

Research Brief

“Different People Have Different Priorities”: Work-family Balance, Gender, and the Discourse of Choice

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Background

How a problem is conceptualized shapes the solutions that are imagined and enacted. Recent work on the ‘demographic inertia’ in STEM fields predicts that change will remain unacceptably slow well into the future. We suggest that the pace of change is related, in part, to how stakeholders understand and frame the problem. Therefore, by examining how faculty members think about underrepresentation, we are able to identify discourses that contribute to continued gender inequalities in STEM departments.

Purpose

This paper addresses the following question: *What discourses do STEM faculty engage to make sense of underrepresentation, and how do those discourses advance our understandings of why underrepresentation persists?*

Methods

As part of ADVANCE-Purdue’s Academic Career Pathways study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nineteen STEM faculty members. They included four men and fifteen women. Ten held tenure-track assistant professor positions, seven were tenured, and two had been denied tenure. Participants represented several different racial and ethnic groups. Grounded theory methods were employed to analyze the data.

Results

Paradoxically, while highlighting a range of family-related gender inequalities and social pressures in both work and home lives of women, participants also emphasized the role of agency and individual choice in women’s decisions not to pursue faculty careers, thus belying the significance of those inequalities as a problem deserving of action or attention. Gendered family roles were a prominent explanation for underrepresentation in academia, and faculty interpreted those roles as individual choices such that underrepresentation was not seen as a problem warranting significant action and/or is simply too entrenched in a larger gender system to be changeable. In other words, it is not a problem located in the academy itself. In that way, any impetus for changes to structures of the academy is mitigated by the discourse of individual choice.

Conclusions

The notions of choice and agency require further reflection and contextualization. Given that women are so underrepresented among STEM faculty, we do need to deconstruct *why* other options are more appealing to women more often than men, rather than simply writing it off as a matter of individual priorities. We need to understand participants’ focus on choice as a manifestation of larger neoliberal and modernization discursive formations and the dialectical tension in interviewees’ responses as valuable for understanding persistent underrepresentation.

Implications for Practice

- Rather than relying solely on climate surveys or assessment data to understand faculty members’ situations and decisions, universities can employ social scientists to research these issues through critical lenses. Individual STEM faculty members do not necessarily have the theoretical and sociological knowledge to identify, or be critical of, how their location in certain social or institutional structures impacts them. First-order data from surveys, or even interviews, should not be taken at face value but instead interpreted and built upon by scholars with theoretical knowledge of discourse, gender theories, and other critical approaches.

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