



Community Resources and Work-Family Conflict: Is the Gender Gap Really Closing? An Interview with Marisa Young

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While the gap in men's and women's experience of work-family conflict (WFC) appears to be closing, the reason is not that women are experiencing less work-family conflict. Rather, as men have taken on more family care responsibilities over the past few decades they have experienced significantly increasing levels of WFC. Although several factors, such as supportive supervisors and flexible workplaces, help men and women to meet the demands of their work and family responsibilities, community resources may also play an important role in reducing WFC.

Marisa Young, an assistant professor of Sociology at McMaster University, was curious about how perceptions of the availability of community resources impacts men's and women's experience of WFC. In examining community resources, Young considered both physical resources, such as affordable childcare services and recreational facilities, as well as social resources, such as formal support groups and helpful neighbors. She also wanted to know if these neighborhood resources were more effective in reducing WFC for parents who have young children living at home compared to residents who do not have young children.

Research Questions and Design:

The two research questions this study explored were:

1. How do community resources differentially benefit men's and women's experiences of WFC?
2. Do these associations vary among residents with and without young children in the household?

To address these questions, Dr. Marisa Young used three datasets.

- ❖ The first dataset includes individual-level data collected through one-on-one interviews with 2,412 individuals between the ages of 25 and 64 in the Greater Toronto area. A team of twelve interviewers gathered these data over the course of two years and achieved a 72% response rate.



- ❖ The second dataset includes information about available community services such as non-profit childcare services, community centers, and support groups.
- ❖ The third dataset includes census-level data from Statistics Canada.

Research Highlights

The research explored how community resources, such as affordable daycare, recreational facilities, support groups and helpful neighbors impact experiences of work-family conflict. Of particular interest to Young was how these resources differentially benefit women versus men, and parents of young children versus individuals who do not have young children at home. Young suspected that the benefits of objective (or actual), and of perceived availability, of community resources would have a greater impact on reducing WFC for women as compared to men. She also assumed that the benefits of these resources would be greatest for women with young children as compared to all other residents.

The study focused on community-level factors that might impact the difference between men's and women's reported WFC. The following results emerged from this research:

- Both the real, and the perceived, availability of community resources helps to *reduce WFC for all residents* regardless of gender or age of children.
- The *perception* of resource availability is much *more important* to reducing WFC than the *actual* physical availability of these resources.
- Women and parents of young children are *worse off* in what are *perceived to be resource deficient neighborhoods*. But, they experience much *less WFC* when living in neighborhoods that are *perceived to be abundant* in available resources. The same cannot be said for men or parents without young children at home.
- When neighbor support (also termed collective efficacy) is low, *women report less WFC* whereas *men report more*. As neighbor support increases, *women report greater WFC* and *men report less*. For women, the support of neighbors may feel more like a demand than a resource because they feel the obligation to return the favor.

Implications of Research for Organizations and Individuals

The discovery that both real and perceived community resources help reduce WFC has several practical implications for organizations and individuals.



For community organizations, the study highlights the need to make parents and other residents more aware of the resources that are available in the communities. Neighborhood associations and other community-based groups need to help residents feel that they have access to support if needed.

At the municipal level, the research underscores that community information needs to be better communicated to residents. For example, getting the word out when new resources become available, such as a doctor's office or a new recreational facility. In addition, to encourage stronger and more engaged neighborhoods, municipalities need to incorporate more "family friendly spaces" in their urban planning. Specifically, creating more green spaces would allow residents to meet and engage in discussions that build a sense of community.

For employers, the results of this study could be translated to the work environment if we consider the workplace to be its own form of community. Beyond creating family-friendly work policies, employers might promote cohesion, foster interpersonal relationships at work, and make employees more aware of family benefits and resources to help reduce work-family conflict. Given the value of perceived resources for women and men as well as those both with and without children, employers can strengthen morale and mitigate WFC through the provision of low cost employee supports. This may come in the form of discussion groups or on-line employee networks, that bring people together around a particular topic or issue such as raising special needs children, dealing with chronic illness, or planning for college finances.

Given that women experience neighbor support as increasing work-life intensity, likely because they feel beholden to reciprocate, employers can support women's advancement by highlighting men's use of work-life supports and active community engagement. They can also encourage leaders, especially male leaders, to talk openly about work-life responsibilities. This paves the way for younger men to feel they are able to speak honestly, and more likely take responsibility, for their equal share of parenting demands.

For individuals, this study highlights the importance of researching available resources in one's community and of building relationships with one's neighbors, especially for women and men raising children.

Implications for Future Exploration

The findings from this study suggest several areas for future exploration.

- How do perceptions of community resources change over time?
- When a new community resource is introduced, does it really make a difference in terms of reducing residents' experiences of work-family conflict?



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- How are residents tapping into contiguous community resources? Are individuals looking beyond their immediate, home-based neighborhoods for available resources and what are the implications for work-family conflict?
 - What constitutes a “family-friendly neighborhood” in the eyes of men, women, parents with young children, and residents without young children?
 - Why does the perception of neighbor support increase the level of work-life stress that women experience?

Research Links

Below are links to other researchers who have examined the influence of community on work-family dynamics:

- **Patricia Voydanoff**
https://workfamily.sas.upenn.edu/wfrn-repo/facet/topic_field/*%3A*?filters=topic_field%3A%22Work%20and%20Family%22%20all_author_field%3A%22Patricia%20Voydanoff%22
- **Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes**
<http://www.bc.edu/schools/gssw/about/faculty-staff/full-time-faculty/marcie-pitt-catsoupes.html>
- **Phyllis Moen**
<http://users.soc.umn.edu/~moen/>