



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 Léa Pessin.



Léa Pessin, Ph.D.

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Experts Panel Link: <https://wfrn.org/expert/lea-pressin/>

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

Léa - During my master's program in economics, I had the opportunity to take a demography class and became fascinated with the empirical puzzle that, starting in the mid-nineties, fertility was lowest in the most culturally traditional countries across Europe, which historically had the highest fertility rates. This empirical puzzle led me to research on how work-family policies and cultural norms intersect in shaping demographic outcomes across contexts.

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

Léa - During my NICHD postdoctoral fellowship at Penn State, I was fortunate to have as one of my mentors our brilliant WFRN vice-president, Sarah Damaske. At the time, I felt quite isolated academically in the United States because I had done my PhD in Europe and had a mostly European based academic network. In the second year of my postdoc, Sarah recommended that I apply to the early work and family fellowship program. I was lucky to be part of the 2017-18 cohort and loved attending WFRN. For me, one of the unique strengths of WFRN is that it combines academic rigor and expertise with a generous mentoring culture. Consequently, attending WFRN felt really approachable and productive as a junior scholar.

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

Léa - I am a scholar of gender, work-family, and social inequality whose current research agenda uses innovative quantitative approaches to study the interplay of culture and structure in shaping cumulative inequalities over time and across the life course.

One of my current larger projects aims to bridge together intersectional theory with work-family research to understand how differences in structural resources and cultural expectations shape racial-ethnic inequalities in couples' work-family outcomes in the United States. For example, together with Sarah Damaske and Adrienne Frech, we study the interplay between race-ethnicity and college education in shaping U.S. women's work and family life course. Another example of this larger project is a study with my graduate student, Elena Pojman, in which we illustrate racial-ethnic differences in the division of housework among Black, Latina, and white couples in the United States (recently published in *Socius*¹).

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

Léa - Both education and race-ethnicity play an outsized role in the United States in determining which women work steadily, maintain lasting partnerships, and achieve their fertility goals. While that may not be surprising, my research shows that returns to education in terms of what type of work and family life courses women have access to remain highly unequal across racial-ethnic groups. Specifically, the association between educational advantage and greater workforce attachment across the life course is stronger for Black and Latina women than white women, whose work-family patterns appear less shaped by their educational attainment.

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

Léa - My research underscores how the intersection of both cultural norms and structural inequalities contributes to producing unequal work and family outcomes across families. Thus, social policy that are aimed at facilitating work-family reconciliation need to account for how differences in cultural understanding of gendered responsibilities and disparities in the structural resources that family that have hand.

WFRN - *How do you integrate work-family topics in your teaching and training? Do you have an assignment or approach that is especially effective?*

Léa - When discussing historical changes in work and family, I start the lecture with a short in-class discussion asking students to define a traditional family. Invariably, students in the United States answer describing the breadwinner-homemaker family model as their idea of a traditional family. I follow up with a myths-and-truths quiz on historical changes in work and family in the United States. To answer each quiz question, I show students historical U.S. Census data to illustrate how the male-breadwinner model represents a household organization of the mid-twentieth century. This leads to a more complex discussion about what qualifies as work and how the industrial revolution has changed family economies. This simple quiz serves two purposes. First, I provide a clear example of why sociological theories about the meaning of work in historical context matter to understand the social world. Second, I use the quiz as a stepping-stone to invite students to draw connections between sociological theories and empirics. At the end of the lecture, I return to the question of what a traditional family looks like, and students provide much more complex answers, such as “it depends on the historical period”, “it depends on how we value and measure women’s work.”

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

Léa - In my own experience, I have found it highly beneficial to invest in a strong network of peers at a similar career stage with whom you share core values. Peer mentors can offer a great source of support at different career stages, which can complement well resources provided by senior mentors. For example, Sarah Patterson (also a WFRN early career fellow of 2017-2018) and I have held an accountability writing group meeting weekly since 2017. During our weekly meeting, we hold space for writing, but also spend some time checking in on one another and share work-related advice. This is one example of how peer mentors can offer a great source of support throughout the years.

My second piece of advice is put into practice what we know from work and family research in our own academic lives. While ideal worker norms can be intense in academia, and it can easily feel like there is always more that can be done, I believe it is essential to build in time for rest and fun outside our workplace. This is something that I try to model with my graduate students to make sure that we can maintain a healthy and sustainable work practice.

¹ Read more about Léa and Elena's Socius manuscript here:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23780231221084765>

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/>.