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INTRODUCTION

Capturing social and cultural influences: relating individual work-life experiences to context

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An education ... (is) being able to differentiate between what you do know and what you don't. Anatole France (1901, 168)

As Anatole France suggests, education is a phenomenon that involves self-reflection to qualify what one knows and still does not know. One of the most valued rituals and social experiences of scholars is the gathering together at conferences to share perspectives. From 2013 to 2015, I served as the first elected President of the Work Family Researchers Network (WFRN) and Program Chair of an international conference held in June 2014 in New York City with over 200 sessions and 42 countries represented. This special issue reflects a partnership with the journal *Community, Work & Family* to capture conference highlights. Below I give a brief overview of papers and the future challenges I called for in the WFRN Presidential address to move work-life research from the margins to the mainstream (Kossek, 2014). As you read this introduction, consider how the issues noted might motivate your next study to focus on under-examined and meaningful questions in our field. While each paper helps to advance understanding of cultural and contextual issues, many gaps remain.

Like the work-family field, the WFRN conference was a rich dynamic experience including researchers, practitioners and policy-makers from around the globe. Participants shared viewpoints on what they 'know' are truths from their ideographic vantage point with colleagues from other cultures and disciplinary perspectives to fill in and make salient though scholarly interactions – how much they still do not know (and have yet to learn).

Social-cultural contextual influences matter

A persistent gap to bridge in work-family-life research is that most of the body of work examining individual-level work-family experiences are devoid of inclusion of higher level social and cultural influences from co-workers, teams, clients, organizations or national culture. When descriptions of social and cultural context are lacking in methods and analyses, we do not know how much the findings from published studies are a function of the ecological social and cultural systems in which the individual, family, dyad or organization were embedded. This idea of nested data – that

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individual-level phenomenon should be bracketed and understood across multiple levels – comes from a number of domains. One of the most prominent examples comes from ecological family systems theory of nested environments examined by Bronfenbrenner (1989) where he examined how a child's experiences, for instance may be linked to family systems which may be linked to school or community systems. Such a multi-level view countervails a common criticism of work-family research – the over-reliance on individual single source survey or qualitative data from one perspective (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Yet the preponderance of work-family research adopts a micro level perspective often focusing on same source individual attitudes predicting individual outcomes, or in the case of qualitative research individual discourse. And when contextual influences are examined, researchers typically use individual self-report perceptions of norms and culture.

This special issue of highlights from the conference, reflects a step forward to address this under-examination of multi-level and other social and cultural influences. Unlike a lot of previous research all of the empirical papers selected for this special issue examines work-family relationships using true multi-level nested data. Why is this so important? Because we know that individual-level work-family experiences do not occur in a vacuum, but occur in relation to a social environment. As an example, individual perceptions of work-family demands and resources are undoubtedly a function of exposure to enriching or depleting work contexts. Similarly, an individual's beliefs about the availability of flexible schedules and policies are likely a function of social comparison to what other jobs and co-workers have and what is seen as normative. At the macro level, the take-up of work-family policies and the degree to which they seen as accessible and used without flexibility stigma may be a function of national institutions and societal cultural expectations regarding the extent to which the poor and citizens caring for children or elders should be publically supported.

Overview of special issue papers

Each of the papers in this issue advances understanding of social-cultural context and brings in macro and multi-level views. The three papers from junior scholars were selected from dozens and dozens of conference and journal submissions. All went through a rigorous blind review process with multiple revisions.

The first paper: 'The Ripple Effect of Schedule Control: A Social Network Approach' by Kristi McAlpine is the recipient of the *best junior scholar paper award*. Drawing on social informational processing and relative deprivation theories, McAlpine found that individuals with relatively less schedule control than their direct social network ties and peers report poorer work outcomes. Specifically, higher perceived schedule control among peers in an individual's job network is significantly *negatively* associated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The paper highlights the importance of equality in schedule control access and the negative social comparison consequences of unequal access to work-life support. This was the only paper regardless of scholarly rank submitted to the special issue, where all blind reviewers recommended accepting the paper.

Laurie Maldonado and Rense Nieuwenhuis's paper 'Family Policies and Single Parent Poverty in 18 OECD Countries, 1978–2008' was a *runner-up finalist* for the best junior scholar paper award. Drawing on a very rich international database,

their paper is novel by examining to the extent to which different *types* of national family policies impact different *types* of parent households. Distinguishing between reconciliation policies (paid parental leave, the proportion of unpaid leave) and financial support policies (family direct transfer allowances), they show that longer paid parental leave, a smaller proportion of unpaid leave, and higher amounts of family allowances result in lower poverty rates across national contexts. The study also highlights the differential policy effects by type of family structure: paid leave is especially critical for facilitating the employment of single parents and reducing their poverty. In contrast, although the population is small, preliminary data suggest family transfer allowance policies matter for reducing poverty for single parent father families. This kind of meaningful nuanced analysis contrasting different work-family public policies across specific family structures and nations is generally lacking in work-family research.

David Hurtado and colleagues' paper, 'Schedule Control and Mental Health: The Relevance of Coworkers' Reports', suggests that individual's mental health may be linked to team members' perceptions of the scheduling context. Using data from over a thousand healthcare workers nested in over 100 work units, Hurtado found that psychological distress was lower for nurses at units where coworkers reported higher flexible scheduling availability. This paper advances methods for capturing schedule control social context by suggesting that coworkers' reports of the extent of availability of schedule control avoids self-report confounding biases of most work-family research.

The final special issue paper by Blair-Loy and colleagues entitled, 'Stability and Transformation in Gender, Work, and Family: Insights from The Second Shift for the Next Quarter Century', was a Presidential invited symposium. The paper takes a look back to re-view the issues raised in Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (1989), 25 years after its publication. The author considers important changes as well as continuities that have occurred since the book first appeared. The authors argue that while much has changed such as dramatic increases in US female labor participation rates and new family dynamics in caregiving and domestic life, much remains the same in terms of the way gender is structured in the home. Women continue to do most of the second shift-unpaid child care and housework. Employers still are relatively inflexible (and lacking) in meaningful work-family support, Paid parental leave is still not a US reality – the latter of which coupled with unequal access to work-life flexibility across class and jobs, is contributing to widening US inequality.

WFRN presidential address highlights of additional gaps with call to action

Despite the contributions of these papers to advancing understanding of culture and social contextual work-family influences, a number of themes noted in my presidential address remain that require additional research. The first theme called for was more research on *how images of work and family should be examined as cultural research artifacts across societies*. As an example, consider the picture that appeared in the *New York Times* in 2010 showing a Swedish man pushing a baby carriage with the caption: 'In Sweden: Men Can Have it All.' Imagine again if that same headline would have the same meaning if it was used to refer to the work-family experiences of men in the USA, India or Japan. Future research is needed to examine work-family

video, pictures and social media across nations and organizations, and see how they shape societal images of normality; and values and assumptions about work-life possibilities. Such studies might also examine how societal images relate to perceptions and norms regarding who needs, is entitled to, deserves or is culturally supported to use work-life policies. Research along this theme might also examine how symbols and images related to perceptions and beliefs regarding values on work-life equality and inequality; and raise emotions, and visceral reactions to work-family policies.

A second unexamined challenge I raised called for the need for more research to further examine *work-family narratives and the discourse and language* used to construct our meanings of work-family issues. By delving deeply into languages and subtle imagery, studies might help reduce work-life stigma and inform, ‘How can we stop using language in ways that oppress and marginalize groups and apply stereotyped labels and assumptions about different work-family groups?’ For example, what images are conjured up with the phrases ‘Stay at home mom; Stay at home dad’; ‘Single parent, immigrant or blended parent family? Other illustrations come from studies noting that ‘On demand jobs’ with virtual 24-7 availability really connote ‘the new face time’ (Grotto, 2015). Employees also have been reported to have ‘virtual babies’ where they show pictures of children to be able to brag about at work, but in reality such they are just role playing they have families, because caring for a real one would be too much work. More positive images and possibilities emanate from ‘the sustainable workforce’ (Kossek, Valcour, Lirio, 2014); yet widespread understanding of best practices to implement such sustainability does not exist. And of course, we have not yet solved, the work-family, work-life or work-non-work linguistic debate as to how to fame what is personal, what is professional and how they intersect (or not) (Kossek, Baltes, & Matthews, 2011). In sum, a key challenge to scholars is to conduct research and make suggestions regarding ‘What is new language we can use to reshape Work-Family discourse?’

A third challenge I asked researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers is to *reflect on their own work-family story and how their own professional/personal identity socialization affects their work and how each of us ‘does work-family’?* Such reflection would help each of us to better understand ‘What is the lens by which we view the world and work-family research?’ This would open work-family scholars up to be open to new perspectives regarding what they still do not truly know about work-family issues – which reflects knowledge as Anatole France suggests. Yet many scholars take a unitary frame despite the danger in having too narrow a lens that allows one to only see one side of the problem from a constrained work-family experience and world view. We work-family scholars need to surround ourselves with smart people who disagree with us. For example, we need to seek out cross-national conversations, cross-disciplinary collaborations, research-practitioner partnerships, and team up with non-work-life scholars so we can better understand how work-life issues relate to other substantive topics. This will better enable us as work-family scholars to consider two sides to new (and even opposing) arguments to advance research.

Cross-national collaboration would also help us avoid assuming that the institutions and cultural and societal experiences we ‘know’ as true translate across borders. Many of us engage in trans-substantive error – the problem where one assumes that the norms and values of one’s own culture operates in the same way and translates similarly to other societies and cultures. Although many of us recognize that our cultural level and frame shape our work, it is difficult to step outside of ways

of knowing that are familiar. The challenge we face is to passionately be open to continuing our own work-life education and move beyond our cultural indoctrination.

A fourth challenge is to seriously *embrace and advance the multi-level and social-cultural research approaches* illustrated by the papers in this issue. Although the papers in this special issue addressed work-group and national context levels, many other levels were overlooked. These include the community, family and organizational cultural levels. The community level in particular is understudied as this journal's title pays homage. Further, culture has many levels that are confounded and under-examined. Examples of under-analyzed 'Levels of Culture' may include (a) organizational/company culture; (b) subcultures and occupational culture; and (c) national cultures/and institutions.

Cross-national studies on the same work-family phenomenon are particularly needed. Although work-life scholars repeatedly emphasized the value of, and need for, cross-national studies in order to understand the variety of cultural ways in which people experience the work-life interface around the world, cross-national studies remain relatively rare. This is a critical gap as cultural expectations and institutional settings vary widely across societies and have profound implications for the interrelationships between work and personal/family life. The lack of awareness of the effects of national context presents a barrier to nuanced understanding of the work-life challenges people face in different countries, as well as the types of solutions that are most appropriate (Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, den Dulk, & Kossek, 2013).

A fifth challenge is to move *beyond critique and description of what is wrong with the work-family status quo to suggest, design and evaluate evidence-based interventions*. Such research would identify prevailing institutional, structural and cultural constraints that shape work-family policy and practice and loosen these up as discussable. For example, understaffing practices, rising caregiving and job workloads and lessening employer accountability to foster work-life well-being may be getting in the way of meaningful change. Customized adaptive interventions are needed that are based on science, not consultant's flavor of the month. Most importantly, by suggesting scientifically grounded interventions, work-family scholars would become part of the solution, learning how to better translate and position research findings to transfer evidence-based knowledge to innovative policy and practice to improve the quality of life across societies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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