The Conflict of Child-Rearing and Academic Careers

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The Conflict of Child-rearing and Academic Careers

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The intense period of early career development is often the time from a biological standpoint that a woman might like to start a family. Thus, having children and establishing oneself in a career are on a collision course for academic women and increasingly for men who play active roles in child-rearing. Unfortunately, the rigor of early careers is confounded by the university's obsession with time. Unlike many businesses, universities impose a time limit on "making it," with "it" being tenure. Universities ask for complete dedication and virtually all of the time of individuals engaged in an academic career, leaving the family in a distant second place. Pregnancy and childbirth, and the continued responsibility of child-rearing while working a more than full-time academic job, makes the five to eight year time limit before tenure review place special pressures on women.¹

There appears to be a great deal of variety in the options academic women have when they decide to have children. To examine this issue, a convenience sample of 15 women who are academic researchers in the fields of marketing and/or consumer behavior were contacted. These women were asked about their experiences with child-bearing leaves, extensions of tenure clocks, etc. Preliminary findings reveal several common themes, which are outlined below.

1. **Women are often reluctant to ask about maternity benefits.** Respondents expressed fears that colleagues would view such requests as inappropriate. This was true even for women who were tenured before pregnancy. Most women said that nothing was offered to them and that no one offered to assist them in establishing time off.

2. **Even when women ask about maternity benefits, they are often given incorrect information which deprives them of benefits.** One respondent asked her department chair about maternity benefits and was not told that women at her university routinely receive a course release at the time of childbirth. She only found this out recently and is now having to request the course release retroactively.

3. **It seems to be fairly common for women to have the option of requesting an extension of the tenure clock (usually for one year) when they have the burden of rearing young children.** This is usually a benefit available to men as well, and one which men as well as women take freely. In principle, this is an excellent opportunity for faculty members to gain a little of the time lost due to child-rearing responsibilities. In practice, however, there is the danger that it can be viewed as an "extra year" in which more should have been accomplished in the same even pattern of output which is expected for men and which may never fit a woman with children.

4. **The norm is for women not to receive course release when they give birth.** While there were some exceptions, most women had their babies during the summer months, or during their "research quarter/semester," and continued to teach their normal load. These women believe that no consideration is given when performance is evaluated, and that women who have children are expected to have the same level of research productivity as any of the male faculty members. Some women who gave birth during their teaching semester just got someone to cover for them for a couple of weeks, and came back to complete the course. The usual comment was that they tried to be back at work full time within a short time frame. Again, this was true for both tenured and non-tenured women.

5. **Women often express frustration at the lack of understanding they receive from male colleagues.** The few women who have received some sort of reduced teaching and/or tenure clock extension have gotten comments from male colleagues that they are getting "a good deal." One male colleague commented to a respondent that, "It's a good excuse to have a baby." Another not atypical example of lack of male support was given by a woman who received a negative review in her second year, after arriving ABD and giving birth after a difficult pregnancy. When she brought up the issue of childbirth hindering her research productivity, her male department chair said, "Lot's of people have children. I have children. What's the big deal?"

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Before male colleagues will recognize that having children is "a big deal," women must acknowledge that it is. Instead of trying to be superwomen, alternative ways of easing the burden of child-bearing and child-rearing responsibilities should be pursued. But it is difficult for individuals to fight "the system." Perhaps by sharing this information, women academic consumer researchers can use it as ammunition to spur change in their own institutions.

We have a long way to go before child-bearing and career patterns can more easily fit together for the female faculty member. While many academic institutions virtually ignore the existence of the problem, other universities have instituted policies intended to ease the burden. In Canada, 16 week paid maternity leaves are federally mandated and supported with a federal funding formula so that universities do not bear the entire financial burden of leaves. Because the U.S. is not likely to institute a similar policy in the near future, universities themselves must take action.

It is important to work actively to ease constraints for women in academic careers. The necessary conditions for success should be identified and implemented. We need to move beyond simply making exceptions for women to the rules which may have been appropriate for men, toward new policies that reflect real changes in the family.

\["Advancement and Promotion at Irvine: A Survival Handbook For Tenure-Track Faculty" was a useful source.\]