Job Satisfaction and Gender

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Numerous studies have pointed to a gap in job satisfaction between men and women in academe, with men generally happier with working conditions. A new study by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education confirms those studies, but finds -- among assistant professors at research universities -- that these satisfaction gaps vary by discipline. In many measures of satisfaction with various policies or conditions, the gaps between men and women are not statistically significant in many disciplines, but are significant in others, especially in the social sciences.

The finding is significant and potentially challenging to many universities, because the social sciences, on average, are more likely to have significant numbers of women in departments than are some other fields. "The fact that these differences cut across disciplines and, in fact, are most evident in disciplines in which women are relatively well-represented is important to keep in mind," said Cathy Trower, research director of COACHE, which is based at Harvard University. In other words, any university that thinks it has solved problems related to gender just by recruiting a critical mass of women may find otherwise.

Some gaps in job satisfaction (all with men as happier than women) were evident across several disciplinary categories. These job areas include: reasonableness of scholarship expectations for tenure; the way professors spend their time as faculty members; the number of hours they work as faculty members; the amount of time they have to conduct research; their ability to balance work and home responsibilities; and whether their institutions make raising children and the tenure track compatible.

In terms of overall job satisfaction (across gender lines), the analysis found that assistant professors in the physical sciences and humanities were satisfied with more aspects of their work lives, while faculty in education and the visual and performing arts were satisfied with the fewest aspects.

The dramatic figures, however, were when gender was added to the equation. Looking at areas where job satisfaction had a gender gap, the social sciences come up far more than other disciplines. Of 45 categories in which at least one disciplinary area was found to have a gender gap in job satisfaction, with men feeling more satisfied, the social sciences came up in 36. Further, in 13 of the job categories, the social sciences were the only disciplinary area with such a gender gap, and in another eight, social sciences were one of two fields with gender gaps in job satisfaction. (In five other categories, there was a statistically significant gender gap in satisfaction, with women more satisfied.)

[Table]

The obvious question from the data: Why do social sciences professors have larger gaps by gender in job satisfaction than do other disciplines?

Kiernan Mathews, director of COACHE, noted that the surveys used didn't ask the assistant professors why they ranked various policies or environments as they did, so there is no clear indication of why the social sciences differ as they do. He noted, however, that when he briefed some provosts and deans about the findings, those who were in the social sciences were "not surprised."

(continued on reverse)
The key finding, he said, is that "critical mass isn't going to be the silver bullet" in female job satisfaction. "The job of our institutions doesn't stop with recruitment," he said. Trower said she hoped that research universities would use the data as a starting point for discussions, discipline by discipline, to see where there are gender differences in job satisfaction (or lower satisfaction overall than is desirable). "This study is set up to start conversations with the faculty," she said.

Several women in the social sciences who are involved in disciplinary efforts to promote equity said that the findings made sense to them.

Rosanna Hertz, the Classes of 1919-50 Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at Wellesley College, is a member of the Council of the American Sociological Association and is that board's liaison to the association's Committee on the Status of Women in Sociology.

As a senior faculty member, she said she has noted frustration among junior faculty about the tenure process. "Many say that they don't understand the tenure criteria," she said. "They ask 'Do I need a book? How many articles do I need?' They want to quantify it in a way that's not always quantifiable."

Hertz said that she thinks the problem is exacerbated -- perhaps especially for women -- by the way online connectivity enables people to work remotely in the social sciences. She noted that in many of the physical and biological sciences, there is regular contact, in person, in a lab. "In the social sciences, people for the most part toil away on their own, and there is more of a sense of isolation," she said. "If I go to any of the science buildings on campus, there are people there 24/7, but sometimes in the social sciences it can be a ghost town. The days of open office doors and people congregating are gone," she said.

For women who are starting their careers, and want mentors, that means it can be more difficult to chart a path.

Barbara M. Fraumeni, chair of the American Economic Association's Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession and chair of the Ph.D. program in public policy at the University of Southern Maine, said that her committee regularly documents the pipeline issues in the field. The latest report on doctoral granting institutions -- consistent with recent years -- notes that far larger shares of those earning doctorates are women than are associate professors and that the associate share is far larger than the full professor share. Fraumeni said that women have been earning doctorates in the field for long enough that the lack of female full professors is something that needs an explanation.

"In economics, I would be surprised if women weren't less satisfied than men," she said. (She also noted that, within the social sciences, economics has more of a gender gap in total numbers than do other fields.)

Fraumeni said she regularly hears from frustrated female economists who feel that they are passed over for promotions in favor of men. She said she just heard from someone (not at her campus) who described how two men with lesser qualifications were promoted, and that the chair talked about these men as "being like sons" to him.

Stephanie Seguino, a professor of economics at the University of Vermont who is president-elect of the International Association for Feminist Economics, said that she also wasn't surprised by the COACHE findings. She said that, in economics, research agendas may play a role. "The mainstream of economics is dominated by neoclassical economists who argue that markets are the best allocators of resources and are efficient," she said. "Many women do research on gender and inequality issues and they find that their work is marginalized."

As a result, Seguino said that she sees many talented female economists shifting to gender studies or other departments. "Very talented women economists have difficulty getting tenure if their research is in the area of gender," she said.

-- Scott Jaschik

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