



FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with Professor Jenny M. Hoobler.



Jenny M. Hoobler, Ph.D.

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South Africa

Experts Panel Link: <https://wfrn.org/expert/jenny-m-hoobler/>

WFRN - *How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?*

Jenny - I started reading Jeff Greenhaus and Gary Powell's work as a doctoral student, and, until then, I didn't know work and family was actually a management, and certainly not a business school, topic. I was inspired! And I was hooked.

I've always been a feminist. While I was discouraged to "do gender" in my dissertation ("No one will hire you!"), I have now come back around to the topics that inspired me in those early days—women and work, specifically documenting ways in which others' biases limit our career achievement. This is what I'm passionate about. I remember seeing things in Corporate America, as a new MBA, that I couldn't name, but I knew were wrong. Documenting and naming these injustices are what I'm proud to do now.

WFRN - *How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?*

Jenny - I remember when WFRN first started. I was so excited that work-life researchers, especially women, now had a home. I value the supportive nature of the organization and specifically the supportive climate of the conference. I think it's a place where students are especially welcomed and encouraged, with little unnecessary competitiveness, like is unfortunately commonplace at other major conferences.

WFRN - *Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?*

Jenny - During the forced COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa, which proved to be one of the strictest lockdowns anywhere in the world, my research changed and took a slightly different direction from the "women and work" projects I've done in the past. Along with two of my doctoral students at University of Pretoria, Kim Dowdeswell and Lerato Mahlatji, we interviewed workers across the race and socioeconomic spectrum about their privilege, sacrifice, and workforce attachment. We were interested in the lockdown as a site for social class work—thinking about one's social position vis-à-vis other workers.

WFRN - *What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?*

Jenny - We found that the lockdown was a social class shock event—getting people to think about their privilege and sacrifice compared to others. While poverty and low-wage work is unfortunately normalized to a great extent in South Africa given we are the most unequal society in the world, the lockdown was a moment in time where people did seem to pause to consider the suffering of others. Upper class persons were presented with media accounts of unprecedented service and

physical labor job losses. They also observed how it was almost impossible to physical distance in South Africa's informal housing settlements. Lower socioeconomic status (SES) persons told us how they pictured the suffering of upper-class workers as still quite privileged—having to “be on laptops all day” and canceling their restaurant plans and trips to the sea. Yet both groups saw it as in some ways a positive moment to try to bridge the social class divide through perspective-taking, given a shared national experience.

WFRN - *How does your research connect to social policy?*

Jenny - That's a great question. In South Africa we have a divided economy, with the rich elites comprising just 5% of the population yet controlling the great majority of the wealth. At the other end, we have a staggering 53% of the population considered chronic and transient poor, the majority of whom rely on government social grants as their primary source of income. Something that may be surprising to Westerners is that the term middle class originated in developed countries and doesn't apply well to South African society. We're economically polarized, lacking a clear, cohesive middle class. So I think assumptions run rife about a complete disregard between the upper and lower classes. But I'd say our research shows that especially in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, people “reached up” and “reached down” if even just cognitively to consider the lives of others. So we shouldn't assume the rich don't care, nor that the poor aren't able to consider the lives of the more privileged. Social programs that bring the two together for perspective-taking exercises and reflection may be helpful in the development of effective, comprehensive policy.

WFRN - *What directions hold the greatest promise for discovery in the work-family field?*

Jenny - I'm an Associate Editor at Journal of Applied Psychology, so I have the privilege of handling a lot of the latest work-family research. I really like the research that acknowledges that our understanding of our own work-family conflict or our work-family balance is a momentary thing. What I mean is that the traditional way of measuring these constructs was almost attitude-like, getting people to think about “in general” their levels of conflict and/or balance. But what resonates more with me, as a real-live working person, wife, sister, and daughter, is that this occurs more episodically (Maertz & Boyar, 2011). I may have flashes of extreme conflict in the same hour as a thought that I have things under control across domains (balance). We as researchers should continue to think about real-world phenomena not in ways that are convenient to our survey methodology but rather in ways that reflect persons' lived experiences.

WFRN - *What advice would you give to graduate students early in their professional careers?*

Jenny - I am passionate about doctoral education. And I'm proud to have worked with my colleagues at the University of Pretoria Faculty of Economic and Management

Sciences to create what we think is a world-class doctoral programme, one we brag is the finest on the Continent. Many programs in Africa and elsewhere are instead based on the one student-one supervisor (no coursework) model. Students are surprised, and quite frankly probably overwhelmed, by what we ask them to do—seminars in quantitative and qualitative methods and theory, deep reading in their disciplines, thought papers, and exams. Our program is the tough route to a PhD in comparison to the traditional South African approach. But I'd advise graduate students to take the tough road. These are the days when you have the luxury of taking time to focus on skills and knowledge development. Once you're a professor, those days are over. Then, your time will be filled with the push to publish, teaching, and student supervision. Use your postgraduate days to focus on learning what you need to know to be a successful researcher. And find the very best program you can, the one where you will be challenged the most. It will pay off in the end.

¹ *Jenny will be leaving to join Nova School of Business & Economics at the University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal in September 2022*

ABOUT THE WFRN

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

During 2021, the WFRN will host a series of virtual conference events. We look forward to our next in-person conference June 23-25, 2022 in New York City.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website [WFRN.ORG](https://wfrn.org). To become a member, please click on this link <https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/>.