
Work–Family Research: A Broader View of Impact

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We agree with many of the suggestions made by Kossek, Baltes, and Matthews (2011) that pertain to future directions for work and family research. They pose excellent avenues for the field to take. However, we offer an alternative viewpoint with regard to several of the assertions, both explicit and implicit, made along the way. We first address specific claims made by Kossek et al. with regard to family-friendly policy implementation, followed by a discussion of impact and the role researchers have with regard to the applied impact of scientific research. Finally, we note the importance of carefully considering when research is ready to be applied.

A More Optimistic Assessment

Kossek et al. cite research suggesting that (a) employers have been reducing their offerings of family-friendly benefits and (b) this should be interpreted as a sign of the low impact of work–family research. Our interpretation of the current state of affairs is more optimistic. First, there is little evidence to support the claim that work–family policies are on the decline. Our review of

the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) report cited in Kossek et al. reveals no significant differences in flexible work benefits offered by employers between those surveyed in 2009 and in 2010. A significant decline in the offering of flextime between 2006 and 2010 was reported, but that was accompanied by a significant *increase* in the availability of telecommuting on a part-time basis (SHRM, 2010; Table G-2). The 13 other flexible work practices assessed showed no change. Of the 23 family-friendly benefits assessed in the SHRM report, three declined from 2006 to 2010 (elder care referral service, adoption assistance, and foster care assistance) and one increased (bring child to work in emergency; Table F-2). No changes were detected between 2009 and 2010. Other reports suggest that employers intend to increase their flexibility offerings. For example, according to a 2010 survey of over 2,700 human resource professionals, 35% indicated that they planned to provide more flexible work arrangements to employees, compared to 31% surveyed in the previous year (CareerBuilder, 2010). A 2009 report released by the Families and Work Institute (FWI) found that most employers were either maintaining the workplace flexibility that they offer or planning to increase it during the recession (Galinsky & Bond, 2009).

Kossek et al. also suggest that paid maternity leave is under attack. However, a review of the original source material for the Shellenbarger (2008) article provides

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a more nuanced understanding of the situation. The maternity leave data come from a FWI study (Galinsky, Bond, Sakai, Kim, & Giuntoli, 2008). The Galinsky et al. study does indicate that the percentage of employers who offer full pay to employees during maternity-related disability dropped from 27% to 16%. However, the vast majority of employers provide pay during maternity disability as part of a temporary medical disability insurance benefit (85% in 2008) not as a distinct maternity leave benefit. Thus, the decline is in total disability benefits not maternity benefits per se. Moreover, in 1998, 53% of employers reported that female employees received some pay during the period of maternity disability compared to 56% in 2008. Turning back to the SHRM study, no significant differences in the number of employers who offer parental leave were detected between 2006 and 2010.

The notion that work–family benefits are somehow underappreciated and/or on the decline can be further questioned based on the widespread attention given to flexibility outside of academia. One of the most striking examples is the effort to promote workplace flexibility within the Obama Administration. In March of 2010, the Obama Administration held a White House Forum on workplace flexibility (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/04/01/a-conversation-workplace-flexibility>). In addition, the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor is currently engaged in a *National Dialogue on Workplace Flexibility* (<http://www.dol.gov/wb/media/natlDialogue2.htm>). Furthermore, on February 1, 2011 SHRM and FWI announced a partnership intended to “transform the way organizations view and adopt workplace flexibility” (<http://www.shrm.org/about/news/Pages/FWIPartnership.aspx>). Each of these efforts is being informed by the research conducted by work–family researchers. Thus, we reach a different conclusion than Kossek et al. and suggest that work–family benefits are not on the decline and that, in fact, there is considerable enthusiasm for their greater implementation.

Although we view these nationwide initiatives and aforementioned data on policy implementation as evidence that work–family research has indeed made an applied impact, we also suggest that a broader view of impact be adopted that extends beyond application.

Impact and the Role of Researchers

Kossek et al. state that, “to date, work–family researchers have not made a significant impact in improving the lives of employees relative to the amount of research that has been conducted” (p. 353). This statement begs the follow-up question: *What is significant impact?* We believe it is a misdirection of energy to evaluate the impact of our research *solely* on the basis of the number of companies that have family-supportive initiatives in place or on employee reports of reduced work-related stress. Impact exists not only when research findings are implemented in the field, but also when the knowledge generated *eventually* influences decisions in the field, either directly or indirectly through informing and influencing subsequent research. That is, it is important to view the success of our research from a programmatic perspective.

Work–family researchers are first and foremost responsible for ensuring the progress and integrity of the scientific enterprise. Our point of view is consistent with that expressed by Cronin and Klimoski (2011). The *primary* role of the researcher is to supply valid research. Rather than being accountable for the ultimate use of what we supply, the first obligation of researchers is to generate knowledge within a field. It is then the responsibility of organizational stakeholders to incorporate these scientifically based findings into practice in a manner that best works for their organizations. This is not to suggest that researchers should lack concern for application. We recognize that industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology is an applied psychology, and we fully embrace the scientist–practitioner model. However, by viewing application as

the sine qua non of impact, our scholarly efforts may stray from the principal goal of producing valid knowledge, thereby skipping the programmatic steps needed along the way to produce applicable knowledge. Without programmatic research, practices may be prematurely “brought to market.”

To illustrate this point, we draw on an example from the human performance literature. In one of the first studies on the issue, researchers found that drivers talking on a cell phone were four times more likely to have an accident than those not (Redelmeier & Tibshirani, 1997). Some state and local governments were quick to implement these findings and prohibited the use of hand-held cell phones while driving, thus spawning the increased use and acceptance of hands-free cell phone devices. This change in policy might be considered evidence of this research having impact. Although researchers in the field have yet to reach consensus, recent studies (e.g., Strayer & Drews, 2007) indicate that the dangers of cell phone use while driving may lie in the attentional demands of conversation not in the manual use of a hand-held device. Other research shows that driving while using a hands-free headset is also associated with negative driving outcomes (e.g., Strayer, Drews, & Johnston, 2003); thus, legislation mandating hands-free headsets, based on the premature application of initial research by policy makers, may have missed the mark and left drivers using hands-free headsets to erroneously believe they were engaging in “safe” driving behaviors.

A similar phenomenon may be occurring with regard to flexible work practices. Early meta-analytic research demonstrated that flexibility was associated with positive outcomes such as reduced absenteeism and increased job satisfaction (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999). These findings have seemingly been extrapolated in a way that suggests that flexible work practices also help individuals avoid work–family conflict. However, research relating workplace flexibility to less work–family conflict is mixed at best

(Allen & Shockley, 2009), with subsequent meta-analytic studies showing significant between-study variation with regard to a broad array of outcomes (e.g., Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Yet, the current emphasis, as described earlier, on flexibility as a key tool for managing work and family responsibilities suggests otherwise. Hence, the primary focus of researchers at this juncture should not be on whether or not companies are implementing flexible work practices but rather on conducting programmatic, valid research that reveals a better understanding of the underlying nature of work–family conflict and the types of flexible work practices that do improve the lives of individuals.

Conclusion

In a paper based on his 1965 presidential address to Division 14 of the APA, Marvin Dunnette (1966) discussed delusions suffered by many psychologists. Among them, he noted our propensity for “rationaliz[ing] certain practices on the grounds that they are intrinsically good for humanity and they need not, therefore, meet the usual standards demanded by psychological verification” (p. 346). Dunnette’s point can be fittingly applied to work–family research. Making work more flexible for employees makes sense, and it makes sense that negative events at work have an impact on life outside of work. Improving the lives of employees and their families is, as Dunnette would say, “intrinsically good for humanity.” However, caution must be taken that we do not become so enamored by the desire to make an applied impact that it alone becomes the focus of what we do. Instead, the *primary* responsibility of work–family researchers is to conduct programmatic science based on sound theory and appropriate methodology and to learn from the successes and failures of field implementations. Such an approach is likely to result in science we can both use and feel good about.

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