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Basic Concepts and Definitions

Increasingly, work-life researchers and practitioners are interested in understanding the work-family challenges faced by workers employed in jobs at the low end of the labor market. This encyclopedia entry approaches this topic by examining low-level jobs, rather than low-level workers. Focusing on jobs is especially promising in terms of identifying potential organizational leverage-points for improving the circumstances of disadvantaged workers and their families.

The organizational literature provides strong evidence that jobs, especially at low-organizational levels, are not designed around people— their education, skills, or preferences— but rather around business strategy (e.g., Bernhardt, Morris, Handcock, & Scott, 2001; Pfeffer & Baron, 1988). One key business strategy employed by an increasing number of today’s firms is that of cost reduction, which privileges labor flexibility over labor stability (Appelbaum, Bernhardt, & Murnane, 2003; Bernhardt et al., 2001). Given such business strategies, efforts to increase the education and training of low-level workers may have minimal effect on the job security or family income of workers in low-level jobs (Andersson, Holzer, & Lane, 2005; Bernhardt et al., 2001; LaLonde, 1995). Many working families are poor despite their educational credentials. For example, two-thirds of low-income working families in Illinois are headed by a parent who has earned a high school diploma, and over 40 percent of low-income working families nationally have at least one parent with post-secondary education (Waldron, Roberts, & Reamer, 2004). Thus, although human capital investments surely matter (e.g., Murphy & Welch, 1989; Angrist & Krueger, 1991), so does the job itself. The goal of this entry is to provide a foundation for work-life research and practice that attends to the challenges low-level jobs create for today’s workers and their families.

Low-wage jobs. Several approaches can be used to define jobs at the low end of the labor market, each holding different implications for knowledge development and practical application. One strategy is to focus on low-wage jobs (e.g., Andersson et al., 2005; Appelbaum et al., 2003; Bernhardt et al., 2001; Smith & Vavrichek, 1992). Studies may target jobs that pay an hourly wage below a particular cutoff value, such as below a “Living Wage” standard established by local municipalities and advocacy organizations. Others identify jobs that do not pay more than a particular proportion of the median wage.
(e.g., 50 percent, median wage) or a selected percentage of the federal poverty line (e.g., 100 percent, 150 percent, 200 percent of the poverty line), often calculated by assuming full-time, year-round employment. In Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto's (2005) annual analysis of the US labor market, the authors report that 77 percent of all new jobs created between 1979 and 1989 occurred in the two lowest-paying service-sector industries - retail trade and services (business, personnel, and health). In 2003, women, who are disproportionately represented in these growth industries, were more likely (29.4 percent) than men (19.6 percent) to earn less than poverty-level wages.

Much of the research on low-wage jobs is actually based on data from low-wage workers, rather than collected directly from firms. (See Schochet & Rangarajan, 2004, for a review of research on low-wage workers.) The advantage to work-life researchers of examining low-wage jobs and the employees who work them is the insight such an approach provides on the special circumstances of workers who are paid minimal wages. One downside to a focus on wages alone, however, is that earnings are a function of both hourly wages and hours worked. Even relatively high wage jobs may not provide workers with adequate income if they do not work enough hours. For example, Mishel and colleagues (2005) report that although hourly wages grew between 2000 and 2002, annual earnings declined during this time period as a result of shortened workweeks and fewer weeks of employment over the course of a year. Low earning workers with relatively high hourly wages may be left out of studies of low-wage jobs, unless work hours are jointly considered with wages, as is done in studies of earnings (e.g., Andersson et al., 2005, Mishel et al., 2005). A second downside of a focus on wages is that not all workers in low-wage jobs are low income. Some workers in low-wage jobs are in higher-income households (Carnevale & Rose, 2001).

**Nonstandard jobs.** A second strategy is to focus on what is referred to as *nonstandard* features of jobs, especially nonstandard job classifications and work schedules (Carre, Ferber, Golden, & Herzenberg, 2000; Kalleberg, Reskin, & Hudson, 2000; Presser, 2003). Standard job classifications are commonly defined as full-time, permanent status positions, but may be paid by the hour or by salary. Nonstandard status jobs include part-time, permanent positions as well as temporary or contingent employment. Mishel and colleagues (2005) report that, in 2001, 22 percent of employed men and 31 percent of employed women held jobs with nonstandard status.

Related to nonstandard status is research that focuses on the timing of work, with attention to whether work schedules are standard (regular, daytime, weekday hours) or nonstandard (variable, evening, or weekend hours) (Heymann, 2000; Presser, 2003). Fully two-fifths of American workers work the majority of their hours outside of daytime, weekday hours (Presser, 2003). Even more workers routinely work some, but not the majority, of their hours in the early morning or late evening (Presser, 2003).
An advantage of distinguishing between standard and nonstandard job classifications is that such an approach takes into account emerging forms of employment that structure the employer-employee relationship differently than in the past. An advantage of distinguishing standard and nonstandard schedule jobs is the lens it provides for capturing time-based conflicts that work schedules can impose on family and other nonwork roles and responsibilities. However, nonstandard categories do not necessarily differentiate jobs that vary in terms of prestige, pay, and employee-driven job control. For example, compared to a professional consultant, a temporary office worker is likely to be poorly compensated monetarily, have little control over her work, and face limited status rewards - yet both work in nonstandard jobs. Analyses by Mishel and colleagues (2005) demonstrate the value of differentiating types of nonstandard employment. They find that African American and Hispanic workers and those with less than a high school degree were overrepresented in the least stable and lowest-paying types of nonstandard employment (temp and on-call work) and underrepresented in better quality nonstandard arrangements (independent contracting). Thus, when researchers analyze jobs based on employment status, it is critical to take into account these kinds of variations within nonstandard employment. (For analyses of the quality of different types of nonstandard jobs see Kalleberg, 2000; Kalleberg et al., 2000, and Tilly, 1996).

Lower-skilled jobs. A third strategy is to focus analyses on jobs that require limited experience and formal education at the point of hiring, commonly a high school degree or less. The preference is to call these lower-skilled jobs, rather than low-skilled jobs to reflect the fact that although these jobs may require limited formal education, the tasks workers are asked to perform can require a variety of skills (e.g., interpersonal and problem-solving skills) and the actual skill level that workers bring to their work can also vary. Nearly three-fourths of the total US workforce has less than a four-year college degree (Mishel et al., 2005). Thus, how well lower-skilled jobs are designed has widespread implications for America’s families.

Focusing on the nature of lower-skilled jobs is a particularly promising approach when one is interested in identifying variations in occupational conditions across different low-level jobs within the same organization and across similar jobs in different organizations. Within a pool of jobs that require minimal formal education and experience, one is able to distinguish jobs that are relatively well designed from those that are not, and then examine those factors, other than skill, that might account for observed variations in job quality. Research drawing on this perspective suggests that lower-skilled jobs do indeed vary in terms of wages and status, and also benefits and work schedules (Batt, Hunter, & Wilk, 2003; Lambert & Waxman, 2005). One drawback to this approach is that the variation in job quality revealed might not afford as clear a picture of problematic job qualities as approaches that begin with a focus on such troubling conditions as low wages and nonstandard status. Nonetheless, research documenting that not all lower-skilled jobs are poorly designed is useful for identifying strategies for improving lower-skilled jobs of lesser quality.
Researchers and practitioners should be aware of how different definitions of low-level jobs are likely to generate different types of knowledge and to ultimately suggest different targets for intervention. In this entry, we vary our focus on the three definitions covered above - low-wage, nonstandard, lower-skilled - depending on their usefulness for furthering knowledge on the occupational condition (wages, status, scheduling) we are addressing.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

The Families & Work Institute (FWI) has played a leadership role in helping to make a business case for extending work-life supports to workers in low-wage jobs (FWI, 1999), recently issuing reports that provide firms with concrete examples of supportive workplace practices directed at workers in these jobs (Bond, 2003; Kim, Lopez, & Bond, 2003). Another recent report issued by The Boston College Center for Work and Family also directs corporate audiences to “Best Practices” for supporting workers in low-level jobs (Litchfield, Swanberg, & Sigworth, 2004). These initiatives are encouraging because the work-family field overall has devoted most of its attention to addressing the work-life challenges of workers in professional and technical occupations, primarily workers who are part of dual-career couples (Bailyn, 1993; Lambert, 1993, 1999; Swanberg, 2005).

The scholarly literature also reveals growing interest in extending work-life research to workers in low-level jobs (e.g., Booth, Crouter, & Shanahan, 1999; Dodson, Manuel, & Bravo, 2002; Heymann, 2000; Lambert, 1999; Perry-Jenkins, 2005; Swanberg, Pitt-Catsouphes, & Drescher-Burke, 2005). This expansion of the field requires an assessment of the applicability of extant knowledge generated from studies of higher-level jobs and their workers and consideration of additional occupational conditions that may be unique to lower-level jobs in ways that matter to the well-being of workers, their children, and their communities. Thus, understanding the nature of jobs at the low-end of the labor market is an essential step in advancing knowledge that can inform the development of work-life policies and practices.

Understanding the nature of today’s low-level jobs also provides the opportunity to help ensure that family-responsive supports codified by employers and in legislation are extended to workers who may need these supports the most. A worker’s access to employment benefits such as health care, sick days, and flextime are often conditioned by a job’s characteristics (Lambert & Haley-Lock, 2004). For example, many employers condition access to employee benefits, such as health insurance, on the number of hours employees work (among other factors). When hours drop below what an employer has established as full-time (usually 35 hours) for more than one pay period, workers in hourly jobs can lose their eligibility for paid time off and health insurance, even though their employer may continue to classify their job as “full-time” (Lambert & Waxman, 2005).
Workers’ eligibility for work-life supports defined in public policy is also conditioned on job conditions such as work hours and job tenure. For example, in 1995, only 55 percent of all U.S. workers met the eligibility requirements outlined by the Family and Medical Leave Act, which not only include the size of the employer (≥ 50 employees) but also hours worked (1,250 in past 12 months) and length of service with current employer (≥1 year) (U.S. Department of Labor, 1996). Similarly, access to income support through Unemployment Insurance (UI) and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) is contingent on workers’ level of labor force participation. Thus, instability in employment and work hours can be significant hazards to accessing supports potentially useful to workers navigating the dual responsibilities of work and caregiving, and both sources of instability are found in lower-level jobs.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Knowledge of the changing characteristics and qualities of low-level jobs can be found in several fields, including business, psychology, sociology, social policy, social work, labor economics, and organizational studies. The research is rich and diverse, in terms of the theoretical perspectives that inform it, its level of analysis, and its methods. Below, we synthesize research from a variety of disciplines with the goal of summarizing the state of knowledge about the conditions of low-level jobs that have implications for worker and family well-being.

Limited wages and wage growth. Wages are an important condition of work for workers in any job. They are especially important when considering the qualities of low-level jobs that may have a deleterious effect on worker and family well-being. Literatures on low-wage jobs stemming from labor market and policy perspectives are especially informative. Several studies demonstrate that jobs requiring limited education rarely provide wages that would exceed the poverty line (Blank, 1997; Danziger & Gottschalk, 1995), even if one assumes the job is held full-time (Appelbaum et al., 2003) and is filled by workers with significant employment histories (Gladden & Taber, 2000). Compared to higher wage jobs, low-wage jobs are less likely to be full-time, less likely to offer employee benefits, have higher turnover rates, and are disproportionately located in the service sector (Acs, Phillips, & McKenzie, 2001; Carnevale & Rose, 2001; Mishel et al., 2005).

The recently constructed Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD) Program Data allow for a longitudinal (1993-2001) assessment of firm-level and individual-level characteristics in explaining the ability of low-earners to move into higher-earning groups. The LEHD integrates survey and administrative data gathered by the Census Bureau - on both individuals and employers - with Unemployment Insurance (UI) wage records (from 22 participating states). In some of the first analyses of these integrated data based on five states, Andersson and colleagues (2005) find that “mean earnings more than doubled for all initial low earners over the entire nine-year period” (p. 51). However, only 8 percent of persistent low-earning adults (defined as workers earning $12,000 a year or less for at least three consecutive years -
1993-1995) consistently earned above $15,000 in the following three years (1995-1998). Between 1998-2001, only 27 percent of these initially low-earning adults earned $15,000 or greater. Overall, the results of these analyses suggest that although a substantial proportion of low earners earn more as they age, many remain at or close to poverty levels. As suggested earlier, Andersson and colleagues’ focus on earnings (a function of wages and hours employed) has an advantage over studies that define lower-level jobs by hourly wages alone.

The fact that low-wage jobs are disproportionately found in growth sectors of the economy, such as the service sector (Michel et al., 2005; BLS, 2001), warns that workers may be increasingly at risk of poverty. Andersson and colleagues (2005) report that the service sector, especially the retail industry, accounted for over three-fourths of all low earners between 1993 and 2001. Several additional studies indicate that a growing proportion of workers appear to cycle in and out of a variety of poor paying jobs (Bernhardt et al., 2001; Meyer & Cancian, 1998; Carnevale & Rose, 2001; Johnson & Corcoran, 2003; Pavetti & Acs, 2002), what Bernhardt and colleagues (2001) refer to as the “growing stickiness of low-wage careers” (p. 164). Bernhardt and colleagues (2001) find that “the heart of the middle class has been hollowed out: there are now 40 percent fewer workers in the central part of the wage growth distribution than there were three decades ago” (p. 175). They estimate that 90 percent of college graduates today would have done better in the industrial economy of the past.

Restricted access to work-life supports. Studies indicate that access to work-life supports is often restricted for workers in low-level jobs. Only a small proportion of low-level jobs provide benefits such as health insurance, paid sick leave, and formal family-responsive policies such as flextime (Currie & Yelowitz, 2000; Gerstel & McGonagle, 1999; Glass & Estes, 1997; Glied, Lambrew, & Little, 2003; Golden, 2001). Notably, using data from The 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce, Swanberg and colleagues (2005) found that workers in jobs paid hourly, providing low wages, and requiring limited education reported less access to a range of flexible scheduling options relative to other workers. Similarly, from a study of a manufacturing firm, Lambert (1998) found that workers in blue-collar, hourly jobs used fewer employer-sponsored work-life supports than managers and technical workers, even though the blue-collar workers expressed greater appreciation of available supports. Other studies show that within the ranks of lower-skilled jobs, there is also variation in access to work-life supports (Lambert & Waxman, 2005).

The literature presents two basic scenarios regarding how differential employee access to work-life supports occurs. First, such stratification may be the result of employer policies that link access to particular job characteristics and classifications. For example, many firms do not offer health insurance to workers in jobs classified as part-time or temporary (e.g., Kalleberg et al., 2000). Firms may also condition access to benefits on a particular hour minimum (maintaining a minimum number of hours week-to-week), pay grade (wage bands that mirror civil service designations), and exempt
(salaried)/nonexempt (hourly) classifications. Thus, employer policies can restrict access to benefits within and across organizational levels, limiting access for workers in low-level jobs overall, and introducing variation among low-level jobs as well.

Second, even when a low-level job is officially covered by supportive policies, differential access can occur as a matter of practice (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005; Lambert & Waxman, 2005). In an examination of the distribution of opportunities for scheduling flexibility, formal benefits, and job security among low-level jobs located in 22 firms in four industries (hospitality, retail, transportation, and banking), Lambert and Waxman (2005) found that those employers whose policies looked, on paper, to be more supportive of workers in lower-level jobs were strikingly similar to their counterparts when it came to actual firm practices.

This disjuncture between policy and practice can be traced to factors related to job instability and benefit costs, among other job conditions. For example, most firms establish benefit-waiting periods for certain job classifications (notably hourly jobs) that often range from 30 days to 1 year for individual health coverage and up to 36 months for dependent coverage (for an overview see Lambert & Haley-Lock, 2004; Lambert & Waxman, 2005). Similarly, workers may be able to accrue sick time, but unable to use it until they have been employed six months or even a year. These benefit waiting periods when coupled with high turnover rates mean that a large proportion of workers in low-level jobs may never qualify for health insurance or sick pay, even when technically eligible on paper (Lambert & Waxman, 2005).

Moreover, the expenses associated with making use of a particular benefit (for example, the out-of-pocket costs that health benefit plans require or the earnings that are foregone with unpaid leave options) may ultimately make benefits available in policy prohibitive for low-income workers.

**Nonstandard Status: Instability and Insecurity.** Although the evidence for declining job stability is mixed for workers overall (Gottschalk & Moffitt, 2000; Jaeger & Stevens, 2000; Neumark, Polsky, & Hansen, 2000), there is little disagreement that employer practices such as outsourcing and the hiring of temporary labor are creating new sources of instability in low-level jobs (Bernhardt & Marcotte, 2000; Habermesh, 1999; Houseman & Polivka, 2000; Osterman, 1999; Tilly, 1996). At this point in time, one of the best sources of information on job stability is Bernhardt and colleagues’ (2001) analysis comparing the job stability and wage growth of two cohorts of white males, one entering the labor market during the 1960s and the other in the early 1980s, using data from the National Longitudinal Surveys. They report that job instability in the later cohort is about 14 percent higher than in the earlier cohort, regardless of educational status. Some of this increase can be accounted for by the shift in the economy from an industrial base, containing historically stable jobs, to a service base, characterized by jobs with higher turnover. However, they also find a decline in job stability within industries as well, suggesting that jobs in all sectors of the economy are increasingly unstable. These findings on job stability are especially
troubling when viewed in light of Bernhardt and colleagues’ other findings suggesting that the wage penalty for changing employers is actually stronger in the current cohort than the earlier one.

Some of the declines in job stability are due to the increasing use of nonstandard employment statuses, such as the growth in part-time, temporary, and contingent employment (Kalleberg et al., 2000). However, even standard employment status (i.e., full-time regular employment) can be unstable and can take on nonstandard characteristics in practice. For example, in many industries, workers in low-skilled, standard, full-time jobs may be regularly shorted hours and put on furlough (a temporary, informal layoff), reducing the distinctiveness of full-time status (Henly & Lambert, 2005; Lambert & Waxman, 2005). Bernhardt and Marcotte (2000) review evidence that the nature of standard employment is shifting in terms of stability, wage-setting practices, upward mobility, and health and pension benefit coverage. Thus, conventional categories used to distinguish standard from nonstandard jobs are increasingly fuzzy and may no longer reflect clear differences, as experienced by workers in these different categories.

Nonstandard Timing: Little Predictability and Flexibility. Much of the recent attention to nonstandard employment in the work-family literature has centered on work timing, in particular the increased prevalence of nonstandard work schedules. As reported earlier, fully two-fifths of American workers work the majority of their hours outside of daytime, weekday hours and the workweek for a larger percentage includes some early mornings or late evenings (Presser, 2003). Jobs that employ workers outside of standard hours are ubiquitous across industrial sectors, but especially prevalent among low-paying service and laborer positions, which are disproportionately filled by workers with limited education (Presser, 2003; Presser & Cox, 1997).

A growing body of empirical work suggests nonstandard work schedules have negative implications for worker and family well-being. For example, research has demonstrated negative associations between nonstandard schedules and the health of workers (Boggild & Knutsson, 1999; Tepas & Price, 2001; Wedderburn, 2000), marital quality and stability (Jekielek, 2003; Presser, 2003; Staines & Pleck, 1986), and on parent-child interactions (Heymann, 2000; Presser, 2003). Nonstandard schedules are also associated with the use of low-quality child care, informal child care, and multiple care arrangements (Han, 2004; Henly & Lamb, 2005; Presser, 2003). To date, these studies are correlational rather than causal, and not all studies consistently find deleterious associations with all outcomes (see Presser, 2003, for a review of existing studies and for additional analyses).

Most research on nonstandard work schedules has focused on the timing of work, that is, the hours and days that work takes place. Less attention has been paid to the predictability of work schedules, defined as the length of advance notice given to workers regarding their work schedules. Although no national data currently exist that would allow an estimation of the proportion of workers who hold unpredictable schedules, qualitative research on low-level jobs suggests that unpredictable scheduling practices are
widespread. Lambert’s aforementioned study of low-level jobs in four industrial sectors - retail, hospitality, banking, and transportation - found that unpredictable scheduling practices were a typical employer strategy for managing fluctuations in consumer demand, observed in all 22 workplaces studied (Henly & Lambert, 2005; Lambert & Waxman, 2005). An in-depth analysis of a subset of retail stores from this study illustrated that work schedules were typically set with one week or less notice and there were frequent last-minute changes to posted schedules (Henly, Shaefer, & Waxman, 2006). Unpredictable schedules can interfere with workers’ ability to effectively structure and use nonwork hours - making it difficult to plan family meals, adopt consistent homework and bedtime routines, participate in children’s school activities, and maintain consistent child care arrangements (Henly et al., 2006; Henly & Lambert, 2005). Thus, schedule unpredictability - distinct from the timing of work hours - may be another important dimension of nonstandard work schedules that requires further research attention.

In contrast to research on the negative implications of nonstandard schedules for worker and family well-being is the work on schedule flexibility. Flexibility research presents in a positive light some aspects of nonstandard work schedules, specifically the possibility that nonstandard schedules can deliver workers greater control over how, where, and when they carry out their work (see Encyclopedia entries on Flexible Work Arrangements; Flextime). Research based on national samples of workers indicates that flexibility in work hours is rare among entry-level workers (Bond, 2003; Golden, 2005; Swanberg et al., 2005). For example, CPS data demonstrate that low-skilled unmarried mothers - who may arguably have the greatest need for flexible work arrangements - are least likely to have them (Golden, 2005).

The literature suggests that it is important to not only distinguish whether or not jobs provide flexibility, but also, who controls it (Henly et al., 2006; Kossek et al., 2005). Workers may work nonstandard hours and experience variations in work hours across days and weeks because their employer requires them to do so (employer-driven flexibility), rather than in response to workers’ own preferences (employee-driven flexibility). In their study of industry restructuring in electronics manufacturing, food service, financial services, and retail sales, Moss, Salzman, & Tilly (2005) found “little employee-driven flexibility and much employer-driven flexibility” in entry-level jobs (p.131). They report that workers in service industries are especially likely to have variations in work hours imposed on them by employers. Henly and colleagues’ (2006) study of entry-level retail workers suggests that when employee-driven flexibility takes place in retail, it often occurs through informal negotiations between individual workers and their supervisors. As a result, employee-driven scheduling flexibility is often distributed unequally and haphazardly even within entry-level jobs.

Changing opportunity structures. The changing industrial mix of the economy has implications for the quality of lower-level jobs. A shrinking manufacturing sector and declines in unionization have resulted in diminishing prospects for lesser-skilled workers and their families (Wilson, 1996). Alternatively, the service sector is surging. In 1999, 80 percent of Americans worked in the service sector, and lower-skilled
workers are disproportionately employed in low-level service sector jobs (Bernhardt et al., 2001). Overall, service sector employment has been characterized as relatively low-paying and nonstandard in terms of both status (part-time, seasonal) and hours (shifting, evening, and weekend) (Bernhardt et al., 2001; Presser, 2003). Thus, examining shifts across industrial sectors of the economy reveals that, on average, prosperity is declining for a growing proportion of America's families, and income inequality is increasing (Bernhardt et al., 2001).

Examining changes within industrial sectors reveals within industry declines as well, suggesting that the declining prospects of low-level workers are not simply a matter of manufacturing declines (Danziger & Gottschalk, 1995). The Russell Sage Foundation has funded a series of studies investigating how industrial restructuring in the face of increased global competition, deregulation, and changes in information technology is reshaping prospects for workers in low-level jobs lodged in manufacturing, telecommunications, hospitality, and health care firms. The results of the Russell Sage initiative are presented in an important volume edited by Eileen Appelbaum, Annette Bernhardt, and Richard Murnane (2003). Overall, the assessment is discouraging. Most firms across industries have adjusted to changing economic pressures by adopting cost-cutting strategies that operate to reduce the security, stability, and compensation of lower-level, hourly jobs.

Yet, there is variation. Particular industries show a shift, rather than a decline, in advancement opportunities for lower-level workers. For example, Lane, Moss, Salzman and Tilly's (2003) analysis of restructuring in the food service industry reveals that food preparation (for restaurants, hotels, and airlines) has largely been out-sourced to food manufacturers, which have experienced enormous consolidation and growth. While this shift has resulted in fewer food preparation jobs in restaurants and hotels, the quality of food preparation jobs, now lodged in food manufacturing, has improved in terms of wage rates, advancement into supervisory and management positions, and "professionalization" (such as menu planning and inventory management) (Lane et al., 2003). The analysis of job quality for call center workers by Batt, Hunter, and Wilk (2003) echoes this point. They found that the quality of call-center jobs and opportunities for mobility depend heavily on managerial strategies and the presence of union representation. As they conclude, “call center jobs do not have to be low-wage, dead-end jobs” (p. 271). Valcour and Hunter (2005) provide a conceptual model that identifies the relationship between technological change and work-life outcomes. They summarize studies indicating that the same technology can be implemented in ways that enrich jobs or de-skill jobs, depending on a host of factors, including the way in which work is organized within the firm and the firm’s larger organizational policies and culture. In sum, it is important that work-family researchers and practitioners keep abreast of industrial shifts in the economy and in the labor market with an eye toward identifying windows of opportunities for redesigning lower-level jobs in ways that assist workers and their families.
Implications for Research and Practice

The work-family challenges faced by workers employed at the bottom rung of the labor market are daunting. Deteriorating job conditions coupled with diminishing public benefits deliver limited economic opportunities and caregiving supports to low-level workers (see encyclopedia entry: Welfare Reform and Work-Family Studies by Randy Albelda). The current state of knowledge is strong regarding the specific conditions of low-level jobs that may influence worker and family well-being. However, the relevant theoretical and empirical writings are distributed across disciplines and within both scholarly and applied literatures. The scattered nature of the literature is one challenge to the development of a coherent knowledge base.

Another challenge is that standard questions used to classify jobs and assess their quality may have limited validity when used to gather information about low-level jobs. For example, assuming that a job provides steady, “full-time” hours when respondents have checked on a survey that they hold a full-time time job could be an erroneous conclusion. Similarly, it is unclear what workers in jobs whose schedules vary week to week and who may experience periodic furloughs (informal lay-offs) throughout the year are likely to report when responding to questions framed in terms of a “typical” workweek. And what does it really mean when workers in low-level jobs report that their employer “provides health insurance?” Being aware of the ambiguities associated with these commonly used variables can help researchers increase the validity of their methods and thus the relevance of their research for capturing the work-life concerns of workers in low-level jobs.

Limited access to work-life supports is a key condition of employment in low-level jobs that has important implications for work-family research and practice. Barriers to accessing supports may stem from firm policy as well as firm practice, suggesting the need for researchers to recognize a distinction between eligibility and access in their data collection efforts and for practitioners to attend to the implementation of policy in everyday workplace practice. To date, work-family scholarship only reflects a partial understanding of how benefits available through policy operate in practice because few studies collect data on the micro-level context in which policies are (or are not) delivered (Lambert & Kossek, 2005; Kossek et al., 2005).

Certainly, organizational policies and practices around a broad array of work-life supports (from sick pay to health insurance to flextime) affect workers in jobs at all levels of the organization, and there can be a disconnect between firm policy and workplace practice throughout a firm. However, the consequences of limited eligibility and access may be most dire for workers in low-level jobs because these workers are disproportionately members of disadvantaged groups. Research demonstrates that low-wage workers, and workers employed in jobs that require limited skills, are disproportionately young, minority, and
female, and are more likely to live in low-income households and households headed by single mothers (Blank, 1997; Carnevale & Rose, 2001; Mishel et al., 2005).

Inattention to the realities of low-level jobs currently hampers the usefulness of public policy for these disadvantaged groups. One example discussed earlier is the low percentage of workers who are eligible for coverage under the FMLA. Another example is Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). TANF does little to help smooth the week-to-week, season-to-season variations in income that accompany shifting schedules and rapid job loss. Instead, TANF policies establish a weekly amount of hours that recipients must work in order to avoid sanctioning, and monthly income that the family cannot exceed in order to remain eligible for Medicaid as well as cash assistance (see encyclopedia entry: Welfare Reform and Work-Family Studies by Randy Albelda). Similarly, states’ eligibility rules for Unemployment Insurance (UI) limit its usefulness for leveling the instability in employment and earnings characteristic of many lower-level jobs. Most states’ eligibility requirements include lengthy qualifying base periods and earnings floors and limit UI to the voluntary loss of a full-time job (e.g., Wenger, 2001). Given the high turnover rates in many lower-level jobs, the growth of part-time employment, and the practice of informal lay-offs, it is not surprising that only about 37 percent of unemployed workers overall even apply for UI upon job loss (Lambert & Haley-Lock, 2004; Wenger, 2001). Reducing hour, wage, and seniority requirements could go a long way toward enhancing the usefulness of public programs for workers at the low end of the labor market.

Crafting public policy to conform to the realities of lower-level jobs has its risks though. If not careful, such adjustments may serve as much to subsidize poor employer practices as poor families. Another strategy for increasing the value of public policy to workers in low-level jobs is to improve employer practices themselves. For example, reduced turnover would mean longer job tenure and thus increased eligibility for public benefits. It would also mean fewer job changes, and because public programs (UI, TANF) and employer benefits (health insurance) usually have waiting periods before coverage takes effect, this would reduce the start-up costs to families that come with a job loss or change. Similarly, the work requirements incorporated into TANF would be more palatable if low-level jobs provided more predictable and stable schedules and were more accommodating to caregiving responsibilities. Thus, improving employer practices would enhance the prospects of workers in low-level jobs both directly, by bettering their daily life, and indirectly, by unleashing the potential of public policies and programs to bolster family well-being during difficult times.

References


