

New research dispels myths about academic parental leave

January 24 2013

New research from sociologists at the University of Massachusetts Amherst counters misconceptions surrounding the use of paid parental leave on university campuses.

In a study published in the January 2013 issue of the journal *Fathering*, UMass Amherst associate professor Jennifer Lundquist (left) and professor Joya Misra, along with KerryAnn O'Meara of the University of Maryland, examined assumptions that men take unfair advantage of parental leave at universities, using the leave as an opportunity to further their research while shirking the responsibility of childcare. Critics of gender-neutral parental leave systems have claimed that male faculty are a greater threat to exploit the system because they are more likely to have female spouses who stay home full-time, or only work part-time, to raise their children.

In studying the faculty at a major public research university from 2006-09, the researchers found that such accusations are not grounded in fact. Not only did relatively few men from their sample take paid parental leave, but the ones who did take leave needed to do so because they lacked a part-time or homemaker spouse. The only faculty who took leave with spouses at home were [breastfeeding mothers](#). Conversely, some faculty fathers whose partners were back at work fulltime still did not take the leave, fearing reprisals.

Those who did not use the opportunity expressed concerns that that they would either be seen as less dedicated to their work or, just the reverse,

as childcare shirkers who are using the leave as a way to do more research. Statistical results showed that faculty of both genders engaged in science and math disciplines (STEM) were among the least likely to take parental leave.

"Many STEM disciplines are still male-faculty dominated," Lundquist says, "and our participants described informal departmental cultures which operate on the outdated assumption that faculty have a stay-at-home partner to provide support."

In addition, the researchers collected data about the activities faculty engage in during parental leave. They found that, in addition to being the primary caregiver of their newborn, men and women alike also engaged in some modicum of work during the leave period, including student advising and research. Although all agreed that becoming parents temporarily reduced research productivity, the leave policy enabled them to care for their newborn and not fall too far behind in their research careers.

Data for the study was collected using a mixed-methods approach of surveys, focus groups and qualitative one-on-one interviews.

Lundquist, Misra, and O'Meara point out that although there are still gender balance concerns regarding family leave policies, these are due more to issues women face from the childbearing process, such as delivery recovery and lactation. Some simple nuancing of policies, such as providing additional time to biological mothers, may provide an adequate remedy.

"The outdated notion of a worker with no care responsibilities doesn't fit the experience of most academics," Misra notes. "Leave policies of this type have the potential to reconfigure academic work more broadly – to the benefit of all faculty and their family members."

Provided by University of Massachusetts Amherst

Citation: New research dispels myths about academic parental leave (2013, January 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-01-dispels-myths-academic-parental.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.