**In Search of an Academic Wife**

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[Image:](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0050032/?ref_=nv_sr_1) Barbara Billingsley and Hugh Beaumont as the Cleavers in Leave It to Beaver

*Wanted: One academic wife. Duties include cooking meals; cleaning house; entering sources into my bibliography; doing some light copyediting, proofreading, and research; and talking employer off the ledge when deadlines loom. Pay includes the usual spousal support, book dedications, and occasional co-authorship, but mostly the honor of being in the presence of a hotshot academic on the rise.*

Some days, like Judy Syfers observed in 1971 in the inaugural issue of Ms. magazine, [I want a wife](http://www.csee.umbc.edu/~mariedj/browse/serious/wives). No, make that most days. Like when my husband and I are cleaning the house, but I’m thinking about the valuable time I could be spending revising an article that’s overdue. Or when I’m dreading the grocery store after an afternoon class, and hoping that we have enough in the budget for take-out so that I can spend an hour on my writing instead of cooking. Or on the days when I’m working on other people’s academic books—as a freelance researcher, indexer, and Zotero/Endnote/program-of-your-choice bibliographer.

Especially on those days when I’m elbows-deep in someone else’s scholarship, I get a little pang of what could have been if I’d had [a wife](http://www.historiann.com/2009/06/01/to-have-it-all-get-a-wife/). I want someone to take care of all the extraneous details so that I can do my research, so that I can focus on that chapter of my book for which I finally have a good outline and a stack of archive notes and interview transcriptions, so that I can actually do work that might get me a chance (however long the odds) at a tenure-track job. (Note: I’m no longer looking for tenure-track positions, so think of this as a struggle where I’ve already waved the white flag.)

Then I realized: For my scholar-clients, I am an academic wife. Sure, they pay me, but it’s sometimes not much more than what they would pay a graduate-student researcher. However, the service I’m really providing them with is time, which you can’t really put a price on. I’m doing the kind of work that frees them up to think big thoughts, or at least to finish writing their book. While I’m copy editing one chapter, they can work on another. While I’m transferring their MS Word-based bibliography into whatever database technology they choose, they can respond to the edits that their reviewers sent. While I’m working on their footnotes, they can think about the structural changes that their editor requires.

And here’s another thing: I’ve never had a married male academic hire me for editing or research work. I’ve had plenty of married male clients hire me to do editing work in other employment sectors, but not in academia, which makes me wonder how much it has truly changed from the old days.

The tradition of the [academic wife](http://chronicle.com/article/The-New-Faculty-Wife/44858/) is a long one, still relatively entrenched despite the feminist movement and the increased presence of women in the academy. In grad school, I knew many men whose wives and girlfriends did much of the work I do for my clients, only they did it for free, in order to be “supportive.” To be fair, one of those men I knew did pay his girlfriend to transcribe interviews; to be fairer, other men I knew did not use their partners as unpaid assistants. But those who did are, to a man, well on their way to tenure (if not tenured already).

If the wives and girlfriends of my peers are anything like a typical woman in the United States, they are more likely to do a [greater share of the housework](http://www.thenation.com/blog/179592/why-it-matters-women-do-most-housework), leaving [more leisure time for men](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/10/another-gender-gap-men-spend-more-time-in-leisure-activities/)—or, in the case of men in academia, more time for writing and research. I’m not blaming these guys for taking advantage of a free reader. After all, I have forced my sister into that role numerous times over the past 15 years, starting with my grad-school applications. But all of that time freed up for work? It adds up.

Mary Ann Mason’s and Marc Goulden’s research shows that [men with wives (and children) are more likely to achieve tenure than women](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/06/female_academics_pay_a_heavy_baby_penalty.html), whether those women are married or single. Although Vitae addressed the issue of women with children in its [series](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/569-are-children-career-killers) [on](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/549-should-you-have-a-baby-in-graduate-school?cid=vem) [motherhood](https://chroniclevitae.com/news/567-the-perfect-academic-baby?cid=vem), discrimination against women with children on the tenure track is only one part of the problem. Women without children also have a lower rate of tenure than their male counterparts. As Mary Ann Mason [notes,](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/06/female_academics_pay_a_heavy_baby_penalty.html) “women professors have higher divorce rates, lower marriage rates, and fewer children than male professors. Among tenured faculty, 70 percent of men are married with children compared with 44 percent of women.”

Further,women occupy the ranks of contingent faculty [at a higher rate](http://www.thenation.com/article/175214/academias-pink-collar-workforce) than men. Mason points out that “[a good proportion](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2013/06/female_academics_pay_a_heavy_baby_penalty.html)” of these women get jobs on the tenure track. But the women who get those jobs at the highest rate (not quite as high as the rate of married fathers) are single and childless. If I were to guess, both single women and married men are more likely to be perceived as candidates who will move anywhere for a job: single women because they have no family ties, and married men because they need to be good providers. Or at least that’s what I’ve heard, repeatedly, through the grapevine.

The most depressing thing, though, is that even if I had all that time I want, the odds are still stacked against me as a woman. In [a study](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/08/18/study-raises-questions-about-why-women-are-less-likely-men-earn-tenure-research) presented at the American Sociological Association meeting last August, Stanford graduate student Kate Weisshaar found that, even controlling for productivity, men were significantly more likely to earn tenure than women in sociology and computer science. (Weisshaar also looked at English, where men were slightly, but not statistically significantly, more likely to earn tenure.)

Weisshaar’s study shows that women don’t need to be as productive as men: They need to be more productive, since they’re usually doing far more service work than men, too.

Maybe I shouldn’t wish for a wife. Maybe I should wish for an entire staff to take over my housework, my freelance work, and my adjuncting. At this point, in order to get off the adjunct track, I would need an army of clones.

Of course, my clients—mostly women, mostly close to tenure—probably wish for the same thing. They’re the ones facing the high bar for research, while I’m the one exiting academia for an alternate career. And, in fact, because I know that they face that high bar, I’m always aware of how much my work for them matters and I’m very much dedicated to helping them succeed. It’s just that sometimes I wish I could have had that opportunity myself.

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See more at: https://chroniclevitae.com/news/732-in-search-of-an-academic-wife#sthash.C6oht3Ld.dpuf