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Cross-Cultural Differences in Work-Life Integration

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Abstract

The dramatic change in the career and family aspirations of Penn graduates over the past twenty years is illustrative of a general trend towards reduced choice regarding work and children. Professor Friedman, founder of the Work/Life Integration Project (W/LIP), discovered that the number of Penn graduates who intend to have children has nearly halved from 1992 to 2012. A greater understanding of work-life balance in Western European countries such as Germany will highlight the cultural changes that need to occur in order to achieve a greater work-life balance in the United States. Through student-led discussions at German universities similar to those of the Work/Life Integration Project Student Advisory Board at Penn, this paper aims to shed light on student attitudes and aspirations that are instrumental in institutional and cultural reform here at Penn and other universities. This study aims to understand how much of the change in career and family aspirations can be attributed to the pre-professional environment at universities in the United States. A cross-cultural comparison between work-life balance in Germany and the United States will be provided through student-led discussions and interviews. This study will highlight institutional mechanisms that facilitate work-family balance and provide policy-relevant recommendations that affect men and women everywhere.

Keywords

work-life balance, Germany, United States, universities

Disciplines

Business

Comments

**Cross-Cultural Differences in Work-Life
Integration:**

*Differences in Career and Family Aspirations
between U.S. and German University Students*

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Abstract

The dramatic change in the career and family aspirations of Penn graduates over the past twenty years is illustrative of a general trend towards reduced choice regarding work and children. Professor Friedman, founder of the Work/Life Integration Project (W/LIP), discovered that the number of Penn graduates who intend to have children has nearly halved from 1992 to 2012. A greater understanding of work-life balance in Western European countries such as Germany will highlight the cultural changes that need to occur in order to achieve a greater work-life balance in the United States. Through student-led discussions at German universities similar to those of the Work/Life Integration Project Student Advisory Board at Penn, this paper aims to shed light on student attitudes and aspirations that are instrumental in institutional and cultural reform here at Penn and other universities. This study aims to understand how much of the change in career and family aspirations can be attributed to the pre-professional environment at universities in the United States. A cross-cultural comparison between work-life balance in Germany and the United States will be provided through student-led discussions and interviews. This study will highlight institutional mechanisms that facilitate work-family balance and provide policy-relevant recommendations that affect men and women everywhere.

Methodology

I employed a mixed-method approach and gathered qualitative data in the form of focus groups and interviews and quantitative data in the form of surveys. As a student at

the Freie University in Berlin from April until mid-July, I leveraged my resources in order to implement bi-weekly discussions over lunch, in order to allow for an intimate atmosphere for a target audience of approximately 10-15 students people per session. I used flyering, contacts with professors, and word of mouth to generate interest for the first discussion, which took place shortly after the start of the semester in mid-April.

Overview of Views on Work/Life Integration at American

The soaring prices of American universities, in stark contrast to the famed free-of-tuition German universities has resulted in many students facing debt after college, and thus searching for high-profile, high-paying internships early on to accommodate the debt. Whereas this once seemed necessary for a select student body, it has now become the norm, regardless of personal socioeconomic status. In fact, most students who take on internships are willing and ready to work “extreme jobs”, ready to work 14 more hours a week than their peers twenty years ago (Friedman, 27). As a result, Americans in the Wharton graduating class of 2012 admitted to having significantly less time for family, long-term, and parenting than the Wharton graduating class of 1992.

The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania vs. Free University of Berlin

The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania is often ranked the best undergraduate and graduate business school in the country, and the University of Pennsylvania is a top-tier school that consistently ranks in the top 10 in global university

rankings. Whereas ivy-league schools such as Penn in the United States bring with them a certain amount of flair and cache, German school systems do not have such “elite” universities. In fact, each German universities has unique strengths – whereas the Freie University may be a top choice for those studying broadcasting and communications, its literature department is much overshadowed by its rival school, the Humboldt University in Berlin. Thus, the pre-professional environment often found in schools such as Penn, where the business school often dominates the overall environment of the campus, there was no overwhelming sentiment as to which career or family choices were the shared by the vast majority. Pressures did not seem to be centered on internships or full-time job offers, but rather focused on personal and family issues.

Women’s Aspirations as Homemakers

Widespread in Germany is the idea of a “*Rabenmutter*”, or an uncaring and bad mother who does not take care of their children. Women who attempt to juggle work and children simultaneously are frowned upon and labeled as such, and Sheryl Sandberg’s suggestion of employing flextime to fit in both picking up kids from the daycare and maintaining a high office position is an unpopular mentality in Germany. The vast majority would view such parenting as unnatural and share the opinion that the mother is abandoning her kids, or that the children’s’ wellbeing are compromised when the mother have to work.

Surprisingly, the optimal number of children among respondents was 3, which lies

well above the national fertility rate of 1.3. This falls in line with the idea that those who choose to pursue motherhood feel compelled to do so wholeheartedly, at the risk of becoming a so-called “rabenmutter”. Whereas both German men and women seemed to believe that becoming a parent would limit career successes, they did not seem to feel particularly strongly about this, instead stating that they felt “neutral” about the statement that they wished to “have it all – a rewarding career, satisfying family, and fulfilling personal relationship.” They viewed achieving successes in their career as possible if sacrifices in the family and personal sphere were made.

Friedman, however, found in his survey that those who found that two-career relationships work best when “neither partner has stereotypical or traditional ideas about men’s and women’s family roles’ were much more likely to plan to have children than those who didn’t share this sentiment (Friedman, 33). An interesting point seems to lie in the fact, however, that the vast majority of German women seem to *disagree* with the fact that being a housewife as a mother can be fulfilling, where as the majority of American women agree with this statement. This further exemplifies the German tendency to view the role of a mother to be a stagnant one, one that is limited by the 9-5 workday and one that must compromise a career in order for one to be the best mother that she can be.

Attitudes on Education with Regards to Career

When I asked German students the most compelling reason for them to list their motivation for pursuing an education at the Freie University, they listed personal reasons as the most compelling reasons, and “expected financial returns on investment” or

“networking opportunities” were ranked among the least important factors. Perhaps much of this has to do with the fact that the Free University is, as its name suggests, completely tuition free, and thus there are no expected financial returns, per se. This stands in stark contrast to American students who feel the increased competitiveness of today’s business world and are preparing themselves for “extreme jobs”, expecting to work 14 more hours a week than 20 years ago (Friedman, 26). The Millennials in Friedman’s study care more about job security and highly valued expected financial returns on their college investment.

The most striking difference was the discussion on how the German students have spent their summers since starting university. The overwhelming majority had spent their simply taking time off (79%) or traveling (71%). In fact, only 7% engaged in a formal, paid internship program, and 29% engaged in an unpaid internship program. Overall, of those who completed an internship, only around 29% did so in the field in which they had hoped to secure an internship. This spoke to both the motives shared by the vast majority of the students who searched for internships – they view them as a vehicle to either earn additional income and many had not even pondered what their “dream internship” might be or which field they even wanted to pursue professionally. Entrepreneurship was also not a popular choice, with only 1 mere respondent spending the summer working on his or her own business. This seems to fall in line with Friedman’s observation of Millennials shifting away from entrepreneurship in favor of job security, increasingly unwilling to make high-risk, high-pay career choices (Friedman, 25).

Not surprisingly, this difference in attitude found at the Freie University in Berlin from the stark pre-professional, competitive environment of American universities such as

Wharton also might help explain the mental welfare of the German students. When asked how their physical health, mental health, and stress level was compared to people their age, the overwhelming majority of respondents answered that their health was either “somewhat better” or “very good” compared to their peers.

With regards to immediate plans after graduation, less than half of respondents answered that they would like to be employed full-time (43.8%), and the next most popular response to the question was “Take time off” (25%) or attend graduate school (18.8%). No respondents mentioned becoming a full-time homemaker or running their own business. In Germany, it is not uncommon for students to remain in school and continue to pursue their masters or even bachelors degree until the age of 30, which explains the tendency to list graduate school or even taking time off *before* graduate school as popular choices. Short-term employment, defined as securing a job 2-3 years after graduation, was viewed as very unlikely not only for themselves but for their partner, for those that were in a relationship.

Future Considerations

As the LGBT and queer community at Penn continues to expand, one cannot help but question how the results may have differed to account for more untraditional types of marriage and parenthood – this was not addressed in the longitudinal survey amongst Wharton graduates from the class of 1992 and 2002, and I was also not able to fully explore this detail in depth. However, if to go back to continue full-time research, I would most certainly make use of the very active LGBT community at the Free University in

Berlin as well to see how their perception of parenthood and achievement of work/life integration corresponds to their career aspirations.

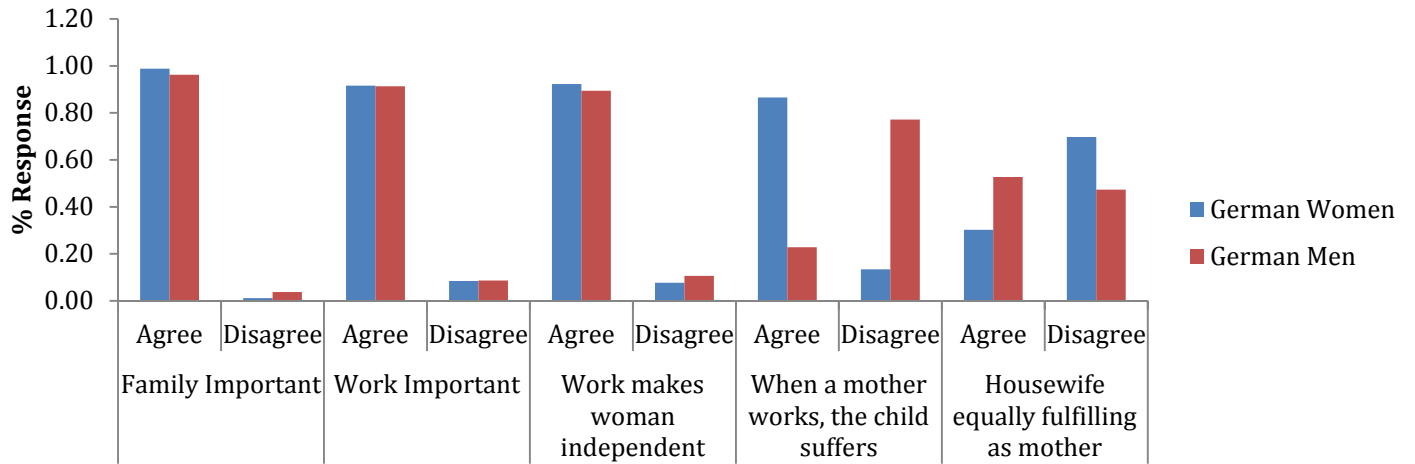
Furthermore, after many conversations with economics students at the Free University in Berlin, a common point of concern was that the Free University was a public university without a designated business school. I had originally chosen the Free University because of its location in an urban area, much like Penn, that would make for helpful comparison. I would, however, in the future conduct a survey with students of the business school in Mannheim, which many reference as the most “practical business” oriented university in Germany, where many top graduates head on to consulting and banking firms.

Conclusion

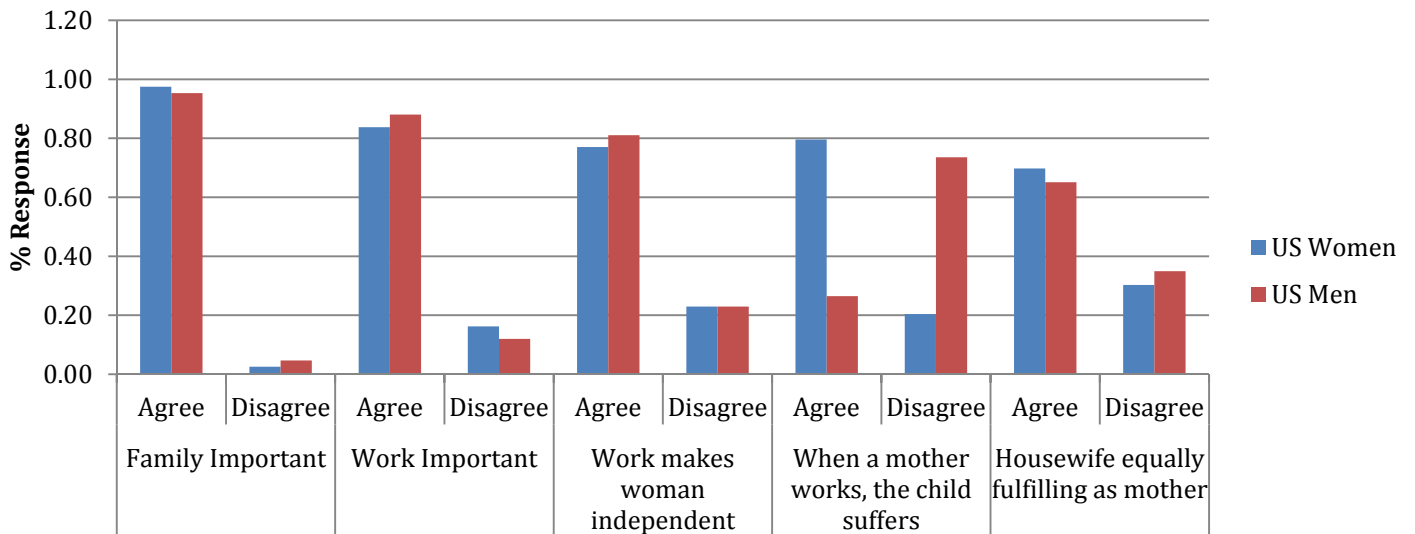
Many of the cross-cultural differences in ideas stem from age-old, rooted traditions such as *Rabenmutter*. Amy Chua’s *Tiger Mom* book, for instance, received media attention for many different reasons than it did in the United States – the idea of an unloving or uncaring mother seemed to be a cultural taboo, and even the idea of working while caretaking seemed frowned upon. This explains the sentiment amongst German women that sacrifices in career and family life are not only necessary, but they have also come to terms with the fact that “having it all” is a lofty goal, one that will most likely not be met. Their less ambitious career goals also seem to indicate a general higher sense of well-being and personal fulfillment, with the majority of the student body feeling mentally stable.

Should the dialogue be shifted away from “having it all” as a woman, and ways that work makes a woman independent (a heavy focus of the World Values survey) to addressing the fact that choosing to pursue a career and have a child does not necessarily make you a *‘Rabenmutter’*? Does the prospect of attending grad school have to seem more alluring both personally and financially in order to offset any immediate anxiety surrounding securing a high-paying job right after graduation? In Germany, because the post-graduation plans varied so differently amongst the student body, there was significantly less “groupthink” that people felt compelled to subscribe to, and there was no stringent deadline on the financial ‘return’ that these had to receive on their education. Continued conversations around these work/life integration topics should be a focus of most university institutions, both in the United States and abroad.

Attitudinal Differences Regarding Family and Work (German Women vs Men)



Attitudinal Differences Regarding Family and Work (US Women vs Men)



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WORLD VALUES SURVEY Wave 6 2010-2014 OFFICIAL AGGREGATE v.20141107.

World Values Survey Association (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). Aggregate File Producer: Asep/JDS, Madrid SPAIN.