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 **Holly Mathias.**

HOLLY MATHIAS

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Canada

Experts Panel Link: https://wfrn.org/expert/holly-mathias/

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

Holly – Growing up in a small town, I was raised to be community-minded and knew that I wanted a career where I could have local impact. I completed undergraduate studies in Global Development Studies at Queen's University. It was here where I first learned about issues related to gender, labour, and social and structural determinants of health. However, I felt frustrated that the field mostly focused on inequities in other countries despite many families and communities in Canada facing these same challenges.

My interest in exploring local health and social inequities led me to pursue a MA in Health Promotion at Dalhousie University, followed by working as a research coordinator and instructor at Dalhousie. I had the opportunity to work on a number of community-based research projects related to mental health and substance use in rural and small urban communities. These experiences reinforced the importance of working closely with people with lived/living experience and their families to co-design and conduct research.

Although my research has always centered around issues related to unpaid work, care, and the role of "family", I didn't engage with the field of family science until my PhD studies at the University of Alberta, where I had the opportunity to take electives in human ecology and sociology. I gained exposure to the body of family scholarship, met other students with similar interests and values, and was encouraged to more critically interrogate the role of family in my research. Near the end of my degree, I was doing a media engagement when the interviewer said "I'm so excited to meet with a family scholar!". This was the first time someone had referred to me as a family scholar rather than a substance use scholar, and it completely changed my perception of my own work.

I am now an Assistant Professor of Family Science where I conduct interdisciplinary community-based research with rural families and communities to better understand emerging health and social issues.

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

Holly – I decided to get involved with WFRN once I began my faculty position as Assistant Professor of Family Science at the University of Alberta. After spending nearly a decade contributing to public health and substance use networks, it was important for me to also find a community of family scholars. In 2026, I received one of WFRN's Early Career Fellowship (ECF) awards and attended my first WFRN conference. Immediately, I was struck by the diversity, generosity, and passion of network members. Often, I am the only "family person" in a room of substance use or public health researchers. It was so refreshing to join a network of hundreds of other family scholars from diverse disciplines, and inspiring to hear how they progress work-family research in their own fields.

I also appreciate the effort that WFRN makes to create a supportive and enriching environment for early career researchers. Being an ECF has given me the opportunity to connect with other ECFs from around the world and engage in ongoing professional development. I am looking forward to the many ways that I will be able to contribute to the network as an ECF throughout the year, as well as in the years to come.

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

Holly – Families in Canada are changing. At the same time, they are facing a number of emerging health and social challenges, such as the toxic drug crisis, climate change, and housing insecurity. Many of our existing family-oriented programs and policies are ill-equipped to support families through these challenges.

As an interdisciplinary social scientist, I use community-based research methods to cocreate and conduct research with families and communities to 1) better understand how they experience these emerging issues and 2) how family-oriented policies and programs can be designed to offer better support to families.

Most recently, I have been conducting research on unpaid family caregiving in the context of the toxic drug crisis. Since 2016, over 55,000 Canadians have died from the unregulated toxic drug supply and thousands more have experienced health and social complications linked to unregulated drug use. Families are often key supports for people who use drugs, especially in rural communities where formal services may be inaccessible or unavailable. My research serves to

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illuminate the experiences of these family caregivers to better understand their involvement in unpaid care work, how it impacts them and what supports they require. I am also working on a recently launched research creation project focused on the material embodiment of substance use-related grief among rural families. In partnership with a local printmaker/artist and collective of people with lived experience of substance use, this project will serve to create a living archive of "grief on the Prairies."

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

Holly – My work on unpaid family caregiving for people who use drugs in rural Canada is, to my knowledge, the first of its kind in Canada so my findings provide an initial glimpse into the experiences of these families.

The most important finding from my research is that families of people who use drugs in rural Canada are doing very important unpaid care work. Although they do similar unpaid work as other family caregivers, like providing transportation and helping their loved one navigate the healthcare system, their care work occurs within the context of a highly stigmatized and criminalized health issue. As a result, the care burden experienced by families is magnified and all consuming. Many reported experiencing impacts on their physical and mental health, social life, and financial wellbeing. For example, many family caregivers are tasked with looking after grandchildren and other young people impacted by an adult's substance use. A number of family caregivers also had to take on debt, use their savings, or sell belongings to help financially support their loved one. Although a number of families experienced significant financial strife, when we asked them what would help make their lives easier, it was somewhat surprising that many did not view financial benefits or tax credits as being key solutions. Instead, many families suggested that upstream or structural changes are the priority. These changes, such as reducing structural stigma, addressing drug policies or housing insecurity, may help prevent the need for unpaid family care in the first place.

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

Holly – Caregiving policy is Canada is going through a major evolution. Unlike other countries, such as Australia the United Kingdom, Canada does not have a national caregiving strategy. This means that unpaid family caregivers in Canada receive different benefits and supports depending on where they live in the country. Often these supports are quite scant compared to what families actually

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need. The current federal government has indicated their intention to support a national caregiving strategy and so there is a lot of momentum building to support this work.

My research is important for guiding new caregiving policy in Canada. Often families of people who use drugs are left out of caregiving policy discussions because substance use is typically viewed as an individual moral failing, rather than a health and social issue. My research helps to legitimize the families of people who use drugs as caregivers and provides insight into some desired policies and programs identified by family caregivers as being potentially helpful.

WFRN – *What directions hold the greatest promise for discovery in the work-family field?*

Holly– In my opinion, community-based research methods are crucial for progressing discovery and impact in the work-family field. Community-based research operates from the guiding principle of the "nothing about us, without us". This means that any research about families should be done with families. Although community-based research means moving at a slower pace, there is so much value in working collaboratively with community members. Community-based research can support better identification of research questions, feelings of respect among research partners, increased potential for community capacity building, and research that is more accountable to families and can be more easily actioned.

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

Holly – One of the number one things I've learned so far in my academic journey is that it is important to plan and set goals, but it is also important to **be open to opportunities** as they come along. So many of my best academic experiences have come from opportunities, connections, and moments that I never could have planned for. For example, as a Masters student, I was offered a part-time research assistant role on a community-based research project about harm reduction program implementation. Although I didn't know very much about substance use at the time, this small role led to my interest in this area, which eventually led to doctoral studies and becoming an independent researcher. By extension, it's important to be open to new ideas and ways of knowing and doing. Being open to interdisciplinary learning and work can lead to amazing collaborations and impactful research!

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I believe **research is relational**. This means that research should give back to the communities that you work in, such as through knowledge sharing, acting as resource to community partners, and trying to shift power in academic projects. Relationality can also happen within research teams. Although it's impossible to completely avoid conflict in life, it's important to remember that research is a human endeavor – we are all humans conducting work to, ideally, make the world a better place for families and communities. Treating colleagues with respect and kindness is so important.

Finally, always remember to **pay it forward**. Although your name is the only one on your degree, so many people have contributed to your journey. I am so grateful for my family, friends, colleagues, mentors, peers, teachers and supervisors who have all played an important role in my academic journey. I'm the first person in my family to have attended graduate school. The belief and mentorship of others have played a major role in my story. Although academia can be fast paced, it's important to find time to pause and recognize others.

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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