Redesigning careers and care for the twenty-first century

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C. Wright Mills (1951) observed that, prior to the Industrial Revolution, most people worked in either agriculture or a family business. This meant that (1) people of all ages (including children) toiled until they were no longer able to do so, and (2) there were no sharp divisions between ‘work’ and ‘family’ in terms of time, place, or commitments. Both were integral to family life and the sustainability of the family economy.

Then everything upended. Researchers at the turn of the last century recognized and sought to capture changing lives in real time in the midst of the disruptive forces of industrialization, migration, and urbanization. From in-depth life histories to investigations of urban policy-making, employing qualitative and quantitative methods, scholars from a range of disciplines charted and sought solutions to the challenges of their times transforming life chances and life quality and, in doing so, rendering apart ‘work’ and ‘family’.

In 1972, Campbell and Converse edited The Human Meaning of Social Change, noting that ‘impressive change in rates, while a critical datum in itself, can be interpreted in very different ways when questions of human meaning of the change come to be asked’ (p. 6). One of the changes they noted was the large numbers of women moving into or remaining in the workforce.

Scholars today confront the challenge of charting the human meaning of the converging forces defining our times. Promising and important research directions involve capturing rising individual and family risks and vulnerabilities, but also opportunities in light of population aging, rapidly changing communication, computational, robotic, and information technologies and global economic processes; alterations, diversities, and inequities in family compositions, resources, relationships; the dismantling or scaling back of job, income and retirement protections; and the obsolescence of the tripartite life course (the institutionalized lock step of first full-time education, than full-time paid work, then full-time retirement that effectively sidelined family care work while accentuating age divisions and gender disparities) and the career mystique (the idea that full-time total commitment to paid work is the path to success – see Moen, 2016; Moen & Roehling, 2005).

At its very core, the Work and Family Researchers Network (WFRN) is about investigating the human meanings of social changes in work and family, as well as the dynamics and contexts infusing these institutions and their interfaces with disruptions, diversities, strains, conflicts, uncertainties, and insecurities. These dislocations lead to mounting inequalities and ambiguities, but also possibilities for new, more sustainable and equitable policies, practices, and life paths around careers and care.

I am pleased to guest edit this special issue of Community, Work, and Family based on the terrific WFRN conference in 2016. The theme of this issue is Redesigning Careers and Care for the 21st Century. The goal is to showcase the value of research aimed at advancing understanding of work and family as interactive social processes embedded in multilayered institutional contexts, with individuals, families, and institutions changing over time. There were so many good papers that some will spill over into future issues.

This is a herculean task, but the papers in this issue begin to address the challenges of understanding the human meaning of social change. Continuity and change in work and
family obligations are perhaps best captured in a deeply personal but also analytical article by Maike Philipsen, Susan Case, Angela Oetama-Paul, and Keimei Sugiyama on their own career and family trajectories and transitions, with different but also similar observations across the cohorts to which they belong. ‘Academic Womanhood across Career Stages: A Work-in-life Perspective on What Was, Is, and Could Be’ brings what Campbell and Converse (1972) described as abstract ‘rates’ into real life – the human experience of academia by women of different ages and life stages.

Other articles in this special issue address variable policy environments. Wike Been, Laura den Dulk, and Tanja Van Der Lippe chart the public/private policy interface in ‘A Business Case or Corporate Social Responsibility? How Top Managers’ Support for Work-Life Arrangements Relates to the National Context.’ This article importantly considers the role of top managers in addressing work–family issues in diverse structures. This is a key study of both individuals (beliefs and decision-making of top managers) and institutions (policies enacted and cultural tropes in various European countries).

Erin Cech and Lindsey O’Connor, in “‘Like Second-Hand Smoke’: The Toxic Effect of Workplace Flexibility Bias for Workers’ Health’, address the deleterious effects on workers of feeling that adopting flexible options may have negative career consequences. This comes at personal cost in terms of health and health behavior, in part because of increased stress and negative work-life spillover. This study underscores that it is not sufficient to simply have family-friendly policies ‘on the books’ if there remains bias against those making use of them.

‘Perceived Time Adequacy Improves Daily Well-Being: Day-to-Day Linkages and the Effects of A Workplace Intervention’ by Soomi Lee, Susan McHale, Ann Crouter, Erin Kelly, Orfeu Buxton, and David Almeida offers a more favorable perspective on flexibility. First, they show the importance for well-being on a daily basis of employees feeling they have sufficient time for their partners, for parenting, and for personal roles. Then they demonstrate that an intervention providing work-time flexibility and supervisor support can lead to just such a sense of time adequacy as well as increasing time with children.

Time is also the issue for Katie Genadek and Rachelle Hill, in this case, time parents spend with their children. In ‘Parents’ Work Schedules and Time Spent with Children’, they show that different attributes of parents’ work schedules operate to constrain or promote family care in the form of time parents share with their children.

The above articles depict cohort change, different national policy environments, costly flexibility policies, an intervention promoting time adequacy, and alternative work schedules. But workers do not simply find themselves in various circumstances; they also seek to exercise some agency in the process. Anne Grönlund and Ida Öun capture some agentic decision-making in professional men’s and women’s strategies around careers and care in Sweden. They find that women do not seek family-friendly jobs. In fact, Swedish women report less control over their work or their schedules and more work–family conflict. But they also seek to avoid family unfriendly jobs requiring constant availability, overtime work, and unpredictable schedules, possibly as a way to manage the confluence of career and care obligation.

In ‘Time Control, Job Execution and Information Access: Work/Family Strategies in the Context of Low-Wage Work and 24/7 Schedules’, Mélanie Lefrançois, Karen Messing, and Johanne Saint-Charles also examine strategies – in their case strategies of low-wage cleaners. They demonstrate the importance of social relationships on the job serving to provide flexibility in what are inflexible conditions. They also chart gendered strategies. Work as a community of relationships striving for collective solutions is a fruitful research area.

Careers and care activities, conditions, conflicts, strategies and impacts are all transforming in uneven ways, in different policy contexts, different organizations, and different families at
different life-course stages. This special issue offers barely a glimpse into some possibilities for promoting better work, better families, and better work–family integration as well as ameliorating gender and other forms of inequality. The theoretical and research challenge is to capture the constraints and opportunities of what is and what could be. Charting inequities, stresses, risks, and conflicts in the career-care-gender nexus is useful, but does not automatically suggest possible solutions. Studies of possible solutions are urgently needed in this climate of hyperchange.

What social forces, deliberate policy changes, and new ways of working and caring are opening up possibilities and providing protections for women, men, and working families at all stages of the life course? What inventive public, business, and community policies, practices, and mindsets can promote health, life quality and equality of individuals and families? This, I believe, is our twenty-first century research agenda.

**Disclosure statement**

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**References**


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