1. Work and family life: revitalizing research and practice

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Women and men have participated in work and family roles and responsibilities for thousands of years. Serious academic interest in the work and family interface is less than 50 years old (Kahn et al., 1964). Organizational interest in addressing work and family issues of employees is only 30 years old (Kossek et al., 2011a). During the past 30 years we have increased our understanding of antecedents and consequences of work–family concerns, with more organizations undertaking initiatives to support the work–family integration of their employees and lessening their conflict.

But some contend that progress in both understanding and preventing work–family distress seems to have slowed during the past decade (e.g., Grzywacs and Demerouti, 2013; Kossek et al., 2011a). Much of the research seems to be covering the same ground, and little innovation has been observed in organizational initiatives to support women, men and families. In the popular media, the role of work organizations in supporting work–life integration, the business case for family-friendly policies, and the feasibility of ‘having it all’ continue to be questioned.

THE PUBLIC DEBATE

How work and family lives can be effectively managed has been a hot topic of public debate in recent years. The issues that make their way into the popular press and the manner in which they are treated tell us something about how work–family issues are perceived in the public consciousness. For instance, much of the coverage during 2012–2013 focused on the work–family experiences of high-profile executive women, including Sheryl Sandberg, Anne-Marie Slaughter and Melissa Mayer.

Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer (COO) for Facebook and a mother, garnered attention for work–family issues in December 2010 when her TED Talk about increasing the representation of women at the highest levels of executive leadership became an Internet sensation (Sandberg, 2010). She encouraged women to change their lot themselves: (1) by not
underestimating their own abilities; (2) by making their husbands ‘a real partner’ in terms of sharing childcare and household responsibilities; and (3) by not tempering ambition in anticipation of having a child but instead to ‘keep your foot on the gas pedal’ until it is actually time. Citing statistics that two-thirds of men in senior management have children whereas that figure is only one-third for women, Sandberg recognized that pursuit of the ‘C-suite’ comes with harder choices and more sacrifices for women. Yet, her central message seemed to be that a woman could have it all if only she would work at it, prompting some to speculate that her message was ‘putting even more pressure on women to succeed’ and perhaps, even if unintentionally, ‘blaming the victim if they did not’ (Kantor, 2012).

In a series of videos for Makers.com, Sandberg made headlines again when she shared that she routinely leaves work at 5.30 p.m. to be home for dinner with her family. Reactions were once again mixed. Some applauded her for leading by example in prioritizing family and giving both men and women ‘permission’ to do the same. Others pointed out that her COO position affords her a level of clout, flexibility and resources that few have.

The appointment of Marissa Mayer as Chief Executive Officer of Yahoo! made news, in part, because she was pregnant with her first child at the time. Although initial reactions largely congratulated Yahoo! for its progressiveness, Mayer’s self-imposed two-week maternity leave raised concern about the example and the organizational expectation she was setting for other women. In February 2013, she made another controversial move in the work–family arena, imposing a ban at Yahoo! on working from home.

In a cover story for The Atlantic entitled ‘Why women still can’t have it all’, Anne-Marie Slaughter wrote about why she left her post as the first woman director of policy planning at the State Department, a senior foreign-policy position with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to return to academia (Slaughter, 2012). Slaughter said she returned to her professorial job because she was unable to spend enough time with her family. Even though she had a very supportive husband, a high income, high levels of organizational staff support and some degree of control over her job demands, she still felt unable to devote adequate time to her two sons. She wrote candidly about her ‘epiphany’ that the State Department position did not afford the same level of flexibility she enjoyed in academia, noting that ‘the minute I found myself in a job that is typical for the vast majority of working women (and men), working long hours on someone else’s schedule, I could no longer be both the parent and the professional I wanted to be’. She also wrote that the pervasive message that having it all is simply a matter of ‘personal determination’ is a disservice, especially to women who will be faced with compromises and sacrifices. Hundreds
of thousands of women, and men, accessed her article and thanked her for her honesty. Other high-profile women executives, such as Lehman Brothers’ former Chief Financial Officer, Erin Callan, were inspired to share their own stories, including regrets about having pursued career success by forgoing children and sacrificing other aspects of a fulfilling life (Callan, 2013).

FROM PUBLIC DEBATES TO WORK–LIFE RESEARCH

A number of the issues, both explicit and implicit, in work–life debates played out in the popular media are evident in work–life scholarship. In their public comments and in the example of their lives Sandberg, Slaughter, Callan and even Mayer demonstrate that among professionals, work and family integration is truly a challenge for both men and women, and it is a more difficult and complicated challenge for women than men. In Chapter 7 in this volume, Ahmad, King and Anderson describe gender differences and similarities in work–family conflict, its antecedents and its consequences, as well as the differential implications of parenting on work–life integration for men and women. Huffman and Frevert (Chapter 8 in this volume) discuss how these issues play out in the context of dual-earner couples. Within a family unit, the work–family conflict experienced by one partner has implications for the other partner through crossover and spillover processes (Kinnunen, Rantanen and Mauno, Chapter 5 in this volume). Positive and negative career and family outcomes cross over between partners, demonstrating that men and women can be both allies and enemies when striving for work–family integration (Litano et al., forthcoming).

The public debate demonstrates that work–life discourse remains highly gendered. The media coverage makes plain that it is still remarkable to find women in top executive level spots, especially mothers. The structures in which men and women enact their careers and attempt to integrate it with family are still masculine, and the behavior of men and women as they seek to balance work and family is scrutinized through a gendered lens (Rusconi, Moen and Kaduk, Chapter 6 in this volume). The same behavior is often interpreted and evaluated differently depending on whether the professional in question is a man or a woman.

For those engaged in work–life advocacy, it may be that ‘any press is good press’ so long as it brings work–family issues to the fore. However, the popular media can be faddish and narrow in the scope of work–family topics that receive attention. The examples at the outset of this chapter
highlight executive women and the ‘Is it possible to have it all?’ debate. The work–life research literature, as evidenced by the chapters in this volume, is more encompassing. Our focus here is on professionals, but not executives exclusively. The research represented in this Handbook also demonstrates that work–family integration is not a challenge exclusive to those with young and school-aged children like Mayer and Slaughter. It is an issue that plays out over the life course (Rusconi et al., Chapter 6 in this volume) and affects workers across generations (Cleveland and McCarthy, Chapter 9 in this volume).

The popular media has a tendency to focus on the fault lines of the work–family interface, the places where integration efforts break down. During its infancy and adolescence, work–family research likewise emphasized negative aspects of the interface, largely focusing on work–family conflict. At this point, research has revealed a great deal about the causes and consequences of work–family conflict (Michel, Clark and Beiler, Chapter 4 in this volume; Michel et al., 2011b). However in recent years, research has increasingly recognized the positive ways in which the work and family domains interact (Casper, De Hauw and Wayne, Chapter 3; Greenhaus and Ten Brummelhuis, Chapter 2; and Wynne and Baltes, Chapter 10 – all in this volume).

THE STATE OF RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Research Vitality

There is a great deal to applaud in the study of work–life integration. It began as a topic treated as peripheral to many fields (e.g., industrial and organizational psychology, organizational behavior, sociology and economics) and has become recognized as a major multidisciplinary research specialty. Several signs point to the health of the field. Across the globe there are numerous university-based work–family institutes (e.g., Berger Institute for Work, Family and Children at Claremont McKenna University in California, USA). Between two bi-annual conferences, work–family researchers from across disciplines now have an opportunity to convene annually. Since 2005, the International Center for Work and Family at IESE Business School at the University of Navarra in Barcelona has sponsored the bi-annual International Conference for Work and Family attracting an international array of work–family scholars. Based in the USA, the Work and Family Research Network hosted its inaugural bi-annual conference in 2012, likewise appealing to a multidisciplinary group of scholars from around the globe. These opportunities
exist alongside numerous within-discipline conferences (e.g., psychology, occupational health, management) that also include work–family research.

Since 2000, the best in work–family scholarship has been recognized annually by the Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award for Excellence in Work–Family Research given in partnership by the Center for Families at Purdue University, USA, the Center for Work and Family at Boston College, USA, and the Alliance of Work–Life Progress. According to the sponsors, ‘This award raises awareness of high quality work–family research among the scholar, consultant, and practitioner communities. It fosters debate about what the standards of quality for work–family research should be, and, ultimately, will raise those standards. And, it identifies the “best of the best” on which to base future research.’

Another sign of the health of the work–family research field is the number of high-quality reviews and meta-analyses published in recent years (e.g., Amstad et al., 2011; Byron, 2005; Casper et al., 2007; Eby et al., 2005; Ford et al., 2007; Hoobler et al., 2010; Kossek et al., 2011b; Michel et al., 2011a; Michel et al., 2011b; Michel et al., 2009; Shockley and Singla, 2011). The publication of edited work–family collections likewise demonstrates the vitality of this research area. For example, Grzywacz and Demerouti’s (2013) New Frontiers in Work and Family Research calls for new research approaches. Poelmans et al. (2013a) celebrate research from the first three IESE International Conferences for Work and Family and engage in visioning on topics such as work–family decision-making (Poelmans et al., 2013b) and coping with work–family conflict (Major et al., 2013).

Finally, the rise in international and cross-cultural research also speaks to the health of work–family scholarship. Creating Balance? International Perspectives on the Work–Life Integration of Professionals edited by Kaiser et al. (2011) is one example of a volume that purposefully takes a cross-national perspective. This Handbook likewise brings together international scholars and considers cross-cultural issues in the work–life interface (Masuda, Chapter 17; and Ollier-Malaterre, Sarkisian, Stawiski and Hannum, Chapter 18).

Progress in Practice

Research has advanced our understanding of how to reduce work–family conflict and how to improve the work–family interface. For example, research has established that flexibility is an essential component of individual and organizational strategies that alleviate work–family conflict (Hill and Morrison, Chapter 14 in this volume). Research also demonstrates the
ways in which information and communication technologies can be used by individuals and organizations to either enhance or detract from successful work–life integration (Chesley, Siibak and Wajcman, Chapter 13 in this volume). Research supports the effectiveness of certain organizational initiatives (e.g., flexible work arrangements) and has yielded best practices regarding the design and implementation of work–life policies (Hammer, Van Dyck and Ellis, Chapter 15 in this volume). Likewise, knowledge of individual strategies for rest and recovery (Demerouti, Bakker and Sanz-Vergel, Chapter 12 in this volume) and insight regarding coping with work–family conflict (Morganson, Culbertson and Matthews, Chapter 11 in this volume) have been improved through a proliferation of research in recent years.

ADVANCING WORK–LIFE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Despite the vitality of work–life research and the gains that have been made in practice, the public discourse and scholarly critiques suggest there is more to be done. Kossek et al. (2011a) contend that, relative to the amount of work and family research that has been undertaken, very little impact in the lives of working women and men has resulted. They identify implementation gaps between work–family research and practice, explain why reducing these gaps is important, and argue persuasively that better and different work–family research should be undertaken. This Handbook articulates what is known regarding work–life integration among professionals and paves the way for ‘better’ future research and practice. Key components of the path forward are described below.

Incorporate Strong Theory

A long-accepted tenet in the social sciences is that good research, and subsequently good practice, is rooted in strong theory (Lewin, 1951). Lewin’s notion that ‘There is nothing so practical as a good theory’ is apt in the work–family arena. Though criticized for being largely atheoretical in the past (e.g., Kingston, 1988), the theoretical foundations of work–family research are better articulated today (cf. Greenhaus and Ten Brummelhuis, Chapter 2 in this volume). Moreover, work–family research benefits when informed by theories from associated research domains, such as leadership (Major and Cleveland, 2007; Major and Morganson, 2011).
Clarify Constructs

Better research also requires better construct clarity. As Morganson et al. (Chapter 11 in this volume) point out, our work–family constructs are rather ‘messy’ in the manner in which they are defined and applied. For example, we have used the terms ‘work–life’ and ‘work–family’ interchangeably throughout this chapter. However, some argue that ‘work–life’ is the better term because it is more encompassing of non-work roles and is more inclusive of single employees and non-parents. Conversely, others contend that ‘work–family’ is the preferred term because it keeps the focus squarely on the two major domains of life, which are most challenging to integrate.

Work–family or work–life ‘integration’ has been variously defined and operationalized by both the absence of negative relationships (e.g., reduced work–family conflict) and the presence of positive relationships (e.g., greater work–family fit). Work–family integration has also been examined from a boundary management perspective, wherein integration involves blending and merging work and family, diminishing their boundaries (Bulger et al., 2007; Greenhaus and Allen, 2011; Kreiner, 2006; Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005). Morganson et al. (Chapter 11 in this volume) place work–life integration at the neutral midpoint on a continuum of work–life constructs ranging from negative (e.g., conflict) to positive (e.g., enrichment). As Wynne and Baltes (Chapter 10 in this volume) point out, the definition matters. Consistent with Kanter’s (1977) notion of ‘the myth of separate worlds’, the term work–life integration is applied as an acknowledgment that the work and family spheres are inextricably linked. This notion, which captures our intended meaning in this chapter and in the *Handbook’s* title, is accepted and a benign ‘given’ at this point in the development of the work–family literature. In contrast, work–life integration as an active strategy is not neutral but rather a course of action that can be associated with considerable negative consequences (e.g., inter-role conflict, process loss, negative spillover; Wynne and Baltes, Chapter 10 in this volume).

Apply a Multi-Level and Multi-Agent Approach

Both research and practice benefit when work–family issues are understood at multiple levels and from the perspectives of multiple agents (Hammer et al., Chapter 15 in this volume; Major and Bolen, forthcoming). Work–family research has largely emphasized the individual level. Even when other levels are implied, the conceptualization and operationalization of constructs centers on individual perceptions (e.g., family supportive organizational perceptions; Allen, 2001). We encourage work–family
researchers to thoughtfully grapple with levels issues in their research, as Shockley et al. do in Chapter 16 in this volume with respect to work–family culture.

Fully understanding work–family issues also means acknowledging multiple agents or stakeholders. There is, of course, the individual employee, and in the case of crossover concerns, his or her partner as well (see Kinnunen et al., Chapter 5 in this volume). The immediate supervisor or leader is likewise a vested agent who influences and may be affected by an employee’s work–family outcomes (Hammer et al., Chapter 15 in this volume; Major and Morganson, 2011). Coworkers and family members are also stakeholders who may impact and be impacted by a given employee’s work–family outcomes (Major and Bolen, forthcoming).

In the work–family arena, multi-level and multi-agent considerations not only have scientific relevance but have social implications as well. When it comes to work–family conflict, there remains a great deal of political debate regarding just whose problem it is, and more importantly, who should be responsible for fixing it. For example, when research and popular media focus on individuals, the message is that work–family integration is a personal matter. Similarly, when the focus is on women, as in the case of the media attention on the executive women described at the outset of this chapter, work–life issues are more likely to be construed as a ‘women’s issue’. A focus on the business case for work–family interventions suggests that employees’ work–life matters may be an organization’s concern, but perhaps only if such issues have a measurable impact on the bottom line. Finally, a focus on national policy suggests that governments have some responsibility for the work–family welfare of their citizens. In actuality, there is no simple solution or single practice that makes work–family integration successful. Instead, work–family interventions have a better chance of success when there is alignment across national social policy, organizational policies, organizational culture, leadership and management practices, and individual efforts (Hammer et al., Chapter 15; Masuda, Chapter 17; Shockley, Thompson and Andreassi, Chapter 16 – all in this volume).

Consider Cross-Cultural and Cross-National Issues

The majority of work–family research has been carried out in Western developed countries such as the US, UK, Canada, Germany and Australia. Kossek et al. (2011a) determined that over 95 percent of work–family studies used Western samples. This is slowly changing, with more work–family research being conducted in developing countries (e.g., Hassan et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2000) and with some of this work being comparative (e.g., Spector et al., 2007; Spector et al., 2004). Lu (2012) reviewed work–
family relationship research carried out in China, Taiwan and other Asian countries, determining that findings were generally consistent with those obtained in the West. However, in almost all of this research, measures previously developed and used in Western countries were employed.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding work–family integration is complex. Over the past few decades, the difficulties that employees encounter in managing the demands of both work and family life have received a great deal of attention. Given that we are living in an era of economic uncertainty, it is unlikely that the interest will wane in the near future (Lauzun et al., 2012). The antecedents and consequences of work–family conflict are well documented (Amstad et al., 2011; Byron, 2005; Michel et al., Chapter 4 in this volume; Michel et al., 2011b). The challenge resides in identifying best practices for prevention and intervention across cultures. Ultimately, the responsibility for achieving work–family integration is shared by both the organization and the individual.

NOTE

1. Preparation of this chapter was supported in part by Old Dominion University, USA and York University, Canada.

REFERENCES


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