
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 overwork 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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.

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

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

25 26 **Unpacking Dependent Care from** 27 **Work–Family** 28

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

1 Once we unpack this issue, we can
2 begin to see it clearly. There are many
3 dimensions on which dependent care needs
4 further identification, but I suggest four as
5 good places to start: dependents, roles,
6 resources, and definitions. There are dif-
7 ferences between, for example, being the
8 primary caregiver for a healthy 12-year-old,
9 an infant, an infirm elder, and a severely
10 disabled adult, and the impact may be mul-
11 tiplicative in cases where these categories
12 combine for one caregiver (Rothausen,
13 1999). Having other human beings depen-
14 dent on you for physical or emotional care
15 and development is qualitatively different
16 from having them dependent on you for
17 economic resources. Doing dependent care
18 is a dissimilar experience in different socioe-
19 conomic classes and with different configu-
20 rations of family and community supports.
21 Finally, as a field, we should take care to
22 include both legal and functional families,
23 as both produce dependents and resources
24 for caring for them.

25 Probably the primary, longest term
26 dependent care category is children. Is car-
27 ing for children a choice? Sometimes, to
28 some extent, but not completely. Should
29 that matter? If so, how? These are important
30 issues to address. Similarly, is being child-
31 free a choice? Again, sometimes, but not
32 always. Can we acknowledge the different
33 nature of child and dependent care in orga-
34 nizations without *unduly* privileging them?
35 Regardless of the role of free will, once chil-
36 dren exist they are a responsibility which, in
37 our society, is largely privatized to parents;
38 however when parents aren’t willing or able
39 to do their care work well, organizations
40 and society pay in the longer term in many
41 ways. Others (e.g., Kittay, 1995) elucidate
42 problems with simply framing children as
43 a choice for individuals and couples on
44 par with lifestyle choices such as volun-
45 teering or training for a marathon. How a
46 generation is raised impacts the ability of a
47 whole culture to thrive. At the societal level,
48 we acknowledge this by public education.
49 At the other end of life, we acknowledge
50 dependency by programs that fund elder
51 security whether or not the receiving elders

1 contributed directly to the care and nurtur-
 2 ing of the generation paying in. There was
 3 a time in the United States when depen-
 4 dents were acknowledged in organizations
 5 as well, such as when a “family man”
 6 got a pay bump by virtue of having eco-
 7 nomic dependents. That approach may be
 8 inequitable, but does this mean that no
 9 acknowledgement should be given?

10 We should also further unpack *work*
 11 and *family*, beyond dependent care. Other
 12 elements of family include care that encom-
 13 passes nondependents, such as creating
 14 a home, preparing meals, and keeping
 15 the family social calendar, as well as
 16 nonresponsibility-related elements such as
 17 the quality of relationships themselves.
 18 Roles, relationships, and responsibilities in
 19 the family likely interact with roles, relation-
 20 ships, and responsibilities at work on vital
 21 outcomes for individual and organizational
 22 health (Rothausen, 2009).

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

28 By now, it is commonly discussed, and
 29 Kossek et al. present new evidence, that
 30 Americans who have jobs work more than
 31 do individuals in almost any other nation.
 32 But other roles also profoundly impact
 33 the health and vitality of society, such as
 34 community involvement and citizenship.
 35 In addition, there are facets of life that
 36 impact the health and vitality of individuals
 37 within society, such as involvement in
 38 spiritual pursuits, art, and sport. What are
 39 the impacts of a de facto choice between
 40 meaningfully engaging these and keeping
 41 one’s job?

42 It is time to unpack the term *life* as well,
 43 and here we have help from life construc-
 44 tion and career researchers (e.g., Hansen,
 45 1997; Super, 1990), who have examined
 46 combinations of work with citizenship, care
 47 of one’s physical and mental health, vol-
 48 unteering, spirituality, ethnic identity, and
 49 leisure, among other life facets. As I–O
 50 and OB researchers, we should explore the
 51 qualities of and outcomes for organizations

1 where employees do not engage other life
 2 facets, versus those in which they do. What
 3 barriers are there to packaging work in
 4 smaller bundles, say of 10, 20, or 30 hours
 5 per week? What barriers are there to paying
 6 for work results rather than for time? Should
 7 there really be the “right to leisure” (e.g.,
 8 Reeves, 1994) or the “right to have a life”?
 9 How about the right not to “get a life”? How
 10 would fair treatment of these issues look in
 11 organizations? How should life facets com-
 12 bine with dependent care? Do organizations
 13 want their employees to be able to engage
 14 in meaningful paid work, significant depen-
 15 dent care work, *and* additional facets of life
 16 such as leisure or community?

17 Until we untangle these issues, we will
 18 struggle to have impact. Kossek et al. sug-
 19 gest this, but their treatment illustrates
 20 the field’s confusion. They state that we
 21 need to “drop the use of ‘work–life’ as
 22 the politically correct way to talk about
 23 work–family matters” (p. 13) and that we
 24 should refer to specific roles instead. How-
 25 ever, they also “define family broadly
 26 and do not use the term simply to refer
 27 to traditional nuclear families, but to
 28 the nonwork and personal roles of all
 29 employees” (p. 6). What is the difference
 30 between that approach and using the term
 31 work–life? Both obscure more than they
 32 reveal.

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1 to organizational actors yet still powerfully
2 impact organizational phenomenon (e.g.,
3 Kelan & Jones, 2010). What we don't
4 see, we don't study or manage. Gender
5 is key to a fuller base of knowledge in
6 this field because it fundamentally impacts
7 dependent care and other roles at work, in
8 families, and in lives (Williams, 2000).

9 10 11 **Integrating Dependent Care, Life** 12 **Construction, and Gender Into I-O** 13 **and OB**

14 Although Kossek et al. (2011, p. x) argue
15 that work–family “has finally moved from
16 the margins to the mainstream,” my obser-
17 vation is that researching it is not as valued
18 as researching mainstream topics in I-O
19 and OB. Yet in my own consulting and
20 research, I have repeatedly encountered
21 evidence that dependent care and other ele-
22 ments of life deeply impact what happens at
23 work for some employees, in terms of their
24 emotions at work, attitudes toward their
25 jobs and organizations, and their behaviors
26 including performance and retention (e.g.,
27 Rothausen, Malshe, & Arnold, 2011). Our
28 mindsets in I-O and OB tend to ignore
29 this, but it wasn't always so. Let's look at
30 just one example: job satisfaction. In his
31 ground-breaking study of job satisfaction
32 75 years ago, Hoppock (1935, p. 5) noted
33 that studying job satisfaction would not be
34 simple.

35
36 ... there may be no such thing as job
37 satisfaction independent of the other sat-
38 isfactions in one's life. Family relation-
39 ships, health, relative social status in the
40 community, and a multitude of other fac-
41 tors may be just as important as the job
42 itself in determining what we tentatively
43 choose to call job satisfaction.

44
45 Where has recognition of this gone?
46 We define overall job satisfaction as
47 “the sum of the evaluations of the dis-
48 criminable elements of which the job
49 is composed...” (Locke, 1969, p. 330),
50 thereby institutionalizing separation of the
51 focal arena for exploring what causes job

satisfaction. Although we have explored
1 relationships among and between job,
2 family, and life satisfactions, and these with
3 behaviors of interest, we have not inte-
4 grated the impact of family and life into this
5 work-domain construct (myself included;
6 Rothausen, 1994).

7
8 I challenge the field to explore integra-
9 tion of family and life into core work con-
10 structs *in addition* to studying the impacts
11 of each domain on the other, as is the
12 focus of most work–family research now.
13 We can utilize literatures that have been
14 underapplied to work–family to date, and
15 that treat work, family, and other life facets
16 as an interrelated whole, such as the iden-
17 tity, social capital, and meaning of work
18 literatures. In psychology literatures, iden-
19 tity refers to “a coherent sense of one's
20 roles and occupational pathway, one's self
21 in relation to others, and one's values and
22 purpose in life” (LaGuardia, 2009, p. 91,
23 emphasis mine). People identify as indi-
24 viduals and in terms of others, both in
25 specific relationships and in terms of collec-
26 tives, including sociodemographic, work,
27 and family memberships, in sometimes
28 highly interrelated ways (Rothausen et al.,
29 2011). Social capital theory models interre-
30 lationships and activities across separated
31 domains (Rothausen, 2009). In a summary
32 of their eight-country study on the mean-
33 ing of work, England and Whitley (1990,
34 p. 66) conclude:

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

44
45 Use of these theoretical perspectives may
46 result in integration of family and life into
47 work-domain constructs. Perhaps we must
48 have this impact on core work constructs
49 in our own larger disciplines, I-O and OB,
50 before we can have a significant impact on
51 organizations and workers.

1 We will not have solutions to work–
 2 family challenges for workers and organi-
 3 zations immediately simply by refocusing
 4 on core issues across levels, but I believe
 5 we will be multiple steps closer to discov-
 6 ery of knowledge that could contribute to
 7 feasible, successful solutions.
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AQ1. Please update ref. "Rothausen et al. 2011" in list.
