



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 Kess L. Ballentine



Kess L. Ballentine

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Experts Panel Link:

<https://wfrn.org/expert/kess-l-ballentine/>

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

Kess - I already had a lot of interest in how institutional policy and practice affected family well-being. But I began to think more about employers as a powerful social institution when I was working as an elementary school special education teacher in a relatively poor, rural area that served a racially diverse community. In the community where I taught, there were multiple large employers who were still doing 24-hour manufacturing as well as a variety of service employers. I began noticing that employer policies and difficult schedules seemed to be behind a lot of parents who were being framed in meetings as “disengaged” or even “neglectful.”

I became concerned that poor labor quality was an unacknowledged factor preventing parents from being involved in school and contributing to stigma against poor parents. Indeed, in some cases, it appeared to me that we might be referring families to child welfare rather than helping to hold employers and communities accountable to supporting working families. I chose to leave K-5 teaching to earn my PhD in order to research the connections between job quality and family outcomes.

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

Kess - I was presenting at the Society for Social Work and Research Annual Conference when I met a few other social workers who are members. Through these relationships I began learning more about the work-family literature and social work researchers’ role in this field and gained valuable senior and peer mentorship through these relationships. Thus, joining WFRN seemed a natural next step, which I have found to be a supportive and stimulating intellectual home.

I highly value my membership in WFRN. I believe our leadership works to live out the values underlying so much of our work - to create working environments that are supportive, interesting, and add to people’s lives. The leadership’s work to protect us while still supporting connection during the pandemic is one example of the merit of WFRN members - people I’m glad to call colleagues. WFRN conferences are great spaces to connect, get meaningful, thoughtful feedback from audience members, and learn from each other, all while having some fun. I was fortunate to be selected to be part of the Early Career Fellowship Program, enabling me to connect with early career colleagues around the world - an opportunity I frankly never imagined I might have as a person who primarily studies workplace and local policy in the United States. I love the interdisciplinary nature of the organization while also the strong membership from my

own discipline, social work. It is a pleasure to get to build research and personal relationships with colleagues who are committed to shedding light on some of the most important stressors of our lives and using research to intervene to promote family wellbeing.

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

Kess - I am currently exploring three interrelated lines of inquiry. First, I continue to work, primarily with other members of the Pittsburgh Wage Study team, on research to understand the effects of wage increases and workplace policy changes on low-paid workers.

Second, as I presented at the 2022 WFRN conference, I am examining mechanisms by which institutional discrimination affects low-paid workers and their families. In six years of field work with low- and middle-income healthcare workers, I have heard too many stories of institutional discrimination and listened to the terrible impact these experiences have on people's well-being. I am currently working to publish analyses of these stories to add more evidence about the importance of workplace equity. I am working with other scholars around the country to propose new research to move toward structural interventions. In my practice, I am collaborating with other labor activists to promote workplace equity in my own community.

Third, I am pursuing a new line of inquiry to investigate the intersections of work- and school-based policy and practice on parental school engagement. When I was an elementary school teacher, I noticed that workplace policies often created barriers for parents to be involved in their children's schooling. Meanwhile, we as educators seemed to have expectations that ignored parents' need to work. I think this is a policy blind spot: how parents experience the intersections of work- and school-based policies and practices. I am analyzing my own qualitative data as well as quantitative data from here in Detroit and nationally in collaboration with the Detroit Partnership for Education Equity & Research and fellow WFRN member, Alejandra Ros Pilarz at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, respectively. I look forward to continuing to expand this area of inquiry in collaboration with other work-family researchers.

WFRN - *How can your research guide the formulation of social policy?*

Kess - I deeply believe that we as researchers must work in partnership with community members to support policy and practice changes. Through graduate school and into my ongoing work now as a co-investigator with the Pittsburgh Wage Study, I have had the incredible opportunity to partner with healthcare workers and labor activists to collect

workers' stories and work to present social policy and practice recommendations directly to local politicians in Pittsburgh.

As I begin work in a new state, I am working to learn the local policy landscape. Through my affiliation with the Detroit Partnership for Education Equity Research housed here at Wayne State University, I am beginning this journey by working with local data to identify connections between workplace policy and practice and children's school outcomes, with the intention of translating these findings into local policy recommendations. Overall, I am working toward building the literature and funding new projects that will not only identify the ways that workplace policies and practices intersect with school-based policy and practices to affect family outcomes, but also to inform future experimental intervention research.

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

Kess - My research helps uncover how institutional policy *and practice* affects people's lives. My dissertation, publications from which will hopefully appear in print in the next year, used a critical ecological framework to help uncover how the day-to-day workings of workplaces, the culture, the policy implementation, and the relationships, affect parents and their ability to care for their children. For example, I found that helpful policies, like paid time off, can fail to support workers through their implementation when workers experience gendered and racialized prejudice that affects how their supervisors implement policies for various workers. Thus, by carefully examining people's lived experiences of workplace policy and practice, we can identify failures and use this knowledge to work toward intervention to improve workplace equity.

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.*

Kess - In my own reading of the literature, so much of it focuses on white and middle or even upper-class workers in heterosexual families. Meanwhile, family structure has become increasingly diverse, family values are ever-changing, and the low-wage workforce, and overall poor-quality workforce has significantly expanded since the birth of the work-family research field. Given the privilege of the families that inform most of the research base, their experiences are unlikely to be generalizable to families and individuals who experience oppression across the social environment.

In my own work, I am primarily interested in the experiences of low-income families with diverse family structures. Unionization is a powerful intervention to improve job quality for these families, however, beyond this, the “business case” for intervention is limited when administrators see low-paid workers as largely expendable and not worth the investment of higher paid workers. In short, how can our research help improve the work experiences of people whom capitalism exploits and oppresses? I don’t see that answer in the current literature base. Thus, one of my key goals as a researcher is to partner with others in the work-family field and the communities in which we live to build the evidence and develop interventions to improve job quality for low-paid workers. Additionally, I hope to contribute to better understanding of the myriad ways that social institutions, including work, school, community, and family, interact with each other to affect families’ lives.

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

Kess - It’s all about relationships. People often reduce professional relationship-building to “networking” which many people hate because it is a hollow version of the real thing. Take every opportunity to build organic, rich relationships with your colleagues, your students, your research partners, people you hit it off with at conferences - everyone. You will always learn something interesting, and you never know who may someday be a treasured co-pi, editor, confidante, and/or friend.

Build a peer mentorship group. It’s important to have senior mentors, but I think we get a lot of advice to invest in those relationships. There is less advice out there urging peer mentorship, which I have found a critical complement to senior mentorship. Peer relationships limit the power differential and benefits from shared experiences joining academia at the same time. Find peers whose work you respect who use similar methods, study similar areas, and are passionate about similar social problems. You can meet peer mentors at your own school, but also use conferences and service opportunities to build your network.

Invest in learning about project management. For those of us who choose an academic career, we have a lot of jobs in one. To be successful without burning out, we need to know project management but we don’t learn it in our training. So, invest some precious time learning about project management. I usually spent 1-2 days per semester during my doctorate scouring YouTube to learn more about project management and designing ways to translate it from the business world to academia. I highly recommend this because I came into my academic position with well-developed project management

skills, efficient workflows, and clear boundaries that help me manage many tasks while limiting (though not eliminating) overwhelm. It's worth the time!

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.

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/>.