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Theorizing national context to develop comparative work–life research: A review and research agenda

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Summary Greater attention is needed in the management and work–life fields to how variation in cross-national contexts and assumptions operating at the individual, organizational and national levels influence work–life policies, practices, processes, and outcomes for individuals, families, businesses, and society. This article presents a review of cross-national studies, based on cultural (e.g. Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, Hofstede and GLOBE) and institutional frameworks (e.g. Esping-Andersen, isomorphism and comparative institutionalism). We outline a research agenda to extend each of these approaches and bridge them. We also discuss the findings and contributions of the papers selected for this special issue; in particular, these papers conceptualize national context as dynamic rather than static and as heterogeneous rather than homogeneous. In addition, they extend important conversations in the field, push its boundaries by analyzing the stakes for developing countries, and offer conceptual and methodological avenues for comparative work–life research.

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Introduction: National context, an elephant in our field

Work–life scholars have repeatedly emphasized the value of and need for cross-national studies in order to understand the variety of ways in which people experience the work–

life interface around the world. Since cultural expectations and institutional settings both vary widely across societies and have profound implications for the interrelationship of work and personal/family life (Bardoel & DeCieri, 2006; Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2013; Lambert & Kossek, 2005; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009), 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. Furthermore, research that applies theories developed in one country to research subjects in a different

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country without attention to the differences in national context threatens to result in misinterpretation of findings. Despite this fact, a prevailing weakness in the work–life field is that although it is politically correct and commonplace for scholars to tout the need for cross-national research and the integration of cultural assumptions and contexts in our studies, relatively few studies actually do so. Thus, the lack of attention to national context in the work–life field is analogous to the saying “elephant in the room,” an English idiom or metaphor for an issue that is both problematic and apparent to everyone, yet is not being addressed. Most of the key concepts studied in the work–life literature, such as work and family role salience, beliefs about work–life balance, normative levels of work involvement, the meaning of work in people’s lives, gender roles and the division of labor, to name a few, are rooted in deep-seated cultural assumptions as well as specific socio-institutional regimes (Powell, Francesco, & Ling, 2009). Social policies at the macro level and individual needs and expectations at the micro level are also closely linked (Bardoel & DeCieri, 2006). For instance, the extent to which family is considered a private matter that individuals must take on by themselves versus a contribution to their country for which they can expect state support impacts individuals’ expectations and the organizational and state support they receive (Kamerman & Kahn, 1997). While in the US individuals and employers, not government, are culturally viewed as responsible for ensuring that care supports are in place, in France and many other European Union countries, the government is viewed as responsible for work–life supports to a greater extent than are employers (Ollier-Malaterre, 2009). Thus, studies on the effects of work–life policies need to assess whether results might be linked to the nation in which the data were collected.

Our premise in this special issue is that work–life research is highly sensitive to national context, a system of factors that operates at multiple levels and in different ways across contexts. Macro-level factors are defined as country-level economic, societal, institutional and cultural influences. These encompass culture and history, gender ideology, public provisions such as personal and family leaves, stage of economic development and strength of the economy, flexibility of the labour market and life-long learning incentives, the industrial relations system, the tax system (that may encourage or discourage dual careers), and the childcare and education system. These macro-level national context factors may impact a range of meso-level work–life variables at the organizational level. Examples include employer adoption and implementation of HR practices to support employees, work–life culture within organizations and work groups, supervisor and co-worker support, and unions’ stance towards work–life issues. The macro- and meso-level components of national context are also linked to micro-level components, including individuals’ experiences of work–life conflict, enrichment, balance and segmentation and integration of work and non-work, employees’ expectations regarding work–life support, and employee awareness and use of work–life policies.

Despite the evident impact that national context factors may have for work–life research, there is a striking paucity of comparative cross-national work–life research (Poelmans & Sahibzada, 2004; Powell et al., 2009). Current

work–life research tends to be Anglo-centric or, to a lesser extent, Asia-centric (Kossek, 2013). Therefore, an emerging body of work is beginning to answer the repeated calls for a broadening of the scope and ambition of work–life research (Bardoel & DeCieri, 2006; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Kossek, Baltes, & Matthews, 2011; Ollier-Malaterre, 2010; Poelmans, 2005). In particular, we need to learn how to conceptualize national context, which includes a range of challenging questions such as: (a) What are the most relevant institutional and cultural frameworks for work–life research? (b) What are the most salient elements of national context that impact work–life policy, experience and outcomes at the organizational and individual levels? (c) How can national context be conceptualized in a dynamic way to account for social and economic change as well as trans-national influences (e.g. European Union impulse, multinationals)? (d) How can within-country heterogeneity (e.g. occupational, regional, socio-demographic and individual differences) be accounted for when theorizing national context? (e) How can theories of national context be operationalized to design robust work–life/work–family research that goes beyond contextualization? In addition, we need to understand what to use national context for. In other words, what does national context explain in work–life research? And what does it explain at each level: individuals, work groups, organizations, unions, civil society and public policy?

National context also shapes the very production of knowledge by scholars who are themselves embedded in a given culture and socio-institutional system (or a set of them, as many scholars have a multinational range of experiences), and whose samples are embedded in national contexts too. In particular, the way scholars select and ask research questions, design research, interpret findings, write manuscripts and diffuse knowledge may be influenced by their initial training and ongoing socialization as well as by their own cultural frames of reference and work–life experience. As an example of this phenomenon, Kossek (2013) analyze how the socio-institutional differences between France and the USA are reflected in the way that work–life research is structured in both countries. Sociologists, political scientists and demographers are most engaged in work–life research in France because most work–life support in the country is provided by the government. In contrast, work–life research in North America is most developed among management and industrial relations scholars and industrial–organizational psychologists because employer-provided HR policies and supervisor and co-worker support are the most significant avenues of work–life support for most North Americans. This scholarly institutional grounding is important as it has implications for the tone of scholarly research. For example, in the US work–life research may take what the employer says at face value and use a positivist approach. In contrast, researchers in some EU countries such as France may be more critical, reflecting scholarly roots.

This interdisciplinary special issue aims to make a contribution to work–life research and beyond by reviewing existing cross-national work–life research, by outlining a research agenda and by presenting articles that theorize national context and/or use robust methods to capture the influence of national context in work–life research. While

we acknowledge the importance of the economy and of labour market characteristics within a country, we intend to particularly contribute to the cultural and institutional approaches to national context. Cultural approaches examine values shared by individuals within a country (and potentially within an organization, when selecting smaller units of analysis), while institutional approaches examine the context created by policies, laws and regulations, public provisions, the education system, the tax system and other institutions at the country level (and potentially at other levels when using smaller units of analysis). Cultural and institutional scholars tend to work in silos and rarely dialogue about or compare their approaches (Aten, Howard-Grenville, & Ventresca, 2012). This special issue presents articles grounded in either or both cultural and institutional approaches. The research presented in this special issue is also interdisciplinary, including work from management and organizational behavior, industrial-organizational psychology, labour and employment relations, public administration and sociology scholars.

In this introduction, we define and review the current state of knowledge on national context factors that shape organizational adoption of work–life initiatives as well as individual experiences of work and life. We first review and outline a research agenda for cross-national studies based on cultural frameworks (Cross-national work–family research based on cultural approaches), then for cross-national studies based on institutional frameworks (Cross-national work–family research based on cultural approaches), and thirdly for studies that combine cultural and institutional approaches (Cross-national work–family research combining cultural and institutional approaches). We then give an overview of the papers selected for this special issue (Overview of papers in this special issue) and discuss their contributions to theorizing national context in work–life research (Contribution of this special issue).

Cross-national work–family research based on cultural approaches

Individual level: How culture impacts work–life experiences and related outcomes

Research investigating the impact of culture on work–life experiences at the individual level mostly falls into two categories: studies based on an emic approach – which Powell et al. (2009) classified as *culture-as-referent* studies, and studies based on an etic approach, which they classified as *culture-as-dimensions* studies. Broadly speaking, emic approaches examine a construct from within a specific culture and understand the construct as the people from within that culture understand it, while etic approaches strive to compare constructs across cultures (Gudykunst, 1997).¹

¹ Some studies make comparisons across nations in individuals' experiences of the work–family interface, using country as a location variable, but do not mobilize culture as a construct. These studies have been classified by Powell et al. (2009) as *culture-as-nation* studies. While interesting, these studies bear no theoretical underpinning to capture national context, be it cultural or institutional.

Emic (culture-as-referent) studies

First, emic (culture-as-referent) studies use the concept of culture in formulating hypotheses and interpreting results regarding individuals' experiences of the work–family interface in one nation, but they do not measure culture or make cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, Aryee and colleagues made inferences about Chinese culture when they used a sample of Hong Kong employees to test a model of work–family conflict that had been previously tested in the US culture (Aryee, Fields, & Yuk, 1999). Also representative of an emic approach, a later study hypothesized moderating effects of gender on relationships between work and family overload, involvement, and support and the conflict and facilitation components of work–family balance (Aryee, Luk, & Stone, 1998; Aryee, Srinivas, & Tan, 2005). Their arguments for gender differences in these relationships were based on assessment of the Indian culture (in contrast to more frequently studied Western cultures). Luk and Schaffer's (2005) study provides another interesting example. Utilizing a sample of employees in Hong Kong, a culture in which work and life are less demarcated and more integrated (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998) than is the case in most Western cultures, they found that cross-domain variables explained a substantial portion of the variance in employees' experiences of work–family conflict (Luk & Schaffer, 2005). To interpret their intriguing finding that supportive organizations and supervisors were associated with greater-not less-conflict between work and family for Chinese respondents, they suggested that, consistent with Confucian cultural values, Chinese employees felt obliged to work harder in order to reciprocate the support they received. Similarly, a recent study identified differences in multiple aspects of the work–family interface between samples drawn from the US and Singapore (Kossek & Chang, 2013). They found, for example, that despite having similar child care demographics, employees in Singapore systematically reported much lower family-to-work conflict than their counterparts in the US. They also found gender differences: Singapore men were systematically more involved elder care demands than US men, perhaps reflecting Confucian values. These are just a few examples of how cross-national culture shapes work–life findings.

While such emic approaches are not generalizable (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003), we argue that well-grounded in-depth analysis of a single national setting can contribute to theorizing national context in two ways. First, it may challenge current definitions of work–life constructs, as Lobel in this special issue does by incorporating poverty alleviation into the scope of work–life balance. Second, it may identify idiosyncratic factors that influence work–life experiences in that country (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003). This approach is illustrated by the article by Kim and Faerman in this issue, which shows how career and gender role norms embedded in national culture limit employees' use of family-friendly practices in South Korea, even in the face of a government initiative to promote them. A similar finding on the disconnect between public availability and use was mirrored in a recent discussion of how despite the general availability of public child care supports in Argentina, many well-off mothers do not use these institutional supports for fear of leaving their neighborhoods to work, out of public safety concerns (Kossek, 2013).

Etic (culture-as-dimensions) studies

Second, etic (culture-as-dimensions) studies propose and test theories regarding the influence of specific cultural dimensions on the work–family interface (Powell et al., 2009). In line with Powell et al. (2009)'s recommendation to develop culture-as-dimensions studies, we argue that such studies make an interesting effort to theorize national context. Among the wealth of cultural dimensions highlighted by Hofstede (1980) and Hofstede (2005), Trompenaars (1998) and the GLOBE project (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004), Powell et al. (2009) suggest that four dimensions in particular may help explain variance in work–family conflict and enrichment across countries: individualism/collectivism, gender egalitarianism, humane orientation and specificity/diffusion. The first two have received more attention in the literature to date.

Individualism/collectivism (I–C). An abundant body of research has endeavored to test the classic hypothesis that in collectivistic societies, work was seen as a way of supporting a family rather than a way of enhancing the self, as it was seen in individualistic US (e.g. see Redding & Wong, 1986; Redding, 1993 for China). In support of this argument, Lu and colleagues found a stronger relationship between work demands and work–family conflict and between family demands and family–work conflict for the individualistic British compared to the collectivistic Taiwanese (Lu, Gilmour, Kao, & Huang, 2006). Similarly, Spector and colleagues (Spector et al., 2004, 2007) found a stronger relationship between work demands and work–family conflict for individualistic nations in the Anglo cluster than for collectivistic nations in the Eastern Europe, Latin American and Asian clusters. Yang and colleagues, arguing that the I–C dimension is likely to be reflected in a priority on family in individualistic societies and a priority on work in collectivistic societies such as China, found that family demands had greater negative impact on work–family conflict for American employees than for Chinese employees, and that American employees experienced greater family demands as well (Yang, Chen, Choi, & Zou, 2000). Contrary to Lu et al. (2006) and Spector et al. (2007), they also found that work demands had greater negative impact on work–family conflict for Chinese employees than for American employees, although Chinese employees did not experience greater work demands than American employees in their samples. Other research, such as a 48-country study by Hill and colleagues, showed similar relationships between work demands and work interference with family and job attitudes across four country clusters, one collectivistic Eastern cluster and three individualistic (West-affluent, West-developing, and US-single country) clusters (Hill, Yang, Hawkins, & Ferris, 2004). Although some inconsistencies in these findings can be attributed to differences in research design and methods (Spector et al., 2007), it appears that more research is needed to understand how I–C may impact work–life experiences at the individual level.

Gender egalitarianism. In cultures that are low in gender egalitarianism, men are expected to be more focused on objective material success, whereas women are expected to be more concerned with the subjective quality of life (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Emrich, Denmark, & Den Hartog, 2004). In contrast, in cultures that are high in gender egalitarianism, there is less of a distinction

between women's and men's societal roles. Consistent with this notion, according to Aryee and colleagues' study conducted in India—a culture that is low on gender egalitarianism—men had significantly higher levels of job involvement than women, with the opposite being true for family involvement (Aryee et al., 2005). Research findings regarding masculinity/femininity (Hofstede, 1980, 2005), a cultural dimension on which the gender egalitarianism dimension is based (Emrich et al., 2004), support this argument. For example, in Finland, a feminine society, men and women were found to experience many aspects of work–family conflict similarly (Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998). Moreover, research indicates that in countries with a more feminine or egalitarian culture both men and women experience more work–family conflict than in more traditional cultures since both partners are expected to have a paid job and to share care responsibilities (Van der Lippe, Jager, & Kops, 2003; Steiber, 2009; Strandh & Nordenmark, 2006).

Organizational level: how culture impacts organizations' provision of work–family programs and flexible working arrangements

Like individuals, organizations operate in diverse cultural contexts which shape their policies and practices. Cross-national research investigating the impact of national context on organizations' provisions of work–family programs and flexible work arrangements tends to focus on national gender equality as cultural factor. Lyness and Brumit Kropf examined the relation between national gender equality and perceived organizational work–life support (a supportive organizational work–life culture), the adoption of flexible work arrangements, and perceived work–life balance among a sample of managers and professional employees in 20 European countries. They measured national gender culture by applying the United Nations' gender-related development index (GDI). The GDI is based on the degree of gender equality in a country regarding life expectancy, education, and income). Drawing on resource dependency and institutional theories, they hypothesized that organizations are more likely to be supportive towards work–life issues when women are seen as valued workers. They made an important distinction between the country context of the organization's headquarters and the national cultural context of the host country in which the workplace is located. Their findings suggest that the national culture of the corporation's headquarters has a stronger impact on the adoption of formal flexible work policies, while the host country's national culture exerts greater influence on the local organization's work–family culture (informal practices and norms). This makes sense since formal HR policies are typically developed at corporate headquarters and diffused throughout an organization's global workplaces, while informal practices are shaped by the national context of the managers who enact them.

To date, recent studies do not yet fully confirm these outcomes (Den Dulk & Groeneveld, 2012; Den Dulk, Groeneveld, Ollier-Malaterre, & Valcour, 2013; Den Dulk, Peters, Poutsma, & Ligthart, 2010). However, there are several reasons which may explain this. First, the studies using the GDI to investigate the impact of the national gender cultural

context on the provision of organizational work–family arrangements focused on the relation between the provision of *formal* organizational work–life policies rather than supportive informal practices within organizations. That no relationship between national gender culture and formal workplace work–life policies has been found suggests that national gender equality may be more relevant for the supportiveness of the work–family culture in an organization than for the adoption of organizational policies (Lyness & Brumit Kropf, 2005). Secondly, these two recent studies included other macro-level factors, such as public work–family policies and national unemployment rate. In particular, the inclusion of the social policy context might diminish the impact of the national gender culture on organizational policies and practices. Many feminist scholars have argued that the social policy context in a country is not gender neutral; rather, state policies and gender ideology affect and are affected by each other (Lewis, 1992; Sainsbury, 1996; Strandh & Nordenmark, 2006). In addition, a more egalitarian national gender culture may create a climate in favor of public work–family provisions rather than encouraging employers to become involved. Finally, the GDI might not be the most suitable indicator for a national gender culture in developed countries. The GDI refers to gender equality in relation to life expectancy, education, and income. These indicators refer to the outcomes of a gender culture rather than to existing norms and values regarding the roles of men and women. In addition, for developed countries it might make more sense to focus on equality of opportunities, such as women’s participation in politics, their access to professional opportunities and their earning power compared to that of men, which are captured by the Gender Empowerment Measure (Den Dulk & Groeneveld, 2012).

A research agenda to advance work–life cultural studies

Among the four dimensions identified by Powell et al. (2009), to our best knowledge, only individualism/collectivism and gender egalitarianism have received some attention. We know of none to date focusing on humane orientation, the degree to which individuals in organizations or societies encourage and reward individuals for being fair, altruistic, friendly, generous, caring and kind to others, as defined by (House et al., 2004)-or on specificity/diffusion. Specificity refers to the extent to which individuals engage others in specific areas of life such that work relationships are segregated from personal life. Diffusion refers to the extent to which individuals engage others in multiple areas of life such that, for instance, professional status also permeates interactions outside of work (Trompenaars, 1998). Powell and colleagues (2009) have articulated interesting propositions pertaining to these dimensions; testing them would make a great contribution towards theorizing national context from a cultural perspective.

Further, we argue that Powell and colleagues’ model could be fruitfully extended to other work–life experiences, such as work–life balance (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Valcour, 2007) and boundary management between work and non-work. A starting point to conceptualize the influence of culture on boundary management is Ashforth and colleagues, who proposed that role integration would

be higher in collectivist, feminine, low uncertainty avoidant, and/or low power distance cultures (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). As an extension to Ashforth et al., we propose that the specificity/diffusion dimension identified by Trompenaars (1998) is a likely additional predictor, such that role integration would be higher in more diffuse cultures. Individuals in culture-specific workplaces, such as the U.S. or Canada, tend to focus discussions and decision-making criteria to workplace facts while avoiding bringing up or factoring in elements pertaining to personal and family lives. By contrast, individuals in culture-diffuse workplaces, such as those found in China, tend to discuss both professional and personal topics and may integrate life outside of work in their decision-making, because they tend to develop more holistic relationships with co-workers and subordinates (Trompenaars, 1998). Thus, it is likely that individuals in culture-specific workplaces show greater tendency to segment their professional and personal lives, either because it is their personal preference or to gain cultural acceptance, and that conversely, individuals in culture-diffuse workplaces tend to integrate their professional and personal lives. This proposition has to our knowledge not been tested before, and could spark interesting research.

In addition, Powell et al. model (2009) has been recently extended to an additional cultural dimension from the GLOBE research, i.e., performance orientation (Ollier-Malaterre, Sarkisian, Stawiski, & Hannum, in press). The performance orientation dimension “reflects the extent to which a community encourages and rewards innovation, high standards, excellence, and performance improvement” (House et al., 2004). Thus, it contrasts competitiveness and ambition on one hand with quality of life and non-work relationships on the other hand. Ollier-Malaterre et al. (in press) propose that reversed individual country or cluster scores might be useful in comparative work–life research as performance orientation in a society or cluster may shed light on how employers and employees in different countries view work–life balance and make achieving work–life balance more or less realistic and desirable. No work–life study, to date, has examined this potentially powerful dimension, which constitutes a promising avenue for research. In a related vein, we also encourage work–life scholars to develop research using a scale created by Den Dulk et al. in this special issue, based on items reflecting importance of work in a country, from the World Values Survey (World Values Survey Association, 1981–2008).

Lastly, we encourage scholars to draw on cultural anthropology to incorporate more emic (culture-specific) knowledge into etic (comparative) studies, as prescribed by Schaffer and Riordan (2003) in their review of cross-cultural research design and methods. An interesting example of integration of such emic knowledge is Yang et al. (2000), who went beyond Hofstede’s dimensions and relied on the work of Bellah and colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996) to analyze the American culture while comparing the US and China. They established that family events and stressors had greater impacts in the US than in China and that Chinese employees viewed extra work responsibilities as temporary family disrupters that could bring future benefits to the family and extended in-group. Incorporating more emic knowledge would help to

identify additional national culture dimensions that may shape work–life research. For instance, new research is needed regarding country-level assumptions about the normalcy of mixing private and public spheres. Such research could build on Karimi’s study on how boundaries between work and leisure may differ between nations (Karimi, 2008).

Cross-national work–family research based on institutional approaches

While cultural comparisons have been the focus of comparative work–life research so far, they been criticized because they often do not take into account the processes by which these shared values are formed and transmitted (Maurice & Sellier, 1979). An emerging stream of research is therefore drawing on comparative institutionalism to examine the impact of social policies—and in particular, public provisions pertaining to the work–life interface such as maternity, paternity, parental and other family leaves; childcare provisions and education systems; and tax systems—on employees’ experiences of the work–life interface at the individual level and on organizations’ implementation of work–life policies.

Two questions are of prime interest to this emerging comparative stream of research: (1) Do employers adopt more, or less, work–life initiatives when the state supports work–life integration through regulation, expenditures and tax incentives, and (2) Do employers adopt work–life initiatives out of institutional pressures or based on economic arguments?

Regarding the first question, linkages between public provisions and employer-sponsored work–life programs have been demonstrated (Den Dulk, 2005; Evans, 2001; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009). Such linkages were implied in Esping-Andersen’s seminal typology, which argues that support for family responsibilities can be provided by the government, by employers, or by families and communities (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Consistent with this premise, Ollier-Malaterre illustrated how robust public provisions were associated with meager provision of work–life policies by employers in France, a national context in which the state is the most legitimate source of support (Ollier-Malaterre, 2007). Relatedly, the work of Den Dulk and colleagues shows that in countries where public provisions are high, employers are likely to provide more of certain types of work–life policies and less of other types. Indeed, organizations can supplement public provisions by enhancing existing state policies (for instance by offering longer leaves or increasing financial compensation) or complement public provisions by offering *different types* of policies, such as flexible working hours or a working time account. Supplementing existing provisions signals that the organization considers work–life balance an important topic that they are willing to support. The introduction of policies that complement public provisions (i.e. offering organizational policies not offered by national government) increases employees’ resources for integrating work and personal life (Den Dulk, Groeneveld, & Peper, in press). Findings from research on different types of workplace work–life policies indicate that in countries with extensive public provisions, organizations tend to offer programs reinforcing areas in which public provisions are

limited, such as flexible work arrangements (Den Dulk, Peeters, & Poutsma, 2012).

Regarding the second question, i.e. using cross-national designs to shed light on whether organizations adopt work–life initiatives out of institutional pressures or based on the business case argument, scholars have drawn on institutional theory. Institutional theory underlies the argument that generous public provisions will create normative and coercive pressure on organizations to develop additional support (Dobbin & Sutton, 1998) and highlights the imperative of organizational legitimacy in the wider societal context. Hence, as Goodstein (1994) explains, organizational decision making is not shaped by economic considerations alone, but also by the need to respond to regulations, norms, laws and social expectations.

The economic logic of the so-called “business case” for work–life support informs a different set of explanations from those informed by institutional theory. Under the business case logic, the presence of public policies reduces employers’ motivation to develop their own additional policies. Rather, the absence of public provisions should increase organizations’ inclination to develop work–life policies, since this may give them a competitive advantage over other employers in the recruitment and retention of valuable workers. This motivation should be particularly strong when the labor market is tight and competition among organizations for valuable personnel is high (Den Dulk et al., 2010).

Both the institutional and business case approaches support arguments that provision of work–life policies by organizations is connected with organizational characteristics including size, proportion of women employees, and sector (Den Dulk et al., 2012; Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995). Whether an organization belongs to the public or private sector, for instance, is a relevant factor with respect to organizational sensitivity to institutional pressure and economic considerations. Public sector organizations are more in the public eye and more likely to be evaluated according to government standards and norms, while private, for-profit companies are likely to be more sensitive to economic conditions. Empirically, these organizational characteristics have been successful in predicting the degree of work–life policies present in organizations.

Additional research in this burgeoning area is clearly needed to consolidate the early findings. More research is also needed on organizational change and feedback loops. For example, we need to understand how organizational initiatives may lead union representatives and policy makers to become aware of specific work–life issues and to act on them as business and societal concerns. One of the current obstacles to further testing institutional theories using cross-national designs is the paucity of comprehensive cross-national databases. For instance, building upon the work of Den Dulk and colleagues in this issue—comparing the effect of the institutional legitimacy rationale with that of the business case for work–life—will require researchers to collect data containing direct measurements of institutional and economic pressures as well as organizational level data over time. The datasets needed to conduct such research are currently scarce. We urge investment in the development of cross-national, longitudinal databases containing repetitive measures of work–life policies and

practices to permit the dynamic analysis of the relation between policy development at the national level and within workplaces. The availability of such data would open the door to welcome advances in the understanding of how national context relates to the work–life supports offered to employees.

Cross-national work–family research combining cultural and institutional approaches

The interactions of cultural and institutional factors

We argue that combining cultural and institutional variables in cross-national work–life research would help to build a systematic and precise knowledge about what predicts similarities and differences in work–family conflict, enrichment, balance, boundary management, and related job attitudes and employee outcomes. We suspect that cultural and institutional variables may interact, as in Luk and Schaffer (2005)'s study that examined domestic helper support in a sample of Hong-Kong Chinese employees, and found that domestic helper support lowered work interference with family, while other supports such as organizational work–family policies or supervisor support, by contrast, increased work–family conflict. They interpreted by arguing that Confucian values do not imply reciprocation for paid domestic help, as this relationship does not fit into the hierarchy of the five most important relationships to nurture. In addition, the combination of cultural and institutional factors may help explain within-country variations, such as those identified by Yang et al. (2000) who found that Chinese men reported more work–family conflict than Chinese women and that older Chinese employees reported more work–family conflict than younger Chinese employees, patterns that were opposite to those found in the US sample.

Some culturally-grounded studies pave the way for including institutional factors, at least to rule them out as alternative explanations for their findings. In particular, Yang et al. (2000), in their Sino-American comparison of work–family conflict, acknowledged that the one-child policy in China, as well as a tradition of grandparents being very involved in children's education, probably reduced family demands. Hill et al. (2004) categorized their 48 countries in four clusters based on both I–C and the level of economic development and of work–family public policy. A more recent study measured the amount of domestic help received by respondents in a 20-country study of work–family conflict. The researchers were able to establish that domestic help did not account for the greater negative relationship between work demands and work interference with family in individualistic countries than in collectivistic countries (Spector et al., 2007). They also indicated that other alternatives aside from cultural differences could explain their findings, including institutional factors such as unemployment rates, wage levels, job mobility and political stability.

A small stream of research, almost exclusively based on archival and qualitative data, has gone further in attempts to encompass both cultural and institutional dimensions of

national context. In particular, researchers conducted focus groups in China, Hong-Kong, Singapore, Mexico and the US to explicate the content and process of the macro-level influences (Joplin, Shaffer, Francesco, & Lau, 2003). Their study identified a number of economic, social, labor laws and technological influences that, together with cultural influences, shaped individuals' experiences of the work–life interface over time. More specifically, the authors propose that individuals in more dynamic societies experience more inter-role stress and work–family conflict because they incur greater loss of resources, and that this effect is stronger in collectivistic, high uncertainty avoidance, and high power distance societies such as Mexico or China. This research is a very interesting example of how institutional factors may help develop richer understanding of work–life experiences than just comparing standard cultural dimensions, and how cultural dimensions shed light on the phenomena at hand.

Another example of research utilizing this dual focus is a doctoral dissertation which integrated institutional and cultural factors to explain why organizational work–life initiatives were largely endorsed in the US or the UK, while they generated little interest in France (Ollier-Malaterre, 2007; Ollier-Malaterre, 2009). On the institutional side, explanations included a complex legal framework that kept HR focused on compliance, with little time for proactive human resource development, a centralized industrial relations systems and a less than cooperative climate which slowed initiatives down in France. On the cultural side, American citizens' distrust towards their government and the ideas of the French Revolution of equality and solidarity which imply that only the State, through its elected representatives, can act towards common good, explained American and British employees' preference for employer-driven initiatives as opposed to French employees' preference for State-driven policies. The distinct Protestant and Catholic backgrounds further supported employers as legitimate ethical actors in Anglo environments, while morality and economic interest can be seen as divergent in France, such that employer-driven programs may generate fears on the part of employees.

Lastly, Karimi's (2008) paper, which we mentioned earlier, offers another interesting example of how combining a cultural and a socio-institutional approach can shed light on a national context. While Karimi acknowledges that work and family in Iran have different meanings than in Western contexts due mostly to higher in-group collectivism (based on GLOBE), she analyses socio-economic and demographic changes that push the Iranian context closer to Western contexts. Her findings support the validity of a six-dimensional model of work–family conflict for Iranian employees, which would not be understandable strictly from the cultural point of view.

Sense of entitlement to work–life supports

An interesting concept that combines institutional and cultural factors is individuals' sense of entitlement to work–life support (Lewis & Smithson, 2001). In a research on young individuals in five European countries, Lewis and Smithson investigated the extent to which individuals viewed the combination of work and life as a personal

responsibility and had low sense of entitlement for support, or on the contrary expected support from the state or from their employers as part as a business case or corporate social responsibility argument.

They argued that the European Union impulse pushing for public supports could heighten individuals' sense of entitlement because of the upward comparisons people make between countries: seeing a policy being successfully implemented in a country begins to demonstrate its feasibility in other countries.

This initial research was then followed upon by the Transitions project which investigated how young people in eight different European countries experience the transition to parenthood. The central objective of this qualitative research was to gain understanding of motherhood and fatherhood from a contextualized perspective, paying attention to a broad range of institutional, economic, and cultural conditions, such as education systems and family traditions. The researchers analyzed not only the public provisions for working parents across countries but also the national discourses and debates, and how these shift over time. They showed, for instance, that also in Northern Europe, there is also an ideology of autonomy and independence that sometimes renders the significant amounts of support received from state and family invisible (Nilsen, Brannen, & Lewis, 2012). We view sense of entitlement as an under-explored and powerful concept to include institutional, cultural and economic in the analysis of national contexts and would like to see more research taking this approach.

The capability approach

Amartya Sen's capabilities and agency approach (Sen, 1999) has been recently introduced in the work–family field by (Hobson, 2011) and provides a powerful framework for bridging institutional and cultural approaches. In Sen's framework, what matters is not only what individuals do (for instance, how long they work or whether or not they utilize work–family programs) but also what their opportunities are and what choices they would make if they had the capabilities to lead the kind of lives that they want to lead (for instance, are they able to realize their desire for a family or to effectively combine work and life).

Sen defines capabilities as being able to achieve a range of functionings, such as having shelter, healthcare, attaining an education as well as more complex aspects of well-being, such as having self-respect. Hobson extends this framework to work–life balance, arguing that not all possibilities are actually transformed into functionings: for instance, women may have access to parental leaves but may lose employment if leaves are not job-protected. By contrast to economic theories stating that workers' behaviors (such as working hours) are in line with their preferences, she points out the gaps between what workers do and what they would aspire to. She contends that capabilities for achieving work–life balance "involve social institutions and normative structures including policies that enable agency as well as gender and social hierarchies that constrain our choice" (Hobson, 2011, p. 150).

Although institutionally-embedded, such an approach also encompasses cultural factors and offers a valuable gen-

der-sensitive framework for cross-national work–life research. The capability set model she provides includes institutional factors at the country and organizational levels, such as public policy and care services, organizational cultures, union bargaining and the quality of jobs, as well as what she terms societal factors such as societal/community norms, media and public debate and social movements.

Overview of papers in this special issue

Papers in this special issue examine a broad spectrum of dependent variables, ranging from individual experiences of work–life conflict, work–life enrichment and satisfaction with work–life balance in countries in transition (Trefalt, Drnovsek, Svetina-Nabergoj, & Adlesic, 2013) to use of non-standard work arrangements in organizations (Stavrou & Kassinis, 2013) and organizational provisions of supports (Berg, Kossek, Baird, & Block, 2013; Den Dulk et al., 2013; Kim & Faerman, 2013; Lobel, 2013). They encompass Australia (Berg et al., 2013; Stavrou & Kassinis, 2013), Brazil (Lobel, 2013), South Korea (Kim and Faerman, 2013), the US (Berg et al., 2013; Lobel, 2013; Stavrou & Kassinis, 2013), and a range of European countries (Den Dulk et al., 2013; Stavrou & Kassinis, 2013) including Eastern and Central Europe countries "in transition" (Trefalt et al., 2013).

They offer a broad understanding of national context, analyzing diverse dimensions such as the economy (Den Dulk et al., 2013; Lobel, 2013; Trefalt et al., 2013), public policies pertaining to work and life (Berg et al., 2013; Den Dulk et al., 2013; Stavrou & Kassinis, 2013), industrial relations systems (Berg et al., 2013), cultural values (Den Dulk et al., 2013; Kim & Faerman, 2013; Stavrou & Kassinis, 2013) and unique macro-level factors related to poverty alleviation efforts in a country, namely issue salience of poverty, field cohesion of powerful organizational stakeholders, national concern for poverty (Lobel, 2013).

Each of the papers selected for this special issue makes unique contributions by exploring under-researched issues and pushing research boundaries in the work–life field and beyond. We first give an overview of their main cutting-edge findings and then synthesize their contributions by discussing themes and trends which span the articles.

Spela Trefalt, Mateja Drnovšek, Ana Svetina-Nabergoj and Renata Adlesic develop an interesting process model of cross-national work–life experiences which argues that national context should be considered a dynamic rather than a static influence. Using transitional countries as an example, they develop theory on how a nation's past history and culture can be used to understand the present. They identify three main mechanisms through which rapid change at the national level shapes work–life experiences: structural misalignment, social and temporal comparisons, and choice overload.

Using a 15-country dataset including European countries, Australia and the US, Stavrou and Kassinis' findings reinforce the importance of considering different institutional-environment factors such as public spending on family leaves and the level of employment protection as well as the national culture associated with them-in this case gender equality captured by the Gender Empowerment Measure-when designing and interpreting nonstandard work

arrangements such as part-time work, telework and compressed work weeks. Their analyses revealed that, while controlling for organization-level variables, national gender equality was positively associated with the use of flexible work arrangements and part-time work options, the level of employment protection was positively related to the use of part-time work, but increased spending on family leave policies was negatively related to part-time work in organizations. The study highlights the need for caution in assuming that non-standard work arrangements practices are “universally” relevant (Ryan & Kossek, 2008). Scholars and organizations, especially multinationals, need to have prudence in applying any generalized assumptions on the use of nonstandard work arrangements without considering variation in external environment, as some arrangements may be better suited than others.

Using a large dataset of 19,516 organizations in 19 European Union countries, Laura Den Dulk, Sandra Groeneveld, Ariane Ollier-Malaterre and Monique Valcour conducted one of the first studies to investigate how organizational characteristics such as workforce gender, size, and industry interact with macro-level factors including level of public provisions, cultural centrality of work and labor market conditions to predict organizational adoption of childcare/leaves supports and flexible work arrangements. They found that public sector and large organizations were more sensitive to state support, cultural centrality of work and male unemployment than private sector and small organizations. In contrast, organizations employing a greater proportion of female employees were less sensitive to state support.

Using university samples in the US and Australia, Peter Berg, Ellen Kossek, Marian Baird and Richard Block found that access to flexible scheduling and leaves (such as unpaid family- or health-related leave and paid annual/vacation leave) is influenced by the level of government involvement in promoting these policies and by collective bargaining in general. This is an important finding because despite the fact that many employees’ access to formal and informal work–life practices such as workplace flexibility is governed by collective bargaining agreements, linkages between employer adoption of work–family policies, collective bargaining and public policy are not well understood within and across national contexts. Overall, they found that government intervention is critical for providing a floor of basic work–life rights. Yet few studies examine collective bargaining language and include it as a key aspect of work–life policy that links public and organizational policy, thus making this study especially valuable.

Based on interviews with 30 employees from the eight largest private and public sector organizations in Korea, Ji Sung Kim and Sue Faerman identify key issues in the use of family-friendly policies. They found that family-friendly programs are not widely used in a Confucian society where employees try to read their elders’ minds when making decisions, strive to maintain good relationships with them and support norms of masculinity. Since neither senior management nor the older generation in Korea generally supports equal division of labour between couples or men taking parental leaves due to traditional gender norms, employees did not make use of available work–family policies out of fear of career consequences or of damaging relationships with their supervisors and families. This paper underscores

how national culture plays an important role in the implementation of work–life supports at societal and organizational levels.

Lastly, Sharon Lobel pushes the boundaries of work–life research with a model of organizational involvement in societal poverty eradication, comparing the higher involvement of Brazilian employers with the lower involvement of US employers. National contextual differences that contribute to greater activism include greater issue salience of poverty, less field distance between rich and poor, and more employer motivation in Brazil relative to the US. She develops a model of in-group and universalistic corporate social responsibility that could be adapted to the cross-national work–life field in general.

Contributions of this special issue

Papers in this special issue make a number of contributions towards theorizing national context in work–life research, which we develop below.

National context shapes how work–life is conceptualized

We know of only one study that examines how national context may shape the very definitions of work, family, and work–family balance. The study we have identified is Karimi (2008) who, referring to GLOBE, explains that family in Iran is an important source of support and also carries expectations of reciprocated support, which goes a long way given that ‘family’ refers to an extended domain that includes parents and siblings, as well as other relatives such as uncles, aunts, cousins and even friends. In addition, she analyzes how, in a collectivistic society like Iran, the boundary between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ is relatively less clear than in individualistic societies. She argues that Iranians find themselves alien to the Western system of rationally-oriented relationships at work, because kinship is also important in workplace decisions.

Lobel, in this issue, took a bold approach to broadening work–life by focusing on how organizations on Brazil and other developing countries may consider initiatives to alleviate poverty. She analyzes how macro-level factors, namely the salience/national level of concern for poverty, field cohesion between powerful stakeholders, and field distance between rich and poor together shape organizations’ motives to address poverty in the countries where they operate. Based on rich empirical data on Brazil compared with the US, she theorizes about four distinct organizational motives (competitiveness, legitimation, in-group corporate social responsibility and universalist corporate social responsibility) which lead organizations to provide distinct ranges of initiatives. Most interestingly, she reveals the underlying rationales explaining why some organizations target their poverty alleviation efforts towards their in-group, i.e. their employees and immediate stakeholders, while others go beyond this to encompass their employee’s families and the larger community. Thus, this paper challenges the traditional scope of work–life research by implying that poverty alleviation can and should be in the realm of work–life programs (or at least considered a prerequisite

to work–life programs), much as providing job security has been identified as a major stake for employees' work–life experiences (Valcour, Ollier-Malaterre, Matz-Costa, Pitt-Catsouphes, & Brown, 2011). Other very important issues such as access to education or HIV prevention may represent critical dimensions of employees' work–life experiences. Overall, Lobel's paper implies that the way work–life is currently conceptualized fits developed countries better than developing countries.² This is consistent with prior observations that the way work–life is currently conceptualized does not enable us to understand the particular work–life needs of migrants, because migrant workers have broader work–life issues than local workers, including language proficiency, access to health, housing and education (Kossek, Meece, Barratt, & Prince, 2005). Research exploring ethnicity, gender and class differences within national racio-ethnic groups would enable a broadening of the scope of work–life research traditionally conducted in developed countries.

In addition, this paper challenges the current confines of work–life research by suggesting that organizations, when they act based on a universalistic corporate social responsibility motive, can and should go beyond the narrow borders of their payroll listings to reach out to employees' families and the larger community. These are truly open challenges for the community of work–life scholars and practitioners.

National context as dynamic, rather than static

While most of existing cross-national work–life research provide static models to theorize national context, or assumes stability of national contexts when formulating their hypotheses, Trefalt, Drnovšek, Svetina-Nabergoj and Adlešič address the dynamic nature of national contexts by boldly focusing on rapidly changing socio-economic environments such as Eastern and Central Europe countries that have suddenly transitioned from socialism to capitalism. They examine three main changes that shape what they term *national context trajectories*: reduction in state support for work–life balance, positive economic development and expanded economic freedom. They provide a process model explaining how each of these three changes impact individuals' experiences of work–life conflict, work–life enrichment and satisfaction with work–life balance through structural misalignment, social and temporal comparisons, and choice overload. Their ambitious paper paves the way for future dynamic process research and challenges scholars to build truly dynamic theoretical frameworks, which has been a deficiency in work–life research and many other fields so far.

We call for future research looking at systemic changes in culture and institutions over time. We identify at least two types of changes that render the relationship between national context and work–life experiences and organizational responses a dynamic one: sudden and rapid transitions from a socio-economic system to another one (such as in Russia or China), and globalization. Both avenues have been largely under-explored.

² We are indebted to Anne Bardeel for this idea, which she expressed during the 2011 Paris conference "Work–life: Cross-national Conversations".

Regarding macro-level transitions, Joplin et al. (2003) have observed that changes in work and family structures, such as an increase in divorce rates, impact the daily experiences of work and life. They contend that individuals in more dynamic societies experience more inter-role stress and work–family conflict, because they incur more loss of resources, and that this effect will be stronger in collectivistic, high uncertainty avoidance, and high power distance societies such as Mexico or China. Still, as pointed out by Trefalt and colleagues in this issue, very little research has investigated work–life outcomes in contexts of major and rapid socio-economic transitions. More theory building efforts such as the one conducted by Trefalt and colleagues need to be made to account for national context trajectories. In particular, in light of the previously-mentioned debate over whether the state or employers represent the most legitimate and effective provider of work–life support, it would be interesting to include organizations as actors potentially able to mitigate situations of rapid societal change which lead to depleted work–life support. Including organizational provision of support and analyzing whether organizations in such rapidly changing national contexts adopt work–life initiatives for economic or institutional reasons would also shed light on the second debate we recalled earlier. Further research at the micro level, exploring how different categories of individuals (e.g. men and women, employees and self-employed) adjust to dynamic national context trajectories is another avenue likely to make substantial contributions to the field.

Further, work–life research would benefit from paying closer attention to globalization, as an increasing body of career research – ie. the globalization career perspective (Tams & Arthur, 2007) has begun to do. In particular, the macro-level changes resulting from the global interdependence of the economy, information and communications technologies, political systems, social trends and the environment have profound impacts on the types of jobs available to people and on their careers, and on where and when they are expected to work, which may induce significant changes in individuals' experience of work and life and in organizational provision of work–life initiatives.

It is also likely that globalization and economic transitions are interacting with long-standing cultural values such that the cultural frameworks used in work–life research may need to be examined in a critically dynamic way too. For instance, career studies have interpreted a certain degree of convergence of career paths across countries as related to a tendency for career patterns to shift away from traditional cultural features such as Chinese *guanxi* (Granrose, 2007) or Malaysian collectivism (Noordin, Williams, & Zimmer, 2002) in the context of economic development and globalization.

National context as heterogeneous rather than homogeneous

Research investigating organizational work–life research in diverse national contexts often considers only the number of policies offered either by the state or by organizations. This shows that organizations differ in the amount of policies they have within and across countries (Den Dulk,

2001; Den Dulk et al., 2010; Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995; Poelmans, Chinchilla, & Cardona, 2003; Remery, Van Doorne-Huisjes, & Schippers, 2003). Although relevant, this does not tell us much about the degree of support employees actually experience with respect to their work–life balance. Research needs to go beyond the number of policies offered and take into account how policies are structured and formulated and how they are embedded in the organizational and larger societal context.

Although this special issue is primarily concerned with capturing the influence of national context, the editors and authors have been careful not to over-homogenize national contexts. Several papers specifically attempt to address within-country heterogeneity, either conceptually or through multi-level and qualitative designs.

At the organizational level, Den Dulk and colleagues considered the moderating role of organizational characteristics when examining the impact of national context factors. Their findings show that public provisions interacted with organizational characteristics, such that public sector organizations were more likely than private sector organizations to adopt flexible work arrangements in countries with greater public provisions, and that large organizations were more likely than smaller organizations to adopt flexible work arrangements and childcare/leaves in countries with greater public provisions.

At the individual level, Kim and Faerman's qualitative findings also point to differences in perceptions of family-friendly programs within categories of South Korean employees, even though global use of such programs was low. They explain how public sector employees view their employment conditions as regulated by law and as such may be less inclined to fear career consequences. They also analyze the different reasons why men and women do not take up family leaves – men to maintain masculinity and women for fear of losing their job. Lastly, they point to younger employees' personal value orientations, which are centered more around their personal lives as compared with older employees. Trefalt et al. have also carefully examined gender as a source of within-country heterogeneity and have offered conceptual propositions that distinguish the outcomes of rapid transitions on work–life conflict, enrichment and balance for men and women.

Overall, we believe that cross-national work–life research needs to go beyond merely controlling for organization-level or individual-level variables, and we call for more multi-level research looking at the interactions between these variables.

Extending key debates in our field

This special issue extends at least three conversations that have been pervasive in the field: (1) What is the relationship between provision of support by the state and provision of support by employers? (2) Do employers provide work–life support mostly for economic reasons (e.g., business case arguments) or for institutional reasons (e.g., legitimacy)? and (3) What role do organizational work–life policies and benefits play in overall facilitation of work–life integration, and how can research help to increase the positive impact of policy adoption on work–life outcomes?

Empirical evidence regarding the first debate diverges: some studies (Den Dulk & Groeneveld, 2012; Den Dulk et al., 2012) found a positive relationship while others (Den Dulk, 2001; Den Dulk et al., 2010 and Ollier-Malaterre, 2009) found a negative one. Berg and colleagues, in this issue, clearly find that employer support is greater when national minimum standards guarantee a floor of rights to citizens. They explain how paid leaves are seen as an employee "right" in Australia instead of an employer-initiated "benefit," as they are in the US. Berg et al. also extend the conversation by analyzing the symbiotic relationship between public policy and union bargaining agendas. Their conclusion is that it takes strong public policies and strong centralized industrial relations to ensure that employees have equitable access to employer-driven work–family support. Further, Den Dulk et al., in this issue, also found a positive relationship between state-provided work–life support and employer adoption of work–life arrangements. Consistent with previous work by Lewis & Smithson, they interpret this finding by suggesting that state support leads employees to develop a strong sense of entitlement to work–life practices (Lewis & Smithson, 2001).

The second debate, on economic vs. institutional drivers, is also a long-standing one, with some scholars focusing on the business case for work–life initiatives and others analyzing the isomorphic pressures at play in the adoption of work–life initiatives (for a review of both arguments, see for instance (Ollier-Malaterre, McNamara, Matz-Costa, Pitt-Catsoupes, & Valcour, 2013). Den Dulk and colleagues, in this issue, support the institutional stance with their finding that institutional pressures (state support for the combination of work and life and cultural centrality of work in a country) are associated with employer support, while economic pressures (male unemployment rate) are not. However, the role of economic considerations needs to be investigated in more detail since labour market shortage may play a greater role at the organizational level than at the national level (see Den Dulk et al., 2010). Lobel, in this issue, shows that CSR motives enable employers to provide more extensive poverty alleviation initiatives than do competitiveness and legitimization motives.

Thirdly, years of research on the effects of work–life policies and benefits have failed to establish conclusive evidence of their effectiveness in helping employees to reduce work–life conflict and achieve satisfactory work–life integration, or to identify the key factors that facilitate or hinder their effectiveness. Much of the debate about the effectiveness of work–life policies has revolved around whether their availability or actual use is more important to employees (Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013). Research has also sought to assess the relative contributions of work–life policies and informal work–life practices (Behson, 2005). Some research has revealed that work–life policies are of little use in organizations in which employees do not feel free to use them (Eaton, 2003). The article by Kim and Faerman in this issue breaks new ground in this conversation with their study of South Korean organizations by illustrating how values embedded in national context can hinder the intended salutary impact of work–life policies. Despite an initiative by the Korean government to promote the adoption of organizational work–life policies, their analysis

shows that traditional gender role norms and norms of work time and deference to the most senior members of organizations make it unrealistic for many employees to actually use the policies available to them. This study reveals the importance of considering national context when planning for and assessing the adoption and implementation of work–life policy at the organizational level. Similarly, the article by Berg and colleagues in this issue sheds light on the contribution of collective bargaining agreements in the provision of work–life policies. Although little research has heretofore been conducted on the dynamics of unions and national policy, Berg and colleagues' comparative analysis of American and Australian university settings shows that unions can be effective in negotiating work–life flexibility practices beyond public policy standards, offering a potential avenue of work–life improvement for employees in countries with limited state support.

Conceptual translation as an avenue to theorizing national context

Lobel, this issue, addresses the challenge of theorizing national context by *translating* a framework initially crafted at the micro level of individuals and the meso level of organizations to the macro level of countries. More specifically, she transposed Bansal & Roth's model explaining the antecedents, motivations, and outcomes of corporate ecological responsiveness to her analysis of the macro factors shaping organizational response to poverty in developing countries (Bansal & Roth, 2000). To do so, she used the meta-theoretical procedure of conceptual translation (Albert, 1977), i.e., she replaced the cross-level context factors Bansal and Roth used so that they were all macro level concepts. For instance, she translated individual concern to national concern. Such transpositions are in this procedure validated only when they produce meaningful propositions. We believe that such conceptual translations are a promising avenue for building macro-level theory able to bridge the micro-macro gap that is currently lamented in management research (Bamberger, 2008).

Conclusion

In sum, the field of cross-national work–life research is still emerging and much remains to be done to advance it. We are grateful to the scholars who have contributed to this special issue and have taken up the challenge we gave them to theorize national context in work–life research, as little guidance was available on how to do so and they have conducted cutting-edge research. We hope this introduction and the papers in this special issue provide fertile ground for future research. While we have focused on culture and institutions, and have tried to outline ways to combine and bridge these two approaches, we would like to emphasize that cross-national work–life research needs to consider economic factors as well, including stage of development, strength of the economy and labour market conditions. We strongly believe that work–life phenomena are complex and multi-layered, and it is our hope that multi-level comparative research helps us to gain a systematic understanding of the work–life interface.

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