KRISTIN MARSH

# Motherhood in U.S. Academe

## How the Presence of Women Disrupts the Ideal Worker Model in Colleges and Universities

*In this article, I consider the myth of the ideal worker and the consequences of that myth for mothers. Behind the constant juggling necessary to be successful professionally as an academic mother is the unstated assumption that a woman's caregiving role should be her primary, essential commitment, and women graduate students and early-career academics have to think strategically about how family fits into the institution of academe. Rendering invisible the whole-person needs of workers, but especially women and mothers, academe assumes an ideal worker unencumbered by family or other life constraints. My interviews with tenured women academic sociologists provide an institutional standpoint for understanding workplace needs of parents. Towards positive change, university policies must be coupled with department and colleague support because workplace climates are experienced by individuals at an intersection of institutional policies and interpersonal interactions. Colleagues must not be expected to "take up the slack" for mothers asking for time off for family leave; nor should departmental intransigence be allowed to interrupt an administration's efforts to institute flexible policies. There is positive potential in mothers' increased visibility in academe, but it will only be realized through active public support from colleagues and administrators, alike.*

The literature on gender and work in academe is replete with stories of the constant juggling necessary to be successful professionally as a woman academic (Philipsen; Ward and Wolf-Wendel). Behind this gendered discussion are understandings that women's caregiving role is presumed to be her primary, essential commitment. It becomes beholden on women graduate students— early PhDs, and early-career academics—to think strategically and carefully about how family life will fit into the culture of academe. Academe (as do

other workplaces) assumes an *ideal worker* unencumbered by family or other life constraints. The reality that caregiving responsibilities fall primarily on women conflicts directly with workplace assumptions that family is a private personal matter that should be negotiated in the home (Acker; Williams; Palley and Shdaimah). A consistent theme of the scholarship in this volume is that women need collegiality and mentoring to help navigate the tough terrain of motherhood in academe, and it can be useful to recognize that some situations are more family friendly than others (Schiffrin and Liss). Strategies for better navigating the institution represent individual-level solutions that may only work for some faculty, but career mentoring that recognizes family can mean professional survival for women. Explicit and unapologetic efforts at reform can target the gender schemas that stereotype mothers as uncommitted workers; in addition, changing the climate and rules of the game to accommodate the *whole person*—she who has a home life, personal responsibilities, and interests outside of her work commitments—will help shape a more inclusive, supportive workplace for the next generation. Furthermore, greater transparency and discussion of whole-person needs help broaden responsibility for household responsibilities and care work beyond the efforts of women. Mothers shoulder most of the child care; but fathers can, too, and they are increasingly called on to do so.

In this paper, I consider the myth of the ideal worker and the consequences of that myth for mothers. My interview research on tenured women academic sociologists provides an institutional standpoint for understanding the workplace needs of parents. At all stages in the academic pipeline—from graduate school through the job market and through first and subsequent jobs—the ideal worker model prevails. I discuss the status of women in U.S. academe and introduce the discipline of sociology as an example of an academic job market that is relatively, though unevenly, inclusive of (white) women. First, I introduce my interview research methods and sample description. Next, I identify and explore themes that are central to the question of family-friendly workplace policies and are salient across my interviews. I discuss institutional policies such as day care facilities and support for family leave and question the efficacy in activating supportive policies—or negotiating terms when policies are not in place. As I have argued elsewhere (Marsh), institutional policies must be coupled with department-level and collegial support, and workplace climates are experienced by individuals at an intersection of institutional policies and interpersonal interactions. The university must not expect department chairs and colleagues to "take up the slack" for mothers asking for a maternity leave; nor should universities allow department intransigence to interrupt an administration's efforts to adopt flexible policies since the legitimacy of family and motherhood demands creative policy adaptation. Just as

universities anticipate faculty taking sabbatical and otherwise "earning" time off with research and community commitments, planning can accommodate needed time off for personal and family obligations. Who takes up the slack? Whereas department faculty members often cover for mothers in practice, adjuncts and contingent faculty are usually asked to fill in when these needs are anticipated in the short term. However, good strategic planning at the departmental, college, and university levels can anticipate time off for family responsibilities as well as for research. This approach stretches our narrow conception of work and aligns easily with a whole-life approach to productive careers and healthy institutions.

There is positive potential in mothers' increased visibility in academe; mothers and fathers who share care work at home unveil the ideal worker model as a static throwback, a relic of a romanticized, never-existent time gone by. However, as an ideal (even an unrealistic one) the unencumbered, fully committed worker symbolizes the competitive potential between academics that universities imagine that they thrive on. It is up to academics themselves to insist that family-friendly policies are implemented and actively supported by college administrators and chairs.

## Gender in Academe and in Sociology

Social science literature establishes the persistence of gender inequalities in society as a whole (Reskin; Padavic and Reskin; AAUW "The Simple Truth") as well as among faculty in academe. At nearly all institution types (research universities, teaching colleges and universities, community colleges, private and public institutions), women are paid less on average, have a lower and slower rate of promotion, are concentrated in fields paying less on average, and are more likely to hold contingency (non-tenure track and adjunct) positions than are men (West and Curtis; Fox). The most recent data show some positive trends toward narrowing the gender gap in hiring and promotion, although full gender parity has only been achieved at the community college level (Thornton).

Various societal, institutional, and individual factors contribute to the persistence of gender discrimination, and a variety of scholarly interpretations on the extent of gender discrimination exists (Ferree and McQuillan; Park; Wright). For example, feminist priorities—such as establishing women's centers and women's studies departments, mentoring junior faculty, and conducting status of women reports—are underrewarded and undersupported (Bird, Litt, and Wang). Complicating matters, academe has increasingly relied on contingent faculty, which undermines job security, career advancement, and academic freedom (Thornton; Bataille and Brown; West and Curtis). Various

dimensions of restructuring have the potential to exacerbate already-existing inequalities that are patterned by gender.

At the inter-institutional level, the family and academe are "greedy institutions," as both spheres of life require near-total commitment of participants (Coser; Grant, Kennelly, and Ward). Women and men professionals struggle with issues of juggling family and work priorities (Spalter-Roth and VanVooren), but they continue to face these issues from a different culturally-shaped vantage point in which women remain primarily *responsible* for housekeeping and childcare.[1] Individual choices about when to start a family affect women's careers directly, and more women are either consciously choosing to wait to have children—until a permanent position is underway or tenure is secured—or are struggling to juggle family responsibilities with pressures to meet publishing expectations and teaching commitments (Philipsen; Kennelly and Spalter-Roth).

At the individual level, cultural and institutionally-shaped processes do affect women as they struggle to make the grade. However, also at the individual-interactional level, both women and men (students, faculty, and administrators) inadvertently apply gender schemas in evaluating the performance of male and female faculty. Men are expected to perform competently and to be good leaders while women are expected to display expressive traits, to nurture, and to act in the interest of community (Spence and Sawin; Martin and Halverson; Porter and Geis). Following these assumptions, women will eventually become mothers and will be distracted from work by their primary caregiving responsibilities at home. In short, gender schemas "skew our perceptions and evaluations of men and women, causing us to overrate men and underrate women" (Valian 208). The process of differential evaluation between men and women contributes to hiring and placement differences as well as pay, tenure, and promotion inequities, which accumulate over time and throughout the course of a career (Valian).

This continued inequality, however, exists alongside expanding professional opportunities for previously excluded groups, particularly white women and (less so) women and men of colour. Inequalities persist, but a meaningful number of women have had highly successful careers at prestigious colleges and universities and in fields that, until recently, were reserved for men. Today, women make up nearly half of all newly earned PhDs, compared with just over 10 percent in 1960; in 2006, women made up 34 percent of full-time faculty and 45 percent of tenure-track faculty at PhD granting institutions and 31 percent of tenured faculty at all institutions (West and Curtis; U.S. Department of Education "Digest of Education Statistics").

In the U.S., women's growing representation in sociology departments mirrors academe as a whole. Women are more likely to hold faculty positions at teaching

colleges, two-year institutions (community colleges), and on contingency and part-time basis. Men are still overrepresented at research universities, in the top ranks, and in administration. For example, in 2006-07 women still made up only 32 percent of sociologists at the rank of full professor (American Sociological Association). However, women are making strides as sociology appears much more women friendly than the traditional male disciplines of engineering, law, computer science, and natural science (Fox; Epstein; Hagan and Kay; Frehill). Currently, sociology holds more of a middle-ground position where neither gender neutrality nor male-dominance can be assumed. Therefore, a closer look at women's experiences within sociology can contribute to a deeper understanding of the stakes at such a threshold level of gender inclusiveness (Bottero). Are white women and women of colour allowed to participate and thrive in academe only if they subscribe to the long-standing normative expectations of the status quo in positivist social science (Moore), and only if they mimic the (white and male) unencumbered, wholly-available employee in the ideal worker model?

## Women Sociologist Report on Their Workplace Experiences

This article uses interviews from a project in which I explore the professional trajectories of women in academe, including perceptions of accomplishment and success as well as attributions of that success. I draw on unstructured, in-depth interviews with twenty sociologists in midlevel and advanced positions. Qualitative methodology allows for an exploration of emergent themes and subjective experiences, calling attention to a more detailed and nuanced understanding of experience (Patton; Silverman). In my sampling, I identified associate and full women professors listed on sociology department websites. I took advantage of snowballing opportunities when they were offered, and I contacted faculty at regional and national conferences. The sample includes fifteen white women from the U.S., three African American women from the U.S., and one Indian woman from India. Four were full professors and seventeen were associate professors at the time of the interview. Most interviews were in person and the average length of interview was ninety minutes.

Although my initial focus was on gendered attributions of accomplishment, open-ended questions and semi-structured interview schedule allowed respondents to expand on questions about a supportive institutional climate in ways that were salient to their experiences. I did ask about things like the presence of childcare and family leave policies, but I did not anticipate much elaboration on these issues. What I heard was a consistent theme of family-to-work spillover and the lack of institutional support for family obligations.

**Challenging the Ideal Worker as Unencumbered by Caregiving**

One of my respondents, Amie, (a pseudonym, as are all others) alerted me to the weight of the ideal worker model on new mothers. She discussed her first conference trip after maternity leave. She was still nursing and took her baby with her to the conference, and she told me that it would have helped her so much to have had childcare for three hours while she gave her presentation, but she ended up paying for it herself. In reference to the practice of supporting travel expenses such as hotel and meals, she said:

> … the university understands that I need to eat, and they understand that I need to sleep. So they understand that I am a living human being. And yet they don't care that my baby is a living human being who might need my actual physical body…. He is nourished by my body that you're feeding and housing. And so we might need to take that into account…. They understand you need pens and paper to do your job. They don't care that you need childcare to do your job.

Amie's critique recognizes that mothers are allowed to continue to do their labour-market jobs, but the family costs resulting from work obligations are the responsibility of the family. Academic mothers must leave their babies at home or pay for the cost of being a mother *and* a worker themselves.

Amie's observation speaks to the lack of childcare facilities throughout academe. None of my respondents reported having childcare at work. I only asked about university-provided childcare when it was relevant to the individual interview, which, in fact, was the majority of my respondents. Nobody reported having on-site daycare or support for off-site daycare. This is a point of contention on many campuses, but universities have generally avoided committing resources, even though graduate students would benefit as well. Pat, a later-career associate professor, discussed the pivotal questions of whether students (the customer) need it and whether it remains a salient issue for faculty and staff over their life course:

> We have tried ever since way before I came; they tried to get childcare on campus and they have never done it. My suspicion is that they sort of know that the people who want it, their demand will drop as soon as their kids are out of it. So they stonewall it … but there still isn't one and that's not just for faculty but we don't have students who have children … and then there's staff, of course.

And Danielle, who had told me earlier in the interview that her husband's

demanding job had meant that she was the one who had to be flexible with her schedule, told me of the stress of trying to piece together time off:

> …the first time I was pregnant we didn't have any maternity leave if you had your baby in the summer. So, we're allowed to bank courses if we do field studies or internships and so that worked out. I just had banked a bunch of courses so I was able to take a fall off and then this time (second time), we had a two-course maternity leave at that point, but it didn't say whether it was a three or four hour course. Well, I teach several four-hour courses so he [my chair] wouldn't give me those. So, it turned out that I had to teach a course up until I couldn't teach it anymore. So, it was bad and then a colleague had to take over. It was bad for students, bad for me … it was stressful…. I just finally figured that they didn't care, but I cared.

She updated me on change in policy: "Now they do have maternity leave for three or four credit courses. You get two courses off, but beyond that you have to negotiate to try to get a semester off. I don't know why they don't just give a semester off."

Again, the experience of academic mothers is often really shaped by an individual administrator or chair, or by supportive colleagues. Danielle went on to tell me that now they have a different provost and he seems more supportive. In addition, they now have a mediating advocate for the faculty members, and she has helped Danielle negotiate to have her January course count. The faculty advocate explained to the provost that if he didn't want to count the January course, it would create a hostile environment. Things are continuously contested and negotiated case by case, but having a third-party advocate can help bring legitimacy to a faculty mother's position.

The implementation of explicit maternity and family leave policies, in contrast with the continued resistance to providing day-care, has increased, as Ward and Wolf-Wendel point out. Since my respondents all have been in academe long enough to have achieved tenure, and many are later-career sociologists, their own experiences of navigating motherhood (or other caregiving responsibilities) have met a culture of gradually changing policies. The terrain remains uneven, but some universities offer a combination of short-term paid maternity leave or unpaid extended family leave (Sullivan, Hollenshead, and Smith). The overriding sense throughout my interviews was that things are changing for the better.

Their own experiences, however, were often of having to piece together a leave strategy. Institutional policies, even when formally accommodating, always met with the uncertainty of actual departmental accommodation. How supportive is the chair? How helpful are the colleagues? Does the dean

intervene when the chair isn't willing to accommodate? My participants felt that support for mothers depended on the department being willing to help a faculty member make things work.

I was surprised by Pat's insistence that her department was supportive. Before she achieved tenure, she had one child. She gave birth to a second child after achieving tenure:

> [The department was] wonderful, but there was no family leave, so they had to teach for me and I had my first baby in September and people thought that I had done that on purpose to challenge the policy, because they always have their babies summer. I'm like, that was not planned…. But they taught for me. I had a C-section and whereas I was planning only to be out for a week, I was out for three weeks and they were teaching all my classes and at that time we had four classes so they were like "take as long as you need but hurry back!"

Pat also raised the question of how leave is used by men versus women. She said that she fears that men take their leave and don't do the childcare:

> They take the leave and do their research. I don't know about her husband, but I think that would be an interesting question. Women are obviously recovering from childbirth and they are doing childcare so that it's not really, you know, we stop the tenure clock for that semester. But are men stopping the tenure clock and therefore getting extra time?

My concern is that both women and men are pressured to keep working while on leave from academe. The research indicates that men are afraid to take a leave because of a cultural bias against it. But women, too, are afraid to stop working, whether the tenure clock has paused or not. Whether because of *flexibility stigma* in academe or more generally in the U.S. workplace, workers in competitive labour markets worry that taking advantage of family-friendly policies signals a lack of professional commitment (Munsch, Ridgeway, and Williams; Cech and Blair-Loy). A department culture that supports its employees matters to women, and when the culture feels hostile to negotiating schedules and time off around family needs, mothers are reluctant to take advantage of the policies that are in place (Solomon).

## Graduate Students as Workers

The ideal worker model affects graduate students to an exaggerated extent. The power imbalance between faculty and graduate students and the constant

scrutiny by mentors and professors (not to mention competition among peers) means that the ideal graduate student not only is seen as unencumbered by caregiving obligations—and is therefore likely male—but also is seen as young, currently single, and available for work around the clock. To become a "rising star" in academe, graduate students must be seen as dedicating all of their time to graduate work.

Because women face many time-consuming activities associated with motherhood, they are less likely to follow a singular school-to-career pathway. Damaske argues that women are asked the wrong question when asked if they are currently working. This snapshot view of a woman's relationship with paid labor misses the variety of pathways that women may take. Faced with motherhood, women may remain steadily employed, but they may also pull back temporarily or their work may be involuntarily interrupted as workplaces are often not accommodating of family needs.

My respondents reported a variety of pathways into and through academe. Some started graduate school at a traditionally young age after finishing their undergraduate degrees. But several women came to graduate school with children, some at an older age while others were young with children. Not only can this be problematic in terms of living up to the ideal worker model, but it can be difficult socially, among peers. For example, Aminah was still young, but was recently divorced with young children, when she started her PhD program. She told me that most of her peers were male, several were married, and that their wives babysat for extra money. She wasn't sure who to hang out with at social gatherings (such as children's birthday parties) because she did not feel she had much in common with either group. She ended up chatting with the mothers about their children, even though she would rather have been talking about research and intellectual topics. Aside from motherhood posing a social dilemma for her, Aminah reported that men faculty members went bowling on a regular basis with male graduate students, which marginalized women students in the department.

Aminah and others in my sample effectively traversed this problematic, gendered terrain. But the research on the leaky pipeline in academe shows that when faced with having to keep family responsibilities invisible, or at least to effectively juggle them to maintain the mirage of an ideal worker, women often either consciously decide it's not worth it—they prioritize their partners' careers over their own—or they simply don't make it through the job market and tenure process. Although my respondents (all tenured associate or full professors) kept their careers on track (stayed in the career pipeline), women in general are more likely than men to drop out of academe along the way: they leak out of the pipeline. According to Mason and Gouldon, new PhD mothers are 29 percent less likely to land a tenure track job than are women

without children, and married women are 20 percent less likely than unmarried women to land a tenure track job. Further down the line, tenure-track women are 23 percent less likely than men to earn tenure and to be promoted to associate professor. And, finally, women are 25 percent less likely than men to become full professors within sixteen years of employment. In sum, women fall through the cracks in the academic pipeline at higher rates than men do. In addition, women report lower levels of job satisfaction and higher levels of stress than do their male counterparts (Jaschick).

### The Importance of Mentoring

Every woman I interviewed emphasized the importance of mentoring. Some reported that they had had extensive, helpful mentoring in graduate school (mostly from women faculty members, but sometimes from men), and some shared that they had received excellent mentoring as junior faculty. Others, however, reported a distinct lack of mentoring, either in graduate school or in their early career. Janice, for example, emphasized that her negotiating skills on the job market had suffered because of a *lack* of mentoring. Nobody told her that she should negotiate her starting salary. When Magda landed a competitive, highly ranked position at a university, her graduate school faculty seemed surprised she had had the nerve to apply for the job in the first place. Gail, on the other hand, spoke with overwhelming gratitude at the support and encouragement she had received in graduate school, and she insisted to me that this was critically important. As an associate professor at a private liberal arts college with a heavy teaching and service load, she expressed thriving within an institutional context that encourages student-faculty engagement on a one-to-one basis.

But themes of mentoring were exclusive to the domain of work: how to get published, how to navigate the job market, how to collaborate effectively, and how to navigate departmental politics regarding heavy service obligations for women. Topics related to mentoring mothers and fathers, on the other hand, were conspicuously absent from the interviews: how to talk about family friendly policies on the job market; where to look for policies on university websites; how to interview the job as much as interview *for* the job. The academic job market is one with a history of "don't ask and tell only if you dare" interactional processes. By law, hiring universities are not allowed to ask interviewees about their marital, partner, or family status. In order to avoid perceptions of gender bias, universities err on the side of thinking they can appear to be gender blind, or at least family blind. This formal neutrality creates a situation in which an interviewing faculty member cannot tell a short-listed candidate what kinds of policies and accommodations would be helpful to a new faculty member who

might be a new mother or father. Therefore, the burden for disclosure falls to the candidate, who is in a precarious enough position.

## Conclusion: Where Do We Go from Here?

What do my interview respondents add to what we already know about juggling career and family? Gender inequalities in academe largely persist because of gender schemas that result in statistical discrimination. Women are assumed to be caring, nurturing, and emotional simply because they are women. They are not assumed to be intellectually brilliant or even to be authorities in their field and they are assumed to be less committed to work than men because of their expected primary role in the family. Cultural norms around the family make women primarily responsible for their children and the household, which affects their ability to be unencumbered at work.

I have looked at the stories of twenty women sociologists from my own standpoint as a peer who shares with them an understanding of gender, career, and family in a disciplinary and institutional context. Many academics can relate to the personal angst of trying to balance career and family, and many know the scholarship on gender and career in sociology, in academia, and in the professions. But two striking themes emerge from my interviews. First, in the moments my participants struggle with personal choices about the timing of their PhD and of their children, about their compromises between seeking high status jobs or following their partners, and about their efforts to balance their lives, they turn to one another. They turn to their mentors and other women colleagues, who themselves struggle to survive and are overworked. Second, the women from my interviews rarely get mad or angry in public and in visible ways. As Amie eloquently put it, universities need "to get it, and to step up." Because centuries of socializing have compelled women to be lady-like, they walk a fine line when they get "uppity" and take issue with the status quo (Ulrich) or even simply ask to be taken seriously (Enloe). Women, therefore, find it difficult to assert themselves because they are trying to survive in the institution of higher education, according to rules of the game that deny gender and family.

Although women generally do not make waves, they do understand their own need for institutional support. In her essay, Stephanie McNulty identifies three overlooked policy solutions, each one emerging from recent research on higher education: increased on-site daycare, as few services exist on U.S. college campuses; more highly publicized liberal family leave policies with pay, which need to be recognized as a legitimate request; and the dismantling of the glass ceiling in higher education that will enable more women to access the top spots, which seem to be reserved for white men.

Culturally, as scholars of workplace policies point out, it is bosses and administrators, at the top levels, who can fully legitimize taking advantage of flex-time and flex-place policies: they have to advertise them, they have to actively encourage them, and they have to use them (Munsch et al). It is organizational leaders who can destabilize the fear of flexibility stigma. When men and women bosses invoke family and embrace family as part of their identities as whole people, women can insist on their right to be whole people, and workplace cultures will shift. But in the meantime, colleagues can support colleagues by insisting that meetings end in time to meet daycare deadlines, that grading does not always spill into weekend work, and that family leave (whether for mothers, fathers, or for children of aging parents) is not a luxury but a legitimate request.

All women who experience these challenges in academe can work towards change. We can allow our families to be a visible part of who we are. We can ask our men and women colleagues and bosses about their families. We can resist the false divide between our public work selves and our private family selves. And, in the end, we can work toward a broader cultural shift that understands children and family as social and public values, not as personal and private problems. The ideal worker model never really fits any worker. Men often have families, and they benefit from allowing themselves to be whole people with lives outside of work; women benefit, as well, when their partners are freed up to share in caregiving and when they can embrace the whole identity of an academic mother.

[1]Men are sharing an increasing proportion of household and family tasks, even those that occur on a regular, day-to-day basis. Nevertheless, women in two-parent families still report dedicating more time to these responsibilities than do men; men report having more leisure time on a weekly basis than do women; and women continue to carry the management role, feeling the obligation to make sure that whatever needs to be accomplished is accomplished. Whether through the occasional delegation of tasks or through accomplishing responsibilities themselves, women carry the mental burden of the responsibility. A job done poorly reflects more directly on the wife/mother than on the husband/father (Hochschild).

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