

Making Academic Life “Workable” for Fathers

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The pregnancy strip came back blue, and the assistant professor was excited at the prospect of becoming a father. He had invested a lot of time in his career, publishing three articles in his first two years and positioning himself on the path to tenure. But he also wanted to be involved in his child's life. He hoped to cut his teaching duties in half for a semester after the baby's birth and began to talk to colleagues about the possibility of tolling the tenure clock for a term so he could spend more time at home with the baby. However, the reactions he got were dismissive, to the point of scornful. “You're doing so well right now,” a colleague told him. “Why would you risk it?” Another senior professor was even more direct—and chauvinistic: “You have a wife at home, right? Can't she take primary duty for the kid so you can make tenure?”

This story comes from 2016, not 1956, and it took place in a political science department at a mid-sized institution. Perhaps it should not be that surprising, since mothers have faced such gendered assumptions and discrimination for years. But there is something new afoot when fathers seek to prioritize parenthood alongside work and when their institutions effectively shut them down. For that matter, fathers face a different set of social pressures than mothers do when they seek—and are seen as being—involved, if not equal, parents.

In this article, we address the experience of fathers in academe, focusing predominantly on fathers who assume equal parenting responsibilities. We discuss the specific challenges they face, including familial responsibilities, cultural expectations, and professional intransigence, and we suggest accommodations and approaches that would better meet their needs. Along the way, we distinguish the experience of academic fathers from that of mothers. Our intention is not to say that “we fathers” have it more difficult than or even as difficult as academic working mothers; it would take willful ignorance to disregard the privileged position that men, fathers included, have over women, mothers in particular, in the work world. Rather, our goal is to contribute to the conversation about academic working fathers and advance the position that the experience of fathers in the academy is unique—both against their female colleagues and in comparison to working mothers and fathers in society at large. This experience needs to be taken on its own terms and in light of ongoing conversations around toxic masculinity in particular and hegemonic masculinity and gender expectations in general. Although we refer to statistics and larger-scale studies,

most of our contribution is the result of personal stories and conversations that took place both at and as the result of the National Science Foundation-funded “Professional Advancement through Narrative” workshop in October 2017.

In our conclusion, we suggest several measures that institutions can pursue to assist fathers in balancing academic life with family life. Like their female colleagues, involved fathers would benefit from family and medical leave, flexibility in work duties, job sharing, and subsidized daycare. However, more than individual accommodations, fathers require a societal rethinking of male caregiving that renders it both “normal” and consistent with masculinity.

A CONTRAST WITH MOTHERHOOD

There have been several articles and books written on motherhood in academe in recent years (Castañeda and Isgro 2013; Childers 2018; Sternadori 2014; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2012; Young 2015; among others). Some pieces have addressed the differences between academic motherhood and fatherhood (Budig 2014; Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden 2013; Tolentino 2016); others have touched on the experiences of fathers in particular (Fotis 2013; Perry 2014). Certainly, it is well known that full-time working women earn only 80% of their male counterparts—a phenomenon hardly foreign to the academy (American Association of University Women 2018)—and that the pay gap is exacerbated by parenthood or what Budig (2014) called the “Fatherhood Bonus and the Motherhood Penalty.” This bonus and penalty relationship is not solely evident in salary gaps but also has an impact on the likelihood of achieving tenure. Waxman and Ispa-Landa (2016) showed that fathers as well as women without children are three times more likely than mothers to receive tenure.

Fathers' commitment to their work is rarely called into question in the way that mothers or even women considering motherhood may face. Conversely, and contributing to the “fatherhood bonus,” men who become fathers often are praised and their involvement with their children is seen as “cute” rather than a distraction or a nuisance. When we queried doctoral students for this piece, one PhD candidate told us that as soon as senior scholars in his field discover that he is a father, “they seem to take me more seriously—I'm immediately assumed to be working diligently, trying to finish quickly, not goofing off or running down rabbit holes.” This external validation also has a counterpart in an internalized sense of purpose. As Fotis (2013), an assistant professor at Albright College, noted, “Having a reason bigger than graduate

school to finish grad school helped me immeasurably....Having three kids helped put everything in perspective.”

So, if men have it easier than women inside academe and out, if parenthood is less a professional hindrance for fathers than mothers, what is the point of exploring the experience and challenges of academic fathers? There are at least three reasons. The nature of fatherhood is changing, yet little work

In fact, work may not even require compromises for them. However, academe has not yet figured out how to acknowledge, yet alone meet, the needs of equal fathers—much as it still fails to meet the needs of working mothers in balancing academic work and family life. How do you prepare lectures, grade papers, and conduct research when your baby won't sleep, there is soccer practice or a band concert to attend, or

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has been done to chronicle the growing distinction between “involved” and “equal” fathers. Although fathers in general fare better professionally than mothers, fully involved fathers face many of the same challenges, even in academe. Moreover, any father who seeks to balance childcare with work—let alone prioritize parenting over work duties—confronts and challenges “hegemonic masculinity,” which in the process threatens the way that others—and perhaps he—sees his own masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This distinction alone makes the experience of fathers worth considering in their own terms, especially those in academe who are presumed to be able to balance work with family life.

THE EQUAL FATHER

The past 50 years have seen a remarkable change in the role of American fathers. Through the 1960s, “patriarchal fatherhood” was the predominant model, in which fathers served as authority figures and saw their primary mission as providing for their families (LaRossa 2004). By the mid-1970s, a new model of fatherhood began to develop: the vision of the involved father. Suddenly, dads were encouraged—even expected—to take on more roles. In addition to providing for their families and enforcing disciplines, fathers were to be their children's friend and playmate, to serve as caregivers, protectors, nurturers, and advocates for their offspring. However, a much smaller percentage of men are truly equal parents (Bright Horizons 2017). The kind of dad who not only gives the children a bath and reads them a story but who also takes the morning off from work to take a child to the doctor. The dad who knows the names of his children's schoolroom friends and who has driven carpool to an after-school activity or weekend game or party. The father who also keeps the proverbial “list” in his mind of which clothes the kids have outgrown, which supplies they need for their school projects, and which groceries are needed for dinner the next night.

In many ways, academe “works” for the involved father. To the extent that these men take on some but certainly not an equal share of child-rearing duties, they are still able to prioritize work significantly ahead of family responsibilities and devote sufficient time to research, teaching, and service.

your kid is sick? For that matter, how can you find and afford good-quality childcare on an academic's salary and locate a pleasant neighborhood with decent public schools within a reasonable commute of campus? But, those issues in many ways are “background noise” to the constant drumbeat of academic responsibilities—teach your courses; meet with students; attend faculty meetings; and publish, publish, publish. Despite the relief of open-ended summers and the flexibility of time-shifting during the work week, we all know that academic life is demanding, particularly for those younger parents on the tenure track who must try to shoehorn multiple responsibilities into a single day.

SEEKING ACCOMMODATIONS (OR NOT)

Mothers have long written about the challenge of obtaining reasonable accommodations from their academic employers (National Partnership for Women & Families 2014). Indeed, one of our former colleagues has chronicled her own experience of being denied tenure when she took maternity leave, paused her tenure clock, and then was chided for not being sufficiently productive (Gagnon 2018). Yet, men do not always share in the same benefits because many institutions do not slow or stop the tenure clock for new fathers. “For men who invoke [the Family and Medical Leave Act] and use that semester to be with their child, the clock keeps running” (Leak 2011, 186).

Of course, this is if men actually seek accommodations from their institutions, and many are reluctant to do so. By that, we do not mean the involved fathers mentioned previously, who share in some of the childcare but essentially are a junior partner to their children's mother who occupies the primary caregiving role. These men might benefit from certain adjustments, such as the rescheduling of evening faculty meetings, but they do not truly “need” accommodations the way that the primary or equal parent craves.

So, what stops the equal father from seeking accommodations? Several men “fear that they'll be stigmatized as ‘less committed’ by their departments” for seeking institutional support (Marotte, Reynolds, and Savarese 2011, xi). There also is a particular view of agency and independence at work that

compels some men to resist accommodations because of their families. Fotis (2013) illustrated this sentiment when he said, “I don’t want to feel like I need to be accommodated because I have a family. I don’t want to be less than my colleagues who can focus their full attention on academic life. Or get a free pass because [I have kids]. I want to feel like having a family and being [an academic] is OK.”

simply offer practical suggestions. In retrospect, it is clear that we also were bucking up each other as men, that—in the face of societal pressure telling us to prioritize work, with fathers who had been primary breadwinners, and with partners who had sacrificed so that we could earn a PhD—we were still, fundamentally, masculine in wanting to prioritize work *and* family.

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However, fathers—especially those who prioritize child care—face a distinct challenge unknown to mothers: others’ judgments of their masculinity. By assuming much of what historically has been “women’s work,” equal fathers fear the skepticism of their peers, their friends, and perhaps even their family members about their prioritizing home life with—if not over—work duties. In this respect, the very act of asking for an accommodation is a potential threat to their masculinity in a culture that codes work as prioritized and masculine whereas family life is secondary and feminine (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

Working mothers have seen the flipside of this coin in the past, facing the withering judgments of those who would question their commitment to their children (Steiner 2017). However, for equal fathers, the challenge is not to their commitment as fathers or to their seriousness as professionals but rather to their very virility as men. If family “is a ‘distraction’ for a man, it’s assumed he must have some sort of testosterone deficiency,” Fotis (2013) explained. “For a man, success at work is culturally more important than success at home.” Therefore, if men “embrace a more active place in the lives of their children, American society” is not yet clear how to evaluate them during the current “shift in social evolution” (Leak 2011, 186).

Men may not be as accustomed as women to “going public” and sharing with others their parenting stories and their challenges (and failures) in balancing family and work life. For men to be personal in this way seems, in the words of poet Stephen Kuusisto, “like an ‘invitation to be nude in public” (Marotte, Reynolds, and Savarese 2011, xi). Still, some equal fathers are becoming increasingly comfortable in sharing their experiences, if only because they crave the support of others and need the kind of work accommodations that mothers previously sought. For one author of this article, that meant convening a lunch group of other young fathers in our assistant-professor days, looking for suggestions on how to find writing time during children’s nap schedules. Eventually, we collectively reached out to a department chair to ask for service responsibilities to be pared to levels in other units. We might very well have sought support from our female colleagues—and we did in broaching the issue of service responsibilities—but the lunch conversations did more than

To be sure, this story has a happy ending, both in finding collective support and achieving a reasonable accommodation, but the situation is not as positive for many other fathers. We spoke with several academic dads who reported feeling isolated and unsupported by their institutions. One tenured professor described a department chair who responded when he announced that his wife was pregnant with their fourth child, “You know, there is a solution for that.” Early in both his graduate-school career and the life of his child, a graduate-student father was told by his adviser that he had to choose between his research and his family. Although other faculty members from different departments agreed that such sentiments were both unrealistic and inappropriate to share with a graduate student, he eventually had to change advisers and “burn a bridge”—which presented a horrible cost in a field that depends on those bridges. Another PhD candidate said that, despite support from his dissertation supervisor, his department considered him to have made “unsatisfactory progress” for more than two years while he was in the midst of family challenges. Although his adviser acknowledged the difficulties and was willing to stand by him, the larger department seemed to dismiss the arrival of the student’s second child and a series of intense medical issues faced by his older child. These responses from faculty members, advisers, and departmental staff can have tremendous demoralizing and psychologically isolating effects on fathers.

There may be a tendency to see these stories as idiosyncratic—that if individual administrators, departments, and schools simply behaved better, then academic fathers would be better served. However, there are larger societal matters at play because working fathers are not used to having their challenges and pitfalls taken seriously. Not only does popular culture often depict them as bumbling—unable to decide on a peanut butter brand for their families when “choosy mothers” know well enough to “choose Jiff”—but there also are few publications, whether academic or popular, that address their needs. We can confirm that fact in the paucity of existing literature we found in researching this article. Even if fathers are not doing the same “heavy lifting” as mothers in childbirth and some childcare, their stories are still valid to consider. Or, as one father said, “Why isn’t my

parent juggling act worth watching? Why if I say, 'I can't go to the meeting because I have to pick up [my kid] from pre-school,' it isn't as culturally accepted as a woman picking up her child from school?" (Fotis 2013).

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CHANGES NEEDED

So, what can be done to help fathers balance academic life with their desired family responsibilities? Some of the solutions match those that mothers have sought, and sometimes won, over the last several years. Family and medical leave should be made readily available for fathers after the birth or adoption of a new child. Schools should permit flexibility in work duties, allowing parents occasionally to trade off a course for additional time (and, in all likelihood, accept a reduced salary) when children require heightened attention. Job sharing and subsidized daycare are all benefits that can promote greater productivity among parents.

None of these measures is particularly new or novel, and it is understandable if working mothers roll their eyes (or worse) at fathers advocating for and obtaining accommodations that they previously sought. On the one hand, social-movement studies show that change is more successful when broadly sought (McAdam 1999), but on the other hand, there is a taint of sexism when institutions respond to calls from men that went unanswered when pled by women. We have seen this dilemma firsthand, when one of our departments finally stopped calling faculty meetings for the late afternoon when three fathers of young children complained that the timing made it difficult for them to reach their children's daycare centers in time for pickup. Whether this is a sign of success or proof of continuing double standards in academe, we agree with Perry (2014) that “[f]athers, too, need to advocate for paid parental leave, child-care assistance, [and] flexible tenure clocks...and they need to advocate loudly, using their privileged position as a lever to move the structures of our profession....”

Yet, whatever concrete accommodations academic fathers secure, the greater priority must be to move the definition of caregiving “beyond the discussion of motherhood” and to foster “a culture that accepts the notion of male caregiving as normal” and consistent with masculinity (Perry 2014). If fathers fear others' judgments of their masculinity in balancing childcare with work, if they are reluctant to seek accommodations for concern about professional stigma, then change will prove more difficult. Academe, of course, is but one institution, and we cannot expect it to singlehandedly create that change—but it certainly can lead the way. Normalizing paternal childcare, creating a work atmosphere in which fathers are encouraged to seek accommodations, allowing fathers to toll their tenure

clocks—all of these measures set a tone and shape a culture in which equal fathers are encouraged and supported.

It may seem counterintuitive to focus on the needs of fathers at a time when “toxic masculinity” is being closely

scrutinized (Black 2018), when the #MeToo movement has drawn attention to the problems of unchecked male power. Yet, the very factors that support toxic masculinity are also those that stymie equal fathers, that delegitimize their choices, and that prevent them from obtaining appropriate accommodations to make those choices a reality. We are now two generations into involved modern fatherhood with at least one generation of equal fathers. It is time that our institutions catch up to and support the change. More particularly, it is time that our academic institutions foster a culture on campus that allows academic fathers to excel at work *and* family life.

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