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Possibilities for Change and New Frontiers: Introduction to the Work and Family Researchers Network Special Issue on Advancing Equality at Work and Home

Abstract

This special issue showcases recent scholarship that clarifies the nature of inequality as it
emerges at the intersection of today's workplaces and homes. We bring together scholarly
works presented during the Work and Family Researchers Network conferences from 2018
and 2020. These articles provide a foundation for the development of future knowledge that
advances equality at work and home, paying special attention to the complex nature of work
and family in diverse contexts. Our introduction to the issue further highlights the need to
amplify the voices and experiences of marginalised groups of people around the world who
have received limited attention in the work and family literature. We conclude by offering
suggestions of the role each of us can play in helping the work-family field become more
inclusive and expanding ways of knowing that better represent work-family occurrences
across diverse contexts.

Key words: Work-Family, Equality, Intersectional Inequalities, Inclusion, Diverse contexts

Introduction

It is an excellent time to take stock of research that can advance equality at work and home. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored entrenched inequalities in communities, workplaces, and homes and sounded a clarion call to vigorously act to advance equality. Racial discrimination, gender-based violence, and xenophobia are examples of injustices rooted in the social and economic divisions exacerbated by the pandemic. Social realities and sensibilities are shifting at every level of the labour market and in every nation. This moment is both promising and perilous.

This special issue showcases the latest scholarship which clarifies the nature of inequality as it emerges at the intersection of today's workplaces and homes. We seek to bring together scholarly works to provide a foundation for the development of future knowledge that advances equality at work and home, paying special attention to the complex nature of work and family in diverse contexts. This issue includes the most interesting and cutting-edge research presented at recent Work and Family Researchers Network conferences (2018 and 2020). Each study offers new perspectives on advancing equality in a particular arena of work-family study and with specific populations. Unfortunately, we were unable to achieve our original goals of attracting contributions that deeply engage issues of intersectional inequalities in work and family life, or ones that examine work-life challenges experienced by workers in nations that have long colonial and imperial histories across the Global South (Jaga, 2020). Thus, as consistent with our original goal that the special issue might serve as a foundation for prompting greater attention to social and economic inequalities, we add to the contributions of the articles by suggesting additional ways in which scholars can help the work-family field become more inclusive.

In this introduction, we discuss the importance of foregrounding neglected topics in the work-family field such as cognitive or mental load labour, care work, and the changing nature of the labour market, highlighting the contributions made by the articles included in this issue. We also emphasise the need to amplify the voices and experiences of people around the world who have received limited attention in the work and family literature. This includes the experiences of people of colour, ethnic minorities, working class, LGBTQ+ communities, and those living and working in the shadow of informality and/or coloniality in the Global South. Only through understanding the broader contexts and diverse demands that shape peoples' experiences at the intersection of work and family can we have meaningful conversations about work and family. With plural perspectives we can generate knowledge

that can effect relevant change, advance equality at work and home, and contribute to social justice across the world.

We begin by discussing the social and economic contexts that gave rise to the special issue and the focus of this introduction. We then introduce the articles included in this special issue, highlighting how they advance knowledge at the frontiers of work-family research. We conclude by emphasising the need to centre diverse voices in work-family research and the role each of us can play in doing so.

Setting the Context: Why Focus on Advancing Equality at Work and Home Now?

Although Social and economic inequalities existed long before COVID-19. Yet, the pandemic has deepened fissures by gender, class, and race (Bowleg, 2020; Chung et al., 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021). The story is not a simple one. For example, women have shouldered a disproportionate burden during the pandemic, including job loss (Joyce & Xu, 2020; Alon et al. 2020), increased tasks at home (Chung et al., 2020), and invisible emotional and mental labour (Petts et al., 2020; Yerkes et al., 2020). However, studies also suggest that fathers have gained a new appreciation of the rewards and demands of providing care, and have expressed a preference for a future that allows more time with family and less time at work (Burgess & Goldman, 2021; Chung et al., 2021).

Similarly, divides by class have become more pronounced, with mixed lessons for the work and family field. Many low-paid workers in businesses deemed essential – from warehouses and grocery stores to hospitals and nursing homes – have been pressed to remain working in public spaces, while higher-paid professional workers have been relegated to work from home (Gould & Wilson, 2020; ONS, 2020). Both groups have incurred challenges in navigating work, home, and health. The recognition of service jobs as 'essential' conveys growing appreciation that workers in low-paid service occupations deserve better wages and treatment, though research suggests workers in essential businesses have been treated as disposable rather than essential (Goger & Jackson, 2020). Certainly, COVID-19 has raised public awareness of the value of care work and its critical role in maintaining society and the economy (Petts et al., 2020). Whether societies will act in accordance with such values is a critical question for the work and family field. Recent research suggests that many of those who were able to work from home prefer only a partial return to the workplace (Alexander et al., 2021). Whether businesses will act in concert with workers' preferences is also an

important question for the field. Overall, inequality in access to return to work because of care demands (ILO, 2020) or flexible work options may continue to create a chasm between more and less privileged workers – an enduring concern among work and family scholars (Lambert et al., 2012).

Recent socially-responsive movements including Black Lives Matter (Lebron, 2017) and Decolonising the Curriculum Movement (Bhambra et al., 2018) attempt to disrupt racial, epistemic, and other injustices. These movements, complemented by scholarly evidence of the impact of the pandemic upon marginalised people's lives, highlight the need for additional attention in the work-family field to the intersectionality of social inequalities in order to capture and respond to the complexities that shape identity meaning-making and social and economic well-being (Crenshaw, 2018; Holvino, 2010). Although the Work and Family Researchers Network has grown in terms of membership across the world and its diversity of scholarly topics, the work and family field is not immune to the Western, middle-class, heteronormative biases structured into much of social science research. The work-family field still has a long distance to go to develop knowledge on how forms of intersectional marginality create inequality and disadvantage at work and home and, more importantly, the steps that can be taken to advance equality and justice.

Foregrounding Inequality in Work and Family Research

The papers within this special issue call attention to key challenges facing marginalised workers, helping to further knowledge on the ramifications of inequality in work and family life. They offer new insights into issues of enduring importance in the work and family field, specifically, the problems created by a long-hours culture and ideal worker norms, the possibilities of creating and sustaining inclusive organisational and societal cultures and new norms, and greater attention to changes on the family-side of work and family.

Long-hours work culture, ideal worker norms, and exclusion

The importance of grounding context-sensitive work-family theory and research in lived realities is becoming increasingly important as workers' experiences and policy outcomes depend on the organisational as well as the socio-cultural, political, and economic context of a country (Jaga & Guetterman, 2021). Workplace cultures and other contextual factors shape the availability of different work-family arrangements, the ability of workers to access an arrangement (Lott & Abendroth, 2020; Eaton, 2003), and the outcomes of those arrangements

(Kelly et al., 2014; Chung, 2022). In particular, studies highlight that even the best work-family policies are rendered meaningless if they are offered in the context of a long-hours working culture. Such work cultures give preference to workers who can act as though they have no responsibilities outside of work and can thus work long hours (Acker 1990; Williams, 2000). Especially in light of workers' declining negotiation power both collectively and individually across many nation states (OECD,2021) the rise in the entrepreneurial worker (Pongratz & Voß, 2003; Bröckling, 2015), and advanced digital technologies (Mazmanian et al., 2013), today's ideal worker is someone who is available all of the time and anywhere – perpetually connected to the workplace (Bröckling, 2015; Chung, 2022). It isn't just managers but also workers themselves who expect their colleagues to be available at all times and penalise those who cannot (Chung, 2020; Berdahl et al., 2018).

Articles in this special issue (Stovell & Besamusca, 2021; Kim & Golden, 2021) foreground the exclusionary nature of a long-hours work culture – where productivity and commitment are measured through hours put in at the job. Exclusion takes place because someone must respond to the pressing demands of family and life outside of work. The entrenched ideal worker long-hours norm become an unattainable ideal for many through its neglect to consider those with care responsibilities for children, ill and elderly loved ones, and self (long-term illness and disability). This is the key contribution of Stovell and Besamusca (2021), in which they examine the ramifications of 'part-time' working hours ambiguity. They show how a long-hours work culture, combined with traditional gender norms that dictate mothers as being largely responsible for childcare and housework, act together as forces of exclusion. Their study demonstrates how professional mothers were unable to meet the 'standard' of excessive hours (65-80 hours) a week and that their engagement in child caregiving shaped co-workers' and managers' interpretation of their working hours and contribution to the company. The authors contemplate how long-hours ideal worker cultures, combined with other normative views toward marginalised workers, are likely to generate similar or worse exclusion for those in precarious employment statuses – such as self-employed or gig economy workers and those in lower-skilled occupations. We could also expect similar patterns to emerge among those with other types of care responsibilities and needs that prevent them from fulfilling the 'productive,' ideal worker norm (for example, for informal care - such as caring for an elderly or sick relative, or self-care for a disability).

In a different way, Kim and Golden's (2021) research also demonstrates the problematic consequences of a long-hours work culture and what happens when workers fall short of ideal

worker norms. Excluded from working sufficient hours, Kim and Golden find that underemployed workers in the US – part-time workers who would prefer to work more hours – are at heightened risk of financial dissatisfaction and work-to-family conflict. In the US, benefits such as health insurance, sick pay, and job-protected leave are conditioned on job status (full-time vs. part-time) and the number of hours worked – perks reserved for workers most valued by employers and society (Lambert, 2008). Part-time workers defy conceptions of the ideal worker and are commonly viewed as less committed than full-time workers, even when they would prefer to work additional hours (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2010; Lambert, 2012). By documenting that part-time underemployment in the US is concentrated among workers who are minority, low-paid, and employed in service occupations, Kim and Golden provide compelling evidence that underemployment – like its counterpart overwork – is a site of exclusion and inequality.

Together, the articles by Kim and Golden, and Stovell and Besamusca, caution us that without meaningful change in the culture of workplaces and societies, workers who work less than 'ideal' hours will continue to be subjugated to lower status and value at work and home. A focus on equality in access and outcomes should remain central in discussions and research on innovations in workplace cultures and worker norms. As in the past, workplaces are havens of inequality and some workers are likely to be excluded from emerging opportunities (Kossek & Lee, 2020; Lambert & Haley-Lock, 2004; Chung, 2018). Understanding how to ensure equal access to enough hours and equal protection from too many hours is an issue that will likely grow in importance over the course of recovery from the pandemic.

Now is the right moment for us to critically explore issues around the notions around the 'ideal' worker. The pandemic has prompted workers in many societies to re-evaluate conventional work arrangements as well as the centrality of work in their lives. Those workers who have been able to work more flexibly during the pandemic are expressing a desire to continue to work flexibly even after the pandemic is over and social distancing measures are no longer in place (Chung et al., 2020; Alexander et al., 2021). Voluntary quits are at a record high across counties, lending the term the 'Great Resignation' to the current economic period (Thompson, 2021). Although research has yet to fully account for this trend, early research indicates that a substantial proportion of quits are among workers who are placing greater priority on time with family members and/or to tend to life outside of work (Chung et al., 2020; Burgess and Goldman, 2021). Others are quitting to move to better jobs as employers raise wages in jobs in low-paid sectors such as food service and retail (Goger &

Jackson, 2020). The pandemic provides an impetus for redefining notions of the ideal worker that is at the root of many of the patterns of inequalities observed in workplaces and homes.

Creating and sustaining inclusive workplace cultures

The work-family field has consistently emphasised the need for transformed and supportive workplace cultures, while the pandemic has accelerated its urgency. Inclusive and empathetic workplace cultures that reflect the diverse needs and demands workers face outside of the workplace are needed more than ever. Across nations, many have faced unprecedented levels of disruption to their work during the pandemic due to the loss of childcare, personal health vulnerabilities, and the need to care for others. At a deeply personal level, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on people's lives as many lost loved ones, had to support others who were ill due to the virus, and faced declining income as their partners and relatives lost jobs (Resolution Foundation, 2020). Elements of positive changes in workplace cultures during the pandemic are emerging, such as workers experiencing more receptive and caring managers during discussions about demands at home (Chung et al., 2020). However, progress is still too slow.

These themes are the focus of the article by Pal, Galinsky and Kim (2021). Using the 2016 US-based survey, the National Study of the Changing Workforce, they explore how workplace inclusion can benefit workers' health and well-being, especially in times when workers are experiencing a range of adverse life events. Here adverse life events – or personal crises – entail a wide range of life occurrences, namely, experiencing a serious illness, the passing away of a close relative or friend, providing care for someone with a serious illness, job loss of a spouse or partner, or close co-workers being laid off, and the worker themselves being unemployed for part of the year. The analyses show that these adverse life events happened regularly to workers (35% of surveyed workers having experienced one or more event) and negatively influenced workers' well-being, specifically, self-rated health, presenteeism and work-to-personal/family spill over. Their study demonstrates how workplace inclusion – namely, feeling supported and listened to by managers and colleagues – can help protect workers from the negative ramifications of a personal crisis. Such findings are useful for envisioning the types of transformations in workplace culture needed to support workers during both everyday life and difficult times.

Given that personal crises and adverse life events have inevitably happened more frequently during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the high rates of job losses, death and illness, the need

for a supportive workplace is even more pressing. Such transformation requires stepping away from the 'ideal' worker norm hegemony toward workplace cultures that support workers with diverse, intersecting identities. All workers have responsibilities in their personal life, may it be childcare, spousal or elderly care, self-care, and even pet care (Kelliher et al., 2019), and many have community roles too. Inclusive workplace cultures that meaningfully acknowledge the reality that workers occupy multiple roles can help maintain workers' experiences of self, well-being, and engagement at work.

Future work and family research is needed that moves beyond documenting the harm incurred by ideal worker norms and develops new models of working that do not hold all workers accountable to a single norm, instead celebrating diversity in commitments across life spheres and the life course. Efficacious strategies include holistic, humanistic approaches that do not 'other' or denigrate people to being little more than workers and working hours. It may be time that we promote a multi-dimensional version of the 'new ideal worker' that recognises commitments in multiple life spheres, one that takes different forms in different contexts.

Bringing attention to transforming households and family roles

Next, we turn to inequalities in the division of household labour, especially among heterosexual couples. Some studies argue that inequalities within the household have reduced, as men and fathers are increasingly more involved in domestic work – a pattern observed especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Yerkes et al., 2020; Chung et al., 2020; Dotti Sani & Treas, 2016). It is clear, however, that women still bear the brunt of domestic labour with significant implications for their wellbeing (Etheridge & Spantig, 2020; Chandola et al., 2019). One relatively new area that has gained the attention of work-family scholars is around the more 'invisible' work of organising and managing the household and children, work that creates a mental (or cognitive) load (Daminger, 2019; Walzer, 1996). Evidence is mounting that the mental load of household management may significantly detract from women's capacity to carry out other work (Young, 2018; Ruppanner et al., 2018). It is only by looking at both the physical 'doing' of housework and childcare as well as the 'thinking' involved that we can accurately gauge the extent of inequality in household labour and pursue meaningful avenues for reducing it.

The article by Dean, Churchill, and Ruppanner (2021) contributes to this emerging area of work-family research by providing a clearer theorisation and conceptualisation of the mental

load – with a goal of making this 'invisible labor more visible to researchers and policymakers' (ibid:3). They define mental load as a combination of cognitive and emotional labour – as the goal of this labour is in ensuring a positive emotional experience of the family/children, which inevitably means managing one's own and the family's emotions. They also focus on the 'load' element of the mental load by emphasising the draining effect it has on the emotional and physical health of the person carrying it out. This mostly invisible work blurs boundaries between work and family. For example, the authors argue that the mental load permeates into paid work, leisure and even sleep, a never-ending 'enduring' labour tied to caring for loved ones. The authors offer important directions for academics, employers, and policy makers to prevent the drain of the mental load on employees and citizens, including the need for comprehensive caregiving support structures to reduce the negative burdens of caregiving that contribute to the mental load.

Centring Alternative Voices: Future Research Pathways

Finally, we wish to highlight the need to centre alternative voices in future scholarship in order to advance understanding of the work-family realities facing marginalised people around the world, and to help develop effective strategies for tackling the specific challenges they face as well as those we summarise above. Every study is an opportunity to rewrite our understanding of inequalities and to pave a new direction for work-family research that does not falsely universalise majority voices by relegating minority voices to the sidelines of research and theory.

As evidenced by the articles included in this volume, work and family scholars are increasingly attending to the role of context in shaping work-family phenomena such as work-family conflict, work-family enrichment, and work-family balance (Allen et al., 2015; Chung, 2022; Hagqvist et al., 2017; Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017). Although studies explore diverse national and social contexts, we would like to emphasise that most remain embedded in Northern epistemologies. Conceptualisations of family – such as the nuclear family form where children live with their parents – and of work – with a focus on capitalist manufacturing and service jobs in the formal economy – miss much of the reality of work and livelihoods in the Global South (Jaga, 2020). More work-family research is needed that challenges the universalising assumptions that accompany the Northern dominance in the field, to open space for plural perspectives that conceptualise new work-family questions,

develop alternative ways of knowing, and capture the plural realities of inequality that shape work-family experiences around the globe. Incorporating diverse histories, geographies, and socio-political factors into research and theory on work and family is necessary if the field is to play a role in disrupting the biases and inequalities created by marginalisation, colonisation, imperialism, and displacement (Collins et al., 2019).

Notably, bringing Southern, postcolonial, and decolonial lenses to the study of work-family phenomena can help to tackle inequalities among marginalised groups. These lenses necessitate sensitivity to local contextual complexities and the geopolitics of knowledge production (Collyer et al., 2019) and are therefore likely to be particularly helpful for identifying points of entry for interventions in diverse contexts. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanied mobility restrictions on social life has had detrimental effects on the livelihoods of people reliant on informal economies and living in informal settlements – people who depend on daily exchanges that take place on the streets and who have no safety nets (Salamanca & Vargas, 2020).

Expanded perspectives are also needed to decentre universal ideas about households and transform research to become more representative of people's lived experiences in Global South contexts. Broadening our understanding of households in diverse contexts can help shift the work-family field from the status quo in defining 'family.' As norms surrounding the ideal worker are slowly shifting away from the male breadwinner model, it is also important to remember that in other contexts, mainly in the Global South, where absent fathers are widespread due to colonial histories and migration, in many contexts worldwide women have long been, and continue to be, breadwinners in multi-generational households because of migration, colonisation and the legacies of enslavement (Davis, 1983; Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020). Recognising household diversity opens up new vistas for pursuing themes long found in work and family research, such as the division of roles among people within the household, including cleaning, food work, parenting, and the invisible work that accompanies these tasks.

We also need to centre alternative voices when developing social policy. Across nations, many policies and practices do not sufficiently consider the intersectionality of social identities and contexts that create inequality in access to benefits and protections (Raman, 2020). For example, the maternity protection resources that were largely created to address the needs of middle-class women do not serve low-income women as well (Chowdhury et al.,

2021; Stumbitz & Jaga, 2020). Policies and practices that neglect the everyday costs of social reproduction incurred by low-income women and other marginalised groups have profound consequences and subvert societal levels of health, gender equality, and economic development. Policy reform that views the intersection of work and family from the vantage point of diverse and marginalised voices is urgently needed for inclusive work-family policy and implementation strategies.

How does the work and family field become more inclusive? We can begin by taking a critical look at every aspect of the research we do, from the methodological approach we employ and how we conceptualise our research questions, to who is included on our research teams. Building bridges between Northern and Southern scholars and partnering with communities will allow work-family scholars to examine how context matters and will expand the reach and usefulness of the field. There is no substitution, though, for developing new theories that centre the voices of those currently neglected in work-family research and practice and making space for their own development of new theory. As editors, reviewers, funders, researchers, and teachers, we can support work that amplifies these voices. Again, this entails not only being reflective of our existing theoretical and methodological approaches when in these roles, but actively creating new platforms for diverse voices to emerge. We need to be mindful that it takes time for new theories to be developed from the ground, and thus our roles in illuminating diverse voices within our field cannot dissipate with the pandemic. By promoting the work of Southern scholars and exploring the intersectionalities of disadvantage, work-family researchers can help chart a new course for scholarship that holds at its centre the goal of advancing equality and social justice at work, home, and in communities around the world. We are hopeful that many in our work-family community will join us on this journey.

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