

Male scientists regret parenthood decisions more than female counterparts, sociologist finds

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Many scientists in academia bemoan the fact that their lifestyles do not allow them to have as many children as they would like. Surprisingly, male scientists harbor more regrets than female scientists, according to a study by Rice University sociologist Elaine Howard Ecklund.

Ecklund and co-author Anne Lincoln of Southern Methodist University measured the perceptions of career, life outside work and the intersection of work and family for scientists in two different scientific fields -- physics and biology. They chose physics and biology because the proportion of women is much higher in biology than physics, where women's representation has remained quite low.

When asked about "denied [parenthood](#)" -- having fewer children than they would have wanted, many more women (45 percent) than men (24 percent) said they had fewer because they chose to pursue a scientific career. However, Ecklund said, "Men are harder hit by this than women. Not having as many children as they wanted has a more negative impact on their [life satisfaction](#) than it does for women."

Ecklund, assistant professor of sociology and Rice Scholar at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, delivered her findings Aug. 15 at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Atlanta during a presentation called "Male Scientists Want to be Fathers, and Other Ways The Science Career Influences Family Life of

Men and Women."

According to the survey, "a lower percentage of female scientists have children, and of those who do have children, they have fewer on average than men, averaging 1.9 versus men's 2.1." Ecklund and Lincoln sought to use the data to draw broader conclusions. "These analyses suggest that experiences of parenthood are different for male and female scientists, that women who have successfully pursued academic science careers have different expectations for parenthood possibilities or that people who persist in science careers are different from those who drop out along the way," they wrote.

As the United States competes with other countries for scientific expertise, many scholars have argued that gender diversity helps to increase the pool of prospective scientists and keeps them in the field once they have joined academia. While recent figures show women and men earn nearly equal proportions of bachelor's degrees in science, far fewer women than men continue in science past their bachelor's degrees. Universities and colleges look for ways to retain female science faculty members so they won't lose this talent.

Ecklund and Lincoln point to satisfaction with work, satisfaction with family and leisure, and the work-family nexus as crucial indicators of whether faculty members remain in academia. Applying the research to scientists, they surveyed men and women who are in different ranks and at different stages of their careers in the top 20 graduate programs in the fields of biology and physics.

Because they focused on these two fields, Ecklund and Lincoln were able to study whether "perceptions and experiences differ within the sexes between disciplines that have more women (like biology) when compared to disciplines where women are severely underrepresented (such as physics)."

They found that fewer male physicists than male biologists (79 percent vs. 87 percent) are married, are less likely to have children and have fewer children. "Male biologists, however, report working more hours per week than male physicists, are somewhat less happy with their jobs and are significantly more likely to report a lack of departmental and university support," Ecklund and Lincoln wrote. "Because there are proportionally more men in physics when compared to biology, this latter finding is consistent with the general organizational finding that individuals are happier when they work with those who are similar to them."

But the results differ for female physicists and biologists. "Women in biology and physics do not differ statistically in rates of marriage, the number of children they have or their perceptions of career impediments," the researchers wrote. "We expected that because there is a much greater proportion of women in biology than physics, women in biology might experience less tension between work and family (e.g., due to working with more understanding colleagues or having greater support through their departmental infrastructure). Yet, there are no disciplinary differences for women in terms of work-family balance as an impediment to career progress or having fewer children than they would have desired. Reaching gender parity in a profession may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to bring about equality with men in the profession or the discipline."

In what could be seen as an unexpected finding, Ecklund and Lincoln noted that when asked about denied parenthood, "women in both physics and biology are significantly more happy with their lives than are male physicists."

Still, Ecklund and Lincoln found that overall, women scientists are less satisfied with their careers than their male colleagues are. "A higher percentage of women (nearly 48 percent) also report that balancing work

and family has obstructed their careers," they wrote. But the researchers did not detect any significant difference between men and women in how many hours they work each week and whether they work on weekends and vacations. Finally, women [scientists](#) are significantly less likely than men to perceive support from their departments, but there is no gender difference in perceived support at the university level.

Provided by Rice University

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