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 **Allison Daminger.**

ALLISON DAMINGER

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Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/allison-daminger/

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

Allison – Studying gender and family wasn't in the plan when I entered graduate school! I expected to research a totally different topic, but in my first year I took a class on social stratification with Sasha Killewald. We read lots of classic texts in family sociology, including Arllie Hochschild's groundbreaking book *The Second Shift,* and I suddenly had a whole slew of new research ideas I desperately wanted to pursue.

I'd always been interested in questions related to gender inequality, and I'd thought a lot personally about the tensions and tradeoffs involved in juggling paid work with caregiving responsibilities. But it wasn't until I started reading some of the pioneering work-family research that I realized this was an active area of sociological inquiry (rather than a problem we'd "solved" decades ago, as I somewhat embarrassingly thought). So I started reading more and more in the work-family literature, designed my own research project (which became the book I'll talk about later), and I was off to the races.

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

Allison – I first attended the WFRN conference in 2018, where I got to present my research on cognitive labor for the first time. I believe I've attended every conference since then, including in 2022, just a couple days after my wedding. Every time, I'm reminded how much I love this group of scholars and practitioners. Everyone is immensely supportive and loves to nerd out on some of the same things I care about. Over the years, I've met people who went on to become some of my favorite collaborators and mentors. These days, I'm always encouraging folks who are intimidated by or have had bad experiences at larger conferences to give WFRN a try.

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

Allison – Last Fall I published a book (*What's on Her Mind: The Mental Workload of Family Life)* that represented the culmination of a decade of research on cognitive labor, which is kind of like the work of project managing the household. I interviewed the members of roughly 90 couples to try to understand what this work consists of, how gender shapes its allocation, and how couples make sense of their cognitive labor patterns.

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

Allison – Unsurprisingly, I found that women in different-gender couples do the majority of cognitive labor, and particularly the more burdensome components of that work. More surprising to me was how couples explained their inequality. Most of them chalked it up to personality, as in, 'She's just Type-A, and he's go-with-the-flow.' What I argue in the book is that this is actually just a subtle reframing of gender essentialism, because it's almost always women who get labeled Type-A and men who are called go-with-the-flow. I don't think these couples are delusional; rather, they're responding quite reasonably to a context where they're simultaneously told that fairness and balance are what they should be striving for, and yet all kinds of structural and cultural forces make that balance very difficult for the average couple to achieve. Not impossible, though! I have a whole chapter on different-gender couples who share the mental load or put more on the man's plate, and another on queer couples who have carved out a different relationship to binary gender roles altogether.

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

Allison – A lot of the conversation on social media about mental load is stuck at the individual level: how can we get men to do more? How can we get women to care less? But what I think my work shows is that these are social problems, not just couple problems. One thing I point out is that a lot of the cognitive labor women are doing is generated by outside organizations, from the governments to employers to schools. It's really cognitive labor-intensive, for example, to get and keep public benefits like SNAP or WIC. In the US, most places lack sufficient high-quality early childcare, which means getting your kid into a good daycare takes a whole lot of mental work. And our public school calendar doesn't match most employment schedules well at all, which means parents (mostly moms) need to do a lot of work to fill in the gaps with aftercare, summer care, sick day care, teacher in-service day care, and so on. My hope is that policymakers will start to think about the cognitive labor impact their policies and programs might have on families and ask whether there's another way to accomplish the same aims that would be less burdensome.

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?

Allison – I teach an upper-level undergraduate seminar on family where we talk a lot about these issues! For one assignment, I have students write an advice column in response to a fictitious questioner's concern about a work-family issue. The

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students read a series of articles where scholars are engaged in productive debate with one another about this issue, and then they're tasked with synthesizing that debate and applying it to the particular dilemma the questioner wrote in about.

For another assignment in that same course, students team up to design a mini-research project about a family issue. We go through the stages of coming up with a thoughtful question, figuring out what kind of data will best answer it, and then gathering and analyzing that data. I'm always impressed with what they come up with!

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

Allison – Keep an open mind, read a lot, and go out of your way to attend a wide range of talks – even if they don't seem directly connected to your research. Some of the most creative scholarship comes from combining ideas that haven't been combined in that way before, so you never know what could end up influencing you. There's a lot of pressure to have things figured out right away, but graduate school is a unique time where you can actually afford to explore and let things percolate.

But. pair that open-minded exploration with discipline in carving out time for your own work. It can be so easy to get caught up in more urgent concerns: emails, student questions, classwork, etc. Your own writing and research is rarely the most pressing thing to deal with, and yet it's (arguably, I suppose) most important for your long-term trajectory. So figure out when you're at your best mentally, and guard that time fiercely. This is advice I still need as a faculty member!

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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