Parenting in the workplace (PIW) is a childcare arrangement whereby employees directly care for their children at their workplaces while simultaneously attending to their routine job duties (Secret, 2005). The presence of children in workplaces is not new (Axinn & Levin, 1997; Qvortrup, 1985). However, in contrast to the historical manifestation of the phenomena where children labored as workers alongside adults in factories or fields, parenting in the workplace (also known as workplace parenting) describes various types of childcare arrangements whereby children’s basic needs are met at the workplace by parents who are also carrying out their paid work responsibilities. In other words, employees who parent in the workplace manage and respond to the demands and responsibilities of both their children and their employer at the same time. In contrast to other types of workplace-sponsored childcare, such as on-site childcare, in the PIW childcare options, the children remain at the worksite with their parents who retain sole responsibility for their care and supervision during the workday.

This encyclopedia entry describes what is known about the nature and frequency of PIW childcare experiences within some of the businesses where it has been allowed and provides an organizational perspective on the benefits and liabilities of the practice. The entry also discusses parenting in the workplace as a childcare option that permeates work-family boundaries and considers what this more integrated approach to work and family might mean for employees, their families and children.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

The seriousness of the childcare problem in the United States, as well as in many other countries, cannot be overstated. Thus, any option that offers parents and other primary caretakers acceptable ways to combine quality care for their children and paid work should be considered. Parenting in the workplace is one such option. It can be a practical, low-cost, and effective childcare response to particular work-family dilemmas created when employed parents are unable to locate or access either routine or back-up childcare (Secret, 2005; Secret, 2006).
Insights about parents’ experiences with PIW have been garnered primarily from major newspapers and national news magazines such as the New York Times, Boston Globe, or Time Magazine (Belluck, 2000; Burge, 2007; Grandpre, 2000; Klaff, 2001; Kleiman, 1999; Sharples, 2008) that have featured stories about employees who bring their children to work. These stories, plus a recently developed ‘Babies in the Workplace’ website (Moquin, 2007), suggest a continued and widespread interest in PIW among the public. The news articles and website provide anecdotal information about an assortment of workplace parenting experiences around the US, offer self-help guides for both employers and employees interested in pursuing the option, and present an overall generally positive view of the practice. In particular, proponents of PIW assert that the practice can improve the quality of life for both parents and children because of the potential for lessened childcare-induced stress, the increased opportunity for interaction between parent and child, and a strengthening of the parent-child bond. On the other hand, the potential for PIW to increase employee work-family conflict due to blurring of the work-family roles or to disrupt the work environment due to the distraction of children in the workplace, has had less media attention, possibly because the practice remains available only to those businesses and employees where the experience has been positively received.

Employers that participated in one of the few systematic studies of the practice described workplace parenting as an organizational strategy used to safeguard routine business operations when employees experience childcare deficits or breakdowns (Secret, 2005). They viewed PIW as a ‘default’ childcare option—a safety net for both employers and employees to mitigate the negative consequences that can arise within the home or the workplace due to a lack of accessible, affordable childcare resources in the community (Secret, 2006). These employers emphasized PIW’s value in maintaining worker productivity and decreasing employee absenteeism generated by employees’ childcare problems. Furthermore, both the employers and employees in the organizations studied reported that the PIW practice engendered greater worker loyalty such that workers will ‘go the extra mile’ at work if their family responsibilities are considered by their employers. Because a ‘work-comes-first’ attitude dominates most PIW experiences that have been studied (Secret, 2005; Secret, 2006), positive parent-child relationships and child outcomes may be by-products of PIW rather than major reasons for the practice. Thus, the PIW experience may be grouped with many other family-friendly workplace policies where family well-being and the needs of children remain secondary to business goals (Albrecht, 2003; Barnett, 1999). In this sense, PIW can best be categorized as a viable childcare alternative that is a business-driven, ‘employer-centered’ strategy. See Barnett’s “A new work-life model for the twenty-first century” in The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (1999) for more detail about these strategies.

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

There are but two known studies about PIW, both exploratory and both focused on an organizational
One study surveyed co-workers in one organization with a 10-year history of allowing parents to bring young children to work with them and where four individuals were currently bringing their babies to work (Secret, Sprang, & Bradford, 1998). These co-workers reported few negative effects of PIW on their work environment and retained generally positive views of the practice. A second study was more extensive in that the researcher obtained a small sample of organizations in one state and surveyed and interviewed 55 employers in the organizations that allowed PIW, a handful of parents in the organizations who were parenting in the workplace, and 67 organizations in the same state who reported no PIW arrangements (Secret, 2005; Secret, 2006).

From these limited explorations, we surmise that PIW is practiced in several types of businesses and industries and has been present in some organizations for as long as 30 years. Although few companies had written policies governing PIW, the opportunity was generally limited to administrative-type positions, to workplace settings that are void of dangerous machinery or toxic materials, and to children whose behavior could be managed easily by the parent (Secret, 2005). A surprising number of fathers and grandparents, 30% of the sample, were reported to be parenting in the workplace and all ages of children were represented. The children were closely supervised by the parent/caretaker, generally visible to other employees but not to customers or clients, and were often occupied with various child-centered activities such as playing quietly with toys or electronic games, sometimes napping, doing homework or working on available office computers. Employers who recently initiated the practice found it to be less intrusive than they had anticipated and were likewise surprised by the overall positive reactions of co-workers.

The nature and frequency of PIW experiences often differed by business size. In larger businesses (over 100 employees), the practice was used primarily for back-up or emergency childcare and the children remained peripheral to the work organization. In contrast, employees in many of the smaller businesses tended to use PIW on a regular basis (Secret, 2006). In these businesses, child and parenting activities were more infused into the organization’s work life suggesting that the practice had become ‘institutionalized.’ Compared to organizations that allowed PIW only on a back-up basis, representatives of companies that allowed workplace parenting on a regular basis were more likely to emphasize the importance of parent-child bonding, family ties, and parental transmission of values; to reflect upon the children’s needs within the workplace setting; and to report more favorable attitudes toward work-family integration (Secret, 2006).

Organizational differences and similarities were also noted between companies who allowed PIW and those who did not. PIW organizations ‘go one step beyond family-friendly’ not only by providing the opportunity for parenting in the workplace, but by being more likely to offer paid leave and flexible scheduling for employees to care for family than do non-PIW organizations (Secret, 2005; Secret, 2006). PIW organizations also seemed more cognizant of recruitment and retention issues and reported
higher regard for innovation and higher levels of collegiality in the workplace than non-PIW organizations, but resembled non-PIW organizations in terms of worker efficiency, work pressure or regard for rules and regulations.

Although the prevalence of PIW is unknown, Secret provides some insight into extent of the practice. Based on the percentage of companies allowing PIW in the one state that she sampled, Secret estimated that approximately 1.6% of businesses were offering some form of PIW at the time of the study. Extrapolating from these estimates, nearly 14,000 employees may have been engaged in PIW in the one state where the study was conducted (see Secret, 2005 for details about these estimations). As a point of reference, the 2005 National Study of Employers conducted by the Families and Work Institute (Bond, Galinsky, Kim, & Brownfield, 2005) report that 7% of employers provide child care at or near the worksite, 6% provide for back-up or emergency care for employees when their regular child care arrangements fall apart, 5% provide for sick care for the children of employees, 3% provide payment for child care with vouchers or other subsidies, and 3% provide child care for school-age children on vacation. These percentages are similar to those found in the earlier 1998 Business Work-Life Study. Including a PIW choice on the list of childcare options when employers or employees are asked by researchers, or governmental bodies such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, to report on the number and types of family-friendly practices provided by their organizations would, of course, be the preferred method to assess the prevalence of PIW practices.

The parent stories about PIW in the Secret study (2006) are similar to those reported in the popular media that emphasize the positive family outcomes of the practice, particularly an improvement in the quality of family life, avoidance of problems of latch key children and a strengthening of the parent-child bond. However, no study to date has directly assessed the consequences of PIW for family and child well-being or investigated the relationship between PIW and employee work-family conflict. Because telecommuting is perhaps the best proxy for PIW in terms of integrating work and family roles, studies about the impact of telecommuting on work-family conflict can help locate the PIW genre within work-family conflict literature. [See Encyclopedia entry, Work-Family Role Conflict http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=264&area=academics]. To begin, one of the more important insights from the telecommuting studies is that the question about whether blending paid work and family roles mitigates or increases the work-family conflict or stress of employees is not easily answered (Kossek, 2003, see Encyclopedia entry, Telecommuting http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=258&area=academics). While earlier telecommuting studies suggested that, for parents of young children in particular, working from home increased stress and negative reactions to both the work and child demands (See Sutton & Noe [2005] extensive review of the literature on the effects of family-friendly programs), more recent studies (Hill, Ferris, & Martinson, 2003; Madsen, 2003), including Gajendran & Harrison telecommuting meta-analysis (2007) find an
association between telecommuting and decreased work-family conflict. Goldern, Veiga, and Simsek (2006), on the other hand, found that telecommuting had a differential impact on work-family conflict, such that the more extensively individuals telecommute, the lower their work-to-family conflict, but the higher their family-to-work conflict (i.e., work intrudes less on family but the family intrudes more on work when employees telecommute).

Theoretical clarifications about the relationships between paid work and family work, particularly on boundary work and flexibility around place of work, have helped account for the complex findings about telecommuting (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2005) and no doubt will inform the growing understanding of PIW experiences. Different conceptual models in the work and family literature provide a range of perspectives and assumptions about the relationship between paid work and family work (Barnett, 1999; Bowen & Pittman, 1995; Pleck, 1995; Zedeck & Mosier, 1990). One of the first perspectives, the separate spheres perspective, identified and subsequently refuted by Rosabeth Kanter (1977), reflected the traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker dichotomy. Because the caregiving parent cannot be easily separated from the breadwinning parent in PIW arrangements, the separate spheres model obviously has little utility for PIW.

In contrast to the separate spheres perspective, the spillover, compensation or conflict perspectives highlight the various linkages between paid work and family work. How employment-based factors influence family relationships and conditions and how family demands and conflicts spill over into the workplace guide the questions that derive from these perspectives (Bond et. al, 2002; Fredriksen-Goldsen & Scharlack, 2001; Galinsky, & Bond, 1998; Moen & Yu, 2000; Voydanoff, 2004). More often than not, the tension between paid work and family life is emphasized (Ishii-Kuntz, 1994; Runté & Mills, 2004). Policies and practices congruent with the spillover, compensation or conflict perspectives suggest that lessening the demands in one domain will relieve tension in the other domain. Because parenting a child in the workplace encourages equal attention to the demands of both the work and the family realm, the spillover, compensation, or conflict models are also not particularly applicable to PIW.

Similar to telework, the PIW experience reflects a more integrated configuration of paid work and family life than that described in the above perspectives and can be informed by the boundary/border theories that focus on the permeability or overlap of the work and family roles. Boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000), work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) and boundary management strategy (Kossek, Noe, & deMarr, 1999; Kossek, Lautsch, Eaton, 2005) all emphasize a segmentation/integration continuum of work and family roles. Segmentation refers to the enactment of family roles as quite distinct in time and place from the enactment of paid work roles with clearly identified transitions between roles. In contrast, individuals who enact their family roles and paid work roles in the same place and time such as those who parent in the workplace are said to have more integrated role behaviors and
repeatedly cross micro-transition points that are often blurred. Propositions derived from these theories are useful for understanding not only the phenomena of PIW but also how and to what degree PIW arrangements might influence employee work-family conflict or individual and family well-being. In particular, these theories combine to alert us to the reality of the micro-transitions that employees who are parenting in the workplace make on a daily basis as they switch between family and work-related roles during the workday. The ‘boundary’ changes can have either a positive or negative affect on the individual, the family, and the business, depending on the characteristics of the employees, the meanings employees assign to work and family connections, their preferences for either a segmented or an integrated work-life synthesis, and the ability to organize their work and family life in ways congruent with their preferences and value set (Desrochers & Sargent, 2002, see Encyclopedia entry, Boundary/Border Theory and Work-Family Integration at http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/encyclopedia_entry.php?id=220&area=academics). Although we would expect PIW to weaken, or eliminate, work-family boundaries and be accompanied by a blurring of the paid work and parenting roles, the impact of the PIW experience on workplace, employee and family outcomes, and particularly on employee work-family conflict, can only be predicted with some knowledge of the context of the PIW experience, relevant information about the actors involved, and an understanding of the ease of the transition from one role to the other.

**Implications for Research and Practice**

Because systematic study of parenting in the workplace is so limited, implications for future research are numerous. First, the relationship between PIW and employee stress and work-family conflict needs better sampling strategies and more rigorous methodological approaches to explore how the extent to which stress and conflict might be linked to various workplace parenting options and how these relationships might be moderated by workplace, worker, or child and family characteristics. Specifically, future studies need to capture the PIW experience as reported by the parents/caretakers, focusing on the micro-transitions enacted during the PIW workday and to examine these experiences within the context of the boundary theories noted above. And, because one of the themes that emerged in the Secret study was PIW as a ‘default’ rather than a choice option, one of the most important issues that work-family scholars need to address is employee autonomy and preference for PIW in order to begin to understand the differences between and implications of those parents who are making active choices to integrate their work and family lives and those who might be forced to rely on PIW to safeguard their jobs.

Second, we need to attend to the causality or directionality of the relationships between workplace parenting and business outcomes. It is just as likely that successful businesses have the ‘freedom’ to allow PIW as PIW is one of the factors influencing positive business outcomes. And, although it is as reasonable to assume that favorable attitudes toward work-family integration are antecedents for PIW practices or they are the consequences, it is the iterative nature of and the interaction between attitudes
and workplace practices that offer the more compelling research questions.

Third, businesses will be interested in objective measures of business outcomes in future studies before they can fully assess a parenting in the workplace response to the childcare needs of their employees. The current expectation that business will benefit from PIW derives from anecdotal information and perceptions, rather direct measures, of success. The businesses in the Secret sample, by their voluntary participation in this study, might have some pre-existing investment in work and family issues that biased the study findings in favor of PIW. Because both the parenting in the workplace organizations and those who do not report parenting in the workplace offer comparatively more workplace supports for managing work and family demands than reported by other businesses in surveys of work-life policies and practices (Galinsky & Bond, 1998), the entire sample can be thought of as ‘family-friendly’.

Longitudinal studies can assess the degree to which attitudes change over time and whether the parenting in the workplace experiences might be a reasonable gauge of movement toward an acceptance of more integrated work and family relationships and of the implications of these formats for child and family well-being over time. And, because PIW arrangements and the culture in which they are embedded no doubt reflect aspects of iterative processes, subtle employee-employer dynamics, and emerging family life norms, qualitative studies about parenting in the workplace experiences can enhance our understanding of how the boundaries between family and work develop and shift during this period in our history.

In fact, the qualitative observations of the Secret study revealed unanticipated factors, in terms of the large number of fathers and grandparents who were parenting in the workplace, and raised interesting questions that can be explored in future childcare and work-family discussions and studies. For example, does the extent of father and grandparent involvement with PIW in this sample suggest something unique about PIW opportunities that draw fathers and extended family members into caregiving roles more so than other types of childcare? Or is this observation more a reflection of changing workforce demographics and family structures (Simon-Rusinowitz, Krach & Constance, 1996; Sylvester & Reich, 2002). Or, if other childcare arrangements were examined more closely, perhaps a greater presence of fathers and grandparents than expected may be uncovered in these situations as well. Furthermore, the consideration of fathers as childcare providers as suggested by our findings adds another dimension to the growing father involvement literature, particularly in terms of child development, marital relationship, and changing gender roles.

In regard to practice implications, although there are many workplace environments and settings where PIW might be able to thrive, it is not a ‘one size fits all’ option for businesses (Secret, 2005). Each
workplace has to consider how factors such as child behavior and parental supervision might affect their operations. Most importantly, decisions will have to be made about whether workplace parenting in a particular setting will be limited to occasional (emergency) practice or allowed as a regular part of the work environment. Parents also have to consider their personal preferences for work-family boundary management strategies, their parenting proclivities and work styles, childcare resources and supports available to them, and child and workplace characteristics and needs as they evaluate PIW as one of several childcare options.

Secret has suggested how, in an environment where work comes first and positive outcomes for the family are secondary, the practice of PIW could be advanced further along the work-life systems strategy continuum towards a more integrated balance between work and family life (2006). First, a shift in the outlook towards PIW is needed. The practice should be considered as a preferred, rather than last, choice for parents who want to have a more integrated work-family life. Second, businesses may need to make accommodations for parents who make the choice to parent in the workplace. These accommodations could include improving office facilities or modifying work responsibilities for the parent-employee. Such adjustments should not be made to the detriment of the employer’s bottom line but rather viewed as an investment in both the business and the family’s well-being. Finally, the quality of interaction between parent and child should be considered (Secret, 2006). PIW merely offers the opportunity for interaction between parent and child. The practice does not guarantee the quality of that interaction or positive outcomes for the child. The possibility of negative outcomes for the child exist in an environment where play and curiosity are stifled for extended periods of time and can be avoided if child development factors and the specific needs of the child are considered when implementing PIW. If workplace organizations and employed caregivers of children choose workplace parenting, it should be a choice that benefits all stakeholders.

References


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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<thead>
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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
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-Catsoughes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

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

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

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

Outcomes

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

Limitations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Individual Antecedents
Family Antecedents
Workplace Antecedents
Community Antecedents
Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

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

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

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

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

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

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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