

INTERPRETATION OF THE POLICY MATTERS MORE THAN THE INTENT BEHIND IT: BUSINESS COMMUNICATION'S ROLE IN CLARIFYING POLICY AND EQUITABLY DISTRIBUTING RESOURCES

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ABSTRACT

Women faculty do not achieve the same success as their male counterparts because of persistent barriers to career success. Best practices in faculty retention and career success have emphasized resource policies to aid faculty with these barriers. Utilizing structuration theory as the guiding framework, this study seeks to explore the extent to which organizational structure constrains or enables career success through the provision of resource policies. Interviews were conducted with 49 faculty women at one research intensive university. Findings illustrate that resources enable *and* constrain tenure, promotion, and care work for women faculty. The three takeaway points include the following: (a) faculty need resources, (b) resources must be known to help faculty, and (c) resources fail because of issues with interpretation of policy, distribution of resources, and consequences for utilization. The paper concludes with action items business communication scholars and practitioners can explore to improve career success for women.

Keywords: business communication; faculty success; tenure and promotion; structuration theory; resources, women faculty

INTRODUCTION

McMurtrie (2013) reports that women do not achieve the same success as men in the academy, but this begins early in a career and speaks to barriers, not abilities (see also, Catalyst 2017; 2020). Women of color experience even more barriers (Catalyst, 2020; Niemann et al., 2020). The constant tension between career and care for women in the academy is a difficult issue;

the outcomes of this struggle are realized in the disproportional number of women leaving the academy before tenure (Jackson, 2008; Monforti & Michelson, 2020); unequal distribution of men and women faculty at the full professor and administrative levels (Catalyst, 2017; 2020); and challenges of facing difficult personal choices about marriage, pregnancy, childrearing, and healthcare (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Hoffman & Cowan, 2010; Kirby, 2006; Schimpf et al., 2013). These care and career barriers are rooted in the organizational structure of the academic organization (Townesley & Broadfoot, 2008; Tracy, 2008).

As such, the current study seeks to explore the extent to which organizational structure constrains or enables career and care responsibilities for women faculty through the provision of resources for faculty success and retention. As we celebrate the 75th year of the Federation of Business Disciplines (FBD), I acknowledge that bias against women and minority faculty in the academy is not a new issue. In fact, it might be as old as or older than FBD itself. Yet, I believe business communication scholars thinking about the future of our field should study workplace policies, especially the interpretation of written policies, procedures for enacting those policies, and subsequent communication about said policies. Business communication scholars are “a group who care about our discipline, our roles in academe, and our scholarship” (Lawrence & Galle, 2011, p. 320). We are uniquely positioned to examine written doctrine and human messaging in the workplace—specifically the academic workplace—and improve distribution of resources and fair treatment of women and minority workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Below I review the literature on care and career challenges for women in the academy followed by a discussion of resource policies as they relate to faculty success and retention. I will then explain the theoretical framework—structuration theory—and how it grounds the methods and analysis.

Women in Academe: Care and Career Challenges

Academia is not an environment that allows women to easily succeed in multiple roles. First, Pain (2010) reports that faculty experience more anxiety and burnout than the average worker outside of academe, and women faculty are even more at risk than their male counterparts (see also Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014; Niemann et al., 2020). In addition, for many women faculty, becoming a mother is a danger to receiving tenure because of perceived inability to balance childcare and career. Inconsistent or nonexistent parental leave policies may prevent some faculty from achieving tenure or promotion (Niemann et al., 2020; Schimpf et al., 2013). Finally, the life of the academic hinders the ability for women to perform care responsibilities (for a review of work/life literature, see Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014). Common perception in the academy is that we can find an intricate balance between work and life. Wieland (2011) writes, “Constructions of work and life privilege particular values and interests” (p. 163). Those particular values and interests stem from a past value system where women (and care work) were kept separate from the academy (Slaughter, 2012; Townesley & Broadfoot, 2008). Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004) argue that when we cannot balance our work and life with one another, “dominant discourses of order and consistency may obscure such tensions from view or depict them as a mark of individual failing” (p. 173). Care work then, usually relegated to women, is often perceived as a choice, one that can be touted as a marker of failure when evaluating career performance (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014).

Success and Retention through Resource Policies

Because of challenges associated with tenure and promotion, academic institutions provide a myriad of resources at the department, college, and university levels to ameliorate demands on faculty and increase both success and retention. On the career side, Piercy et al. (2005) argue that successful faculty retention programs include sustained mentoring, a supportive and open climate, leadership and networking opportunities, and inclusiveness. Retention programs concerned with tenure and promotion should include clear and consistent policies and procedures, provide time-associated resources (e.g., reduction in teaching and service), and should continue beyond the first year. Finally on the care side, best practices for faculty retention should also include accommodations and resources for dual careers, family leave, as well as clock pauses or extensions (Norrell & Norrell, 1996). Much of the research on retention focuses on faculty trying to achieve tenure, but Jackson (2008) argues that tenured women professors continue to need support to complete projects and move through the pipeline to promotion. Moreover, resources available to non-tenure track and contingent faculty are even less—a position where at least 50% of business communication faculty find themselves (Lawrence & Galle, 2011). These faculty also need funding, time, and leave resources to advance in their academic careers. Because policies exist to provide resources for both retention and success, the next section explores policy exploration from a business communication perspective.

Business Communication and Policy Exploration

Business communication scholars have a long tradition of examining policy and its impacts on businesses, employees, and other stakeholders (Bandow & Hunter, 2008; Gilsdorf, 1987; Jennings et al., 2014; Joseph, 2008; Moeggenberg et al., 2022; Muir, 2008; Rupert & Loudermilk, 2002). Jennings et al. (2014) examined the use of social media among employees for both business and personal reasons and concluded that employees' social media use created specific financial and legal liabilities which could be mitigated with employer policies to govern the use of social media. They concluded that when policies exist, employees must be made aware of them: "The 'rules' set forth in any social media policy will not be of much use if employees do not know they exist or do not understand or follow them" (p. 109). This is applicable to the discussion of resource policies, which are not useful to employees if they are not known.

Joseph (2008) examined the legal ramifications following termination procedures based on the phrasing of the initial employment contract. Findings indicated that interpretations of the contract from the employer and the employee perspectives were different, which did impact legal decisions following termination. Bandow and Hunter (2008) explored workplace civility policies including policies governing civil behavior, informal and formal complaint procedures, and retaliation protections; the authors determined that the most inclusive and protective policies default to respect for all employees and consider how administration of the policy ameliorates retention challenges and psychological issues for employees.

Muir (2008) explains that policies are "fraught with ambiguities" in practice because subjective interpretation allows for the policy to work broadly by garnering more agreement:

When we create mission statements, strategic plans, employee handbooks, grievance procedures, diversity statements, or harassment policies, we are constrained by laws and regulations and by internal interests and legacies. Like icebergs, such interests and legacies remain largely hidden but potentially perilous. Thus, even in this post-Enron era when policy writers and committees heed the call for more openness, clarity, accountability, and

shared governance, they know they must also query and satisfy hidden interests and histories if their proposed policies are to be approved and implemented. (p. 87)

Importantly, internal legal and revenue interests are privileged in policy adoption rather than the needs of individual employees, especially when it comes to resources.

Moeggenberg et al. (2022) argue that institutional policies can be inequitable to specific groups of people based on phrasing and interpretation of said policies. Specifically, they explain that policy documents, although written to be applied one-size-fits-all, are not objective or neutral. In particular, policy documents are often inequitable based on intersectional identities including, but not limited to, gender, race, sexuality, socio-economic status, and nationality because of subjective interpretations and normalized perceptions (Holvino, 2010; Moeggenberg et al., 2022).

Based on previous business communication research, we understand how policies are created, who they primarily serve, challenges with interpretations, and their legal and financial ramifications. What we do not know is how they guide the structure communicatively, and how that communication impacts implementation and accessibility of resource policies designed to help employees succeed. Rupert and Loudermilk (2002) encourage business communication scholars in their exploration of policy to determine “the nature of the document’s use and the setting in which these company materials are utilized” (p. 67). As such, the current study seeks to continue the tradition in business communication to examine policy, filling in the communication gap between policy writing and implementation while utilizing Structuration Theory as a guiding framework.

Theoretical Framework: Structuration Theory

Giddens (1984) claims that workers are actors that have agency, and the organizational structure is brought into being by the communicative actions of those workers. People come together through communication; form organizations where rules, policies, and procedures are developed through further communication; those rules, policies, and procedures create a baseline structure; and then people interact with each other within, through, and against the structure to alter it (McPhee et al., 2014). MCPhee et al. (2014) assert that structures are observable but cyclical only because they are both “interaction and its outcome” (p. 76). This process is called the duality of structure because a structure is built from verbal and written communication as well as interactions between actors in the organization, and then the structure guides future interactions while it is also simultaneously being transformed by those interactions.

At the core of the theory are structures, which are the combination of rules and resources (McPhee et al., 2014). Rules are both formal written rules and regulations of an organization but also informal norms, routines, or principles that guide communication exchanges and behavior in the organization. A resource is anything that helps to accomplish activities or goals within the organization, such as money, tools, knowledge, skills, and time. Policies and procedures are both classified as rules under the theory. Sometimes a policy can be both a rule and a resource (e.g., parental leave policies).

PowerDMS, a company that specializes in policy management, defines policy as “a set of general guidelines” that detail “an organization’s plan for tackling certain issues” (What is a policy, 2020, n.p.). Policies communicate the organization’s culture, values, and philosophy regarding what the company expects from employees (e.g., code of conduct, social media use) and what employees can expect from the company (e.g., employee benefits, vacation time, parental leave). A good policy should “communicate expectations to employees and guide day-to-day operations”

(n.p.). PowerDMS asserts that good policy should be accompanied by clear procedure, which “should provide step-by-step instructions for specific routine tasks” including, but not limited to, who is responsible for actions, steps that need to be followed, and reporting (What is a policy, 2020, n.p.). Policies, then, explain the rules, but procedures explain how to implement the rules.

Structuration theory has even been used in business communication to examine basic written communication, genre repertoires, communicative exchanges and norms, temporal rhythms, cross-boundary coordination practices, and even communication technologies (Kellogg et al., 2006; Orlikowski & Yates, 1994; 2002; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992; 2002). Specifically related to resources, Kirby and Krone (2002) used structuration theory to explore the “discourse of organizational members regarding the implementation and utilization of work-family policies” (p. 51). By examining rules and resources within the organization, they discovered that the discourses about the policies were not in line with the policies themselves. Utilization of the policies framed women, mothers, and part-time workers as having preferential treatment and not doing an equal amount of work. In turn, those employees felt as though they were the subjects of discrimination, and they reported being punished for using the leave policies in the first place. Power and bias are often structurally interwoven. Biases are active in organizations and are acted on both consciously and unconsciously through assumptions about people, their actions, and the worth of their work (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012). Subjective interpretation about resources or the workers who utilize them might matter more than the actual policy and the intent behind it.

Therefore, structure can be both invisible to the organizational member, while also being very tangible. Poole and McPhee (2005) contend that meaning, power, and bias are still part of every interaction episode and are also embedded within the organizational structure through those interactions. For Giddens (1984) power is exerted through policies and procedures in text, communication about rules and resources, division of labor, and organizational climate and culture.

Research Questions

A more complete picture is needed of organizational resources to understand specifically how the organizational structure enables and constrains the success of faculty women. As such, the following research questions will be the initial focus of data collection.

RQ1: How do structural resources enable/constrain career success (e.g., tenure and promotion)?

RQ2: How do structural resources enable/constrain care work?

METHODS

Academia is a unique context to review policies and distribution of resources for three specific reasons. First, tenure is a practice that only academic organizations utilize. The failure of not receiving tenure means loss of employment, income, and benefits in addition to potential loss of workplace relationships (Perlmutter, 2008). Additionally, the probationary period has the potential to create high levels of anxiety, stress, and burnout for employees (Pain, 2010). Second, although flexible work is touted as beneficial in some organizations (Golden, 2013), the tension between flexibility and choice is prominent and problematic in academic organizations, as unyielding expectations camouflaged as flexibility might impact both career and care (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Hoffman & Cowan, 2010). Third, knowledge discrepancies about policy, inequitable distribution of resources, and subjective interpretation of policy lead to bias and unfair

evaluation in tenure and promotion decisions for women and minority faculty members (Andrews, 2015; Niemann et al., 2020).

Research Site

Because the study sought to explore the extent to which structural resources enable/constrain career and care responsibilities for women faculty, the data were collected from only one research site in order to explore the organizational structure in detail. The research site was an R-1 institution, chosen because it has a wide range of resources available for career development in addition to family friendly programs to assist with care needs/responsibilities.

Participants

After receiving IRB approval, the recruitment script was emailed to 439 female faculty members and administrators representing 76 departments on campus. Of those recruited, 49 faculty women participated in interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to 2.5 hours in duration. The participants come from six different colleges and represent 38 different departments. At the time of the interviews, 16 participants were assistant professors, 16 were associate professors, and 17 were full professors. Additionally, 12 participants were in administrative roles during the interviews or had previously served in an administrative role.

Data Collection

Procedures included semi-structured interviews supplemented with document analysis, which provided opportunities to attend to participants' meanings of their own lives (Haraway, 2014) contextualized within formal policy (Poole & McPhee, 2005). According to Patton (2002), the semi-structured interview guide ensured continuity but also allowed flexibility to tailor the same interview to specific participant needs and availability. All of the interviews were recorded for audio with the exception of two participants, and the audio records were transcribed to give preference to the participants' own words (Charmaz, 2014), resulting in 963 single-spaced pages of interview data. Documents created by the institution and institutional members were collected to contextualize the interviews and clarify specific policies related to resources (n=433); 17 of those documents are used in the analysis below.¹

Data Analysis

I utilized grounded theory methods as discussed by Charmaz (2014) for coding and analyzing interviews. First, I open-coded transcripts using NVivo data analysis software, as it is beneficial for managing large quantities of data and being consistent with the rigor of grounded theory analysis (Bringer et al., 2006). Second, using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) constant comparative method, each response was compared to the others to discover trends and differences that emerged from the codes. This process also presented an opportunity to pay attention to similarities and differences that fell along intersectional lines (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Holvino, 2010). Third, axial coding was applied to determine how the codes were related to one another (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) claims that axial coding elucidates dimensions of each category, as it helps the researcher restructure the fractured data after initial coding. Thematic

¹ Document analysis is contextualized within the interview narratives intentionally to mask the research site and maintain anonymity of the participants. Full textual analysis of the documents was not possible without making the research site searchable and potentially breaching confidentiality of the participants.

analysis was used in this stage to restructure the fragmented data into themes (Owen, 1984) related to the theoretical grounding of the study.

FINDINGS

Below I present findings for the two research questions. The resources to help faculty achieve tenure and promotion are first discussed followed by the resources for care work.

Resources to Help Faculty Achieve Tenure and Promotion²

Both formalized resources built into the academic routine and an abundance of optional resources in which faculty can choose to take advantage are available. Formalized resources concerning mentoring programs and annual reviews are reported elsewhere (citation blinded for review). What follows is a detailed description of available, but optional, campus resources from departments, colleges, and the university.

Available Resources

Participants listed more resources than would be possible for me to report here but the top three resource categories for faculty to achieve tenure and promotion were time, money, and support. First, all faculty need time to complete the tasks they have been assigned. Time away from teaching and service helps faculty focus on their research. The following vignette demonstrates the importance of protecting faculty's time, so they can progress on their research:

We try to protect [new faculty] from anything taking up their time for research, so we give them light committee assignments. We never put them on the graduate committee for example, that meets all the time and has a lot of responsibility. And often they can teach multiple sections of the same course, so that cuts down on the number of preps. All this is designed to help them spend time on research. (Camilla)

Camilla's department is a clear example of how a department can strive to not over-burden new faculty with unnecessary time commitments.

Additionally, faculty mentioned resources on campus that would help them save time launching research projects.

When I write the grant proposal, then the [research and partnerships department], they provide grantsmanship's support services. They do all these seminars around campus telling us pointers for how to make grant proposals stronger, and they host workshops where they bring in external experts on grant writing in stuff for where we can actually go in and hear from them. So we get an outside perspective as well as internal perspective. Then there's [grants management department], which does the budget for us, so we don't have to do that. . . . They take care of organizing all of the materials to submit, and then they actually do the physical mouse click to submit the grant when it's done when all the pieces are in place. . . . They just make sure that there's no bureaucratic (or administrative) reason for the grant to be returned without review. (Riley)

The different offices on campus that help with grant writing and submission save faculty time but also provide peace of mind during a stressful process on a tight deadline.

² Analytical claims and clarifications about policy availability, utilization, and language are based on the actual policy documents themselves.

The second category of resources was money, and monetary support is used to help with a variety of career-related tasks:

When I first started, my start up package included money for equipment and supplies. Also, it included support for two graduate students, for two years. That was so I can have two funded RAs for two years. And some summer salary, because we don't get paid during the summer, but we do work everyday anyway. (Sadie)

In addition to conference travel and manuscript submission support, Sadie explains that she received a start up package, and her start up package specifically budgeted for two graduate students for two years. She is in a field where she is expected to be grant productive, and when a faculty member has this expectation, they have to pay their own graduate students without departmental support. If she were unable to hire any graduate students until she had her first grant, her research program would be set back significantly. As such, her start up funds give her a buffer of time where she can gain momentum in her research program while also applying for grants that will eventually sustain her lab. Every participant in the study received some start-up money, and many participants used their start ups for equipment, books, and other research related activities, but some faculty also used start up for instructional materials, office equipment, and summer salary. Additionally, the university offers travel money for conferences and research presentations, manuscript submission support, internal grants for which faculty are able to apply, and financial resources for faculty advancement.

The third most referenced resource was support. As illustrated in the following vignettes, support comes in a variety of forms:

In terms of administrative support, we have here in the department, it's a site called SharePoint, it's like a shared platform where people upload their syllabi, and like promotion materials for example. So whenever you're preparing, so I just submitted my materials for the 3rd year review, and I was able to look at other people's forms on the SharePoint, to see what they put there, so I could get some idea about the kinds of things I need to be talking about. . . . The colleagues who have done this like last year or the year before, their materials are up there so I was able to take a look at them, so that was very helpful. (Olive)

At the department level, Olive describes a system her department has in place for supporting faculty when they are preparing their promotion materials for review. Additionally, some faculty discussed college-wide support systems or networking opportunities for women who are isolated in their home departments, and at the university level, many faculty mentioned intentional networking and faculty development/success opportunities. The multiple levels of support across campus for faculty allow the university to communicate its investment in faculty success at the department, college, and university levels. Participants feel like the institution wants them to succeed even if they do not feel supported in their home departments.

When Resources Fail³

The important thing to note here is that resources have to be known in order to be utilized. Departmental resources (e.g., travel money, semester leave, start up packages, and teaching assistants) are much easier to use because they are advertised during the interview process, and verbal reminders are provided by colleagues and department heads. On the other hand, resources

³ All of the narratives in this section include descriptions of resources and policies that have been verified with actual policy.

from the college and the university are not as widely known, especially because many of those resources were not available or did not exist when senior faculty were trying to earn tenure. Many of the participants who utilized college and university level resources were informed about those resources from their deans or their department heads specifically. This type of support is one that not all faculty are afforded, especially in departments where the climate is more competitive or caustic. Where no communication was present, the faculty searched for the information on their own; however, new faculty might not realize that resources are available for which to search or might be too overwhelmed to look for resources. At its core, this lack of information dissemination is a communication issue.

One particular problem with disseminating information about resources was that the communication is provided when it is not relevant. The following passage explains this problem in more detail:

After your first year all of a sudden, you're not a new faculty member anymore and the support drops considerably in terms of outreach and programming and things like that. That has been slightly challenging to deal with because I still feel like, even though this is my [#] year, that I'm kind of new and probably still need the support that new faculty get but there's none of that. . . . Like, is there a way to get back on those mailing lists? Like, I don't know what to do about that. But I kind of feel in this weird place where I'm not new but I'm not tenured. . . . Like, I'm not new, so I'm not shiny anymore, but I'm also not tenured so I still have some fear for my job. . . . So I'm in this weird middle space. (Serenity)

When faculty begin their jobs as assistant professors on the tenure track, they are inundated with information about the resources and support on campus. That information can be lost in the barrage of information or in some cases, it is not yet applicable to the teaching load or research program. Once a faculty member is settled into the job and really begins to focus on preparation of materials in their second or third year, they are no longer privy to this information unless they know where to look for it. Serenity echoes this sentiment. While these faculty could simply search for the information, they also need to remember what they are even searching for in order to find the programs that would be the most helpful to their needs.

In addition, participants also complained that the resources do not always function as intended or that the restrictions on the resources prevented them from being fully utilized. The following excerpt illustrates some of the restrictions:

I applied, the first two years I applied for the [summer grant] and did not, I don't think anybody, from what I've been told, nobody in [college] has gotten one of those in any recent history. After hearing that, I just stopped applying for them. (Suri)

I definitely have a start up package that is a pot of money for students and research and equipment. But I will say one thing that was definitely a bit shocking when I first started is that I could only use it within four years. . . . One of the issues associated with that since this pot of money is for students, so if I tell a graduate student, "Hey, come do a Ph.D. with me," the expectation is that it will take you right about four years. At that point, I couldn't earmark money as spent for this graduate student. Even though it's there set aside for the student, if they went past that four year time point, that money would be gone. I felt very uncomfortable bringing someone in and saying, "Hey I can maybe pay you for three and a half years because you've started half a year since I got this money. After that, we're up in the air whether I can actually support you." (Bernadette)

Suri's frustration is directly linked to bias in the allocation of summer research grants, as the work produced from her college is not valued the same as other colleges. If university biases exist in terms of which research programs are more important, then resources will not necessarily be distributed equally to faculty. In this case, there is a procedural issue with the policy, which allows bias to enter the selection process.

Bernadette's frustration is with the time limits placed on how fast she has to spend her start up package; if she only has access to that money for four years, then she would be unable to fully support a graduate student for the full time that student would need to earn a Ph.D. In this case, restrictions on her start up package could delay her research program rather than helping her build the program as the money was intended. Resources, then, are only beneficial when they are known, function as intended, and are equitable in distribution. The same can be said for policies and resources related to care work (e.g., leave policies and clock extensions), discussed in more detail below.

Policies and Resources for Care⁴

Although the university offers a variety of resources designed to aid faculty with care work, leave policies and clock extensions were the two discussed at length during the interviews.

Leave Policies

The university offers a variety of leave policies to accommodate faculty with care work (e.g., elder care, childbirth, childcare). Participants in this study focused on only three of the above-mentioned leave policies: sick leave, family medical leave act (FMLA), and paid parental leave (PPL). At the time of the current study, both male and female faculty were allowed six weeks of paid leave under PPL, pending that they have been an employee of the university for at least one consecutive year.

In some departments, faculty are also granted a teaching release for their birth semester. The following participant explains how the semester course release works:

When I first said I was pregnant I thought I was going to have to teach up until he was born. As I was the first pregnancy in a while, once the business office or someone got in touch with HR, they were like, "Oh no, this is how it goes. You just give them the entire semester off from teaching and give them research and service tasks until the baby comes." . . . It seems like they didn't know that ahead of time because I was the first one in a while. (Ella)

Ella was granted a course release for her entire birth semester, and according to several interviews, her experience reflects the intention of the policy to support faculty and provide students with an uninterrupted semester. However, other faculty had varying experiences with the policy because faculty only learn about it through word of mouth, and it is not available for review. This policy is not detailed in the Faculty and Staff Handbook, nor is it explained at all on the Human Resources website.⁵

⁴ Analytical claims and clarifications about policy availability, utilization, and language are based on the actual policy documents themselves. Where the analysis is based solely on perception or where the policy was unavailable for collection and evaluation, this has been noted in the text.

⁵ The author verified that the policy does exist, but it is only available in writing for HR and administrators (e.g., department chairs, deans); it is not available in writing for faculty or staff.

Distribution of parental leave was one of the greatest frustrations from women faculty. In this case, an unclear written policy, relatively unknown to most department heads, resulted in a wide variety of distribution practices, resulting in varying constraints as women tried to utilize the resource. The two complaints that were repeated throughout the interviews were about parental leave in the summer and teaching release during the birth semester. For many of the participants in the study, these issues came up simultaneously. The following statement illustrates this frustration:

Maternity leave, that is a department decision. My department head might not have given me the leave had it not been that I knew someone in another department who had just gotten leave from her head. I kind of had to play that off in order to get leave because it is, apparently, a departmental level [decision]. That being said, after I had my son, I have a male colleague who, they were expecting their first child during the semester, and he did get the same leave that I got, which I'm totally happy about. I think, that's wonderful, but I had to fight to get it. My son was born in the summer. . . . What was going to be disrupted? It was never framed in terms of a nine-month appointment because I'm still an employee and once you've been on for 12 months, you get maternity leave but the key is, it wasn't going to be disrupting my classes, so what was the logic? (Cecilia)

The parental leave policy available through the university website, and available to all employees, states that if an employee has worked for the university for one consecutive year, they are entitled to six weeks of paid parental leave, but this policy comes into question when a nine-month faculty member has their baby in the summer. In some cases, it appears this paid six weeks is granted, even in the summer or possibly granted in the fall semester, but in other cases, it is considered illogical since the faculty member is not technically, according to contract, working (though expectations of work do not cease in the summer even if the contract does). According to Cecilia, this is up to the discretion of the department chair, who may or may not decide the faculty member should have time off. Some participants, at the discretion of their chair, were not granted a semester teaching release because their babies were born in the summer or because the chair acted on biases about the need for the release.

Interviews confirmed that department chairs are privy to a written policy inaccessible to the rest of the university employees. In this case, policy is not widely available for review, and procedure is unclear even for those who have access to the policy. The unclear rules about teaching release in the birth semester are even more problematic when faculty are pressured to have their baby in the summer to avoid disruption in their classes or adding burden to other faculty. These discrepancies are unclear at best and deeply problematic for care and career balance at worst. Alani sums up the problems, responsibility, and potential for transformation the university has in the following statement:

In general I'm just disheartened at the way this whole country treats women who have children. I think universities are a place where they could really start to make an impact. We want to do all these things. We're doing so much research on how to get women to stay in academia. Why don't we give some benefits to them? . . . I think there's a lot of policies that could change to make the university actually family friendly. I don't know exactly what they are, or whether the university is willing to give, but the current paid leave I don't think is helpful and I don't think that the unwritten teaching release is helpful. (Alani)

Alani is right that universities want to keep their female workforce, and while the policies have improved from the past, having unclear policies or policies that require a gatekeeper to access is a continued failure of the university structure.

Care work policies also have implications for their influence on how employees plan their lives and families. The following example illustrates this influence:

So I thought that the leave policies weren't great for having a baby, and part of that was that I had my daughter 10 months after I got here. . . . So you get six weeks of leave, but only if you've worked for [University] for a year, so we didn't get any leave and we happened to be really lucky that it worked out. She was born the beginning of May. . . . So it was on the website, and I don't know, we had sort of been planning anyway. It's hard to decide to wait, I feel like, to make that happen, so I guess we could have waited longer to try and have a baby but we didn't. I knew that that was going to happen, but I sort of just thought that the department might have a little bit more flexibility and that we would still get some modified duties, which is not written down anywhere, that's really unclear. . . . So I would like to see [University] have some sort of more formal statement about modifying duties beyond just the six weeks or how the six weeks should go about. Like do you have to juggle everything so that you push all your important stuff before or after those six weeks? Because that's what it seems like a lot of people have to do basically. (Celestine)

While Celestine could have waited to try for a baby, she and her partner decided that they were ready for a family, and the time was right for them in their personal lives to try. However, her baby was then born outside of the eligibility requirements for parental leave. She mentions that they were lucky because the baby was born in May, and they were not required to teach over the summer anyway, so in that regard, they were lucky with the timing. However, she also echoes the above discussion about clarity for the modified duties of the birth semester and after. Neither she nor her partner received any modified duties.

Even though the majority of participants explained the use of leave policies related to parental leave, other faculty need FMLA or sick leave for difficult times in their lives:

Sydney: I think it's fair to say that the semester that my husband died, that it often felt like, "Well I'm here. I've shown up."

Interviewer: Did they offer you a teaching release or time off for the family medical leave act?

Sydney: No. No one ever discussed it with me. I never skipped a class, and that was partly that I had no family here. . . . When my husband died, there was no one; if I went home, I was alone. (Sydney)

This prime example of resources being available for someone who has every right to use them demonstrates how they are not advertised or clear. During this time in her life, Sydney's priority was caring for her dying husband, a time when she did not have the time or energy to investigate leave policies for herself. Faculty need both time and emotional capacity to research policies that might not even be on their radar in stressful situations. For many faculty, the use of a leave policy is accompanied by a clock extension, which is discussed in the next section.

*Clock Extension Policies*⁶

While most of the participants referenced “stop the clock” regarding the arrival of a child, this extension policy can also be used in extreme cases. The formal policy is the Tenure-Clock Extension Policy, and it grants clock extensions in two specific cases: (a) birth of a child or adoption for either or both parents and (b) when conditions or “personal circumstances” arise which “substantially interfere with progress toward achieving tenure.” Participants in this study have received clock extensions for both cases.

For the birth or adoption of a child, there is *only* a form, which has to be signed and submitted by the department head within one year of the arrival of the child. The clock extension is then automatic for one additional year on the tenure clock. The following participant explains how easy the process is supposed to be:

You have to submit a form. It took me a long time to find the form, which is shame on [University] for its websites being terrible. It's automatic once I submit it. It basically goes to the provost or whoever and they say yes and send it back to the department head. (Ella)

Procedurally, information from a designated source could clarify how to access the form, but the process is easy to navigate based on clarity in the policy.

If a faculty member intends to acquire a clock extension for reasons other than the arrival of a child, there is a longer process that has to be completed. The faculty member must work with their department chair to submit the request and verify both previous progress and conditions for the clock extension. So, the department chair must be willing to write a letter explaining that the faculty member has been progressing effectively toward tenure and essentially has not been wasting time. The faculty member then must also present evidence verifying the truth of the condition or personal circumstance. In any case, once the letter has been submitted, it is the decision of the Provost whether or not the extension will be granted.

Melissa explains her procedural role as Department Chair in the process of clock extensions:

I make sure that everybody knows. All the assistant professors . . . know they can have an extra year, and three assistant professors have gotten an extra year since I came, and for different reasons. One was for a baby; one was because they had a very bizarre Visa process; and then the other one was they had a parent who was very seriously injured. This person had to take off work and figure out what was going on with her dad, and it was really a big mess. I make sure they know. . . . I just sign the form [for the arrival of a child], and the letter that I write [for extraordinary circumstances] isn't... I don't have to go on, and on, and on. I just have to say, “I've been aware of these circumstances. The person is in other ways making good progress, so it's not like they're just trying to buy time and making something up. It's a real event.” (Melissa)

As department chair, Melissa has the responsibility of helping faculty receive a clock extension if it is needed and warranted. She is vocal about the policies being available and encourages assistant professors in her department to utilize the resource if they need it. Since this process is not automatic and requires the involvement of more gatekeepers, it also presents the opportunity for more bias in the process. Should a chair not want to grant a clock extension, the chair would have the power to deny the request, even if the request were legitimate.

⁶ All of the narratives in this section include descriptions of resources and policies that have been verified with actual policy.

Suri explains a personal circumstances where she was granted a clock extension:

So I was getting divorced, my son went to war, I was up for tenure, oh my God, it was absolutely brutal. My [mentoring] committee was very good about it, and I actually got an extra year because it was so stressful. And they said, “We want you to take an extra year to do tenure,” which I felt was a little bit of an embarrassment, because it made me feel like I wasn't adequate. But they said, “No, no, you're dealing with way too much stuff.” . . . So it was very difficult, and they were very good about it. (Suri)

Clock extensions are not, in writing, gendered. As indicated in the examples above, anyone can use the extension policies, including new mothers and fathers and any male or female faculty member going through extenuating circumstances, pending the department chair is willing to write and advocate for them.

However, extension policies are fraught with their own issues. Some faculty experience bias regarding the use of an extension for adoption or birth of a child, and challenges with interpretation of what the extension actually means when evaluating materials during the vote for tenure also occur. The following passages demonstrate the subjective nature and interpretation of clock extensions when evaluating a packet and call into question whether clock extensions for the arrival of a child actually help women succeed:

Actually, she was advised not to ask for an extra year because the feeling is that sure you get an extra year, but then the expectations are going to be higher. You know, it is not going to work to your advantage. Your expectations will be higher and unless you thought in that one year you could just turn out a lot of work, it wouldn't . . . so she didn't ask for it. (Camilla)

I had an extension on my tenure clock because I had a baby. . . . But then when it came time, my normal time to go up for tenure they told me, “Well no, you have an extension now. . . . Now your actual date is the next year. If you go up at this normal time that you would have that would be perceived as you going up early and then you have to have much more to look tenurable when you're early.” Right. Because to tenure somebody early they have to be a superstar. (Josephine)

Stop the clock procedure actually helps men a lot more than it helps women. . . . I don't think it's actually helping women become successful mothers and employees. . . . The gentleman in my department who had a baby . . . had both his parents and his wife's parents come over. His wife stayed home with the baby. He had almost a year of grandparent care and then all this other stuff. And he got a year on top of his tenure. He had plenty of time to do a lot of extra work that I absolutely could not get done. You look at that, you're like, we both were in same situation, but not really in any way. All we did was both had offspring. That's only thing that's the same. Everything else about it was entirely different. (Alani)

The above excerpts illustrate the problematic ways in which clock extensions can be and are subjectively interpreted by departments and committees despite the formal policy granting an extra year. Neither the policy nor the procedures for granting/utilizing the policy explain how to evaluate a packet where an extension has been granted.

Camilla describes a department that is still relatively unsupportive of women faculty and also caustic enough to interpret the clock extension as an *extra* year whereby extra work is expected. This specific interpretation of clock extensions is why many women, like the woman described in the passage, and also Camilla herself, opted out of utilizing this policy altogether. Josephine, on the other hand, filed for her clock extension, but when it came “time” for her to go up for promotion, she did not think she needed the extra year and wanted to go up at her normal time. In her department, this choice is perceived as going up early, which comes with an increase in expectations for performance.

Finally, Alani highlights the struggle that many women face when using a clock extension. Their male counterparts receive the same extension but inherently experience the arrival of a child differently. Other participants echoed Alani’s frustrations, expressing that side-by-side evaluation, with or without the extension, favors men who do not experience hormonal changes, breastfeeding challenges, and the physical healing from childbirth. Clearly, challenges associated with the implementation and interpretation of clock extensions exist and are present.

DISCUSSION

Resources Enable and Constrain Tenure, Promotion, and Care Work

In summary, the findings from this study clearly reveal that resources *both* enable and constrain tenure and promotion as well as care work. First, structural resources from departments, colleges, or university programs enable tenure/promotion. Any resource that provides time for launching and completing research projects or decreases time requirements for service and teaching enables tenure and promotion. Additionally, monetary resources or grants enable tenure and promotion by providing support for access to materials and/or personnel, faculty advancement, and completion of tasks, which all enable tenure and promotion. However, structural resources constrain tenure/promotion when they are unknown or forgotten, fail to work as intended, come with unnecessary restrictions, or are not equitably distributed.

Second, structural resources are designed to enable care work but do not always function as intended due to interpretation. Leave policies and clock extensions ideally help faculty navigate care work within the time frame of tenure and promotion. However, real issues with the uneven distribution of these policies are present, which are often at the discretion of the department chair rather than through a centralized system (e.g., paid leave in the summer term, distribution of course release). Additionally, problems with how to interpret the utilization of a clock extension and the corresponding vitae during tenure and promotion review arise (e.g., more work for the extra year, more work for on-time or early review, and side-by-side evaluation when needs are different). Uneven distribution and subjective interpretation of family policies constrain care work for women faculty, but also constrain tenure and promotion through unnecessary restrictions on the utilization of care work policies that are designed but fail to help women become more successful academics.

Implications and Action Items for Business Communication Scholars and Practitioners

Acker (2006) argues that organizations should be sites for investigation of complex inequality, but should also be sites for recommendations to alter such inequalities. As such, the present study illustrates three key takeaway points: (a) faculty need resources; (b) resources must be known to help faculty; and (c) resources fail because of issues with interpretation of policy, distribution of resources, and consequences for utilization. Gilsdorf (1987) asserts that policies should be reviewed on a regular basis, promoted routinely for information and utilization purposes,

and also updated consistently based on challenges. As we look to the future of business communication research, business communication scholars and practitioners can challenge the ways in which policy documents and associated procedures, both rules and resources, are written, updated, discussed, implemented, utilized, and even how they are distributed through gatekeepers. As I discuss each of these points below, I will also present action items for future business communication scholarship toward this goal.

First, faculty need a variety of resources for career and care, specifically related to research completion, teaching preparation, mentorship, family planning, and elder care. This study confirms that a supportive climate, communication from leadership, and inclusiveness are all important in the distribution of resources (Bandow & Hunter, 2008; Piercy et al., 2005). Additionally, time-associated resources were the most prevalent resources discussed for both care and career (Piercy et al., 2005), and leave policies and clock extensions were the most referenced family policies discussed by participants (Kirby & Krone, 2002; Norrell & Norrell, 1996).

Action Item 1: Investigate communication patterns from leadership about the availability of resources to their faculty/subordinates to determine best practices for the distribution of information.

Despite the consistency of this sample organization to follow guidelines for best practices, the resources available in this study still illustrate the tendency for US organizations to offer policies for individuals looking for balance rather than policies that are part of an ethic of care (Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014; Tracy, 2008). This supports previous assertions that organizations offer these policies not because of altruism or care for the individual employees, but because the organization desires to be seen as legitimate, garner a competitive advantage to improve recruitment and retention, save on costs, mitigate legal actions, and align with changing environments (Kirby, 2006; see also, Muir, 2008).

Action Item 2: Develop focus groups of policy writers, administrators, gatekeepers, and workers where they can discuss the different purposes of written resource policies for the organization and the workers who should benefit from them.

Action Item 3: Help organizations interested in an ethic of care rewrite resource policies to be more receiver-centric and develop procedures that are mindful of organizational pressures.

Yates and Orlikowski (1992) studied genres of written communication (e.g., proposal, memo) and explored how structures govern changes in genre over time through institutional expectations and human interactions. Policy documents themselves are a genre of written communication, which is also governed by the duality between institutional norms and human communication and interaction (see also Muir, 2008). Teasing the structural constraints of the genre before they are up for discussion or out for implementation is another way we can explore policy documents about resources in the future.

Action Item 4: Complete a structural analysis of the policy document genre, and determine if sub-genres exist depending on the type of policy (e.g., rule or resource, type of resource, type of document).

Second, resources must be known and advertised at the appropriate time to help faculty (Jennings et al., 2014). This is consistent with Piercy et al.'s (2005) claim that successful faculty retention programs should continue beyond the first year and Jackson's (2008) argument that

tenured women professors continue to need support to complete projects and move through the pipeline to promotion (see also Lawrence & Galle, 2011). Giddens (1984) argues that actors must have knowledge in order to act with agency; knowledge should also be both practical and repetitive. Poole and McPhee (2005) argue that researchers should examine individuals within an organization as a “structure of resources . . . and rules . . . that people can draw on when they interact in social situations (p. 181). As such, knowledge is a micro-level resource and habits are micro-level rules, which means that strategically repeated information can become knowledge over time, which can change individual habits, therefore altering the microstructure.

Action Item 5: Build communication training for leaders who might not know how and when to discuss resources with their faculty/subordinates.

Action Item 6: Work with universities on a tenure-track resource information schedule through new faculty programs to the tenure vote.

Action Item 7: Assess the resource information needs of already tenured faculty through surveys and interviews.

Action Item 8: Work with universities on a post-tenure resource information schedule to help tenured faculty with subsequent promotion and post-tenure reviews.

Action Item 9: Assess the resource information needs of non-tenure track faculty through surveys and interviews to determine how their needs are unique within the structure.

Action Item 10: Work with universities to develop a resource information schedule that would foster the growth and advancement of contingent faculty.

Finally, resources fail because of issues with distribution and interpretation. Specifically, resources are sometimes unevenly distributed, interpreted in a variety of ways, and are sometimes paired with negative repercussions thus illustrating how organizations create barriers to success and inequality regimes for women faculty (Acker, 2006). Poole and McPhee (2005) claim structures are bound by a paradox where the structure creates efficiency and coordination through rules and resources, but also becomes limiting and oppressive. Kirby (2006) argues that these policies then “may coopt employees under the guise of helping them . . . implying that since the organization fulfilled a supportive (family-like) role in providing these programs, it need not change” (p. 477). Moreover, Moeggenberg et al. (2022) claim that while policy documents are represented as neutral and objective, their subjective interpretations creates an organizational culture that supports blockages for certain people.

Action Item 11: Examine exactly how academic and organizational policies are written, teasing out multiple interpretations through unclear language.

Action Item 12: Determine who communicates the policies and resources to employees and how they are discussed.

Action Item 13: Conduct interviews across organizations to see where policies and procedures create blockages and how those documents can be improved or clarified to prevent further blockages.

Because the control is built into the structure, both as part of the formal written policy in the macro-structure and part of the departmental culture and interpretations in the micro-structure, policies can work against their intended purpose (Kirby, 2006; Moeggenberg et al., 2022). Golden (2013) explains that policy makers/writers “need to consider carefully how these policies will be interpreted and enforced” (p. 119). Where improvements can be made for clarity and fairness, it should be an organizational priority (Gilsdorf, 1987). Moeggenberg et al. (2022) propose a series of questions business communication scholars can use as we examine policy documents: (1) How does a policy document account for its audience? (2) What audiences are left out, and what strategies are used to leave them out? (3) Who fails to orient toward a document? (4) Who is invisible? And (5) How do documents perpetuate specific ideologies of privilege?

Action Item 14: Work with organizations interested in increasing accessibility, inclusion, and equity to systematically review written policy and associated procedures.

Action Item 15: Determine who policies are written for, who they leave out, and how policies perpetuate inequality regimes and ideologies of privilege through their usage.

Orlikowski and Yates (1994) explained how communication practices over time create genre repertoires, which then lead to structures. Applying this to the way we discuss leave policies and clock extensions, genre repertoires can explain why gatekeepers develop and keep using the same communicative responses even when policies change over time.

Action Item 16: Create resource utilization training for gatekeepers to mitigate and eventually avoid/eliminate unequal distribution of policies.

Action Item 17: Consult with organizations interested in eliminating the gatekeeping model of resource distribution to design a more centralized and equitable distribution procedure.

Given the need to prove oneself for tenure/promotion, the interviews revealed that leave and extensions are private and personal matters, consistent with Hoffman and Cowan’s (2010) findings that resource utilization both reproduces and simultaneously challenges structure. Employee competency was weighed through the utilization of resources suggesting bias in evaluation. Consistent with previous research, the discourse of choice (e.g., to have a child, to take time off, to extend the clock) outweighs the promises of flexibility from the resources themselves when it comes to tenure and promotion (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Wieland, 2011). Wieland (2011) claims, “work/life programs potentially bring with them new challenges and forms of control” (p. 179). Interpretations of the vita based on the utilization of resources are a form of discursive control. Orlikowski and Yates (2002) developed the notion of temporal structuring when examining organizational practices allowing researchers to “bridge the gap between objective and subjective understandings of time by recognizing the active role of people in shaping the temporal contours of their lives, while also acknowledging the way in which people's actions are shaped by structural conditions outside their immediate control” (p. 684). This is directly applicable to the subjective interpretations of how time should have worked on a curriculum vitae following a clock extension or clock pause, and encourages the acknowledgement of structures individual faculty are unable to control (e.g., tenure clock, side-by-side comparisons of the CV).

Action Item 18: Create resource utilization training for decision-makers to mitigate and eventually avoid/eliminate unfair penalization for policy utilization.

Best practices for faculty retention should include family leave policies and clock pauses/extensions (Norrell & Norrell, 1996). In the current study, campus climate surrounding family policies is positive including all policies included in best practices, but departmental cultures were not always consistent, which led to punishment and discrimination rather than equity (Kirby & Krone, 2002; Piercy et al., 2005). Just as Kirby and Krone (2002) discovered that the “discourse of organizational members regarding the implementation and utilization of work-family policies” (p. 51) was not in line with the policies themselves, this study too illustrates that in certain departments, interpretation and discretion led to inequitable distribution of resources, which in turn limits career success for women faculty. Schimpf et al. (2013) found that leave policies do not consider many facets of an academic’s responsibilities and STEM faculty are undermined in their attempts to utilize leave policies. Their findings hold true for the current study.

Action Item 19: Complete assessments of gatekeeping, resource utilization, and outcomes within and across institutions to assess where bias is most prevalent.

Action Item 20: Tease out gender and racial biases in communication practices about resources.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms Rupert and Loudermilk’s (2002) assertion that “the fate of some employees may be determined by the documents that technical communicators write when these documents outline company policy and procedures” (p. 67). The situated knowledges (Haraway, 2014) presented in this study illustrate both where resources successfully help women faculty be successful but also specific indicators where the resources fail to work as intended. Additionally, structural analysis allows us to see how structure is both invisible (e.g., just the way things are in this department) but also very tangible (e.g., conforming family planning to fit structure; losing the provision of resources because of departmental bias; McPhee et al., 2014). This structural analysis is meant to provide a baseline state of resource distribution and utilization in the academy, but more importantly, it is meant to be forward-looking for future business communication scholars interested in exploring policy, resources for women workers, and/or academia.

While this study only explored resources within the academy, the results are applicable in other settings as well where women face barriers to advancement based on career and care responsibilities (Hamel, 2009). Outside of the university system, these findings can be extended by business communication scholars to several other types of workplaces to examine the policies and procedures surrounding resources for women employees and improve availability and utilization (e.g., hospitals and other medical facilities, law firms, banks and other financial services, government offices, daycare centers, law firms, technology firms, police stations and fire departments; Rupert & Loudermilk, 2002). As we look to the future of the field, business communication scholars and practitioners can heed the call to investigate resources both within and outside the academy as they impact faculty retention and success, but also more generally, the success and career advancement of women workers, business professionals, and entrepreneurs (Hamel, 2009). If the field chooses this as a focus, a thorough investigation of resource policies, resource allocation, and resource discrimination could address inequality regimes in individual

micro-structures (Acker, 2006), and in combination, our field can contribute to the untangling of complex inter-organizational practices instituted and supported in macro-structures (Holvino, 2010; Poole & McPhee, 2005). Jackson (2008) argues, “Change requires real effort, entailing motivation, dialogue, leadership, funding and sustained commitment. Change requires the sincere belief that when qualified females succeed, everyone wins” (p. 232). Only through identifying and explicating the status quo can we have a place to launch an action plan for the field. Looking to the future, we have much work to do to make universities and businesses alike equitable places to work for women.

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