

Research Brief

STEM Faculty and Parental Leave: Understanding an Institutions' Policy within a National Policy Context through Structuration Theory

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International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology

Background

Scholars who study women's experiences in the academic workforce and work-life balance continue to identify new or ongoing inequalities and barriers toward fuller representation in the academia. Many policies and programs have been proposed or implemented to address the inequalities and barriers women experience in STEM academic careers, including parental leave policies. However, in contrast to many other countries the United States has a less developed national policy for parental leave.

Purpose

Past researchers have explored STEM faculty members experiences with parental leave policies in the United States and abroad. However, the policies, particularly on the national scale, are quite different in other nations. In this paper we seek to explore STEM faculties experience at one institution with generous parental leave, which is situated within a larger (and less generous) policy environment. We incorporate Giddens structuration theory to guide our analysis.

Methods

Our data are come from interviews with STEM faculty who were eligible for or who took advantage of the parental leave policy at the institution. We interviewed STEM faculty members about their experience with the policy, aspects that went well, aspects that went less well, why they chose to use it (or not), among other topics. We analyzed the data for (1) difficulties STEM faculty encountered using or not using the policy and (2) how these difficulties related to affordances or lack of affordances in the larger policy environment.

Results

We identified four major themes. Two of these themes related to idea that there is a misalignment between the parental leave policy and the work circumstances of STEM faculty. This was further exacerbated by the policy being constrained only to the university. Faculty members experienced different demands from different external institutions that may or may not have similar policies. The third theme we found concerned understanding of the policy, which was complicated by the newness of the policy at the institution as well as the lack of references for handling such a policy, such as national standards. The final theme concerned ways faculty members compensated for lack of extra-institutional support for the policy.

Conclusions

Researchers continue to find that simply introducing a policy is not sufficient for it to be fully utilized. This study identifies connections between institutional polices and a larger policy environment as sources that may impact STEM faculty members ability to use the policy. By using structuration theory we are also able to study how faculty members actions are influenced by the policy and how they can change the policy's application in meaningful ways. However such changes are not likely to extend beyond the institution in which they were engendered.

Implications for Practice

- Policies at local institutions may be hampered in their effectiveness by other institutional policies or the larger policy environment.
- While the first point is far reaching, it can also be used for calls for more wide spread use of parental leave policies.

Citation

Schimpf, Corey, Marisol Mercado Santiago, Jordana Hoegh, Dina Banerjee and Alice L. Pawley. 2013. "STEM Faculty and Parental Leave: Understanding an Institution's Policy within a National Policy Context through Structuration Theory." *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology* 5, 2: 102-125.

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