

## Taking Steps as Women in Academia: Struggles and Solutions

Elissa J. Brown, *New York University School of Medicine*, S. Jean Caraway, *University of South Dakota*, Kristine L. Brady, *Alliant International University*, Gayle Y. Iwamasa, *University of Indianapolis*, and Toy Caldwell-Colbert, *University of Illinois*

One week prior to the 1999 AABT conference, an article appeared in *The New York Times* highlighting an important gender shift in academia. According to Wyatt (1999), "The annual total of women receiving Ph.D.s has increased by more than 50% in a decade, growing over twice the rate of the number of men getting those degrees. As a result, a record 41% of more than 42,000 research doctorates awarded by the United States universities in the 1996-97 academic year went to women" (p. A17). During the same academic year, women constituted 67% of Ph.D.s granted in psychology (cf. Rabasca, 2000; Sanderson & Dugoni, 1999). What, if anything, is happening within the world of academic psychology to promote the success of these women?

We attempted to address this question during a panel discussion presented at the AABT conference on the choices and challenges associated with being women and academically oriented clinical psychologists (Brown, Caraway, Iwamasa, Brady, & Caldwell-Colbert, 1999). Our panel included five academic psychologists at different stages of their career development (from first-time faculty to 22 years in the field) and personal lives (single to married with children). Our goal was to expose junior colleagues to the potential choices they have regarding the content (clinical work, teaching, research, administration), setting (departments of psychology, medical centers), and location (rural, urban environments) of their work. These options were presented in the context of our ongoing struggle between personal and professional goals. Special attention was given to the challenges of being in the minority as women and the additional burden of being a woman of color in academia.

The responses of male and female colleagues, both during and after the presentation, were quite revealing. Graduate students, clinicians, researchers, teachers, and full-time mothers trying to rejoin the work force raised their own dilemmas, indicating the need for ongoing discussions in this area. Thus, the goal of this article is to present these issues to a larger audience. More specifically, we will summarize the struggles experienced and suggestions given regarding the pathways to becoming a successful academic clinical psychologist.

### Struggles

#### *Balancing Professional and Personal Life*

Choosing to pursue a position in academia means that there always will be more work to do. We are judged by our output and, of course, output is determined by input (i.e., hours worked). This creates tension between our professional and personal lives. Finding a balance can be a lifetime struggle. Roberts and Newton (1987) summarized four different studies on women's career development and found that they experienced a "split dream," in which they placed equal weight on career and family. Unfortunately, most women expressed dissatisfaction in both areas. The members of your social support system may or may not understand this dilemma, which can make finding the answers more difficult. Do you want to be a full professor by age 40? Do you want to be actively involved in raising your family? Can you do both? And how will you handle it when professional and personal priorities change over time?

One goal is finding a work environment that matches your own pace, in a community that matches your personality. The struggle is that the "best" job is not always in the community that is "best" for the applicant. Prestige of the institution can be a draw, maybe even a priority; the key is to be honest about yourself and your needs.

#### *Valuing the Educational Process*

We spend the beginning of our lives as academics feeling as though we are jumping through hoops: finish the master's, pass the comprehensive exams, complete the externships, apply to internship, write the dissertation proposal, complete the internship, defend the dissertation, apply for the first job, take the licensure exam, write the first grant proposal, etc. As a result, many of us spend those years thinking only about the product, not the process. Each of these hoops requires a great deal of dedication and focus, but is it at the cost of enjoying the learning process and attending to other areas of our lives?

#### *Finding a Balance Between Your Needs and Those of Other People*

Once we begin to accomplish our personal goals (e.g., romantic partnership, children, spending time with friends and family), another challenge arises: the ability to balance our own needs with other people's needs and expectations. For example, for women in romantic partnerships and/or with children, finding a job involves making decisions as a team. The answers to questions of professional setting, community of residence, and timing of a move are made with consideration of two (or more) people's needs.

The flexibility of an academic position can influence other people's expectations about our time. The assumption that it is easier for us to run errands because we have a more flexible schedule may be true, but putting our time into errands encroaches on our productivity. Similarly, for those with children, the expectation that, as women and academics, we will rearrange our schedules to parent feels unfair. One alternative, placement in child care, means that someone else becomes a primary caregiver to our children. As clinical psychologists, we are aware of the potential risks of this decision. Are we putting our careers before our children? Are we judged by other people for these decisions? Are we unfairly judging ourselves?

#### *Finding a WoMentor*

Finding mentorship that supports professional and personal development is a rare blessing, regardless of gender (or any self-defined issue of importance). The question of whether women need to be mentored by women remains a heated one. Are we more likely to find female mentorship in certain areas of research? Do women bring a unique perspective to research issues, methodology, and interpretation of findings?

Although there are many male mentors who actively promote the professional development of their female mentees, some women have reported that their male mentors are insensitive to their professional/personal struggles. One example is male mentors conveying envy for their single female mentees' schedules by commenting that the women are "lucky" to have no family and "nobody waiting at home." A second example occurred when a male advisor was critical of his female mentee

because she turned down a job offer in a rural area that had no professional opportunities for her husband. How should we respond? If we do not agree, do we educate these men and, by doing so, engage in a very personal conversation about our desire for partners and families? Do we say nothing and reinforce the idea that work is more important than our personal relationships?

A second challenge in dealing with male colleagues and mentors is the perception that, as women and/or people of color, it was “easier to get jobs.” This perception implies that we are less qualified for our positions and creates acrimonious, resentful work relationships. Often women and people of color must work harder and accomplish more to be seen as “just as good” as white men. How and when should these issues be addressed?

The alternative is to seek female mentorship, which has its own challenges. Although there are women who focus on providing supportive mentorship to female junior faculty (including advocating with senior faculty and administrators), other female academics maintain what appears to be a survivor mentality. More specifically, they convey a message of “I did it with no help. You do the same.” In addition, some senior female mentors challenge personality traits of female junior faculty that are traditionally feminine, yet are not necessarily an impediment to academic success, such as modesty (versus self-promotion), collaborating on decisions (versus assigning tasks), and giving unpaid (versus paid) talks. These women managed to be successful in spite of the patriarchal nature of academia, which is impressive. Given the changes in academia, how can we encourage senior female faculty to alter their views rather than maintain a system that fosters junior female colleagues’ sense of isolation?

### *Being a WoMentor*

Given our desire for guidance from women senior to us, it is not surprising that female trainees are approaching us with requests for mentorship. One challenge is agreeing to provide this mentorship when we do not see ourselves as good models. As junior faculty, many of us are struggling with the balance of personal and professional lives. If we work late and have a limited personal life, do we want students to emulate this behavior? As we teach trainees behavior therapy, are we effective mentors if we suggest that they “do as we say, not as we do”?

Additionally, the mentorship requested by and expected of women may differ from that of men. Some female mentees may want social/emotional support. In turn, female mentors may be expected, because they are women, to provide this social/emotional support. The struggle for the mentor is whether she wants to engage in this type of interpersonal relationship. Just because some mentors are able to communicate on an emotional level doesn’t mean we want to or should. Or is the issue of social/emotional support more a function of individual differences than gender?

### *Continuing the Dialogue*

As we presented and discussed the aforementioned struggles, the audience’s responses indicated an appreciation and perceived need for continued dialogue. Attempts to identify the setting for this ongoing dialogue raised more important questions. In what forum should these issues be discussed? Should it be in formal settings (e.g., classes dedicated to professional issues) or informally (e.g., as part of mentorship)? Should the informal discussions include only women or both men and women?

### **Solutions**

Clearly, the panel discussion raised many questions. Although none of us believed that the answers are obvious or easy to implement, the panelists and audience suggested and discussed a number of potential solutions.

### *Setting Clear Expectations and Standards Regarding Your Roles and Accomplishments*

An important first step is to find our own definition of success; otherwise, success will be defined for us by our colleagues, institution, and/or professional community. Often, young faculty members are encouraged to participate in a number of various departmental and university-level projects, while at the same time teaching classes, mentoring, and conducting research. Saying no can be challenging for people who are in the beginning of their careers and even more difficult for women, but it is a critical lesson. Choosing to participate in certain activities and not others is a critical aspect of setting expectations for yourself and other people. If you do well, people will continue to expect you to do well and want you to do more. The old adage, “If you need something done right, give it to the busiest person you know,” results in successful women being and feeling overwhelmed. Be aware that when you set the mark for yourself, you’re also setting the mark for other people’s expectations of you. The recommendation is to do a smaller number of tasks extremely well, rather than doing many things poorly.

Saying no to activities may be easier than saying no to students in need. Women and ethnic minority students may be more likely to seek mentorship from junior female faculty and faculty of color. It is important to be supportive (especially given the previously discussed desire to change the attitudes of senior female mentors), but availability to students is only one aspect of our evaluations for promotion. If you make mentorship a priority, one suggestion is to record your time spent engaged in mentorship and document it as a service activity. A second suggestion is to meet with students in a group format; the time commitment is less, students learn about other research areas, and you provide an observable model of mentor-mentee relationships.

Even with effective solutions, we may still not meet our definitions of success. Perhaps this is because we have unrealistic expectations for ourselves. Senior women fac-

ulty shared their need to lower their expectations. The need to be supermom, superwife, and superprofessional can result in a strong sense of failure. Instead, we should model the cognitive-behavioral technique of setting more reasonable goals so we have the opportunity to accomplish them.

### *Discovering Support Systems*

Research tells us that an important moderator of stress is social support. The key is identifying sources of this support in our professional and personal lives. Within your division of clinical psychology, there may be other junior female faculty; if not, senior women and junior men can provide support related to shared struggles. These interactions can be formal (e.g., committee to address policy) or informal (e.g., social gatherings). Support also may come from other areas of psychology (within the department), foci (nonacademic clinicians), disciplines (outside the department), and institutions. Some universities have women’s organizations to promote this support. Alternatively, meetings at conferences allow us to provide empathy and encouragement for one another, while also engaging in problem solving.

Social support also needs to come from our personal relationships. Our schemas of the academic environment become unhealthily ingrained over time; friends and family outside the field challenge the tenets to which we have habituated. Additionally, our sense of being overwhelmed by our to-do lists can be mitigated by sharing responsibilities with a partner. Lastly, female faculty with children emphasized the need to feel comfortable about child care. Without this comfort, it is impossible to concentrate on your work. As we tell our patients with anxiety disorders, focusing on the worry distracts from progress. If you trust your child care, you can engage in your work, finish it more quickly, and return to your children without distraction.

### *Asking the Right Questions . . .*

*Of your institution.* Ask administrative leaders about policies (e.g., maternity/paternity leave, tenure process), and then ask colleagues about the impact of those policies. Explore the culture and politics of the division, department, and institution. What is the expected breakdown for teaching, research, and service? To what degree does each of these contribute to decisions about promotion and tenure? What is the norm in terms of the number of hours worked? What is the relative importance of face time (e.g., availability to students) versus productivity? What are the attitudes regarding flex-time (e.g., requesting night classes)? What are the employee benefits regarding maternity/paternity leave? Does or will your department support research that addresses ethnic and/or women’s issues? Will you be expected to serve on a lot of committees as the female/minority representative? If so, how will your time be compensated (e.g., release time from teaching a course)? Will online teaching activities be val-



ued as highly as traditional courses taught? Does the university provide grant support for research and travel?

*Of your partner.* Our partners also must define success for themselves. What is their expectation about the amount of time they will spend on their career, child care, home maintenance, etc.? To what degree does your partner have time flexibility (e.g., ability to work at home)? Does your partner's profession limit options regarding community of residence (e.g., major metropolitan areas)? How will you make decisions about job changes as a couple? Although some decisions are unexpected ("You never know when the headhunter will call"), female mentors suggest setting up a plan with your partner in which you agree to take turns being the priority in decision making. Taking turns provides a sense of balance and fairness, and discussing these issues up front prevents later disappointment and frustration when decisions have to be made.

*Of yourself.* We need to know ourselves, our needs, and the reality that everyone has different circumstances and, hence, will make different decisions. Define a program of research. Develop a schedule and then monitor whether you are able to stick with it. Are you setting reasonable goals? As mentioned, because priorities may change, making these decisions is an ongoing process. Check in with yourself regularly to revisit your goals and plans for achieving them.

### *Taking Evaluations Seriously*

Because women and people of color may be perceived as having an easier time getting hired, they feel a stronger need to prove themselves. This makes evaluations intimidating yet important. Waiting until the tenure process is a mistake—it may be too late. Request a third-year review if it is not policy. Look for resources on your campus to facilitate your effectiveness as an instructor and academe, such as the teaching and learning center, statistical consultation, women's network for mentoring by senior-level faculty members, ethnic/women's caucus groups. One recommendation is for instructors to establish a teaching portfolio including student evaluations and peer reviews of courses.

### *Investigating Other Professional Options*

Although there is often pressure in graduate school to become a research-oriented academic, this is not the best fit for everyone. We have choices. In addition to the well-known options of private practice and teaching-oriented institutions, senior female mentors recommended considering positions in administration and public policy. In these positions, we have the opportunity to be at a decision-making level that may actually influence women and ethnic minority students and faculty. To discover whether a career in administration is of interest, junior faculty can participate in fellowships that provide release time to gain administrative experience and/or mentorship from an administrator (in a de-

partment, at the college level, or in central administration). There also are national programs, like the American Council on Education Fellows Program and Harvard's Institute for Executive Management. Lastly, faculty interested in administration may apply for interim positions.

### *Working to Implement Progressive Initiatives*

There are a number of progressive programs and policies that can protect and advance junior female faculty. Some institutions have a spousal hire program that matches funds for a particular department in which your spouse might be hired. Even if they do not have employment for your partner on campus, the institution may be helpful in finding employment in the community. Additionally, ask about the "tenure rollback" program, in which the tenure clock stops for a negotiated period of time (e.g., first year of child's life). This program is offered to both men and women. Birth of a child also can be planned around a sabbatical; however, this was discouraged for junior faculty. If your sabbatical is a time for you to do a lot of writing, then that may not be the time to have a child. If there is less pressure regarding publications/grant funding, having a child during a sabbatical may be a more viable option.

Learning that an institution has these programs in place can provide relief for those women and men who are trying to balance professional and personal lives. If your institution does not have these programs, contact the faculty governance structure and women's caucus groups to initiate the implementation process. Another alternative would be to join the union and suggest items for their agenda.

### *Influencing Large-Scale Change*

Implementation of large-scale change seems intimidating and premature given our status as junior faculty, but senior faculty encouraged early and active involvement. One avenue is faculty governance through which junior faculty can learn about the policies and the inner workings of the campus while getting tenure service credit. A second recommendation is involvement on departmental committees or college committees within your campus. Two committees that may be particularly relevant include the personnel (or executive) committee and the awards committee. By volunteering on the personnel committee, junior faculty can learn about the promotion and tenure process and the inner workings of human resources. Participating in the awards committee exposes junior faculty to what is valued as excellence on campus. The third suggestion is involvement in university-wide initiatives. For example, some institutions have an assessment committee that evaluates the students' outcome (e.g., adjustment to college, learning across the curriculum). Other possibilities include a women's studies program, a committee on the status of women, or a committee on diversity initiatives. Involvement in these committees

not only informs junior faculty about their institutions, but also allows us to enact change in the system and explore whether administration is an area of interest.

### **Conclusions and Future Directions**

What became evident during the presentation and discussion was that we raise more questions than answers. Finding a balance between our professional and personal lives and between our needs and those of other people, learning to value the educational process, and finding and being mentors were topics that elicited strong reactions and the need for continuing dialogue. The specific topics covered in this article were selected because they had been highlighted during and following the panel discussion. We recognize that they do not represent all of the issues relevant to women in academia. Additionally, many of these issues may be as relevant to men as women. Fortunately or unfortunately, our lives continue to become more complicated, which will result in needing to consider additional factors (e.g., taking care of elderly parents).

Hopefully, our understanding of qualities and circumstances that optimize the success of women in academia will inform our understanding of other groups who also face additional stressors in academia (people of color, lesbian/gay/bisexual, people with disabilities). Increasing this understanding requires prospective, longitudinal research on the predictors of success, and outcomes research on programs that are designed to promote female faculty. As helpful as this nomothetic approach may be in informing our general understanding, each woman has unique life goals and circumstances, requiring individual decisions. Perhaps the first step is to create safe, supportive environments in which women can share their struggles and find their own solutions. We hope that the panel discussion and this paper move us in that direction.

### **References**

- Brown, E. J., Caraway, S. J., Iwamasa, G. Y., Brady, K. L., & Caldwell-Colbert, T. (1999, November). *Choices and challenges: A panel for women taking the first steps in clinical psychology*. Panel discussion at the annual meeting of AABT, Toronto, Canada.
- Rabasca, L. (2000). In search of equality. *American Psychological Association Monitor on Psychology, 31*, 30-31.
- Roberts, P., & Newton, P. (1987). Levinsonian studies of women's adult development. *Psychology and Aging, 2*, 154-163.
- Sanderson, A., & Dugoni, B. (1999). *Summary report 1997: Doctorate recipients from United States universities*. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center.
- Wyatt, E. (1999, November 4). Women make rapid gains in the chase for doctoral degrees. *The New York Times*, pp. A17. ✍