

Research Brief

Institutional Ethnography as a Method to Understand the Career and Parental Leave Experiences of STEM Faculty Members

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Background

The majority of academic institutions have parental leave policies to help faculty members manage their career and personal life. Gendered patterns within organizations can influence parental leave policies. Studying these structures can help us understand how gendered policies and benefits affect the career and family life of faculty and staff members. Through the analysis of policy documents, in the context of faculty members' experiences using them, we can see how institutions are structured in gendered ways, which might then yield different kinds of solutions to think about women's underrepresentation in engineering.

Purpose

The research question we focus in this paper is: *How do institutionally generated texts shape STEM faculty and staff members' experiences in ways that prescribe their ways of being?* The aim is to use institutional ethnography to investigate the parental leave policy and to identify disconnects between peoples' experiences of the policy and the intent and structure of the policy.

Methods

Our data come from 13 interviews of faculty and staff members in the time period of 2009- 2010. Six interviewees are from STEM fields, three are administrators, and four are in non-STEM fields. The interviews covered the topics of faculty and staff members' experiences in understanding, using, or implementing the parental leave policy, its procedures, and the effect of its implementation on personal and career lives. Data were analyzed through the lens of structuration theory.

Results

Leading themes were: lack of childcare, difficulty accessing and understanding the policy information, continued work while on leave, the need to improve adoption benefits, the way that the policy is written, and adjusting pregnancy timing to better manage teaching loads. Our participants shared with us many suggestions and commentaries on how to improve the policy's procedures and interpretation.

Conclusions

Using institutional ethnography as a research method and Giddens' theory of structuration as a theoretical framework revealed that disconnects between the written policy and the people who use the policy may make careers in academia difficult for faculty deciding whether or not to expand their family. There is tacit knowledge embedded in the process of enacting the parental leave policy, forcing faculty members to rely on their department heads or administrators for navigating it effectively. Without the right network of people to master the process, faculty members may risk missing out on benefits to which they have a right.

Implications for Practice

- Childcare facilities on-campus should be expanded and a mechanism in the policy should be included to help faculty and staff members find these services before returning to work
- The university should consider offering comparable financial support for faculty members adopting children.
- Online accessibility of the policy should be improved through a user-friendly design. Moreover, policies should be edited (or written in the first place) for broader and more diverse audiences to ensure its equitable and proper interpretation.
- Parental leave policy should have a separate clause to cover the labor context of faculty members, such as grant submissions, paper deadlines, conferences, and research group advising.

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