Review of the Literature

Children – for women on the tenure track – have been portrayed in academic research as “impediments” or “threats” (Armenti, 2004; Finkel & Olswang, 1996). Given this characterization, it comes as no great surprise that many women plan or sequence childbearing around the tenure process (Drago, Crouter, Wardell, & Willits, 2001). Some choose to have children before starting

academic careers, while others plan summer or post-tenure babies (Armenti; University of Michigan, 1999).

For both men and women who choose to have children prior to or during the bid for tenure, the complexities of parenting and pursuing tenure are many. Fox, Schwartz and Hart (2006) have characterized parenting and the tenure track as a “collision” that forces difficult decisions related to both work and family. Ward and Wolf-Wendel (2003) have suggested that parenthood is often incongruous with the professoriate. This is indeed influenced by an antiquated tenure process that has often presumed or favored a faculty member who has a spouse/partner who is able to be a primary caretaker at home with children during childrearing years (American Association of University Professors, 2001; Grant, Kennelly & Ward, 2000; Hochschild, 1975; Park, 1996; Rudd, et al., 2008; Williams, 2000). Family responsibilities and family patterns are factors that may impact men and women differently in their bids for tenure (Grant, Kennelly & Ward; Rudd, et al.). Park’s evaluation of tenure achievement describes a process laden with masculine values and practices, all of which place women at a disadvantage. Given the gendered nature of this process, it is important to better understand the different facets of tenure achievement that may impact men and women differently.

Workplace support has been identified as an important factor in job satisfaction (Harris, Winskowski & Engdahl, 2007). A small but growing body of literature has identified that supportive work environments are important factors that influence tenure achievement for faculty. Specifically, support (or lack thereof) from colleagues and deans or department heads has been identified as an influential piece of the tenure process. In a recent study of new geography professors, findings indicated that all faculty members benefit significantly from supportive collegial environments and supportive department chairpersons (Solem & Foote, 2006).

Others have examined the role of support specifically related to parents who are seeking tenure. Recent qualitative and quantitative work has examined how departmental support for balancing dual roles is differently experienced by men and women on the tenure track (Grant, Kennelly & Ward, 2000; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Young & Wright, 2001). In their study of mothers on the tenure track, Young and Wright found that mothers perceived their experiences in the tenure making process to be very different from their non-mother colleagues. In this qualitative study of 22 mothers, respondents reported feeling as though their colleagues questioned their abilities to be productive or competitive when compared to non-parenting colleagues, while respondents also reported feeling that parenting and non-parenting men were not subjected to the same degree of judgment or scrutiny. One-third of the respondents also reported that they lacked support from colleagues.

Due to a lack of information specifically related to mothers on the tenure track, the literature related to support and women faculty who are not necessarily parents is also important. Echoing some of the concerns of Young and Wright’s (2001) respondents, in Tierney’s (1996) study on organizational socialization and tenure, women (though not necessarily mothers) reported working long hours in an effort to demonstrate their tenacity and commitment as equal to that of their male colleagues.

However, not all research suggests that parents perceive their colleagues to support them differently based upon parenting. O’Laughlin and Bischoff, in their 2005 study of 264 faculty members (both junior faculty and tenured faculty) from across the U.S., have reported no significant difference in perceived support for dual roles as academics and parents at the departmental level.

Both Young and Wright (2001) and O'Laughlin and Bischoff (2005) also addressed supervisor support from deans department heads for dual faculty roles. Young and Wright's work has indicated that support from deans/directors is perceived as essential for mothers who are trying to navigate both tenure and parenthood. Yet not all mothers feel supported in these dual roles. Parenting women in academia have reported having less institutional support for balancing dual roles when compared to reports from male colleagues (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005).

The current study has built upon the work of O'Laughlin and Bischoff (2005) and Young and Wright (2001) by further investigating gender differences in this emerging area of research. The purpose of this exploratory study was to expand the knowledge base related to gender differences in perceived levels of collegial and departmental supervisory support for dual roles as academics and parents. Three specific questions were explored. First, among faculty members on the tenure-track, was there a difference between men and women in their perceived levels of collegial support for balancing dual roles as academics and parents? Second, was there difference in perception of support from deans, or department heads for this work-family balance based upon gender? Third, did these perceived levels of support impact how confident faculty members were that they would receive tenure if they remained in their current positions?

Methods

Population and Sample

Faculty members on the tenure track at a major research university in the Southeastern United States were surveyed during the 2006-2007 academic year. The survey included questions pertaining to many different areas of work-life balance and the tenure process. A list of all pretenure faculty members employed at the university at the beginning of the 2006-2007 academic year was provided to the research team by the university's administration. This list was used by the research team to generate an email database of eligible participants. Because the research team had no way of knowing which faculty members were parenting at least one child under age 18, all pretenure faculty members were invited to participate in the anonymous and voluntary survey (N = 405). The invitation email and corresponding screening questions allowed only parents of at least one child under the age of 18 to complete the survey. Informed consent was implied by participation..

Procedures

Permission to conduct research with human subjects was obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) at the university where the study was conducted. The electronic survey delivery program Survey Monkey was used for all facets of the data collection including the initial email invitation, survey management, and subsequent email reminders. The program allowed the research team to anonymously collect the data via encryption of respondent's ISP/email addresses. Pre-notification and subsequent follow-up email reminders (at 5, 10, and 15 working days) were used to increase the response rate. Of the 405 faculty members who were originally recruited to participate in this study 126 linked to the online survey. Of these respondents, 119 met the inclusion criteria. Without knowing how many potential respondents opted out because they did not meet the inclusion criteria versus how many simply chose not participate, calculating a valid response rate is not possible.

Instrumentation

The data for the present study was taken from a larger study of parents on the tenure track. Because previous research related to support for dual roles as academics and parents is limited, two Likert-type items were created specifically to measure the concepts of perceived collegial and administrative support. To measure perceived collegial support, the respondent was asked to rate this statement: My colleagues are supportive of my choice to be a parent and an academic on the following scale, 1 (strongly disagree); 2 (disagree); 3 (somewhat disagree); 4 (somewhat agree); 5 (agree); 6 (strongly agree). Similarly, to assess perceived administrative support, each respondent was asked to rate the following statement using the same scale: My dean/director is supportive of my choice to be a parent and an academic. While reliability and validity was unknown for these items, they were deemed to have good face validity.

To assess perceived confidence in tenure achievement, respondents were asked to rate the following statement using the scale referenced above: I am confident that I will receive tenure if I stay in this position at this university.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Among respondents, the average age was 38.16 (SD = 7.21). Among women, the age range was 28 – 52 (M = 36.97, SD = 5.879, n = 38) and among men, the age range was 26 – 60 (M = 39.36, SD = 6.221, n = 69). Among all respondents, spouse/partner’s age ranges from 23 – 57 (M = 37.64, SD = 7.21). Table 1.1 provides additional demographic and family information. Approximately 10% of respondents elected to not provide demographic information.

Among respondents, 85.5% considered themselves the “primary breadwinner” for their family. Family incomes, reported on an ordinal level, ranged from \$35,001 – \$50,000 (0.9%) to over \$110,000 (40.6%). Income variation can be attributed to both spouse/partner occupation and the discipline/profession in which the faculty member was employed.

Among the respondents, 103 provided information about their spouse/partner’s occupation. A majority of the respondents (26.9%) identified their

Table 1.1 Demographics and Family Characteristics

<i>Demographics</i>	
Gender (n = 112)	
Male	64.3%
Female	35.7%
Race (n = 110)	
White	75.5%
African American	7.3%
Latino/Hispanic	0.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander	13.6%
Other	2.7%
Marital Status (n = 112)	
Married	96.4%
Single*	1.8%
Committed Partnership	1.8%
Children (n = 107)	
1 child	40.2%
2 children	41.1%
3 children	13.2%
4 children	1.9%
5 or more children	3.7%
Pregnancy and adoption (n = 112)	
Self/partner pregnant while in current job	44.7%
Delay further childbearing until after tenure (n = 109)	
No	77.7%
Yes	33.3%
Plan to have additional children? (n = 109)	
No	65.1%

spouse/partner as someone who “stays at home.” Among men (n = 67), 35.8% identified their

Yes, before tenured 25.7%
Yes, after tenure 9.2%

**includes those who identified as divorced and not re-married or widowed*

spouse/partner as someone who “stays at home.” Only 8.3% (n = 36) of women respondents identified their spouse/partner as someone who “stays at home”. A Chi-square test for independence indicated a significant association between gender and whether or not one’s spouse/partner stays at home, $\chi^2(1, n = 103) = 7.78, p < .05$. These results are consistent with those of other studies indicating that women in tenure-track jobs are less likely to have a stay-at-home spouse/partner than are men in the same positions.

On average, respondents had been working in their current job for 3.23 years (SD = 1.52). They averaged 3.19 years until they will go up for tenure (SD = 1.62). Almost 50% of respondents (47.5%) reported that they worked, on average, 55-69 hrs/week; 36.4% work 40-59 hrs/week and 9.3% work 60-85 hrs/week. Only 4.2% reported working over 85 hrs/week and 2.5% work less than 40 hours. Table 1.2 provides an overview of job title and distribution of efforts.

Perceptions of Support, Success and Achievement

Table 1.3 provides an overview of each of the three Likert-style items used to assess collegial support, administrative support and tenure success. Results are provided for the entire sample as well as for male and female respondents.

Table 1.2 Job Characteristics and Distribution of Efforts

<i>Job Title (n = 119)</i>	
Assistant Professor	92.4%
Associate Professor w/o tenure	3.4%
“Other” (including special title series)	4.2%
<i>Distribution of Efforts (n = 115)</i>	
Research and Teaching	83.2%
Teaching Only	0.8%
Research Only	1.7%
Research, Teaching and Clinical	7.6%
“Other”	7.6%

Table 1.3 Support and Tenure Self-Report

	ALL RESPONDENTS (n=110)		MEN (n=68)		WOMEN (n=35)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>My colleagues are supportive of my choice to be a parent and an academic</i>	4.63	1.19	4.79	1.12	4.32	1.30
<i>My dean/director is supportive of my choice to be a parent and an academic</i>	4.48	1.31	4.65	1.18	4.20	1.51
<i>I feel confident that I will receive tenure if I stay in this position at this university</i>	4.22	1.36	4.44	1.28	3.83	1.48

In order to answer the research questions, a series of t-tests and hierarchical regression analysis were used. Prior to analyses, the suitability of the data for parametric analysis was examined and variables were deemed appropriate for use in bivariate and multivariate analysis. Perceptions of Collegial Support

Whether or not perceived support for the dual roles of parent and academic differed by gender was

assessed using an independent samples t-test. Equal variances were assumed and the results showed that, when compared to women, men agreed more strongly that their colleagues are supportive of their choice to be a parent and an academic. For men, $M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.120$ and for women, $M = 4.32$, $SD = 1.297$; $t(107) = 1.987$; $p < .05$.

Perceptions of Administrative Support

Perceived support for dual roles from one's dean/director was also assessed using an independent sample t-test. This test yielded no significant results, indicating that there was no significant difference between men and women in perception of support from their deans/directors ($p = .102$).

Perceptions of Confidence in Tenure

Whether or not men and women felt differently about the question "I am confident that I will receive tenure if I stay in this position at this university" was examined using an independent sample t-test. Equal variances were assumed and the results of the analysis show that men were more confident ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.277$) that they would receive tenure than were women ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.483$); $t(110) = 2.32$, $p < .05$.

Relationship between Perceived Support, Gender, and Confidence in Tenure

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to assess perceived collegial and administrative support as related to confidence in receiving tenure while controlling for gender. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure no violations of the assumptions necessary for regression analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Gender was entered as a dummy variable (0 = female, 1 = male) at Step 1, explaining 4.7% of confidence related to receiving tenure. After entry of collegial and administrative support at Step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 35.6%, $F(3, 98) = 18.083$, $p < .05$. Collegial and administrative support explained an additional 31% of the variance in perceived confidence in achieving tenure, after controlling for gender, $R^2 \text{ change} = .31$, $F \text{ change}(2, 98) = 23.572$, $p < .05$. In the final model, only colleague support was statistically significant ($\beta = .455$, $p < .05$). Administrative support was not significant ($\beta = .158$, $p = .130$).

Discussion

Men and women report differences in the perceived support they receive for balancing dual roles as parents and academics from both colleagues and administrators. Overall, men report more perceived support from colleagues, but there is no difference between men and women in their perception of support from deans/directors. Additionally, men feel more confident that they will receive tenure than do their female colleagues. These findings, and their implications for future research, are discussed in this section.

Collegial and Supervisor Support

In the current study, men report higher levels of perceived support from colleagues for balancing tenure achievement and parental roles than do women. Reasons for this difference could be many – differences could be attributed to the different structures of academic departments, colleges and units. For example, within a male-dominated area such as natural sciences, one might expect to see lower levels of support perceived by female colleagues in general, whether or not they are also mothers.

However, in an area dominated by women (i.e. art history, social work, nursing), one might expect to see higher (or equal) levels of support reported by women. The results presented here contradict O’Laughlin and Bischoff’s (2005) study wherein men and women did not report significantly different rates of collegial support. This suggests that future research efforts should focus on the further exploration of support for dual roles among men and women in academia.

Current research has focused on perceptions of support, as reported by faculty members themselves. Future research could be designed to facilitate a better understand and assess attitudes/support for balancing dual roles by surveying faculty members about their support for their colleagues – helping to understand where parents may find more or less support for their dual roles. For example, are parents more likely to be supportive of other parents than are non-parents? Is there a gender difference related to who is more supportive of colleagues who choose to balance these dual roles? By better understanding where these differences lie, departments/colleges and institutions will be better equipped to create organizational and cultural change that better supports junior faculty members who choose to balance work and family life.

Perceived supervisor support, as measured using self-report of one’s dean/director’s support as a proxy, is not statistically significant between groups in the current study. This also contradicts the work of O’Laughlin and Bischoff, who found that women perceived support from administration to be significantly lower than did men. The single-item used to measure supervisory support within the current study may have been a limitation; however these preliminary results suggest that future work should also further this line of inquiry. A more robust measure of supervisor support could be used to better understand gender differences. Additionally, qualitative research could focus on deans/chairs and directors, focusing inquiry on how administrators feel they are equipped and able to support parents on the tenure track. This line of inquiry could help to bolster support for changing the tenure process for parents – i.e. supporting half-time tenure-track positions, creating and implementing tenure extensions for all parents, etc. While these policies exist within some institutions of higher education, they are not yet available to all parents on the tenure track.

Tenure

Within this sample, men have significantly higher confidence in achieving tenure than do women. Per Park (1996), “sexism is embedded in the structures, norms, and policies of the university itself” (p. 47) – thus these results are not surprising. However, these results do suggest that further work needs to continue to investigate why women perceive institutions of higher education to be “chilly climates” (Cooper & Stevens, 2002, p. 9) and why women are less confident than are their male colleagues that they will receive tenure.

Support and Tenure

Results from the regression analysis reveal that perceived collegial support is the most significant variable related to confidence in receiving tenure. In this analysis, gender is not significant. Such results are consistent with a previous study examining geography faculty, which indicate that collegial support was important to all new faculty (Solem & Foote, 2006), as well as with another study indicating that social support explained 17% of the variance in job satisfaction (Harris, Winskowski & Engdahl, 2007). In the current study, the fact that collegial support explained 31% of the variance in perceived success in gaining tenure suggests that this indeed is a very important factor. As McElrath (1992) reminds us,

the tenure process begins with colleagues, thus the ways in which one's colleagues support (or do not support) junior faculty who are balancing careers and kids can play a huge role in the tenure process.

Study Limitations

As stated above, single-item indicators of perceived support for dual roles are a limitation of this study. More robust indicators of colleague and supervisor support should be considered in future research in this area. Further, this study is limited by a convenience sample of faculty at one major research university and therefore results are not generalizable. In order to maintain confidentiality of study participants, specific information about their discipline/profession was not collected. Future work should include information about academic disciplines/professions as the area in which one works may influence how well one's colleagues and supervisors support the dual roles of parenting and the professoriate. Additionally, factors outside of the scope of our measurement may have contributed to faculty perceptions related to tenure achievement (i.e. publications, research funding, teaching and service, etc.). Even with these limitations, this study does add to the growing body of literature related to collegial and supervisor support for parents on the tenure track.

Conclusions

Even though these results are exploratory, they suggest that it is important for faculty members to have support from colleagues as they balance dual roles as academics and parents. Further, the results of this study suggest that this collegial support may in fact be more important to the achievement of tenure than support from deans, department heads and/or other departmental administrators. Without support, faculty members may doubt their own abilities, may not engage in collaborative projects, and may be reluctant to seek mentorship from colleagues. Given that men report higher levels of support than do women, it is imperative that departments, units and colleges begin to examine their own organizational culture, asking whether or not they fully support women who choose to work in academic, tenure-track jobs while also raising children. Are there outdated or unspoken departmental – or institutional – customs or cultures that may be contributing to this lack of support and gender difference in the way mothers seeking tenure are treated? Indeed, this lack of perceived support may be one of the many contributors to the gender disparity in the professoriate. Bronstein and Ramaley (2002) advise pretenure faculty to become aware of institutional culture – both written and unwritten – and unfortunately much unwritten culture may be gender biased and/or biased against parents. Future work should further break out colleague and administrative support – are there differences for men and women who enter the tenure process as parents and those who choose to have children while “on the tenure clock”?

In order to create effective work environments that allow faculty members, students, and institutions to succeed, universities and colleges must better understand how perceptions of collegial and administrative support influence the working lives of faculty members. As research continues to validate the many struggles that women face in successfully navigating the tenure track, it becomes more important for administrators to confront bias and to begin to create change that will allow for all faculty members – men and women, parents and non-parents, to successfully navigate the tenure process, rewarding those whose achievements merit tenured status. In addition, many of the talented young faculty on the tenure track today are also parents, thus it is imperative that solutions must be sought that address how best to support the dual roles of these faculty members to assure that the best and brightest are retained for the benefits of individuals, students and institutions alike.

Cooper and Stevens (2002) remind us that not only should faculty members be mindful of the culture and barriers to success within the institution, but institutions should not remain static. The current body of work developing around collegial and administrative support should spur administrators to critically examine institutional norms and values and to ask whether or not institutional culture is supportive of pretenure faculty who are balancing dual roles as parents and academics. Similarly, pretenure parents should work to advocate for fair treatment and policies that ensure that parenting does not continue to be viewed as a detriment to tenure. Tierney (1996) outlines a change process whereby institutions must learn from faculty and faculty must learn from institutions – creating new norms and cultures whereby women and parents are not deterred from seeking tenure track jobs. As Leslie (2006) reminds us, the job opportunities for newly minted PhDs outside of academia are increasing and are oftentimes providing opportunities with more work-family balance and corporate culture that supports dual responsibilities of work and family. If a progressive shift in culture does not occur within our institutions of higher education, attracting and retaining highly qualified and driven faculty members could become increasingly difficult and universities and colleges may suffer great losses as talent, creativity and passion for excellence is applied in non-academic sectors.

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