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Department Chairs’ Perspectives on Work, Family, and Gender: Pathways for Transformation
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DEPARTMENT CHAIRS’ PERSPECTIVES ON WORK, FAMILY, AND GENDER: PATHWAYS FOR TRANSFORMATION

Amy S. Wharton and Mychel Estevez

ABSTRACT

Purpose — We examine chairs’ beliefs about the role of gender and gender inequality in their departments. Because work-family concerns have been central to explanations of gender inequality in the academy, we pay special attention to these issues.

Methodology/approach — We analyze interview data collected from 52 department chairs at one research-intensive, public university.

Findings — Although the chairs we interviewed were sympathetic and aware in many respects, their views on gender, work, and family were filtered through the lens of personal responsibility and choice, an outdated view of work as separate and distinct from family life, and a notion of...
As understood throughout this volume, the academy is a deeply gendered organization. Men predominate in the top ranks of the professoriate, and academic fields defined as more masculine are more highly rewarded than fields associated with women. Further, the structure and organization of the academy reward high levels of career devotion and a single-minded focus on work rather than family and personal life (Hochschild, 1994; Mason & Goulden, 2004). While women have made significant entries into the professoriate in the last few decades, they lag behind men in pay, promotion, and professional recognition (Roos & Gatta, 2009). Recognition of these challenges has prompted attention to the ways in which gender shapes women’s and men’s experiences in the academic pipeline and as faculty members (Bailyn, 2003; Callister, 2006; Fox, Fonseca, & Bao, 2011; Misra, Lundquist, Holmes, & Agiomavritos, 2011; Winslow, 2010).

Departmental climate has been a significant focus of this literature. This construct refers to people’s perceived work environment, encompassing factors such as workplace policies and practices and social interactions and relationships (Ostroff, Kinick, & Tamkins, 2003; Parker et al., 2003). Studies show that positive departmental climates are associated with faculty job satisfaction, commitment, and intent to stay (August & Waltman, 2004; Bilimoria et al., 2006). Women faculty generally perceive departmental climate more negatively than men, a result that contributes to their lower average satisfaction levels and undermines their achievement and success (Callister, 2006; Maranto & Griffin, 2011; Settles, Cortina, Malley, & Stewart, 2006).

Research on departmental climate is plentiful and worthwhile, yet has limitations. In particular, much more is known about the consequences of climate perceptions than their antecedents (Maranto & Griffin, 2011). Many agree that chairs exert significant influence on their departments
(e.g., Bird, 2011; Bilimoria et al., 2006), yet chairs’ role in shaping climate perceptions has not received much attention. While some research has examined the cultural meaning systems that animate faculty perceptions of gender, gender inequality, and work-family linkages (e.g., Cech, 2013; Ecklund, Lincoln, & Tansey, 2012; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012), leaders’ beliefs have received less scrutiny.

Our chapter helps to address these omissions. We analyze interviews with department chairs to examine their beliefs about the role of gender and gender inequality in their departments. Because work-family concerns have been central to explanations of gender inequality in the academy, we pay special attention to these issues. Our focus on departmental leaders fills an important gap in the literature, which has focused more on the perspectives of faculty and less on those with the power to frame gender issues and shape policies. By examining the meaning systems of departmental leaders, we provide another vantage point from which to examine how cultural biases and frameworks reproduce gender inequality in the academy. Understanding these issues is essential if we are to develop strategies that can make chairs more effective in “undoing” gender inequality in their departments.

GENDER AND THE CULTURAL FRAMING OF INEQUALITY IN THE ACADEMY

Climate studies have been used extensively to diagnose the supportiveness of the academy for women and underrepresented groups more generally (August & Waltman, 2004; Fox et al., 2011). We turn our attention to the related concept of culture and specifically cultural beliefs and perceptions. Culture represents the “deep structure” of organizations, with climate being its by-product or outgrowth (Denison, 1996, p. 624). People’s “values, beliefs, and assumptions” are a central element of culture, and they are our focus here (Denison, 1996, p. 624). Cultural beliefs are communicated through social interaction, embedded in everyday activities, and serve as frames through which self and others are perceived. These beliefs are also a key mechanism through which inequalities of all kinds are reproduced.

Inequality beliefs in the broader culture have received much attention. This research shows how beliefs about inequality and people’s explanations for the relative standing of different groups gain expression in the policies, practices, and frameworks of social actors (McCall, 2013). Several recent
studies examine these issues among faculty. For example, Cech and Blair-Loy (2010) show that structural explanations for gender inequality predominate among successful women in scientific and technical fields, particularly those who encounter gender barriers in their day-to-day work and family lives. In academic science, explanations for the underrepresentation of women are highly gendered, with female faculty more likely than men to cite discrimination as an explanation for gender disparities (Ecklund et al., 2012). Beliefs about gender and gender inequality are also shaped by factors specific to an academic field or profession (Cech, 2013).

Of interest in this study are inequality beliefs about gender. Gender inequality in the academy is closely tied to the gendered nature of work and family. Gatta and Roos (2004, p. 126) suggest that “work and family integration has been and continues to be a major (if not the major) obstacle women face in academia.” Studies showing that female faculty are less likely than men to marry and have children, and more likely to delay childbearing provide evidence for this claim (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004; Mason & Goulden, 2004; Misra, Lundquist, & Templer, 2012). Others point to the gendered organization of academic life, which makes long work hours and uninterrupted commitment to career as the primary, if not only, pathway to advancement and success (Gatta & Roos, 2004; King, 2008; Suitor, Mecom, & Feld, 2001; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004; Winslow, 2010). Underlying these patterns is an entrenched set of cultural beliefs that define the “ideal worker” as one unencumbered with children or family responsibilities (Williams, 2000).

As in the wider society, beliefs about gender and gender inequality in the academy help to reproduce disadvantage in this arena. These beliefs may encourage or deter women and men from entering particular fields or pursuing certain kinds of activities, such as having children or taking family leave (Ecklund et al., 2012). Cech (2013) showed that, in engineering, beliefs about the relative value of social versus technical activity help to explain gender-based wage inequality in that profession. In this way, gender beliefs are a central ingredient in the broader system of “gender inequality practices” in the academe (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012, p. 71).

The Role of Leaders

Some organizational actors have more control than others over the cultural meanings that operate in the workplace. Members of dominant groups and
those with formal or informal organizational power are especially influen-
tial due to their ability to control “what can be said, how it can be said, and who can say what to whom” (Schwalbe et al., 2000, p. 435). Because the ability to regulate discourse is intrinsically linked to the regulation of action (Schwalbe et al., 2000), paying special attention to leaders’ beliefs about gender and gender inequality is essential.

These ideas are consistent with studies showing that leaders affect climate perceptions of subordinates (Dragoni, 2005). This influence derives from many aspects of leaders’ roles, including their control over the distribution of resources and rewards. More important, however, interactions with leaders serve as a “filter in the interpretations that provide the basis for subordinates’ climate perceptions,” and leadership style more generally shapes how climate is perceived (Kozlowski & Doherty, 1989, p. 547).

In academic departments, leadership is provided by the chair. Chairs shape departmental climate through the exercise of their formal responsibilities, such as resource allocation, assignment of workloads, and faculty evaluation, and their informal practices (Bilimoria et al., 2006). Chairs also exert a powerful influence on faculty’s satisfaction with their careers, colleagues, and work environment (Bensimon, Ward, & Sanders, 2000). Chairs have a particularly important influence on women’s work lives in the academy (Settles et al., 2006). However, while much is known about how chairs’ actions and behavior are perceived by faculty, chairs’ own perceptions and beliefs are less well understood.

The primary research question motivating this research is “What are chairs’ beliefs about gender and gender inequality in their departments?” We pay particular attention to how these beliefs are associated with chairs’ work-family views. Our results show how efforts to address gender inequality in academic settings can become distorted or transformed as they combine with pre-existing systems of belief (Van den Brink & Benschop, 2012).

DATA AND METHODS

The data for this study were collected through in-depth interviews with 52 chairs of academic departments at one research-intensive, public university in the West. The interviews were conducted by a four-person team in the summer and fall of 2010, and were tape-recorded and transcribed. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. They focused on four main areas: (a) the experience of being chair; (b) chairs’ views of practices and
policies related to faculty recruitment, advancement, and retention; (c) views of departmental climate; and (d) their use of and need for policies and resources needed to do their jobs. The recipient of an NSF ADVANCE grant, at the time of the interviews the university was in the middle of a five-year effort to not only increase the representation of women in STEM disciplines, but to make the entire university more gender inclusive and attentive to faculty work-family issues. As part of that effort, the university had attempted to raise awareness among chairs and faculty regarding its work-family policies, including partner accommodation, modified duties, and a stop-the-clock policy for caregiving. It had also provided workshops for chairs and other administrators focused on faculty satisfaction, department climate, and mentoring.

The chairs we interviewed comprise roughly three-quarters of all occupants of this position in the university. They were from 10 colleges and include individuals employed at each of the university’s four campuses. Half were from STEM departments. The vast majority (roughly 80 percent) moved into the chair role from a faculty position at the university, and most expected to return to the faculty when their term as chair was completed. Eleven out of the 52 chairs were women, a percentage that is slightly higher than the percentage of female chairs in the university as a whole. Because of the relatively small number of female chairs in our sample, our ability to explore the ways that gender shapes chairs’ views is somewhat constrained.

The interviews were coded using the NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software package. The analyses proceeded iteratively. First, all members of the research team independently read a randomly selected subset of the interviews and proposed codes based on the themes present in the data. These codes were discussed by the group and refined until an agreement was reached. Next, one co-author and a second member of the research team coded all of the interviews according to the codes agreed upon by the group. The two coders regularly met to discuss and resolve areas of inconsistency. The findings reported in this chapter are derived from the authors’ additional analyses of the interviews, which were systematically coded for themes related to our research question. These analyses enabled us to look more deeply at the ways that chairs discussed their own or their faculty’s family circumstances, or invoked gender to explain or describe work- or family-related issues. We thus paid special attention to any mention by chairs of women or men, gender, and work and family. Chairs’ comments about these topics emerged in all four sections of the interviews, as described above.
FINDINGS

Work, Family, and Gender in the Chair Role

Women were a small proportion of chairs in our study, but female chairs more so than their male counterparts discussed their role in the context of their family responsibilities. Faculty face intensive time demands, but chairs viewed their time pressures as even more acute. Balancing administrative responsibilities with children was seen as especially problematic. Two female chairs described how parenthood had shaped their own paths into (or out of) administration. One explained: “And by the time I made full professor … my colleagues started to ask me to be chair, and my response was always ‘I can’t because of my kids’…. And [a colleague] said no, I’ve known you since before you had children and your kids are almost in college now, and you are still relatively young, and you need to really seriously consider this.” This chair went on to say that “I’m not sure that I could have really done this job and done what I wanted to do as a mother and a wife previously in my career.” Another female chair who served in an interim position at a higher level said, “I was working harder than I’ve ever worked and loving it … It was all very exciting, but it really took a toll and I had no time for my family. I got through the year, but after that I had second thoughts.” This chair was later offered an upper-level administrative position elsewhere, but turned it down for “all personal reasons … Had it not been for the personal issues, I probably would have gone.”

In addition to its effects on their willingness to take an administrative position, several chairs identified other work-family challenges. A male chair described how he and his wife juggled work and parenting so that one parent would always be home at the end of the school day. He said “I understand the family issues … There were times when I had my two kids in my office, so I know.” A female chair recounted advice she received from her predecessor (a man): “He said ‘I never missed one of my son’s baseball games. You put it in the calendar and you go.’” However, she went on to say that this advice did not necessarily result in less personal stress: “Even if I was walking out and leaving to go to the game, I felt like I was tearing home, getting everybody dinner … even though I was doing it, I can’t say that it was with any equanimity.” As this comment reveals, even when work time can be curtailed for a family activity, women are likely to have domestic responsibilities.
A few male chairs did identify challenges associated with being chair and having family responsibilities, but their observations about family life were more likely than women’s to emphasize their families as a source of support. Several noted the role their spouses played in helping them alleviate the stress associated with their jobs. A typical response was: “One thing that helps me is that I can usually talk to my wife … Most of the time she will understand and have some advice for me.” Another said that his decision to take on the chair role was based in part on the additional income it provided, noting that “I’m raising a family and it is helpful.”

**Autonomy Rules**

The language of personal choice and responsibility permeates the societal discussion of work-family issues (Williams, 2000). In particular, women’s choices are often invoked to explain their absence from higher-level, predominantly male jobs and their involvement in caretaking responsibilities. Ecklund et al. (2012) found that academic scientists also deploy this argument; when asked to explain women’s underrepresentation in physics as compared to biology, both male and female scientists said that women “opted out” of physics due to their interest in having careers and families. Several qualitative studies of female faculty find that women tend to view work-family integration as their responsibility (Gatta & Roos, 2004; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004).

The tendency to offer personal choice-based explanations of behavior is exacerbated in academic settings, especially in research-intensive institutions. According to Cech and Blair-Loy (2010, p. 379), “By emphasizing competitive individual effort and meritocratic achievement, higher education endorses individualistic interpretations of social outcomes.” In addition, expectations for sustained productivity set into motion a pattern of long work hours as faculty attempt to meet performance standards (Fox et al., 2011). However, while academic jobs require long hours, they tend to offer at least some flexibility with respect to how those hours are spent (Misra et al., 2012). Although this flexibility may be somewhat more illusory than real (Winslow, 2010), the assumption that faculty control their time reinforces a view that attributes success to individual effort and dedication.

Most chairs in our study endorsed this view of faculty work, viewing it as demanding and time-intensive but ultimately under the faculty member’s control. Chairs described their efforts to protect or buffer faculty from
external demands or other distractions. One chair said his role was to “remove the administrative minutia from the faculty so they can focus on their jobs … and really try to make a clear path for them for whatever they are trying to do.” Another stressed that he had no desire to physically monitor his faculty, trusting that they knew best how to do their jobs. This chair said: “… I have no interest in knowing where the faculty are. The important thing is that they are where they need to be and doing what needs to be doing.”

A few chairs attached moral significance to their belief in faculty autonomy and responsibility. One chair explained: “In the end, most faculty that are good do it on their own. They are people who would be successful anywhere they went and who drive their own program. I just have to get out of their way and let them be as good as they can be. And, in the end, that’s what makes a university. A university is about individuals.” Many chairs believed in leaving faculty alone, even as they often expressed frustration over what they perceived as their own their lack of authority.

This hands-off approach extended to chairs’ views of work and family issues in their departments. Challenges associated with work-family integration were treated as personal issues that faculty could (and should) manage by themselves. One female chair said: “Work-life balance, I don’t know. Most faculty figure it out.” This chair went on to describe her more involved efforts with other employees: “With staff, we work really hard. Because they are so low paid, I really work hard to give them a good work-life balance.”

When asked whether it was possible for faculty to have a life outside academia, another (male) chair said: “That’s up to you. I can’t tell you what to do. What I say is you have to decide …. You are the only one that knows. That is what I try to say to my faculty …. [So, the answer to your question is] Yes, it depends on what you want to do. You have to figure out how to balance it. But I can’t tell you how to do it.” Another chair stated, “Tenure-track positions are killers for everybody. In our society, if you have to make a choice and only one individual can do the killer job, it’s usually the female who chooses to stay home or the couple chooses that it’s the female that stays home.”

Work-Family Integration is a Woman’s Issue

In addition to an emphasis on responsibility and choice, some chairs personalized work-family integration by focusing on specific issues faced by
individual women, almost always associated with their roles as mothers or partners. For example, many chairs believed that single faculty of both genders were difficult to recruit due to the university’s relatively isolated geographic location, but this was especially true for women faculty. One said that recruiting women was challenging due to “social issues more so than research or academic issues.” Recruiting single women was difficult due to the limitations of finding a partner in a small, college town, whereas those with spouses were hard to attract because of the likelihood that their partner would be another academic who also needed a faculty position. After explaining these issues, one chair said: “I can count up three or four examples just like this, where we had female faculty at the top of the list … and it ended up not succeeding.” In contrast, sometimes family and personal issues worked in a department’s favor. One chair mentioned a highly recruited, well-known researcher in his department, noting that “the reason she came here is that she wanted to live in a small town and she wanted to raise her kids in a small town.” Such cases were viewed as happy surprises or instances where good things happened without any intervention by the chair or university.

Although many chairs felt that their ability to recruit women — especially single women — was constrained by factors outside their control, they were more optimistic about their ability to hire a female faculty member with an academic partner. The university’s partner accommodation policy, which provides financial assistance to departments who hire partners (male and female), was viewed in largely positive terms and seen as essential to faculty recruitment. Several chairs could cite multiple successful hires that involved accommodation of a partner. As one said: “Having been other places, I think [the university] does a very good job with partner accommodation. In fact, four of the last six hires that I’m familiar with, a faculty member came with a partner accommodation of one type or another. It was very easy.” Another said “We have had several very successful matches that worked, and the spouses are happy, and it has really helped make the hire permanent.” For some, the ability to hire a couple was itself a work-family success. As one explained, “The only family related concern that we’ve tried to do something about is partner accommodation. And we were successful in this last hire. That made all the difference.”

The partner accommodation policy is not aimed exclusively at the partners of women faculty, however. In fact, a few male chairs noted that their female partner had been hired through this program. The policy’s universality may help account for its widespread support. In addition, chairs viewed partner accommodation as first and foremost a recruitment
(and retention) tool that enhanced their ability to hire (or retain) good faculty. Although this policy is an important way that universities can support faculty members’ ability to integrate work and family, most chairs did not conceive of it in these terms. Chairs who were reluctant to engage or were unsure how (or if) work-family issues were a departmental matter had no hesitation with respect to accommodating a partner.

In addition to partner accommodation, the university offers policies that allow modification of duties for a period of time to accommodate personal or family responsibilities and a stop-the-clock policy for those whose family-care responsibilities occur in their pretenure years. Most were supportive of these policies and believed that they were actively promoted by the administration. As one chair said, “If somebody doesn’t know about these things, they have their head in the sand” and described the university as “progressive” around these issues. Another said stopping the tenure clock is “a very reasonable thing to support.” Despite their positive views, few chairs had had faculty members who had actually used them. As one chair explained: “I haven’t used it, but I know about it and if I needed to, I would. Especially if I had a young woman in a tenure track, I certainly would not be hesitant to stop the tenure clock.”

Policies such as modified duties and temporary stoppage of the tenure clock are by definition designed to provide individual solutions to specific situations. This reinforces chairs’ inclination to treat work-family issues as a matter for individual women (and an occasional man) at particular times. For example, in response to a question about the stop-the-tenure clock policy, one chair said: “Well you know we only have one female faculty here and she’s not married, so it hasn’t come up. Although everybody has had babies, but the tenure thing never came up.” Another chair, whose faculty had used the policies, emphasized the individual nature of the decision-making involved. He said “I think everybody is aware that you can stop the tenure clock. We’ve had people use that, including probably the only male faculty member at the university [to] request and be granted an extra year toward tenure. And we have folks that know about it and will opt not to use it.”

Another chair used a personal example to illustrate the choices involved in policy use (or lack of use). Noting that he was tenured, while his wife was not, the chair said that he could “facilitate her being more productive and me being less productive, so that she can earn tenure” (without stopping the clock). He went on to say that “I think people individually make these choices, knowing what their prospects are and what this would mean or not. Even if institutionally the policy is there, people opt not to take it.”
chair recognizes that work and family are linked and that his wife’s tenure prospects are shaped by his own decisions about work. However, he uses this example to illustrate the ultimately personal decisions that are involved.

Several chairs also provided examples of departmental members informally pitching in to support a female faculty member. As this chair explains: “Of the three or four women faculty that we have hired in the last five years, almost every one of them had a baby while being here. And colleagues were extremely supportive of having them on leave without it impacting their courses ... And this was all arranged in a one-on-one between faculty members and the faculty member having the baby.” Informal, short-term accommodations were offered as examples of support for helping women to temporarily balance family and work.

Most chairs thus were supportive of their female faculty, though reluctant to view work-family matters as a departmental issue. Instead, work-family challenges were temporary, personal life events that emerged and then receded from view. As this chair explains: “Most of the women that are going through now are either single, so it’s not an issue; or if they are married and they have kids, what I find is they have very supportive spouses so they are able to negotiate that way.” For this chair, however, as women’s work-family challenges receded, men’s were increasing: “I think, if anything, what I am seeing now is that there are a lot of young male faculty who have families, and I think they are devoting way too much time to their families and not enough time to their profession because again of this balance issue and of taking responsibility and shared child rearing and everything else.”

**Gender Barriers: Individual Problems, Individual Solutions**

This narrative of personal choice and individual responsibility played a large role in chairs’ perceptions of gender inequities or barriers and how (or if) they attempted to overcome these challenges. Roughly 20 percent of the chairs we interviewed felt that there was “no bias in the system” or “structural impediments” to the fuller inclusion of women in their departments. When barriers or inequities were acknowledged, they tended to be viewed in individual rather than systemic or organizational terms. In this view, individual faculty members may be biased or act in discriminatory ways, but these are not reflective of the department as a whole, or built into its practices and policies. As this chair explains:

There are people who unbeknownst to themselves probably say or do things [that are] not hostile necessarily, but off-putting. They are not actually attempting to be off-putting.
but maybe they just grew up in a culture where—if there weren’t any women around—then things like that never got eliminated and they don’t have to think about it. I think it is not the department culture as much as it is each individual as an individual. You can’t actually tell people how to behave in too great a detail. Everyone has to be responsible for their own behavior at a certain level. You can’t police everything down to what they are wearing every day or whatever. I guess I think that we have some good things, and there are probably some unfortunate things that happen on occasion.

Another chair echoed this sentiment, saying of one faculty member that “there are certain attitudes and opinions that he’s voiced that at least make the women less comfortable. And I’m not suggesting anything [related to] sexual harassment, just that he’s an older man and they’re all much younger. It’s a big gap.” In another instance, a male chair noted problems created by a female faculty member, saying “One faculty member in particular is occasionally engaged in male bashing, which I’ve tried to squelch. These are personal attitudes of faculty members that we are dealing with. I don’t think there are institutional problems with it at all.”

Chairs who believed that sexist attitudes among a small number of male (or female) faculty were a problem tended to also believe that this problem was being solved through generational replacement. These chairs believed that departmental life was improving for women as an “old guard” was being replaced with younger, more open-minded faculty members. As one chair explained: “I don’t know of anybody who is opposed to advancing diversity. I don’t get comments from any faculty member about that. I get comments from retired faculty about that, but not from any current faculty.” Another said: “… historically this has been a bit of a good ole’ boy department … it was a relatively senior [department, with] relatively dominating males, who had always run the place. And I think that’s gone—mostly by way of retirements. But, I think high sensitivity to potentially different needs of female faculty has not always been our strength, historically.” This chair went on to say that “Things are going to change, and they are going to change whether you want them to or not …. The younger faculty all know that. They come in with that idea. But with a lot of the older faculty, it is hard to get those changes across, but it is getting better.”

Other chairs shared this optimism about the more open-minded views of untenured faculty. As one explained: “The fact that we are a younger faculty is going to work to our advantage.” Younger faculty “are a little more conscious [of diversity] and that creates a better atmosphere.” Another chair said he was “confident” that the junior faculty women in his department would be successful professionally, noting that it was “a generational issue.” He went on to say that “I was a really involved dad, but there are a lot of dads that aren’t, so often it falls on the women … our
faculty have done a good job balancing family and work responsibilities. Maybe that is because of the support they are getting. Come back in ten years, I hope that I’m right and we have a lot of full professors who are female.”

**The Invisibility of Gender**

Discussions of gender outside the context of women’s family lives were largely absent from chairs’ comments. A few chairs referenced these issues indirectly, such as the chair who referred to the “good ole boys” who had dominated his department for many years. Another noted the unequal distribution of service responsibilities, noting that “service falls on the women more than the men. And of the people who don’t do much service in the department, they are all men and they just find a way of getting out of it.”

Two chairs offered diametrically opposed views about the degree to which gender could (and should) be acknowledged as in academic life. Neither of these views were typical, yet they help illustrate two very different views of gender in the academy. One calls attention to the gendered nature of faculty work, while the other insists that faculty work is gender-neutral. One set of comments came from a male chair, who spoke of the need for a department to be “mindful” of the issues that confront women and faculty from underrepresented groups. These issues include the knowledge that “this faculty member is going to be in high demand for advising and service on campus” or that “female faculty are going to be challenged more in class than male faculty; faculty of color are going to be evaluated differently than white faculty.” He noted that: “We need to know [these things] upfront. We need to say that we are sympathetic to that and these are the adjustments that we will make.” This chair also commented on work-family issues, saying that “academia sort of twists the life cycle …. How is taking on the responsibility of a child, for example, going to be integrated into the teaching load going forward? … All of the factors that make the faculty diverse can also make their jobs more challenging. I think that foreknowledge is important.”

A female chair offered a very different perspective on the role of gender in departmental life. This chair felt that calling attention to gender (especially women) did a disservice to women. As she explains:

*I really hate it when people make [the idea of women chairs] an issue …. You should get the very best person that you can to fill the job …. In my first job, I was the only*
female applicant for a faculty position, and when I took the position, I was told “you are going to have some challenges.” Everybody does. The guys have challenges as well. Maybe our challenges are different, and certainly there were some times when people will blow you off because you are female … But I hate [the perspective] that my view must be different because I’m a female in a particular role.

This chair went on to acknowledge that she may not have been included in male chair gatherings, but noted that “if you want to make that a problem you can.” Women need to “go out there and deliver.” She continued, “If we do that, it speaks a whole lot more loudly that we are competent and successful and capable in our positions than somebody saying ‘we needed more female representation in the administration, so we want you to fill that chair position with a female.’ I would absolutely say ‘you can have your job, because if that is why I’m getting the position, I don’t want it.’ That is why, in a nutshell, I’m fairly resistant to some of these things. I don’t think it serves women well if we need to have special concessions made for us. This is the job that has got to be done, if I can do it, and then let me compete for it.”

**DISCUSSION: GENDER INEQUALITY BELIEFS**

Almost all of the chairs in our study believed that they influenced at least some aspects of their departments. One said “departments will tend to take on the characteristics of their leaders eventually,” while another suggested that the chair “is the person who has the biggest potential to be destructive to collegiality in the department.” While their individual influence likely varies, chairs’ beliefs about gender, work, and family are likely to influence the kinds of efforts they make in these areas. Our findings call attention to three major aspects of these beliefs.

First, despite awareness and support, chairs were reluctant to make work-family integration a departmental matter. This tendency to treat work-family issues as personal and private, and outside the realm of work is not unique to department chairs or academe. Prior studies have shown how this stance reinforces a view of the ideal worker as male and unburdened by family responsibilities, with women as outsiders and unsuited for success in a demanding workplace. These effects may be even more pernicious in academic settings, where faculty autonomy is prized, celebrated, and protected, and the only limits to success are self-imposed. Faculty flexibility is a double-edged sword for many reasons (Fox et al., 2011; Misra
et al., 2012; Winslow, 2010), but it may also exacerbate the unwillingness to treat work-family issues as anything more than another choice about how to allocate one’s time. Chairs’ recognition of work and family as an issue affecting faculty careers is a starting point for change. However, it is important to break down the boundary that keeps work-family integration segregated from discussions of faculty careers, success, and satisfaction.

Second, helping faculty reduce the work-family conflict or finding ways to accommodate their work-family responsibilities became issues in only limited circumstances, and chairs’ work-family practices were personalized and focused almost exclusively on women. Chairs worried about how to recruit women — both single and partnered — and focused attention on women’s needs around pregnancy and childbirth. They supported policies designed to facilitate the hiring of academic partners and those providing modified duties or a stop in the tenure clock around childbirth. However, focusing attention on short-term events reinforced the impression that work-family issues are temporary, rather than ongoing features of people’s lives. Informal work-family support is also important in facilitating work-family integration, so these activities are valuable (Behson, 2005). However, the effects of children on career trajectories are long-term, with potentially cumulative disadvantages for caregivers.

Chairs’ emphasis on women as the focus of policies such as modified duties and stopping the tenure clock contributed to a view of caregiving as women’s responsibility. This approach also gave women faculty what Gatta and Roos (2004, p. 137) call a “marked” status as mothers or wives and set them apart from their male colleagues, whose family lives were less visible. In this way work-family integration becomes a woman’s issue, not a workplace issue affecting faculty of both genders. Further, when focused only on mothers, attention to work-family issues may strengthen rather than undermine gender stereotypes. Chairs supported women faculty as caregivers, but by doing so may have contributed to the view that women, but not men, need help to be successful and mothers, but not fathers, face work-family challenges. The comments of the female chair who felt that attention to gender meant that women were receiving “special concessions” illustrate these perceptions.

The university’s work-family policies were described as “progressive” and valuable. Such policies are a critical piece of what is needed to improve gender equity in academe and the work and family lives for both women and men. Yet, research inside and outside the academy has shown that policies alone cannot change a workplace (Mennino, Rubin, & Brayfield, 2005; Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008). We found that some policies were supported by chairs, but not often used, as women chose to “opt out.” To
be a successful ingredient of workplace change, policies need to be accom-
panied by more comprehensive discussions about how work is organized,
evaluated, and rewarded, and how work and family can be better inte-
grated on an ongoing basis.

Finally, we found that chairs were largely silent around gender outside
the context of family issues. Studies of women faculty show that while
departmental attention to their caregiving responsibilities is important,
they are most troubled by day-to-day features of the work environment,
including exclusion from formal and informal networks, concerns about
fairness and gender equity, workloads, and other aspects of departmental
life (Fox et al., 2011; Maranto & Griffin, 2011). These issues were hinted at
in the comments of the male chair who stressed the need to be “mindful” of
issues facing women and faculty of color. In general, however, our results
may indicate a divergence between how chairs are attempting to respond to
women faculty and the concerns of faculty members themselves.

Some chairs acknowledged gender barriers or inequities, but attributed
these to individuals, not to departmental cultures, practices, or policies.
However, chairs who embrace these views are unlikely to look more deeply
at their departmental dynamics or become aware of the organizational and
structural factors that gender faculty life and careers. Further, while many
chairs lamented their inability to deal with “bad actors” (especially those
who are tenured), they also did not feel strongly compelled to act due to
their belief that generational replacement was taking care of the problem
for them.

Chairs’ beliefs that newer faculty have more egalitarian attitudes than
their senior colleagues may be accurate in some respects, yet there are pro-
blems with putting too much faith in evolutionary change. Without paying
attention to changing the organization of faculty work and the rewards on
which it is based, incoming faculty members will face a workplace as rigid
as that encountered by their more senior counterparts, and their success
will be evaluated in the same terms. It also may be wrong to minimize
senior faculty’s ability to contribute to workplace change, as those with
more experience may have a better vantage point from which to assess bar-
rriers and challenges than those with less experience (Ecklund et al., 2012).

**CONCLUSION**

Van den Brink and Benschop (2012, p. 89) argue that change in the acad-
emy is slow because practices that perpetuate inequality may “hinder, alter
or transform equality measures.” Our results are consistent with that pattern. Although the chairs we interviewed were sympathetic and aware in many respects, their views on gender, work, and family were filtered through the lens of personal responsibility and choice, an outmoded view of family as a woman’s issue and as separate and distinct from work, and a notion of gender as a personal characteristic rather than an entrenched feature of the academy. Chairs would benefit from a view of gender that recognizes its entrenched and pervasive power in academic life. At a broader level, our results suggest that chairs should become more conscious of their role as shapers of reality and framers of events.

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