

**The Family Life of Academics:
Gendered Priorities and Institutional Constraints**

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, women have formed a growing percentage of university graduates and more female graduates are entering high-level careers and moving into the senior ranks of their chosen careers. However, numerous studies from the English-speaking countries have found that women are more likely than men to make employment concessions for family responsibilities, regardless of their educational attainment or employment aspirations. Using full-time academic staff working in universities as examples of highly educated professionals with strong career commitment, this paper investigates the impact of family circumstances on academic careers. Studies from several countries indicate that the family status, rank, salary and attrition rates of women academics typically differ from their male counterparts. Gender segregation also remains in many university departments, especially at senior ranks. These studies suggest that gendered differences in professional status reflect varying family and personal priorities, the division of labour at home, and a variety of institutional practices that favour those without family responsibilities. Through a review of international research on family life and academic careers, supplemented by qualitative interviews with New Zealand-based academics, this paper explores the choices and constraints involved in personal life and academic work. The paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on balancing work and family life, as well as the continuing gender gap in academia.

Introduction

For decades, research has indicated that patterns of family formation differ for men and women with high levels of educational attainment and job commitment. While educated men tend to have high rates of marriage and reproduction, educated women have lower marriage and fertility rates, and higher divorce rates. Regardless of educational attainment, employed women are also more likely to make work concessions for family responsibilities and to report problems with work-life balance (Beaujot 2000). A gender gap has been apparent in most occupations, including academic university staff, with more men teaching full-time in universities and reaching the top of the profession. This paper investigates the various ways that family responsibilities and choices influence the gender gap among full-time academics.

Over the past three decades, more women have been awarded doctorates in Australia, Canada, United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand, more have become academics and more have moved into senior academic positions (Brooks 1997, Carrington & Pratt 2003, Sussman & Yssaad 2005). This gender rebalancing has been influenced by ideological and intellectual struggles within the women's movement and the larger academic culture, as well as generational differences and socio-demographic changes in the larger society (Glaxer-Raymo 1999). Yet some university departments remain remarkably segregated by gender, particularly at the higher ranks and in science and business (Nakhaie 2007).

Researchers have identified a number of indicators of the academic gender gap, including higher attrition rates for women doctorates and junior academic staff, a lower probability that women will work full-time and acquire 'tenure-stream' jobs¹, lower qualifications and publication rates for women (Probert 2005, Nakhaie 2007), less satisfaction by women academics with their job security, teaching loads² and advancement opportunities (Bellas & Toutkoushian 2003), and higher rank and salaries for male academics (Wilson 1986, Brooks 1997, Curtis 2005, Nakhaie 2007, Toutkoushian et al 2007, Monroe et al 2008). North American researchers have also reported a 'chilly climate' for academic women working in universities and an 'unbreakable glass ceiling' (Drakich et al. 1991, Glaxer-Raymo 1999, Bracken et al 2006, Saulnier & Swigonski 2006, Monroe et al 2008).

This paper, which is based on a survey of the international literature and an empirical study of New Zealand-based academics, focuses on the interrelationship between family constraints and institutional practices in explaining the continuing gender gap. Firstly, I will outline my methodology, then summarize the research findings on the family demography of

¹ This refers to a position that could lead to relative job security if performance is deemed satisfactory.

² Probert (2005) found no objective evidence of higher teaching loads for Australian women academics although they might devote more time to teaching.

academics, discuss patterns in the division of labour of academic families, and then elaborate on the various ways that these patterns are interpreted within the institutional practices and priorities of the English-speaking universities.

Methodology

This study began with a survey of the research on the gender gap and work-life balance issues in universities in the English-speaking countries, although the bulk of the research comes from the United States. The literature survey focuses on full-time academic staff working in tenure-stream or continuing positions in universities, while acknowledging that there is even a greater gender gap among part-time and temporary academic staff (Brooks 1997).

The empirical portion of the study is based on 30 qualitative interviews³ with full-time male and female academics working at either a ‘research university’ or a ‘teaching university’ in New Zealand. Academic staff members were chosen from university websites in arts and social sciences, to include men and women from lecturer to professor. Initially, I sent them a personalised email containing attachments of the formal participant information sheet and letter of consent required by the ethics committee on university letterhead. Interview times were arranged by email or telephone and the interviews were done by me or my MA student assistant in their offices. These confidential interviews were qualitative in form, consisting of questions relating to their academic credentials, experiences with mentoring, their domestic circumstances and division of labour at home, the intersection of their family life and work, perception of promotional opportunities, and commitment to the profession. The interviews were taped and transcribed, lasted about an hour, and the findings are used in this paper to supplement and expand on international research.

³ The interviews were still in progress at the time of this conference paper.

The Family Demography of Academics

Studies of the personal lives of academics identify different gendered patterns that could generate implications for hiring, research productivity and promotion in an academic career.

Firstly, academic men are more likely than academic women to be married and to have more children (Probert 2005, Nakhaie 2007). A 'marriage gradient' is often visible among the general population, with men marrying 'down' in terms of age, educational attainment and occupational status. Academics tend to follow this pattern as well. For example, Mason et al (2006) found that married male doctoral students in the United States were more likely than their female counterparts to have younger partners with part-time, temporary or no paid jobs.

Studies have also noted that academic women are more likely than their male counterparts to be in dual-career marriages, and especially those in which both partners worked more than 40 hours a week (O'Laughlin & Bischoff 2005, Probert 2005). Women are also more likely to live with another academic, especially in second or subsequent marriages (Astin & Milem 1997, Creamer 2006). Astin and Milem (1997) reported that among partnered academics in their American research, 40% of women and 35% of men have spouses or partners who also work in higher education.

Studies show that marriage is usually considered to be an asset for promotion in academia (Toutkoushian et al 2007). Some research suggests that marriage to a non-employed spouse is a definite asset for men's salary and promotion (Bellas 1994), while marriage to a professional man is an asset for women's initial hire but not for promotion (Long & Fox 1995). Xie and Shauman (1998) concluded that both men and women academics benefit from the 'human capital' of having a highly educated spouse, which tends to enhance their academic networks and research productivity. Academic couples often read and critique each other's academic papers and sometimes publish together. However, women's academic

partners usually have a higher rank and salary and are reported to work longer hours for pay than their female partners (Fox 2005, O’Laughlin & Bischoff 2005). Several studies also suggest that women married to academics need to maintain some intellectual autonomy from their partners early in their careers in order to progress through the ranks (Creamer 2006). Otherwise, their husbands (and other male collaborators) are given a disproportionate amount of credit for the joint publications (Rossiter 1993, Loeb 2001, Nakhaie 2007).

Among tenure-stream academics, more women than men are single or divorced, and academic women are much more likely than academic men to become single parents (Moyer et al 1999, Fox 2005, O’Laughlin & Bishoff 2005). Although academic women are less likely than academic men to have children, most academics have their children at the start of their career, before they achieve job security or ‘tenure’. However, academic women with tenure-stream jobs are less likely to be married with children (Mason et al 2006). For example, twelve years after receiving the doctorate, 69% of men in tenure-track positions in American universities are married with children, compared to 41% of women (ibid).

Women PhDs who are not in the labour force tend to have the highest fertility rate, followed by part-time academics, and then full-time tenure-stream academics. This suggests that women who enter full-time tenure-stream positions in academia are either less interested in marriage and motherhood or find it too difficult to combine motherhood with a full-time academic career.

Balancing Work and Family

Several studies have noted that childlessness is more prevalent among tenure-track and tenured women than their male counterparts, while a disproportionate percentage of non-tenure track women (many of whom are working part-time) are married mothers (Harper et al

2001, Mason & Goulden 2002, 2004). In the United States, women academics are more likely than other high-achieving career women to remain childless, while male academics are more likely than other male professionals to become fathers (Hewlett & Vite-Leon 2002). American studies also find that academic women who have babies within five years of earning a doctorate are less likely to receive tenure than other academics (Mason & Goulden 2002).

Many studies find that pregnancy and infant care interferes with publishing and job searches more for mothers than fathers who are academics (Bassett 2005, Bracken et al 2006, Mason et al 2006). Women doctorates with young children are less likely to find a full-time academic job immediately after graduation, and more likely than their male counterparts to work part-time or in temporary positions with few promotional opportunities, or even to opt out of the labour force temporarily. Women doctorates with children and full-time tenure-track positions may be those who are very career-minded and have also found satisfactory childcare services and/or domestic support from their partners (Valian 1998).

Although female academics are less likely than male academics to become parents, numerous studies find that those who become mothers take more responsibility than their partners for caring and domestic work at home. Academic women report greater involvement in childcare and household tasks than do male academics despite the fact that academic husbands/fathers tend to have more flexible hours than men in other occupations, and despite the fact that educated men sometimes accept more domestic responsibility than less educated men (Ferber & Loeb 1997). A study at the University of California found that women faculty or academic staff who were between the ages of 30-50 with children reported working 100 hours per week when they included academic work, childcare and housework. In contrast, their male counterparts reported working 85 hours per week. In this study, the working hours of men and women did not converge until they reached the age of sixty (Mason *et al* 2006).

High levels of family stress have also been related to work stress, and work stress is particularly high in the pre-tenure years when productivity levels need to be elevated to retain one's job (O'Laughlin & Bischoff 2005). Married or partnered mothers perceive lower levels of social support from their partners for parenting and domestic work. In my study, several women with non-employed husbands said that they themselves did most of the domestic work at home. One justified this by saying that "I have different standards of housework than him". In Australian research, many more mothers than fathers who are academics report being the primary caregiver of children, and more women reported caring responsibilities for aging parents (Probert 2005).

The international research typically finds no gender differences in partner support for academic careers (O'Laughlin & Bischoff 2005). Because so many academic women live with more senior academic men, their male partners are reported to provide career advice and a sounding board for intellectual ideas. Sweet and Moen (2002) found that co-working in an academic setting tended to buffer work and family strain, especially when partners worked at the same university.

Women academics are more likely than academic men to comment on the negative effect of work stress on their family life, including the requirement to work long hours, the absence of suitable childcare services (especially infant and after-school care), and restricted geographic mobility and career opportunities. Academic men are less likely to mention family stress as a concern, partly because many men have wives who work part-time and care for the children at home, but also because men are more likely to accept the heavy work demands of academia as normal and acceptable. Stress levels are not always related to actual workload but rather to expectations and perceptions of stress as well as social support.

Academic women have a higher probability of divorce than men (Brooks 1997, Bracken, Allen & Dean 2006). Many separated or divorced women do not have children, at least not young children living with them, but academic women do have a higher probability of becoming a single parent, a status that implies a heavier domestic workload than living in a two-parent family (Brooks 1997). The higher divorce rate among academic women may reflect their unusual assertiveness as women, their unwillingness to accept perceived inequities within marriage, the stress of working long hours, or simply their greater opportunities than other women to become self-supporting. However, single or separated spouses are better able to give the required hours to their academic work.

On average, academic women are less likely than academic men to have a doctorate and tend to publish less (Brooks 1997, Wolf-Wendel et al 2004, Probert 2005, Leahey 2006, Nakhaie 2007) but parents do not necessarily publish less than academics without children at home. Wolf-Wendel et al (2004) found that married academics are more productive than single ones, but that men are more likely to be married. Academic men are likely to have partners who are willing to ‘hold the fort’ when they are busy. As one of my single female participants said, “When you are single, you have to do everything yourself, including the housework, the lawn and repairs”.

Fox (2005) found that women with school-aged children publish more than other academic women, which may reflect their self-selection as determined workers with high levels of personal efficiency. However, academic women with children at home are more likely than academic fathers to report that working long hours, attending distant conferences and writing papers placed stress on their parenting activities. Mothers are also more likely to complain about the lack of career-related networking opportunities, as they find it more difficult to travel and spend informal time with colleagues (Fox 2005, Mason et al 2006).

A number of studies report that academic women often lack knowledge of work-life balance policies that are available in their universities, or that they are afraid to use them because of the assumed negative impact on their careers. One participant in my study argued that her (research) university's requirement to travel overseas for at least six weeks in order to receive the sabbatical travel grant discriminated against mothers with young children. She said: "I've never been away from my children for more than two weeks and I have no desire to do so". Many academic women simply resign themselves to fewer promotions after they become mothers but others delay childbirth or forgo having additional children as a strategy to maintain or further their careers. In order to understand the implications of these different patterns of family formation and dissolution, it is necessary to place these within the context of academic values and practices in university-based work.

Institutional Values and Academic Practices

University hiring and promotion, which are often done by committees, are said to be based on academic merit, with pre-established universal and impersonal criteria (Jenks & Riesman 1977, Nakhaie 2007). In most fields, recently hired academic staff members are required to have a doctorate, with graduates from high prestige universities given priority (Burriss 2004). University teaching experience and research publications are also important but hiring and promotion committees tend to give more credibility to research activities and peer-reviewed 'research outcomes' of international quality than to classroom teaching or academic 'service', especially in the top universities. Highly valued research increasingly is funded by competitive grants, may involve overseas partners and quantitative research, and may also come with teaching 'buy-outs'. When teaching is 'bought out' by permanent staff, classes are often

taught by doctoral students or part-time lecturers, many of whom are women (Brooks 1997; Bracken, Allen & Dean 2006).

For decades, studies have emphasized the importance of geographic mobility for initial hiring and later for promotion. Finding the first tenure-stream position often involves moving to another institution, city or region to locate a job in an institution or department with lower teaching loads, a doctoral program and promotional possibilities. Given the hiring preference for external candidates in many universities, graduates who perceive that they lack geographic mobility may search only for local jobs and therefore find only contractually-limited teaching positions with few promotional possibilities. For example, Mason et al (2006) found that married women doctorates in the United States often felt obligated to limit their academic job search to the location where their older and more established partner was employed, which was also the same place where many of the women received their doctorates. In contrast, partnered male doctoral students, with younger wives who were often master's students, were more likely to find tenure-stream jobs within a few years of receiving their doctorate and could relocate to find work while knowing that their spouse would accompany them.

Throughout their careers, women academics are more likely than their male counterparts to change jobs for their partner's career moves, although this trend might be abating. In my study, one woman with two children came to work at the research university from North America. In this case, her husband was the 'trailing spouse' but he had made a decision to retire from paid work. This need for geographic mobility means that many academic couples live far away from extended family members who might otherwise have helped out with the children. Although academics can usually hire day care for their children, the need for substitute care may also arise in the evenings, on weekends or when the children are sick. One academic man in my study reported that their younger child was in day care

three days a week while he and his academic wife each worked at home one day while minding the child. The flexibility of academic work makes this possible.

Part of the academic promotion process involves entrepreneurial activities, such as developing new projects, assembling a research team, locating research funds, obtaining 'better' job offers, and finding journals or publishing companies to disseminate research results. For example, 'grantsmanship' involves persuading peers and grant committees that one's research is innovative, theoretically and methodologically sound, and worth funding because it makes a significant contribution to the discipline, the agency's goals or the nation. Grantsmanship requires a certain level of personal confidence that is often developed through family socialization but girls are less likely than boys to be encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs or experts.

Academic mentoring continues to be important for progression through the ranks and has been related to salary, promotion and career satisfaction. However, women doctoral students and junior academics are less likely than their male counterparts to report that their doctoral supervision experience was positive, that their supervisors were interested in their research topic, or that they presented papers or published with their supervisors (Brooks 1997, Seagram, Gould & Pyke 1998, Carr et al 2000). In fact, these studies suggest that the mentoring process can still be tainted with sexual harassment for some female doctoral students and junior academic staff (Rosser 2004). Despite substantial increases in the number of women academic staff, reports of gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment remain common. Sexual harassment is particularly reported by separated or divorced women, who are disproportionately represented among academic women, and older academic women reporting about past experiences (Carr *et al* 2000).

Academic promotion is said to be based on merit, and usually involves peer assessment of research outputs, teaching evaluations and postgraduate supervision, as well as service to the university, department and profession. Recent research has shown that publication productivity plays an important role in the promotion or rank of university lecturers or professors but that the publications produced by women tend to be awarded less value for promotion (Bellas & Toutkoushian 1999, Nakhaie 2007), which has also been found in earlier US studies (Long 2001).

Women are also less likely than men to apply for promotion and when they do, they apply 'less vigorously' (Probert 2005). In my study, several women spoke of their perceived difficulties with promotion. One said that she did not ever expect to be promoted to full professor, despite the fact that she could work another twenty years before retirement. When asked why, she replied: "I'm not hungry enough". Presumably, she was referring to the required ambition and competitiveness to actively seek promotion. Other studies also find that promotion systems continue to place a heavy emphasis on years of seniority within the level or rank, or within the discipline (Rosenfeld 1981, Long 2001, Nakhaie 2007). In my project, several participants perceived that those who tried to get promoted before reaching the top of their category were seen as "tall poppies" and cut down.

Despite many changes in academia, female academics are still less likely than their male counterparts to have a doctorate as their highest qualification (Brooks 1997, Nakhaie 2007). Academics who have attained doctorates have already proven that they can do research, are more likely to see themselves as researchers, and tend to publish more than academics with lower degrees (ibid). Many studies continue to find that women academics publish less than

their male counterparts, regardless of how productivity is defined⁴ (Zuckerman 1991, Brooks 1997, Bellas & Toutkoushian 199, Long 2001, Nakhaie 2002 & 2007). However, when researchers control for the structural variables influencing publication (such as subject area, teaching loads and degree of specialisation) and include non-refereed publications, the gender differences in publication rates become negligible (Xie and Shauman 1998, Leahy 2006). However, women are more likely to work in departments with lower publication rates and higher teaching loads, to have non-refereed publications, to see themselves (or be seen by others) as generalists rather than specialists, and to downplay their expertise (Bernard 1988). Bellas and Toutkoushian (1999) also argue that women work more slowly and carefully on their publications due to heavier scrutiny of their research outputs and exclusion from academic networks.

Assessment of the merit of ‘research outputs’ (usually publications) remains partly subjective but is partly reliant on the researcher’s personal conviction of their worth and the ability to ‘sell’ their ideas to colleagues, journals and publishing companies. Girls and young women are less likely than boys and young men to be encouraged by their families to self-promote their ideas or careers. Furthermore, women’s research projects often involve smaller-scale studies that cost less money, involve local and qualitative research, rely on feminist perspectives or women participants, and include female collaborators (Leahey 2006). This last point is interesting because studies show that women receive less recognition for their efforts when they publish with men (Loeb 2001), especially if they are married to them (Rossiter 1993). Yet research done by women, especially if it involves feminist research, female

⁴ Apparently, women are more likely than men to publish textbooks and non-refereed articles, including book chapters, which are sometimes given less credibility.

research participants or topics related to family, is seldom acknowledged or read by men (Leahey 2006).

Ranking systems give some universities more prestige than others, with higher scores granted to 'research institutions' than those focusing more on undergraduate teaching. Research universities pressure their staff to increase their publications but may also offer incentives, such as lower teaching loads and internal research grants. Academic men are more likely than academic women to be hired by research institutions or departments with lower teaching loads (Brooks 1997). Nevertheless, women often report that they gain pleasure from their interactions with students, a comment made by many women in my study, but they also seemed to accept a disproportionate number of service positions relating to teaching and student advising compared to their male counterparts. Bellas and Toutkoushian (1999) found that parents did more service work in their departments and universities than childless academics.

Considerable research has focused on new neo-liberal practices and the recent ascent of 'managerialism', as universities become more influenced by the 'audit culture', cost-cutting, the enumeration of 'research outputs', reliance on external funding, merit pay and university rankings (Larner & LeHeron 2005, Taylor & Braddock 2007, Thomas & Davies 2002). Restructuring in the university sector has sometimes included merging teaching colleges with universities, raising the expectation that academic staff will do more research and increasing actual research productivity. Nakhaie (2007) compared Canadian academics in 1987 and 2000 and noted higher publication rates in the latter year. In addition, many universities have amalgamated or closed departments, often focusing on fields that generate fewer students and/or research funds and lower publications. Historically, some of these departments have employed a disproportionately high number of women staff, such as

language teaching, women's studies and education. The departments with the highest amounts of research funding and highest publication rates have generally been the physical sciences, where the percentage of women is the lowest, especially at the senior ranks (Brooks 1997, Nakhaie 2007).

The corporatization of the university has been seen by some as creating new obstacles for women, as it has brought downsizing, the creation of dual labour market between teaching and research, the retrenchment of feminized fields, and a backlash against affirmative action (Glazer-Raymo 1999, Curtis 2005). At the same time, the corporatization has created new mentoring programs that help to increase women's productivity, their commitment to the profession and their career satisfaction (Devos 2008). Nevertheless, women academics with young children continue to express concern about heightened requirements to deliver scholarly conference papers or develop research partnerships in foreign countries. Organising such professional commitments or even gaining uninterrupted time to do research and write scholarly articles is particularly complicated for academics who are also the mothers of young children (Thomas & Davies 2002). Women academics also report that their male colleagues tend to focus on the high-visibility and more prestigious activities of research and publications, leaving much of the student advising and teaching undergraduate classes to the women, junior staff and part-timers. There is also some suggestion that male academics find it easier to refuse work requests by their head of department, such as becoming student advisor.

Career longevity remains important for promotion to the highest academic rank of full professor. Academic men typically have more years of full-time employment than academic women, as well as higher academic qualifications, a greater degree of specialisation, more publications and citations, and higher visibility and peer esteem (Leahey 2007, Nakhaie 2007). Women are more likely than men to enter academic careers later in life after having children

or working in other occupation (Brooks 1997). Despite women's longer life spans, they tend to retire earlier than men and the timing of retirement often coincides with their (older) male partner's retirement, or the pursuit of life interests relating to charitable work or grandchildren. This means that many academic women have shorter careers than their male counterparts, which contributes to lower academic rank upon retirement.

This discussion of institutional factors and academic priorities shows that the gendered differences in family circumstances of academics can be very consequential to entering academic work and progressing through the ranks.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that the continuing gender gap in the professional status of academics reflects a combination of different family circumstances, personal priorities and the division of labour at home, as well as institutional practices that favour those who are willing to work long hours, publish widely and remain full-time in the profession throughout their working lives. In recent decades, a higher percentage of women are receiving doctorates but many are "leaking out of the pipeline" prior to attaining tenure-track positions (Mason et al 2006). Some are trading marriage and motherhood for academic success. Those who choose to combine full-time academic work with motherhood face tremendous challenges in terms of hours, stress and work/family conflict. In American studies, academic women talk about the difficulty of managing children and elderly parents against a 'ticking tenure clock' (Rosser 2004).

With recent restructuring, many universities have increased their emphasis on external research funding, international conference presentations and publishing in high-prestige journals or reputable international publishing companies (Ashcroft 2007), which may actually

augment the gender gap. The gap will widen further if universities augment the dual labour market by hiring more research-only staff and increasing the percentage of part-time or temporary lecturers to teach undergraduate students. However, as more young doctorates accept the current research emphasis in academia as ‘normal’, more women are likely to acquire full-time academic positions and to progress through the ranks.

When women enter the academic profession at about the same age as men and remain working full-time throughout their lives, as they are increasingly doing, more will reach the highest ranks of the profession. As senior men retire, more women may fill the new vacancies although many of these positions could be lost with ‘downsizing’ or heavier reliance on part-time lecturers. Clearly, women with fewer or no children are still more likely to succeed in academia, as the division of labour in many families remains gendered, even when both partners retain demanding careers. Furthermore, universities have not always provided effective mentoring systems, equity programs, maternity leave, carers’ leave, or childcare services. Academic success still seems to require women to adopt ‘masculine’ career patterns, to reduce their fertility, to protect their intellectual autonomy from male collaborators, and to work harder than men to embrace the challenges of balancing academic work with family responsibilities.

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