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The Work and Family Researchers Network: an organizational and intellectual agenda

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This essay outlines the organizational form and programmatic goals of the Work and Family Researchers Network (WFRN). This international membership organization aspires to bring together researchers and scholars from a range of academic disciplines as well as policy makers and practitioners. A brief sketch of the structure of the WFRN emphasizes its marriage of virtual and face-to-face communities. A sketch of the intellectual domain of work and family research maps this field with respect to basic social science and applied concerns. I suggest that the preoccupations of this field of inquiry are not marginal but rather occupy intellectually central space in several disciplines. Moreover, the policy questions of interest to work and family researchers are numerous and noteworthy, as they pertain to different stages of the life course and individuals facing a wide array of work and family interactions. Work and family research is interdisciplinary, based on the extensive cross-disciplinary citation patterns that are already well established in this area. WFRN can nonetheless play a role in facilitating communication and fostering collaborations. The essay ends with a brief note about opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Keywords: work and family research; academic disciplines; interdisciplinary research; scholarly communication; work and family policy

Este ensayo resume el modelo organizativo y los objetivos de la Red de Investigadores sobre Familia y Trabajo (WFRN). Esta organización de membresía internacional aspira a reunir investigadores y eruditos provenientes de diferentes disciplinas académicas, así como a diseñadores de políticas y profesionales. Un breve resumen de la estructura de WFRN enfatiza la unión de comunidades virtuales y las de carne y hueso. Este ensayo explora el campo intelectual de trabajo y familia con respeto a las ciencias sociales básicas y los asuntos de interés relevantes. Con esto quiero decir que los asuntos de este campo de investigación no son marginales, sino que ocupan un espacio intelectual central en varias disciplinas. Además, las cuestiones políticas relevantes para los investigadores sobre familia y trabajo son numerosas y reseñables, en tanto que hacen referencia a diferentes etapas del curso de la vida y a individuos que se enfrentan a un amplio abanico de interacciones entre el trabajo y la familia. Las investigaciones sobre trabajo y familia son interdisciplinarias, con base en los amplios modelos de citación multidisciplinar que ya están bien establecidos en este área. Sin embargo, WFRN puede facilitar la comunicación y fomentar la colaboración. Este ensayo termina con una breve nota sobre las oportunidades y los desafíos que están por venir.

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This essay is based on the Presidential Address delivered at the inaugural meeting of the Work and Family Researchers Network, New York City, June, 2012.

Palabras clave: investigación sobre trabajo y familia; disciplinas académicas; modelos de citas; comunicación científica; políticas de trabajo y familia

After nearly two years of building the infrastructure of the Work and Family Researchers Network (WFRN) and planning for this conference, it is a pleasure to see such a large and distinguished group of researchers and scholars. Over 750 participants are in attendance from over 30 countries around the world. The fields of sociology, management, family studies, public health, demography, social work, economics, and public policy, among others, are prominently represented.

I would like to take this opportunity to give you a brief overview of the WFRN, starting with a discussion of its form as a membership association. Turning next to the intellectual terrain of the field, I will stress the many ways in which the themes of work and family research connect with central concerns in a number of disciplines. The broad range of applied organizational and public policy concerns in this arena connects the field with a numerous of practitioners and policy makers. Given the interdisciplinary nature of WFRN, a few words about the current state of cross-field connections are in order. I conclude with a few comments about the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead for the field of work and family research.

WFRN and its precursors

The Work and Family Researchers Network was conceived as the Sloan Work and Family Research Network was about to be phased out. The Sloan Network had been the premier online destination for work and family research for the past 14 years. The network was a staff-centered project that offered many services, including a newsletter, profiles of prominent figures in the work and family area, research briefs on diverse issues, and a compilation of state and local policy initiatives in the US. The network compiled a bibliography of work and family research that grew to over 12,000 entries.

In 2009, the network, which had been funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, began to search for an alternative model in anticipation of the end of grant support. The initial planning focused on the reduction of cost by transitioning from a staff-based model of information generation to a decentralized or crowd-sourced model. The hope was that costs could be lowered to the point that the network would be self-sustaining. Integral to this approach was the development of an open-access repository that would allow researchers to deposit their papers in a central location that would be accessible for free to interested parties around the world. The hope was that a new work and family website could become a self-sustaining, virtual community.

The missing piece in this cost-reduction model was a membership organization. In other words, the creation of the Work and Family Researchers Network as a membership-based organization resolved a number of organizational challenges. It created a natural audience for the website and repository and simultaneously generated a community of prospective contributors. Moreover, a face-to-face community could compliment a virtual community by generating a sustainable funding base. The cost of maintaining the website would become part of the ongoing operations of the association. In other words, WFRN was conceived from the outset

as a marriage between a virtual and a face-to-face community. The project is premised on synergies between conferences where personal and intellectual connections could be made and a virtual community that sustains these contacts between meetings.

WFRN currently has an active newsfeed which allows members to keep up to date on the latest developments in the world of work and family. The Work and Family Commons is the name given to the open-access repository that incorporates the extensive reference data base compiled by the Sloan Network as well as a growing number of full-text articles and working papers. WFRN is a research-based organization that makes every effort to reach out to practitioners and policy makers.

While these ideas helped to launch this endeavor, going forward WFRN will be what we make it. The issues it addresses and the form it will take will evolve based on the interests and concerns of the membership. The leadership will be democratically elected, and there are many opportunities for members to get involved.

WFRN has an elected Executive Committee which is formally responsible for the continuity of the organization. While the University of Pennsylvania will house WFRN's Executive Office, a rotating set of officers, including a president, vice-president, secretary-treasurer, will help to keep fresh energy and ideas flowing. The by-laws, which were ratified by the membership as part of its first electoral process, are posted on the WFRN website: <http://workfamily.sas.upenn.edu>.

The domain of work and family research

Work and family are major social institutions with social, cultural, organizational, political, and economic components which in turn are linked to many other institutions, including education, social services, and health care. Work and family issues are prominently situated in a number of academic disciplines, including sociology, management, and economics.

In the field of sociology, scholars have long-standing interests in the evolution of modern families, the increased labor force participation of women, the declining gender segregation of the workplace, and trends in the gender wage gap, along with a host of related issues.

The management of human resources focuses on the cost and productivity of the labor force, with the issue of engagement one of the central foci. Work and family issues are relevant for recruitment and retention of workers, their engagement and productivity, and the management of diverse workforce. Powerful trends in the workplace, such as globalization and the rise of the virtual workplace, impinge on family life in many ways.

Economists often do not see work and family as a social problem because it is assumed that individuals make trade-offs based on their personal preferences and needs. Yet the nexus of work and family is directly related to a large swath of micro-economics, including trade-offs between monetary and non-monetary forms of compensation (compensating differentials). Economists have ventured into the family and have made claims regarding issues as diverse as fertility, cohabitation, and marital dissolution.

For example, dual earner families may be seen from an economic vantage point as representing insurance against the instabilities of the labor market, while a more traditional gender division of labor is seen as reflecting the benefits of economic

specialization in diverse skills (Winslow-Bowe, 2009). How much of the gender gap in wages and career advancement can be linked to women's labor market disruption? What accounts for fathers' wage premium and mothers' wage penalty? These and many related issues are debated by prominent scholars in economics journals. While not all work and family researches accept the premise of efficient markets and optimizing self-interested decision-making, the issues raised by work and family scholars are directly relevant to many of the questions explored by micro-economic researchers.

Work and family issues can be linked to the central concerns of many other fields. For example, demographers are interested in the connection between women's labor force participation and national fertility rates. Women's studies and gender studies scholars have critically examined various forms of gender inequalities, many of which related directly to the public and private roles of women and men as wives and husbands.

Work and family scholarship is diverse in its methodological approaches as well as in its substantive concerns. Work and family research is often cross-national in focus, employing hierarchical linear models and other advanced techniques. At the other end of the spectrum, qualitative research, such as the article by Case and Richley (2013), helps to illuminate the lived experience and micro-dynamics of work and family issues.

Another way to think about the place of work and family research in the context of social science research is to consider the outcome (or dependent) variables in work and family research. Work and family researchers study well-being, time use,

Table 1. Selected outcome measures employed by work and family researchers.

Gender disparities
Happiness
Intergenerational transfers
Time
Money
Care
Marital measures
Marital Quality
Timing of Marriage
Divorce
Fertility
Sleep
Stress
Well being
Child wellbeing
Elder wellbeing
Family wellbeing
Women's labor force participation
Attachment to employers
Earnings
Career trajectories
Workplace productivity
Job satisfaction
Employee engagement
Labor productivity
Time use

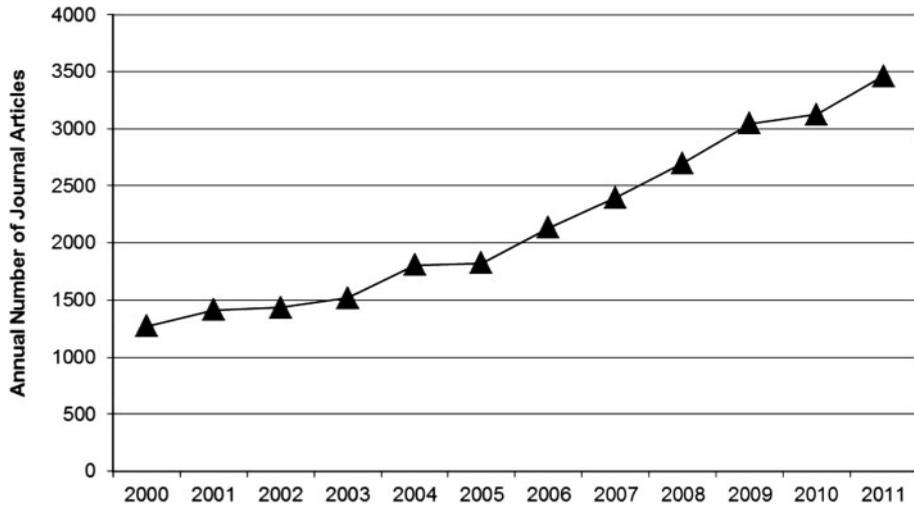


Figure 1. Trends in the number of work and family journal articles.

Source: ISI Web of Knowledge.

happiness, stress, sleep patterns, and indicators of employee productivity (see partial list in Table 1). We also examine gender disparities, marital stability, children's outcomes and career satisfaction. Work and family issues span the life course, from the impact of the quality of child care on children to the stress of busy work schedules on marriages to the needs of elder care. These are important issues in social science fields, from developmental psychology to gerontology.

Sometimes researchers worry about focusing on an inter-disciplinary field because it is at the margins of one's home discipline (Jacobs, 2013). While being attentive to the priorities and standards of one's discipline is important, it is also the case that we are asking fundamental questions that are important to many fields. This brief review suggests that interest in the work and family field brings researchers into some of the main debates in field after field.

Furthermore, academic interest in work and family issues is growing,¹ making this a good time to catch the wave. Figure 1 depicts the trend in the number of articles published in the area of work and family from 2000 to 2011. The results represent a subject search of the term 'work & family' using the data drawn from the ISI Web of Knowledge. The number of articles published annually rose steadily from below 1300 in 2000 to nearly 3500 in 2011. This is of course only a rough approximation. The data may overstate the volume (but not the trend), because the subject heading captures some articles that are not primarily about work and family. On the other hand, the extent of the research may be understated because there are many specialized topics in the field that may be missed by this particular subject heading. In addition, it should be noted that the coverage of the ISI Web of Knowledge data is incomplete, especially in the area of work and family. For example, the journal *Community, Work & Family* is not included in this data base. Citation counts using Google Scholar tend to be roughly twice as high as those using the ISI Web of Knowledge data (Jacobs, 2009).²

Figure 2 presents further evidence of the growth in work and family research. This analysis is more restrictive in relying on a title search of specific terms rather

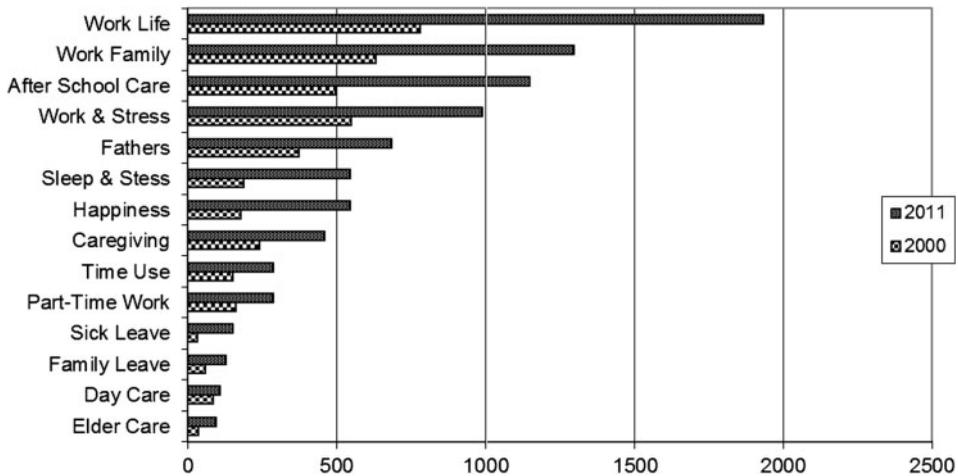


Figure 2. Work family articles by topic, 2000 and 2011.
Source: ISI Web of Knowledge.

than the broader topic search presented in [Figure 1](#). For each of the 14 terms examined, there were many more articles published in 2011 compared with 2000.

Family life is affected by many aspects of work, including the length of workweek, the intensity of work, the location of work (home-based, office-based, and travel requirements), the timing of work (days, nights, weekends, and rotating shifts), and the predictability and security of work. While this list emphasizes the tensions and negative impacts, there are many ways in which positive aspects of employment, including income, benefits, satisfaction and social status, spill over into family life.

Work, in turn, can be affected by many aspects of family life, including long-term factors such as parenting and elder care, as well as short-term disruptions such as the temporary illness of dependents, bereavement, family stress, or instability. The extent of support for nuclear families from extended families, government and corporate policies can reduce these negative spillovers.

The case(s) for work and family

There are many distinct rationales for attending to work and family issues.

The 'business case' maintains that work and family initiatives will pay off in terms of the return on investment to the initiating firm. Addressing work and family concerns can affect employee productivity and firms' labor costs via a number of mechanisms: reduced stress, minimized family-to-work spillover, enhanced mental focus, increased employee engagement, deepened commitment, and reduced turnover. While the business case is a powerful one, many firms have yet to voluntarily adopt flexible work arrangement for all of their employees.

There is an economic case for work and family policies even if these reforms are not spontaneously adopted by individual firms. Economic considerations are vital because an assessment of the cost of various initiatives and policy reforms is inescapable. For example, critics will ask whether we can really afford work-family policies in an era of high unemployment, downsizing, and intense global

competition. Are work–family and work–life policies expensive indulgences that unfortunately must be trimmed in response to the economic crisis? Ellen Galinsky, Ken Matos, and Kelly Sakai-O’Neill (2013) have shown that workplace flexibility policies in the US have not been shredded as a result of the recent economic crisis.

Work and family policies could well benefit a nation’s economic standing as a whole even if those benefits were not fully captured by individual firms. For example, providing adult children time to care for their elderly relatives might put a dent in the rise of health care costs. This could well benefit the broader society and economy even if it did not pass a cost-benefit test of the individual firm.

I would encourage work and family researchers to attend to the economic dimensions of these issues. Having solid estimates of the costs and benefits of policies are essential in order to make the case for adopting and maintaining such reforms. While the case can and should be made in human terms, the parallel arguments in dollars and cents must not be neglected.

Beyond these economic considerations, there are numerous additional bases for making the case for work and family policies. These include promoting the goals of gender equity, public health, child welfare, elder welfare, and family stability. There is much to be said to support the view that gender equity and equality in the workforce will not be complete without major progress in the area of work and family (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Heymann (2000) among others has shown that the inflexibility of schedules of working parents poses problems for their children, including the inability to attend appointments with teachers, difficulty in scheduling doctor’s appointments for children with chronic conditions such as asthma. Care of the elderly by their adult children affects the recipients as well as their caregivers (Moen, Robison, & Fields, 1994; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2003; Wermuth, 2011). Presser (2005) presented evidence that the 24-7 economy can disrupt family life, and in some cases contribute to marital dissolution. Still others argue place caring at the center of the analysis in ethical, political (Tronto, 1993, 2013), or economic terms (Folbre, 2001).

To summarize, there are many distinct frames of reference on which to base the case for addressing work and family issues at the level of the firm, the nation and even the international community. Work and family researchers can assess theory and evidence as they relate to these many aspects of the issue. The range of considerations broadens when one considers the diversity of work and family needs.

Diversity

Work and family challenges vary by work setting and family situation. Among the key dimensions of diversity are social class, family composition, one’s stage in the life course, corporate policies and culture, and the extent and nature of work regulations and supportive social services.

While dual earner families and their unique time pressures are increasingly common, they are by no means the whole story. Nearly one-third (32%) of children in the US were not living with two parents in 2012; 86% of single parents were mothers and 14% were fathers (US Census Bureau, 2013). Family needs vary over the life cycle, with the care needs of children giving way to the care needs of the elderly. Children and other family members with special needs create particular demands for families. Work and family research encompasses this wide spectrum of situations.

Just as families are diverse, so too are workplaces. In the US, work and family challenges of professional and managerial workers are very different from those in blue-collar jobs. The former work many hours per week, but tend to have flexible work arrangements and the financial wherewithal to handle challenges. Blue collar workers, in contrast, often seek to work more hours per week in order to be able to earn enough to make ends meet (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Their jobs tend to be less flexible and more place specific. For example, sales clerks and cashiers are rarely in a position to work from home.

Part-time jobs and those without benefits leave workers vulnerable. In the US, workers in this type of job are easily fired and rarely receive benefits such as health insurance and paid sick leave. The result is that one size does not fit all. A spectrum of situations needs a spectrum of responses by corporations and government.

It should also be noted that the diversity of situations and needs complicates the work–family agenda. From the work and family scholar’s point of view, the need for a range of policies to address the needs of disparate groups fits together as part of a larger mosaic. The average voter, however, may see after school programs and support for elder care as unrelated issues. Does a middle-class professional with an incessantly ringing iphone see a week of sick leave for part-time restaurant workers as part of a package of work/family reforms that could benefit all? The same professional may opt for privately paid, high-quality after-school care or day care, and thus be less likely to support public programs in these areas.

Moving our focus from diversity within the US context to diversity across countries, the extent and nature of policies that pertain to work and family vary widely across countries. The need for work and family issues, however, is growing in many parts of the world as modern forms of work arrangements disrupt traditional forms of family support (see the essay by Heymann, McNeill, & Earle, 2013).

From the point of view of WFRN members, the diversity of work–family needs and work–family interactions adds complexity to the already complex conversations between researchers from diverse disciplinary and national backgrounds. The range of these conversations naturally leads us to consider the issue of interdisciplinarity.

Interdisciplinarity

One of the most compelling features of the WFRN is its interdisciplinary character. Researchers from sociology, management, family studies, gender studies, psychology, economics, education, public health, public policy and many other fields come together to share findings and questions of interest. Interdisciplinarity has been widely discussed in recent years (Jacobs, 2013). Since terminology in this area can be confusing and claims for the benefits of interdisciplinarity are often overstated, a few comments on this theme are in order.

The first point to be made is that research in the work and family is already interdisciplinary. By that I mean that researchers in one discipline frequently draw on scholarship from other disciplines. While it is clear that scholars tend to be more familiar with research within their field rather than outside it, the extent of cross-disciplinary citations is notable.

Figures 3 and 4 display citations to prominent studies classified by the field of the journal in which the citations appeared. **Figure 3** presents citations to three books that have been influential in sociology: Rosabeth Moss Kanter’s *Men and Women of the Corporation*; John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey’s *Time for Life*; and Janet

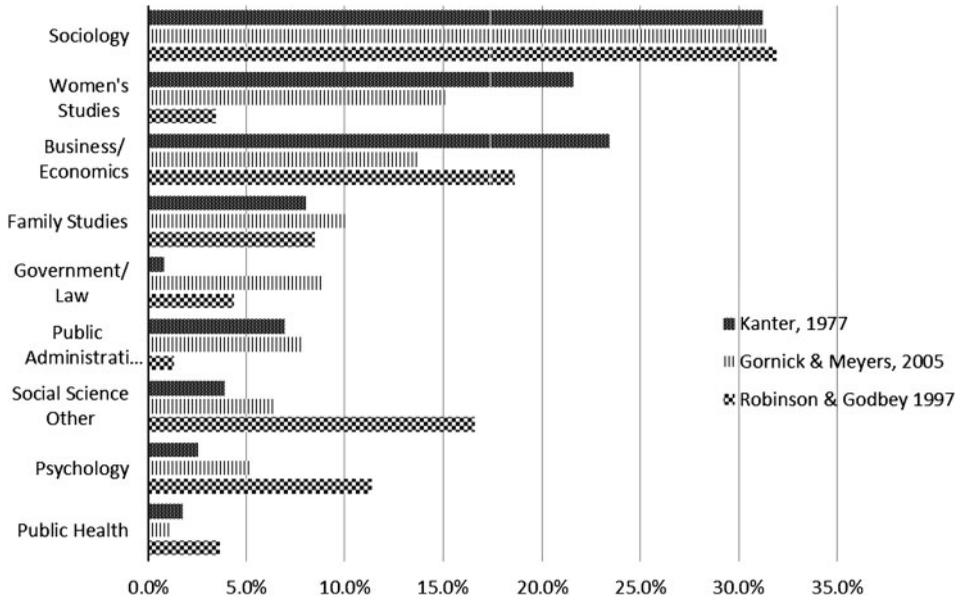


Figure 3. Kanter (1977), Robinson and Godbey (1997), Gornick and Meyers (2005). Source: ISI Web of Knowledge.

Gornick and Marcia Meyer’s *Families that Work*. In each of these cases, citations in sociology journals are most common, yet for none of these does sociology represent more than one-third of references. The scholarly audience for these studies include

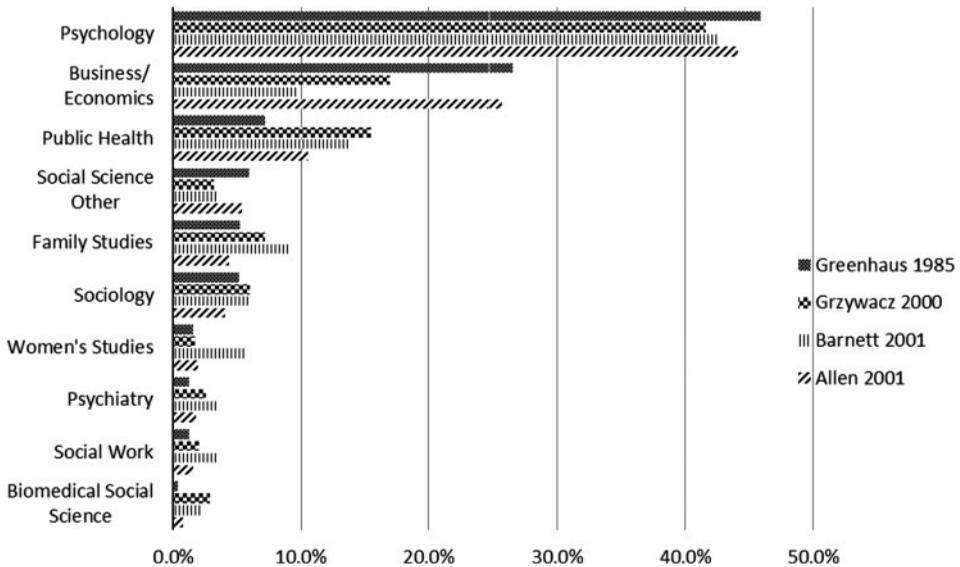


Figure 4. Citations to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), Barnett and Hyde (2001), Gryzwacz and Nadine (2000), Allen (2001). Source: ISI Web of Knowledge.

women's studies, business and economics, and family studies, along with law and government, psychology, and public health. While the distribution of references across fields varies to some degree, there is a considerable commonality in the pattern.

It should be noted that the academic locations of the authors of these three influential studies are themselves quite varied. Kanter is a sociologist by training who has long been a faculty member at a business school. Robinson, a sociologist, collaborated with Godbey, a leisure studies specialist. Gornick is a member of a Political Science Department with a secondary appointment in sociology, while her co-author, Marcia Meyer, is based in social work. Thus, the prominence of these studies in sociology occurs despite the fact that most of these authors are not based in sociology departments.

The second set of studies, shown in [Figure 4](#), displays a different but nonetheless interdisciplinary pattern of influence. The articles authored by Jeffrey Greenhaus and Nicholas Beutell (1985), Rosalind Barnett and Janet Hyde (2001), Joseph Gryzwacs and Nadine Marks (2000), and Tammy Allen (2001) are most influential in psychology journals, followed closely by journals in the area of business and economics. This pattern makes sense because these are studies that examine corporate-based employment practices from a social-psychological perspective. These studies are also cited in public health journals and a wide spectrum of other fields, but their concentration in psychology and business journals is prominent. The commonalities in the distribution of references in [Figure 4](#) are even more evident than was the case with the sociological studies graphed in [Figure 3](#).

While it is hard for any individual to keep up with the burgeoning volume of research in this area, the evidence presented in Figures 3 and 4 suggests that disciplinary distinctions in this area of scholarship do not represent hardened silos. On the contrary, the volume of cross-disciplinary references makes it clear that work and family scholarship routinely draws from many sources. Thus, even without cross-field collaboration, researchers in the area of work and family draw on diverse sources of literature.

I want to avoid the temptation to oversell interdisciplinarity. There is nothing inherently magical in it, and nothing inherently bad about a disciplinary approach. Indeed, the results of interdisciplinary conversations and efforts at collaboration are often disappointing (Strober, 2011), and successful cross-field projects are based on in-depth discipline-based knowledge.

Interdisciplinarity is a challenge because there is too much to know and too many lines of research to keep up with. Some of the presentations at this conference will be too applied for your taste, while others may seem too theoretical. Some speakers are convinced that political strategies are indispensable, while others maintain that corporate solutions are the only viable way forward at present. Some will fit with your conceptual and empirical assumptions and others may not. My summary of these issues is that work and family research represents an extensive terrain of inter-related topics. We have a great deal to learn from each other. We should focus on common concerns and ways to improve research and public understanding of these issues without letting disciplinary differences get in the way.

Opportunities and challenges

As we have seen, work and family issues are of growing interest to academics. They are also growing in importance as substantive concerns. They are evident in one form or another in country after country around the world, as the essay by Heymann and her colleagues (2013) attests.

Policy needs are complex, since work and family issues pertain to so many aspects of life. One important point to keep in mind is that some important policies may be adopted for reasons having little to do with reducing work–family conflict. For example, after-school programs were enacted in part because they contribute to a reduction in crime (Newman, Fox, Flynn, & Christeson, 2000). Thus, policy research in this area can examine the direct effects of reform on work–family conflict as well as considering potential secondary impacts of these policies.

Another impetus to further research in this area is the fact that the nature of work is rapidly evolving. The nature of work and the workplace is a moving target, due in part to the pressures of the global economy and the impact of ever-more-rapid technological change (Cappelli, 2008; Kalleberg, 2011). Families too are evolving – in their form, duration, and in terms of cultural expectations. The interaction of these moving targets gives us plenty to study.

With respect to challenges, the doctrine of austerity that remains ascendant in many countries is threatening the underpinnings of the welfare state that has cushioned work–family tensions in many countries. While economists such as Paul Krugman (2013) maintain that excesses in the financial system and misguided fiscal policy are the cause of our problems, the enduring economic doldrums are nonetheless attributed within the political realm to the welfare state and excessive labor regulations.

In many countries, positive achievements in the work and family area are part and parcel of a welfare state and regulated labor market. The recession threatens these long-standing achievements. Budget cuts represent ongoing challenges to key social services and the welfare state itself. Efforts to reduce or dismantle labor protections could sweep away progress that was decades in the making.

Efforts to cut back the pensions and other protections for public sector employees are an additional source of concern, since government employees often have achieved some of the most extensive work and family protections. Women, as well as members of minority groups, are disproportionately concentrated in public sector employment and will bear the brunt of cuts in this sector. Efforts to undermine public sector unions pose the risk of additional declines in union membership and disproportionately affect women and minority groups. Thus, efforts to protect the existing work and family policies need to go hand in hand with advancing new initiatives in this area.

Conclusion

The field of work and family research covers a larger and increasingly important series of inter-related topics, which cover the range from basic science to applied studies and policy-related research. There is much that we can learn from each other if we are willing to reach across disciplines, research styles, and national borders. Let us strive to focus on common concerns rather than the myriad of lines of

demarcation that could divide and divert us from our goals. Let us seek opportunities to collaborate to enhance research and understanding of work and family issues. And let us resolve to develop ways to more effectively inform key stakeholders, including corporate leaders, policy makers, and the broader public.

Notes

1. For reviews of portions of this literature, see Byron (2005) and Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, and Brinley (2005).
2. This analysis relies on the ISI Web of Knowledge data base because of its journal classification system and its ability to classify publications by year.

Notes on contributor

Jerry A. Jacobs is a professor of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, where he has taught since earning his Ph.D. in sociology at Harvard in 1983. In 2012, he served as a Founding President of the Work and Family Researchers Network, an interdisciplinary and international scholarly association that focuses on work and family issues. His numerous books, edited volumes, journal articles and book chapters have addressed various aspects of women's employment, including authority, earnings, working conditions, part-time work and work-family conflict, and entry into male-dominated occupations. Specific studies have targeted women physicians, academics, managers and welfare recipients. His research with Kathleen Gerson was honored with the Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award for Excellence in Work-Family Research in 2002, and led to the publication of *The Time Divide: Work, Family and Gender Inequality*, published by Harvard University Press in 2004. His current projects include an experimental survey of attitudes toward the employment of parents of young children.

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