

## Conversations with the Experts

### Anticipated and Unanticipated Consequences of Work-Family Policy: Insights from International Comparative Analysis

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Stephen Sweet

**Bio:** Stephen Sweet is an assistant professor of sociology at Ithaca College and was formerly the associate director of the Cornell Work and Family Careers Institute. His books include *Changing Contours of Work* (2008), *The Work and Family Handbook: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Methods and Approaches* (2005), *Teaching Work and Family: Strategies, Activities, and Syllabi* (2006), *College and Society: An Introduction to the Sociological Imagination* (2001), and *Data Analysis with SPSS: A First Course in Applied Statistics* (2008, 2003, 1998). His studies on work, family, community, and inequality appeared in a variety of publications, including *Generations*, *Research in the Sociology of Work*, *Sex Roles*, *Family Relations*, *New Directions in Life Course Research*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Innovative Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Development*, and *Community, Work, and Family*, *Popular Music and Society*, *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*. His articles on teaching and curriculum development have been published in *Teaching Sociology*, *Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom*, and *Excellent Teaching in the Excellent University*. In addition to his research and teaching responsibilities, Stephen Sweet currently serves as the Teaching Resources Specialist for the Sloan Work and Family Research Network, co-edits the *Work-Family Encyclopedia*, and manages the Sloan Early Career Scholars Program.

#### An Interview with Stephen Sweet

by Judi Casey

#### Where did the idea originate for this special issue of *Community, Work & Family*?

The origin of this special issue stems from a preconference held in conjunction with the 2009 International Community Work and Family Conference. With funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, Judi Casey (Director, Sloan Work and Family Research Network) and I organized a panel of leading scholars, policy experts, and representatives of the business community to consider the anticipated and unanticipated consequences of work-family policy.

The intent of the panel meeting was to identify variations in work-family policies among countries, the forces that shape these variations, and the extent to which these policies meet the needs of working families, their employers, and national economies.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the panel considered how to move its observations to a broader public consciousness. We identified a special issue of this journal as one means of accomplishing this goal.

### **Can you discuss some of the issues that surfaced during the Sloan Network 2009 Panel Meeting?**

The panelists presented many compelling observations concerning work-family policy. These included the unresolved challenge of reshaping men's participation in care, unevenness in women's integration into the paid labor force and career prospects, new patterns in the timing of reproduction, tensions that result from rigid work/career designs in a 24/7 economy, and the logistics of implementing multinational corporate work-family programs in the context of varied (and sometimes contradictory) national work-family policies.

I think one of the most important outcomes of the collective discussion was the observation that one needs to simultaneously consider within-country variation and between-country variation when assessing the outcomes of work-family policy.

### **Please describe the focus of the articles in this special issue.**

All of the articles share a policy focus and cross-national comparative analysis. Some studies focus on the impact of family policies on women's employment, on women's hours and wages, and on gender inequality. Other studies consider the impact of varying strategies to incentivize fathers to take parental leave, or to spur reproduction.

Another study identifies the cultural resistance evident in response to social policies that had an impact elsewhere. And one study considers a multinational organization that attempted to roll out a flexible work initiative and some of the challenges experienced in trying to be more family responsive.

### **Have work-family policies achieved their anticipated outcomes?**

One question to consider concerns who is doing the anticipating. For example, a family leave policy might be enacted in order to promote the provision of care for children, or it might be enacted to help secure women's attachment to the labor force, or it might be enacted to promote gender equality. Even if societies implement similar programs, they do not always do so with the same intents in mind.

That being said, the articles in this volume offer consistent affirmative support for advancing and expanding resources for working families both in the opportunity to provide care, as well as to remain integrated in the workforce. However, the articles offer qualifiers, explaining why some effects are not as strong as might be hoped for and why effects are sometimes restricted to particular classifications of workers or families.

### **What are some of the unanticipated consequences?**

I'll give just one example here. One reason for organizing the conference that led to this issue of the journal concerned the paradoxical relationship between family leave and gender equality. Previous studies showed that the more generous the parental leave in a society, the higher the level of gender inequality. Few members in the work-family community of scholars believe that family leave should be reduced or eliminated, and most believe strongly in the issue of gender equality. So how are we to resolve this paradox?

In this special issue, authors find that the unanticipated outcome is largely restricted to workers in professional positions. When considering the impact of family leave for workers in lower tiered occupations, family leave actually increases gender equality (which for many is the intended outcome). However, the unanticipated

outcome for women in professional positions seems to remain intact, and it appears that family leave policies offer incentives to employers to discriminate against women.

This leaves open the question of how best to counter this unanticipated outcome. Is it to somehow get men to participate more equally in the taking of leave, and if so, how? Is it to penalize employers who engage in discrimination?

Certainly, few members of the work-family community would be inclined to recommend eliminating parental leave, even though it is associated with gender inequality among professional workers. But as that unanticipated consequence seems to be clearly identified, we do need to consider the gendered outcomes.

### **What are some of the factors that impact these unanticipated consequences?**

The studies indicate that the amount of resources and the ways they are directed matter significantly. For example, if a society simply offers a gender-neutral parental leave policy, leave will tend to be taken by women. If it offers paid parental leave, it will be taken by greater shares of women.

It is only after paternal (father's) leave is integrated and incentivized in these parental leave policies that we see take-up for men increase. This indicates that culture, and the way it interacts with the structures defined by policies, has a powerful impact.

This is also evident in the ways families choose to provide care for young children. Policies and resources matter, but so do the attitudes of parents. Additionally, subtle and not-so-subtle variations in the ways specific policies are formulated (i.e., length/availability of leave, universality, monetary compensation, and so forth) can have a significant impact on outcomes. These findings focus attention on why resources extended through a policy may be underutilized, as well as the points at which diminishing returns are identifiable.

For example, one might expect that a tax incentive to have children would boost fertility. However, if that incentive were modest, it may have no impact (this should have been anticipated, but might not have been when the policy was formulated). And if it were a fairly substantial incentive, its impact might not be so much on influencing the number of children a family has, but rather the timing of when they have them.

### **What is the impact of work-family policy on employers?**

In this special issue of *Community, Work & Family*, a case study is presented that considers employer responses. Merck is a pharmaceutical company that has been working to implement a flexible work arrangement initiative for its global workforce.

One interesting finding from this study is that there are significant challenges in constructing a global corporate policy that can fit both the cultural expectations within each society, as well as the regulatory framework that exists. In other words, a flexible work policy that might fit employment practices in one nation might not fit those in another society.

As each society (each with its own culture) has been wrestling with the best means of reconciling work-family tensions with different policy approaches, the challenges for multinational employers have become even more complex. However, the case of Merck also shows the importance placed on these issues, as accommodating the concerns that exist for employees in the worksite is now well recognized as a key talent management practice.

## **What challenges remain? What further research is needed?**

It is important to note that the conclusions reached by the authors in this issue are primarily based on comparative analyses of policies as they have been formulated and implemented in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Thus, there is much more to be gained by advancing additional comparative analyses of countries in the emerging economies of the global system.

And while some of the articles in this special issue contain some historical analyses, I think there is much to be gained by assessing changes over time, both within societies and between societies.

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