Advancing Work–Family Research and Practice

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Abstract and Keywords

In this final chapter we offer a summation of some of the major themes contained in this volume with regard to future research needs, including a discussion of work–family theory building, the role of gender in the work–family interface, the diversity of the modern family, family supportive organizational policies and practices, and work-family intervention research. We move beyond summation and review by offering specific new ideas for moving work–family scholarship forward. In doing so we highlight the importance of investing in work–family initiatives that enrich employee lives as well as those that benefit families, organizations, and society at large.

Keywords: work–family theory, modern family, gender, diversity, work–family practice

Introduction

It is an exciting time in the development of work–family scholarship and practice. The field has grown tremendously over the past several decades. Federal agencies are funding work–family research, academic and practice-oriented conferences and meetings dedicated to work–family issues can be found each year, and decision makers within organizations frequently recognize the importance of the topic. The previous chapters within this volume demonstrate the many directions the field has taken and the potential that exists for future growth.

Collectively the authors of this volume provide a rich array of ideas and suggestions that can propel the research and evidence-based practice of the work–family field forward. In this final chapter we identify some of the common themes with regard to future research needs that emerged across the chapters. Our intent is not to repeat the suggestions made by the chapter authors but rather to build upon those themes in an effort to identify several areas that represent “critical mass” for further inquiry and advancement of the work–family field in the years ahead. In the following sections we discuss suggestions for additional research that builds on five themes that cut across the various chapters: (1)

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theory building, (2) the role of gender, (3) the diversity of the modern family, (4) family-supportive policies and practice research, and (5) intervention research.

Theory Building

A host of theories are mentioned throughout the chapters of this volume. Collectively chapter authors recognize the theories that are frequently used in the work–family literature (e.g., Conservation of Resources; , 2002), theories rarely applied to work–family research but that have potential explanatory value (e.g., adaptation theory; Frederick & Lowenstein, 1999), as well as sets of theories from other literatures that can be integrated into the work–family literature (e.g., leadership theories). Moreover, several chapters hone in on theory to practice issues such as translating research findings via social media.

Despite the considerable number of theories currently in use, the need for additional theoretical (p. 478) development was a common theme identified by many of the chapter contributors. In line with concerns with regard to the need for theoretical advancement, a call was issued for papers for an *Academy of Management Review* Special Topic Forum on advancing and expanding work–life theory (Powell, Greenhaus, Allen, & Johnson, 2015). We concur with this perspective and further note that to some extent the development of theory has not kept pace with empirical research and practice in the field. For example, there has been a rapid increase in the number of experience sampling studies that examine work–family variables (e.g., Shockley & Allen, 2015), but theory to help us understand intraindividual experiences and the role of time in the work–family interface continues to be lacking (Allen, 2012).

With concern for the future theory-related needs of the work–family field, we suggest that in addition to the development of new theories, scholars identify different approaches to the way that existing theory is typically used. This could lead to a merging of complimentary theories or to the winnowing of similar theories. For example, two of the most commonly applied theories include Conservation of Resources (COR; Hobföll, 2002) and the job demands/resources model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). These theories both focus on individuals' stress responses, with COR emphasizing actual or perceived threat of resources as a catalyst of stress and the job demands/resource model arguing that high demands deplete employees' mental and physical resources, contributing to burnout, reduced engagement, and lower performance. Questions to consider include the following: Do these two theories lead to different predictions and if so, under what circumstances? Does the field benefit from reliance on both theories? There is a similar need for research that pits existing theories against each other in an effort to refine our understanding of the work–family interface. This is rarely seen in work–family scholarship, but can also lead to theoretical advancement (Edwards & Berry, 2010; Platt, 1964). A recent example is Matthews, Wayne, and Ford's (2014) longitudinal study, which tested competing predictions regarding stress reactions in the work–family arena. By collecting data over three time periods the authors were able to empirically compare predictions from work–family

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conflict theory (predicting a negative relationship between work–family conflict and subjective well-being) and adaptation theory (predicting a positive association between work–family conflict and subjective well-being). The authors found that in the short term a negative association exists, but in the long term past experience with work–family conflict was related to enhanced well-being.

Another recommendation to aid theoretical development is to enhance the precision with which theories are applied to work–family phenomena. For example, there is a lack of clarity concerning what constitutes a demand and what constitutes a resource in studies grounded in the job demands/resources model. In some cases lack of a resource is conceptualized as a demand and vice versa. Moreover, the conceptualization of both demands and resources is so broad across studies that the field may be in danger of characterizing almost anything in the work or in the family domain as a demand or as a resource. The development of more precise theories also requires the development of more precise measurement tools (Edwards & Berry, 2010; Van Maanen, Sørenson, & Mitchell, 2007). Despite decades of research, concerns remain with regard to the way key variables in the work–family literature such as work–family conflict and work–family enrichment are operationalized (e.g., MacDermid, 2005; Masuda, Nicklin, Allen, & McNall, 2012).

Although theoretical development is needed, we also suggest that room be made in work–family scholarship for research that makes a primarily empirical contribution. In recent years there has been considerable discussion about the state of our scientific enterprise. Scholars have lamented that too much of an emphasis has been placed on theory and that there is a lack of appreciation for inductive theory building and empirical contributions (e.g., Aguinis & Vandenberg, 2014; Hambrick, 2007; Locke, 2007). It is also documented that top tier journals that publish work–family research (e.g., *Journal of Applied Psychology*) have noticeably increased the emphasis on the role of theory in the articles deemed acceptable for publication (Cucina & Moriaty, 2015). We find this trend troubling given that inductive research, whether qualitative or quantitative, often provides fresh insight, can challenges existing doctrine, and spurs the discovery of new phenomena. Along these lines, researchers may benefit from working with practitioners in organizations to identify practices that have been applied with success.

The Role of Gender

Despite a voluminous body of research investigating gender and the work–family interface, contributors to this volume aptly note that many **(p. 479)** questions remain. Based on meta-analytic findings indicating that men and women report similar levels of work–family conflict (e.g., Byron, 2005), it may be easy to dismiss the importance of gender as a driver of work–family experiences. However, we also know that men and women enact their work and family roles differently. In particular, the division of paid and unpaid labor continues to be gender based, with men contributing more to paid labor and women contributing more to unpaid labor (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010). Ideas for developing

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a more nuanced understanding of the role of gender within the work–family interface are noted by contributors throughout the volume. We offer several additional directions that build on this theme.

One issue that needs research consideration is how men can be empowered to engage in home-related roles. In her book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg (2013) notes, "As women must be more empowered at work, men must be more empowered at home." Arguably, the existing research base is geared more toward investigating ways to empower women within the workplace than toward investigating ways to empower men within the home. Women at work is a highly researched and popular press topic; men at home is less so. Only recently has there been a concerted interest in empowering men to take more time for family (e.g., Behson, 2015). The effort is buoyed by highly publicized cases in which men take paternity leave such as baseball player Daniel Murphy (Bapat, 2014). However, such leaves are not without controversy. Some commentators were publicly critical of Murphy. Although there are ample popular press articles concerning the stigma associated with men who take a paternity leave (e.g., Miller, 2014), scholarship on the topic remains scarce, particularly from an organizational policy perspective. Research is needed that is geared toward developing a better understanding of the various factors that relate to organizations offering paternity leave as well as the factors that are associated with men who take such leave. The study of paternity leave is critical in that several studies show that paternity leave is associated with greater participation in daily childcare tasks (Haas & Hwang, 2008; Nepomnyaschy & Waldfogel, 2007). Men who take parental leave learn parenting skills and come to view themselves as a co-parent with their partners rather than as a helper (Rehel, 2014). Thus, early involvement by fathers in childrearing via parental leave appears to be an important gateway through which a more equitable division of unpaid labor within the home may be achieved.

Research focused on the empowerment of men to take on a greater role in unpaid labor that integrates the ways by which men and women enact masculine and feminine identities is also needed. Much has been written about the notion of "manhood" and what it means to be a man (e.g., Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Manhood is thought to be precarious in that it must be earned, once it is achieved it can be lost, and it is confirmed primarily by others. Moreover, masculinity is often equated with the ability to provide financially for the family (Thebaud, 2010). One way in which men attempt to avoid the loss of manhood is to avoid femininity. Femininity can be avoided by eschewing activities traditionally associated with women such as caregiving and routine household tasks (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Women who fail to live up to feminine ideals also have something to lose and therefore may engage in actions to maintain their status through "maternal gatekeeping." Maternal gatekeeping refers to a set of behaviors and beliefs that inhibits a collaborative effort between mothers and fathers in family work (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Gatekeeping is associated with a resistance by mothers to relinquish control of childcare and household tasks and adherence to a strict set of standards. This is presumably done out of a desire for external validation of the maternal role. External societal pressures such as attachment parenting and breast-feeding advocacy contribute to enhanced idealization of the role of the mother and to the notion that women are uniquely suited for

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child care (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Loke, Harp, & Bachman, 2011; Pickert, 2012). Living up to masculine and feminine ideals constrains both men and women and serves to reinforce adherence to traditional gender roles, but these twin forces are rarely studied together. Bridging these streams of inquiry based on research conducted both within and between couples across time could yield insight into how unpaid labor norms are established and ways by which they might be changed. Such a line of research could be further enriched through the incorporation of macro-level contextual variables such as cultural values and labor market structures, both of which have been associated with the reinforcement of pressures for men to live up to breadwinning expectations (Cha & Thebaud, 2009; Thebaud, 2010).

System justification is a theory that has not been applied to the work–family interface, but may be a useful lens from which to view the perpetuation (p. 480) of existing gender differences and the continuation of gender-specific domain roles (Williams & Chen, 2014). System justification theory has been used to explain the "process by which existing social arrangements are legitimized, even at the expense of personal and group interest" (Jost & Banaji, 1994, p. 2). The theory suggests that an individuals' motivation to maintain the status quo can outweigh the desire for equality. This is most likely to happen when inequalities require social change that is thought unlikely to occur. In such cases, even the members of the lower-status group espouse the inequality. As suggested by the theory, men's dominance in paid labor and women's dominance in unpaid labor may be viewed as complementary and as providing a balance of overall power. Household power has been shown to have negative effects on women's career motivation (Williams & Chen, 2014). The findings are consistent with system justification theory in that for women, thinking of themselves as powerful at home negates the need to also achieve within their paid work roles, thus supporting the status quo and creating an illusion of equality. Research that attempts to reveal the justifications that are used to support the status quo and ways in which these justifications can be modified could yield further insight into facilitating gender equity across and within work and family roles.

The Diversity of the Modern Family

Chapters across the volume touched on the need to expand upon the typical samples and family structures that are used in work–family research. Historically, the "family" in the family side of the work–family research equation has been treated as homogeneous. Work–family studies often employ inclusion criteria that specify that individuals must be partnered and/or have a child living at home. Moreover, it often assumed that couples are heterosexual or same-sex couples are explicitly excluded. Family structures that include grandparents in the home are rarely considered. The time is certainly ripe for broadening our span of research. The chapter contributors offer a variety of compelling topics and ways to consider family that are in need of examination. We offer several additional thoughts on this theme.

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The liberty of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals is the civil rights issue of the current time. We have reached a tipping point in which acceptance rather than prejudice has become more normative. In a landmark decision, on June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right for same-sex couples to marry, legalizing same-sex marriage in all 50 states (Hurley, 2015). Shortly thereafter, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission ruled that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars sexual orientation-based employment discrimination (Gansle, 2015). In addition, the number of children being raised in same-sex households has risen as same-sex adoption and parenting become more widely accepted (Tavernise, 2011). Product advertisements are beginning to feature lesbian/gay couples (Wong, 2015). Although LGBT families have begun to move from the margins to the mainstream within society, research on work–family issues within such family structures is lagging behind. Several streams of research are merited.

LGBT families operate outside of heteronormative societal expectations with regard to who should do what at work and at home, but feel the same pressures and concerns with regard to achieving work–family balance (Richardson, Moyer, & Goldberg, 2012). Without socially prescribed scripts, the study of gay and lesbian couples may yield unique insights into the ways in which paid and unpaid labor are negotiated and distributed within couples. For example, research shows that gay couples tend to be egalitarian in preference and in practice with regard to the division of unpaid labor (e.g., Richardson et al., 2012; Tornello, Sonnenberg, & Patterson, 2015).

As organizations are mandated to provide equal rights to LGBT employees, family-supportive organizational policies such as parental leave will require review. The way in which paid leave following birth is administered can differentially impact same-sex versus different-sex couples. In the United States duration of paid leave is often gender specific and is covered under medical leave for biological mothers. Biological mothers tend to receive more time off than other new parents. For example, at Google biological mothers are provided between 18 and 22 weeks of paid maternity leave whereas fathers, gay couples, and other parents who adopt are provided 7 weeks (Shontell, 2013). Thus, different-sex and lesbian couples stand to benefit to a greater extent than do gay couples. Other firms such as Facebook provide all parents with the same amount of leave (4 months) (Shontell, 2013). Research investigating the consequences of different leave policies and the impact on individuals who are part of different family types is needed.

Another area of study with limited research within the work–family domain is grandparent (p. 481) caregiver families and multigenerational families. In some cases grandparents are the primary caregivers and the parent does not live in the home (sometimes referred to as skipped-generation families). In other cases, three generations (or more) reside in the same household. Poor economic conditions over the past decade have contributed to the increase in these types of families. In 2011, 1-in-10 children (7.7 million) were living with a grandparent and for approximately three million of these children the grandparent

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was the primary caregiver (Livingston, 2013). In comparison, the number of children living with a grandparent was 4.7 million in 2005 (Scommegna, 2012).

Despite the increased prevalence of grandparent caregiver families, little research has examined their unique work–family experiences. The events that lead to grandparents taking on the role of primary caregiver to grandchildren are often prompted by a crisis such as teen pregnancy, incarceration, child neglect, and substance abuse (e.g., Wang & Marcotte, 2007). Such events may create additional stressors and demands that make work–family balance challenging for employed grandparent caregivers. For example, because of the circumstances that lead to custodial grandparent care, the children raised by grandparents tend to have higher psychological difficulties than do children in the overall U.S. population (Smith & Palmieri, 2007). Moreover, grandparent caregivers are often at a life stage in which they are contemplating retirement but with additional household expenses may no longer be able to do so (Bailey, Haynes, & Letiecq, 2013). Thus, these individuals may face increased work–family conflict at a time when they have begun to taper off in terms of work responsibilities.

Likewise, little is known about the work–family experiences of individuals who reside in multigenerational homes. On the one hand, the grandparent(s) may be a resource to working parents through the provision of assistance with child care and household tasks. This may be particularly important for single parents or individuals with more limited local social support networks. Grandparents may also serve as positive role models for the children they care for and offer additional emotional support that facilitates positive child development. On the other hand, the grandparent may require caregiving, creating an additional family demand. In addition, differences in parenting styles between adult children and grandparents may lead to family conflict, strained relationships, and discipline problems if children consistently receive mixed messages about appropriate behavior from a parent and grandparent caregiver. Multigenerational families may also face unique challenges if grandparents have strained relationships with sons or daughters-in-law, amplifying work–family conflict for adult children who are trying to appease both a parent and a spouse. Multigenerational families may also experience unique challenges regarding the maintenance of boundaries that meet all family members' needs for both privacy and inclusion. Given the almost complete absence of research on multigenerational families in the work–family literature, we see this as a high priority area for future research.

Family-Supportive Policies and Practice

National and organizational policies and practices continue to be a major research stream within the work–family literature. Chapter contributors note a variety of issues that require further examination. We suggest that one key issue is that a broader lens is needed when considering whether policies and practices intended to be family supportive are having their intended effect. Although the mixed outcomes associated with flexible work arrangements have been discussed (e.g., Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013; Kossek

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& Michel, 2011), family supportive policies are often advocated for by work–family researchers and the tone in which they are discussed is typically one that presents them as beneficial. However, studies are emerging that demonstrate the ways in which family friendly policies can backfire, particularly for women (Miller, 2015).

Recent research by economists has demonstrated that family-supportive policies can have negative implications for the careers of women. For example, Chile implemented legislation that required all firms with 20 or more female workers to provide an approved child care facility near, but independent from, the workplace where mothers could leave children under 2 years old during the work day. The law was intended to assist mothers with the transition back to work while also promoting the mother–child relationship and healthy child development (Prada, Rucci, & Urzua, 2015). Prada et al. (2015) reported that women hired in the firms with the mandatory employer-paid child care services were penalized in terms of starting wages. Specifically, the monthly starting wages of woman hired in firms with 20 or more female workers were between 9% and 20% below those of female workers hired by the same firm when no requirement of providing child care was imposed. Within the United States, Thomas (2015) reported that women hired after (p. 482) the enactment of the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) were 5% more likely to remain employed but 8% less likely to be promoted than were women hired before the FMLA. Moreover, the likelihood of promotions decreased even among women who would not benefit from the policy and women who never had children. Thomas (2015) concludes that organizations are more cautious about investing in the careers of women who may leave the organization, penalizing all women in the process.

Research also indicates that generous paid leave policies (e.g., longer parental leaves) can be harmful to the career outcomes of mothers. For example, in a study of 35 countries, Dupay and Fernandez-Kranz (2011) found that the wage gap between women with and without children is larger rather than smaller in countries that are lacking in equal pay policies. In addition, damaging career outcomes for women, including reduced hiring frequency, lower likelihood of promotion, and higher rates of termination, were found following the passage of right to work part-time laws in Europe (Fernandez-Kranz & Rodriguez-Planas, 2013). In concert, these issues draw attention to the need to investigate both short-term and long-term outcomes associated with work–family policies and to carefully consider the cultural context in which such policies are enacted. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the need to better connect the work–family and the career development literatures.

Another line of research needed with regard to policies and practices is expansion of the outcomes considered. As we noted above, career-related outcomes should be examined.

In addition to the emphasis on reducing work–family conflict, careful consideration as to what types of practices and policies promote positive spillover would be a welcome addition to the literature. For example, it may be that some policies that are often grouped under the family-friendly policy umbrella (e.g., tuition reimbursement), but rarely investigated as such, help the employee develop human capital that in turn helps enrich family life.

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Another example is access to employee assistance programs, which often offer referrals to substance abuse treatment, bereavement counseling, mental health counseling (for the employee and other family members), school tutoring for children, and marital/family counseling, any of which may yield positive effects on employees and/or their families.

It is also important to assess multiple work–family outcomes within the same study. Policies may be beneficial for some outcomes but negative for others. For example, in an international poll conducted by Ipsos (2011), a large percentage of participants agreed that telecommuting creates more family conflict because it reduces the boundaries between work and family life (53–12% strongly, 41% somewhat). However, the same participants also agreed that telecommuting helps employees achieve balance between work and family (78–29% strongly, 49% somewhat).

Intervention Research

One of the most consistently made calls across the volume was the need for intervention research using rigorous experimental designs. Many chapter authors lamented the lack of intervention studies within the work–family literature and provided excellent suggestions for future research. Intervention research is needed that takes into account individuals, supervisors, and organizations and that does so in combination.

There are several worthwhile avenues to pursue that focus on the individual. Several researchers have conducted mindfulness-based interventions designed to reduce work–family conflict with promising results (Kiburz, Allen, & French, 2014; Michel, Bosch, & Rexroth, 2014). A line of research targeting the cultivation of mindfulness may have benefits for family members as well. For example, being able to let go of work when at home by focusing on the present may help reduce negative crossover of stress and strain between spouses. Trait mindfulness has also been associated with couple-related outcomes such as relationship satisfaction (Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Accordingly, it seems likely that couples with higher levels of mindfulness may provide more support for each other, thus minimizing the occurrence of family-to-work conflict and excessive family demands.

The need to better incorporate the concept of time into work–family scholarship has been called for previously in terms of connections with mindfulness, role transitions, and cross-national scholarship (Allen, 2012; Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014; Allen & Paddock, 2015). We believe that rethinking of time is also an avenue for intervention-based research. Difficulty finding the time to accomplish tasks and achieve goals that cross multiple roles is a key aspect of work–family conflict. One approach to addressing this challenge is to rethink time by identifying and applying “multipliers” (Aaker, n.d.). Multipliers are defined as activities that fulfill multiple goals. For example, if increasing physical exercise and **(p. 483)** spending more time with a relationship partner are important goals, these goals could be combined by taking up Latin dancing together as a couple. The concept could form the foundation for training that helps individuals identify goals that are important and then

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aligning those goals in a way in which they can be achieved through the creation of multipliers.

One final approach focused on individuals that we believe merits more consideration is an approach that builds on the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC) meta-theory (Baltes & Dickson, 2001; Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003). SOC is based on the idea that limited resources such as mental capacity and time require individuals to make choices with regard to the allocation of those resources. Selection refers to choosing goals. Optimization refers to the acquisition, application, and refinement of resources to achieve selected goals. Compensation pertains to replacement of lost resources in an effort to sustain goal progress. Recent research demonstrates the efficacy of SOC training in enhancing employee well-being, suggesting the potential for application to work–family experiences (Muller, Heiden, Poppe, Herbig, & Angerer, 2014). Pre-post comparisons of the SOC training group versus a control group showed a significant improvement in the well-being of those in the training group relative to those in the control group across time.

To date, supervisor-associated work–family interventions have been based on the work of Hammer and colleagues who have developed training geared toward increasing the frequency by which supervisors display family-supportive behaviors toward their employees (Hammer, Kossek, Anger, Bodner, & Zimmerman, 2011). Building on the ideas presented earlier, incorporating mindfulness training for supervisors may be beneficial. Reb, Narayanan, and Chaturvedi (2014) found that leader self-reported trait mindfulness was associated with employee reported work–life balance. This suggests that training supervisors on mindfulness skills may not only pay dividends for the supervisor, but also for his or her employees.

At the organization level, more needs to be done to assess the effectiveness of existing common practices and policies that are intended to help individuals manage their work and family roles. There is shockingly little experimentally designed research investigating workplace flexibility practices with work–family outcomes as the focus. In their meta-analytic review of the workplace flexibility and work–family conflict literature, Allen et al. (2013) identified only one study that employed a quasiexperimental design (Hicks & Klimoski, 1981). Moreover, the investigation of combined approaches that cross multiple levels such as providing SOC training prior to beginning a telecommuting arrangement would provide additional insight into how organizations can maximize the beneficial effects of company-sponsored work–family initiatives.

Conclusions

The field of work–family scholarship has grown tremendously in the past decade. We hope that this is a harbinger for change, both in terms of further legitimizing work–family scholarship and in bringing work–family issues to the boardroom. The chapters in this volume offer a multitude of new directions for future research and important evidence-based guidance for practitioners and organizational decision makers alike. We hope that this inspires work–family scholars to take work–family research in new directions and encour-

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ages managers and organizational decision makers to invest in initiatives that help employees better manage the demands of work and family life, as well as reap the benefits of enrichment from these important life roles.

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