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Illusions of Flexibility Among Academic Careers: Contradictions And Competing Expectations Within Faculty Cultures

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Introduction

To those outside of academia, an assumption exists that the faculty careers are flexible. We often are subject to comments such as, “it must be great to have the summers off” in which it is assumed that we only teach and do little else. Yet, teaching only represents a portion of what most tenured and tenure track faculty do as we are also expected to conduct research and engage in service inside and outside our institutions. In this thought paper, I will explore this “illusion of flexibility” and how it contradicts reality within academic cultures that are often plagued by overwork associated with establishing a “career trifecta” in which excellence in teaching, research and service must be simultaneously achieved. In their quest for excellence in all three areas, faculty may find themselves managing competing expectations within each domain. For example, students and curriculum coordinators expect faculty to be devoted to their students while department chairs and peers expect faculty to be devoted to publishing in high quality journal outlets. At the same time, university administrators and the business community impose demands upon faculty to comment on current events in the media and engage in and or lead organizational change and policy initiatives across campus and beyond.

These competing expectations can also cross over to nonwork-domains and often carry gendered implications. For example, women faculty who are mothers may use this illusion of “flexibility” to portray themselves in a more positive light by others in their home life, while they may be simultaneously trying to downplay their parenting roles at work. Men on the other hand, may downplay any flexibility assumed in their academic careers to be portrayed as more masculine and “hardworking” by others (Ladge & Little, 2019). In this paper, I will address these contradictions and competing expectations within faculty cultures, paying particular attention to business faculty where academic research is often the most significant evaluative measure of success within the academic community but is often an unrecognized role by many within (students, administrators) and outside the academia (family and friends, practicing managing), by drawing upon prior research, generating new research questions, avenues for future research and exploring potential practical solutions.

Contradictions and Competing Expectations within Faculty Cultures

Perceived flexibility in the literature is often defined as the extent to which employees feel they have the flexibility in their schedule and workload which has been found to have

positive effects on employee health and well-being and workplace attitudes (e.g. Grzywacz et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2001; Richman et al., 2008). Yet despite its positive benefits, work-family researchers often find that formal flexibility programs are often underutilized when workers feel it may impact how others may perceive them (Allen, 2001; Thompson et al., 1999). Research has consistently found that there is a stigma associated with professionals who take advantage of flexible work arrangements. These individuals are typically marginalized, assumed to be less committed to their organizations and viewed as “time deviants” for not fitting the “ideal worker template” (Epstein et al. 1999, Glass 2004, Leslie et al. 2012; Williams et al., 2016: 525). Research also shows that those who engage in flexible work programs suffer career consequences such as lower performance ratings, receive fewer promotions and less pay over time (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). This coupled with the psychological consequences of perceived threat of being seen as less dedicated workers may explain why many workers don’t utilize such programs. Often burden falls heavily on those who have significant obligations outside of work and need to balance their work and family/life demands. Given this the flexibility bias is highly correlated to a work-life stigma.

Although flexibility is a body of research that has been well studied by work-family scholars, researchers have not explored what I refer to here as an “illusion of flexibility” (IOF) which relates to certain roles and professions which may be assumed to be flexible (by others and by oneself) when in fact they often are not. In particular, we know little about how IOF may affect workers, how they respond to others’ impressions of IOF, and whether the impact may be greater for some groups of workers over others. Although this is an understudied area of research, prior research may be relevant to exploring this phenomenon including research in the areas of impression management, professional identity construction and managing multiple roles – which often considers the interaction between work and family roles rather than the dynamic interplay among multiple work roles (e.g. Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013; Rothbard, Phillips & Dumas, 2005; Ruderman et al., 2002). Additionally, who and how individuals are affected by IOF may be shaped by contextual factors such as workplace culture and perceived support as well as individual factors such as gender and tenure within an organization.

Looking to our own profession (academia), it may be assumed that flexible schedules may be leveraged to attend to the many facets of one’s job. For example, if a typically teaching load is two courses per semester, the other days may be used to engage in research and service. While the teaching times and service commitments (e.g. scheduled meetings, conferences, attending or leading seminars) may come with limited flexibility, research time can

be quite flexible and is often “squeezed in” between these other commitments. The problem with this is that research is often the most important evaluative factor for faculty and the piece that students and outsiders don’t recognize as part of a faculty members job. Part of the issue is that academic environments are often siloed in these three areas and rarely do the three paths meet. Expectations are high for all three roles, particularly at the mid-level (associate professor). Meeting the expectations of the many constituents can be challenging and can lead to overload, stress and burnout. Some research suggests that pressure to publish can have negative effects on the other domains (Miller et al, 2010). Indeed, Flexibility, when utilized, can have enriching effects, but “illusions” of flexibility may in fact have depleting effects.

Additionally, these competing expectations can also cross over to nonwork-domains and often carry gendered implications. For example, women faculty who are mothers may use this illusion of “flexibility” to portray themselves in a more positive light by others in their home life, while they may be simultaneously trying to downplay their parenting roles at work. Men on the other hand, may downplay any flexibility assumed in their academic careers to be portrayed as more masculine and “hardworking” by others (Ladge & Little, 2019). Research has consistently shown a range of gender-based expectations and biases that often hinder women academic careers (and women’s careers more broadly) including bias in teaching ratings (Bennett, 1982; Boring, 2017), maternal wall bias (Huopalaainen & Satama, 2019; Ghodsee & Connelly, 2011; Mason, Wolfinger & Gouden, 2013), and engagement in more “office house work” (Babcock, Recalde & Vesterlund, 2018). What is less clear and may be a new avenue for future research is to explore how IOF perpetuate these biases gender biases. Additionally, those faculty with family may be assumed to require even greater flexibility than is assumed or afforded. In my own experiences, I have had colleagues assume I am not at meetings because I am tending to my family responsibilities when in fact I am in class or in another meeting. The same working parent stereotypes that plague most organizations also exist in academia.

Where do we go from here? Research questions, Future research and Practical solutions

There are several questions and the potential for different avenues for future research related to the issue of IOF in academia. Below I outline several questions that might be addressed in future research and identify areas of literature that may help explain or build on these questions. The first set of questions that may be explored are: How does IOF affect workers and what are the ways in which academics respond to others’ impressions of IOF? A second set of questions might explore: How might IOF impact some groups of workers over others and what role does gender and work-family stigma play in navigating IOF? Lastly, are there particularly what career stages of IOF that matter the most and how does it impact faculty

career progression? There are several ways to gain insights into these questions and avenues for future research should not only consider the impact to the individual faculty member but also the interpersonal and contextual factors that shape their experience.

Further, what practical solutions that address the issues of IOF as we simultaneously develop a research agenda to understand this phenomenon in depth and its impact on individuals and University setting?. First, we must address that IOF is a real issue for faculty and determine ways for faculty to gain more autonomy in navigating the three areas. Addressing how faculty performance is measured and evaluated should be a dynamic, not a static process based on generic numerical ratings that are provided on an annual basis. Consideration of how much time is dedicated to each domain should be an important factor determining performance metrics and evaluation. Additionally, providing more opportunities within business schools to showcase faculty research to nonfaculty constituents including students, administrators and the business community might also help manage competing expectations among the varied work roles. Some business schools are already very good at this but others are so heavily focus on publishing in top journals, that there is often a disconnect and shared understanding of what is and is not valued. However, while promoting faculty research in school publications and websites are effective ways to show the external world about research, universities often do little to promote other faculty roles such as teaching and service. Rewards and extra compensation may be one approach to motivating faculty to engage in areas that may be less valued but important to the University and one's overall performance.

More important, business schools need to consider their organizational culture and the extent to which the culture ignore IOF. Recognizing and valuing faculty for all of the work they do and not just one area (typically publishing in a top tier journal), needs to be a high priority for senior administrators. Research active faculty are often rewarded with reduced teaching loads and service obligations which may perpetuate biases and place an overwhelming burden of service and teaching on faculty who are striving to gain traction in the research but can't because of their other responsibilities. Additionally, there should be efforts made to acknowledge work-life stigma in Universities such that working parents don't have live up to outdated norms about what it means to be an ideal worker (or ideal parent).

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