



Marriage, Children, and Academia

A Review of

Do Babies Matter? Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower

by Mary Ann Mason, Nicholas H. Wolfinger, and Marc Goulden

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Is it possible to balance a career, marriage, and children? Most academics or aspiring academics ask themselves this question at many points in their career. In their book *Do Babies Matter? Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower*, Mary Ann Mason, Nicholas Wolfinger, and Marc Goulden review the data to expose the difficulties of maintaining a career and a family. They also provide in the final chapter (Chapter 6) suggestions on how to make the academy a more family-friendly place.

The authors begin with reviewing data on the early years of graduate school and the postdoctoral years, and they carry their discussion through to the retirement years. Throughout this trajectory, the effects of marriage and children on a successful academic career are assessed.

Do Babies Matter? gives voice to an issue that is often discussed in secret or apprehensively. Rather than the work–family balance being an issue of time management or nagging self-doubt, the book highlights the larger systemic issue perpetuated by a faulty system. The authors give a nuanced account of how marriage and children affect genders differentially and fields of study differentially (humanities vs. sciences). They also point out areas where marriage and family seem related to academic success. Interest in this book may be personal to some readers who have struggled to achieve a satisfactory balance between the academy and family. Other readers may feel encouraged to learn about the family-friendly programs at their universities or to begin discussions of ways to lessen the effects that the academy has on family life. Despite the nature of one’s interest, this book is relevant to the average *PsycCRITIQUES* reader, as one who has traversed the academy and experienced the sacrifices that the ivory tower demands.

One of the critical assertions of the authors is that the academy is losing some of its brightest students because of the demanding hours and the lack of work–family balance. The authors argue that promising graduates are pursuing careers in nonacademic settings due to concerns that the academy is not family friendly. Moreover, graduate students are deterred by the lack of mentors or role models who encourage family or demonstrate how to successfully balance academia and family.

Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden provide multiple research findings that substantiate that marriage and children do affect success in academic careers, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) areas. According to the text, those most at risk for failure are those who are beginning family and career at around the same time. If one survives the first decade in academia, marriage statistically benefits the academic careers of men and women, as married professors are more likely to receive tenure. Also, having children six years of age or older also seems to be beneficial. Conversely, women in the sciences with children under the age of six are substantially less likely to receive tenure compared with their male counterparts and childless female counterparts.

Indeed, women in science with young children are the group most at risk of failing in their efforts to balance family and work successfully. Perhaps this is because science demands full-time grant writing, full-time teaching, and full-time research—activities that have to be curtailed to meet family obligations and to achieve any kind of balanced lifestyle. Patterns in the humanities differ in that neither marriage nor having children affects tenure decisions. The authors hypothesize that the culture of the humanities may be different from that of the sciences, with fewer hours in a lab and less dependence on grant writing.

The authors' arguments are based on statistics from various national surveys and research findings. However, at times, readers may become saturated with statistics and/or have different interpretations of the data than do the authors. For example, the authors report that a married woman is 17 percent less likely to obtain a tenure-track job than is her unmarried female counterpart. This may be misleading because women, in general, who pursue careers in higher education are less likely to be married.

Thus, it may be that the population of women pursuing tenure-track positions are less likely to be married than are women in the general population, not that married women are achieving differential success rates once they are in the pool of tenure-track applicants. It is unclear whether in the cited work *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006) the researchers controlled for the disparity among educated women, in general. There are some data indicating that the gender disparity in marriage exists at the start of an academic career, as Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden report that 71 percent of new male faculty are married, compared with 61 percent of new female faculty. Qualitative and longitudinal studies on married and unmarried faculty from hiring to tenure are needed to assess how marriage affects achieving tenure.

The authors find that the effects of family formation are marginal for men compared with women. The gender disparity for success in academia is still robust and widespread. This issue has long been a feminist issue, as it is well established that, unlike men, women who attain education are less likely to have children and marry (Bumpass, Rindfuss, & Janosik, 1978; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1989). This is true for women in the ivory tower and those in other careers. The statistics show that the academy is unfriendly to women with families but exalting of men with families. Nevertheless, the commonality shared by men and women in academia with respect to family formation is that both genders have fewer children than those working in similar careers that require advanced degrees, such as doctors or lawyers. After reading this book, one may answer the question, "Do babies matter?" with a response of "it depends on whether you are a man or a woman."

Although women may be more adversely affected by the academy, the authors clearly show that both women and men would benefit from a more family-friendly atmosphere. For

graduate students, the authors recommend policies such as parental leave, affordable child care that includes emergency and drop-in options, lactation rooms in the department, medical insurance that covers dependents, family housing, parent centers, organized mentoring systems that promote work–family balance and provide professional advice, and provisions to stop the normative time-to-degree clock after childbirth. Some universities already offer some of these benefits, but most do not offer any of them.

At the postdoctorate or professorate level, suggestions include a tenure-clock stoppage policy for childbirth, paid parental leave (mothers and fathers), subsidized and emergency child care, part-time tenure-track appointments, dual hire programs for mothers and fathers both in academia, modified duties for mothers after childbirth (e.g., relief from teaching one semester), modified duties for fathers, and child care grants to help mothers to attend conferences.

It would be of minimal cost to accommodate some of these suggestions, particularly child care grants so parents can attend conferences and course relief for a semester. However, to implement the other suggestions would involve a strong institutional commitment to systemic change. Yet the authors report some encouraging efforts. The University of California provides all eligible employees access to a registry of prescreened local caregivers, which makes finding suitable babysitters, nannies, or caregivers much easier. University of California, Berkeley, provides faculty with subsidized temporary day care or in-home care services on short notice. The program provides services for both children and adults in need of care, and all faculty are eligible to use 40 hours of care each year. The University of Rhode Island has a policy that once a job candidate has received a tentative offer, he or she may request assistance in identifying academic employment for his or her spouse or partner. A request for a new position is put in, and the spouse is then given a regular job interview: progress, indeed, from the days when nepotism rules severely hurt the careers of many potential female academics.

Do Babies Matter? reveals the need for a culture shift within academia but more so in society as a whole, considering that the issue presented stems from a larger issue that extends beyond the ivory tower. This book is important to *PsycCRITIQUES* readers because it creates an awareness of issues that are occurring on the “home turf” of many of us as well as in the larger society.

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