

A Qualitative Investigation of Individual, Interpersonal, and Institutional Contributions to Postpartum Work-Family Balance

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Abstract

Managing personal and professional responsibilities may be challenging during the postpartum period, as employees navigate new roles, responsibilities, and family dynamics. The purpose of this paper was to understand the work/life balance experiences of diverse stakeholders and identify opportunities to improve the work environment. We conducted a series of in-depth focus groups with faculty, staff, and graduate students ($n = 22$), and in-depth interviews with administrators ($n = 10$) at a research-intensive university in the United States. A six-phase thematic analysis approach was used to examine the experiences and perspectives of individuals with different roles. Three themes with subsequent subthemes emerged: 1) employee role shapes perspectives on campus policies and practices; 2) confusion about policies exacerbates return-to-work issues; and 3) coworkers and supervisors are the primary sources of postpartum support in this workplace. Employees in our study expressed strong desires for clear, consistent institutional policies to ensure employees' postpartum return-to-work experiences were not dependent on informal arrangements with coworkers and supervisors. Faculty, staff, and graduate student postpartum needs are shaped by individual, interpersonal, and community factors. Clear communication between individuals who make policy decisions and those who are subject to the policies may reduce employee issues during the postpartum period.

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Introduction

Work-life balance, defined as the “combination, fit, balance, harmony, or integration” (Wayne et al., 2021, p. 3) of work and non-work roles, is an important aspect of life and job satisfaction (Haar et al., 2014; Wayne et al., 2021). Employees with adequate resources to manage work and life responsibilities often have higher job satisfaction and performance, better management of personal responsibilities, and improved physical and mental health

(Amstad et al., 2011; Gatrell et al., 2013; Haar et al., 2014; Mazerolle & Barrett, 2018; Mishra et al., 2019). Conversely, when personal and professional responsibilities conflict or are overwhelming, employees may experience worsened mental and physical health outcomes (Antai et al., 2015; Griep et al., 2016; Haar et al., 2014; Hutchinson, 2018; Nitzsche et al., 2013; Weale et al., 2018).

Managing work and life responsibilities may be challenging for employees after returning to work postpartum (Boeding et al.,

2019; Page et al., 2018). New responsibilities and expectations at work and home, increased financial burdens, and altered family dynamics often challenge their ability to manage responsibilities (Cohen et al., 2019; Dagher et al., 2011; Doss et al., 2009; Kazley et al., 2016). This transition may be particularly difficult for academic employees. Many scholars argue that the academic environment is designed for individuals who can behave like scholarship is their sole responsibility (Berheide et al., 2020; Misra et al., 2012; Ollilainen, 2020). Academic employees often have long working hours and heavy workloads to try to balance the teaching, research, and service demands of the role (Kouritzin, 2019; O'Meara et al., 2017).

Although there has been increasing attention to the issue of work-life balance in the empirical literature, most studies have focused on either graduate students (Evans et al., 2018a; Martinez et al., 2013; Sallee, 2015; Yusuf et al., 2020) or faculty (Berheide et al., 2020; Eversole & Crowder, 2020; French et al., 2020; Kavya & Kramer, 2020; Mazerolle & Barrett, 2018; Misra et al., 2012; Reddick et al., 2012). Relatively little research exists on the staff experience (Gander et al., 2019). Studies have also not incorporated the perspectives of administrators, who significantly influence institution culture.

To understand the experiences of academic institution stakeholders and identify opportunities to improve work environments, we conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with employees at a research-intensive university. By comparing employee experiences, we can better understand each group's needs and account for these in future organizational decisions. Additionally, by engaging with administrators, this study promotes a better understanding of how perceptions vary between individuals who make policy

decisions and those subject to them. Through a holistic investigation of experiences, our findings have actionable implications for supporting parents through postpartum employment transitions.

Theoretical Framework

The ecological framework provides a unique lens to consider the issues of work-family conflict and balance during the postpartum period. Although widely used in health promotion and public health (National Cancer Institute, 2005), it is less commonly used to understand vocational behavior. Developed by McLeroy and colleagues (1988), the framework has two key concepts. First, there are multiple levels of influence on individual health and wellness: individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and public policy. The framework emphasizes the interactions across the levels and their interdependence (National Cancer Institute, 2005). Second, individuals' behavior and perceptions are shaped by their interactions with these multiple levels of influence (National Cancer Institute, 2005). We approached this study with a focus on understanding factors at each level and were particularly interested in how individual characteristics, specifically employment type, influenced participants' experiences.

Methods

Context

This study was conducted at a very high research activity (R1) institution in the Midwestern United States. Approximately 35,000 undergraduate and 10,000 graduate students were enrolled in 2020, with 2,000 faculty and 4,000 staff employed by the institution. The institution offers two types of family-related leave: family and medical leave (12 weeks unpaid leave) and paid

parental leave (6 weeks paid leave; Family Medical Leave Act, 2018; Paid Parental Leave, 2017). Family and medical leave was based on the federal Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) requirements (Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, 2006; Family Medical Leave Act, 2018). Beyond leave, the university offered programs for new and expecting parents, which were one focus of our study (Purdue University, 2015). The Purdue University Institutional Review Board approved this study. All participants gave signed informed consent. A summary of data collection is noted below, with additional details outlined in a companion article (Demaria et al., 2021).

Focus Group Discussions

We recruited focus group participants via print and electronic flyers. Faculty, staff, and graduate students who had welcomed a child into their family within the last three years were eligible to participate. Focus groups were separated by role to facilitate sharing and reduce potential conflicts of interest or biases (Lune & Berg, 2017). The focus groups occurred between February and March 2020, before the COVID-19 shutdown. A total of 22 employees participated in three focus groups: 7 faculty, 8 staff, and 7 graduate students (Table 1). The discussions followed a semi-structured focus group guide (Table 2). Focus groups ranged from 84-108 minutes. After each focus group, participants completed an anonymous demographic survey.

In-depth Individual Interviews

We recruited administrators at department, college, and university levels via targeted email invitations. A total of 10 administrators participated in the interviews (Table 1). Interviews occurred during June and July 2020 and ranged from 38-72

minutes. Due to COVID-19, we conducted interviews remotely via Cisco WebEx. Each participant completed an anonymous demographic survey before the interview began. Interviewers used a semi-structured interview format (Table 2).

Data Analysis

We utilized the six-phase approach of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clark (2006) to analyze focus group and interview transcripts. To begin, all team members reviewed the transcripts to understand the data and highlight areas of interest. Each team member contributed to a draft codebook, then worked to revise the codebook. Revision continued until we reached a consensus on code meanings and application. Five team members applied the codebook to the transcripts using an open coding method, which connected portions of the data to the codes. Transcripts were coded twice, and discrepancies between coders were tracked and resolved via consensus. Then, we conducted axial coding to draw connections within and between the transcripts. Once coding was completed, the whole team began identifying themes, specifically focusing on comparing employee roles. We reviewed all themes to determine if they were representative of the data. After finalizing these, we compared them to the coded transcript to ensure consistency and identify sub-themes.

Results

Themes

When asked about work-life balance, postpartum return to work, and workplace support (Table 2), three themes emerged in analysis: 1) employee role shapes perspectives on campus policies and practices; 2) confusion about policies

exacerbates return-to-work issues; 3) coworkers and supervisors are the primary sources of postpartum support in the workplace. Themes are presented below with quotes and corresponding focus group (FG)

type (i.e., Staff FG, Faculty FG, or Student FG). Interview quotes are presented with administration level and interview number (DeptXXX; CollegeXXX; UnivXXX).

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

	Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students (n = 22) n (%)	Administrators (n = 10) n (%)
Gender		
Male	5 (23%)	3 (30%)
Female	16 (73%)	6 (60%)
Non-binary	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Race/Ethnicity		
White	17 (77%)	8 (80%)
Hispanic or Latino	2 (9%)	0 (0%)
Black or African American	2 (9%)	0 (0%)
Native American or American Indian	1 (5%)	1 (10%)
Asian	0 (0%)	1 (10%)
Educational Attainment		
College	4 (18%)	0 (0%)
Some graduate education	0 (0%)	2 (20%)
Graduate school	18 (82%)	8 (80%)
Employment Status		
Staff	8 (36%)	7 (70%)
Faculty	7 (32%)	3 (30%)
Graduate students	7 (32%)	0 (0%)
Children in Household (under 18)		
0	1 (5%)	5 (50%)
1	13 (59%)	2 (20%)
2	4 (18%)	2 (20%)
3	2 (9%)	0 (0%)
4	1 (5%)	0 (0%)

Table 2

Selected Topics and Questions

Topic	Respondent Type	Questions
Work-life balance	Administrators	<p>What are some ways you balance your work responsibilities with your life responsibilities and interests? <i>Probe:</i> Have you always maintained the same level of work/life balance? If not, tell me a bit more about a time when it was different for you.</p>
	Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students	<p>What are some ways you balance your work responsibilities with your life responsibilities and interests? <i>Probe:</i> Is balance something easy for you? Hard for you?</p> <p>After welcoming an infant, what were some of the major struggles you had with balancing work and home responsibilities? <i>Probe:</i> Why do you think these struggles were present? What do you think caused them?</p>
Return to work	Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students	<p>Thinking back to your recent return-to-work experience, how different was it from your ideal situation? In what ways?</p> <p>Was returning back to work something easy for you? Hard for you? In what ways? <i>Probe:</i> Describe the support that helped you most. Personal support? Employer support? <i>Probe:</i> What hindered your positive experience most?</p>
Support	Administrators	<p>What are some ways Purdue University supports its employees as a family-friendly institution? <i>Probe:</i> What is Purdue doing well? <i>Probe:</i> What could Purdue do better? <i>Probe:</i> What support is given to employees who are returning to work after welcoming a new child into the home?</p>
	Faculty, Staff, and Graduate Students	<p>How does Purdue University make you feel when it comes to being an employee and a parent? <i>Probe:</i> Does Purdue University make you feel supported and understood? Why or why not? <i>Probe:</i> What are other actions Purdue University could take to help you balance work/life responsibilities as a parent of an infant?</p>

Employee Role Shapes Perspectives on Campus Policies and Practices

Faculty, staff, and graduate student perspective. Faculty, staff, and graduate students (referred to as students hereafter) generally agreed university policies and practices were inadequate (Table 3). Lack of access to affordable childcare was a consistent concern among students and staff. One student stated, “It’s nearly impossible to find a good [childcare center] that’s at a decent price” (Student FG). The lack of access to childcare had a significant impact on these employees. One staff member “had to take like, a month off of work, while a waitlist opened elsewhere” (Staff FG). A student whose partner was likewise a student explained that “my partner and I were like, oh, is one of us gonna have to actually stop our studies because we had trouble getting daycare” (Student FG). The faculty group also discussed insufficient access to affordable childcare but did not include personal experiences.

Additionally, several participants discussed frustrations with the lack of flexibility and understanding surrounding postpartum return to work. Staff tended to focus on the short-term impact of inflexible work environments. One staff participant described issues with pumping at work saying, “I think the policy around pumping and nursing at [university] is not as strong as it could be in my experience” (Staff FG). Others focused on needing flexibility in hours or work location. As one focus group member stated, “To work from home while your kid is sick? No way” (Staff FG). Faculty shared similar concerns but were primarily focused on longer-term issues, such as career advancement and tenure decisions. One faculty member shared that they accepted the additional year of pre-tenure contract offered to assistant professors who birth or adopt a

child, “But then they-then when I went up, it was like, ‘Well why don’t you have more publications because you had an extra year?’” (Faculty FG).

Administration perspective. In contrast to faculty, staff, and students, most administrators reported that the university had generous family-friendly policies and practices. Several administrators noted that the paid parental leave policies were more generous than peer institutions, covering faculty, staff, and graduate students. Other supports included access to childcare on or near campus (e.g., “We do really well with childcare, there’s a lot of childcare on campus” (Univ108)), numerous lactation spaces (e.g., “We have over 50 lactation spaces on campus” (Univ102)), and healthcare options for children (e.g., “...the Center for Healthy Living works. And that you can get appointments for your spouse or for your children, do flu shots for your dependents” (Dept110)).

Although most administrators thought the university adequately supported employees, some reported more could be done. Several administrators discussed insufficient access to childcare, either because of high cost (e.g., “I mean, childcare is a huge issue for hourly folks, especially for low paid hourly people” (Dept110)) or because childcare centers were full (e.g., “We don’t have enough options for infants and parents” (Dept107)). A few administrators thought additional paid parental leave should be offered, while others thought lactation spaces should be improved.

Some administrators also described university resources as inconsistent. A few discussed instances where students and staff were treated differently from faculty. One administrator described a staff member who wanted to bring her infant to work to support breastfeeding, with permission from her department head and the dean of the college. However, “...that turned out to be like a hard

Table 3

Employee Role Shapes Perspectives on Campus Policies and Practices

Theme	Example Quote
Staff/Students: Inadequate childcare access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You like, you literally have to start calling the day you get your positive pregnancy test, especially with big centers to have hope of getting in. And some of them have policies if someone else, if another family has a child there already. They give preference if that family gets pregnant and has child, a new infant that needs to enter at the same time yours would be trying. (Student FG) • [they want access to quality childcare] without 8, 9, 10 months of wait time. (Staff FG)
Staff/Students: Need for greater flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • [there needs to be flexibility for when] your kid has a two-hour delay. Or they just had hives pop up all over from an allergic reaction. Kids actually do get sick all the freaking time. (Staff FG)
Faculty: Substantial short-term flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Then I brought in my child to any of the faculty meetings and like he’s been in my office anytime, and yeah. And no one has frowned upon it. (Faculty FG)
Faculty: Concerns about long-term impact on career	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I found that some of the older females who had never had maternity leave, they were like, ‘Well, why can’t you just do it? We had to do it.’ (Faculty FG)
Administrator: Generous policies and practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We really do have what I believe to be a pretty comprehensive set of benefits and resources available as it relates to family-friendly initiatives. It’s by far and away above and beyond any place that I’ve worked in my 25-plus year career before coming to Purdue University. (Univ101)
Administrator: Opportunities for improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We don’t have one [a lactation station] within our building, and we have had mothers who have given up on pumping, because of the fact that they were having to leave the workplace, walk to [another building], and hope that the lactation station was open. (Dept110) • What I don’t think happens consistently is support of young families. (Dept106)

‘no’ from HR. Which really surprised me because I can guarantee that faculty women are doing that all the time” (College104).

Confusion about Policies Exacerbates Return-to-work Issues

Unclear communication. Many focus group and interview participants agreed that the institution lacked clear communication about policies and resources (Table 4). This

lack of clear communication was challenging because “there was just a lot of ‘it’ll work out.’ And it did work out, but it was rather stressful at the time” (Faculty FG). The confusion may have resulted from how these policies and resources were developed. One university administrator shared that policy development “was kind of dispersed and there really, there was a group of people that

kind of touched those things, they weren't—it wasn't a dedicated position" (Univ102).

Employee lack of awareness. Most administrators described a substantial number of family-friendly policies and practices. One administrative participant stated,

[We offer] paid parental leave, childcare and the resources we have around childcare, the partnership we have with KinderCare [and their] resources [are] available, support for future mothers coming here, we have the Center for

Healthy Living, [and] lactation support. (Univ101)

Although family-friendly programs appear plentiful according to administrators, many of the focus group participants were unaware of these. Many resources mentioned by the administration were never mentioned in the focus groups. One participant spoke on this, discussing the substantial amount of time she spent looking for resources, and said, "They don't even have anything about a lactation consultant" (Staff FG). However, several administrators explicitly described a lactation consultant program, suggesting the existing program is disseminated poorly.

Table 4

Confusion about Policies Exacerbates Return-to-work Issues

Theme	Example Quote
Lacking clear communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think one area that we have an opportunity to do better isn't necessarily offering more benefits because I think we already offer a pretty comprehensive sheet, but it's how we package, how we communicate, how we educate around those benefits that I think gets a little challenging sometimes. (Univ101) • Just trying to chase down who to even email to initiate the paperwork for my parental leave was a chore, in and of itself (Student FG). • Nobody seems to know what the policies were. So there was a lot of fear of putting anything in writing (Faculty FG).
Limited employee awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had no idea what the policies and procedures are. (Faculty FG)

Coworkers and Supervisors are the Primary Sources of Postpartum Support in the Workplace

Employees and students who felt supported through their pregnancies and return to work often reflected on informal

arrangements within their departments rather than institutional support (Table 5). One said, "Whenever I talk to other departments that have a lot of women, a lot of the issues, whether it's about family, work-balance, flexibility, hiring, all these things, they're like 'we don't have issues'" (Faculty FG).

This sentiment was echoed by others in the focus group. One faculty participant stated, “I know how my department makes me feel, but I don’t think I feel anything from [university]” (Faculty FG). Comparable perspectives were discussed in the staff and student focus groups. One student would share a very positive experience, such as “my supervisor had had twins that were in the NICU for a while, so she was very accommodating” (Student FG). Then, another student would disagree, such as, “Yeah, well, my experience was my supervisor didn’t have a kid. So, she didn’t

understand” (Student FG). Similarly, a staff member shared that their supervisor was “very, seriously very, supportive” (Staff FG) but felt less support from the institution.

As a result of the inconsistencies, focus group participants favored policies that applied across the university. One participant spoke on this, saying, “A lot of us have had some good experiences, but it’s not so much because of an actual policy, it’s because of how particular people and departments decide to handle things sort of informally” (Faculty FG).

Table 5

Coworkers and Supervisors Are the Primary Sources of Postpartum Support in the Workplace

Theme	Example Quote
Supervisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel like [support] comes down to the supervisor. So maybe one of the things that [university] needs to do a better job of is working with supervisors to understand what it means to be family-friendly or to have work-life balance. (Dept110) • I’m thankful my supervisor is really been understanding. (Staff FG)
Department colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the people, I think, that you have contact with are-are the ones that you know if you have good relationships, you feel a certain way. The upper administration, there seems to be a-a huge disconnect right now. (Faculty FG)

Discussion

Overall, our results demonstrated many divergent perspectives and experiences in postpartum work-family balance, even though all participants were at the same institution. Administrators were quite optimistic about the resources and policies available to support employees postpartum, while faculty, staff, and graduate students were less positive. There were also substantial differences between the discussions in the focus groups, and within each focus group among participants in

different colleges and departments. Many of these differences were consistent with the traditional structure of the academic setting, with faculty holding relatively more power than professional staff and students holding the least among the roles (Martin, 1998). Faculty described having the highest degree of autonomy and flexibility in the short term but were concerned about how having a child would alter their career trajectory. Staff and students attended to the more immediate concerns, like missing work for a sick child or the lack of affordable childcare, because they had less autonomy and flexibility.

However, there were also several unifying themes across the focus groups. There was agreement that supervisors and coworkers were responsible for the support received when returning to work postpartum. As a result, participants' experiences were dependent upon the policies and practices of the department. Additionally, employees felt there was unclear communication about relevant policies and practices.

Many aspects of the individual, family, employer, and social environment influence work-family balance and conflict. Our participants focused on the interaction of these factors, although some also shared family dynamics. The remaining discussion describes how our results support or diverge from the extant literature and identify practical implications.

Individual and Family Factors Shape Work-Family Balance

Although our study did not focus on gender and personality, two individual-level factors that shape work-family balance, we explored how employee roles shaped participants' postpartum experiences. Professional roles tend to be associated with more work hours and job demands, which cause more opportunities for work-family conflict (DiRenzo et al., 2011). There were differences in faculty and staff experiences even though both are professional roles. Faculty tended to have more autonomy and flexibility. Although this reduced work-family conflict during the short term, many were concerned about long-term career impacts. Some faculty who had already achieved tenure felt penalized during promotion, as postpartum leave and extended tenure processes resulted in higher expectations. In response, faculty were pressured to continue high levels of productivity postpartum, which challenged their ability to attend to family needs. Prior

research suggests that parents who delay their tenure review are penalized. In one study, delaying tenure review was associated with a lower salary (Manchester et al., 2013). In contrast to faculty, staff tended to have less flexibility in the short term and expressed fewer concerns about long-term impacts. Having adequate access to childcare and the flexibility to respond to emergent needs (e.g., school/childcare cancellations, sick children) were primary concerns.

Although "graduate student" is not generally considered a professional role, emerging evidence suggests that they also experience significant workloads and struggle to balance their triple role as a parent, student, and employee (Sallee, 2015). A recent study of a U.S.-based sample demonstrated that more than 75% of graduate students work at least 30 hours per week beyond their responsibilities as a student (Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2015). In our study, students shared experiences of managing these roles. To fulfill their professional responsibilities, several students described working at odd hours so that they could spend time with their child(ren) and partner. Although the literature on professional and family dynamics among graduate students is limited (Sallee, 2015), there is increasing attention to work strain among this group. Some scholars have described the situation as a crisis with "a growing cry for help...with significant mental health concerns" (Evans et al., 2018b, p.282). Our findings suggest that student-parents may be in particular need of resources and support.

Family factors were rarely discussed by our participants. However, some described the importance of supportive partners, while others addressed negotiating with their partners about family responsibilities. This is consistent with prior studies suggesting supportive partners play an important role in

navigating work and family responsibilities (Selvarajan et al., 2016).

Employer and Social Characteristics Influence Work-Family Balance

Most information shared by participants centered around the employer's role (e.g., leave policies, flexible work) and local environment (e.g., lack of affordable childcare) in work-family balance. Consistent with prior studies, coworkers and supervisors played a critical role in employees' perceptions of work-family balance (Goh et al., 2015; McMullan et al., 2018; Schwab-Reese et al., 2017). Some faculty, staff, and students described feeling very supported, which they felt eased their return to work. Conversely, some felt unsupported, which complicated their ability to achieve work-family balance. Prior literature on coworkers and supervisors has been somewhat mixed across professional roles. In samples of professional employees, support was strongly associated with perceived work-family balance (DiRenzo et al., 2011; Selvarajan et al., 2016), consistent with our findings. However, the importance of coworkers and supervisors did not replicate in one study of lower-income employees (Griggs et al., 2013). Although all participants in our study worked in a professional environment, most graduate students made significantly less money than the local average. Since students in our sample repeatedly discussed the importance of this coworker and supervisor support, there may be non-financial aspects of lower-income employment that negate the impact of supervisor and coworker support.

More broadly, the overall employer culture and policies often influence employee perceptions of work-family balance (Direnzo et al., 2011; Griggs et al., 2013; Selvarajan et al., 2016). Employers may support work-family balance by promoting job autonomy

and fostering a supportive culture. While these are important factors, our findings suggest that interventions without accompanying communication are unlikely to be impactful. Administrators in our study discussed numerous resources and policies intended to support employees during the postpartum period. However, most of the employees in our focus group were unfamiliar with them. This lack of clarity negatively impacted employees in multiple ways. First, they were unlikely to use resources and policies that were available. Second, the lack of transparency caused significant stress for many employees. Even employees with a supportive supervisor and/or coworkers described how policy confusion negatively impacted their return to work. Employers who wish to support their employees need to provide clear, accessible information about policies and practices if they want these efforts to reach employees.

Prior studies in academic settings suggest that human resource interventions, such as employer-wide policies, can be an important but insufficient way to support employees (Eversole & Crowder, 2020). Our findings strongly support the results of these studies. The institution contributed to the culture through its policies, but the department and college had more influence on the employees. Our findings also suggest that employees experience the postpartum return to work in different ways, even if they are at the same employer. Understanding the diverse perspectives across employee types may be an essential first step to creating supportive policies and resources that will improve employee well-being.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Given the design and scope of our study, our findings should be regarded as hypothesis-generating. We emphasized the

nuances and complexities of these experiences in a small sample, which may not generalize to other locations or populations. On their own, our results highlight the importance of considering the complex interplay of factors across the socioecological spectrum, ranging from the individual to the society. Complex quantitative models, such as structural equation modeling, can be used to understand the relationship of these independent and interdependent factors.

Because administrator views were overall positive, the differences between their and the faculty, staff, and graduate student perspectives may be related to concerns about how the administration is perceived. Social desirability bias occurs when an individual presents themselves in a perspective that is socially acceptable but not entirely consistent with reality. To mitigate this, some researchers suggest building rapport during interviews or asking interview questions in a way that limits bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Although we tried to do so in our study, we may not have successfully limited this bias.

Our results also emphasize the importance of diverse samples. Overall, our sample was demographically similar, but their experiences differed due to professional role. Historically, studies of work-family balance have focused solely on professional roles, but emphasizing diverse samples may provide a more holistic understanding.

Conclusions

Overall, our results highlight the impact of factors across the socioecological framework on postpartum work-family conflict. Individual factors, such as professional role, influence how employees experience work-family conflict postpartum. Interpersonal factors influence how supported employees feel during their return to work and may provide adequate support in the absence of

strong institutional policies. Finally, the disconnect between faculty, staff, graduate student, and administrator perceptions of the policies and practices underscores the importance of clear communication. Faculty, staff, and students in our sample expressed a clear desire for institution-wide policies that set strong and consistent expectations, while many administrators felt these policies were present. Institution-level interventions will only positively influence work-family balance if employees can access them.

Implications for Health Behavior Theory

Our research suggests university employees would benefit from supportive interventions when returning to work postpartum. Two primary issues emerged: the overall lack of postpartum resources and the ineffective dissemination of current resources. Both issues could be mitigated using multilevel interventions through a socioecological framework.

Individual level. Because many employees were unaware of postpartum resources, they were likely being unused. Individual-focused interventions could bridge this gap by educating employees on accessing and utilizing these resources. This might occur through a comprehensive guide of resources online, hand-outs in administrative offices, or inclusion in email newsletters. Increasing the exposure and accessibility of resources to employees will likely increase their overall application and effectiveness.

Institutional level. The sufficiency of institution resources cannot be fully determined until there is effective resource dissemination to employees. However, immediately expanding these resources could be advantageous as a precautionary approach. Postpartum resources could occur in a variety of forms at a university. One example is Infant at Work programs, which

allow participants to bring their infants to work with them (DeMaria et al., 2021). Ultimately, assessing employee needs and implementing evidence-based strategies is crucial when choosing and adopting programs and policies.

Social level. In this study, there were also concerns about negative stigma towards employees struggling to maintain work-life balance postpartum. An unfavorable climate and culture could affect the uptake of postpartum resources among employees (Schneider et al., 2013). Social-level interventions directly targeting this stigma should be implemented, such as events promoting resources and normalizing postpartum experiences (Stangl et al., 2019). These proposed interventions are only a starting point of what could be implemented to improve employee experiences returning to work postpartum. Further research should be conducted to understand the impact of family-friendly interventions on employees and the surrounding community.

Discussion Questions

1. From the socioecological model, it is shown that many layers of a system impact the health outcomes of individuals. In the context of this approach, how much responsibility should the employer (i.e., the university) have in protecting its employees' health?
2. Why might there be such a gap between available resources and their intended participants? How can health behavior theory be used when effectively making resources available to populations?

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