

Conversations with the Experts

Work-life Fit and the Life Course



Phyllis Moen

Bio: Phyllis Moen recently accepted a McKnight Presidential Chair in Sociology from the University of Minnesota (fall 2003). Prior to that, she served for many years as the Ferris Family Professor of Life Course Studies and Professor of Human Development and of Sociology at Cornell University.

Her research focuses on careers, gender and the changing life course, and is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the National Institute on Aging. Her forthcoming book, *The Career Mystique: Cracks in the American Dream* (2005, with Pat Roehling), addresses the fundamental mismatch between the ways work and retirement are organized and the realities of a changing workforce and an uncertain global economy. Other books include *It's about Time: Couples and Careers* (2003), *Women's Two Roles* (1992) and *Working Parents* (1989). She has also co-edited *Examining Lives in Context* (1995), *The State of Americans* (1996), *A Nation Divided* (1999), and *Social Integration in the Second Half of Life* (2000). Moen has also published widely in professional journals on topics related to gender, aging and the life course; work, retirement, civic engagement, and social policy; and the work-family-health interface.

Moen received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Minnesota, and served as director of the Sociology Program at the National Science Foundation in the late 1980s. While at Cornell she founded the Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center, as well as the Cornell Careers Institute, an Alfred P. Sloan Working Families Center.

An Interview with Phyllis Moen

by Judi Casey and Karen Corday

Casey: How does the concept of *life-course fit* better describe the efforts to manage home and work demands, in comparison to the terms “work-family” or “work-life”?

Moen: For one thing, it is a noun not an adjective. We use “work-life” as a modifier for a lot of different outcomes, and there is some argument about whether they are objective or subjective measures (such as conflict, enhancement, spillover, enrichment). The concept of ‘fit’ is a subjective, cognitive assessment by individual family members of the degree of match or mismatch between the claims on them and the resources available to them. ‘Fit’ moves away from a focus by work-family scholars on people (especially mothers) who have children. Most members of the workforce don’t have children at home, and that’s only going to increase with the aging of the workforce. The diversity of the workforce in terms of age, family responsibilities, and household composition is simply not captured under the “work-family” rubric. Also, the “work-family” construct implies that any potential problems lie between these two exclusively, and not within one or the other domains. Scholars often give negative family-to-work spillover and negative work-to-family spillover equal weight, but I have come to the conclusion, after 30 years of research, that it is really the *conditions of work* that promote the greatest stress and overload. This is in part because workers are reducing if not eliminating demanding circumstances at home: they have fewer or no children, they have them later in life, they marry later, don’t marry at all, or else divorce. So, Americans have done all they can on the *family side* to accommodate to the changing reality of having all adults in a household working for pay. What hasn’t changed are the toxic working conditions based on the career mystique of continuous full-time, exclusive dedication to work, a mystique based on the breadwinner/homemaker model. That family model is obsolete, but Americans see the career mystique rules and regulations as natural, the way things are, and the way things must be.

Casey: So you think the conflict comes strictly from the work arena?

Moen: I do. Otherwise, we're blaming families, blaming workers -- blaming the victims. Let's say that yes, married people experience more stress in managing two careers, two sets of job demands. Is the solution *not* to get married? Or *not* to have children? Americans have tried to accommodate to the temporal rhythms around work—the time clocks and calendars that we take as given, but those are what need to be transformed. As long as we're talking about “work-family,” we're privileging the idea that the problem arises from the intersection of those two. And yet, even single workers are feeling stress as a result of overload, time pressures, and the idea of being available 24-7. All of this has nothing to do with the family side— family circumstances may exacerbate and moderate the effects of toxic work conditions in some ways, but they are not the source of the problem, or of the solution.

Casey: Are there other changes in families, work environments, or society that inform this concept of life-course fit?

Moen: When we read and use the term “work-family” in research, we tend to summarize all the findings regardless of *when* the studies were done, or at what stage workers are at in their family and career building. However, changes based on the number of women in the workforce, the age of the workforce, global economic turbulence, and new information technologies have transformed this subject. “Fit” easily captures the importance of life stage given the changing mix of resources and claims (on time, skills, emotional resources, and money) over the life course *and* that this is a changed and changing world, with spiraling uncertainties, insecurities, and time pressures around work.

Casey: So “fit” is more of a fluid concept?

Moen: Yes. It also brings in considerations like job security, which has been typically ignored by work-family scholars. But there is nothing more harmful to families than job loss or chronic economic insecurity. An employee may have great work-family balance and enhancement, but at the same time, if he/she is worried about losing their job, nothing else matters.

Life-course fit puts the onus, not on the individual, but on their resources and on the claims that are made on their time, commitment, and other resources. The concept of fit really points to the structures and cultures in which the life courses of family members play out. Even though life-course fit is a subjective assessment, it reflects the mix of personal, organizational, family and community resources and constraints perceived as opening up or curtailing opportunities and options. .

Casey: The responsibility for a solution is on the organization?

Moen: Right. What are required are new organizational, social and community policies and practices recognizing that most workers have other interests, goals, and responsibilities.

Casey: The other thing you mentioned in one of your articles is that work-family doesn't take into account changes over time—that at different times in your life, you may need a different fit.

Moen: Absolutely; things may be perfect one day, and then your child is sick and it's a mess. That can change so quickly, especially around health issues of one's self or one's spouse or children, or around job loss of one's self or one's spouse. Our aspirations may change as well; what was a good enough job at one point in life may not feel like that later on. That's why I call it *life-course* fit,—to try to remind people it's not a stagnant concept; rather fit changes with changing family stage, career stage, and external shocks, like the current recession.

Thus far, at the center of “work-family” scholarship has been the individual or the couple at one point in time. “Fit” takes into account potential selection bias about who is *not* in the sample. For instance, new mothers who experience too much strain and overload are apt to leave the workforce. Life-course fit incorporates the idea that people make *strategic adaptations* in response to the misfit of outdated arrangements designed for a workforce without family or other interests, goals, and responsibilities. When conditions are too stressful, employees may leave that job to take another, or stay at home, or retire early. Others are no longer in a sample of employees because they have been laid off. Scholars miss that in the static concept of work-life or work-family. We don't take into account that people are selected into or out of particular environments. Individuals and families act to increase their sense of fit, but they do so within constrained choices.

Casey: Let's talk about the flexible work and well-being study project at Best Buy.

Moen: It's a study co-directed by myself and Erin Kelly, funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Center for Disease Control as a part of a larger interdisciplinary network consortium to try to understand the structures and cultures at work that are affecting health. This work/family/health network is really amazing because the NIH usually studies how to change individuals— how to moderate, let's say, individuals' smoking or exercise activity. This large interdisciplinary initiative, by contrast, is investigating how to change environments and working conditions in order to be more conducive to health by reducing "work-family" pressures and conflicts.

Our study at Best Buy Headquarters was a serendipitous melding of our interests in promoting employees' control over their working time and an actual work redesign that was being launched at Best Buy. By networking with work-life professionals in various companies in the Twin Cities area, we learned that Best Buy was about to launch an initiative in some of their headquarters' divisions, rolling out a program called ROWE, which stands for Results Only Work Environment, designed by Jody Thompson and Cali Ressler (<http://www.caliandjody.com/>). We were able to launch our study of ROWE, thanks to funds from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, to collect both qualitative and quantitative data *before* they rolled out this initiative. In that way we were able to collect pre-test as well as post-test information on the participants. In addition, we used employees in divisions who were going into ROWE in the last part of the rollout as a comparison group. Our pre-test survey asked all kinds of questions about working conditions, home lives, psychological well-being, and employees' sense of control over their working time. They then participated in the ROWE training, which transforms the work time rules and regulations that we all take for granted. Under ROWE, it doesn't matter where or when you work as long as the desired results are achieved.

The hardest part of this for most firms and for managers as well as employees is to clarify what exactly are the results to be achieved. A lot of people define productivity by time—the hours they spend working—so it is sometimes difficult for people to get their heads around ROWE. There is often some push-back by managers and by employees. All of us are socialized to take as "given" the clocks and calendars guiding our lives. We assume Monday is the first day of the work week, that eight (or more) hours, five (or more) days a week is what work is. Simply being at work equals productivity and dedication. Employees in the pretest would say that they tended to go home only *after* their supervisor left for the day. In a high-performance company such as Best Buy, there's a real focus on productivity, and productivity is measured by face-time—your managers need to see you. Were you there before the manager came in? Did you leave after? If so, managers have the sense that you are really working hard.

Gradually, through a series of different meetings, discussions, and trying new ways of working and reporting back, participants went "live" into the ROWE way of working. Thanks to the NICHD grant we were able to observe them through this process and re-interview them six months later. What we found was just amazing. We saw no change in the hours that people worked. What changed was *when* they worked; there was considerable variability in when and where participants did their work. There was an increase in participant's sense of work-time control and of their ability to decide when and where they work. The qualitative material from the study is fascinating. People especially talk about being able to take their children to school and going to work when there was no rush hour—that they would save two hours of commute time each day! Participants reported going to their child's school play, taking their ailing mother to a doctor, or seeing a doctor themselves—without guilt. Participants described both a sense of freedom and greater responsibility for actually accomplishing results.

ROWE requires a lot of communication and coordination between team members, and many reported working better as a team when they could no longer count on all being together all the time. Team members made sure that everything was covered, that the customers were served, and that the work got accomplished on the right timeline. This enabled them to reduce the number of what they call "fire drills"—where suddenly something urgent unexpectedly arrives on their desks late on Friday afternoon—because they planned their work better. Team strategies were different in every situation. Examples include cross-training so that two people could cover for one another, instead of just one person knowing a certain task. Or, instead of each person responding to their customers every single day, Employee A would respond to all customers on Monday, writing up good notes so that Employee B would respond to all customers on Tuesday.

Casey: How about productivity—did that change at all?

Moen: We were not allowed to measure concrete productivity—we weren't given that data. However, Cali and Jody did measure productivity, and they report an increase. What we do know is that turnover decreased among the ROWE groups, and expectations about future turnover also decreased. People reported high satisfaction under the ROWE way of working, and some even refused promotions that would require them to go from a ROWE to a non-ROWE group.

Casey: Was there any downside to the ROWE program?

Moen: Some things just didn't change. We did not, for example, find changes in the amount of exercise people engaged in. But thus far, we don't have negative findings. Some people did like the security of the way work had previously been done, but these were generally older men who had worked a certain way and chose to simply continue to work that way. What they realized is that ROWE doesn't mean that you *have* to change.

Casey: It sounds as if even if people didn't embrace ROWE, they could continue working the way they were working. That was a better fit for them, I guess?

Moen: Right. This leads to the idea of fit, in that a sense of fit emerges based on what works for you and your particular situations at home and at work. ROWE provides more degrees of freedom to working families so that they *can* achieve greater fit. I think the big difference is to not have to ask for permission. Many existing family-friendly programs and policies require workers to ask for permission to take off half a day, for example, or to work from home. The manager decides. With ROWE, employees don't explain to anyone that they won't be in on Monday, because no one takes it as given.. There was a big drop in the number of meetings. A lot of the regular meetings were not conducive to results, but were just on the books as "something we do," and were great time wasters. There was a decrease in such low-value work, enabling employees to be more effective in high-value work.

Casey: What was really interesting to me is that people often feel that their work-life situation is unique, but it seems that everyone fits somewhere. It's helpful for people to know that they're part of a group that's kind of like them. We're not all just struggling alone.

Moen: This is about a paper we did on how Best Buy employees cluster into various categories. We found unique constellations of circumstances that employees face at any given time. Virtually 100% of people who were caring for an elderly relative were in one category. People with a sick child are very different from people with a healthy child. If we asked people with a health condition, they would say they were very different. We tend to just lump people together by whether or not they have a child, but there is considerable variation and shifts in any workforce.

Casey: What about the implications for employee well-being and possible reduced health care costs? What do you think about life course fit model and health outcomes?

Moen: We're very interested in the health outcomes. In a paper presented at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, we show that employees undergoing the ROWE experience get on average an extra hour of sleep per night. And considerable research shows the deleterious health effects of not enough sleep. We also find that employees are more apt to go to a doctor when sick, and to not go to the workplace when sick. There was also an increase in reported energy levels. We also found other outcomes that weren't directly affected by ROWE, but were affected by work-time control and reduced work-family spillover. Those two indirect factors reduce levels of exhaustion and depressive symptoms, while increasing employees' sense of personal mastery.

Casey: It seems like there are some lessons here about the role of prevention.

Moen: Yes. I think that's where our field should move—we should not only investigate how to reduce, for instance, work-family conflict or misfit, but how to *prevent it* in the first place. That requires something different than cross-sectional, observational data, or even longitudinal data, which has been the gold standard. The gold standard then becomes studies of change: looking at the conditions that prevent conflict or fit introducing policies for improving these conditions, and observing corresponding changes.

Casey: Do you think this is a US-centric lesson here or do you think it has transferability in Europe?

Moen: I think it does have transferability to Europe, although it may manifest in a change in public policy in European countries. For instance, in Europe there is impetus towards "right-to-ask" legislation, which is the right to formally request a change in your hours. There, the word "flexibility" is confounded with *employer* flexibility. In the US, we don't tend to talk about employer flexibility—the ability to let people go, to restructure. European scholars are very interested in the Best Buy case example of giving greater autonomy to employees by focusing on results not time spent at the workplace. This is flexibility taken to the next level.

Casey: How could workplaces better support the life courses of their employees?

Moen: By challenging and loosening the clockworks of work and career paths. We take the standard workweek for granted; it is deeply embedded in our culture. You can ask a child when people should be at work and when they should be home. Even young children know about work weeks and work days. The whole focus on the clocks and calendars of work seems so natural that it's very difficult to challenge. The turbulent economy has people questioning existing arrangements. We see, for instance, whole groups of people reducing their hours rather than have layoffs. And older workers are seeking ways to work less. Perhaps this will break open the mold, challenging the way work time should be organized, opening up the possibility of people reducing their hours voluntarily. Flexible work and reduced hour work need to be legitimate options, not special cases. Flexibility in the form of greater work-time control will happen more because of the aging workforce than the stresses of working parents. When there is a skill shortage and people want to retain older workers, the only way to do so will be to provide this flexibility and control over work hours, the timing of work, and the seasonality of work.

Casey: Do you think there's going to be some push back? This kind of a mindset certainly works for corporate headquarters at Best Buy, but it probably wouldn't work for nurses, bus drivers, doctors, judges, or housekeepers. Are there certain workers who need to be at work for certain hours?

Moen: That's why Phase II of the NIH/CDC network initiative is now taking a modification of ROWE and conducting a random field test in two different workplace organizations, using several different groups of employees. The randomized field test is being conducted in an IT group of a telecommunications company and in a set of nursing homes. Some sites will be assigned to the workplace innovation and others won't, so this will be a true experiment. We deliberately chose the nursing home environment because, as you say, it is a work environment requiring people to be at work during certain hours. However, in some nursing homes and hospitals, and in many service organizations, the schedules are set up the Friday before the coming week. Employees can't plan a doctor's appointment or to attend a child's play with such little notice. We believe there is a way to modify the way work is organized providing some degree of control and flexibility. Some employees in nursing homes, for instance, are interested in having two weeks off to visit families elsewhere, but can't take that time off.

Casey: Do you think that public policy initiatives that promote flexible work arrangements or healthy families are in line with what you're trying to accomplish?

Moen: Absolutely. It's helpful to take a new look at wage and hour laws to see how they might be updated, protecting workers but moving away from the old lock-step ideas about working days, working weeks, working years, and working lives. I'm interested in this idea of fit around older workers decisions to remain employed. Many employees want to work as they get older, they just don't want to keep working at the frantic pace and long hours that they're working now.

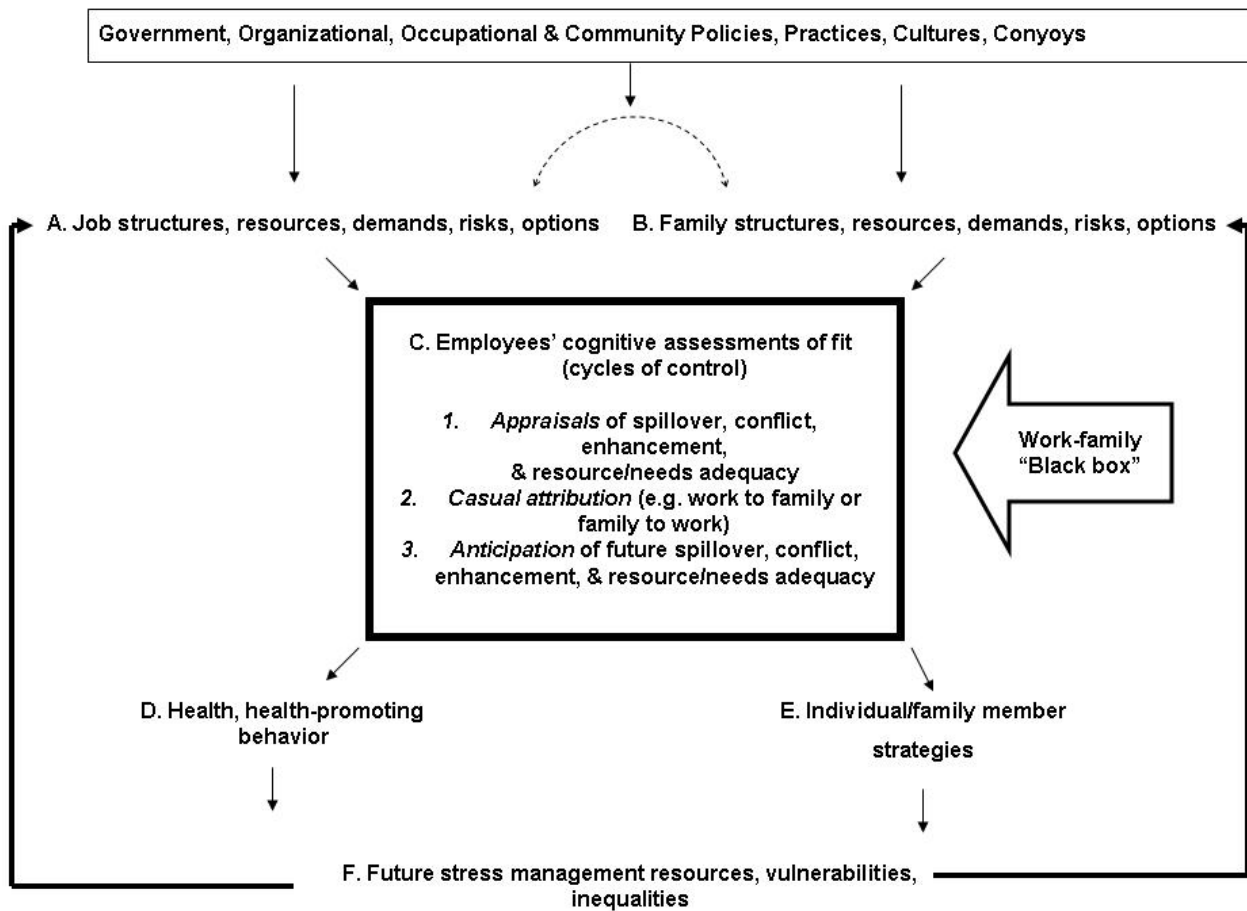
Casey: Are you getting traction on this notion of fit?

Moen: It's very hard because we have a set language, and I use it myself. But the word "fit" applies to the mismatch between resources and demands in models of psychosocial job strain, as well as to the concept of person/job fit. We all are used to the words "work-family," and I think that will continue. But I'd like to move to "work-family fit" and then to "life course fit." What we want is not a sense of balancing two demands, but changing the demands and the resources to make multiple dimensions of life both fulfilling and possible.

Casey: Is there anything else you want to mention?

Moen: This is an exciting time to study this change-in-process, as the social and temporal organization of work and the life course unraveling. Such dramatic transformations really open up the field. Scholars can investigate existing arrangements— what works and what doesn't—but also seek out and study pockets of *innovation* in organizational policy and practice. We can learn from innovative organizations and adapt their advances for use elsewhere.

The Ecology of Fit: A Cycles of Control Model



Source: Moen, P., Kelly, E., & Huang, R. (2008). 'Fit' inside the work-family black box: An ecology of the life course, cycles of control framing. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 81, 411-433.

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