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 LaToya Council

LaToya Council, Ph.D.

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Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/latoya-council/

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

LaToya – I was introduced to work-family issues as a graduate student at the University of Southern California. For my first research project, I wanted to learn more about Black middle-class men's attitudes toward romantic partnering and whether Black women's education or income achievements shaped their view of romantic partnering and family life. This project led me down the road of understanding the meaning of providership for Black middle-class men. I found that egalitarian support for co-providing did not neatly align with a more gender traditional view Black men held about their position in the home and the family. I decided to build on this project in my dissertation work, which explored heterosexual Black middle-class couples' management of work and family life, especially since Black people tend to hold supportive viewpoints of Black women's participation in the paid workforce. How then does this support, and the necessary expectation of Black women to participate in the paid workforce, shape Black couples' management and negotiation of work-family issues? This question is what motivated me to become a researcher in this field.

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

LaToya – I became involved with the WFRN summer 2024 after being selected for the Early Career Fellowship program. I had known about the WFRN prior to my selection into the program, but as a graduate student, it was hard for me to join all the organizations I found interesting due to cost. So, eager to get involved, I applied for the program.

Through the program, I had an opportunity to meet and network with peer-scholars, as well as participate in workshops that helped broaden my knowledge about work-family issues. It's easy to become siloed into one specific area as a work-family scholar. It is rewarding to be in community with other scholars who are engaging in research and asking questions that complement my own work.

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What I value most about the organization is its commitment to fostering community among its members, and for its creative and cost-conscious way of building an intellectual community. I enjoy that the in-person meetings are held biannually, which helps me not feel so overwhelmed with much conference travel. At the meetings there are numerous networking opportunities, and they are balanced well with paper sessions and the "Big Ideas" sessions. I also appreciate that learning opportunities continue virtually throughout the year. I have participated in several of the virtual mini conferences. I find them informative, and again, I always leave them having learned something new.

I appreciate the WFRN's weekly updates and the Big Ideas videos that we receive via email. As researchers, it is important to stay up to date as much as possible on the research in various areas. The weekly updates are my primary means of seeing what others are researching and writing about. These are just a few of the many things I value about the WFRN.

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

LaToya – I am currently researching work and family life among heterosexual Black middle-class couples with children. The questions my research project seeks to answer are how does race influence the purpose of marriage and parenthood for heterosexual Black middle-class couples? How do workplace cultures shape the choices about marriage and parenthood? How do Black professionals cope with work and family demands framed by systemic gendered racism? I begin with these questions and include a focus on marriage because heterosexual Black middle-class couples view their marriages as sources of mutual care and support that helps them manage integrated work and family demands. A reliance on marriage to manage work and family life aligns with Black Americans longstanding use of collective care to manage external constraints that are framed by systemic gendered racism. I define their work and family management approach as empathetic care. Empathetic care is informed by the symbolic meaning of marriage for Black middle-class Americans—marriage as an economic arrangement; marriage as a cementer for love and lifelong commitment; marriage as a foundation for children; and marriage as a support network when encountering gendered racism.

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Black couples' reliance on each other are critical, particularly in their effort to secure what I call a private Black family safety net. Their safety net depends on empathetic care which is an interconnected multidirectional process involving safeguarding the marriage, socially supporting each other, and strategically compromising. By using integrated illustrative types, I show the racialized gendered emotional labor Black couples deploy to secure a private Black family safety net, and the impact of that labor on Black families in a nation that continues to operate under the neoliberal assumption that family life is private, therefore, solutions to solving work and family demands must also be private.

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

LaToya – I am a qualitative researcher. I use a combination of archival data, interviews, and ethnographic observation to answer an array of questions about Black families, work, and family life. My research is framed by Black feminist theory and methodological approaches which means I carefully examine how individual's choices in relation to others, social institutions, and informed by social structures allows for opportunities to resists even as social inequality is prevalent. That is, I specifically seek to understand how people "define themselves for themselves" which Patricia Hill Collins underscored in her theoretical contribution *Black Feminist Thought*. Approaching research from this perspective opens opportunities to help individuals and contribute new knowledge that can potentially inform social policy.

In light of findings from my current research agenda, I believe my research can positively guide the formulation of social policy. I believe social policy should consider more interlocking systems of race, gender, and class oppression on individuals and their work and family experiences. Aligning with scholars like LaShawnDa Pittman, Dorothy Brown, and Dianne Stewart, social policy must include stronger analysis of structural gendered racism and introduce intentional measures that ease burdens among the most vulnerable. Doing so, uplifts everyone and cultivates care structures and social supports that benefit everyone.

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

LaToya – I write with individuals and families in mind. As a scholar writing about empathetic care, and heterosexual Black couples use of empathetic care to contend with integrated work and family demands, I place an emphasis on the power of love and support for Black people individually and collectively. Black couples value creating care structures for themselves and their families. This work is admirable, and it is also gendered. The lion's share of empathetic care is shouldered by Black women. By showing this, and discussing the potential impact on Black women, my research might help individuals and families reconfigure and create care structures that relieves Black women from so much of the emotional work. To do this, I urge couples, extended family members, and friends who are like families to approach social change from the perspective of Black love. That is, what do we gain when Black love is viewed as a radical political project capable of transcending harmful structures to heal us all?

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?

LaToya – Each topic I teach in the classroom includes work, family, gender, and race in some capacity. Courses I teach often are Ain't I A___? Black Identity, and Gender Politics; Sex and Gender; and Sociology of Black Families. Work-family topics fits well in each of these courses.

I also collaborate with Lehigh campus centers and spaces that focus on topics complementing these areas. For instance, my students always visit Lehigh University Art Galleries, which often includes exhibits that complements understandings of gender, race, and care networks. Most recently, me and my students visited the Nellie Mae Rowe exhibit. My students were able to connect Nellie Mae Rowe's artwork with community care, as well as identify with her work as a Black woman self-taught artist. Bridging work-family topics with art opens many doors for exploring artistically the importance of care for people individually and society broadly—how care fosters justice, and when not appreciated and compensated equitably can reproduce inequality.

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

LaToya – I would advise graduate students and early career scholars to spend time creating and cultivating networks of support for themselves. Those networks should be reciprocal, in that, graduate students and early career scholars should recognize that we are all having a human experience and face many demands. We need support and to find ways to provide support in return. Simply expressing gratitude to senior scholars for their time, or reaching out just to say hello, can go a long way.

I would advise them to make time for their loved ones. It's okay to be committed to our careers, and to doing our best, but do not forget about those who've sacrificed for you to be a successful scholar. Contributing to those relationships is critical. Most important is remembering to give back to those who support you daily. I truly believe an expression of gratitude can go a long way in all our relationships. Lastly, I would advise that care and expressions of gratitude must also be turned inward. Most recently, I began working on a photobook album project cataloging pictures from various activities I participated in during my 8 years of graduate school. Although I experienced challenging moments, the photos captured moments of joy. I appreciate cataloging these memories because I was reminded that I did make time to care for myself. The photos also reflected how rejuvenating personal time is outside of research, teaching, and service. My smiles gently reminded me that all is not bad, joy too is present if we allow ourselves to experience it. So, take care of yourselves and have some fun!

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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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