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Family-Friendly?

Challenging Choices for Women in the Student Affairs Field

Anat H. Levtoy

Author's Note: During the past two years I have observed student affairs administrators, both women and men, struggle to adhere to high professional standards while balancing a relationship with a partner and/or children. Although I am a young, single woman with no current eldercare responsibilities or immediate plans to have a family, these observations have led me to research this issue. I have been profoundly impacted by several of the texts cited in this paper, and hope to raise awareness among graduate students and new professionals. In addition to my personal interest, I am intrigued by the literature's political reframing of the issue as a feminist and humanist concern. My hope is to ultimately integrate theory and practice by recommending action at the university level to assure equal access and genuine professional opportunities for those who attempt to balance their family and work lives.

Finally, a note on language. The literature cited in this article frequently uses the word "woman" as an overarching term without further reference to differences in race, class, sexual orientation, age and ability. This assumes that women as a category share identical problems and issues and expect similar resolutions. This could not be further from reality. However, the specifics of these different situations are beyond the scope of this particular article, so generalizations should be considered with care.

In particular, researchers and authors cited use terms such as "married couples" and commonly make reference to women's partners as "husbands." This word choice strongly reflects societal heterosexism and demonstrates how narrowly we have historically constructed the definition of the word "family." One man, one woman and their biological offspring are considered the "traditional family," and our professional language is not yet inclusive of other forms of partnerships and families. Although their challenges are disregarded in most of the research literature, professionals in family configurations that differ from this norm are likely to experience many of the same issues outlined in this article. Thus, their complicated professional choices are further compounded by society's dismissal of their partnerships.

Given new political developments, such as the passing of Civil Union legislation in Vermont, and the fact that increasing numbers of institutions now offer domestic partnership benefits, there is a clear mandate for more progressive research agendas which will include all types of families.

Women in the student affairs field face disproportionate challenges when attempting to combine family life with their careers. The historical and social context of women's professional work and success frame these challenges. This article will explore the concept of professional socialization, which perpetuates norms and values that enhance a male-dominated concept of work and further complicate women's choices. The author then describes the emotional challenges that women face in trying to balance career and family. Research on the issue within the student affairs field is reviewed, and specific complicating factors for the profession are detailed. Lastly, the author discusses strategies to raise awareness of these critical issues with members of the university community.

Consider this piece of advice from a guidebook for women in educational administration:

A good rule to follow if you are in an administrative position is not to talk about family issues at work unless it is critical. If you must take your child (or parent or even spouse) to a doctor's appointment, that appointment should be referred to as yours.... This cannot be stressed enough: keep personal business to yourself. (Witmer, 1995, p. 346)

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This excerpt accurately reflects the challenging realities of women attempting to combine family and work in today's professional arena. The author of the guidebook recognizes and reinforces the current paradigm of success in the work world, which does not allow any discussion of family and personal realities. Society has long considered work a sacred domain upon which family should not encroach, and women's career advancement is still conceptualized within this historically male context (Mortimer & Sorensen, 1984). Thus, advancement in the professional world must come at a cost to women's roles as nurturing family members. Women who choose to raise or support a family are often encouraged to hide that side of themselves.

Although the student affairs field is not considered to be as male-dominated, competitive or cut-throat as other business fields, women administrators still struggle to balance their dual roles. In her essay "Invisible Babies," English professor Charlotte Holmes (1998) comments:

Achieving a balance is never easy, no matter the profession. It seems a diminished life that encourages us to see our children as impediments to success, distractions to be dealt with or 'managed,' little beings sacrificed upon the altar of our productivity (p. 128).

Reclaiming the humanist and feminist value of intimate connections requires challenging the assumptions and realities which lead to this diminished life. This article summarizes a historical overview of the social context of women's professional work and success. The author then describes the emotional challenges that women face in trying to balance career and family. Research on the issue within the student affairs field is reviewed, and specific complicating factors for the profession are explored. Lastly, the author discusses strategies to raise awareness of these critical issues with members of the university community.

Social Context of Women's Work

Separation of Work and Family

Historically prevalent in American society is the "myth of separate worlds." This myth has traditionally constructed the workplace, where the (most often) male family members spent much of their lives, as a world completely separate and distinct from the family realm (Mortimer & Sorensen, 1984). Just a century ago, work was considered simply labor and was only intended to provide a livelihood for the family. The implications of an individual's involvement in the workplace were not considered, and discussion of the workplace's impact on family dynamics was rare (Mortimer & Sorensen).

Within the traditional family, gender roles were highly prescribed. Men worked outside the home and provided wages, and women were expected to tend to the family matters inside the home. The theoretical separation between work and family was thus easily maintained, until the 1960s when middle class women began to work outside the home in large numbers. However, working women often received significantly lower wages than men for equal work. This discrepancy was justified with the assumption that women did not need to support a family with their income (Gideonse, 1984).

Women's Work

Women's work was not historically conceptualized as a "career." It was assumed that women did not want or need to engage in interesting and stimulating work which would offer opportunities for personal growth and advancement. Evidence indicates that "employers often gave women fewer opportunities than men because employers assumed that women's paid work is less important to women than their family responsibilities, making them less committed to paid work" (Reskin & Padavic, 1994, p. 148). Women who did work outside the home were clustered in occupations that made use of their "natural" traits as homemakers and emphasized social and nurturing skills. These positions traditionally included teaching, nursing, counseling, and service positions. Jobs open to women contrasted sharply with men's positions, which were typically more high-powered supervisory or managerial jobs requiring a variety of skills (Borman & Frankel, 1984). Even today, gender role socialization suggests that young women should imagine themselves primarily as wives and mothers. Women may not feel encouraged by society to seek professional employment for their own personal development.

Impact on the Workplace

The percentage of married women in the workforce has risen dramatically from 4% working outside the home at the turn of the century (Reskin & Padavic, 1994) to 61% in 1994 (Herz & Wooton, 1996, p. 44). In the past 20 years, a combination of factors including the women's movement, a rise in educational opportunities for women, and aggressive affirmative action policies have resulted in women acquiring more power-oriented professional positions. However, the entry of women into the workforce and their success in rising up the ladder has not yet changed many of the fundamental assumptions behind career advancement and development.

The definitions of success for women in professional fields continue to be based on the male model of professional socialization that pre-dated women's appearance in the work force. A study on female corporate managers states:

Ostensibly, women holding professional positions in corporate organizations exemplify a gender free concept of behavior. To succeed in an environment that requires characteristics ordinarily associated with maleness, women must eschew a relationship orientation and adopt an independent achievement stance that has been assumed to be typical of men. (Freeman, 1990, p. 9)

Professional Socialization

The concept of professional socialization is useful in understanding how a male model of success continues to be perpetuated. Socialization is the process by which an individual acquires the norms, values and behaviors of a group (Reynolds, 1992). Thus, women entering a profession may have to adhere to these unstated values and assumptions in order to affirm their commitment to professional success. The process consists of three stages: (a) the anticipatory stage (recruitment and choice of field), (b) the occupational entry and induction stage (schooling and preparation, mentorship), and (c) the role-continuance stage (high degree of commitment and involvement). This theory has been used in an attempt to explain the differing accomplishments of men and women in academic and corporate careers (Clark & Corcoran, 1986).

The existing work culture creates a set of expectations and norms that new entrants to a field are expected to follow. Each stage of socialization can present challenges for the working woman. In some cases, behaviors and values that are typically seen as signs of high dedication to success in a professional position come into conflict with family commitments.

Two aspects of employment illustrate how professional socialization in a career field may disadvantage women: an uninterrupted employment history and geographic mobility. During the first and second stages of Reynold's socialization model, the anticipatory and entry/induction stages, a woman would learn that a professional's resume is expected to demonstrate steady promotion through a series of related positions. Since she has been socialized into these norms, a woman may come to hold these values herself as she reaches the third stage of involvement in her career, the role-continuance stage.

Her degree of commitment and involvement to her field may come into question if she does not follow these professional "standards" into which she has been socialized. This may result in problems; there is evidence that women who choose to take time off from work to start a family or care for their family members are more likely to receive decreased wages and be passed over for promotion opportunities (Borman & Frankel, 1984).

A 1994 court case, *Fisher v. Vassar College*, clearly illustrates this point. Dr. Cynthia Fisher was a biologist at Vassar from 1977 through 1986. At that time she was denied tenure by her department "which, although conceding the high quality of her scholarship and teaching, charged that after the completion of her postdoctoral studies in 1965, she had devoted nine years entirely to her family and personal life" (Glazer-Raymo, 1999, p. 76). Her choice to pause her career development for several years was not considered appropriate by her colleagues, and her professional commitment was still in question almost twenty years later. Vassar was initially found guilty of sex discrimination based on Fisher's age and marital status, however this decision was reversed by a divided Second Circuit appeals court in 1996. The Supreme Court has declined without comment to hear this case further (Glazer-Raymo).

Similarly, in the case of geographic mobility, a woman may be socialized to believe that her advancement up the professional ladder depends on her willingness to relocate and make a geographic move. This may present a drawback for women during the role-continuance stage; evidence shows that women are still more likely to follow their spouses than husbands are to follow their wives in order to pursue a career promotion (Reuschmeyer, 1981).

The powerful process of professional socialization perpetuates models of employment and success that may put women at a disadvantage. The realities of combining a family and a career may be incompatible with the current values of a profession one has been socialized into. If women choose to challenge their professional socialization, their sincere commitment to their career is often questioned and doubted.

Emotional Challenges of Combining Work and Family

For many women the highly personal choice of motherhood needs to be played out in public terms (Freeman, 1990). Women, more so than men, have to make a conscious decision about if and when to start a family, knowing that this choice may not fit with the values and the work culture into which they have been socialized. Despite changes to our society and the conception of work, if women want to pursue a successful career they must consider the potentially detrimental effects that having a family may have on their professional advancement.

Dual Roles

Working outside the home does not necessarily imply a reduction in women's responsibilities in the home. In the early 1980's the term "double shift" was coined to refer to this reality. Reskin and Padavic (1994) observe: "In addition to working many women are responsible for caring for four groups: themselves, husbands, children, and elderly parents or in-laws. All require considerable time and emergencies that cannot be scheduled off work time" (p.147). Once women return home from their day job, they often perform a full day's work, including chores and childcare. Studies indicate that women still spend close to double the amount of hours that men do on household chores. Estimates of working hours per week for these "double day" women range from 65 to 84 hours a week (Reskin & Padavic).

Personal Challenges

The long hours and mounting demands required of women are often emotionally taxing. The literature on working women consistently refers to the stress women experience while attempting to balance work and home lives. Working women report a variety of negative emotions, including exhaustion, stress, discouragement, despair, and emotional imbalance. Lack of time is consistently mentioned as the most critical concern (Bean & Wolfman, 1979). Working mothers in particular feel caught in a trap; if they spend time at work, they feel guilty for not attending to their children. If they spend time at home, their employer may perceive that the women lack commitment to their work. Women also report longing for increased personal time for recreation and relaxation, which they are rarely able to enjoy (Bean & Wolfman, 1971; Coiner & George, 1998; Rueshemeyer, 1981).

These cumulative negative consequences suggest that the current structure of professional employment does not allow women the full range of free choices in personal matters if they wish to be successful in the professional arena. The limited range of personal freedoms in the professional arena prompts some authors to claim that "women who choose [emphasis added] not to parent can hardly be said to have exercised something as benign as free choice" (Diamond, 1998, p. 60). This dilemma is particularly poignant for the field of student affairs, which is founded on the values of equal access, equal rights and the development of the whole person.

Women in Student Affairs

Studies Within Student Affairs

Few studies have explored women who are balancing home and family lives in the field of student affairs. In 1985, Nancy Evans conducted a study of women's career development in student affairs in which she interviewed women administrators in Indiana. Although her inquiry did not focus on balancing family and work, she found that many of the women mentioned that family responsibilities had conflicted with their career

development. Her results indicated that younger women and women who had never married were more likely to exhibit continuous work patterns, consistent with findings outside of the academy. The married women with children that Evans interviewed suffered from role conflict and guilt over not having enough time for their children. Evans also found that the married women's husbands were supportive of their work as long as the women were compromising and the men were not called to alter their career plans. This observation raises concerns about inequality: for women, being married and having a family seems to act as a disadvantage and barrier, while it does not appear to hinder men who seek professional advancement (Chliwniak, 1997).

Martha Marshall and Craig Jones (1990) conducted a survey to investigate how women's childbearing sequence influenced their career development. Their respondents, members of the National Association for Women Deans, Administrators, and Counselors, indicated that many of the women who had children felt that they had paid a high price in professional advancement. Women often felt forced into making a choice between their career and their family life, because they could not successfully foresee combining both aspects of their identity. One respondent said: "I regret having had to choose.... As my children leave home, it is sometimes hard to touch the satisfactions [of having a family], while the effect on my career is all too apparent" (Marshall & Jones, 1990, p. 535).

June Nobbe and Susan Manning (1997) conducted a comprehensive study of issues for mothers in student affairs. They interviewed 35 women administrators who had reached at least the rank of director. An important theme that emerged was the great effort women unfailingly made to take personal initiative in balancing work and family obligations in an environment which was not always supportive of their difficulties. The respondents consistently spoke of meticulously planning their family choices and attempting to minimize inconvenience to colleagues, for example by carefully timing their pregnancy. Women returning from maternity leave often felt scrutinized on the job; they were aware that fellow administrators were watching to see how they would manage. Many of the women had only seen professionals make the choice to take a "time out" or slow down their career ascent once they started a family. They could not recall positive role models for combining a successful career with a stable family life.

Some of the key factors that made their transition back to work easier were the ability to use technology and have flexible work options, finding quality and affordable child care for their children, and supportive partners. Despite the support they felt from supervisors and employers, many of the women struggled with exhaustion, confusion, and feelings of failure. They often believed that they needed to hide these feelings in order to be positive role models to others (Nobbe & Manning, 1997).

Complicating Factors for Student Affairs

The studies within the student affairs field confirm the broader research regarding pressures placed on professional women. In addition, the values held by the student affairs profession and realities in the field contribute to tough decisions for women administrators. Specific issues of concern include a work culture which values long work hours, a personal contact paradigm, and increasing expectations despite decreasing resources.

Work culture. Nobbe and Manning write:

The work culture in student affairs organizations is one that demands long hours of hard work for levels of compensation that are not competitive with the private sector. Those beginning their careers are generally the first to be asked to commit themselves to evening and weekend engagements, to live on the job, or to otherwise structure their time so that the task of managing a family would be made especially difficult. (p.108)

An example from the weekly schedule of a residence life administrator demonstrates this pattern. Live-in positions often entail 50-60 hour work weeks, including several evenings and weekends. Being on duty or on call prohibits preplanning of activities and restricts leisure and relaxation opportunities. Not only are live-in professionals expected to be accessible in their office during standard work hours, but they must also be easily reached at any time by their staff or colleagues. Historically, many of the young professionals who chose a live-in position were single and thus may not have been initially concerned about the lifestyle. However, with the growth of the field, many candidates who do not fit this mold are interested in live-in positions and are seeking

more balance between work and family. Currently, there is no viable alternative that would welcome these professionals and meet their needs, resulting in a high rate of burnout and attrition from the field.

Personal contact paradigm. While women working in the business sector can utilize technology and flexible work hours to accomplish their professional tasks from their homes, the field of student affairs has traditionally been based on concentrated personal contact. Currently, job descriptions often include heavy student interaction that cannot be accomplished in a flexible manner. Moreover, professional socialization in the field has elevated the importance of rapid and constant responsiveness to students concerns, creating a de-facto culture of overworking. While this paradigm values and champions some women's nurturing and caring sides - an aspect that male leadership models have traditionally eschewed - it also limits the possibilities for women who are seeking to balance their professional and private lives.

Increasing expectations. Terms such as efficiency, accountability, productivity and results have become more prominent in public debates of higher education in recent years, prompting financial and business concerns for institutions. Students and families have increased their expectations from student affairs staff regarding customer service and personal attention. Given this public attitude, as well as substantial budget cuts in divisions of student affairs around the country, staff members will be expected to do more with fewer resources. Fewer staff and personnel will mean that responsibilities will be redistributed among remaining staff members. This will only exacerbate the situation for female administrators who are seeking balance in their lives. Without substantial changes in working conditions, the additional workload may increase the risk of burnout and attrition, particularly for young professionals who are seeking the right time and environment in which to start a family.

Recommendations for Transformational Change

The challenging choices of balancing work and family become obvious after considering the history of women in the workplace and the process by which they are socialized into professional positions. Recommendations for change must take into account these realities which define women's roles in society, and particularly in institutions of higher education. It is thus impossible to create one list of recommendations that will work for women at every college and university.

I strongly believe that women's challenges in the field of student affairs must be connected to questions in society at large. These would include critical and political issues such as: who shapes the work culture; who has power in the public sphere of work; who determines what is "valuable" work and who is considered a "successful" professional; and are women accorded formal rights, but in substance, their opportunities limited?

Enacting changes on campus without consideration of such questions may limit the possibility of true systematic transformation. Systemic change does not mean simply adding on options or offering policies and solutions that only appear neutral. Suggestions for change must be tested for the possibility of "disparate impact." This legal concept assesses employment practices not only for overt discriminatory actions, but also for unintended consequences that nevertheless perpetuate inequality. A clear example is the Family and Medical Leave Act, which implies equal treatment of men and women, but will impact pregnant women far more often.

A frequent tactic to avoid institutional change is to deny the existence of this systematic bias. Thus, only an increased awareness and understanding of the challenges described in this article can initiate a true transformational change. Both women and men should work to raise critical consciousness of balancing work and family as a political issue.

The solution to the dilemma of family-work balance is too often left for women to ponder on their own. As Regina Moratz-Sanchez (1998) writes: "I didn't know in 1970 that the burdens I carried should not have been mine alone, that in a society in which women had equal opportunity, support networks for families with working parents should exist" (p.19). Student affairs professionals cannot continue to shift responsibility to individuals to change and adapt to disadvantageous and discriminatory conditions. Because professional socialization processes determine one's values and assumptions about the field s/he enters, student affairs professionals must begin to collectively identify these unspoken understandings and critically challenge them.

In order to fundamentally rethink the entire work culture and not just offer superficial solutions, professionals should initiate discussions and debates about the essential definitions of work culture, overworking, and increased balance. Only a comprehensive and transformational discussion of the issues can assure that women in the student affairs field will not continue to feel the lonely burden Moratz-Sanchez writes about.

Conclusion

Researching and writing this article has had a significant impact on my personal awareness as a woman and a student affairs professional. I look to Piven and Cloward's model of successful protest (as cited in Buechler, 2000) as a critical framework for future action. They claim that before change can occur, one must (a) define a situation as unjust, and thus question the legitimacy of social arrangements that create problems; (b) believe that change is possible and that the world (or some significant part of it) could be organized in a different fashion; and (c) believe in the efficacy of action: one must feel that his/her own actions will make a difference in changing social arrangements.

As a first step, this critical look at the social context and history of women's work allowed me to see the current conditions as unjust and redefine what I consider a truly equitable and supportive work environment. This motivated me to explore the possibilities of organizing and defining our professional practice in a changed and transformed way. Thirdly, the publishing of this article is a testament to my belief in the power of voice. I hope that it empowers others in the student affairs field to raise their individual awareness and create change.

If the field of student affairs chooses to ignore family and personal concerns, it will block professionals' aspirations for self-actualization and hinder the efforts to communicate and educate students. bell hooks speaks of an engaged pedagogy of education, which emphasizes personal well being: "Teachers must be committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (hooks, 1994, p.15). As educators striving to create a more inclusive and empowering work environment, women as well as men must strive for deep systematic change, and work to promote true balanced alternatives.

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