Unpacking Work–Family: Core Overarching but Underidentified Issues

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Leaving aside technology, Kossek, Baltes, and Matthews' (2011) recommended paths echo the levels at which work–family researchers have long argued we should focus: individuals and families, work organizations, and collaborative societal levels (e.g., Zedeck, 1992). Levels are important, but if focusing on them has not been effective to date, why will it be any more effective now? Closely collaborating with organizations, for example, may have led us to studying organizational responses rather than doing research that could suggest better solutions (myself included; Rothausen, Gonzalez, Clarke, & O'Dell, 1998).

What is the alternative? I propose a ''matrix'' of the field with levels as lenses through which we examine core, overarching issues (Table 1). What are these issues? We need a larger conversation to identify them, but here I propose three that I believe are widely acknowledged but underidentified, and which may be hidden from plain view by our approach to them.

Two core, related, causal issues that underlie why we even study work–family and work–life are *dependent care* and, separate from that, the pressure toward over-work and its attendant lack of freedom to *construct lives* to optimize individual and collective quality of life. Both these issues are fundamentally impacted by *gender*. If, as I hope, we use these three foundational issues in a coherent research program, we should also focus on their *direct impact* on core constructs in our larger disciplines—industrial–organizational psychology (I–O) and management of organizational behavior (OB), in addition to our current focus on examining relationships between work and family/life constructs.

Language Matters

Kossek et al. point out that framing and language are powerful because of underlying inferences of positive or negative impact and ''normal'' or ''accommodated'' status. I agree but go farther. What we call the field and what the names highlight or obscure is even more fundamental. Kossek et al. review the changes from 1960s ''women's issues'' to 1980s ''work–family'' to ''work–life'' around 2000. I contend that these name changes masked core overarching issues or allowed others to frame the conversation such that now vital issues are relatively less visible and perhaps even politically incorrect to talk about in organizations.

Arguments for changing names largely centered around issues of stigma and equity, important points that I've certainly been challenged to address by virtue of my work in this field (e.g., see mention of my discussion with the author in Burkett, 2000).

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Table 1. *A Nonexhaustive I–O/OB Work–Family Matrix of Programmatic Research Questions*

	Overarching issue		
	Dependent care work	Life construction (overwork)	Doing gender
Individuals and families	• To career and family counseling, add life construction counseling highlighting dependent care and acknowledging the interrelatedness of these systems in quality of life. • Seek to guide partner and organizational choice preferences considering dependent care work. • Study different configurations of dependent care to identify successful ones for dependents and workers.	• Explore life facets in addition to worker and parent/caregiver, such as citizen, learner, ethnic community member. • What are the impacts of inability or lack of desire to engage important life facets? • Causes of preferences for uni- or multi foci over the life span, for integration or segmentation, and related long-term outcomes.	• Internalization of masculine and feminine life facet roles—positives and negatives for individuals and families. • Gender values and integration versus segmentation. • Causal directions between masculine and feminine values and different life span involvement in dependent care and other life facets.
Organizations	• Which dependent care policies are most desired by which employees? Which have most impact on retention and performance? Which overlap? • Study different configurations of dependent care policies to identify most successful ones in terms of multiple organizational outcomes.	• Impact of different life construction patterns on work-related outcomes. • What are the organizational benefits and what is missing in organizations in which employees are most and least engaged in other life facets?	• Explore gendered nature of "neutral" organizational cultures, work norms, and policies. • Who benefits from which policies? Who loses? What are the implications for dependent care and other life facets?
Society	• Benefits of and problems created by how different organizations and societies define dependents; who benefits, what are the costs? • Barriers to choice in number of hours worked for good jobs (now largely constrained to employer-determined "packages" of either 0 or 40+ hours).	• Explore different overall life patterns and their long-term impacts on the health/welfare of communities and societies. • Explore market failures to recognize costs of individuals' disengagement from art, sport, community, citizenship.	• Systematic overvaluation of masculine versus feminine roles at work and in families and alternative valuation systems across societies. • Compare quality of organizations with dominant masculine and feminine values.

We should not avoid issues of choice, fairness, and equity. Indeed, they are often the most central issues. But the solution is not to create euphemisms for overarching issues such as dependent care, quality life construction, and the undervaluing of feminine tasks and values.

The risk of continuing to focus on levels is that we adopt the myopic worldviews that can exist at those levels. The power of focusing on overarching issues at multiple levels is that it allows us to see a more holistic view. Other research streams, such as that on relationships between job satisfaction and performance, suggest that focusing on an issue across levels can lead to nuanced insights on complex issues. Focusing on issues across levels would allow us to create a program of research that truly addresses the primary reasons that work–family/life has emerged as a field of study. The table is a simplified, partial version of how such a research program might look.

Unpacking Dependent Care From Work–Family

The term *family* can obscure multiple roles, relationships, and responsibilities. Unless we ''unpack'' these, we will be limited in the solutions we can suggest. Dependent care work deserves separate treatment for individual and societal reasons. When you ''have dependents,'' other human beings rely primarily on you, either for their very lives or for the quality of their lives, in such a way that few, if any, can replace you. It is therefore unlike many other activities in which you may want to engage, and this distinct nature has implications at work. In the aggregate, the way caregivers do their care work is how society treats its dependent members. I am not making value judgments about whether dependent care is more or less important than other life activities, but I am suggesting that until we explicitly explore the distinct nature of having dependents and how this comes into the workplace we leave a major gap in our field.

Once we unpack this issue, we can begin to see it clearly. There are many dimensions on which dependent care needs further identification, but I suggest four as good places to start: dependents, roles, resources, and definitions. There are differences between, for example, being the primary caregiver for a healthy 12-year-old, an infant, an infirm elder, and a severely disabled adult, and the impact may be multiplicative in cases where these categories combine for one caregiver (Rothausen, 1999). Having other human beings dependent on you for physical or emotional care and development is qualitatively different from having them dependent on you for economic resources. Doing dependent care is a dissimilar experience in different socioeconomic classes and with different configurations of family and community supports. Finally, as a field, we should take care to include both legal and functional families, as both produce dependents and resources for caring for them.

Probably the primary, longest term dependent care category is children. Is caring for children a choice? Sometimes, to some extent, but not completely. Should that matter? If so, how? These are important issues to address. Similarly, is being child-free a choice? Again, sometimes, but not always. Can we acknowledge the different nature of child and dependent care in organizations without *unduly* privileging them? Regardless of the role of free will, once children exist they are a responsibility that, in our society, is largely privatized to parents; however when parents aren't willing or able to do their care work well, organizations and society pay in the longer term in many ways. Others (e.g., Kittay, 1995) elucidate problems with simply framing children as a choice for individuals and couples on par with lifestyle choices such as volunteering or training for a marathon. How a generation is raised impacts the ability of a whole culture to thrive. At the societal level, we acknowledge this by public education. At the other end of life, we acknowledge dependency by programs that fund elder security whether or not the receiving elders

contributed directly to the care and nurturing of the generation paying in. There was a time in the United States when dependents were acknowledged in organizations as well, such as when a "family man" got a pay bump by virtue of having economic dependents. That approach may be inequitable, but does this mean that no acknowledgement should be given?

We should also further unpack *work* and *family*, beyond dependent care. Other elements of family include care that encompasses nondependents, such as creating a home, preparing meals, and keeping the family social calendar, as well as nonresponsibility-related elements such as the quality of relationships themselves. Roles, relationships, and responsibilities in the family likely interact with roles, relationships, and responsibilities at work on vital outcomes for individual and organizational health (Rothausen, 2009).

The Right to "Have a Life" and Other Needs of Societies and Individuals

It is commonly discussed, and Kossek et al. present new evidence, that Americans who have jobs work more than do individuals in almost any other nation. But other roles also profoundly impact the health and vitality of society, such as community involvement and citizenship. In addition, there are facets of life that impact the health and vitality of individuals within society, such as involvement in spiritual pursuits, art, and sport. What are the impacts of a de facto choice between meaningfully engaging these and keeping one's job?

It is time to unpack the term *life* as well, and here we have help from life construction and career researchers (e.g., Hansen, 1997; Super, 1990), who have examined combinations of work with citizenship, care of one's physical and mental health, volunteering, spirituality, ethnic identity, and leisure, among other life facets. As I–O and OB researchers, we should explore the qualities of and outcomes for organizations where employees do not engage other life

facets versus those in which they do. What barriers are there to packaging work in smaller bundles, say of 10, 20, or 30 hours per week? What barriers are there to paying for work results rather than for time? Should there really be the "right to leisure" (e.g., Reeves, 1994) or the "right to have a life"? How about the right not to "get a life"? How would fair treatment of these issues look in organizations? How should life facets combine with dependent care? Do organizations want their employees to be able to engage in meaningful paid work, significant dependent care work, *and* additional facets of life such as leisure or community?

Until we untangle these issues, we will struggle to have impact. Kossek et al. suggest this, but their treatment illustrates the field's confusion. They state that we need to "drop the use of 'work–life' as the politically correct way to talk about work–family matters" (p. 357) and that we should refer to specific roles instead. However, they also "define family broadly and do not use the term simply to refer to traditional nuclear families but to the nonwork and personal roles of all employees" (p. 354). What is the difference between that approach and using the term work–life? Both obscure more than they reveal.

Doing Gender

Although there is research on systematic differences in work outcomes for women versus men, and research on the gendered nature of work in organizations and in families, our field has not brought these as effectively to bear on what we study as we could. Yet, it is difficult to find an aspect of work–family or work–life not impacted powerfully by gender. We are at risk of treating symptoms without seeing a core underlying condition.

Although gender is related to biological sex, they represent different things; gender is something we do in our daily lives (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1987). Others have shown that gender can be invisible to organizational actors yet still powerfully impact organizational phenomenon (e.g.,

Kelan & Jones, 2010). What we don't see, we don't study or manage. Gender is key to a fuller base of knowledge in this field because it fundamentally impacts dependent care and other roles at work, in families, and in lives (Williams, 2000).

Integrating Dependent Care, Life Construction, and Gender Into I–O and OB

Although Kossek et al. (2011, p. 352) argue that work–family "has finally moved from the margins to the mainstream," my observation is that researching it is not as valued as researching mainstream topics in I–O and OB. Yet in my own consulting and research, I have repeatedly encountered evidence that dependent care and other elements of life deeply impact what happens at work for some employees, in terms of their emotions at work, attitudes toward their jobs and organizations, and their behaviors including performance and retention (e.g., Rothausen, Malshe, & Arnold, 2010). Our mindsets in I–O and OB tend to ignore this, but it wasn't always so. Let's look at just one example: job satisfaction. In his ground-breaking study of job satisfaction 75 years ago, Hoppock (1935, p. 5) noted that studying job satisfaction would not be simple:

> There may be no such thing as job satisfaction independent of the other satisfactions in one's life. Family relationships, health, relative social status in the community, and a multitude of other factors may be just as important as the job itself in determining what we tentatively choose to call job satisfaction.

Where has recognition of this gone? We define overall job satisfaction as "the sum of the evaluations of the discriminable elements of which the job is composed" (Locke, 1969, p. 330), thereby institutionalizing separation of the focal arena for exploring what causes job satisfaction. Although we have explored relationships among job, family, and life satisfactions,

and these with behaviors of interest, we have not integrated the impact of family and life into this work-domain construct (myself included; Rothausen, 1994).

I challenge the field to explore integration of family and life into core work constructs *in addition* to studying the impacts of each domain on the other, as is the focus of most work–family research now. We can utilize literatures that have been underapplied to work–family to date and that treat work, family, and other life facets as an interrelated whole, such as the identity, social capital, and meaning of work literatures. In psychology literatures, identity refers to "*a coherent sense* of one's roles and occupational pathway, one's self in relation to others, and one's values and purpose in life" (LaGuardia, 2009, p. 91, emphasis mine). People identify as individuals and in terms of others, both in specific relationships and in terms of collectives, including sociodemographic, work, and family memberships, in sometimes highly interrelated ways (Rothausen et al., 2010). Social capital theory models interrelationships and activities across separated domains (Rothausen, 2009). In a summary of their eight-country study on the meaning of work, England and Whitely (1990, p. 66) conclude:

> Working seems, then, to be of general significance to individuals because it occupies a great deal of their time, because it generates economic and sociopsychological benefits and costs, and because it is so interrelated with other important life areas such as family, leisure, religion, and community.

Use of these theoretical perspectives may result in integration of family and life into work-domain constructs. Perhaps we must have this impact on core work constructs in our own larger disciplines, I–O and OB, before we can have a significant impact on organizations and workers.

We will not have solutions to work–family challenges for workers and organizations immediately simply by refocusing

on core issues across levels, but I believe we will be multiple steps closer to discovery of knowledge that could contribute to feasible, successful solutions.

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