Conversations with the Experts

Work and Family Through an International Lens

Bio: Samuel Aryee is a Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management in the Aston Business School at Aston University. He obtained his Ph.D. from McMaster University. He previously held teaching positions at the National University of Singapore and Hong Kong Baptist University. His research interests include work-family interface, careers, organizational justice, employee-organization relationship and counterproductive workplace behavior. His work in these areas has been published in the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Management*, *Human Relations*, and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. He is an associate editor of the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* and sits on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* and *Human Relations*.

Samuel Aryee

An Interview with Samuel Aryee

By Suzan Lewis and Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya

Lewis: How did you become interested in work-family issues outside of Western countries?

Aryee: Well, it was the context in which I found myself as well as my interest in careers and the experiences of minorities. I have lived in Ghana, Canada, Singapore and Hong Kong. I've visited Australia and a number of countries in southeastern Asia and now live in Britain. When I was working in Singapore, I noticed that the careers of educated women were falling behind their male counterparts. Women in Singapore who are pursuing careers face the same hurdles as those in western countries. I wanted to find out more, which led me to examine work-family issues. In Singapore, both work and family are extremely important. Because of labor shortages, the government has always encouraged and enticed women—especially educated ones—into the workforce. At the same time, to maintain current population levels, women are also encouraged to reproduce. Caught between these two conflicting messages, women experience considerable work-family conflict. This provides an interesting context in which to study work-family issues, because like many non-western countries, you also have the issue of patriarchy. Managing work-family interface was seen primarily as a woman's problem. Men were very much unencumbered by the demands of running the family or a home.

Lewis: Yes, it is a very interesting context. Does the government's interest in increasing the population, particularly that of educated people, mean there's no research looking at men, dual-career families, or less educated women?

Aryee: It's primarily women doing research on women. When I started doing research on work-family issues in Singapore, people asked me "Why are you doing this? You're a man! Why are you interested in women's issues?"

Lewis: Work-family is still seen as a women's issue in Singapore?

Aryee: I think that notion is beginning to change, because women are beginning to contribute as much to family finances as men, if not more in some cases. With economic power comes other types of power as well. Many women are urging men to assume responsibility for domestic issues. What they call "enlightened" men

are seen ferrying their children to daycare centers, picking them up, taking them to the doctor and other care-taking tasks. It's increasingly not just a woman's problem; it is seen as a societal problem. I have advocated that the government must create a situation in which men and women are fulfilled in their dual roles as parents and as employees.

Lewis: Is anybody looking at less educated women?

Aryee: Well, that is the unfortunate bit. Educated women are more visible, and the Singapore government has put a lot of faith into the idea that they have a positive effect on the economy. There is also some "social engineering"; for example, the Social Development Unit has as its overriding objective the pairing of educated men and women to encourage them to have children. The government believes that a highly educated wife married to a highly educated husband will very likely have highly educated offspring. There is much less governmental interest in women who are not well educated. Another factor is that researchers tend to study those who are similar to them. That has been the story of research on work-family issues in many countries.

Lewis: I think the research questions that get asked tell quite a lot about the culture of a country. You've also done comparative research. Why do you think it's important to do cross-national research on work and family?

Aryee: In my view, many of the forces that precipitate work-family conflict tend to be very similar, but people's responses to these issues are very different. If we ignore research coming from non-Western countries, we will end up with a very restricted understanding of what it means to experience work-family conflict and its manifestations. For example, I did research in Hong Kong using Frone's work-family interface model, which is very much a Western-based model in which the distinction between work and family seems to be very evident. When you transfer this model to a different context in which this assumption doesn't hold, it becomes very interesting to question its applicability. In Hong Kong, some of the antecedents of work-family conflict and its manifestations tend to be generally the same as the West. But in a Chinese society, the blurring of work and family roles tend not to be as clear as you would find elsewhere because of utilitarian familism, the tendency to place family interests above those of the individual and to structure social relationships so that one's familial interests is a primary consideration. In Hong Kong and many other Asian societies, people are engaged in work roles primarily for family reasons. If a worker happens to be working from 9 to 9, it's not so much because he or she enjoys the work. It might well be the case, but that is a side issue. Of central concern is the ability to support one's family, so the overriding objectives to which everybody within the household rallies become supporting the breadwinner and making adjustments so that this person can bring in the money to ensure the financial security of the family. It's not for self-development that somebody will, for example, engage in work-related travel. All these things are meant to satisfy one objective and that is to ensure the financial security of the family.

Lewis: Does that include women?

Aryee: Yes; however, one needs to have a supportive husband. I think much like elsewhere, more Hong Kong women are making deliberate choices. Either they don't get married or if they do, they don't have children or they limit it to one child.

Lewis: Is that changing? Would you say there is a developing concept of career as identity, self-development and self-actualization?

Aryee: The male breadwinner notion in Hong Kong is increasingly challenged. With the spate of downsizing, it's not always the case that the man is the principle breadwinner. Most men and women are increasingly quite blunt in terms of their choice of a career and partner. They look at the person's earning ability and calculate how much this person can contribute to the household. Some women go out with a man and on the first date they are asked, "So, is your apartment paid for? How much do you pay in mortgage every month? What's the value of your apartment? How much do you earn?" These are questions that until recently were taboo. People are now quite pragmatic about these matters.

Lewis: Do you think the male breadwinner notion makes Hong Kong very different than other countries that you've researched?

Aryee: Hong Kong and Singapore are perhaps a bit different, because although they've retained their Confucian heritage, there is what I might call a pervasive western influence. In a way, the people of Hong Kong are torn between two competing forces: their Confucian heritage and the dictates of western, modernizing tendencies. The role of the husband as a breadwinner and the wife as the secondary breadwinner is strong in the Confucian heritage. In situations where the wife earns more than the husband, the wife will have a traditional role and take on responsibilities from which men are customarily absolved. In Hong Kong, people

have typically worked very long hours. They leave home at 7:30 or 8:00 in the morning and often don't return until 11:00 PM. They're tired. The next morning, they're off again. This is true of both men and women.

Lewis: What about globalization? Do you see western influences spreading everywhere?

Aryee: I don't see the world as becoming homogenized. We have had this perennial debate about whether industrialization and modernization will result in countries having the same institutions (convergence) or whether culture will influence how countries respond to the demands of industrialization and modernization (divergence). I think there will be a fair amount of convergence, but cultural forces and their impact should not be brushed aside. How people respond to these pressures very often tend to be dictated by their cultural heritage. I've seen quite a bit of that in Hong Kong and Singapore; even in China this is the case. Chinese parents tell their daughters what sort of man they should be looking for. A man's attraction as a marriage partner depends upon his ability to provide. This may be the case everywhere, but it is especially true in a place like China.

Lewis: So, there are lots of deep-seated gender issues?

Aryee: Deep-seated, really deep-seated. These issues are being played out again in China. It's a very interesting place in terms of researching work-family issues. Because the government has limited families to one child (in urban areas), you may think work-family is not an issue, particularly in urban areas. However, there is real work-family conflict, particularly for women, which is a reflection of their status in society. Although Communist ideology was supposedly one that didn't discriminate against women, in real terms, China remains a very patriarchal society and women are supposed to know their place. There is change, but change is very, very slow.

Lewis: What about Ghana, where you were born?

Aryee: If you look at places like Ghana, women have always worked, but tend not to talk about work-family conflict; it's something they have taken in stride. Many women in Ghana and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa are employed in the informal sector where they enjoy a number of flexibilities, which might be denied to those in formal employment. These may have made it a touch easier to combine work and family. For such people, pressures will come in the form of money, financial insecurities, and perhaps their dependence on the extended family. In Ghana, the extended family has always been the bedrock. However, the extended family itself is changing due to the pressures of globalization. People are beginning to think more in terms of the nuclear family than the extended family: "My responsibilities are primarily to members of my immediate family. I provide for my parents. If an auntie is unwell and she needs my help, I have to think very hard about what she did for me when I was a kid." This was totally unheard of in the past. The family system is changing, and I think that is why work-family is becoming an issue in Ghana and many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. The extended family has always been important in Asia as well. Changes in the family system in places like Asia could be at the root of the emergence of work-family as a problem. I don't know the extent to which these changes will play out, but my natural instinct is to hope that families in developing countries do not become nucleated. There is a lot of merit to the extended family system, especially since these societies do not have social safety nets.

Lewis: Exactly. Someone has to be the caretaker.

Aryee: Yes, and traditionally that responsibility has fallen on members of the extended family. For many of us, who live and work overseas, we get these requests for help: "My son is coming to the UK. Can you pay the fees and provide accommodation?" Now I say my responsibilities are not to your son; maybe I can help with his passage to this country, but once he gets here, he's on his own. It's a changing situation that appears to be driving many of the issues relating to work-family.

Lewis: That's a very different issue of work-family, being responsible for your family back home. Are there some areas of similarity in the issues facing the various countries you have studied?

Aryee: Yes, we have an emergent middle class in Ghana (as in many developing countries), which seem to constitute an island in the sense that their lifestyle and work modes tend to be at variance with the general context in which they operate. Many of these people draw their inspirations not from the surrounding environment, but from their experiences while living overseas or from watching TV. They aspire to that sort of lifestyle. For them, there will always be that tension between the duties of their culture and the lifestyle to which they feel entitled. It is in managing this tension that we can also locate work-family conflict. You can have hired help and supports, but these days you cannot just go and drop off your kids at grandma's place, because grandma also has her own responsibilities. So yes, I see similarities. We stand to miss a lot in terms of our understanding of work-family conflict if we neglect to examine the context in which these conflicts play out.

Lewis: Absolutely. So what do you think are the big issues cross-nationally and their implications? I'm thinking about implications for employers, human resource managers and so on.

Aryee: I think the bottom line is the realization that as people participate in both work and family roles, there will be synergies as well as conflict. In recent terms, I'm heartened by the fact that we are moving away from a generally negative view of the work-family interface to looking at how we can build synergies across these roles. Whether we like it or not, people want to participate in various roles. There was an interesting piece in the *Academy of Management Journal* [Ruderman, M.N., Ohlott, P.J., Panzer, K. & King, S.N. (2002). Benefits of multiple roles for managerial women. *Academy of Management Journal, 45*, 369-386] that looked at the benefits of participation in multiple roles for managerial women. A respondent indicated that planning and prioritizing multiple tasks at home gave her the skills to juggle multiple managerial responsibilities. There is that facilitation between roles.

Lewis: So non-work roles can be very valuable to the workplace. Do you think there is more awareness of this synergy in some of the cultures you've looked at? Work-family conflict is a very Anglo-American notion anyway, isn't it?

Aryee: In my view, yes, people in developing countries are very much aware of the synergies between these roles. In fact, these synergies seem to have helped to ensure that work and family didn't emerge as conflicting realms. However, that might be threatened by the demise of the extended family and the inability of governments to provide for their citizens. In developing countries, organizations have to step in and do something; this is certainly true of Singapore. In Hong Kong, although it is a Chinese society with pride of place given to the family, there still are very few organizations that have family-friendly policies.

Lewis: Is that because of lack of awareness, a lack of interest in family or beliefs that women should be at home?

Aryee: I think in Hong Kong, people have learned not to depend on the government. People have resorted to hiring domestic helpers as an informal means to cope with work-family issues; therefore, organizations have not thought it necessary to provide family-friendly policies. Work-family researchers have done ourselves some disservice as we have not really demonstrated the impact of work-family policies on the organization's bottom line. That is the language that organizations in Hong Kong understand.
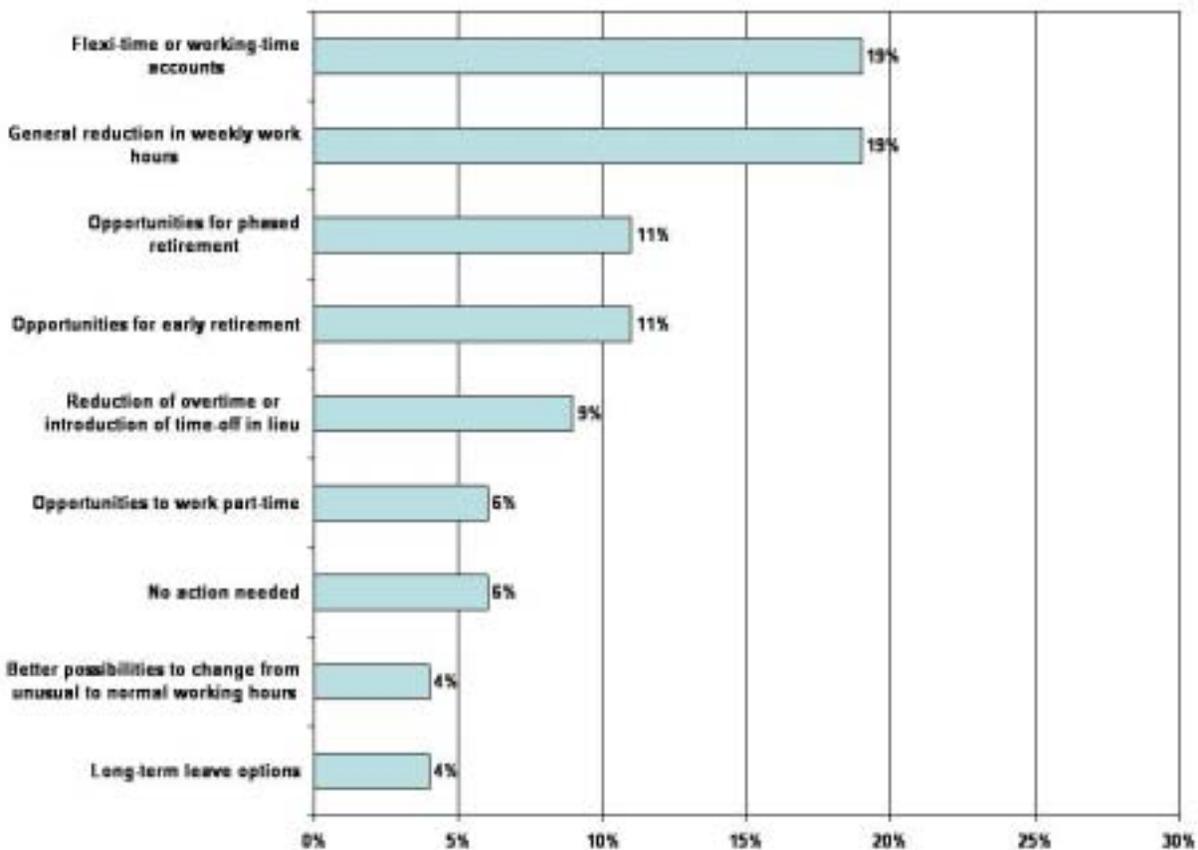
Lewis: What about Singapore, where the government is very involved in sustaining the level of their population, its educated population anyway? Do they support child care?

Aryee: They have daycare centers; Singapore's National Trades Union Congress operates a lot of daycare centers across the island. A few employers and organizations have onsite daycare centers. Hong Kong and Singapore, although they have been successful, pursue different policies to arrive at the same goal. Perhaps because of Hong Kong's colonial heritage, people have learned to be self-reliant; for example, by employing domestic helpers. In any case, having a domestic helper is a lot cheaper than sending a preschooler to a daycare center, where the fees charged by the better ones can be quite prohibitive. I must point out that employing a domestic helper is an informal strategy for managing the work-family interface in the more affluent countries in south-east Asia. In Singapore, it's the opposite. People have learned to be dependent on the government, because the government has always provided for them. Then you go just across the border to Malaysia, for example, and it's again a different story; the Malaysian government hasn't been that involved. Furthermore, given that the bulk of Malaysians are Malays, religion is a big factor in stressing women's traditional roles. However, there are Malaysian feminists who advocate that work-family is a societal problem, not a woman's problem.

Lewis: You have illustrated very nicely that you do need to look at the context to examine and understand work-family conflict. But that context, you say, is changing—even in Malaysia where you have feminists who are questioning strong religious values. What's the situation in China?

Aryee: There is a sort of vacuum there since China is in transition. At one time, the government played a big role when they had state-owned enterprises, because these enterprises were much like total institutions. Workers were entitled to medical care and day care and other benefits. With the growing demise of state-owned enterprises, managing the work-family interface is becoming an issue that the government will have to face. Private sector organizations are not interested in these issues, and the previous supports provided by the state-owned enterprises have not been picked up by anyone, so the social safety net is not there anymore. Furthermore, people are beginning to work very long hours. Work-family issues are really being neglected at the moment while they are increasing.

Most Desirable Initiatives With Regard to Work-Life Balance

Initiative	Percentage
Flexi-time or working-time accounts	19%
General reduction in weekly work hours	19%
Opportunities for phased retirement	11%
Opportunities for early retirement	11%
Reduction of overtime or introduction of time-off in lieu	9%
Opportunities to work part-time	6%
No action needed	6%
Better possibilities to change from unusual to normal working hours	4%
Long-term leave options	4%

Base: Establishments with employee representative interviews.

Source: European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. (2006). *Working time and work-life balance in European countries: Establishment survey on working time, 2004-2005.* Retrieved August 6, 2006, from http://www.eurofound.eu.int/pubdocs/2006/27/en/1/ef0627en.pdf.

Additional Resources Related to Work and Family Through an International Lens

International Center of Work and Family: This center is run out of the University of Navarra, Barcelona, Spain. Its mission is "to help organizations create a family-responsible environment, which we believe is essential for the well-being of societies, organizations, and individuals alike."
- To access the website, click here: http://www.iese.edu/en/RCC/ICWF/Home/Home.asp.

International Labour Organization: Gender Promotion Programme: "The Programme has developed a knowledge base and tools addressing emerging gender and employment issues, and undertaken advocacy, advisory services, as well as technical cooperation activities promoting more and better jobs for women and men."
- To access the website, click here: http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/gems/index.htm.

International Review of Leave Policies and Related Research, 2006: "The report is the latest product from an International Network on Leave Policy and Research and contains national audits on leave arrangements in 22 countries (including maternity leave, paternity leave, and the availability and use of parental leave.)"
- To access the report in PDF format, click here: http://www.dti.gov.uk/files/file31948.pdf.

Promoting Personal Work-Life Effectiveness: Singapore's Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports started a Work-Life Unit to encourage family-friendly workplaces and to assist workers in managing their work and home lives. The initiative won an AWLP Work-Life Innovative Excellence award in 2005.

- To access the website, click here: http://app.mcys.gov.sg/WEB/faml_workharmony.asp.

Working Time and Work/Life Balance in European Countries: "The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions' Establishment Survey on Working Time and Work–Life Balance 2004–2005 set out to map the use of a variety of working time arrangements in companies, to assess the reasons for their introduction and their impact. This report… focuses on aspects such as flexible time arrangements in general, overtime, part-time work, nonstandard working hours, childcare leave and other forms of long-term leave, phased and early retirement and company policies to support work-life balance."

- To access the report in PDF format, click here:
  http://www.eurofound.eu.int/pubdocs/2006/27/en/1/ef0627en.pdf.