

Chapter 9

Challenging the Ideal: The Complex Realities of the Childfree in the Academic Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This book chapter delves into the experiences and perspectives of higher education staff and faculty who have intentionally chosen to remain childfree. Through personal narratives and research, it examines the motivations behind their choice and impacts on their personal and professional lives. Those in academia face rigorous demands: extensive teaching responsibilities, long hours, institutional financial constraints, administrative duties, and high expectations for research and writing. Professionally, being childfree can offer advantages such as increased productivity, capacity to pursue demanding roles and smoother promotion paths. However, societal expectations and workplace norms can create barriers or stigmatize childfree individuals. Misconceptions about their dedication and the assumption of greater work availability can lead to additional pressures and risk of burnout. Despite these challenges, the insights and alternative paths to fulfillment provided by childfree academics contribute to a more inclusive and understanding discourse within the academic community.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter delves into the experiences and perspectives of women staff and faculty in higher education who have made the deliberate decision to remain childfree. It examines the reasons and motivations behind their choice, as well as the impact on both their personal and professional lives. Additionally, the challenges and stigma childfree individuals, particularly by women in academia, may face—such as societal expectations and pressures surrounding parenthood—are explored. By highlighting the unique narratives of female, childfree staff and faculty, this chapter amplifies voices often overshadowed in discussions dominated by parenting and family life. Drawing on research and personal anecdotes, it presents a focused exploration of the reasons and outcomes of this choice within the context of higher education.

The experiences of women in academia warrant focused attention, as studies consistently reveal the persistent challenges they face in navigating university environments. Research consistently demonstrates that gendered treatment is not only prevalent but deeply embedded within the structures and systems of academic institutions, often slowing advancement and placing unique stressors upon women (Acker, 1990; Basford et al., 2014; Bouton, 2023; Brooks, 1997; Martinez et al., 2007; Park, 1996; Priola, 2007; Stainback et al., 2011). Given the pervasiveness of these gendered inequities, as well as the unequal stigmatization of childfree women, this chapter will focus specifically on the experiences of women in academia. While recognizing the importance of diverse perspectives, discussions of male and LGBTQ+ experiences will be excluded to concentrate on the distinct ways in which the childfree choice uniquely affects women within academic spaces.

The demands on faculty and staff in higher education are rigorous: extensive teaching and student support responsibilities, long hours (often a sixty-hour workweek), growing financial constraints within universities and departments, administrative duties, long tenure processes, lofty expectations of research and writing, and increased teaching loads (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004). Given the pressures of academia, it may not be surprising to note that, in a study of doctoral students, 70 percent of women and more than one-half of the men considered faculty careers at research universities as unfriendly to family life (Mason et al., 2013). Women academics are considering what this means personally and professionally, and many are choosing to forgo or delay having children. As Mason et al. (2013) report, low fertility is not

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