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 **Patrick Ishizuka.**

PATRICK ISHIZUKA

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Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/patrick-ishizuka/

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

Patrick – I was first introduced to work-family issues through a graduate seminar on "Gender and Economic Activity" taught by Viviana Zelizer at Princeton University. The course pushed me to think historically about how paid work and family life are jointly organized and how gender inequality is produced not only through individual choices, but also through cultural norms, workplace arrangements, and public policy.

A key theme for me was that labor markets are shaped by cultural expectations and broader institutional arrangements, especially around the transition to parenthood. Readings on the motherhood penalty and the "ideal worker" norm clarified how workplace evaluations and the way jobs are structured create predictable work-family inequalities, even when couples hold gender-egalitarian ideals.

That approach helped me see work-family inequality as something patterned by job design, cultural norms, and public policies rather than simply the result of individual choices. It also shaped my research: I study how workplace arrangements and employer practices produce gender inequality, particularly around parenthood, and how the organization of work interacts with family demands in ways that policy can either mitigate or exacerbate.

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

Patrick – I first got involved with WFRN as an Early Career Fellow in 2020. The fellowship was my entry point into the WFRN community, providing structured opportunities for professional development and connections with other early career scholars thinking seriously about inequality in work and family life.

A couple of years later, I deepened my involvement by serving on the program planning committee for the 2022 WFRN conference. That was my first WFRN conference, where I organized a session on parenthood and gender inequality—an experience that made the network feel more like an intellectual home. I've also appreciated the virtual conference series as a way to stay connected between biennial meetings.

What I value most about WFRN is its combination of academic rigor, policy relevance, and community. It's a place where sociologists, demographers,

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psychologists, economists, and policy scholars are in conversation about questions with real consequences for family well-being, and where research is translated into insights that are useful for employers and policymakers.

WFRN – Tell us about your current research. What are you studying?

Patrick – I study the pace of gendered change in U.S. family life and what it reveals about the status of the gender revolution.

One project asks whether housework has become meaningfully "degendered" since the 1970s. Prior research shows a clear empirical pattern: women's housework has declined more than men's has increased, and gender housework inequality has narrowed but persists. Yet scholars disagree about what these patterns mean for the status of the gender revolution. Using PSID data from the 1970s through the early 2020s, I introduce two novel measures of degendering. First, I examine how much of the gender gap we can explain with predictors that should matter for housework—paid work hours, earnings, partnership, and children. Second, I test whether these same predictors have become increasingly similar in their consequences for women's and men's housework. Although women's and men's housework hours have converged substantially over time, I find that in recent decades we still explain only about 20% of the gender housework gap, and core work and family predictors continue to operate in gender-asymmetric ways. The goal is to clarify what "progress" actually means in this domain and to move beyond the existing interpretive impasse in research on gender and housework trends.

A second project asks how people decide what "good parenting" looks like when adolescents violate cis- and heteronormative expectations in their gender expression, gender identity, or sexuality. How parents respond to LGBTQ+ adolescents is highly consequential for adolescent health and well-being, but we lack population-representative evidence about contemporary parenting norms. In a preregistered vignette survey experiment with more than 3,500 U.S. adults, I compare evaluations of supportive versus unsupportive parenting while varying situational features like adolescent age, sex assigned at birth, and whether the context is more public or private. For gender expression and sexuality, support is highly sensitive to situational cues and varies strongly by personal characteristics like gender, education, religiosity, and political affiliation. Gender identity is distinct: evaluations show no systematic patterning by either situational features or personal characteristics, suggesting that cultural scripts are less settled in this domain.

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Together, these projects map where gender change is real, where it remains constrained, and where meanings are still in flux.

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

Patrick – Much of my research examines how gender and class shape work-family inequality by testing assumptions that are largely taken for granted but not well documented with population-representative or causal evidence.

One key finding comes from my work on class, gender, and parenting norms. Although scholars have theorized that parents of different social classes have fundamentally different ideas about what constitutes "good" parenting, I find that ideals of child-centered, time-intensive parenting have diffused broadly. In a vignette survey experiment with a nationally representative sample of parents, I found remarkably consistent support for intensive parenting across social classes, and this applied to both mothers and fathers. This pattern suggests that class differences in parenting behavior may reflect unequal constraints more than divergent cultural conceptions of "good" parenting, and it helps explain why work-family conflict can feel widespread even when parents' resources and practices differ.

A second key finding is that the "ideal worker" norm does not operate uniformly across occupations or labor market segments. In an audit study using more than 2,200 fictitious applications to professional/managerial and low-wage service jobs, I found strong causal evidence that employers discriminate against mothers relative to equally qualified childless women in both sectors. Notably, within each sector, discrimination was stronger when job ads described particular demands: time pressure, collaboration, and travel in professional/managerial work, and schedule instability in low-wage work. This highlights how distinct job demands generate distinct motherhood penalties. In related work with Kelly Musick, we show that the association between parenthood and women's employment depends on occupation-level work hour inflexibility, highlighting how labor market organization and caregiving expectations jointly constrain new mothers' employment.

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

Patrick – My research points to a common policy lesson: many outcomes that get framed as problems of values or attitudes are often better understood as problems of constraints.

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One example comes from my work on cohabiting couples' union transitions, which shows that meeting the financial prerequisites of marriage—the "marriage bar"—is positively associated with transitions to marriage. Marriage is more likely when couples' earnings reach a socially meaningful threshold and when they have accumulated assets, including homeownership. A practical implication is that marriage-promotion strategies focused on messaging about the value of marriage are likely to be misguided. The more promising policy levers are those that reduce financial barriers through stable earnings and opportunities to build assets.

A second example comes from my research on contemporary parenting norms. If ideals of time-intensive, child-centered parenting are broadly shared across social classes, then policy approaches premised on a cultural deficit (e.g., "some parents don't value intensive parenting") are also likely misguided. Instead, policies should aim to reduce the gap between widely held parenting ideals and what families can realistically do. This points toward a constraint-reducing policy agenda: paid leave, affordable childcare, schedule stability, protections against volatility in hours and income, and workplace practices that increase parents' temporal flexibility.

Together, these projects suggest that social policy is most effective when it targets the resources and institutional conditions that shape families' options, rather than relying primarily on attempts to shift attitudes.

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?

Patrick – In my undergraduate "Families and Social Inequality" course, I try to help students connect everyday experiences of work and family to rigorous social-scientific evidence and see how research design shapes what we can claim.

Early in the semester, I administer a short "pretest" survey about work-family issues, including how workplace arrangements and work-family policies shape gender inequality. Students often arrive with strong intuitions shaped by family experiences or media narratives, but they may lack an evidence-based framework. At the end of the semester, students write an essay revisiting their initial responses and reflecting on how their answers changed after engaging with the course readings and activities. This makes learning visible and encourages students to treat their own beliefs as hypotheses that can be updated in light of evidence.

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I also use research exercises to demystify methods. When we cover gender inequality in unpaid labor, for example, students complete time diaries by interviewing a classmate and translate them into implied weekly time-use patterns. We then discuss what time diaries capture well, what they miss, and how measurement choices shape conclusions about inequality. I also sometimes run survey experiments with students and use the results to illustrate random assignment, sampling, generalizability, and causal inference.

Together, these approaches help students develop intuition about methods while seeing work-family debates as questions that can be addressed empirically rather than just matters of opinion or personal anecdote.

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

Patrick – It can be easy in graduate school and the early-career years to feel pressure to optimize every decision for the job market or tenure (e.g., topic choice, methods, even framing). My advice is to resist letting strategic considerations drive the work. Early in graduate school, when I was designing an audit study and asked a mentor, Matt Salganik, how a design choice might affect its publishability, he said: "Just focus on doing good work." That has stuck with me.

By "good work," I mean asking questions you genuinely find important, designing the most rigorous study you can, and being transparent and careful about what the evidence can and cannot say. One way to maintain this mindset is to evaluate projects with two questions: (1) What is the clearest contribution this study can make? and (2) What would make the evidence meaningfully stronger? If you can answer those, you're already doing important work regardless of any single publication outcome. And because it's so easy for academics' sense of worth to become tied to external validation, anchoring yourself in the value of the work can make an academic career feel more sustainable.

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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