

## Intersections Between Work and Family: When a Playpen Can be Office Furniture

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Do you think he'll continue to work full time now that he's beginning his family? He sure has become unreliable since they had that baby. He doesn't seem to be taking his career as seriously as he did before the baby was born. I wonder if he will take time to pursue tenure as rigorously or seriously now that he has a baby? How will he find time to write as a father?

Stuff you never hear in the break room about new fathers. Stuff you hear too frequently about new mothers. There was a pool when I became pregnant with my first daughter, a bit ahead of schedule, about whether or not I would finish my dissertation—at my degree-granting institution, at my place of employment, and even at my family dinner table. What was frustrating to me was that my husband became a more credible and reliable employee at the point of pregnancy (after all, he'll be more responsible now that he has a family to provide for, right?), and I became less so (after all, she'll be less reliable now that she has a baby to take care of, right?). What was up with this unfair, outdated, and career inhibiting double standard? Why was my baby a liability and his a responsibility magnet? Hadn't the feminists of the 1960s taken care of this inequality? Couldn't we share the same baby?

While I felt on one hand that I had joined a very cool club that nobody told me about at the point of pregnancy, a sisterhood of mothers, I also felt a vague unspoken threat to my status as a professional in my departmental community (a good ol' boys network). I felt like I had let them down somehow, like I hadn't given them their money's worth before I became pregnant. I should mention that in 1988, the year of the blessed event and

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having been on the job for a little better than two years, I was the first tenure track woman in the history of my department to become pregnant. There was only one other tenured/tenure track woman in my workplace, Jan Norberg; she was near retirement and had never married or had children because she wanted to be taken seriously as a scholar, and in her day, giving up family was the only sure way to do that. I found her to be one of my best supporters, helping me fight for my rights as a mother even though she had relinquished her own. We were two women in a department of twenty one, taking every opportunity to fight the status quo biased attitudes about work-family roles. She taught a course called *The Changing World of Women*, which I teach now. It was time for change. In a very real way, becoming a mother radicalized me, sensitizing me to how the arbitrary and social nature of gender roles creates unnecessary limitations for parents who work in the academy. We need to socially construct fair workplaces that do not force artificial compartmentalization of work and family life.

Over the last forty years, there has been much attention paid at a policy level to what to do with pregnant employees. When my mother, who was a teacher in the 1950s, became pregnant with me, she was required to resign (i.e., terminated). Her daughters, on the other hand, were able to work until the day before delivery and then return to work after a leave. Erin Kelly and Frank Dobbin note a big change in one generation thanks to government mandates prohibiting sex discrimination. I look forward to even better policies, reflecting less limiting parental stereotypes, for my daughters and their partners. Social change takes time and does not happen uniformly among people or across institutions, which is why we see such tremendous variation in family policies. Sometimes the issue can be that there are no explicit policies, creating a default to the social expectations of a nebulous majority, which means we often must navigate unclear paths to learn our family options. Strategic ambiguity only works in our favor when its purpose allows for more creativity and options, rather than limiting them.

When I told my chair in February that I was expecting in November, we started exploring my alternatives. I discovered very early that my institution did not have an explicit maternity leave. Instead I would use my "sick" leave. So now having babies was not only frowned upon, it was "sick"? I tell my students to examine what an employer calls its leave for family (Maternity? Family? Parental? Disability? Sick?), if they want to learn something about how family friendly they will really be to work for.

As it turned out, I didn't have enough sick leave to take me from my due date to the end of the semester, so I would have to leave each of my classes with a substitute for a month, and then return the last week of the term to finish up and give finals. This was clearly not an optimum situation and, after all, it wasn't like we couldn't plan something better with all the advance notice. What I proposed to do was to teach my fall term like an eight-week summer term, completed by midterm. Students would know from the beginning that the class would meet double time; it would be less disruptive for them; I could take a longer leave; and (the point that sold administration), the university would not have to pay a substitute for my classes.

What I learned from this experience is how important it is to challenge the binary assumption that one is either a good professional or a good parent. When the status quo tips a bias one way too far, it is critical to push back by finding creative and cost effective ways to accomplish your multilayered goals. To suggest that children and career are mutually exclusive limits the richness of our range of life options as both women and men. I also learned that pushing a big rock uphill makes you stronger, in both your career and family roles. Call it resistance training.

While some aspects of gender bias in work-life issues are absolutely critical (access to a fair tenure evaluation), others are merely annoying. For example, who stays home with a sick child? When my husband called in, he was a hero (what a guy!). When I called in, it was simply expected (mom's job). He smelled like a rose, and I smelled like baby barf. What is merely annoying can grow to be critical when the attitude which produces it is dominant and taken for granted. One of my pet peeves is when we call what male parents do when they take care of their children "babysitting." Women never "babysit" their children. This kind of language, like the "sick" leave, reflects role biases that limit both men and women, by making it arbitrarily normative for both to have only partial experiences (bread-winning or milk-producing, to use gendered food metaphors).

Which brings me to what I believe to be a very noble and important commitment many women make to nurture their children—breastfeeding, another difficult workplace conversation. Nancy Mohrbacher concluded in *The Breastfeeding Answer Book* that there are many benefits of breastfeeding for both mother and child, which I chose to take full advantage of with my children. For me, this included expressing milk at school and freezing it for subsequent consumption by my child. It not only provided



nourishment for my baby, but also allowed my husband to share in the night-feeding bonding experience. I was very discreet, using a breast pump in my office behind closed doors. When some of the guys at work made jokes about my five o'clock shadow in response to what sounded like a razor from my office, and then learned what it was, they seemed quite embarrassed at the thought of a bared breast in my office, which was somehow different than the nakedness that accompanied other natural bodily functions and flushing in the privacy of the bathroom, which was also audible from the hallway. I do not have space here to expound upon the sexualization of the nipple, or as David Boles describes it, the perversion of the nipple. Suffice it to say there is a problem when a lactating breast is morally stigmatized. Stigma is a social construction. For it to derive from "normal" everyday life issues (mothers nurse, people have children) is neither fair, nor productive.

During my children's preschool years, I had a playpen and children's corner of my office (with crayons and toys). I did it with the attitude that, of course, my children should share my office lifespace when it did not conflict with my work responsibilities or the ability of my colleagues to do their work. Not everyone shared that attitude. Respect for our colleagues is critical to the development of productive work communities. Respect for parents is part of that dynamic. It is good to remember here that the reason Susan B. Anthony was such a powerful change agent in the suffragist movement was because she assumed and behaved as if she had rights that she had not yet been socially granted. Looking unfairness directly and unwaveringly in the eye is a start toward positive social change.

I once read a book in a hospital waiting room, *Men are Like Waffles—Women are Like Spaghetti* (intended as a humorous look at sex differences), that compared men to waffles, with compartmentalized thinking and roles, and women to spaghetti, with ideas and roles that were interwoven. It sticks with me as a good description of masculine and feminine ways of being and working. My spaghetti brain saw it as practical for my children to be with me for some kinds of work in my office. My colleagues with waffle brains saw it as inappropriate for little people to be in the academic space. While the children were not disruptive—I had wonderfully well behaved offspring—the idea of them being there was.

These days it seems as though there are many ideas that disrupt our abilities to maximize the relationships among families, scholarship, and the workplace. It is important to recognize multiple ways of appreciating

and "doing" both work and family. For example, we have colleagues and students who have or are same-sex parents, foster parents, foster children, blended families, extended families, adoptive families, and more. Given the effects that both have on the other, it is important to consider work and family together.

The experiences I describe raise some important questions. In whose interest is it to keep the binaries of career and family mutually exclusive or, at best, simultaneously difficult? How are we complicit in sustaining the complications of our careers (i.e. what taken for granted assumptions are hurting us)? Does maintaining borders between the personal and professional somehow serve our best interests? I had two children pre-tenure, spent time as a single mom, and then acquired another child with marriage post-tenure, so I am well acquainted with the challenges of being both a good professor and a good (step)mom. In conversations with others who walk similar paths I have learned ways to meet these relational and practical challenges. Valery Begley suggests that we need dialogue to critically examine our institutional policies and structures related to issues of work-family balance in the academy. I concur. This conversation and commentary is a good place to (re)consider how we can socially construct workplaces that value families, scholarship, and the intersections between them.

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