Mini-case Study:
PhD Candidates in the School of Education at Fordan University

Page McMullen

Ed151x: Introduction to Qualitative Research
Dr. Fetterman

12/09/01
Introduction

It was not that long ago women were, under the law, deemed worthy of receiving the same rights and privileges of men in the United States. Continuing even after that initiative were the stigmas and biases that kept women out of traditionally male-dominated occupations and spaces within the society. One of these occupations was that of schoolteacher or professor; the absence of women scholars was even more obvious at the most prestigious universities in the country. Today, women populate the campuses of these universities as students and to a lesser extent, as professors. This case study offers a glimpse into the lives of women pursuing PhD degrees in Cognition and Development. Four, female graduate students discuss their experiences of pursuing doctoral degrees at one of the most well-known and respected universities in the country. Through their stories, the challenges, difficult decisions, and benefits inherent in choosing this path surface. The similarities in their ambitions, the pull between family and career aspirations, and the need for a support network emerge.

Background

Looking at the education department as a whole, statistics show that 67% of the graduate student population are women. It is not a large leap in logic to assume that the faculty population might reflect similar proportions of women as found in the student body, after all about half the students are pursuing a PhD. Employed by the School of Education, forty-six education faculty members research, teach, and write on current education and educational innovations. However, when the numbers are examined, they reveal that only nineteen of the education faculty, about 40%, are women. While that statistic is not especially alarming, the ratio of male, full professors to women is quite skewed. Of the twenty-eight full professors, only six are women, a meager 21% of the tenured faculty. This disparity invites investigation. Where does the explanation for the difference between the PhD female-to-male ratio and the faculty female-to-male ratio in the School of Education lie?

Literature Review

Past literature suggests several possible reasons for unequal representation of women in academia, at large, both in graduate programs and faculty membership. Historically, women were not offered the same educational possibilities as men. While women secured entrance into undergraduate
and graduate programs over one hundred and fifty years ago, their presence in higher education was still a highly debated issue (Farooq, 1999). Despite this fact, in 1879-80, women represented 36.6% of university faculty (Association of Women Faculty, 1999). Alarming, instead of a continual increase of women in faculty positions, this number sharply decreased until the late 1960’s where they slowly began to rise from a low of 22%.

While the numbers indicate that women made great strides in achieving a more equal percentage of faculty positions, from 27.5% of faculty in the 1980’s to 34.6% in 1999, unequal representation still prevails. Much of the current literature examines the possible reasons for this situation. As to be expected, much of the research focuses on inequality of opportunity for women. Disappointingly, women in academia still earn, on average, anywhere from $1000 to $7000 less than their male counterparts (Association of Women Faculty, 1999).

The inequity in salaries alone does not explain why women are represented in small numbers in academia. It is the subtler pressures that some suggest discourage women in academia. Women, whether because of attempts to reflect diversity or varied interests, are often inundated with requests to serve on committees. Stereotypes often make it difficult for women to turn these offers down, as they are sometimes viewed as uncooperative or uncaring when rejecting opportunities in order to focus on their own research (American Psychological Association, 2001). Additionally, women often feel subject to chilly attitudes that discourage the inclusion of women. Women may be denied access to powerful networking and support systems, traditionally made up of male professors, making it harder to find a welcome place within the academic community (Association for Women Faculty, 1999). The combination of these two factors may lead to greater feelings of stress and isolation for women in academia.

**Methods**

On the well-manicured campus of a prestigious university on the west coast, I set out to examine the experiences of male and female education students pursuing their PhDs, but as the interviews progressed, the stories of the women in the program especially fascinated me, turning my study in their direction. Perhaps it was because of my identification with them as women, my previous studies in feminist theories, or the fact that the majority of students in the program are women, but the patterns that emerged in my interviews with women students intrigued me. When forced to make a decision because
of limited time and resources, the cohort on whom I chose to focus was made up entirely of women students in their last two years of a PhD program in Cognition and Development.

While I did not recognize my eventual topic at the beginning of my study, as I interviewed the small cohort of women in the PhD program at the School of Education at Fordsan University, I began to understand the experiences and choices of women at Fordsan University and how these might lead to the disproportionately low representation of women faculty compared to women PhD students. Spending twelve hours interviewing and observing four female PhD candidates in the process of researching for and writing their dissertations for the program in cognition and development, I learned about many aspects, both academic and professional, of their lives. Guided by my first interviewee, May, each woman was chosen for the different perspective she offered on the nature and experience of pursuing a PhD. Ranging in age from 27 to 37, every one of them had taken a different path to Fordsan. After narrowing my focus to women and seeing a pattern develop concerning family and career, I made careful efforts not to mention family issues until the interviewee discussed the issues first. In spite of this fact, when I chunked and sorted my notes, the pattern continued to develop. Due to limited time, both of the individuals in the cohort and the duration of the study, the number of participants is limited. The study speaks clearly for the four individual lives that were shared with me. They shared their thoughts, struggles, and successes, which, in turn, offer a glimpse into the larger picture of the life at the university. It should be noted that many other individuals, both faculty and student, who were contacted expressed interest in the study, but did not feel able to commit to even a one-hour interview.

**Site Description**

The inability of many contacted to commit might be a reflection on the nature of the school itself. US News ranks the Cognition and Development Department at Fordsan number one in the country; the School of Education is ranked number two overall. The mean GRE scores of the class entering in 2000 were 636 verbal and 659 quantitative and the PhD acceptance rate was a low 16.9%. The faculty at Fordsan is renowned, and its members are considered “internationally distinguished scholars.” Declared in the school’s brochure, Fordsan “seeks to be a world leader in ground-breaking, cross-disciplinary inquiry that shapes educational practices, their conceptual underpinnings and the professions that serve
The prestige of Fordsan’s School of Education is reflected, not only in its reputation and the quality of its faculty and students, but in its environment and community as well. Located near the center of the 8,180 acres that Fordsan owns, the two stately buildings that house the department stand in contrast to each other. Built in 1938 of rough-cut, buff sandstone, the original School of Education building is surrounded on two sides by a breezeway assessed through multiple arches. Trees shade the multitudes of bike racks that line the side of main entrance. The interior of the building smells slightly musty and footsteps echo on the tile floor. The deep, dark wood seems to call for hushed voices, especially since one word in a normal voice will multiply to three. Large windows appear to provide the only circulation. Downstairs in the basement, dimness and staleness prevails. Down the narrow halls with faded carpet, non-descript, off-white doors lead to small, windowless offices of the PhD students. Each closed door identified with a small nameplate.

A short, 3-minute walk away from this building is the newer, educational research center. Light streams in the 5-story tinted-glass walls at either end of the rectangular building. Glass doors in each wall provide entrance to the 1972 building. Alternating floors on each side of the building line the two long sides of the building, each with an open walkway that supplies views of the first floor lobby. Three computer labs lie of the main lobby. Numerous computers fill the labs, always available for student use. The newly redecorated lobby welcomes long hours of study in relative comfort.

The Women

Each woman offered me her perspective and shared the experience of her journey through the PhD program, reflecting their individuality and similarity. To frame their experiences, it is appropriate to start with a description of each and how they came to be where they are. The answers to the questions “Why did you chose to pursue a PhD?” and “Where do you plan to be in five years?” offer a context in which to place these women’s stories.
May

May, my first interview and key informant, is a small-framed, Asian woman, age 28. She wears her shiny, black hair cropped close to her shoulders. During our interview, she wore loose, gray athletic pants and a matching shirt and carried a bottle of designer water. For most of the interview, she leaned back in her chair with her foot resting on the edge of the chair, her knee pulled up close to her chest, occasionally resting her chin on the top of her knee.

Situated in this chair, May explained her reasons for pursuing a PhD. May felt that she had tapped out her natural talent; she needed theories to back up and validate her ideas. She was driven to “find answers for what [she] was seeing.” Over the years, her plans for the future solidified. She desires to start her own non-profit that focuses on youth development, a place where girls can express and explore their identities. Ideally, she would like to teach at a small college or university, as well, where her students could see “theory brought into practice” in her non-profit. At the heart of it all, she “wants to work with practitioners, to inform their work and improve it.”

Sal

Walking into the lobby area of the newer education building on the day I was supposed to meet Sal, I saw a woman in a jean-jumper leaving the restroom. She looked as if she might be having a baby any minute now. As she saw me, she came over to introduce herself. One of the first facts that I learned about Sal is that she is eight months pregnant. Fortunately for both of us, she had agreed to meet me for the interview on a day on which she had to drive to campus anyway. Sitting up towards the edge of the sofa, Sal occasionally snacked on her lunch throughout our interview. She apologized for being unable to wait to eat, but admitted she must keep up her energy.

Alternating between sitting up and reclining, Sal elaborated on her experiences and the decisions that ultimately changed her path from a focused, unattached graduate student to the woman before me now, 37 and pregnant. Sal, determined to do her best, entered graduate school at the age of 32 and swore she would not date again until she earned her PhD. After two years working for a leading publisher of standardized tests for children and adults, she realized that she needed a PhD to be the professional she wanted to be; she was tired of “doing half the work and getting none of the credit” since she only had an MA after her name. She had her goal in site and was determined to reach it without distraction. Over
time, she realized that being a test developer would not fulfill her completely. She wanted to work within the “system of accountability,” to make a difference; as a result, she changed her focus to policy assessment. The personal aspects of Sal’s life also changed over the years. Soon after starting her PhD, Sal found herself starting a relationship despite her intentions of remaining unattached. In the last four years, she got engaged, married and became pregnant.

**Sara**

Sara, 27, met me in the lobby of one of the Education buildings. She had her long, blonde hair pulled back away from her face in a ponytail. She looked relaxed in her Eddie Bauer fleece and slim jeans. Matching the casual nature of her whole outfit were her running shoes. Facing me, Sara explained how she ended up at Fordsan. Sara with her “over-achiever mentality” knew there was very little she could do with a bachelor’s in psychology so she felt destined to attend graduate school. As long as she was going, she “might as well get a PhD” and have all her options open. As a result, she went straight into graduate school from undergraduate at the best, public university in the area. In the end, her degree will allow her to “research to influence solutions, not just Band-Aid responses.” It will also enable her to teach at a university like Fordsan, but she does not want this.

**Elise**

Elise, 35, was the only one of the women that I met in her office in the basement of the older Education building. When I entered the approximately 6-foot by 12-foot room, Elise was seated at one of the two desks in the office. Turning to face me, I could see that her hair was stylishly cut, framing her face. She wore similar clothing to Sara, a sweater and jeans. Her story started in another program at the school. She had received her masters in Educational Technology, but realized her questions were much larger so she applied for a doctorate in Cognition and Development. Her main reason for attending Fordsan was the reputation of her advisor for being “innovative, in terms of learning.” She admitted that she thought about continuing in academia once she receives her degree, perhaps being an assistant professor, but she doesn’t want to be tenured track. Ideally, after awhile of working at a smaller university, she would like to start a summer program for teenagers. She believes that this time, summer camp, provides a real opportunity to make a difference in children’s lives; she remembers this as being one of the best experiences in her younger years.
Ambition

Within the two Education buildings at Fordsan, these PhD candidates spent most of their time in the last few years with classes, assisting faculty research, and preparing for their dissertations. Each woman entered with her own dream and ambition and watched as these dreams took shape and changed. There is one striking similarity within these women’s descriptions of what they want to do with their degrees: to make a difference in the world. May proudly states that she “made it a priority. If [she] wasn’t doing research then she was volunteering. It helps ground you.” Before entering the program, she worked for four years in Americorps, a non-profit service agency. Sara’s research interest in adolescent problems also echoes this dedication to helping others. “When I read Reviving Ophelia, it just resonated with me. A book has never affected me as much. All of the sudden in adolescence, the ante is upped. Life is so much more heavy – girls are on a trajectory to either a maladaptive or healthy life.” Their words reflect a common trend within the world of academia for women. Research has found that women in academia are “more likely to be involved and offer expertise in extrainstitutional projects. Women tend to put more time into service because they believe community service is as important as research and that such contributions will be valued. The governance and other service activities that women choose are more likely to be based in helping others than in attaining power” (American Psychological Association, 2001).

Delving deeper into the experiences of these women, one finds what might be possible explanations for the other similarity in these women’s ambitions, the absence of discussion about being a faculty member at a prestigious university like Fordsan. May felt that she had to set limits last year. She had a “problem saying no - to local research, to panels, to RAships, to whatever anyone asked her.” She had to make time to think enough to be able to say no. Sara shared a similar experience. After two years of working and not engaging fully in her friendships, she was confronted with the question, “how do I want to spend my time?” She began to think, “in 10 years, am I really going to wish I spent 5 more hours in my room in front of the computer.” The answer was “no.” In the end, it was people that mattered. Elise feels that she must juggle her time between work and trying to have a social life. While it was within the walls of the two education buildings that each was gaining the knowledge to help them change the world, each woman, at the same time, also learned that they must balance their time.
Priorities

Choices like these seem to permeate most experiences in the world of academia. Sara suggests that working as a professor at Fordsan would be “hard for both women and men, but women are more likely to be torn up about it, women are going to give more to the family.” Sara admits that she has seen “no good role models of how to achieve tenure and stay sane.” Seeing her advisor fighting for tenure in the “publish or perish” world, she decided that it involved “more sacrifices than she was willing to give.” She didn’t see a lot of room for a family in the life of a tenure-track professor at Fordsan.

May verifies this struggle with a story. In her first years at Fordsan, she went to a talk about women in academia. A relatively new, female professor who was pregnant was on the panel. One of the graduate students questioned the professor about maternity leave. The professor honestly didn’t know about the policies. She was new, so it made sense that she wouldn’t be completely informed. What shocked the female students was what a senior, tenured professor said next. Professor Lawlor said that in her thirty plus years in the School of Education she had never seen a female professor start a family before she was tenured so she wasn’t sure about the policy either. It takes on average at the school 10 years to get tenured. This means that these women were waiting until their late 30s and early 40s to start families in order to secure their careers. May said the audience was stunned. They suddenly realized “here we are in the School of Education, which is predominately women, and they don’t even know if they have maternity leave.” In fact, the school, by law, does have maternity leave, but the absence of the knowledge among the faculty speaks for itself.

In her graduate school experience, Sal exemplifies this struggle. The woman who was determined to finish her PhD without dating again is now eight months pregnant after starting a relationship, planning a wedding, and getting married within her 5 years in the program. She accepts the reality of the fact that she will have to give up promotions in order to raise her children the way she wants. “Women have to do that – we call it a choice, but it is not really a choice.” Sal will never be a seventy-hour a week career woman. That is what it would take to reach the heights at which she originally desired to be. She now feels that she doesn’t need to be a career director; she has opted for a middle level job. She emphasizes that opportunity wise things are very equitable for men and women, but that
she has stopped herself from climbing the career ladder. It is obviously an internal struggle for her. She admits that she is “really conflicted about graduate school and having a personal life.”

This conflict came to a head about 6 months ago. Distressed, she talks about her thoughts of quitting the program. She lists the reasons, patting her stomach, “daycare is so expensive; I haven’t even had the kid and I am already trying to get someone to take care of him!” She admits that she has put Fordsan 2nd, 3rd, or 10th in her life and that she has not seen the men in the program do the same. It is Sal’s belief that not one male PhD candidate at Fordsan will settle for anything less than being a “top player.” It is as if the men are saying, “I will get it because nothing will stop me.” Meanwhile, she battles with the fact that “[she] has stopped [herself].” She explicitly says that no one else has made her feel bad about her decisions, but that within she is still conflicted. “I am smart enough, want to be challenged, can do good things, and am driven, but I don’t have the same focus.”

Elise feels that her age is the more salient issue when it comes to facing these choices. At 35, she still wants to get married and have children, but that means having a social life. Up until 6 months ago, she really didn’t feel like this was possible. She is now trying to date but isn’t quite sure how to meet people without joining “one of those singles groups.” While she didn’t think about this issue when she was entering the doctoral program, she says she “probably should have. But who knows?” Now she feels “a lot of stress about not being married and having kids.” Yet, she feels that being a PhD student must be a priority; “it has to be a priority.” Still, pulling on her time and resources is this “other really important priority in her life.” In the end, she believes that “PhD’s don’t prioritize the same way.” She lists examples. “Jan Traughber [a professor] doesn’t even like to be married, much less have kids. Margie Major [another professor] doesn’t have kids.” When she looks around, she sees examples of people prioritizing differently than the status quo.

Sara has seen a difference in priorities as well. She believes that the fact that there are more men on the other end, more men as professors, reflects this difference. With a smile on her face and irony in her voice, she states, “A bunch of men teaching women.” Elise sees women professors making their careers the first priority and Sara sees less women willing to prioritize that way. While each woman adamantly believes that they are offered the same opportunities as the men in their program, each shares the belief that there is something slightly different about the experiences of the men and women in the
program. From the choices that biology necessitates to the atmosphere that they desire and build, the women see subtle, yet substantial differences.

While most of the factors discussed in the literature review for the unequal representation of women in academia seemingly stem from both explicit and implicit unfairness inherent in academia, other factors also appear to have an influence on women's success and interest in academia.

“A problem faced by all junior women faculty seeking tenure is the balance between work and raising a family. Earning tenure requires much time and energy. Without the support of a spouse the tenure-track becomes even more difficult. Traditionally, male professors have the benefit of a wife to deal with the home, children, and other responsibilities. This is rarely the case for women professors. Another problem unique to women is that childbearing years coincide with years typically devoted to earning a Ph.D. and tenure. Departments can subtly discourage women from having children, and women are forced to choose between having a career in academia and having a family. Universities must make changes in maternity leave policies (Pearl et al. 1990). The rigidity of the traditional Ph.D. and tenure programs discourages many individuals.”

- Harrelson, 2001

It appears for some that social inequity alone does not discourage participation in the academic profession. Instead, some women feel torn between career and family. The traditional pathway from undergraduate education to professor leaves them conflicted.

**Support**

Last year, May struggled with her desire to quit the program. “Last year, I was going to quit. I was fed up with the lack of support, not knowing how this dissertation thing works.” After students finish their classes, there is no support network after that. “You don’t have conversations anymore with your peers. When you do, you have to teach them a new language to communicate because everyone’s experience is so unique and separate. “A friend convinced her to stay.” To somewhat compensate for the lack of a support, several women formed their own group to help nourish each other’s writing. Sal, another member of the writing group, mentions that there are “no men in the group for a reason. Not because we don’t want them there, but because they don’t want to be there.” She feels that they are driven in another way and don’t want to consider supporting others’ writing.

Elise states “things need to change. There was very little support in my process of getting my PhD.” She thinks, as does May, that it is “easy to fall through the cracks, especially if you don’t follow your advisor.” Sal echoes this concern. “Fordsan is very autonomous, which allows you to be an individual,” but on the flip side, its “do it yourself or it doesn’t get done.” As each woman got “cut loose
more and more,” they did not feel fully directed or supported enough to properly and confidently continue on the path to their degree.

**Interpretation and Conclusion**

The women in the Cognition and Development PhD program at Fordsan shared with me their perspectives on their experiences and lives over the last few years. During my interviews and observations, I saw within these high-achieving women many of the conflicts that have been well documented elsewhere, for example, the pressure to prove themselves, the inability to easily say “no,” and the lack of a support network. While the opportunities for them appear limitless, internal conflicts and expectations pull them in different directions. Women, in academia, often struggle between dedicating their lives to building a career and dedicating part of their lives to family. The female professors at Fordsan, with a few exceptions, were women who had chosen to put career first, who had chosen family as a second priority or not a priority at all. On the other hand, the bright, motivated women in my study desire to be at the top of their field, but not at the expense of family. These two goals seem to be at odds with each other. The women I interviewed did not see this as a result of unfairness or prejudice in the work world, but as a result of something more difficult to overcome, a conflict between biology and the path that leads to the highest rungs of the career ladder. At any age, this conflict appears to be resonating in the back of women’s minds. Decisions are made and plans are formed around the desire to balance both family and career in their lives, but still, most women feel that one or the other will inevitably be compromised. At this point in our society’s evolution, what will be compromised is a choice each individual must make.

A female physician, mother of four, was once asked “What would have made a family and career easier for you?” Her reply “Being born a man.”

Despite all attempts to create equal opportunity and appearances of such, these women’s stories reflect the need for continued efforts to alleviate obstacles that prevent women from fulfilling both their family and career aspirations. The question now becomes how, as a society, do we develop an environment or social order that supports as equally women’s ambitions for career and family as it does men’s ambitions for both.

---

Written almost forty years ago and at the low point in representation of women in university faculty positions, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* exposed an essential issue in the lives of women, the need for something beyond being housewives, a way to define themselves other than through family life. They asked the question, “Is this all?” The answer Friedan found was that women believed that there was more to life. Many wanted a career as well as a family. Since *The Feminine Mystique* was published, women have discovered that many of the barriers that prevented their entry into the career world have been lowered. In the years that followed, it appeared that it was now possible to have a career and family if that was what a woman wanted. The question plaguing women today seems to be “what will be compromised if I attempt to have a career and a family?”
References


