Mother Discrimination in Psychology
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(Part 2 of 2)

In Part 1 of my exploration of mother discrimination in psychology I wrote about many real life examples from women in our field who had experienced covert or overt discrimination because of their status as mothers (or mothers-to-be). It appears that the number of mothers (and some fathers) being discriminated against is quickly on the rise (or at least being reported more). It is not bad enough that the "average working woman loses $1.2 million to wage inequity" (Jeffery), she now has to potentially contend with discrimination on the job simply because she is a caretaker. In an article on how academe treats mothers Joan Williams (2004), Director of the Program on WorkLife Law and a lawyer, suggests counting up the number of mothers (and then fathers) in your department. The number she argues, could suggest women who have chosen to be childfree OR it may suggest that women, unlike men, sacrifice having children to get ahead. Past APA President Diane Halpern, argues that the fact that only 22% of full professors (in the U.S.) are women, is a civil right's issues. She further notes that employees with any kind of caregiving responsibility are penalized by the current promotion and tenure system in psychology. Furthermore, the APA Task Force on Women in Academe (1999) noted that overt sexism has been replaced by more subtle sexism and that inaccurate stereotypes impact women's evaluations and job advancement.

There are many articles in popular magazines about how to stand up for one's self and advocate for less hours, flexible schedules or any numbers of family friendly adaptations. Laws in some states also protect employees from discrimination and allow for Family Medical Leave when a child is born or adopted. Yet as a nation we are way behind other countries in being family friendly. Graduate students have it even harder. Earlier this year Stanford was only the 2nd university in the United States to create a Childbirth Policy for female graduate students.

Psychology does not specifically address these issues for our own. What options do psychologist mothers have when they have been discriminated against? As a society who focuses on individuality, we treat work and family as two completely unrelated entities. As psychologists we know that these two are intricately related, but too often, psychologists in positions of power dismiss family concerns as individual concerns that are unrelated to the workplace.

Psychologists who are mothers could certainly choose to sue or fight their discriminatory bosses, supervisors or workplaces, but there is a huge potential for backlash for many women who fight back. For many it would truly be career suicide to fight their workplaces. They may be seen as a liability in a future job or be "blacklisted" by others in their particular career trajectory.

Below is a list of ideas that may be helpful in dealing with discrimination. (If you have further ideas, please e-mail me and I'll include them in a future column.)

1. Know your Rights. Read your employee handbook or talk to someone in Human Resources to know what your rights are regarding pregnancy, maternity leave time and pay, breastfeeding at work and taking off days when children are sick.

2. Assert yourself by directly talking with your employer about the discriminatory situation. Create a paper trail, so that it is more difficult for your employer to fire you (Garskof, 2004).
3. Be aware of your state's laws (There is no federal statute that forbids discrimination against adults with caregiving responsibilities.)
5. Explore legal options:

A. Contact a labor attorney or the state department of labor (Garskoff, 2004).
B. Contact the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, www.eeoc.gov (1-800-669-4000).
C. Contact the U.S. Department of Labor, www.dol.gov (1-866-487-9423)
D. Contact the Equal Rights Advocates, www.equalrights.org (1-800-839-4372)
E. Contact Joan William's Worklifelaw program (at the University of California's Hasting's College of Law) for information and attorney referrals, http://www.uchastings.edu/?pid=3624

6. If you do get fired, get their reasons in writing.
7. Become an activist before there is a problem.

A. Encourage your department, program or workplace to draft family friendly guidelines and while being aware of the local state laws, go beyond the minimum (e.g. stopping the tenure clock for one year).
B. Lobby at the state level for legislation that would protect pregnant women and parents at work.
C. Work with the APA and other psychological organizations to create educational programs for employers and co-workers so they can learn about pregnancy and responsibilities involved in caring for an infant or children. Role playing about stereotypes of mothers can be very effective in examining personal biases (Williams, 2004). Also, address the realities of caring for children (e.g. maternity leave is not a vacation, daycares will not accept sick children, etc.,).
D. Work with the APA and other psychological organizations to draft ethical guidelines for employees who are mothers and fathers.

<u>If you are an employer</u>:

1. Ask your employees what they need, rather than making assumptions (Williams, 2004). Most employees want to do well at both their job and at being a parent.
2. Be aware that law suits (with huge pay-outs) are on the rise. In 2005, for example, 4,449 pregnancy discrimination suits were filed (Paul, 2006).
3. Create options that help and support the new parent, which in turn leads to a happier employee. Go above the minimum required by law!
4. Consider creating a list of local childcare options and paying a percentage of the cost.
5. Examine your own biases about what it means to be a parent. If you do not have children or were not the primary caregiver of your children, ask colleagues (or do your own research) about the realities of caring for children. It is extremely hard work.
6. Look to other organizations that have innovative ways to support parents.
7. Educate childless or childfree employees about the demands of parenting. Encourage them not to view breast milk pumping breaks or staying home with a sick child as "preferential" treatment. Also, when an employee is on maternity leave, bring in

temporary help (e.g. adjunct) to cover that employees workload, rather than expecting the other employees to do both jobs. Failure to do so can create resentment.
8. Encourage and support fathers in taking paternity leave.
9. As a psychologist you are in a very unique position to create a family friendly workplace and break down stereotypes about men's and women's roles as workers and parents.

References

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