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Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Recommended Citation

Matthews, R. A. (2020). Barriers to Organizational Work-Family Support in Academia: An HR perspective. In E. Kossek & K.-H. Lee (Eds.), *Fostering Gender and Work-Life Inclusion for Faculty in Understudied Contexts: An Organizational Science Lens* (pp. 110-115). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue e-Pubs. DOI: 10.5703/1288284317222. Retrieved from <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/worklifeinclusion/2018/dccsowfs/2>

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Barriers to Organizational Work-Family Support in Academia: An HR perspective

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Scholars have consistently noted that employee perceptions of family-supportive supervision and family-friendly organizations foster experiences of reduced work-family conflict, promote emotional and physical well-being, and enhance positive work-related outcomes such as engagement, job satisfaction, commitment, and retention (e.g., Kossek et al., 2011). The underlying premise here is that organizational efforts to accommodate employee non-work needs are reflected not only in providing *but also* embracing supportive benefits and policies by proactively encouraging employees to practice healthy work-life management (e.g., Kossek, 2005). Yet in the context of academia, to have a meaningful conversation around promoting a supportive work-family culture there are important underlying institutional realities that must be recognized. This thought paper emphasizes family-supportive perceptions as explanatory mechanisms as to why, even in a resource rich environment like academia, faculty still experience heightened levels of conflict between work and family. Highlighting a number of human resource (HR) practicalities, a pivot is made to argue that if we truly wish to develop our understanding and promotion of organizational work-family support for academics, we must begin to systematically consider realities facing post-secondary institutions.

A Resource Perspective

A consistently robust finding is that working adults with more resources are better able to handle and cope with different stressors, wherein resources are defined as objects, states, conditions, and other things that people value (Halbesleben et al. 2014). Given the nature of their jobs, academics often have access to an array of resources helpful in managing the often conflicting demands that arise when dealing with work, while also having a life outside of work (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). More concretely, in light of known resources that promote the effective management of the work-family interface (Eby et al., 2005), it is arguable that academics function in resource rich environments. Academics often have access to such resources as job autonomy and job flexibility, challenging and engaging work, work that is meaningful both individually and to society, as well as more concrete resources like healthcare, childcare, tuition reimbursement, access to university facilities and events (e.g., athletic facilities, cultural events), 24-hour police protection, and retirement plans.

And yet, academics experience significant trouble managing the work-family interface (e.g., Beigi et al., 2016; Judge & Colquitt, 2004; Watanabe & Falci. 2016). In light of the many

demands academics must deal with (e.g., Hendel & Horn, 2008; Reevy & Deason, 2014), this potential paradox (i.e. conflict between domains even within a resource rich environment) can be partially understood in light of two other organizationally-sourced resources, *family-supportive supervision* (FSS; employees' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors' behaviors consistently promote and facilitate effective management of work and family life: Allen, 2001) and *family-supportive organization perceptions* (FSOP: the degree to which employees perceive their organization is supportive and accommodating of their family-related responsibilities and non-work needs; Allen, 2001). Without a supportive work-family environment, work-family promoting resources (like many of those available to faculty) may remain underutilized for various reasons, including concerns about negative consequences associated with use and lack of awareness of the resources (Kossek, 2005; Neil & Hammer, 2005). And an unsupportive supervisor can in fact undermine the success of family-specific policy implementation and the development and maintenance of a family-supportive work environment (Kossek, 2005). As organizational intermediaries, supervisors relay information between levels of the organization, thus they are in a unique position to facilitate, or hinder, employees' ability to effectively manage work and family roles (Kossek & Distelberg, 2009).

The Human Resource Side of Post-Secondary Education & Work-Family Support

While most post-secondary institutions would like to argue they promote a positive work-family environment through the provision of formal policies and benefits, the reality is, most fail to some degree. Further, even within a given institution, there is likely meaningful variation in perceptions of work-family support (i.e., FSOP and FSS) given the sheer diversity in the people who make up the faculty (i.e., meaningful subgroups exist). Although it is the responsibility of the institution and its leadership (e.g., president, provost, deans, chairs, directors) to promote a positive work-family culture, we must recognize that these institutions, like all organizations, have meaningful HR-related practicalities that influence the provision and promotion of organizational work-family support.

Recognition of these practicalities is not meant to imply that post-secondary institutions are free of the responsibility of ensuring a positive work-family culture (e.g., FSOP and FSS). Rather, the goal is to highlight these issues so that realistic expectations can be developed and to facilitate proactive plans to address these issues to maximize the provision of work-family support. Taking a HR perspective, a series of issues are highlighted below. Each of these, conceptually, have the potential to influence the work-family culture developed and maintained in an institution, the nature of support (i.e., resources) provided, and/or impact how subgroups

within an academic environment might differentially perceive and experience the work-family culture.

Faculty are One of Many

First, we must recognize that faculty (i.e., instructional staff) are only one part of any successful institution; instructional staff account for approximately 36.7% of employed individuals in post-secondary institutions, 63.3% of staff are *not* instruction-focused (Ginder et al., 2017). When discussing policies and benefits that might promote an academic's ability to manage work and family, from an operational standpoint, there are still other employee constituents that must be considered. For example, any institutional leave policy developed to support work-family must be written to ensure it encompasses all university staff (Crouter & Booth, 2009). Having separate policies for faculty vs staff may in fact result in negative justice perception, and in turn negatively effect overall perceptions of the institution (e.g., Auer & Welte, 2009).

“Faculty” Ambiguity

Even focusing on faculty there is still a huge range to consider, and the picture is increasingly complicated. It is estimated that there are approximately 1.6 million postsecondary faculty of which 52% were full-time and 48% part-time faculty (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). With that in mind, the term *faculty* itself is actually relatively ambiguous; the U.S. Department of Education uses the term to encompass assistant, associate, and full professors, as well as instructors, lecturers, assisting professors, adjunct professors, and interim professors. The general use of the term masks the complexity of experiences across these groups wherein the roles, responsibilities, and even access to work-family resources are going to potentially vary dramatically (e.g., Castañeda et al., 2015). Further, it is estimated that from 1999 to 2016 (USDE) there was a 51% increase in the number of faculty in postsecondary institutions, with much of that growth driven by the hiring of adjunct and contingent faculty (Yakoboski & Foster, 2014). And in the same time span the percentage of female faculty increased from 41% to 49%. Developing a true understanding of institutional work-family support will require careful consideration of what and who we mean by faculty, recognizing the inherent diversity of faculty, the associated diversity in those faculty's family situations, as well as a recognition that as faculty surface and deep level diversity characteristics shift, so too will the organizations' definition of what it means to be work-family supportive (Allen & Eby, 2016).

Complicated legal structure

While not common in work-family research, we must recognize that post-secondary institutions function within a complex legal environment. At the Federal level alone institutions

must comply with *hundreds* of laws, Executive Orders, and statutes governing not just HR practices (e.g., benefits, wages, hiring, recruitment, termination, discrimination, retirement, unions) but also how academic programs are managed, accounting practices, admission, campus safety, contracts, procurement, diversity, environmental health & occupational safety, fundraising and development, health care and insurance, immigration, IT and information security, international activities, political activity, and research. Not only does this legal context directly and indirectly affect the daily functioning of faculty (e.g., compliance demands), but it places boundary conditions around how institutions function. It is instrumental to recognize that sometimes institutional leadership makes decisions that seemingly negatively impact faculty, and by extension their ability to manage work and family, not because they do not care, but because the institution is required by law to engage in certain practices.

Other Issues:

While beyond the current scope, other HR issues to consider in conversations around organizational work-family support include: the changing financial structure of institutions and the resulting pressures this places on faculty, poorly defined organizational strategies that ignore the changing demographics of society, antiquated people analytics systems making it difficult to understand faculty and staff experiences, poorly defined appraisal systems that leave faculty unsure about what is valued, the role of alternative compensation packages, and the selection of departmental leadership as well as the training and development of these leaders.

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