Women in Academia: The Implications of Culture and Institutional and Governmental Policies for Work/Life Balance

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INTRODUCTION

- Women half the workforce
- Traditional division of labour persists
- Academic women struggle for work/life balance
- Impact on ability to perform in classroom
- Challenges affect every aspect of teaching process
  - Vary with childcare responsibilities and phase of career
- Institutional and governmental policies
CURRENT RESEARCH

- Challenges for desirable work/life balance
- Impact of cultural norms and institutional and governmental policies on balance
- Available policies and prevailing social and cultural norms:
  - Shape individual perspectives on and expectations of desirable work/life balance
  - Limit individual’s ability to achieve desirable balance
METHODS

- Participants:
  - 60 academic women, 20 each in the US, UK, and Australia
  - With and without primary care responsibilities
    - US—16/20 (80%) with children
    - UK—8/20 (40%) with children
    - Australia—10/20 (50%) with children
  - Permanent contract positions
  - Aged 31 to 71, all points in career

- Procedure: In-depth, in-person interviews
  - 12 open-ended questions
  - Follow-up survey
RESULTS

- **US Academics**
  - Career very important to personal identity
  - Greatest job satisfaction; least likely to leave academia

- **Australian Academics**
  - Most satisfied with ability to balance work and life
  - Zero participants equated work with life

- **UK Academics**
  - Responses fell between extremes of US and Australia
Guilt: To Feel or Not to Feel

- Participants describing feelings of guilt:
  - US—10 (50%); 6 with children
  - UK—7 (35%); 4 with children
  - Australia—6 (30%); 5 with children

- Formal institutional policies vs. implicit expectations

- Cultural attitudes toward working women
  - Reflected in formal policies

- Implications for teaching quality
  - Productivity
  - Occupational health—stress, illness
  - Job satisfaction and commitment to organization
  - Overall life satisfaction
**Discussion**

- Cross-cultural comparison
  - US academics experience most difficulty achieving balance
  - UK academics somewhat better off, but still feel conflict with cultural attitudes toward work
  - Australians are most satisfied—culture and formal policies are mutually supportive

- Governmental and institutional policies
  - Crucial role in work/life balance
  - Can only go so far: society and culture must allow for implementation of policies
**RECENT ADDITION**

- Data collection completed in Stockholm, Sweden
- Most progressive policies in the world
  - 480 days of paid parental leave
  - 2 months of “Daddy Days”
  - High-quality childcare widely accessible
- Preliminary Observations
  - Even more satisfied than Australian academic women
  - Considerably more equal division of domestic labor between men and women
  - Children not seen as impediment to woman’s career
**BIG PICTURE**

- Importance of work/life balance
  - Job and overall life satisfaction
  - Effective teachers, advisors, mentors
- Cultural attitudes and available policies
- Institutions and governments have responsibility to support work/life balance
- Cross-cultural comparison provides potential solutions to shared social problem
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