Opting Out (2010)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

Opting out is a term most commonly understood to describe the decision of married women to voluntarily quit professional careers and remain out of the labor force for a relatively extended period of time (beyond the duration of parental leave) during which they are engaged in family caregiving, primarily motherhood, to the exclusion of paid employment. While scholars have long recognized that women use a variety of strategies to reconcile work and family responsibilities, including time out of the labor force, opting out, by virtue of the attention given it by the media, has assumed special prominence and a distinct identity.

The larger narrative surrounding opting out posits a return to what has been variously labeled “new traditionalism” (Faludi, 1991), “neo-traditionalism” (Keller, 1994), or “new momism” ( Douglas & Michaels, 2004). The novelty of opting out is that the women said to be returning home (and thereby re-creating the traditional family form of male breadwinner/stay-at-home wife/mother) are, unlike the stay-at-home mothers of the 1950s, seasoned professionals with considerable career success who are making their decisions in an historical context that affords them a wider range of options than were available to earlier generations of women, even privileged women. Throughout most of the 20th century, in fact, the prevailing work-family pattern among college-educated women was sequencing -that is, work or family, one to the exclusion of the other (Goldin, 1997). Employment, when anticipated at all after marriage, was regarded as short-term and secondary. Beginning in the 1970s, however, educated women made a break with the past and began, in significant numbers, to combine sustained employment with motherhood.

As early as 1991, in a lengthy article in the business journal Barron’s, journalist Maggie Mahar (1992) wrote of what she characterized as an emerging trend whereby “young women are opting out [emphasis added] of the job market and staying home.” The term opting out was subsequently popularized a decade later by writer Lisa Belkin in a high-profile and controversial cover story in The New York Times Magazine entitled “The Opt-Out Revolution” (Belkin, 2003). Belkin noted a similar trend and argued that it was being driven by women’s changing preferences for domesticity and rejection of career success as
conventionally defined. In the early 1990s, when these articles appeared, women’s labor force participation especially that of mothers had indeed begun to plateau and even dip, after a decade of rapid increase, prompting some basis for journalistic attention and speculation as to the causes. However, as Susan Faludi (1991) and other media analysts (Walters, 1995; Barnett & Rivers, 1996) pointed out, the story line that women were abandoning jobs and careers for family was popular and recurring well before any slowdown had been registered. Critics charged that such coverage embodied an anti-feminist agenda (Walters, 1995), cloaked in the rhetoric of choice (Williams, 2000) and reminiscent of an earlier era’s feminine mystique (Crittenden, 2001).

An analysis of print media largely confirmed the foregoing critique (Kuperberg and Stone, 2008). The period from 1988 to 2003 saw more than 50 articles on this topic published in large circulation outlets such as big city newspapers and national magazines. Articles shared striking similarities with respect to their subjects and narratives. The opt-out demographic was white, college-educated, married women with children, and had formerly worked in professional jobs. Among the 80 women interviewed in the articles whose previous jobs could be identified, job titles included business executive, lawyer, vice president, journalist, CEO, economist, engineer, college professor, television producer, and member of the U.S. House of Representatives. The stories’ major news hook was that women were leaving high-powered careers in favor of family and were doing so by choice or as a reflection of an evolving preference for family and domesticity. Choice imagery was exemplified by the defining New York Times story (Belkin, 2003), for example, whose cover teaser asked “Why don’t more women get to the top? They choose [emphasis added] not to.”

Despite the decades-long publication of such articles, it was The New York Times piece, with its combination of high visibility and aggressive articulation of the choice perspective that put opting out (a phenomenon that until then had no name) into the lexicon. While some, mostly in the media, accepted the claim that there was an opt-out revolution among college-educated women (e.g., Shellenbarger, 2006; Leung, 2004), and others took women to task for making the decision (Bennetts, 2008; Hirshman, 2006), the prevailing reaction -among journalists and scholars -challenged the opt-out narrative. Typical was a critique by fellow journalist E. J. Graff (2007) who faulted Belkin’s group of informants (members of an Atlanta book group) as non-representative and the ensuing article as more reflective of “me and my friends journalism” than any real social trend. Echoing earlier criticisms, the opting out story line was also attacked for being anti-feminist and inaccurate on a number of points. Many commentators took issue with the tone of the media for portraying opting out as a preference or personal choice (Graff, 2007; Williams, 2007). They argued that workplace inflexibility combined with a highly gendered division of labor in the home (Bianchi & Raley, 2005) amount to a type of discrimination that views being a mother as incompatible with being a professional. The fallacy of “choice rhetoric” (Williams, 2000), or the misattribution of women’s work status to their personal preferences, assumes that these mothers make
work-related decisions without constraints and renders them invisible.

The controversy surrounding opting out—questions raised about the existence and extent of the trend as well as the reasons behind it—has spurred a growing body of academic research. While the relationship between childbearing and labor force participation as well as women’s movement in and out of the labor force to accommodate family has been much studied, opting out is identified as a distinctly class- and race-based strategy, deployed primarily by white middle- and upper-middle class professionals (Stone, 2007b; Williams & Boushey, 2010). These women, by ideology and practice, have historically been associated with a separate spheres model of work and family (Kessler-Harris, 1982), a new embrace of which is seemingly signaled by opting out. This group has also been identified with a particular family form, heterosexual marriage, which is linked to opting out insofar as the ability to exercise this option is typically open only to women with a male partner whose earnings can offset the loss of their own.

Accordingly, research on opting out typically (but not consistently) focuses on married women who are college-educated and/or formerly worked in jobs in the broad category of professionals and managers (the subject of opting out media coverage). This still new but growing body of research takes as its central question the role played by motherhood and changing tastes and values about domesticity (especially children) in women’s decision-making with regard to labor force participation and related outcomes. What the media and the reading public sees as a counter-intuitive or surprising decision by high-achieving women to opt out also runs counter to what would be predicted by numerous theories in various academic disciplines. The gender role perspective in sociology, the neoclassical theory of the family, and the associated human capital perspective in economics, and most approaches in vocational psychology hypothesize that highly educated women, especially those already working in professional fields, would show continuing high levels of work and career commitment. Academic research on opting out thus seeks to understand the influence of various individual-level influences on women’s decisions to opt out as well as the effects of more often overlooked (especially by the media) structural and institutional impediments to professional women’s ability to integrate work and family.

**Importance of Topic to Work and Family Studies**

Opting out is important to a number of key issues in the work-life field. The notion of opting out posits not only a change in behavior among elite, mostly white, well-educated mothers but also a shift in preferences among them, a return to a neo-traditional approach to negotiating work and family life after a generation of increasing diversification of family forms and work-life arrangements. Many of the women whose behavior is described by the term have made considerable investments in human capital and, therefore, have significant and historically unprecedented discretion in making decisions. As noted, movement in and out of the labor force is not a new strategy for managing work and family, per se, but
what is new and perhaps revolutionary would be the use of this strategy by women with such significant investments in their own human capital.

To the extent that opting out is often positioned by the media as a new work-life coping strategy, better understanding of its use -the extent, reasons for, and consequences -is critical to questions surrounding household decision-making about a host of work-life issues and about work-life integration more broadly. Professional, dual-career couples, for example, have in past research been found to be “more equal [i.e., more egalitarian] than others,” (Hertz, 2004), but opting out raises doubts as to whether this may be changing, with professional men’s career success giving them greater bargaining power (or hegemony [Pyke, 1996]) and creating pressure for a reversion to the more traditional male-breadwinner family. Given the link between caring and earning, opting out also has implications beyond the immediate family dynamics and household division of labor. For example, to the extent that men are “back-stopped” by an at-home wife and mother, research shows that they have a competitive edge in fulfilling ideal worker expectations over workers (of whatever sex) who are not (Stroh and Brett, 1996). If opting out is indeed motivated by a new traditionalism, then the role of “opt-out moms” in perhaps further intensifying motherhood, and parenting standards generally (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003), also warrants greater attention for its potential to redefine motherhood to a narrow, class-based standard that increases pressure on and stigmatizes other types of mothers and caregivers, most of whom are not able to meet its time-intensive demands, much less its financial demands.

A better understanding of opting out is also important as it would shed light on issues related to the status of women in the professions as well as in the workforce more broadly insofar as just under half (approximately 40%) of all women in the labor force work in professional positions. In most such fields, women currently make up large shares of degree recipients (approximately half in classically male-dominated fields such as law and medicine, for example, and the large majority in historically female-dominated fields such as teaching). Opting out calls into question women’s continued presence in these professions. Even if women do continue to enter them, the implications of opting out of professional jobs are considerable in terms of earnings and advancement, especially in the more lucrative male-dominated professions. In economic parlance, opting out exacts an unusually high opportunity cost in terms of salary and promotions foregone, its effects extending throughout a lifetime to depress pension and retirement accrual.

At the aggregate level, career interruption (as a manifestation of disrupted labor force participation or intermittency generally) has been shown to be a major source of gender-based earnings differentials and of the wage gap (as measured by the female-to-male earnings ratio), improvement in which has slowed over the same period that opting out has been said to be increasing and women’s labor force participation generally has plateaued. The coterminous nature of these trends hints that there might be a link between
them. Opting out has also been invoked to understand the failure of women to reach senior positions of leadership and authority in the professions, career interruption being implicated in the “leaky pipeline” syndrome that finds increasingly fewer women in higher ranks and upper echelons (Mason and Goulden, 2004).

While opting out media coverage emphasizes women’s individual choices and their preference for family over career, even the defining New York Times article (Belkin, 2003) included examples of women who had been unable to arrange satisfactory flexible arrangements at their place of work. Considerable research shows that workers in professional jobs have more autonomy and control over the conditions of their work than do workers in other types of jobs, but the professions are also characterized by rigid career trajectories and demanding time, travel, and “face time” requirements that are difficult for women to meet while juggling caregiving responsibilities (Williams, 2000). Better understanding of the reasons women opt out might thus shed light on numerous issues surrounding the design, availability, utilization, and success of flexible and family-responsive workplace policies in professional employment and provide insights into how the design of these policies might be improved to better meet the needs of working mothers and families.

While a recurring critique of the media coverage of opting out has been that it focuses only on a small elite group of women, others have argued the opposite - that this group is important, despite its relatively small numbers. Hewlett (2007) cites the importance of studying the behavior of educated women with children because they possess “market power.” Similarly, Stone (2007b, p. 15) highlights their disproportionate influence as “cultural arbiters, defining what is acceptable for all women in their work and family roles.” Among the first to challenge the status quo at work, these mothers and the struggles they face raise a question at the heart of work and family studies: “If the most privileged women of society cannot successfully combine work and family, who can?” (Stone, 2007b, p. 15).

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

**Operationalizing Opting Out**

There is no explicit definition of opting out in media coverage of the phenomenon. The defining New York Times article (Belkin, 2003), for example, profiled mostly at-home mothers who were out of the labor force but included a few women who worked part-time or on a freelance basis. Nonetheless, the emerging definition is of a decision to take a prolonged period (beyond employer-granted parental leave) out of the labor force to take care of children. As depicted by the media, opting out is, in its most basic form, a decision to allocate one’s labor away from paid employment to unpaid care work in the home and, to a lesser extent, the community. Positioned as a lifestyle choice, “opting out” refers to a relatively sustained
interruption from the labor force (and typically a professional career) during which women devote themselves exclusively to domesticity, primarily child care, making their husbands the sole earners in the family. In this latter aspect, it is simultaneously a decision about paid employment and family form, representing a shift from a dual-earner to male-breadwinner configuration.

Opting out is typically understood as a strategy distinct from other forms of work-family accommodation such as those involving alternative or non-linear career trajectories (e.g., mommy tracking, downshifting, nonlinear, or “kaleidoscopic” [Mainero and Sullivan, 2006] careers) or those involving alternative work arrangements (e.g., part-time, job-sharing, or flextime). While conceptually distinct from these other strategies, opting out may be used in conjunction with them or be viewed as part of a larger nontraditional career strategy. In fact, the extent to which opting out is related to these different strategies or used in combination or in sequence with one or another are research questions of some interest.

Empirically, academic researchers have operationalized opting out in a number of ways. The most frequently used indicator has been the labor force participation rate, whether the respondent is in the labor force (i.e., either employed or actively seeking work) for a designated reference period (typically last week or last year). Other operationalizations have been used, as will be discussed below, including working part-time and staying home to take care of family.

**Recent Trends in Opting Out**

The long-term rise in married mothers' labor force participation that began in the 1970s appears to have begun slowing in the mid-1990s. The downturn was concentrated among college-educated women, especially mothers of very young children (Bradbury & Katz, 2005; Mosisa & Hipple, 2006; Cohany & Sok, 2007), the group that has been the focus of media speculation and whose “quiet revolution” (Goldin, 2006) transformed women’s employment patterns and expectations in the 1970s. Between 1997 and 2000, for example, the labor force participation rate of this group dropped by 9% (but still remained the highest among all mothers) and has shown no clear trend since 2000 (Cohany & Sok, 2007). During this period, the labor force participation rates of women with infants across all educational levels declined, as well. Generally, the probability of women’s being in the labor force was inversely related to number of children and showed an inverted U-shaped relationship to husband’s income: Women whose husbands earned in the top 20% or in the bottom 20% of the income distribution were less likely to work than women whose husbands earned in the middle 60%. The authors speculate that several factors other than motherhood may have also contributed to these trends: weaker labor markets; changing demographic characteristics such as aging and increased race and ethnic diversity; changes in cultural values; and shifts in personal preference.
More recent research directly addresses the validity of the media’s opting out narrative. Heather Boushey’s (2005) analysis of Current Population Survey data showed that the decline in mothers’ labor force participation during the period under particular scrutiny (2001 -2005) was primarily due to a weak labor market and that childless women and men were almost equally affected. Boushey also suggests that a variety of demographic factors (e.g., an increase in Hispanic women in the general population, a group more likely to become full-time homemakers), as well as labor market conditions, might be responsible for the apparent decrease in women’s labor force participation. Her analysis shows a 2.1% decline in the labor force participation of women but concludes that “the claim that this decline is explained by the decision of women to stay home with their children is simply not true. Children had no more impact on women’s decisions to join the labor force in 2004 than they did at any earlier point in the preceding 20 years” (Boushey, 2005). With regard to the highly educated contingent of mothers who are the focus of opting out speculation, she finds that “for highly educated women, dropping out of the labor force is [emphasis added] usually associated with having a child at home,” which, she notes, is “just about the only reason better-educated older women drop out of the labor force” (Boushey, 2005).

In a follow-up study, Boushey (2008) examined opting out among mothers in light of lower employment rates for all U.S. workers in the early 2000s. She focused on the effect of children in the home on women’s employment rates (the “child effect”) between 1979 and 2005, finding that it decreased sharply for mothers with both high school and college degrees. Boushey credited the dip in women’s labor force participation to broader labor market changes, including the recession of the early 2000s. For highly educated women in particular (those with a graduate degree), Boushey found no statistically significant increase in opting out between 2000 and 2005. For the typical opt-out population -professional women with graduate degrees aged 33 to 40 -she also found no trend toward opting out.

Hoffman (2009) analyzed Current Population Survey data as well, but found, in contrast with earlier studies, that fewer married women with children were working in 2004 than in the prior decade. He identified the reason for the inconsistency between his finding and those of others as due to their inclusion of single women with children, a group that saw a particularly sharp increase in labor force participation as a result of welfare reform during the period in question, and a group that is not usually associated with opting out as conventionally understood. Less-educated single mothers do indeed have low rates of labor force participation and are more likely to be stay-at-home mothers than the well-educated professionals said to be opting out, but their decision-making about whether or not to work or stay home is not typically positioned by the media as “opting out” nor characterized as such in scholarly research (see, for example, Edin and Lein, 1997), further underscoring the class-based nature of the phenomenon.

Sociologist Christine Percheski (2008) examined cohort differences (as opposed to annual trends per se)
in the labor force participation and full-time, year-round employment rates of college-educated women in professional and managerial occupations for the years 1960 to 2005 using Census and American Community Survey data. Looking at cohorts born between 1906 and 1975, she found that the percentage of women with young children working full-time, year-round increased markedly, from approximately 33% for women born before 1946 to approximately 67% for women born between 1956 and 1975. The effect of young children on women’s overall labor force participation rates (including part-time work) was found to have decreased significantly across all cohorts. Children did have an effect, however, on the probability of working long hours. For the youngest cohort studied, born between 1966 and 1975, mothers were 60% less likely than women without children to work 50 or more hours per week.

Accumulating research thus casts considerable doubt on the claim of an “opt-out revolution” (Belkin, 2003), typically finding neither a significant decrease in the labor force participation of mothers, especially college-educated mothers, nor an increase in the depressant effect of children on this group’s labor force participation. Further work remains to be done to clarify and resolve inconsistent findings, which appear to be due primarily to differences in the samples analyzed and also perhaps to differences in the labor force outcomes under study. This body of research is typically descriptive in nature, and while statistical differentials and correlations suggest possible causes of opting out, a full understanding of causal mechanisms awaits further study employing different methodology. In the meantime, several studies have sought to assess the underlying motivations of women who fit the opt-out demographic so as to better understand the larger meaning and context of their decision-making with regard to work and family.

Reasons Why Women Opt Out

A variety of explanations have been put forth regarding the reasons for the movement of mothers out of the labor force, however small the proportion. More broadly, the reasons can be categorized as (1) individual-level explanations such as shifts in women’s tastes and preferences or (2) structural explanations such as larger cultural shifts and/or “pushes” from inhospitable work environments. The former emphasize women’s choices among competing options of work and family; the latter emphasize constraints or barriers to the integration, or simultaneous pursuit, of work and family. Research on the reasons behind women’s decision to opt out has typically focused on the affluent professional population that is the subject of media coverage.

In the case of individual-level explanations, some researchers maintain that women are not satisfied with their careers and, therefore, have an easier time stepping away when faced with motherhood. In a study of why high-achieving women “off-ramp” their careers (a term these researchers use to describe a phenomenon essentially identical to opting out), Hewlett (Hewlett, Luce, Shiller, & Southwell, 2005) found that 29% felt their career was neither satisfying nor enjoyable, while another 23% felt stalled in
their careers.

Though poorly supported by the empirical work on larger trends, the media have suggested that women prefer the home and care for their children over work, regardless of job satisfaction. The “ideology of intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996) is considered a significant factor contributing to the strength of these homeward pulls. However, 55% of women’s responses to the question “Why did you decide to off-ramp?” did not involve the desire to spend more time with children (Hewlett et al., 2005). Measuring the interest of mothers in career re-entry, Hewlett et al. (2005) found 26% wanted to return to work immediately after having children and another 43% wanted to return within 1 to 10 years. Hewlett et al. (2005) also found that the majority of women (58%) see their career as non-linear, failing to follow the steady, linear progression up the career ladder that typifies the ideal worker. Research from Catalyst, an organization devoted to the advancement of women in business, indicates that while women in the corporate sector may make more trade-offs between their careers and personal lives, they also have very high levels of career satisfaction (Catalyst, 2004), and 69% reported they would continue working regardless of financial need (Catalyst, 1998).

Blair-Loy (2003) studied the work-family conflicts facing female executives in the financial services industry. She analyzed the conflict in terms of competing “schemas of devotion” -one being family and the other work. Blair-Loy found that the definition of a successful professional conflicts with the definition of a good mother and that most women find it impossible to reconcile these two roles. Some women, therefore, sacrifice their careers and devote themselves more intensively to mothering, while others delay childbearing or choose not to have children at all in order to remain dedicated to their careers at the level required of them to achieve success (Blair-Loy, 2003). Specifically, regardless of the devotion schema chosen, women struggle to make the right decision and are rarely certain that they have done so.

This struggle is echoed in an in-depth study of 54 highly educated, former professionals who had quit their jobs and were stay-at-home mothers -opted out, as conventionally understood -which found that the large majority of these women were highly conflicted about their decision (Stone, 2007a). Further challenging the prevailing explanation that their decision was primarily about motherhood, most women did not quit their careers because of a preference to stay home with their children (only 5 among the 54 interviewed); instead 90 percent mentioned reasons related to their work. This finding, coupled with that from the Hewlett study, data for which were from a national survey, reinforces findings on the fixed nature of workers’ attitudes toward work (Hynes and Clarkberg, 2005) and fails to confirm the idea that mothers are quitting their careers out of preference for home over work. Rather, women cited overly demanding, inflexible all-or-nothing workplaces as the major motivation for their decisions to quit. The intense time commitments of their professional jobs and the expectation that employees be unencumbered by competing responsibilities created a climate in their places of work in which flexible work arrangements,
such as working part-time or job-sharing, were either not available or, more commonly, stigmatized, marginalized, or mommy-tracked -leading women who took advantage of them to ultimately quit (Stone, 2007a).

Adding to these workplace pushes was an often unequal division of household labor that placed full responsibility for the care of the home and children on women. Husbands were unable or, often, unwilling to cut back on their own high-demand careers (Stone, 2007a), in effect requiring that their wives do so. Although virtually all of the women in the sample were happy to have more time to spend with their children, most still identified with their professions and intended to return to work at some point in the future, although their plans were uncertain.

Additional evidence from another study of high-achieving women shows that mothers who were in the labor force before having children are more likely to continue working after their children are born and that different professions showed distinct differences in career persistence (Goldin and Katz, 2008). For a sample of Harvard/Radcliffe alumni who had entered or graduated between 1969 and 1992, Goldin and Katz found that 15 years after graduation, time out of the labor force following childbirth decreased across cohorts, with the mean time out of work for the most recent graduates being only 19 months. For those with advanced degrees, women in certain occupations appeared to have an easier time balancing work and family. While doctors and Ph.D.s took the shortest time out of work, women with MBAs were out of the labor force for the longest amount of time (Goldin & Katz, 2008). Women with children were found to have lower full-time, year-round labor force participation rates overall than male graduates or women without children, but those with advanced degrees showed a strong commitment to their careers by returning to work after only brief absences following childbirth (Goldin and Katz, 2008). These results suggest that certain industries, including the corporate sector, may pose particularly difficult challenges for women with young children. In common with findings from Stone’s study (2007a), they highlight the influence of workplace organization and culture on women’s ability to combine careers and family and on the decision to opt out.

Long hours are one of the hallmarks of professional occupations. Using longitudinal data for a nationally representative sample (the Survey of Income and Program Participation [SIPP]), a recent study found that for women, having a husband who works long hours greatly increases the chance of leaving the workforce; for men, in contrast, having a wife who works long hours has no effect (Cha, 2010). Specifically for women in professional careers, having a husband who works 60 hours or more per week increases the probability of quitting by 51% compared to women whose husbands work fewer than 60 hours per week. For professional women with children, their odds of quitting increase 112% when their husbands work 60 hours or more per week (Cha, 2010).
The Motherhood Penalty

The professions, typically understood as those requiring advanced or specialized training and entailing a high degree of autonomy and responsibility, have been characterized as the last bastion of male breadwinner privilege (Coltrane, 2004), identified with a male model of work (Acker, 1992) and a male clockwork (Hochschild, 1975) and personified by an ideal worker free of outside responsibilities (Williams, 2000). As Rosanna Hertz described it, “the hegemonic culture of the workplace both assumes and depends upon an infrastructure in which individuals sequence their lives according to jobs and career demands” (Hertz, 2004, p. 233). A related body of research demonstrates that considerable penalties are attached to motherhood in the workplace, which, as the foregoing research suggests, create an inhospitable climate for working mothers to persist in their careers.

Researchers have found gender-family effects playing a role in the unequal tenure rates between men and women in the academy, as ideal worker norms (i.e., long hours, travel, geographic flexibility) push mothers, particularly those with children under the age of 6, away from “fast-track professions” (Mason & Goulden, 2004). Researchers have also documented the unfortunate reality of workplace discrimination against mothers (Still, 2006; Williams and Bornstein, 2006). In one study, researchers asked participants to rate four consultants with equivalent credentials: a mother, a woman without children, a man without children, and a father. The mother was rated the least competent, committed, and appropriate for hiring (79% less likely to be hired than non-mothers), training, or promotion (100% less likely to be promoted than non-mothers), and was offered a starting salary lower than the rest of the consultants (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). A new form of employment discrimination, family responsibilities discrimination (FRD), or employment discrimination against workers based on their responsibilities to care for family members (Bornstein and Weber, 2008), is emerging as additional evidence of workplace discrimination against mothers. An increase of nearly 400% in the number of FRD cases filed between 1995 and 2005 compared to the prior decade demonstrates the unfortunate reality many employees, mostly mothers, face when caring for dependents (Still, 2006).

Implications for Research and Practice

While opting out is just one of the strategies women use to accommodate work and family, and an extreme one insofar as it entails exiting the labor force and interrupting a professional career, the attention given to opting out draws attention to two larger issues of which it is but one manifestation: (1) the failure of workplaces to adapt to the realities of today’s workforce, many of whom—women and men—have significant family caregiving responsibilities, and (2) the absence of public policy in the United States, in distinct contrast with most other industrialized nations, to support working families. Accumulating evidence makes clear that the prevailing understanding about opting out—professional
women are exiting the workforce in large numbers and doing so for reasons related primarily to family—is false, but additional research is needed to better understand both the larger trends and resolve inconsistent findings in this body of research. To advance both goals, researchers need to evolve a commonly agreed-upon definition and operationalization of opting out. Another avenue of research involves extending and testing hypotheses suggested by past research, much of which is qualitative and/or based on limited samples.

Although women who opt out are a minority, their exits represent a significant “brain drain” of human capital and talent (Hewlett et al., 2005). Existing research suggests that long work hours are a major obstacle to women’s sustained presence in the labor force and that workplace policies to support working mothers may be inadequate. Further research is needed to confirm and better understand these preliminary findings, but employers who seek to retain these women, or avoid being the target of family caregiving discrimination lawsuits, would be well advised to review their practices. Research suggests that women are not “choosing” to quit but rather are unable to continue, pushed out by the conditions of their jobs rather than pulled home by their children. Correctly understood, this implies a large unmet demand for workplace flexibility; in addition, underutilization of flexibility may reflect a fear of penalty for its use rather than a lack of interest. The often overlooked role that husbands’ long hours play in the decision to opt out argues for the need to make such policies attractive to men as well as women. Finally, that some professions might be more or less conducive to women’s persistence suggests that there are lessons to be learned from certain fields that might be usefully applied to others, especially the corporate sector.

References


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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 ...).

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.

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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 work-family 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
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).

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

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).

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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives</th>
<th>Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain C: Covariates</th>
<th>Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues and Experiences</th>
<th>Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Individual Antecedents</td>
<td>Individual Experiences: Needs &amp; Priorities; Problems &amp; Concerns</td>
<td>Individual Covariates</td>
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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains