

## **Revisiting the Social Construction of Family in the Context of Work**

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### **Structured abstract**

#### **Purpose of this paper**

To demonstrate how traditional definitions of family, in the context of employment, have not kept pace with actual family formation in the U.S. and much of the rest of the world, and how this disadvantages individuals from atypical (i.e., non-nuclear), but increasingly common, families.

#### **Design/methodology/approach**

A wide range of literature from disciplines spanning industrial relations, gerontology, management, and family studies is invoked to illustrate how employers' definitions of "family" are often incompatible with actual contemporary family structures, and how this poses difficulties for employed individuals in non-traditional families.

#### **Findings**

Many family structures are not accounted for by employment legislation and thus organizational work-family policies. These include same-sex couples, multi-generational and extended families (e.g., including parents or other elders; members from outside the bloodline or with grandparents providing primary care for grandchildren) and virtual families.

**Practical implications (if applicable)**

We discuss a number of problems associated with current provision of work-family policy and practice among organizations, and recommend that governments and organizations expand upon the traditional definition of “family” to better enable employees in a variety of familial configurations to successfully balance their work and family demands.

**What is original/value of paper**

This paper identifies current failings in employment legislation and suggests improvements so that both governments and organizations can better facilitate employees’ work-life balance. As such, it will be of use researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers interested in the interface between work and family.

**Keywords:** family, legislation, work-life balance, work-family policies, diversity

**Category:** Conceptual paper

## **Revisiting the Social Construction of Family in the Context of Work**

The United States Department of Labor defines a family as “a group of two or more persons who live together and who are related by birth, marriage, or adoption” (U.S. Department of Labor, 2004). This definition of family is mirrored in other national contexts in terms of the way it excludes many familial type relationships based on cultures, customs, and individual choices among people who are not related by birth, marriage, or adoption, such as unmarried same- or opposite-sex partners. The institution of family is supported by law in nearly every country, and governments take effective regulatory measures to protect its integrity and the well-being of its members. However, the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993 limits family members for whom employees may take leave to one’s spouse, adopted, foster, or natural child, or parent. Notably, siblings, in-laws, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and others for whom one may provide care are excluded.

In this manuscript, we take the perspective that definitions of “family” with respect to work-family concerns should include others for whom workers care and whom workers include in their support networks. Specifically, following Piotrkowski (1978, cited in Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux & Brimley, 2005) we define family as a collective of two or more individuals who are in a relationship of interdependence towards shared vision and goals. We suggest that employees should be allowed to define family in their own terms rather than being forced to accept the narrow definitions of family provided by American employment legislation. We argue that the contemporary definitions of family in the context of work should be broadened to capture a wider set of familial type relationships, and that organizations may derive potential benefits by allowing employees to define their own “family” in their own terms.

We begin with a brief history of the construction of family and work in industrialized countries. Next, we consider other researchers' calls for better conceptualization of family in the concept of work. We also offer our suggestions for some areas that should be considered, including same-sex couples, multi-generational families, and virtual families. We next discuss the consequences of using narrow definitions of family. Lastly, we make recommendations for change, including suggestions for research and practice. Throughout the manuscript, while we focus on inadequacies in the U.S. law and organizations, we incorporate work and family concerns from other areas.

### **A brief history of the construction of family and work in industrialized countries**

International consensus on definitions of work and family has been underpinned by the politics of social life and industrialization (Weber, Giddens, & Parsons, 2001) and with episodes of sea change in family structures across the post-industrialized countries (Carnoy, 1999). As depicted and espoused in Parsonian sociology (Parsons, 1951), the functional family ideology served the engine house of industrialization. The functional family ideology assigned different roles to women and men at work and home, along gendered lines. This separation meant that men were assigned the role of breadwinners, who would go out to do paid work, whilst women were assigned unpaid domestic responsibilities and the care of children and the elderly. This dominant ideology has meant that industrialization required the isolation of work and life domains; male laborers needed to draw on their family members' free domestic labor in order for them to remain at work for long hours. An early example of this separation is the 'five dollar day' scheme introduced in Ford Motor Company in 1914. This scheme suggested that men could earn five dollars a day provided that they conform to a family ideal. One of the many paternalistic

criteria for a worker to earn five dollars per day was that the worker's wife should support him at work by looking after the home (Beynon, 1984).

In the last three decades, however, this functional approach to the separation of work and family has been scrutinized and its adverse impacts on the constitution of social and work lives examined. Of particular interest to these explorations has been the growth of dual income and single parent families, unmarried but co-habiting same- and opposite-sex couples, and the extended families that remained outside the legal and economic conceptualizations of family. Nuclear families, made up of a married heterosexual couple with children, upon whom the functional family ideology has been founded, are no longer the dominant form of family in the industrialized countries of today. In her study of working mothers in Malaysia, Ahmad (1996) suggests that the separation of work and life along gender lines is no longer evident in many non-Western countries either. Therefore, a broader range of logic now operates in modern societies in the social construction of family, which deems the definitions based on matrimony, economics, and social mores alone to be inadequate.

This is not a simple problem of definition, however. The legal, economic, and social definitions of family frame the institutional mechanisms by which the families are supported and sustained in advanced democracies. Therefore, the inadequacy of existing definitions of family is imbued with often dire material consequences for individuals whose conceptions of family are not aligned with these narrow legal, economic, or social classifications.

The process of industrialization has also accelerated the demarcation of work as paid work in the formal sector. This has led to work in the informal sector and the domestic sphere (see Tuominen, 1994 for the case of care-giving work), as well as work of unpaid nature (Lewis, 1997) or work which emanates from kinship or social

ties (Fletcher, 1999) to remain unrecorded and/or undervalued and consequently fall outside the legal and economic conceptualizations of work. Limiting work to paid work in the formal sector marginalizes and devalues the contributions of women whose work largely remains in the informal sector or in the domestic sphere as unpaid family workers. Furthermore, Hochschild (1990, 1997) alerts us to the gendering of much unrecorded work and refers to ‘second shifts’ in relation to women’s disproportionate contribution to domestic labor and permeable boundaries between work and home. Therefore, when we refer to the demands of work and family in this paper, we refer to ‘work’ in each case, as both family and work demand unpaid and paid work from its members. We propose to conceptualize both work and family demands as work not only in recognition of the gendering process as outlined, but also because the conception of work as limited to paid work in formal sectors of employment means that the minority ethnic workers, workers with disabilities, or older and younger workers, who are trapped outside or at the margins of the formal economy, have remained largely outside the formal conceptions of work and the structural benefits that work in the formal economy affords to its workers.

Therefore, defining work and family in this tapered way has not been an innocuous practice of definition. Indeed, it is more sinister in reality as legal, economic, and social framing of work and family predicts what types of work and family are legitimized and supported via the institutional mechanisms of social economy and politics. A recent report funded by the European Union highlights how different political regimes, gender cultures, and ethnic and class divisions impact on the provision of family support policies in Bulgaria, Norway, the UK and Portugal (Nilsen & Brannen, 2005). Narrow definitions of work and family, once institutionalized, privilege certain groups whilst marginalizing the interests of others.

Pitt-Catsouphes and Christensen (2004) provide a review which seeks to unmask the taken for granted assumptions of the work and family literature. In this paper, we explore some of these taken for granted assumptions and the process of marginalization, which characterizes the experience of non-traditional families, across the fault lines of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

### **Calls for a better conceptualization of family in the context of work**

Many researchers have acknowledged the inadequacies in definitions of “family” used in research, among governmental agencies, and commonly accepted among the public. Suggestions to more accurately describe “family” include recognition of additional family structures and of the cultural variability in the meaning of family. For example, Voydanoff (1988, 2005) has called for a better reconceptualization of the work-family field, to include non-paid work and non-traditional family structures. At present, the common understanding of family in the U.S. is based on the “nuclear” model of a heterosexual married couple, living with their children in a household headed by the husband (Rothausen, 1999). This may have been the dominant form of family in decades past (although this point has been debated; see Coontz, 1991). However, the demographic structure of American families has changed significantly in recent years, with increasing divorce rates and single-parent households (Fields, 2003). The nuclear model is no longer viable as the default American family structure.

Evolving definitions of family include people who may not be kin, but who act as family for some individuals (Rothausen, 1999). Bogan (1991) uses the term ‘wider families’ to refer to this concept, and opines that such families result from individuals’ lifestyles and may not involve the sharing of a household. This concept of family describes a group of people who are invested in one another due to bonds of

dependence, obligation or duty, love, caring, or cooperation (Rothausen, 1999). In the same way, Weeks, Heapy and Donovan (2001) refer to same-sex families, which are founded on bonds of individual choice, as ‘families of choice’.

There is also a great deal of cultural variability in how the term family is defined. Studies of low-income Black families in the U.S. demonstrate conceptualizations of family that place greater emphasis on grandparents and great-grandparents, on households headed by women rather than by men, on the ways in which friends and neighbours fulfill family roles, and on the potential for children to have homes in a number of different households, including with their parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles (Patterson, 1996).

The evidence suggests that there is a need for a wider definition of family, as work and family policies and initiatives at the organizational and national levels have variable impacts on different groups of workers. There are a number of family configurations that are not addressed in the work-family literature, or indeed acknowledged by American employment legislation. The following section will review some of these non-traditional family structures and discuss the ways in which they differ from “traditional” (i.e., nuclear) families with respect to the work-family interface. The areas in which non-traditional families are disadvantaged by current policy and legislation will also be discussed. We will conclude by suggesting changes to academic theory as well as to policy at both the organizational and governmental levels.

### ***Same-sex couples***

The American Community Survey (2004) estimates that there are approximately 707,196 same-sex, cohabitating couples in the U.S. This figure makes up 1.16% of all American households. According to recent figures, approximately



four million children in the U.S. are being raised by lesbian or gay parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). While same-sex households share much in common with their heterosexual counterparts, research provides evidence of some notable differences between the two in both the work and the family domains. Distribution of paid and unpaid work hours tends to be more egalitarian among same sex couples than among heterosexual couples. While female partners in heterosexual couples often work fewer paid hours than their male partners, in gay and lesbian couples, both partners are more likely to work full time. Division of household labour is also more egalitarian, with fewer instances of gender-based patterns of task allocation (Kurdek, 1993; Patterson, 2000).

Differences between lesbian and heterosexual women are also evident with regard to their managers' and co-workers' attitudes toward working mothers. A recent study of workplace attitudes toward lesbian women found that lesbians were preferred over heterosexual women as employees, due to perceptions of lesbians as less likely to get married and give up work to raise children. Lesbian women on average earn more than heterosexual women, and employed lesbian mothers are perceived as being more competent and committed to work than employed heterosexual mothers (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2004).

In terms of relationship dynamics and support to be found within the home domain, lesbian couples have been found to report higher levels of positive problem solving than their heterosexual counterparts (Kurdek, 2001). Partners in lesbian couples also reported higher levels of relationship cohesion and equality, and lower levels of relationship costs than did heterosexual couples. Support from friends and family also differ between same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Kurdek's (2001) research found that both gay couples and lesbian couples received less support from

their families of origin than did heterosexual couples. However, lesbian partners reported higher levels of support from both their own friends and their partners' friends than did heterosexual couples. Rose and Bravewomon (1998) note that in terms of social network and extended familial networks, gay and lesbian families are similar to heterosexual extended family structures.

In the U.K., owing to adoption of the European Union's progressive legislation, same-sex couples that register their civil partnership have had the same rights as a married couple in areas such as tax, social security, inheritance, immigration, and workplace benefits since 2005 (Women and Equality Unit, 2005). While a number of places in the U.S. have registered partnerships or registered cohabitation systems wherein many or all of the same benefits granted married people are given to same-sex couples (e.g., Vermont, California, Hawaii, Washington, D.C., New Jersey), same-sex partnerships are not recognized in many other states. Organizations in these states therefore have no requirement to provide their gay or lesbian employees with health, leave, or pension benefits that recognize their same-sex partners. This lack of recognition can result in severe financial penalties for same-sex couples, with no access to survivor pensions or to health insurance coverage, and no right to take family leave in order to care for a non-marital partner. For instance, the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's release of the "The State of the Workplace 2005-2006" report shows that nearly half (49%) of Fortune 500 companies still fail to offer domestic partner health insurance benefits. As Rothausen-Vange (2005) notes, many companies continue to rely on legal definitions of family, such as that used by the FMLA, to guide them in their provision of benefits and leave policies.

Sexual orientation presents a significant consideration for the definition of family at organizational and national levels. Failure to recognize civil partnerships as

a legitimate form of family puts gay, lesbian, and bisexual workers at a disadvantage in the workplace. However, the field of civil partnership, which is afforded to gay and lesbian couples as an alternative to marriage, and other sexual liberties are targets of many political and theological battles (Brammer 2006) that are currently being settled in the international domain. The precarious nature of rights and the growingly vocal opposition deems the position of gay and lesbian families more vulnerable, and more deserving of academic attention.

### ***Multi-generational and extended families***

#### The “sandwich generation”

In a survey of a nationally representative sample of the U.S. labour force, 20% of respondents had simultaneous childcare and eldercare responsibilities (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998). These individuals are commonly referred to as the “sandwich generation,” and are acknowledged as facing exceptional difficulties in balancing the demands of work and home (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000). When contemporary demographic conditions are considered, eldercare provided by the sandwich generation is likely to result in increasing sources of conflict between work and family in the U.S., as in much of the Western world. As average life expectancy increases and the birth rate declines (United Nations, 2005), the American population is aging (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). The age distribution of the United States is characterized by an overrepresentation of people in their prime working years, and a diminishing pool of young adults. As the average age of the population increases, more working adults will be called upon to take responsibility for care of their elderly parents or other relatives. Currently, the National Alliance for Caregiving and the American Association of Retired Persons (2004) estimate that 44 million American adults provide unpaid care to another adult, and 59% of these either work

or have worked while doing so. Sixty-two percent of this group has had to make some adjustments to their work life, such as coming in late to work, or giving up their jobs entirely.

In a national survey of 2,352 sandwich generation Americans, the National Association of State Units on Aging (2001) found evidence of racial differences in caregiving responsibilities. While 42% of Asian Americans reported providing heavy eldercare or financial support, only 20% of White respondents provided care for their elderly parents. Approximately one third of both Hispanics and African Americans reported providing care for their parents, with Hispanics (similar to Asian Americans) engaging in heavier care duties.

Research indicates that caring for elderly dependents whilst engaging in paid employment can result in a number of negative consequences for individuals. Work by Gottlieb, Kelloway and Fraboni (1994) found that increased involvement in elder care activities placed employees at risk of more family interference with work, more stress, and more personal and job costs. Eldercare has also been found to adversely affected employees' well-being and work performance if they are situated in unsupportive work and family climates (Kossek, Colquitt, & Noe 2001). This may be partially due to the fact that employment does not appear to diminish the amount of time caregivers spend in eldercare activities (Levande, Herrick, & Sung, 2000). For instance, research by Doty, Jackson and Crown (1998) found that employed women who were the primary caregivers for elderly parents provided an average of 18 hours of care per week, which was comparable to the amount of time spent in caregiving activities by unemployed women.

Women tend to report spending more time in caregiving activities for elderly dependents than do men, and they also appear to suffer greater negative consequences

of caregiving because of their greater level of involvement (Kramer & Kipnis, 1995; Lee, Walker, & Shoup, 2001; Martin, 2000). Lee et al. (2001) found that employed individuals providing informal care for elderly relatives reported more symptoms of depression than did retired caregivers or employed non-caregivers. As the number of caregiving hours increased, significantly more symptoms of depression and poorer overall emotional health were reported.

Although providing care for elderly relatives is similar to providing care for young children in that it places additional resource demands upon the caregiver, individuals engaged in eldercare activities may experience problems and burdens that those caring for children do not. For instance, awareness of the elderly relative's degeneration, and the nature of the relationship between the caregiver and the care receiver, are issues unique to those providing informal care for the elderly (Lee et al., 2001; Tully & Sehm, 1994). Researchers have found that hours spent on eldercare are more stressful for employed women than those spent on childcare (MacDonald, Phipps, & Lethbridge, 2005). A lack of alternative care providers also presents a problem to employed individuals who are responsible for elderly relatives. While neighbors or family friends might be prevailed upon to babysit young children should the need suddenly arise, it can be much more difficult to arrange for substitute care for elderly relatives given work-related crisis requiring late hours or last-minute travel.

While the FMLA does permit employees to take leave from work in order to care for their parents or spouses, other groups of individuals for whom employees may provide ongoing care are not included in the eligibility criteria. For example, the National Alliance for Caregiving and the American Association of Retired Persons' (2004) report identified grandparents, parents-in-law, and siblings as other major care recipients. Fully 17% of all caregivers reported providing care for elderly persons

who were not relatives. Should a caregiving emergency arise that requires them to take time off work, employees providing care to those other than their own parents are vulnerable to a host of consequences ranging from demotion to job loss.

### Extended families

Extended families living in the same household can be considered another form of multi-generational household and are examples of differences in the assumed normal form of family across cultures. In many Asian countries, for example, a “normal” family includes three or more generations living in one household, sometimes with aunts, uncles, and cousins in addition to parents and children. Within the United States, many of these cultures have been understudied (Rothausen-Vange, 2005). Approximately 20% of adults aged 65 to 70 in the United States live with their adult children (Levande, Herrick, & Sung, 2000), and as life expectancy continues to rise, the number of multigenerational families may increase. In some countries, there are expectations that unmarried children remain in their parental homes. In the case of Turkey, this is evident even in cosmopolitan areas, offering young adults temporary protection from the harsher conditions of the commercial housing market (Özbilgin & Woodward, 2003).

According to Bengtson (2001), the role of extended families is becoming progressively more important given increases in marital instability and the divorce rate in the United States over recent decades. As the bonds of nuclear families dissolve, he argues, these families’ ability to socialize, nurture, and support their members is weakened, and extended family members will be required to provide these functions. At the same time, conflict has been identified as a significant element in multigenerational families (Clarke, Preston, Raksin, & Bengtson, 1999). Bengtson,

Rosenthal and Burton (1995) refer to the “paradox between conflict and solidarity” as characteristic of most relationships between parents and children.

There is also extensive literature on distinct formations of families that emerge after separation and divorce. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001, p. 96) highlight the emergence of serial family formations including ‘patchwork families,’ which are families with children from previous relationships as well as from current ones. The patchwork family formation adds to the complexity of the extended family issue by bringing in another form of division in families, i.e. by blood line.

Extended or multigenerational families offer unique supports, and unique challenges. For employed mothers living in the same household as their parents-in-law, as is common in families of Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi origin, the presence of the older generation may result in assistance with childcare responsibilities. On the other hand, this arrangement also entails additional housework, as cultural expectations hold the wife responsible for looking after the husband and his parents (Dale, 2005). Living in extended families is often associated with more traditional cultural values on the part of the older generation, which can add an extra layer of family pressures to working women, especially mothers. For example, Dale’s (2005) research among employed women of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women identified cultural expectations for these women to attend events such as weddings and funerals for extended family members or friends of the older generation, as well as to provide hospitality for any visiting friends or family members, however distant. Therefore, whilst extended families may lend support to their members, there is always a reciprocity which places demands and expectations on the members. Put in the context of expectations of temporal and spatial flexibility from individual workers in industrialized societies, extended families do not only

provide support for accommodation of these demands but may also constrain their members' temporal and spatial commitment to work, through assertion of reciprocal expectations.

Even when the family is described in standardized terms, the cultural significance of what family means in the context of work varies extensively. For example, Aryee, Fields, and Luk (1999) identify differences in the work-family interface among samples of U.S. and Hong Kong workers. For the American employees, family interference with work exerted a significant, positive effect on levels of depression. For the Hong Kong employees, it was work interference with family that exerted a negative effect on well-being.

Women in particular appear to be subject to greater difficulties in reconciling work and family when living in extended families that are very traditional in their outlook (Aycan & Eskin, 2005). In these types of cultural context, women are still expected to make family and domestic life their priority, regardless of their commitments to paid employment. Employers, for their part, largely fail to recognize family structures other than the nuclear unit, and workplace policies often do not account for relatives other than parents, spouses or children. As stated earlier, the FMLA makes no provisions for siblings, cousins, aunts, or uncles, or other relations with whom an employee may share a household or simply have strong ties of affection or obligation.

#### Grandparents as parents, again

Grandparents who are responsible for primary care of their grandchildren are the final form of multi-generational families we consider. Over four million children in the United States under the age of 18 live in a grandparent's household (Minkler & Roe, 1993). At some point in their lives, nearly 11% of all grandparents provide at



least six months' care for their grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997) and 39% of grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren have been doing so for longer than five years (Simmons & Dye, 2003). The 2000 Census reports that 2.4 million people have primary responsibility for grandchildren under 18 living with them, with a higher proportion of these grandparents being African American and Native American than White, Hispanic, or Asian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Approximately 71% of grandparents who are primary caregivers for their grandchildren are between the ages of 30 and 59, which are key working years (Simmons & Dye, 2003). Studies of grandparents raising their grandchildren conducted in the 1990s have placed the rate of their employment between 25% and 55% (Burton, 1992; Jendrek, 1994).

There are a number of reasons why these “skipped generation families” of grandchildren living with grandparents come into being. Diminishing social welfare afforded to families (Iceland & Kim, 2001) and increased proportions of single parent families (Cooksey, Menaghan, & Jekielek, 1997) account in part for a growing need for the care services of grandparents. Teen pregnancy, parental substance abuse, imprisonment, mental and/or physical illness, death, or abuse and neglect of their children may result in grandparents assuming primary responsibility for their grandchildren (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). Such traumatic circumstances may result in these grandchildren experiencing unique emotional, psychological, and/or physical needs. These needs, in turn, may adversely affect their grandparents' ability to work.

A great deal of research supports the notion that grandparent caregivers suffer an emotional and psychological toll from their caring responsibilities. In a study of 40 grandmothers who were primary caregivers for their grandchildren, challenges

identified by the participants included having limited energy due to their age, negotiating changing family roles, and parenting in what they perceived to be a toxic social environment (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Providing primary care for a grandchild has been associated with reduced levels of self-assessed health (Musil & Ahmad, 2002), and higher levels of depressive symptoms (Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 1997). In a study of 50 African-American grandparents who were raising their grandchildren, 94% reported a clinically significant level of stress (Ross & Aday, 2006).

Younger grandparents, who are still experiencing demands from the workplace as well as from their caregiving responsibilities, are apt to experience more depression and psychological anxiety (Minkler et al., 1997; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). A lack of available support is another key factor contributing to the stress of grandparent caregivers. Low family cohesion, poor grandparent health, and grandchildren with psychological and physical problems have been associated with psychological anxiety and depression, while the use of professional counseling and special school programs is related to lower levels of stress (Minkler et al., 1997; Ross & Aday, 2006; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000).

As is clear, grandparents caring for their grandchildren face a host of issues different from those experienced by parents looking after their own young children. These are exacerbated by a lack of formal recognition of their role by definitions of family such as that exemplified by the FMLA. Grandparents who need to take time off work because of their caregiving responsibilities may have few options beyond taking unpaid leaves of absence, or leaving their jobs altogether. Finding subsequent employment may be difficult due to their age and to their childrearing duties. Daycare or after-school care for children often have eligibility requirements that are complex,

and these care programs may either exclude grandparent caregivers from making use of them, or offer fewer benefits than those provided to parents (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). In addition, not all employed grandparent caregivers have legal custody of their grandchildren, which can be yet another complication in the search for community or workplace support.

### ***Beyond space and time: Virtual families***

The way we traditionally frame family is bounded by rationales of time and space. It is coded by space, as family is often considered a unit of cohabiting individuals in its broader definitions. Academic research on the work-family interface in both Western and non-Western contexts continues to tacitly accept marriage as the main measure and proxy for family membership (e.g. Ahmad, 1996; Aryee, Fields & Luk, 1999; Aryee, Srinivas, & Tan, 2005; Clark, 2000). This leads to a wide gap in our knowledge of non-traditional families and their interface with work. Considering that the conception of family demarcated as a nuclear family based on matrimony is a Western concept, studies on non-Western contexts that adopt these U.S. based models are more likely to diverge in their understanding of the realities of family and work in non-Western contexts.

Family is also characterized by a temporal commitment between partners outside work hours. However, cosmopolitan lifestyles of today also allow for different conceptions of family, including partners living mainly away from each other and with limited time together. Increased migration enhances the likelihood of such long-distance family formations and poses further complexities for care, family and work decisions as migrant families fall outside our mainstream conceptions of family (Wall & Jose, 2004). It is important to acknowledge, nevertheless, that even a virtual family

that transcends traditional expectations of spatial and temporal commitment also places demands on workers' work and life arrangements.

### **What are the consequences of using narrow definitions of “family”?**

As this review has shown, limited institutional definitions of family disadvantage non-traditional families in a number of ways – primarily by denying them the supports they need in order to successfully balance paid work with family life. U.S. employment legislation betrays a bias toward the nuclear family unit, excluding many different types of family configurations from the benefits enjoyed by what amounts to a shrinking proportion of American households. As a result, many workplaces exhibit a limited awareness of alternative family models, and thus provide limited instrumental and emotional supports. Family-related issues that are not concerned with childcare, such as elder care, may suffer from a perceived lack of legitimacy.

Bruce and Reed (1994) note that many ‘family friendly’ policies fail to help working parents and dual income couples, as the traditional approaches of workplace supervision of command and control are underpinned by values that question the integrity and commitment of workers who assume childcare responsibilities. Therefore, the organizing logic and culture of work should be scrutinized if the negative effects of narrowly defining family are to be overcome.

Another outcome of limited institutional definitions of family is limited research on work-family issues. Other researchers have highlighted shortcomings of the work-family literature. Parasuraman and Greenhaus (2002) cite the overemphasis of work-family research on nuclear families and the exclusion of single parent households or blended families, noting that research investigating the role of family social support usually limits itself to support provided by a spouse or partner, and thus

underestimates the amount of support actually received by individuals in non-traditional families. In her review of organizational research measures of “family,” Rothausen (1999) identifies the almost exclusive adoption of the legal, nuclear definition of family as a major weakness. However, the vast majority of articles published in the work-family literature still focus on couples in heterosexual relationships, usually with dependent children. This constrains our knowledge about the processes underlying the work-family interface for all but a subset of the population, and therefore restricts researchers’ ability to identify problems faced by members of non-traditional family configurations. With such limited knowledge of the realities faced by employed members of non-nuclear families, appropriate solutions to existing problems cannot be effectively developed.

### **Recommendations for change and directions for research**

We now provide several recommendations that may help address some of the inadequacies of narrow definitions of work and family. We first call for a more inclusive conceptualization of family and work, which embraces both emergent and mainstream forms. Family can be defined in a more inclusive way in research projects. Questions on family and marital status can be modified to include a wider range of possibilities. It would make sense to spell out civil partnerships, extended, patchwork, and virtual family formations in designing research instruments. Families are not likely to remain static over time. Therefore, research design could capture the transformation of what research participants consider as family by allowing the option of an ‘other’ category, with the opportunity to write in relevant “members” that captures new forms of family.

We argue that the organizational initiatives of work-life balance should also be more accommodating of diverse choices, experiences, and relationships of the

workers. Furthermore, achieving a balance between work and family demands requires cultural and structural changes through a spectrum of organizational development activities as well as public policy interventions and state regulation.

When “family” is narrowly defined from an institutional standpoint, individuals who fall outside the confines of this definition are disadvantaged in the workplace. To overcome this disadvantage, changes in academic theorization and in policy at both the organizational and legislative levels are needed.

Bielby (1992) notes that the literature on commitment to work and family often conflates the distinction among family, marriage, and other constituent parts of family. In recent years, there have been attempts by some scholars to offer wider measures of family structure to include individuals who are married (Carlson & Kacmar, 2000), parents (Clarke, 2002), living with partners (Baltes & Heydens-Gahir, 2003), co-habiting (Batt & Valcour, 2003) with children (Berg, Kalleberg, & Appelbaum, 2003) and caregiving responsibilities (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). Whilst some of these studies incorporated multiple family configurations, very few studies incorporated a comprehensive set of family configurations including samples with or without partners, children, or eldercare responsibilities (e.g. Edwards & Rothbard, 1999). What is lacking is a level of coherence or convergence across studies of the work-life interface to adopt wider and more inclusive measures of family structure. Furthermore, definitions of family in academic studies are not broad enough to reflect emergent and non-traditional forms of family that are becoming more prevalent in society. These distinctions should be recognized and reflected in design, implementation and analysis of research in the field.

One of the difficulties of offering classical categories of single, married, co-habiting, widowed, and divorced, is that individuals – particularly those in same-sex

relationships, civil partnerships, or with large and extended families - may fail to identify themselves in these terms, as these nuances are often lost in the design of survey questions. For example, terms such as dual-income couples often do not include same-sex dual income partnerships (e.g. Butler et al., 2005; Crossfield, Kinman & Jones, 2005) or dual-income but work-sharing couples (Gronseth, 1974). Therefore, there is a need for inclusion of these categories in more open terms in future research studies.

There are a number of potential research questions that arise from our suggested redefinition of family in the context of work. First, researchers may gain greater insight into a wider range of issues surrounding the interface between work and family. How do we frame family and personal responsibilities with commitment to paid employment if we adopt more inclusive definitions of both work and family? What are the implications of more inclusive definitions of family on accommodating work and life demands of workers? What are the unique accommodations that are made, both in the family sphere and at work, by groups that are traditionally excluded from definitions of family? Do these accommodations have repercussions for career progress or family well-being? What forms of organisational and familial support are available to these types of families, and are they sufficient?

Secondly, a more inclusive definition of family yields research questions related to organizational work-family policy. Are employees likely to express less satisfaction with the restrictive work-family policies currently offered in most organizations if the concept of family is expanded in scope? Research tells us that women and employees with children are most likely to view work-family policies as fair (Parker & Allen, 2001). If the definition of family is expanded but access to work-family policies is not, would the perceived fairness of these policies be

diminished? Might take-up of work-family policies increase, as the “mommy track” stigma of policy use is reduced, or would career-oriented individuals continue to steer clear of any admission that their commitment to the organization exists alongside family responsibilities?

If same-sex couples and virtual families are explicitly included in the definition of family, to what extent would the gendered nature of work-family issues continue to dominate public and organizational perception? Would this expanded definition help to increase the focus of work-family conflict beyond working mothers to include all members of all family structures and types, and would this in turn contribute to a change in traditional organizational cultures that require family life to accommodate work, rather than the other way around? Could such an inclusive definition of family challenge and subvert the gender binaries that currently dominate our routines of work and organisation, and free the concept of ‘family-friendly’ from the grasp of paternalistic, authoritarian and conservative ideologies of work? If the concept of family is expanded, are organizations willing to concurrently expand benefit offerings and other practices associated with “family”?

In terms of organizational work-family policy, Scully and Creed (1999) describe a firm whose solution to the issue of spousal versus domestic partner benefits was to offer all employees a fixed amount of benefits, which could be deployed to whomever the employee wished. This enabled employees to direct resources to the family members who most needed their assistance, whether that meant a spouse, an elderly aunt, or a non-relative who nonetheless held an important place in their lives. This type of approach ensures equal treatment for all employees, regardless of their household configuration or family responsibilities, and is a template for organizations



wishing to create an environment in which all workers can contribute to the best of their abilities.

This approach, however, naively assumes that all workers face similar challenges and demands at work and life and that standardized measures could promote a feeling of equity. In an Australian study, Bardoel, Moss, Smyrnios, and Tharenou (1999) demonstrated that workers from certain groups, such as women, union workers, long serving employees, and those with dependents, display a greater need for work-family policies than others. Therefore, a further suggestion can be made that organizations should also recognize differences between individual circumstances and act with compassion and benevolence towards the demands of their workers for better accommodation of their work and family responsibilities.

If compassion and benevolence are not viewed as relevant to the bottom line, effects on absence, tardiness, and turnover relevant to work and family conflicts are clearly relevant. Current research highlights the existence of benefits for organizations that seek to assist their employees to balance both work and family demands. Surveying the causal relationship between work-family initiatives and the bottom line in the U.S. context, Arthur (2003) demonstrated that companies implementing policies to accommodate the work-family interface reap benefits to their financial bottom line and to their shareholder returns (Arthur & Cook, 2004).

Similarly, the social context and culture of the workplace play a significant role in take-up of work-family initiatives. Therefore, as Blair-Loy and Wharton (2002) propose, the social context needs to be considered in terms of its varied impact on individuals from different demographic backgrounds. Furthermore, conceptualizations of family and work are embedded in cultures and geographies, reflecting the particular requirements of social and economic life in these settings.

Attention should be paid to understanding the contextual variations of meaning, frames and practices of family and work in order to ensure realistic theoretical and policy formulations for family and work, in ways that are sensitive to cultural and contextual differences.

Two main challenges that face employers in improving work-life balance are (a) the entrenched nature of long working hours in cultures where full-time working hours are the dominant norm, and (b) the difficulties in recognizing the pressures and demands that paid work and unpaid domestic and care work place on individual employees (Drago & Hyatt, 2003). This latter issue is particularly problematic given the constrained model of “family” adopted by U.S. legislation and thus the majority of American workplaces. Wide adoption of this model is likely to result in non-work related pressures and demands on employees being underestimated. However, both issues present a complex challenge. Anttila, Natti, and Vaisanen’s (2005) report on experiments on reduced working hours conducted by Finnish municipalities identifies both positive and negative outcomes of the trials. While shorter working hours may appear to be an attractive organizational strategy for achieving greater work-life balance among employees, Anttila et al.’s research showed that men remained reluctant to make use of this accommodation, perpetuating the stereotyped perception that family is the domain for women and that work-life balance is a women’s issue. Therefore, quick fix legal solutions based on narrow conceptualizations of work and family may not generate desired positive impacts if they are not supplemented with cultural changes at the level of the organization and the society.

Albrecht (2003) argues that family-friendly policies at the organizational level are insufficient to respond to the challenge of sustaining the well-being of family members in free market economies, as such policies are vulnerable to changes in

economic circumstances, becoming more evident in times of economic growth. Similarly, a review by Glass and Estes (1997) illustrates that organizational policies for a family-responsive workplace are problematic at multiple levels. Albrecht (2003) suggests that in the absence of effective organizational policies, there is an ethical case for governments to take effective action to address the problems faced by working families.

Outside of the U.S., examples of more inclusive definitions of “family” can be found at the level of national government. Despite evidence of wide variation across European countries in terms of national contexts and uptake of work-life policies (Hantrais & Ackers, 2005), Cook (1989) explains that the U.S. does not fare well when compared to European countries in terms of its public policy efforts to provide supports for non-traditional and atypical families. For instance, in addition to its legal recognition of same-sex couples through its 2004 Civil Partnership Act, the United Kingdom’s employment legislation presents a progressive approach in Europe, and accounts for a much broader interpretation of family than does the FMLA. The right to take time off work to care for dependents allows employees to care not only for immediate family members such as children or parents, but also any other members of the household who are not tenants or employees. The law further specifies that in cases of illness, injury, or the breakdown of regular care arrangements, dependents can also be defined as individuals who reasonably rely on the employee for assistance (Department of Trade and Industry, 2007a). As an example, employees may take time off work to care for a nearby relative who becomes ill unexpectedly, or for a neighbour living alone who suffers a fall and becomes injured.

More recently, the U.K.’s Work and Families Act 2006 was passed to update the 2003 Flexible Working Law. These legislative acts give employee caregivers the

right to request to work flexibly, and place a duty upon employers to consider these requests seriously. Eligible employees may have caregiving responsibilities for children under six years of age, disabled children under 18 years of age, or adults who are either relatives, or who are living in the same household as the employee. In addition to parents and foster parents, guardians and “special guardians” of children are eligible to make requests to vary the amount, timing, or location of their hours of work (Department of Trade and Industry, 2007b). By extending the definition of care recipient beyond the usual criterion of offspring or parent, U.K. legislation attempts to enable employees in a variety of familial configurations to successfully balance their work and family demands. With its continued focus on the increasingly outmoded nuclear family unit, U.S. legislation needs to follow suit in order to better meet the needs of a populace whose domestic arrangements and own interpretation of family are too often incompatible with the rigid definition used by government and many workplaces. There is certainly a need for further research to uncover the interplay between framing of family and work and its consequences in the design of jobs, organizational interventions, social policy and state regulation.

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