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Recommended Citation

Careless, Erin (2010). "Dueling Clocks: How Academic Women Balance Childcare with the Road to Tenure," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/roundtables/4>

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Dueling Clocks: How Academic Women Balance Childcare with the Road to Tenure

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Keywords: academics, role-balancing, motherhood, tenure, policies

Abstract: This proposed study looks at the experience of academic women as they combine the demanding roles of motherhood and academic seeking tenure. Literature has identified several themes related to role-balancing: social and gender roles/expectations, time limitations of tenure and childrearing years, available support, ambiguous policies, and personal expectations (Armenti, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004; Young & Wright, 2001). Data will be obtained using narrative inquiry, and examined through a critical feminist perspective. Individuals representing both academics and those employed in the policy sector will be interviewed, with the aim of assisting in the adaptation of university-based policy for academics.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, women's participation in academe – as students and educators – has become more visible. However, the increase of women learners is not reflected by an equal increase in women faculty (Stalker & Prentice, 1998). According to Perna (2005), women “continue to be underrepresented among the nations tenured and highest ranking faculty. Not only is the share of women full-time faculty who hold tenured positions smaller than the share of men, but also the gender gap in tenure rates does not appear to be closing” (p.277). In a study addressing power issues in women's distance learning experiences, Gouthro (2004) states that change at the social and cultural levels is required to foster women's educational experiences and careers.

A moderate amount of literature attempts to identify reasons for women's absence from tenured educational appointments (Armenti, 2004; Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006). Recent research focuses on the dilemma of balancing work and family lives. The research highlights several barriers facing women striving for tenure: demanding publication schedules, ambiguous tenure policies, lack of support, and time constraints for child bearing (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004).

Balance is a significant issue for many women who choose to enter the workforce. For this qualitative research study, I will explore the challenges faced by women as they attempt to balance childcare and tenure-track positions. Relevant literature shows that childcare is a significant factor for women pursuing demanding careers in educational institutions. Discussion of this issue can lead to policy change and academic success.

Literature Review

A review of literature about mothers and balance reveals several themes: social and gender roles/expectations, time limitations, available support, ambiguous policies, and personal expectations. Gender roles/expectations can contribute to stress for mothers who wish to pursue a career. In their study about the antecedents and consequences of women's academic-parental role

balancing, Comer and Stites-Doe (2006) found that many participants “view motherhood as a barrier to successful career progression” (p.496). Young & Wright (2001) identified timing of both tenure process and childbearing in their participant’s responses when asked about the struggle to balance roles. Tenure demands years of work and publication that often coincide with the latter part of the childbearing cycle. Regarding the notion of support, van Emmerik’s (2002) study found that a supportive climate can be extremely beneficial for women academics, and that practical assistance is necessary for reducing dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion.

Many women feel that ambiguous tenure and family-friendly policies lead to dissatisfaction and fear of stigmatization by colleagues. Maternity leave and extended tenure periods are often not taken due to possible repercussions (Young & Wright, 2001). Lastly, women also face the challenge of their own personal goals and expectations as both a mother and a professional. Biernat and Wortman (1991) found that women were more self-critical than men when married couples were asked to provide self-reports of role fulfillment. Women today are conscious of existing traditional expectations.

Methodology

Participants will be located using a snowball technique, and experiences documented using a narrative inquiry methodology. I will address the following primary research question: How do women academics incorporate childcare into their demanding climb up the tenure-track ladder? Between seven and nine individuals will be interviewed: five or six academic women and two or three individuals who are involved in policy design and implementation in academic institutions.

Of the academic women, three or four will be employed full-time in tenure-track positions, while the remaining will have secured tenured appointments. This will serve as a point of comparison for the proposed study. I will be seeking participants who have at least one child under the age of ten, as children of that age will require some form of childcare. All interviews will be recorded using a digital recorder, and following transcription and editing, a copy of the interview will be sent to individual participants for input and clarity where needed.

Implications

The goal of this study is to assist in informing policy for all parents, particularly women, who are employed in academic institutions. In the current literature, participants see a need for clarity of tenure policies, as well as improved, accessible family-friendly policies, which will improve the post-secondary experience for all.

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