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 **Caitlyn Collins**

Caitlyn Collins, PhD

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Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/caitlyn-collins/

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

Caitlyn – My first year in graduate school, I read Pamela Stone's fantastic book, *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*. In it, she shows how privileged working mothers often turn to individualistic discourses around "personal choice" to explain their decisions to leave their jobs and become stay-at-home mothers. Stone demonstrates how these women are actually pushed out of workplaces that still rely on outdated ideals of a father breadwinner/mother homemaker family model. I saw this tension reflected in my own mother's experience growing up, and I found Stone's explanation really powerful. I was enrolled in Christine Williams' Sociology of Gender course, and I unpacked Stone's ideas in my final paper, considering how I might build on them with a cross-national interview project to consider how women navigate employment and motherhood in countries with different public policies and cultural beliefs than the U.S. This was the beginning of my dissertation research that became my first book, *Making Motherhood Work*.

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

Caitlyn – Christine Williams was my adviser in grad school; she told me about WFRN and their biennial conferences. She said, "You have to go! These are your people!" So I did. I didn't know anyone at my first conference and remember feeling so nervous. I smile looking back at this younger version of myself since the aspect I value most about WFRN are all the wonderful connections I've made over the years. Attending a conference now is like reuniting with a group of scholars and friends whose work I admire and have been foundational for my own thinking and career trajectory. What a gift.

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

Caitlyn – I'm conducting interviews with working parents about how they navigate the market for childcare in St. Louis. I plan to expand to an international field site in a country with quality, universal childcare. I think childcare is one of the biggest sources of stress for most U.S. parents today, and we're lightyears behind other countries in our policy supports on this front. Our unequal, patchwork system of care has dire consequences for kids, parents, families, and employers. Different families have wildly different

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experiences with care. This has stark implications for children, parents' jobs and careers, and their families' long-term stability and wellbeing. Like my first book, I'm trying to paint a picture of what it's like for parents to manage paid work and family care in different contexts. We can organize childcare so much differently, and so much better, than we do right now.

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

Caitlyn – I'm still in the thick of interviews so no big findings yet—circle back with me! I always have a swirl of messy ideas in mind while I'm collecting data. One trend that surprised me is the number of working mothers who tell me they are also stay at home mothers. Before beginning this project, I would have told you those were mutually exclusive identity categories. I was wrong. I've learned that the dramatic expansion of remote work combined with the extraordinarily high cost of quality childcare means that many workers—women in particular—are working from home full-time while also caring for their children full-time. This astounds me, and I think it has complex implications for kids, parents, and employers that I'm just beginning to parse out.

I will say that the field notes I take during data collection are invaluable to capture the moments of surprise and unexpected findings that crop up in conversations. But I find that formal data analysis and writing are when many of my a-ha moments come to me. Theory formation happens throughout the research process.

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

Caitlyn – I love bringing qualitative sociological research to bear on questions of social policy. Researchers and policymakers often have a good sense of how to design promising work-family policies, and how to evaluate the outcomes of those policies. What they sometimes lack, I think, is a clear sense of what's happening in the interim. How are parents using, grappling with, creatively navigating, and resisting these policies? What do they want? What would be better or more useful? When evaluating the use and impact of social policies, I have found that I have found that firsthand accounts from those using (or not) those policies to be incredibly informative. In *Making Motherhood Work*, I give an example of my first interview and my first overseas field site, western Germany. I expected to hear women tell me how much they appreciated the lengthy paid maternity leave available at the time there. Instead, in the first few minutes of my first conversation, a mother launched into a lengthy explanation of how much she detested this leave policy. She thought women felt cultural pressure to use the full leave, even when they wanted to return to work, lest they be seen as bad moms. This is an example of how cultural beliefs shapes the ways in which policies are perceived and used. Interview methods are uniquely suited to answering these questions about how people

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experience policy. And in particular, I think cross-national interview methods are an exciting method to investigate research questions regarding work-family policy.

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

Caitlyn – For an assignment in my Gender in Society course, students use my interview guide from my study on working mothers to interview someone with whom they're close. Students often end up interviewing their own moms or other relatives. They report learning all sorts of new things about these women that they didn't know before, and say they gained new perspective and appreciation for just how much they've done over the years. Seeing and honoring people's caring labor is central to my own work; I love enabling students to do the same with the people they care about. Students also tell me they never realized how much work goes into conducting one single interview. This insight into the qualitative research enterprise is useful, too.

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

Caitlyn – Create a network for yourself. Attend WFRN conferences! Reach out to folks whose work is important to you beforehand and ask them to coffee or to go for a walk. Come ready with questions to inform your own projects; people tend to be more than happy to engage with students and early career scholars about how your work can be in conversation with theirs. It's a compliment to have someone engage your work. Introduce yourself to people at the social events and to panelists after sessions (even when it feels awkward. It's all good!). Follow up via email after so you can stay in touch. Nurture these connections; these people are your interlocutors, co-panelists, reviewers, and cheerleaders in this fascinating subfield. The work is more fun and meaningful in community.

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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. To become a member, please click on this link https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/.

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