



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 Erin Cech



Erin Cech

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Experts Panel Link:

<https://wfrn.org/expert/erin-a-cech-phd/>

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

Erin - I have long been interested in issues related to occupations and professions, particularly cultural beliefs about “good work” and what counts as “expertise,” but my introduction to the interface of work and family issues arose out of collaborations with two phenomenal mentors—Mary Blair-Loy (UC San Diego) and Maria Charles (UC Santa Barbara). I had the privilege of working with Mary on a two papers related to work devotion and family devotion among STEM professionals, and co-authored a chapter with Maria on cross-national expectations of intensive motherhood. Both experiences were formative in my development as a scholar and made abundantly clear to me that we cannot understand the institution of work without understanding how it interfaces with other life demands and expectations.

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

Erin - I have had the privilege of being involved with WFRN for over a decade. I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Clayman Institute at Stanford when I attended my first WFRN conference. I had attended the conferences of several other professional associations at that point and WFRN felt different; I was immediately struck by how vibrant, engaged, and supportive the WFRN community is. WFRN represents one of the best examples I’ve ever encountered of a space where scholars, policy makers, and change agents talk amongst, rather than past, one another to address pressing workforce concerns.

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

Erin - I recently published two books on work-related topics. The first, *The Trouble with Passion: How Searching for Fulfilment at Work Fosters Inequality* (University of California Press, 2021) investigates the ways that the seemingly positive career goal of “following our passion” can reproduce workforce inequality and exploitation. I argue that while prioritizing passion may seem like a smart option at the individual-level – by making the ubiquitous demand for work devotion feel less onerous – the *passion principle* reinforces class, race, and gender segregation and inequality. For example, I find that the pursuit of passion in the US white collar labor force often requires access to financial “safety nets” and social capital “spring boards.” Working class and first generation passion-seeking college students, who typically have far less access to these safety nets and springboards, are more likely than their more privileged peers to end up in precarious jobs far outside of their passion. More broadly, the passion principle helps to culturally legitimize and reproduce an exploited, overworked white-collar labor force.

The second book, *Misconceiving Merit: Paradoxes of Excellence and Devotion in Academic Science and Engineering* (UChicago Press, 2022) was written with Mary Blair-Loy and investigates the gender, race, and LGBTQ biases built into the yardsticks that are used to measure merit and excellence in STEM professions. Studying over 500 STEM faculty at a large research university, including surveys, administrative data, publication and grants data, and interviews, we seek to understand a paradox: how can academic STEM revere objectivity and meritocracy, yet have such entrenched patterns of inequality? We argue that a central factor upholding inequality in STEM is the very way that scientific merit and excellence are defined. The book examines two schemas that we argue are at the heart of these cultural definitions of merit – the *work devotion schema* and the *scientific merit schema*. The work devotion schema is the belief that scientific work demands single-minded alliance, and all other commitments must come second. Other life responsibilities like parenthood (especially for women) not only are perceived as threats to STEM faculty’s commitment to their work, but also as threats to their competence as scientists and engineers. Second, the scientific merit schema is a constellation of characteristics that are presumed to be markers of excellence in STEM. One of these characteristics is assertive leadership (e.g., self-promotion, risk-taking). STEM faculty who embody assertive leadership are paid more in their departments, but aren’t actually more productive. Yet, women, people of color, and LGBTQ individuals are considered to lack this marker of excellence, even when they are equally productive.

I am currently working on several projects investigating the cultural logics that the dominant group members within occupations (e.g., white heterosexual men without disabilities in STEM) use to legitimize their privileged positions and to resist equity efforts. I am also starting a new book project on what I call “inequality tales”—the causal stories that people give to account for patterns of social difference.

WFRN - *Does your research inform workplace practice? How?*

Erin - *Misconceiving Merit* raises vital questions about the way STEM work is structured and rewarded in academia and beyond. Mary Blair-Loy and I argue that the narrow way that STEM fields tend to define merit belies the full range of characteristics and activities that are actually required for STEM innovation. STEM work is increasingly collaborative and interdisciplinary, and thrives with diverse perspectives. Cultural schemas that devalue collegiality and see diversity concerns as a threat not only undermine the potential contributions of academic departments and universities, but of science and engineering itself.

WFRN - *Can you tell me about how your research might help individuals or families develop effective personal strategies?*

Erin - *The Trouble with Passion* finds that “following your passion” is a dominant cultural narrative of good career decision-making, yet being able to follow one’s passion presumes access to springboards and safety nets that are really only available to career aspirants from middle and upper-class families. The book also raises troubling questions about the potential for our passion to be exploited by our employers. I find in an experimental study, for example, that job applicants who express passion for their jobs receive more interest from potential employers in part *because* they are presumed to be willing to take on more responsibilities without additional compensation. I caution that passion-seeking can lead to existential vulnerabilities as well as financial ones. The labor market is not structured to support us in our search for our sense of self; it is structured to take advantage of our labor. This demands that workers think carefully about their relationship to paid work. I also argue that workers should also work to “diversify their meaning-making portfolio” – by this, I mean, investing time and effort in activities they feel passionate about (e.g., creative endeavors, music, sports, volunteering) that exist wholly outside of their paid employment. This won’t provide any greater employment stability, but it will help to insulate their sense of self from the volatility of the global economy.

WFRN - *What directions hold the greatest promise for discovery in the work-family field? I am thinking here of theory, methods, or research questions that might be posed.*

Erin - Workers in the US have experienced labor market whiplash – from mass layoffs and furloughs in early to mid-2020, to the comparatively flush labor market of the past two years, to raising inflation and bank collapses. It is crucial to examine what these shifts have meant for workers’ understanding of their relationship to paid work. How do they understand work expectations alongside other life obligations and opportunities? How has their experiences over the last half-decade shaped how they think about good jobs and good employers? Another vital area of research is understanding the way that the increased use of machine learning and artificial intelligence in workplaces might interface with longstanding practices of worker surveillance to amplify race, gender, and class inequities in the labor force. Third, I have long been an advocate for multi-method work; projects that combine qualitative and quantitative insights often make the most compelling rhetorical cases for use by change agents and policy makers.

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

Erin - In *The Trouble with Passion*, I argue that the passion principle is not just a guiding principle that individual career aspirants use when making decisions about their paths; it can also often be a moralized *expectation*. Nowhere is this expectation more palpable than in academia. I would argue that part of the way that graduate programs assess students' "promise" or "fit" with a graduate program is whether the students seem adequately passionate about the discipline. This may put tremendous pressure on graduate students and early career professionals to *perform* passion – not only in how they talk about their work, but in their constant responsiveness to emails, excessive work schedules, and willingness to sacrifice in all other realms of life. Outside of academia, I expect there are many other professional realms where the performance of passion is taken as a proxy for work drive and even skill.

In the midst of this pressure, it is important to take a step back and think about what you want *your* relationship to the paid workforce to be. How does graduate school, and a demanding academic or professional job fit into that? There are many avenues that can lead to an impactful career inside and outside of academia, and many things besides your passion for the work itself that drive how happy you are in a given job on a day-to-day basis. If you are pursuing your passion, I encourage you to make room in your schedule for fulfilling activities outside of work. In the midst of intensive training and work, all of us could probably use a reminder that there are many places outside of paid work to anchor our senses of self.

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.

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