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Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry

Family Well-Being (2004)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

Well-being has been defined as the quality of life of an individual or other social unit (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Well-being can be assessed through the lens of an individual's subjective assessments of his or her experiences (Diener, 1984), such as perceptions of emotional or spiritual well-being, or via objective measures such as those indexing physical health (e.g., blood pressure). In addition, cultural definitions of well-being or positive functioning may often be found operating within societies. For example, individuals might be considered to have adequate quality of life when they are gainfully employed and financially self-supporting. Regardless of who is doing the defining -- individuals themselves, researchers, policy makers, or society at large -- all definitions carry implicit or explicit values about the elements of positive well-being (Campbell, 1981), and the definitions of different entities may differ or even conflict. For example, some individuals equate luxury with high quality of life, but groups concerned with social justice might see such a lifestyle as self-indulgent and question its quality.

Given the difficulty of defining individual well-being, defining (and measuring) family well-being is even more complex. One approach is simply to assume that family well-being is the sum of its parts. That is, if each individual in a family displays or reports positive well-being, the well-being of the family would be considered high. In this approach the unit of analysis is really the individual, and conclusions about the family are drawn based on data from or about individuals and their experiences. The measurement strategies would be the same as those used to measure individual well-being.

A second approach is to assume that the family is more than the sum of its parts-that family well-being is something different than simply the aggregation of data about individuals. In this approach there could be multiple units of observation or analysis including individual members, dyadic relationships, and the family as a whole (Thompson & Walker, 1982). Just as when assessing the well-being of individuals, there can be both internally- and externally-defined criteria for family well-being, all guided by implicit or explicitly stated values.

There is no well-established consensus about the 'ideal' way to measure family well-being. One list of possible indicators was developed by Amato and Keith (1991, p. 46). Several of the indicators on the list focus on the well-being of individual family members, including:

- (1) psychological well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety, life satisfaction);
- (2) self-concept (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of power, internal locus of control);
- (3) physical health (e.g., chronic problems, disability);
- (4) behavior/conduct problems (e.g., drug use, alcoholism, teen pregnancy);

Other indicators focus on the likely availability and use of resources by family members:

- (5) one-parent family status;
- (6) self-concept (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of power, internal locus of control);
- (7) occupational quality (e.g., occupational prestige, job autonomy, job satisfaction);
- (8) material quality of life (e.g., income, assets, housing quality, welfare dependency, perceived economic strain);
- (9) use of mental health services;
- (10) social well-being (e.g., number of friends, social participation and support, contact with parents and extended family);

Finally, several indicators focus on the quality of relationships within the family and at the level of the family itself:

- (11) marital quality (e.g., marital satisfaction, marital disagreements, marital instability);
- (12) marital stability (e.g., separation or divorce);
- (13) pquality of relationships between parents and children; and
- (14) quality of general family relations.

Most studies of families and work focus on indicators of the well-being or performance of individual workers, their spouses or children. Some studies focus on the quality of relationships between spouses or between parents and children, but well-being at the level of the family is rarely an explicit focus, in part because data from multiple family members are essential for good measurement. In virtually all instances, indicators of well-being are based on subjective judgments of respondents, such as life satisfaction or perceived stress (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Objective indicators are occasionally used; the

most common examples are reports of absenteeism (Pousette & Hanse, 2002), measures of physical health such as blood pressure (Broadwell & Light, 1999; Frone, Russel, & Cooper, 1997), or indicators of relationship quality based on laboratory observations (Lindahl & Malik, 1999).

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

The well-being of families is a function of the well-being of each family member. When one family member struggles all others are impacted. If an employee's occupational well-being is related to the well-being of the individual in their family, then an awareness of both occupational and family well-being is integral to maintaining an effective workforce. Similarly, an organization's policies, wages, and demands can have an impact on an employee's family. This relationship gives an organization the ability to make profoundly beneficial impacts on the community in which they reside by creating an environment that supports the well-being of not only their employees but their families as well.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Family systems theory (Bateson, 1972; Minuchin, 1974) and ecological perspectives about families (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) suggest that the experiences of workers are likely to reverberate throughout their families. Validation has come from empirical studies that have revealed, for example, connections between workers' experiences and the socialization of children (Emiliani & Molinari, 1994; Waldfogel, Han, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002), marital interactions (Repetti, 1994; Repetti & Wood, 1997), parenting (Costigan, Cox, & Cauce, 2003), relationships with adolescents (Crouter, Bumpus, Maguire, & McHale, 1999), and community involvement (Lapan, Osana, Tucker, & Kosciulek, 2002).

"Spillover" - the reciprocal influence of family and work - is one of the most popular constructs in the research literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982). Spillover from work to family has been found in a variety of studies and with a variety of consequences (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000). For example, Greenhaus and colleagues (1987, 1989; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002; Stoeva, Chiu, & Greenhaus, 2002) found relationships between family well-being and employees' work environment, work concerns, and time commitments. Similarly, organizational policies, wages, and demands have been found to influence employees' families (Glass & Estes, 1997; Voydanoff & Kelly, 1984; Warren & Johnson, 1995). A second form of spillover-from family to work -was proposed by Voydanoff (1990) to create a circular or reciprocal process between work and family life. In studies of the influence of families on the work life of individuals, family well-being predicts individuals' behavior in the workplace (Barnett, 1994; Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997; Crouter, 1984).

Job Stressors and Family Well-being

In the following paragraphs we cite examples of studies of family-well-being conducted during the past two decades. For additional summaries of the literature, see reviews by Haas (1999), Menaghan and Parcel (1990), and Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, and Crouter (2000).

- Greenhaus and colleagues, (1987, 1989; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002; Stoeva, Chiu, & Greenhaus, 2002) have found relationships between work factors and personal and family stress, marital quality and satisfaction, and quality of relationships with children.
- Kinnunen and Mauno (1996, 1998) found that work-to-family conflict was more prevalent than family-to-work conflict, and both were negatively related to family well-being. In this case family well-being was defined by a cluster of variables including marital satisfaction and communication, parenting and childrearing restrictions, and parent and child behavior and psychological well-being.
- Larson, Wilson, and Beley (1994) showed a systematic relationship between job insecurity and family functioning as measured by a marital adjustment scale and the McMaster Family Assessment Device. In a similar study, Doby and Caplan (1995) suggested that chronic or high-threat stressors at work are significantly related to negative family well-being as measured by anxiety parents in the home.
- Hughes, Galinsky, and Morris (1992) observed relationships between these types of stressors and marital adjustment and quality.
- Repetti (1994) found that negative social climates at work influenced family interactions and overall emotional tone later that evening.

Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, and Crouter (2000) suggest that individual personality, coping strategies, social supports, family sizes, ages of children, and other family dynamics can act in ways to buffer families from stressors at work. Though little work has been conducted with families of diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and family structures (e.g., single mothers), some studies suggest that such families might be especially vulnerable to the negative effects of job stressors (Broman, 1991; Herrera & DelCampo, 1995; Marshall & Barnett, 1991; McLoyd, 1993; Parcel & Menaghan, 1997).

Contextual Influences on Family Well-Being

The contexts in which families find (or put) themselves also can affect their well-being. Four common examples are: social class or family economic well-being, social networks and support, and neighborhoods or communities.

The economic context. Access to suitable employment and financial stability are important predictors of well-being. For example, Ross and Mirowsky's (1992) definitive study found higher income improved both men's and women's sense of control. In fact women that earn a greater proportion of their family's income than their husbands do less domestic labor (Presser, 1994). Recently, Marshall and colleagues (1997) and Zedlewski (2002) have found that low family income and limited benefits have negative influences on child and family well-being. Other authors have found that income is negatively related to perceptions of stress and positively linked to perceptions of well-being (Jacobs & Gerson, 2001; Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998).

The social context. Social integration is often cited as an indicator of family well-being (Campbell, 1997). Social integration is often measured by looking at children's involvement with their schools and their peers, and parents' involvement with their co-workers, friends, and family (Bowen & Richman, 2001; Stroh & Brett, 1990). Neighborhood areas that are economically challenged have been found to have diminished levels of social organization involvement (Elliott, Wilson, Huizinga, Sampson, Elliott, & Rankin, 1996).

The community context. Researchers have recently focused on the role that neighborhoods and housing characteristics play in influencing family functioning and child development (Bowen & Richman, 2001). Neighborhoods have become important contexts due to the growing acceptance of the idea of "geography of opportunity" (Galster & Killen, 1995). Poorer neighborhoods offer fewer and less beneficial resources for families and children to draw on (Wilson, 1987, 1996).

Researchers have also found that family well-being is associated with safety. Campbell (1997) has developed a sophisticated measure of communities that assesses safety and sense of well-being in a community. Families in highly disadvantaged housing environments often must contend with extremely high levels of crime and violence, which can directly affect the nature of family functioning and well-being (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999).

Implications for Future Research

Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, and Crouter (2000) call for a greater "definition and meaning" of the term 'family well-being.' More consistent definitions and measures would make it easier for us to understand how

families are actually faring. Additionally, we suggest more cross-cultural and comparative studies be conducted to broaden their understanding of the dynamics of work and family life (Ishii-Kuntz, 1994).

Second, we suggest the use of structural modeling and hierarchical analyses to better understand the interaction between various work factors and indicators of separate family member's well-being. We also call for the use of experimental and longitudinal research methods to see how workplace policies and environments influence family well-being over time. Future research should also focus on combined work schedules of family members rather than changes in individual work patterns (Jacobs & Gerson, 2001). Awareness of the interplay of work on family members and their interrelationships will weave together a better understanding of the welfare of families in the U.S. and around the globe.

Conclusion

The last two decades have been a time of remarkable changes in the world with the potential to affect the well-being of families in both positive and negative ways. We have seen dramatic increases in globalization, aging of the population, restructuring of the labor force, increases in mothers' labor force participation and single-parent families, and greater diversity in family forms. We call for a greater delineation of what family well-being means to our field and a broadened understanding of how diverse families are impacted by the influences of employment and the economy.

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Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:

(Click on the titles to link to citations/annotations in the Literature Database.)

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Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. ([More about the Matrix ...](#)).

Concepts related to adult development are relevant to all of the "Individual" domains in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Study. In addition, theories of adult development are relevant to Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings.

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.

Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives	Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences	Domain C: Covariates	Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues and Experiences	Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts
Individual Antecedents	Individual Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Individual Covariates	Individual Decisions & Responses	Individual Outcomes & Impacts
Family Antecedents	Family Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Family Covariates	Family Decisions & Responses	Family Outcomes & Impacts
Workplace Antecedents	Workplace Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Workplace Covariates	Workplace Decisions & Responses	Workplace Outcomes & Impacts
Community Antecedents	Community Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Community Covariates	Community Decisions & Responses	Community Outcomes & Impacts
Societal Antecedents	Societal Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Societal Covariates	Societal Decisions & Responses	Societal Outcomes & Impacts
Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains				

About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network

Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.
2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. Key Informants: The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. Literature review: Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. Peer review: On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. Our use of the word "family" refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term "work-family" to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term "work-family" (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word "family" continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word "family" to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

Work-Family Experiences: The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

Antecedents: Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see

Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).

Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives	Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences	Domain C: Covariates	Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues and Experiences	Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts
Individual Antecedents	Individual Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Individual Covariates	Individual Decisions & Responses	Individual Outcomes & Impacts
Family Antecedents	Family Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Family Covariates	Family Decisions & Responses	Family Outcomes & Impacts
Workplace Antecedents	Workplace Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Workplace Covariates	Workplace Decisions & Responses	Workplace Outcomes & Impacts
Community Antecedents	Community Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Community Covariates	Community Decisions & Responses	Community Outcomes & Impacts
Societal Antecedents	Societal Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Societal Covariates	Societal Decisions & Responses	Societal Outcomes & Impacts
Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains				