

COMMENTARY

It all begins when you are a graduate student

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In the last several years, much research has touched on maternity and pregnancy in the workplace, including recent attention on how menopause may affect women's experience at work (e.g., Grandey et al., 2020). In their focal article, Gabriel and colleagues (2022) discuss the importance of taking what we have learned through research and applying it to better support women faculty members. In doing so, they tellingly discuss the lack of support from their institutions, colleagues, and fellow department members. We have no dispute with any of their arguments but want to highlight a separate yet related aspect regarding support for women in academia. Specifically, in this commentary, we (a current graduate student and a faculty member who has been chair of an Industrial/Organization [I/O] Psych and Organizational Behavior doctoral program) suggest that the lack of support for female academics begins well before they assume their first faculty positions. It all begins in graduate school, when the high workload, minimal access to parental leave, limited financial resources, and a lack of access to childcare together communicate that: "Now is not the time to have children!"

Signal 1: Workload

Approximately 39% of SIOP members are students, with some 44% of those students identifying as female (SIOP, 2021a). Regardless of gender however, throughout graduate studies, students receive consistent signals that having a child is not possible while completing their doctoral education. Although there are variations in the typical structure of a PhD program in I-O psychology or organizational behavior, the first year or two are generally consumed by compulsory course work, during which students are also expected to conduct research. Comprehensive exams then loom large, with some (perhaps many) students then having to fulfill teaching requirements, internships, or work placements for financial reasons or as course requirements while focusing (supposedly) full time on their dissertations. Throughout all of this, most doctoral students serve as teaching and research assistants to faculty members. Given that none of this is new, why is it worth repeating? Because the depth and breadth of all these requirements serves as an implicit signal to graduate students, irrespective of gender: "Now is not the time to have children!"

Signal 2: Low access to parental leave

In addition to the intense nature of a PhD program, access to parental leave may deter graduate students from having children. Although some schools do offer parental leave, the leave offered can vary in length and in the amount of funding students have access to through its duration. If no funding is offered, graduate students may feel as though adding a child to their family may be too costly without access to additional income. We would also be remiss in this response if we did not

mention the involuntary pregnancy loss (e.g., miscarriage, stillbirth) that some students may experience. Any policies that support parental leave should be broad enough to include situations involving involuntary pregnancy loss.

Signal 3: Financial resources

I-O psychology students learn an important lesson from the funding packages they receive. Even though graduate students invariably work the equivalent of a full-time job, and most work the equivalent of overtime as well, most graduate programs do not provide an income that could sustain a parent and child. Although most programs do provide a graduate student stipend, as well-intentioned as the funding packages may be, they are invariably less than what is required to cover tuition, housing, healthcare, food, and other expenses, including childcare. Thus, the lack of funding reinforces the lesson for graduate students: “Now is not the time to have children!”¹

Signal 4: Childcare access

Another signal that can discourage students from having children is the lack of available infant/childcare. Although the cost and availability of childcare varies between countries, because approximately 89% of SIOP members are from the U.S. (SIOP, 2021b), we will focus on childcare in the U.S. Although funding to aid low-income student parents increased in 2018, so too did the demand for childcare on campus. Moreover, student parents are not always made aware of the financial resources available to them for accessing childcare (Douglas-Gabriel, 2019). In addition to a high demand and lack of outreach to students, the number of childcare services offered by public universities in the United States has declined from 59% in 2014 to 45% in 2021, and remains difficult to obtain in terms of the complex wait list processes at many U.S. childcare centers. When students do have childcare centers available to them on campus, receiving this childcare remains largely unaffordable (Cruse et al., 2021). Taken together, the lack of instrumental support provided to students through a lack of childcare availability, as well as its high expense, reinforce the implicit signal that: “Now is not the time to have children!”

Signal 5: Equity

We should all be concerned about an additional inadvertent message that may be sent to I-O psychology graduate students by traditional funding packages, namely that only graduate students with alternative sources of income (such as spousal/partner income, family-of-origin wealth) can think about having children while in graduate school. Most of our universities and graduate programs are finally emphasizing diversity and inclusion, but until *all* students are equally in a position to become parents if that is their choice, or until parents are in a position to become students, and not only those with the family or financial support, we may inadvertently be increasing inequality rather than inclusion in our programs.

Taken together, these five signals are not only relevant to graduate students who do not yet have children. We also need to be concerned as to what signals are being sent to prospective graduate students. Might we be losing incredibly talented graduate students who are just not willing to subject themselves to these job conditions for 5 or more years? Might these conditions deter

¹Another lesson that I-O psychology graduate students might be learning is that their work is not valued and what they can do about it. At the time of writing this commentary, teaching and graduate students at the University of California in the United States and at McMaster University in Canada are on strike, claiming that they are overworked and underpaid (O'Reilly 2022; Westervelt, 2022), and no doubt undervalued too. The lesson they learned was that when management did not respond to their workplace issues, seeking an alternative mechanism to resolve the dispute, in this case a labor strike, is the only avenue open to them.

parents who are qualified and motivated to enroll in graduate studies but unwilling to withstand the financial burden or pay the price in terms of work–family balance? We need to ensure that our current policies, practices, and procedures regarding parental rights do not serve as a potential early barrier that later limits the talent pool of I-O scholars and practitioners.

Though we suggest that workload, limited access to funding, parental leave, childcare access, and financial inequity can serve as signals that “Now is not the time to have children” to all graduate students, regardless of their gender, it is important to bring this discussion back to the perspective of women’s success in academia; after all, women are currently most affected by this message. As Gabriel et al. mention, women engage in a disproportionate amount of caregiving, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this inequity (Ranji et al., 2021). As well, female students are further disproportionately affected by the demands of pregnancy. They may have to take time off their graduate schooling (whether it be an official maternity leave, or simply just time off) as they recover from childbirth, as well as become accustomed to the physical requirements of breastfeeding and the normal routines and requirements of childrearing. Finally, although delaying starting a family can affect everyone, female graduate students have the additional stressor of worrying about their fertility, as the risk of infertility increases after 35 years of age (Delbaere et al., 2020). As such, the aforementioned signals may serve as disproportionately stronger signals to female graduate students.

A path forward?

Despite all this, our central message is not one of doom and gloom.

We believe that the current situation presents an opportunity for supervisors and departmental leaders. From one perspective, our scholarly knowledge and involvement with organizations puts us in an ideal position to benchmark our own department’s and university’s policies and practices against those of known university and industry leaders, as well as policies and practices in other countries, and do what we can to influence our own organizations to move in similar directions.

From the supervisory perspective, there is both an opportunity and a need to enact ethical leadership. Although faculty motivate for better work–life practices for themselves, and seek to change the seemingly incongruous work–life norms associated with academia given what we would advise organizations to do, they should simultaneously demand for their students what they seek for themselves. Doing so would send a message about the type of society and graduate schools that students would be proud to belong to and provide one of the best lessons in ethical role modeling that their students will learn.

We acknowledge that sometimes resources required to support graduate students who are parents will not always be available. However, the best supervisors are those who go above and beyond to advocate for and support their students. One option is informal interpersonal and instrumental support that can be provided by supervisors (and graduate programs). In the absence of formal policies and programs, supervisors can make a real difference through empathy, listening, and understanding. Similarly, supervisors and program chairs have the latitude to extend deadlines, forgive absence, and so forth when justified. Research by Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2019) showed that women who believe that they are unwelcome in their organization after becoming pregnant may elect to “opt out” of their organizations, and this may also be a cause of attrition from graduate programs. In addition, the use of organizational programs that allow women to stay in touch with their workplaces while on maternity leave could benefit their perceptions of agency and feelings of commitment (Hideg et al., 2018). Taking these two studies as examples, supervisors can make conscious efforts to keep those students who are on parental leave engaged with the school and display both emotional and instrumental support for their students’ parenthood.

At a somewhat higher level, what we are talking about is the reproductive rights of I-O psychology graduate students, and this includes access for fertility supports, given that many of our graduate students do not start graduate studies until they have work experience, in some cases for many years. In addition, we would be remiss in this response to Gabriel et al. if we did not mention the shadow cast by the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the U.S. Although there is little that individual graduate schools can do to reverse this legislation, we are first-hand witnesses as I-O psychology students, academics, and practitioners to what progressive organizations are doing to ensure the reproductive rights of their employees in states that have outlawed abortion for all practical purposes. As examples, companies such as Patagonia, Reddit, Lyft, and many others, announced they will cover travel expenses for employees who need to travel to receive an abortion (Goldberg, 2022).² What students and their supervisors can do is to advocate for their own universities to institute similar opportunities for their students (and employees) to ensure their continued access to full reproductive rights. Princeton University, for example, has included travel and lodging costs for abortion access in their student health plans (Princeton University, 2022). As well, although the reproductive rights of all I-O graduate students should be protected, in this context, the threat to female students' reproductive rights is most dire.

All that said, as Gabriel et al. note themselves, for women to have access to the full range of supports and benefits, supports such as parental leave and childcare funding/availability should be provided to students of all genders. We echo Gabriel et al. and encourage all recipients to maximize these leaves for the purpose intended; in that way, there would be multiple beneficiaries.

Finally, although we loudly echo Gabriel et al.'s call to action for better support to female faculty, now is the time for this call to action be extended to female graduate students. Lessons that we have collectively generated from I-O scholarship and practice about what makes for productive and healthy workplaces require that we make I-O psychology graduate programs inclusive and inviting for current students, and for the generations that will follow.

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²Although the benefits of covering the expenses required to travel out of state to receive healthcare are obvious, organizations having direct health knowledge about employees does raise privacy concerns that will need to be dealt with as use of these funds and policies continues.

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