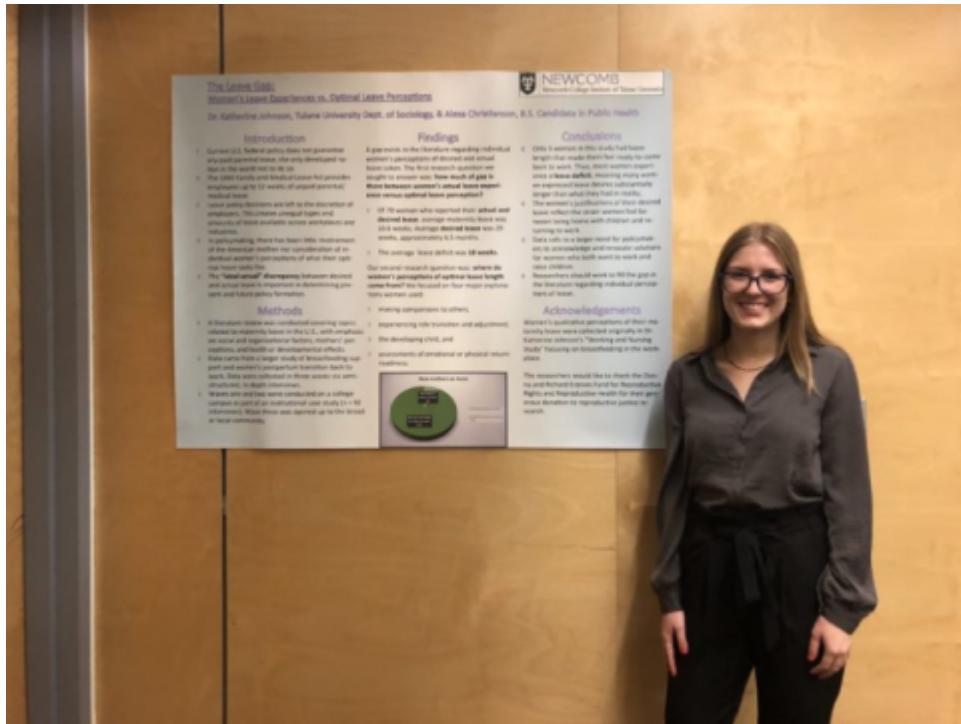


# The Leave Gap & More: My Final Semester!

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As of January, it has officially been a year since I started working with the Newcomb College Institute Reproductive Rights and Health Internship program! I work on an ongoing study, Working and Nursing, with Dr. Katherine Johnson in Tulane's Department of Sociology. The study began as a campus initiative to interview faculty, staff and students who were juggling breastfeeding and employment at Tulane. Since then, the study has expanded to interviewing dozens of women in the greater New Orleans community, as well as a branch-off investigation into these women's perceptions of their maternity leave experiences.

Last semester, Dr. Johnson and I launched more into the maternity leave topic, reviewing past interviews with mothers to examine specific questions asked concerning maternity leave. Namely, we wanted to know about an “ideal-actual discrepancy” or “leave deficit,” referring to the difference of time between what amount of leave they received and what they ideally would have liked. It was fascinating to me that we could uncover so much new material and analyses from a couple of small questions within a larger interview! Especially in the field of sociology, so many themes and issues are interconnected in relation to women, the family, and work-life balance. The struggles encountered by these mothers in juggling breastfeeding, a sometimes-unsatisfactory maternity leave situation, and the return itself to work, varied greatly across the board but always involved the challenge of balancing.

Our new maternity leave angle culminated in the drafting of a paper and a presentation at NCI’s Conceiving Equity event two weeks ago, my first intern work of the semester. I prepared a poster presentation titled “The Leave Gap: Women’s Leave Experiences versus Optimal Leave Perceptions” and spoke to event-goers about the “leave deficit” concept that Dr. Johnson and I explored. I started with some important background information about leave policy in the United States, such as that we are the only industrialized nation in the world that does not guarantee any paid leave, and the FMLA currently mandates up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave with a federal job guarantee. Leave policy decisions are therefore largely left to the discretion of employers, creating vast discrepancies between industries and companies across the nation based on what they are able or willing to offer their employees. This facilitates inequities for women, too, depending on factors such as socioeconomic status and occupation type.

I then did an overview of the rest of my work on the paper, often referring back to the fact that our semi-structured interview design about breastfeeding was the jumping-off point for collecting maternity leave data. I talked about the gap in the literature concerning women’s individual perceptions of what constitutes an “optimal” length of time for leave, our research questions of how much leave was actually taken on average, how much time women wanted to take on average, the average discrepancy between those reports (18 weeks between actual and desired leave!), and how women justify their judgement of their ideal leave. Interestingly, the literature was generally supportive of what women discussed in interviews: they made comparisons to others’ experiences, expressed concerns for their child’s

development, discussed their personal adjustment and role transition, and assessed their own physical and emotional readiness.

A topic as far-reaching and universally applicable to working mothers (seven in ten mothers with children under 18 in 2015 worked, according to [pewresearch.org](http://pewresearch.org)) as maternity leave is difficult, if not impossible, to exhaust, especially in one poster. At the end of *Conceiving Equity*, I felt a bit as if I had only scraped the surface of what was possible to discuss and address relating to maternity leave policy and how future directions could remedy the situation. However, I came to two definitive possibilities: 1) researchers need to fill the gap in the academic literature concerning women's individual perceptions of an "ideal" maternity leave, and 2) policymakers and legislators should pay more attention to qualitative, narrative-style data that directly reflects the needs of their constituents.

Following *Conceiving Equity*, Dr. Johnson and I mapped out some next steps for the coming weeks. First, I'm continuing my quality checks of interview transcripts, which means I get to listen back on the interviews that me, Dr. Johnson, or a past research assistant has conducted, and read over the transcript to make sure everything matches. This is actually really fun for me, and was a great way to get acquainted with the ins and outs of breastfeeding and some of the thematic patterns of what these women have gone through. I love listening to their stories!

Dr. Johnson also maintains records of each of the lactation spaces available on campus, via a form that involves collecting photographs, general impressions and specific amenities included in the room. This allows for easy comparisons between campus space quality as well as national or occupation-specific standards. Mussafer Hall, Tulane's new advising building on the Uptown campus, is up and running and equipped with a lactation space that I will soon be evaluating. I love Mussafer Hall's bright, open design and welcoming feel, so hopefully the lactation space is comparably impeccable and organized.

Finally, we are furthering collaborative efforts with an organization Dr. Johnson connected with in the fall, called Diapers to Desk, who work with Touro in putting on parenting courses and Internet outreach targeted towards mothers preparing or currently resuming their work after having a child. Last semester, I wrote my first blog post for them, "It's Not Hard...To Build a Nice Lactation Room," detailing what the recommended amenities are for workplace lactation spaces, along with anecdotal data from women we had talked to about their positive and negative

experiences pumping in designated lactation spaces at work. Diapers to Desk is asking Dr. Johnson and I to write for them twice a month with research-based, easy-to-understand pieces targeted towards working moms concerning breastfeeding and maternity leave. Writing skills are paramount, and writing concisely is even more challenging, so I am thrilled to take on this part of the project!

As my final semester as an undergraduate is underway, I am full of gratitude that I am continuing this dynamic and ever-changing work with Dr. Johnson. Research is a timely process, and the shifting focus and emerging findings of our qualitative work reminds me that disciplines always interact and structural barriers play a huge role in issues of reproductive justice. I hope that my writing and further work on this study aid Dr. Johnson's aims, with an extra push for community engagement.