

It's "like walking on broken glass": Pan-Canadian reflections on work–family conflict from psychology women faculty and graduate students

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Abstract

Studies on work–family conflict amongst university faculty members indicate that women experience significantly more conflict in balancing their dual roles than their male counterparts. Research suggests that female faculty may be disadvantaged because of the norms structuring academic environments, which seemingly accommodate the life courses of men. Interestingly, the experience of work–family conflict for graduate students, who are besieged by many of the same environmental forces as female faculty, has been largely ignored within the scholarly literature. In the present study, qualitative responses regarding work–family conflict from 65 academic women (32 faculty; 33 graduate students) from universities and colleges across Canada were submitted to thematic analysis. Results revealed three interconnected themes: masculine workplace norms, the need to choose between work and family, and consequences of work–family conflict. The findings point to the need for academic institutions to critically examine their cultures surrounding motherhood in an effort to provide hospitable environments for faculty and graduate students who are, or who will become, parents.

Keywords

mothers, graduate students, academia, discrimination, childcare, work–life balance, conflict

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Work–family conflict can be defined as the extent to which “work demands clash with adequate and pleasurable performance in non-work roles” (Taris et al., 2006, p. 140). Winefield, Boyd, and Winefield (2014) assert that academics employed in university and college settings are subject to ever-intensifying demands within the workplace, which, in turn, compromise faculty’s ability to achieve role balance. Specifically, faculty are expected typically to publish research, scholarly, or artistic work; obtain ongoing funding from granting agencies; contribute extensively to administration; and perform exceedingly well in the areas of teaching, student supervision, and mentorship. Further, the extent of workplace demands and myriad other academic-related stressors such as pressure during pre-tenure years, low pay scales, and long working hours may deleteriously affect women’s and men’s ability to manage work and caregiving responsibilities simultaneously. To date, the empirical literature suggests that workplace demands affect women’s abilities to role balance in the areas of work and family life more so than they do men’s, and that women report greater work–family conflict (McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). However, limited empirical attention has been given to understanding the institutional and cultural norms within post-secondary settings that serve to shape academic women’s experiences of work–family conflict.

McCutcheon and Morrison (2016) assessed levels of work–family conflict amongst 143 male and female faculty working in psychology departments across Canada. Results indicated that women experienced a greater degree of work–family conflict than men and performed, *on average*, 10 additional hours of childcare per week, despite having significantly fewer dependent children. These findings are consistent with earlier studies examining hours faculty spend engaged in childcare and household tasks. For instance, in their survey of 264 university faculty (179 females; 85 males) from the United States, O’Laughlin and Bischoff (2005) found that female faculty reported significantly greater involvement in childcare and household tasks than did male faculty, even when the women and their partners worked the same number of hours per week. In contrast to the female faculty surveyed, a majority of the male faculty reported having romantic partners who worked fewer than full-time hours; thus, it is plausible that these men’s partners were shouldering more of the childcare and household responsibilities.

Young and Holley (2005) found that women perceive androcentric norms surrounding work and the act of parenting. In a survey of 75 faculty members from departments of social work within the United States, they found that female academics perceived a career in academe and childrearing to be incompatible. Indeed, some female participants contended that academia follows a “male model of adult development” and were led to believe that childbearing should be postponed until after having achieved tenure. As further evidence that women are receiving messages befitting men regarding work and childrearing, Young and Holley observed that fewer female academics have children than male academics; when children are present, men in academe have more children than women; women’s engagement in activities related to work (i.e. where they spend an average of 48.5 hours per week) may make role-balancing efforts more difficult due to greater expectations and responsibility assumed for a larger proportion of childcare and housework duties.

Workplace norms that follow a male life cycle model also seem to affect graduate students. In one of only a handful of studies focused on the graduate student experience, American researchers Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden (2013) found that approximately 70% of female graduate students surveyed across a wide range of academic disciplines at the University of California considered an academic career to be incompatible with “family” life. The vast majority of female participants were discouraged by their supervisors from having children and, if they did become pregnant, received little in the way of departmental support during pregnancy or childbirth. Results also indicated that female participants with children were twice as likely to report wanting to avoid a career in academia, compared to male students with children and female students without children.

In one of the few Canadian studies, Armenti (2004) found that, of the 19 female professors interviewed, a majority actively engaged in strategies to minimise the negative repercussions of their motherhood status on their work and buffer disapproval from colleagues. These strategies included timing pregnancies around the end of the academic year (i.e. May) or choosing to delay pregnancies until after becoming tenured. Some participants also indicated that they would hide their pregnancies during job interviews because they feared this display of impending motherhood would negatively affect hiring decisions. Armenti argued that academia is structured to accommodate the life courses and family formation patterns of men; therefore, women must alter their maternal decisions to conform to these standards. Additional consequences of male-centred environments were outlined by another team of American researchers; on the basis of data from more than 160,000 recipients of doctoral degrees in the United States, Mason and Goulden (2004) found that, when female tenure-track faculty had children, they were significantly more likely to indicate that they had fewer children than they had wanted, and tended to have children at an older age than men.

For the many women who are trying to manage their motherhood status within university or college settings that are based on a male normative model, there are many more who are deterred from becoming mothers while employed at a post-secondary institution. Further, there are many women who have shied away from academia *altogether* due to the perceived incompatibility of having a child(ren) and instructing at a university or college (Adamo, 2013). Research identifying the actual and perceived consequences for women working in post-secondary environments, as well as for those who may be contemplating academia as a potential employment outlet, is warranted. And, if universities and colleges are to attract the best faculty, it is necessary that the experiences and perceptions of graduate students, insofar as the types of apprehensions or barriers they may be experiencing about entering the academy, are understood.

The present study

Data for the present study were obtained from an open-ended question that appeared at the end of a survey designed for men and women in psychology departments across Canada. The survey was not specific to work–family conflict

per se (five of the 149 survey questions related to work–family conflict), but touched on a range of topics (e.g. research output, workplace satisfaction, mentorship) that assessed academic climate. The final survey question asked participants, “Do you have any comments you would like to add in relation to any of the topics addressed in the survey?” Half of the comments submitted by women related to work–family conflict; therefore, it was determined that an analysis should be performed on this topic because of its saliency to participants. Given that the data were unanticipated and were not initially collected for the purpose of delving into women’s work–family conflict experiences, the study’s purpose and theoretical framework were developed and adopted post-data collection. After reading the comments from female academics, it was apparent that the purpose of further analysis was to explore, from the perspective of psychology faculty and graduate students, the masculine norms and perceived barriers they encounter regarding work–family balancing in the academy, and the decisions and consequences that result from these challenges.

This study offers several notable contributions to the extant literature on academic women’s experiences of work–family conflict and role balancing. Importantly, the study includes both psychology faculty as well as graduate students and, in so doing, supplements the bulk of the research in the area of work–family conflict that has considered only the perspectives of faculty members. It is highly plausible that graduate students are aware of the challenges faced by female faculty members when actively trying to role balance. However, whether institutional or cultural norms are disadvantaging graduate students, and whether messages about women’s abilities to balance their dual roles as academics and mothers are being transmitted to them, remain largely unexplored. Important, too, is the possibility that the comments of graduate students and faculty members may be different. Faculty members are employees who have chosen academia as their career and must either advocate for change if the environment is inhospitable or develop coping mechanisms. Alternatively, graduate students may or may not choose to continue with a career in the academy after they graduate. Were graduate students’ perceptions and experiences to be negative, a concomitant implication might be that graduate students feel less inclined to pursue careers in academia. Given national reports indicating that attrition is more pronounced amongst female faculty, particularly for those with younger children (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009) and those in certain disciplines (e.g. medicine; Cropsey et al., 2008), efforts to empirically document these perceptions and experiences are increasingly important.

Finally, much of the research on work–family conflict amongst academics has been conducted in the United States. Generalising the findings to Canadian populations is premature until additional data are collected within a Canadian context. Many American universities do not offer the same type of parental leave as that offered by Canadian universities (Yoest & Rhoads, 2004). The present study will advance understanding of work–family role balancing from the perspective of Canadian academic women. To situate the reader within the Canadian academic context, the next section briefly outlines relevant structural elements and institutional policies that exist within the vast majority of Canadian universities and colleges.

Canadian context

We acknowledge that this study takes place in a particular North American socio-cultural context. Each Canadian academic institution has a collective agreement that outlines the opportunities afforded to faculty (e.g. parental, medical, or sabbatical leaves). For instance, when introducing an adoptive or biological child, faculty receive a “top-up” that takes the faculty member’s salary within approximately 95% of their original one for a specified number of months, depending on the university’s collective agreement. After the specified number of months expires, women faculty can apply for employment insurance that will be provided up to a maximum of 55% of a woman’s salary or a maximum of \$543.00 per week. There also exists a tenure and promotion ladder. Faculty typically begin in a tenure-track Assistant Professor position and, after approximately five to seven years, and based on satisfactory performance reviews, they may be granted tenure (i.e. permanent employment) and promotion to Associate Professor, and later to Full Professor. The expectations and standards for performance at each successive rank (i.e. Assistant, Associate, Full) become increasingly more stringent. Also, some faculty are hired as Lecturers (in a part-time position or in a full-time, tenure-track position) and only have teaching responsibilities.

Graduate student funding in Canada is quite variable; some universities fund their students and some do not. In terms of structural support for parental leave, there is some consistency across Canadian universities such that mothers can take up to 12 months of leave following the introduction of a child, but this leave is, for the most part, unpaid. In fact, of the 98 universities in Canada, only a very small proportion offer some form of financial support to their graduate students who become parents while enrolled in a graduate training programme (Allen, 2014).

Theoretical approach

Williams’ (1990, 2010) reconstructive feminist approach to understanding women’s experiences of work–family conflict was adopted as a theoretical framework to guide analysis and interpretation. Williams’ framework was chosen particularly because it stems from an attempt to move away from the “sameness-difference” dichotomy that has shaped public debate and workplace practices and policies around work–family conflict. Instead, it moves the focus onto the workplace system itself. Proponents of the “difference” perspective advocate that men and women are inherently different, and, therefore, as a natural result of women’s biology, they will choose to “opt-out” of the competitive work sphere to have and support their family. Conversely, the “sameness” perspective argues that men and women should be viewed and treated equally when it comes to family workplace policies. In this case, men and women would be granted the same opportunities to take parental leaves, engage flexible work initiatives, and “stop clock” initiatives. Williams notes that the problem with these policies is that women often use them as intended (i.e. to actively engage in childcare), while men use them for personal (e.g. to take a vacation) or professional benefits (e.g. to publish more) that are unrelated to their family responsibilities.

Williams (2010) argues that in order for true equality between men and women to be achieved, the labour force system needs to be deconstructed to eliminate the privileging of masculine norms. Reconstructive feminism aims to identify the sources of work–family conflict by highlighting the masculine norms that are intrinsically intertwined with norms in the workplace. The attention is shifted away from women’s and men’s differences (i.e. disproportionate time spent on household and childcare, and economic consequences of divorce) and focuses on the masculine norms that perpetuate women’s work–family conflict. As such, the present study endeavours to focus on the structural and institutional cultural norms that complicate women’s ability to balance their work and family roles.

Method

Qualitative data were taken from a Canadian-wide survey of male and female faculty and graduate students within the discipline of psychology. The survey included 149 questions in total.¹ Information about the present study was sent to all psychology department heads within Canada. All department heads were asked, in turn, to provide consent for the researchers to send invitations to participate to their faculty members and, if applicable, graduate students within their departments. In total, 70 psychology departments from universities and colleges across Canada were contacted. Approximately half the department heads opted to forward the invitation to participate to their department members on their own, while the other half assented to invitation emails being distributed by the researchers. One department head declined to forward the invitation or to have the researchers directly contact department members on the basis that the call for participants was analogous to spam; therefore, faculty and graduate students from 69 universities and colleges were sent invitations. Invitations also were sent to listservs associated with the Canadian Psychological Association’s Sections.

Of the 870 individuals (i.e. 337 faculty members and 533 graduate students) who completed the survey, 160 provided a response to the final open-ended solicitation for additional comments, and 130 of those were from female participants (i.e. 19.3% of the 674 female participants provided comments). Of interest to the present study was that half of the female-generated comments ($n = 65$; 9.6% of the total female sample) explicitly discussed anticipated or actual work–family conflict. The comments focussing on work–family conflict spanned 24 pages of text. The other half of the comments covered a range of topics (e.g. prevalence of women in psychology departments, sexism, difficult workloads, relationships with supervisors or colleagues, and the structure of academic positions). Only five questions (3.4%) within the full survey related to work–family conflict, suggesting that participants were not primed to discuss this topic more than other survey topics. Thirty male participants provided comments, of which seven (3.6% of the total male sample) addressed concerns about work–family conflict or role balancing. Two of the comments acknowledged greater work–family conflict among women. Due to insufficient content to analyse, commentary from men was excluded from the analysis.

Participants

The comments from 32 female faculty and 33 female graduate students were analysed. The faculty ranged in age from 29 to 74 years ($M=42.05$; $SD=10.51$), all were Caucasian, 78.1% ($n=25$) reported having children, and 84.4% ($n=27$) were in a relationship. With regard to rank, 18.8% ($n=6$) were Full Professors, 25.0% were Associate Professors ($n=8$), 31.3% ($n=10$) were Assistant Professors, and 25.0% ($n=8$) were categorised as “Other” (e.g. lecturers or sessional instructors). The graduate students ranged in age from 23 to 47 years ($M=30.00$; $SD=6.91$). The majority of the graduate students were Caucasian (84.8%; $n=28$), 30.3% indicated that they have children, and 75.8% ($n=25$) were in a relationship. The majority of the graduate students were at the PhD level (63.6%; $n=21$), with 33.3% ($n=11$) at the Masters level, and one student who did not provide a response. In total, 92.2% of the sample reported being heterosexual and only two of the faculty reported being partnered with women. However, we wish to acknowledge that work–family conflict is an issue for women of all sexualities (Tuten & August, 2006).

Procedure

Data were collected entirely online. Appearing in all faculty and graduate students’ invitations to participate was a link to the online survey. Once participants clicked on the link, a consent form that explained the study’s purpose appeared. Respondents were informed of their rights as participants and assured that the researchers’ Institutional Research Ethics Board had approved the study. Following the attainment of informed consent, participants were presented with the survey, which took approximately 20 minutes to complete. After submitting their responses, participants were debriefed, thanked electronically, and invited to enter a lottery for one of five \$100 gift certificates. The debriefing informed participants that the survey was a comparative study of female and male graduate students and faculty members and that the intention was to better understand gendered experiences in academia. They also were provided a brief outline of the extant literature examining the experiences of women in academia. Participants were given the contact information for the authors if they had any comments or questions.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic coding (Boyatzis, 1998), a method allowing researchers to discern recurring patterns in the data. The authors selected thematic coding primarily because of its flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis can be used to identify, analyse, and interpret themes from a subset of an overall data corpus. The guidelines for rigorous thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) were employed when analysing and interpreting the data. The first author reviewed the comments and created an initial coding scheme, which was verified and expanded upon based on the existing literature on

women's work–family conflict and role balancing within academic settings. To ensure an intimate familiarity with the data, the first author read and categorised the comments multiple times. This method also confirmed that no themes were overlooked (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The second author reviewed the first author's coding and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Following these steps, the codes were reduced into themes in order to form an understanding of the data in its entirety (Creswell, 1998). Using a realist/essentialist epistemological position, semantic themes were identified. This framework was selected due to the limitations of the data collection method (i.e. participant survey commentary), which only lends itself to a descriptive analysis. After coding, Williams' (1990, 2010) framework was used to inform the interpretation of the identified themes.

Results

Three interconnected themes were identified (see Figure 1). The first theme, “masculine workplace norms”, outlines masculine-normative institutional policies and practices that guide academics' behaviour around work and family roles, as well as the implicit (and explicit) messages that female faculty and graduate students receive from their departments and universities about the questionable value of mothers in academia. The second theme, “perceiving the need to choose between academic work and family”, describes the struggle of female graduate students and junior faculty members who feel they must choose between pursuing a career in academe at the expense of their familial roles or concentrating on their families to the detriment of their career. The third theme, “consequences of work–family conflict”, comprises comments from faculty and graduate students with children

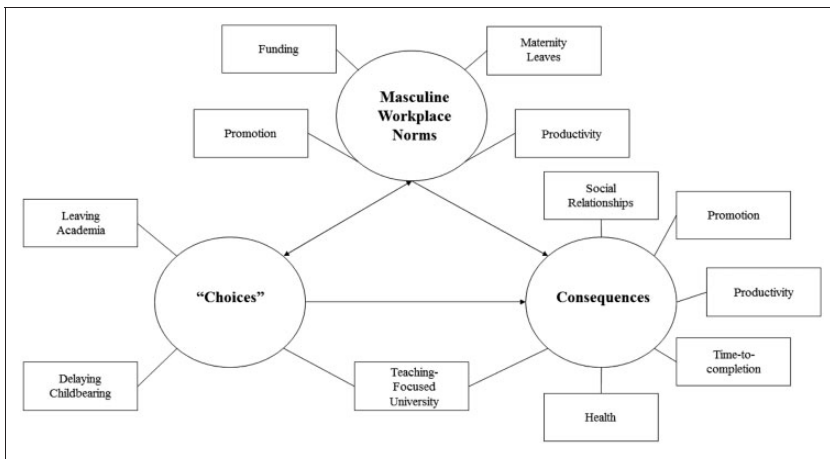


Figure 1. Graphical representation of thematic analysis of work–family comments of female academics.

or a partner who have struggled to navigate their dual roles and have encountered negative outcomes in their careers because of the prioritisation of their family role. The themes are discussed in turn.

Masculine workplace norms

Several participants recognised that there are structural norms within their departments and institutions that are designed to accommodate the life course of men and can result in disadvantages for them if they have children. This quotation from a graduate student, who provided no demographic information, describes this perception: “[There are] clearly biased policies being instituted to prevent female graduate students from having children in graduate school – yet the same policies would not apply to male students.” While this participant did not discuss in depth what policies she was referring to, other women, like the next participant, provided more detail about the types of inequities they have encountered:

Because I did not take a full year (I could not afford it), at least one funding body did not count my maternity leave. This meant that the time I was off . . . was considered productive working time and I was not eligible for postdoctoral funding because too much time had elapsed since completing my PhD. I tried to fight this rule but was told that the rules were in place to make the opportunities fair to all! (PhD student, 39, separated, two children)

This woman’s account demonstrates one of the critical problems with maternity leave policies for female graduate students. Due to financial constraints, many graduate students are unable to take a full maternity leave; therefore, their productivity is expected to continue at the same rate, despite the addition of new family demands. Several other participants with children also discussed unrealistic expectations about their productivity during maternity leaves. The following quotation describes one woman’s attempt to avoid stigma around maternity leaves:

I feel unrealistic expectations when it comes to maternity leave, as though I’m expected to remain as productive as ever . . . I feel confident that grant reviewers are more lenient towards a “medical leave” than a “mat leave” gap or reduction in productivity. I do not describe my medically complicated mat leave as pregnancy related when writing grants anymore, I simply describe a vague “medical emergency”. (Term appointment, married, one child, no age provided)

Williams (2010) describes a barrier to career mothers’ success that she refers to as the “maternal wall”. Experimental research shows that mothers are less likely to be recommended for employment or promotion and are offered a lower starting salary than non-mothers with identical qualifications (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Several participants noted that their career advancement was contingent on the academy’s stance about the value of mothers. In particular, faculty perceived messages based on evaluations of their productivity. Below, one participant questions

the extent to which review committees consider motherhood when evaluating productivity-based applications from women: “I believe that parental leaves and raising young children is not considered when evaluating productivity in grant reviews: I have had reviewers puzzle at why my productivity dipped around the birth of my child” (Assistant Professor, married, one child, no age provided). Other women indicated that it was not merely an oversight by review committees, but rather a deliberate obstruction of academic mothers:

They block top administrative positions from female faculty who have kids. The blocking is not for women in general, but rather for women with kids – because they don’t want the department to slow down by having the grad program director (for instance) being someone who works “only” 40 hours a week and has a family. (Assistant Professor, 34, married, three children)

Williams notes that, “mothers have to work harder to overcome the powerful negative competence and commitment assumptions triggered by motherhood” (p. 92). The participants in the present study echoed this sentiment, which is exemplified in the following quotation: “I do strongly believe that I (as a young faculty member who is a mother) have to work harder to prove myself. I don’t feel like the administration is sensitive to my schedule as a single mother” (Assistant Professor, 36, single, one child). Messages about mothering within the academy were predominantly negative. Women discussed the invisibility of families, the questioning of non-work-related responsibilities, and the feeling of being unsupported within their departments.

The stigma against motherhood is continually reinforced by the masculine norms that pervade the workplace. Williams (2010) notes that men who work longer hours, do not discuss their caregiving responsibilities, and have spouses who do not work outside the home are perceived as more masculine. Women and men who do not meet the breadwinner ideal, which has become commensurate with hegemonic masculinity, are relegated to lower statuses. The next quotation describes the denigration of faculty who work less than full-time hours: “There is still a sense, sometimes explicitly stated (always by a male colleague), that part-time faculty are less committed, insufficiently available, and unable to be properly productive as researchers” (Full Professor, 50, married, one child). Smithson (2005) describes part-time work as a gendered category in that it is typically associated with women who often have caregiving responsibilities, while full-time work is associated with masculinity and traditional male working hours.

While most of the participants’ comments related to inequities within the workplace, a few acknowledged the disparities between women and men in the home as a factor in the discrepancies that exist regarding women’s productivity and career advancement.

I think there are widespread structural and attitudinal obstacles, many of which are internalized, that lead women AND men to expect that women do more than their share of the child care and household work, to take more responsibility for running

the household, and cause men to feel threatened when their spouse has a higher status job/qualifications or a higher salary. (Full Professor, 50, married, one child)

Several researchers (e.g. Comer & Stites-Doe, 2006; O’Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Williams, 1990, 2010) have cited the tendency for women to shoulder the bulk of the childcare and household responsibilities as an important contributor to academic women’s work–family conflict.

Perceiving the need to choose between academic work and family

In Williams’ (2010) framework of career women’s work–family conflict, she discusses the illusion of choice. She notes that society perceives that women may “opt-out” of their preferred career trajectories (e.g. by shifting to part-time work, reducing productivity) because of a biological or psychological yearning to have a family. In this narrative, it is women’s “choice” to step off the fast-track and move onto the “mommy track” (a term coined to refer to workplace policies and practices that allow greater flexibility, often at the expense of career advancement and higher pay; Marecek, 2003). However, Williams argues that this perspective is inaccurate and certainly does not represent the diversity of experiences of career women, nor the possibility that it may be the workplace, and its masculine norms, that are pushing some women out.

In the present study, many women were aware that there was a choice to be made regarding their dual roles:

For women especially, it is difficult to even consider having a family while pursuing higher education – one should not have to choose between an academic career and having children. While it may appear to be accepted on the surface, the silent stares at a pregnant graduate student say it all. (MA student, 25, married, no children)

By stating that women “have to choose”, this participant is making it clear that the choice is not voluntary. Several participants explicitly used the word “choice” to describe the requirement to make sacrifices in their personal or professional lives; however, in most cases, their comments included a statement denoting a lack of choice. For example, in the next quotation, the participant starts her comment with “the only way” as a means of illustrating the necessity to make sacrifices:

The only way to be competitive and get enough funding to live comfortably is to have a very poor work/life balance. It is not uncommon for students in our program to work 60+ hours per week. This makes it a choice to either compromise on family/social/personal things or school accomplishments. (PhD student, 30, married, one child)

Based on a number of participant comments, the perceived inability to have a successful academic career *and* have a family has led a number of women to believe that they will be unable to stay in academia. The following quote

illustrates this decision:

I would have liked to pursue a career in academics. I really enjoy research and academia; however, I would like to have children and a family, and would like to be there for them. I made the decision a few years ago not to pursue a career in academia for this reason. (PhD student, 28, single, no children)

This woman voiced a desire to remain in academia; however, a career in the academy was perceived as incompatible with motherhood. Based on the observations of another graduate student, the “choice” to leave academia in order to prioritise family appears to disproportionately affect female graduate students compared to male students: “A few women have left in their PhD in the past few years in order to move on and start a family. This attrition is normal. No men have left” (PhD student, 28, committed relationship, no children). The implications of potential work–family conflict for female graduate students compared to male graduate students are evidenced further by the absence of commentary regarding work–family conflict from the male students surveyed. In total, 78 female graduate students provided end-of-survey comments, of which 33 (42.3%) related to work–family conflict. Conversely, of the 11 male graduate students who provided comments, none addressed work–family conflict.

While some female graduate students felt forced out of the academy because they want to have a family, others felt obligated to focus predominantly on work to the detriment of a family life. Due to the demands of a graduate programme, lack of support from their departments, and little financial stability, several students reported delaying childbearing. For some older women, this delay put them at risk for complicated pregnancies or infertility:

The issue of when to have children is very difficult and more salient to me as I’m approaching the age in which I may have more difficulty having children. I think about it frequently but have decided that I need to wait until my PhD is completed before starting a family. (PhD student, married, no children, no age provided)

Even with an awareness of the risks of delaying childbearing, this woman perceives that she can only meet the demands of her role as a student, and, therefore, must postpone becoming a mother. The next quotation further explains the reasons aspiring female academics delay childrearing and illustrates the challenges they face when trying to achieve their personal and professional ambitions:

The problem is . . . the educational process – undergrad, grad, and postdoc – are way underpaid . . . and temporary. Who wants to have children when they are financially strapped, working all the time, and moving every 2–3 years? Not to mention that the year of maternity leave will result in a big black hole in your CV. Have fun trying to get a job then! I just think that the system is backwards. (Assistant Professor, single, no children, no age provided)

Williams (1990) has made a similar argument as this participant in her discussion of female lawyers' experiences of work–family conflict. She notes that, “[parenting] demands will be a factor for only about one-third of the life of a normal worker” (p. 357). However, academia, like law firms, are structured so that the demands to be productive and work longer hours are greater near the beginning of one's career, during the time when women are at prime childbearing age and parenting demands are at their peak. Academic women must make important decisions about their careers and families during the period in which the demands from each sphere are the greatest.

Based on the commentary of the female participants, the perception that women “choose” to reduce their productivity, leave academia, or forfeit more prestigious career opportunities in order to have children is pervasive. Several participants described a façade of acceptance within their departments; however, their comments illustrated that there are implicit messages being disseminated about the unacceptability of having children in graduate school and, “there is no doubt which [i.e., prioritizing work over family] is preferred and celebrated” (PhD student, 30, married, one child). According to the following participant, the belief that it is a “choice” to opt out of top-level productivity to focus on family demands has been used as a reason to justify negative career outcomes:

I feel women with children are judged unfairly at this university with respect to requirements for tenure and promotion...it is unfair to require the same level of productivity from a single mother with two young children than a man whose wife does 90% of the child care. The attitude of some men on this campus is, “it was their choice to have children and they should accept the consequences.”

I have heard these words spoken by male faculty. (Assistant Professor, 50, single, two children)

This quotation further illustrates the institutionalised gender norms that underpin the complications women face when trying to reconcile their dual roles. Williams (1990) argues that the work schedules of high-intensity careers “reflect a system of gender privilege” (p. 352). Women are often not afforded the capacity to allocate childcare responsibilities to their partners (if they have one), as many professional men do (Williams, 1990). Many women in the present study recognised, either consciously or unconsciously, the gendered inequities that operate within the academy and at a broader societal level.

Consequences of work–family conflict

In addition to describing their experience of work–family conflict and the structural inequities they face in their institution, many women also described the consequences of work–family conflict on their career or academic experience. While the comments in this theme came predominantly from faculty members, some graduate students recognised that early decisions about prioritising one's self and

one's family as opposed to work have repercussions:

I sometimes fear that my attempts to get through the program while maintaining my mental and relational health will backfire for me in that I will not have enough research and publishing experience and have difficulty getting an internship and employment when I am done. (PhD student, married, no children, no age provided)

Those without children tended to cite the sacrifices they had to make in terms of time spent with their partners or their friends:

I put about 50% into being a partner and 50% into being a student. I don't feel satisfied with either aspect of my life, because I can't give 100% to either. (MA student, 26, committed relationship, no children)

However, it was particularly graduate students and faculty with children who noted that it was difficult to balance their work and family roles within the academy. In almost all comments, women tended to prioritise their families at the expense of their work:

I do feel as if my dissertation has suffered because I had a child. I feel torn between the two, and have chosen to prioritize my child over my writing... It is taking me longer to finish and I worry about time-to-completion... after a full day of clinical work, spending time with my child, and household chores, I am too tired to write at night. (PhD student, 42, married, one child)

A decline in productivity or research output was a commonly cited consequence of work–family conflict. Many researchers have found that academic women (with and without children) have significantly lower research output than men (D'Amico, Vermigli, & Canetto, 2011; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016). In the next quotation, a woman describes how the time she took off to have children left her in a position of reduced productivity when it came to her career:

Both of my mat[ernity] leaves left me starting again in my lab – no projects on the burner at the beginning of the return to work; nothing in the publication pipeline; feeling behind with respect to the field...no students or staff; low confidence. (Associate Professor, 40, married, two children)

Many of the consequences discussed by participants touched on how they have not been as successful in their careers as they could have been if not for the balancing of work and family demands. For instance, one participant said, "The tradeoff for keeping all the balls in the air may well be a year or two delay in a promotion application" (Associate Professor, 38, married, two children). Some women also discussed the decision to accept a position at a less research-intensive institution so that they could focus more on their families. The next quotation illustrates this: "My job was the only one I could have managed with my children. I have

considerable autonomy and have had much freedom to work around family responsibilities . . . However, the costs are reduced professional mobility and less respect” (Instructor, married, two children, no age provided). Lastly, while most participants discussed negative career-based consequences, a smaller group of participants described health consequences associated with work–family conflict. For example:

Teaching is a very demanding profession and like motherhood is not a 9–5 job. I often find myself burning the candle at both ends because I do not want to compromise on family life or on quality of job performance. This has resulted in health concerns over the last few years. (College Professor, married, one child, no age provided).

Discussion

The present study focussed on the analysis of responses about actual or anticipated concerns regarding motherhood within university and college settings from women graduate students and faculty within Canadian psychology departments. The study provides clarity about the many challenges faced by women graduate students and faculty when navigating masculine norms in the academy, making decisions about work and family, and the consequences they endure when trying to achieve a balance between work–family roles. To the authors’ knowledge, this is the first study to qualitatively examine female graduate students’ perceptions of impending work–family conflict in an academic arena, as well as their direct experiences with this conflict as they navigate the terrain of the academy. The findings suggest that well before becoming a faculty member, female graduate students are making career-related decisions and sacrifices based on the perceived incompatibility of family and career roles for women. Also of consequence is that graduate students who endeavour to pursue a career in the academy weigh the costs and benefits related to their career and family aspirations and perceive a “forced” choice option that favours the former typically over the latter. These comments echo the findings of Damiano-Teixeira (2006) that women struggle with choosing between work and family demands. They also support Williams’ (2010) argument that society as a whole (including women themselves) perceive career women’s opt-out decisions to be a personal choice, even though the masculine workplace norms that are embedded in academic institutions do not enable women to successfully balance their work and family roles.

The present study also expands Williams’ (2010) overall theory about the influence of masculine workplace norms on women’s work–family conflict into the area of academic institutions and within a Canadian context. Participants reported a detrimental effect in the realms of funding (i.e. scholarships and grants) and promotion, which directly relate to their career advancement and financial position. For women who had taken maternity leaves, there was grave concern about the implications of these leaves for their ability to successfully obtain funding and considerable scepticism that granting and promotional review boards considered

circumstances such as motherhood in their decision-making. In their discussion of these masculine workplace norms, a number of participants explicitly described the inequities in the institutional treatment of men and women. As one woman described, women are denied access to the top tiers of the academy simply for having children. The ideal “male breadwinner” employee is unburdened by child-care responsibilities that could jeopardise maximal work hours and output.

Another important advance made by the present study in relation to the identification of masculine workplace norms is the elucidation of explicit and implicit messages about being or becoming a mother in post-secondary institutions. These serve to reinforce and perpetuate the masculine-normative model of the “ideal worker”. Their content provides valuable information as to how academia is viewed (e.g. whether it is a hospitable or inhospitable environment for women with families), why some women choose not to remain in academia, and how these messages are being disseminated. Participants described disapproving stares being directed at pregnant students; verbal warnings from mentors; inconvenient meeting times; and insensitive tenure, promotion, and grant reviews as ways in which it was communicated to them that academic women with families are valued less than other students and faculty members.

The present study also points to the need to acknowledge and address the lower productivity rates of women in academia, particularly those with familial responsibilities. Several researchers have found female professors to have significantly lower lifetime publication rates than male professors (D’Amico et al., 2011; McCutcheon & Morrison, 2016); however, when shorter time periods are considered or the gaps in publications as a result of maternity leaves are removed, the gender difference, in some cases, disappears (Nakhaie, 2002; Stack, 2004). If tenure and promotion committees do not acknowledge the reduced productivity and accept that this may occur for women during maternity leaves, then they will be disadvantaging women relative to their male colleagues. “Tenure clocks” should be calibrated consistently across the country so that a faculty member is evaluated only on the years in which she has been actively working (i.e. not on maternity leave); in other words, faculty should be given the opportunity to “stop” the tenure clock. Graduate students or faculty members also may choose to leave the academy completely for a period of time to have children and may be unable to secure an academic position after a number of years have elapsed without any research output. As Damiano-Teixeira (2006) found in her study of female faculty in the United States, even if female academics refocus on their careers after their children have grown, their publication record may not equal that of their peers or they may have already chosen to work in a smaller institution.

An adverse outcome of work–family conflict for female faculty members and graduate students, as well as academic institutions, is the high attrition rates of women in these milieus. Indeed, the presence of female graduate students and university faculty decreases disproportionately at each level of the academic hierarchy, a phenomenon referred to as the “leaky pipeline” (Pell, 1996; van Anders, 2004) or the “pyramid problem” (Mason, 2011). Women constitute 58.2% of students enrolled in undergraduate programmes but only 45.6% of those enrolled in

PhD programmes; and, while 41.4% of Assistant Professors and 34.7% of Associate Professors in Canada are female, they only account for 18.8% of Full Professors (Robbins & Simpson, 2009). The present study offers some insight into why the academic pipeline may be leaking. The pressure graduate students and junior faculty members feel to “choose” between work and family, the masculine norms that pervade the academia, and the consequences associated with work–family conflict appear to prompt some women to select alternative careers or to sacrifice prestigious academic positions or promotions.

Limitations

A limitation of the present study is that no information was attained about the challenges facing male academics in balancing their work and family roles. With regard to the perspective of men, some research suggests that men also face challenges balancing their dual roles (Reddick, Rochlen, Grasso, Reilly, & Spikes, 2012). However, given the stark contrast between the number of comments generated by women and men in the present study, the “weight” of the challenges related to role balancing appears to be greater among female academics. Indeed, other investigations of young women’s (ages 18–26) negotiations surrounding motherhood and careers suggest that many women anticipate being predominantly responsible for childrearing when in a relationship with a male partner (Jacques & Radtke, 2012).

The results of the present study cannot and should not be generalised to all female academics. While half of the female-generated comments related to work–family conflict, only 19.3% of the total number of women who completed the quantitative survey provided comments. The remaining 80.7% may or may not have also experienced work–family conflict and been affected by masculine workplace norms. However, there were no significant differences in work–family conflict scores between women who provided comments and those who did not based on the five work–family questions included in the survey. Further, it cannot be assumed that the women who provided comments and did not mention work–family conflict have not also experienced difficulties in role balancing. An additional missing perspective from the female academic population is that of women who have chosen to leave academia. The graduate students and faculty surveyed provide some insight about women who have left in their discussion of female peers and colleagues having to leave academia in order to fulfil their familial aspirations. Women who have left the academy could provide valuable information about the factors contributing to their decisions to leave. This future empirical angle also could assist the generation of recommendations for institutional change.

Limitations on generalisability also relate to the sample being from the discipline of psychology within Canadian institutions. We expected that this convenience sample would contribute to a better response rate because we are “in-group” members and would enable better analysis of the data because we have a more intimate understanding of the structure and climate of Canadian psychology departments. Differences in institutional policies and practices in other countries

may result in variations in women's work–family conflict. Also, a woman's experience of work–family conflict and the masculine norms she will encounter in her workplace will likely be different by discipline. Psychology is increasingly becoming a female-dominated space (Kite et al., 2001) and, therefore, the results of the present study may not be generalisable to fields that are comparatively more male-dominated.

The data collection method also constitutes a limitation. While it provided spontaneous accounts of experiences and perceptions that arguably could be the most salient to the participants, it did not allow for the researchers to follow-up on the comments. As such, saturation could not be assessed. An in-depth exploration of the participants' comments could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of their role balancing and work–family conflict experiences.

Recommendations

The present study suggests that improvements to the environment of academic institutions are needed to ameliorate the levels of work–family conflict experienced by female graduate students and faculty. Williams (1990, 2010) has advocated for a reconstruction of the wage labour system to eliminate the masculine norms that prohibit women from accessing the same success in balancing a career and family that men are afforded. She has acknowledged that this is a long-term goal but there are incremental steps that can be made to improve women's work–family conflict. For example, different work commitment expectations could be introduced for parents and nonparents depending on the age of dependents as work–family conflict is at its peak when children are young (e.g. Stack, 2004). While this is a progressive suggestion, how this type of flexible policy should be best implemented requires further thought as it leads to many complex questions (e.g. Would this flexibility extend to faculty with elder care responsibilities? How would the policy be adapted for parents with children who have physical or mental health challenges?). Additionally, while some initiatives, such as the “stop the tenure clock” policy, endeavour to offer academic mothers flexible options, research suggests that these strategies are not being used to their full potential (Bhattacharjee, 2004; Waltman & August, 2005). Unless the culture of the academy changes, academic mothers may not feel comfortable taking advantage of these policies. Further research is needed to identify ways in which they could be implemented more effectively to improve overall usage.

As an incremental step forward in changing college and university culture, sensitivity training and education surrounding work–family issues for administrators and faculty members could potentially improve support for mothers within academic departments, reduce the negative messages surrounding motherhood, and prevent further attrition of female graduate students and faculty members in the academy. To achieve greater communication about these issues, universities and colleges within Canada should create Work–Family Issues Committees to foster multi-directional dialogue. All faculty and graduate students could bring work–family concerns forward to the Committee. The Committee members would have a

mechanism by which they can make concerns known to unions or faculty and graduate associations, and university administration.

A final recommendation is for mentoring of graduate students. It appears that the female graduate students who participated in this study are trying to navigate a system that disseminates negative rather than affirmative messages about having a child(ren). As well, it appears that graduate students may not perceive positive messages from female faculty who have children, but rather seem to be informed about the many challenges and difficulties they will experience if they pursue academia and incorporate motherhood into their lives simultaneously. Instead, non-academic work environments are viewed as more welcoming and hospitable, a sentiment that signals the potential loss of highly qualified, talented personnel. The development of mentorship programmes for women that focus on “life-related” issues, rather than the more singular pursuit of an academic placement or job, is strongly recommended.

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Note

1. Of the 149 questions, the topics were academic climate (31), work satisfaction (12), stress (7), work–family conflict (5), partner support (4), attitudes towards career mothers (11), hours worked in various areas (7), publication information (6), supervision/mentoring and departmental support (31), university and personal demographics (34), and one question soliciting general comments.

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