Work and Family Directions in the USA and Australia: A Policy Research Agenda

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Abstract: This article provides a comparative glimpse of work/family issues in Australia and the USA. It begins with a summary of an emerging vision of ideal policies and practices for work and family. The article then provides historical background for the recent emergence of a 'care gap' in both countries, focusing on key commonalities and differences. The current status of the gap and the related 'default solution' to the gap are then outlined. Key commonalities here include an increasing diversity of family forms, a rise in delayed and denied childbearing, and substantial gender inequality. Significant current divergence across the societies includes relatively more family-responsive governmental policies in Australia, more attractive part-time opportunities for mothers in Australia, a relatively more equal division of labor in the home in the USA, a greater prevalence of corporate-sponsored work/family policies in the USA, and greater coverage of Australian employees by work/family policies negotiated through enterprise agreements. A tentative research agenda is provided in conclusion, focusing on part-time employment options, work incentives and childcare for single parents, the causes of delayed and denied childbearing, and enterprise bargaining and corporate policies.

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Introduction

In both Australia and the USA, much public policy surrounding employment, wages and working conditions was built upon the model of 'separate spheres' (Bailyn, 1993; Moss-Kanter, 1977; Williams, 1999). According to the model, husbands worked for wages in the public sphere, while wives served as unpaid housekeepers and did the child-rearing in the private sphere of the home. Status, power, wealth and income were associated with the public sphere, while love, care, and low status tasks were relegated to the private sphere.

Although the model of separate spheres continues to be embodied in many public and private sector policies, and to influence behavior, norms and expectations across the two societies, the key objective condition underpinning the model no longer exists. As of this writing, over 40 percent of employees in the USA and in Australia are women, and in both countries a majority of mothers of dependent children are employed. Neither country witnessed a corresponding decrease in male employment nor a return of fathers to the home for child-rearing and housekeeping purposes of anywhere near the scope that would be required to make up for the historical loss of the unpaid hours of work provided in the home by women. The result is a 'care gap' (Harrington, 1999) wherein families, governmental bodies, employers and labor organizations, and community and non-profit organizations are left scrambling to figure out how to make up for the loss of unpaid labor. The result is a very uneven system of care, where many parents believe that organized childcare is either or both of low quality and unaffordable, where many parents are forced to have children return from school to an empty house, and where caregivers receive low or no wages. The brunt of this care gap has fallen upon families who have attempted to either increase their unpaid childcare time or avoided child-rearing responsibilities entirely, and the burden has fallen particularly hard upon women as caregivers (both paid and unpaid) for children, the disabled, and the elderly.

The resulting problems are ultimately complex, in part due to issues such as the increasing diversity of families in both societies, and the ongoing internationalization of both economies in tandem with the rapid expansion of information technologies. Nonetheless, a consensus seems to be emerging from the work/family literature regarding core values and policy objectives (Bailyn, 1993; Crittenden, 2001; Deutsch, 1999; Dowd, 2000; Folbre, 2001; Fried, 1998; Glass, 2000; Harrington, 1999; Heymann, 2000; Hochschild, 1997; Lakoff, 1996; Risman, 1998; Russell and Bowman, 2000; Stone, 2000; Williams, 1999). The core values include the following:

- Individuals have the right to a life where they can successfully meld responsibilities to paid employment and to their families, and
- Care for children and other dependents should be valued.

The vision of work/family flowing from these values is one where individuals are able to simultaneously make commitments to both work and to family, and to adjust their work and family commitments over the life course. For some examples:
• Individuals should be able to take some paid time off following the birth or adoption of a new child, without cost to the employer, and regardless of the particular family structure.

• Individuals with particularly heavy responsibilities, including those associated with very young or special needs children, disabled partners or spouses, and seriously ill elders, should be supported financially at a reasonable level, and be provided with meaningful opportunities for employment when and if those responsibilities lessen.

• Careers should be structured, and work designed, such that opportunities to reduce hours for short or long duration care giving responsibilities do not result in loss of employment and promotion opportunities.

• Low wages and salaries currently associated with occupations involving a significant amount of care giving (e.g. nurses, teachers, and childcare providers), should be eliminated, while the quality of care is raised to a reasonable standard across each society.

• Men and women should perform an equal amount of care giving and housekeeping labor in the home.

Although this agenda for policy and practice sounds ambitious, it is hardly utopian, as many of the pieces are currently falling into place in Australia and the USA. Moreover, much as some might wish for a return to a more patriarchal past (Fukuyama, 1999), neither economy could survive a massive withdrawal of women or mothers from their labor forces. Therefore, the current situation in both countries can be cast in terms of an institutional lag, whereby various institutions require updating to fit current conditions. Pockock (2003) provides a good discussion of the issues apparent in the Australian context.

Note further that this vision does not specify an ideal family type. Families have become more diverse, and will likely continue to do so. What the vision does specify is environments that are fair in terms of the burdens of paid and unpaid work, and where individuals are in a superior position to make and meet commitments to both family and work.

The research agenda associated with this vision involves the testing of linkages between desired outcomes and various policies and characteristics of families, governments, employers, labor and community organizations, and social infrastructure. Some of these linkages are straightforward, as in the relationship between tax supports for caregivers and levels of caregiver poverty. Others are far more complex, with perhaps the most well-known example being the very tenuous association between formal employer provision of parental leave policies and utilization of those policies (Fried, 1998; Hochschild, 1997).

Two further considerations should shape research on work and family policies. First, it is crucial to ascertain whether specific policy options will be viewed as fair by the general public. Recent research suggests that the 'backlash' against work/family policies promoted by the media and others (e.g. Burkett, 2000) is almost certainly overblown (see Drago et al., 2001, and citations therein). Nonetheless, there are significant differences in levels of support for work/family policies across groups who are and are not likely to use
the policies (Drago et al., 2001). The ability to successfully promote and initiate work/family policies, whether individuals feel free to use the policies, and even the long-term viability of such policies hinges upon ensuring that they are perceived as fundamentally fair.

Second, the success of policy initiatives hinges in large part on whether the burdens placed on specific institutions are consistent with the objectives, viability, and success of each institution. For example, requiring employers to provide paid family leave for employees effectively penalizes employers with large numbers of employees with elder care responsibilities, making those firms less competitive. Very differently, requiring parents to return to full-time employment soon after a new child is born may have deleterious effects upon children.

Background

In Australia and the USA, employment relations, the educational and social infrastructure, and relevant governmental policies were historically built upon the foundation of separate spheres. Related to this, jobs for working class men and careers for professional men followed the assumption that men should be breadwinners. These structures in turn provide a crucial context for understanding the specific ways in which the care gap emerges in each country.

In Australia, the breadwinner assumption was enshrined in the 'basic wage' as specified in the Harvester case of 1907. The basic wage for an adult male performing unskilled labor was defined as that which would provide sufficient income for a family of five if the employee worked full time (Davis and Lansbury, 1998). The basic wage represented an attempt to ensure that families would not need to place women and children in the labor force. Further, female wages were set at 54 percent of the male wage.

Related policies in Australia were consistent with this approach. Prior to September 1994, the 'breadwinner' was the only member of a couple that had to satisfy the activity test for unemployment benefits (i.e. to search for and be available for full-time work) and would receive the payment on behalf of the entire family.

In the USA, these assumptions were not directly embodied in the 'minimum wage' provisions of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. Those provisions were instead intended to ensure that, on the one hand, unskilled workers would receive a wage sufficient to move them near or above the poverty line and, on the other hand, to reduce the possibility of wage competition by non-male, non-breadwinner employees who could afford to work for a lower wage (i.e. women, youths, and non-parent men).

The more far-reaching provisions of the Act concerned the standardization of working time on the 40-hour week (44 hours in the original Act, amended to 40 in 1940), and particularly the overtime provisions of the Act. These provisions specified a 50 percent hourly wage premium for all hours beyond 40 in any given week for non-salaried employees. The most direct consequence of
the Act was that employers slowly moved many employees over to salaried status wherein earnings were fixed regardless of hours. An indirect consequence was that the 40-hour week became a social norm, and US employers tied the provision of benefits, particularly health insurance and pensions, to full-time employment status (Drago, 2000). There is nothing in the Act specifically linking full-time status to the provision of benefits and of higher hourly wages, but the result occurred nonetheless.

Breadwinner assumptions were directly placed into collective bargaining agreements negotiated between organized labor and employers in the USA. In their heyday in the 1950s, such agreements covered around one-third of the US workforce, and at the center of these agreements lay the notion of seniority. Under seniority provisions, uninterrupted employment is rewarded with higher wages, promotion opportunities, greater retirement earnings, and enhanced job security. By design, breadwinning men were uniquely situated to take advantage of seniority provisions, while employees who took time out of the labor force for care giving responsibilities were penalized with the loss of seniority rights.

In both countries, but especially in the USA, regulations surrounding employment and benefits produced a relatively high fixed cost for full-time employees. In the USA, fixed costs included training, health care insurance and pensions; health care costs are not relevant to employers in Australia, and prorated pension payments were provided to casuals as of the early 1990s. Additional or non-standard hours resulted in higher hourly wages (i.e., overtime pay or premia), but with high fixed costs, it was often more economical to work full-time employees long hours than to hire part-time employees. This is particularly true in both countries with regard to salaried professionals, where the marginal cost of an additional hour of work is effectively zero so long as the employer can motivate the employee to provide the hour of work.

High fixed costs implied that employers in both countries had little reason to create short-hours jobs. And employers did not have any strong incentive to structure careers such that interruptions for family commitments are the norm.

Fixed costs do not provide a complete explanation for the emergence of long-hours and uninterrupted employment as the norm for careers in Australia and the USA. In addition, we need to consider the role of the ‘ideal worker’ norm (Williams, 1999). Initially described by William H. Whyte (1956) as applying to men on their way up the organizational ladder, women who entered careers found themselves facing and adapting to the same set of expectations (Bailyn, 1993; Hochschild, 1997; Williams, 1999).

The importance of the ideal worker norm for present purposes is twofold. First, the norm is inconsistent with any significant time commitments for care giving. Second, the expansion of the norm cross-nationally may help to explain the increase in average working time among high-earning professionals in both Australia and the USA during the last two decades (see Wooden [2001a] and Drago [2000] respectively).
During this period, the increase in working time at the top end of the labor market was mirrored by a decline in working time among low-wage employees. Partly as a result, earnings inequality increased in both countries. The major difference here is that income inequality per se grew much more rapidly in the USA, while unemployment became pervasive and often of long duration among low-skill Australians (McClure, 2000), and perceptions of job insecurity remained high across much of the Australian labor market (UMR Research Party, 2001).

The similarities outlined provide much of the context for the emergence of the care gap in both countries. However, four key historical differences shaped initial responses to part-time employment, health care financing mechanisms, governmental provision of welfare benefits, and coverage by collective agreements.

1 The treatment of part-time employment per se, is quite different in Australia and the USA. In both countries, it can be argued that trade unions fought against the emergence of part-time employment arrangements, believing that such arrangements would threaten the breadwinner model of employment and therefore the men who historically comprised the vast majority of union members in both countries. The strategies employed to oppose part-time employment, however, were very different. In the USA, unions attempted to make part-time employment economically unattractive to employees. The resulting lower wages (Budig and England, 2001), absence of job security, and widespread shortfall of health care and pension benefits for part-time employees in the USA (Williams, 1999), demonstrate the success of these attempts. In addition, many collective bargaining agreements have historically restricted the number of part-time positions an employer may create. In Australia, trade unions strove to make part-time employment unattractive to employers through the casual loading, a wage premium (typically around 20 percent) paid to most casual employees and to most part-time employees (who tend to be casual) in lieu of vacation, sick time, and other benefits. In addition, and parallel to the US experience, many awards historically restricted the conditions under which part-time jobs could be created, restrictions that were loosened in recent years. Even with the casual loading affecting most part-time employees, recent Australian evidence suggests that lifetime lost earnings for women who have even one child is in the order of AUSS$115,000 for women without a high school diploma, and AUSS$510,000 for women with a college degree (Chapman et al., 2001). Crittenden (2001) suggests the comparable figures for college-educated women in the USA are far higher.

2 Health care financing is also distinct in Australia and the USA. In the latter country, health care insurance is closely linked to employment and particularly full-time, permanent employment. As a result, 50 million US citizens currently have no health insurance. Groups disproportionately represented among those without health insurance include children, part-time employees, job changers, and the unemployed. Australia provides public health insurance
that is not financed by employers. These approaches to health care financing raise the fixed costs per employee facing employers in the USA relative to Australia.

3 Both Australia and the USA historically provided a system of income and benefit support systems for individuals who would otherwise live in poverty, and particularly for poor mothers (see McClure, 2000 and Albelda and Tilly, 1997 respectively). Further, both systems limited such support to non-employed individuals living in households with low income. Nonetheless, the Australian system has traditionally been far more generous, and income supports were not, and are not, dependent upon past employment or marital history. In the USA, by way of contrast, the most generous welfare provisions were traditionally for widows and for adults who lost their jobs through no fault of their own (i.e. the Social Security and Unemployment Insurance systems). During the 1990s, welfare was reformed in both countries in an effort to link support to attempts by able-bodied adults to obtain and hold employment.

Among remaining differences across the income and benefit support systems, at least two are important for present purposes. First, the Australian system currently has no work requirements or time limits on the receipt of income support payments for single mothers of dependent children, while recent welfare reforms in the USA include both work requirements and time limits. Second, the US system continues to have a major employment disincentive in that health care insurance supports are pulled as family income rises even minimally above the poverty level.2

4 Both Australia and the USA have experienced dramatic declines in union membership during the last half-century. As of 2003, only 12.9 percent of all employees, and 10 percent of private sector employees in the USA were union members (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2003). In Australia, trade union membership dropped from around half of all employees in the mid-1970s, to 23 percent by 2003 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2003: Table 17). Where the countries diverge more significantly is in the rate of coverage by collective agreements. In the USA, union membership figures tend to align closely with coverage by collectively bargained contracts. In Australia, between 35 and 48 percent of employees are covered by enterprise agreements (Wooden, 2001b), while The Award and Agreement Coverage Survey 1999 found that 86 percent of all employees in businesses with at least five employees are covered by awards (Joint Governments' Submission, 2000: Table 5.7), a figure that undoubtedly overlaps much if not all of employees covered by enterprise agreements. The importance of the divergence in coverage by collective agreements in Australia as opposed to the USA for present purposes lies in a greater ability to implement policy changes through such agreements in Australia, as indeed happened.
The 'Default Solution'

With the context given, we can now consider the specific shape that the care gap takes in each country. The care gap emerges as what is here labeled the 'default solution', wherein earlier institutions built around the breadwinner model remain intact while work/family circumstances have changed.

Commonalities across the two societies are as follows:

1. Family forms have become more diverse as the incidence of divorce, non-marriage partnerships, and single-parenthood have risen in each country (Bond et al., 1998; Russell and Bowman, 2000). Who requires care within the family, and who is available to provide care have therefore taken on more diverse patterns across families over time. In part, though not entirely, the increase in the diversity of family forms is due to the emergence of the care gap, as the economic value of men to (now employed) women has fallen, while the likelihood of men filling the care gap within any particular family has increased only marginally (although see Deutsch, 1999; Schor, 1998).

2. Delayed and denied fertility have become far more prevalent, particularly among highly educated women. Evidence from both the USA (Varner and Drago, 2001) and from Australia (Barnes, 2001) suggest that many women are increasingly viewing work and family as an 'either/or' proposition, therefore delaying or abandoning attempted childbirth in the belief that employment security and promotion opportunities would be endangered following the birth of a child. In both countries, the expectation that men will have careers and families remains intact, and is not viewed as a trade-off, but this is not the case for many women. McDonald (2000) traces declines in fertility across a variety of countries to the 'default solution', since rates of fertility are lowest in countries where the institutional lag is more severe, where neither men nor government agencies nor other institutions provide substantial supports for care giving.

There are three reasons to view delayed and denied fertility as social problems. The first, affecting delayed childbearing only, is that health care costs systematically rise with the age of the prospective mother because of risks to the child, risks to the mother, and infertility treatments (detailed in Varner and Drago, 2001). The second is that delayed and denied childbearing are arguably unfair, as signaled by the lopsided distribution of the phenomenon across employed women and employed men. The third reason to view these as problems is that the employment and hence tax bases of Australia and the USA, particularly relative to pensioners, is shrinking.

As Barnes (2001) argues, both countries have responded to the last mentioned problem in part through a heavy reliance upon immigration. They will become more dependent as they struggle to shore up their tax bases in response to the ageing of their populations and resulting financial burdens on public support systems. In what is already shaping up as an international 'war for immigrant talent', the USA probably enjoys substantial advantages. Nonetheless, neither
country can view immigration as a complete solution, since the numbers do not add up. A reversal of delayed and denied fertility could ameliorate this emerging war for talent.

3 The bulk of unpaid care giving continues to fall upon the shoulders of women. What Arlie Hochschild labeled the 'second shift' of unpaid housework and childcare performed by employed women (Hochschild and Machung, 1989), continues to exist both in Australia and the USA (see Bittman, 1999 and Sandberg and Hofferth, 2001, respectively). Such an outcome is not only inequitable but also arguably unsustainable (see point 2).

In addition, recent studies find little divergence in the determinants of whether firms in Australia and in the USA offer work–family benefits (Bardol et al., 2001), even though the overall extent of such provisions differs markedly.

Although the following is very preliminary, it appears that the following differences exist across the two societies:

1 Governmental policies are relatively more family-responsive in Australia. For example, although neither country provides for paid parental leave, new parents with permanent employment (either full time or part time) are guaranteed a full year of shared unpaid leave compared to only 12 weeks in the USA. A recent Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) decision also allows long-term casuals parental leave. Paid maternity and paternity leave is available in the public service and is also becoming more common in the private sector in Australia (although as Baird, 2003 shows women in low paying jobs have lower levels of access to paid maternity leave). Further, subject to means testing, Australian parents may be entitled to receive an income support payment for parenting (Parenting Payment), an additional benefit for raising dependent children (Family Tax Benefit), and a benefit to help with childcare costs (Child Care Benefit), all of which lie above the basic federal provision in the USA (i.e. the Earned Income Tax Credit), and none of which take the regressive form of the US federal income tax deduction for dependent children. Further, state welfare-to-work policies under the PRWOA (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act) of 1996 in the USA tend to force even mothers of very young children into the labor force, often leaving even those receiving welfare benefits living under extreme hardship (Bushey and Gunderson, 2001) and forcing children into dangerous childcare arrangements (Benet, 2001). In Australia, very differently, currently no work requirement is imposed on welfare recipients (e.g. poor, single mothers) until a child is 16 years of age. Some additional requirements on recipients of Parenting Payment have been announced in the 2001–2 Commonwealth Budget; however, they are nowhere near as extreme as those in the USA. If passed through the Senate the changes will require Parenting Payment recipients with children 13 years and over to undertake an average of 6 hours a week of activities designed to help them return to work. Recipients with children aged over six years would be required to attend an annual interview to help prepare them for re-entry into the labor force in the long term. Also, the Jobs, Education and Training
Scheme introduced in 1989 for recipients of Parenting Payment in Australia is aimed at assisting parents to re-enter the labor market.

Labor force participation rates for lone parents in both Australia and the USA have risen in recent years (ABS, 2000; US Department of Labor, 1999). This change enhances the importance of policies designed to permit simultaneous commitments to family and work. Recent discussions in policy circles have centered around introducing a work incentive payment in Australia, much like the Earned Income Tax Credit in the USA, which is expected to have further positive effects on labor force participation for lone parents in Australia.

2 Reduced-hours arrangements are relatively attractive in Australia. As mentioned earlier, part-time employment typically implies a lack of health care insurance or pension benefits, and a lower hourly wage in the USA, while part-time employees in Australia receive full health care benefits, and pensions are not related to employment history. These differences have contributed to much higher rates of part-time employment in Australia. Although the figures are not perfectly comparable, 5.6 percent of women in the USA were employed part-time in 1999, while the Australian Labour Force Survey shows that close to 23 percent of Australian women were employed part-time as of May 2001, in both cases using a cut-off of 35 hours per week or less to define part-time employment (figures constructed from BLS [2000: Table 1] and ABS [2001a: Table 2] respectively). Of women employed, 27.7 percent worked part-time in the USA compared to 44 percent in Australia. Although such arrangements may serve to reduce levels of conflict between work and family (Williams, 1999), Moen and Yu (2000) note that existing gender inequality may be extended and re-solidified through these 'neotraditional' families where the woman continues to perform most unpaid work in the house and holds a subordinate position in the labor market. Consistent with the latter view, a recent Australian survey found 66 percent of part-time and casual workers reporting increased difficulties in balancing work and family relative to a figure of 55 percent for full-time employees (see UMR Research Party, 2001). This difference is intuitively odd, since many part-time employees may take such positions specifically to achieve a better balance between work and family commitments. However, most of the accommodation here seems to fall on women. For example, Bardool et al. (2000) report that out of employed parents, over one-half of all Australian mothers work part time, while only 5 percent of fathers do so. What may be going on is that part-time employment for mothers worsens the division of labor in the home by giving fathers an excuse to avoid housework; simultaneously, family income and the opportunities to purchase childcare and housework may be reduced following a switch to part-time employment.

Note that the growth in part-time employment in Australia during the 1990s was mainly associated with females, which may largely be associated with women trying to balance their work and family life (ABS, 2001b).

3 The gender division of labor in the home is more unequal in Australia. The higher rate of part-time employment among mothers in Australia may have increased
the opportunities for Australian men to keep the second shift firmly placed on
the shoulders of women. For example, Glezer and Wolcott (2000) summarize
Australian time use studies suggesting that among heterosexual couples, men
typically spend half as much time on housework in general, and a tiny fraction
of the time women spend on low-control tasks such as laundry, ironing, and
clothes care. While Barnett and Rivers (1998) report that such differences
remain in the USA, the magnitude of the divergence is smaller.

4 Corporate policies are far more prevalent in the USA. Although a wide variety
of evidence suggests that it remains difficult for employees to use policies in
the USA, work/family policies are more common. For example, Russell and
Bowman (2000) summarize a variety of evidence showing that corporations in
the USA, relative to Australia, are at least twice as likely to offer on-site child-
care, after school care, childcare or elder care resource and referral services,
nursing rooms, seminars for employees with family issues, and compressed
work weeks. Australian corporations led in the provision of part-time work (92
percent compared to 69 percent) and in the ability of employees to use sick
days to attend to family commitments.3

5 Some collective agreements in the USA are very advanced; nonetheless, the wide-
spread extent and certain key features of Australian agreements tend to make Australia
more family-responsive. Because coverage by collective agreements in the USA
is so limited, the impact of unions and such agreements on the average US
employee is also limited. Nonetheless, many recent agreements in the USA are
extremely impressive in the scope, depth, and financial commitment to work/
family issues. For examples, see the Labor Project for Working Families web
site (http://laborproject.berkeley.edu/), or the Ford-UAW Family Service and
Learning Centers (http://www.familycenteronline.org/). The latter provides
services ranging from on-site to subsidized childcare, retirement programs,
after-school care, and continuing education. By way of contrast, enterprise
agreements in Australia include more limited work/family provisions that
cover numerous employees. The 1996 Workplace Relations Act was designed
to facilitate enterprise agreements promoting ‘more innovative work styles
and working patterns that balance work and family responsibilities more effec-
tively’ (Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business
[DEWRSB], 1999: 3). At present, it appears that most paid maternity and
paternity leave in Australia is provided through such agreements, which have
been built on statutory requirements. Also awards provisions were recently
extended to provide maternity leave to some casual (or temporary) employees
(see http://www.actu.asn.au).

A Comparative Research Agenda

The glimpse at work and family in two societies provided here opens up an
array of potential avenues for comparative research. These include:
Journal of Industrial Relations 49(1)

1 Survey and case study research on the long-term consequences of part-time employment for parents. If reduced hours arrangements are to serve as genuine options over the life course, with individuals flowing between part-time and full-time employment as needed, an understanding of the long-term consequences of part-time employment is required. For example, data from the first wave of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and from the 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce for the USA could be used to answer many of the following questions:

a Do the preferred hours of employees decline when young children or elder care responsibilities appear? If so, do those hours increase as children age and elder care responsibilities ease?

b If the prior questions are answered in the affirmative, then we would ask whether working hours change in response to changing employee hours preferences. Preliminary evidence from Australia (Willis, 1997) suggests that two problems may exist: (1) movement from part-time to full-time employment may be 'non-convex' or lumpy, such that a very limited range of choices exist in terms of hours arrangements, and (2) employers may tend to relegate part-timers to long-term part-time status. In either case, the types of occupations that do and do not facilitate movement between full-time and part-time status should be explored. Further, it would be useful to know whether it is easier to switch from part-time to full-time status in the USA, where part-time is less common, or in Australia, where the phenomenon is far more widespread.

c Existing longitudinal studies in the two countries have not asked whether part-time status for even a relatively short period of time reduces promotion opportunities for a matter of years, or if instead the effects disappear over time. For those contemplating part-time options, knowledge of long-term effects would be extremely useful.

d Do appropriate employer policies facilitate part-time options for career employees? At present, related research has begun in the USA (see e.g. http://www.pardc.org), but more is needed both there and in Australia.

e How do part-time arrangements affect the division of labor in the home? Although a connection between the part-time employment of mothers and the second shift seems reasonable to suggest, no evidence for the linkage exists in either Australia or the USA.

f Related to the above, what conditions or policies are related to the utilization of part-time work arrangements by men, and particularly fathers? At present, the number of men using such arrangements appears to be small, so case study rather than survey methods might prove most fruitful for analyzing the issue.

2 Work incentives and childcare for single parents. The overarching structure of supports for poor, single parents in Australia and the USA seems to favor parenting in Australia and paid employment in the USA. The US system seems relatively putative (e.g. Bushey and Gunderson, 2001), and harsh both in terms
of family living standards and the time available for family relationships, while the Australian system allows long-term non-employment for poor single mothers, but much time for family relationships. Improvements to both systems might move each somewhat closer to the other, enhancing standards of living and family time in the USA, while increasing work incentives in Australia.

Other Australian research shows that the incentives imposed by the interactions of the tax and social security system have predictable labor force participation effects on both single parents (Duncan and Harris, 2001) and members of couples (Kalb, 1999).

One opportunity for policy experimentation lies in part-time employment. As Kalb (2000) has found using Australian data from the mid-1990s, there has been a substantial penalty associated with part-time employment for women. Particularly for the parents of school-aged children, improving opportunities for and reducing the penalties associated with part-time employment might result in greater work experience among those leaving income support systems as children become independent. In turn, such work experience might lend itself to more positive labor market outcomes (e.g. higher wages and more stable employment) among those leaving the system. Existing research has established the parameters for estimating the likely effects of pursuing such policies, but the estimates need to be derived.

It might also be worthwhile to simulate the effects of such policies for specific states in the USA (welfare programs are now state specific in the USA). At present, to the best of our knowledge, welfare-to-work programs in the USA are exclusively built around full-time employment opportunities. However, better outcomes for families, and superior long-term employment experiences, might result from pursuing part-time employment options, particularly for the parents of school-aged children.

3 The causes of delayed and denied childbearing. The evidence presented earlier suggests that many women in Australia and the USA, particularly highly educated women with career aspirations, find traditional employment inconsistent with childbearing and child-rearing. Initial evidence from the 2000 census in the USA suggests that Hispanic and Asian minorities are holding up the birth rate there, but further research is required to ascertain whether educated women in these groups also generate high levels of fertility or if, instead, lower levels of average education are responsible. If the latter is true, as is suspected, then research is needed to identify the conditions under which highly educated women feel free to bear children and maintain a career (i.e. to neither delay nor deny childbearing). Different types of data could be used to identify these conditions, since they might include:

a Working time arrangements, the organization of the workplace, and the culture of the workplace with respect to work and family.
b Occupation- and industry-specific conditions.
c The likely contributions of men towards parenting time and housework.
d Tax- and related financial supports for working parents.
Journal of Industrial Relations 49(1)

4 Enterprise bargaining and corporate policies. A crucial problem for those promoting a work/family agenda has been the low rates of utilization associated with the presence of even very generous and flexible corporate policies (Fried, 1998; Hochschild, 1997). It seems possible that the provision of such policies through enterprise awards might have the effect of increasing utilization rates. One reason for positing such a connection lies in the distinction between benefits and rights. To the extent enterprise agreements transform policies from benefits to rights, as suggested by Gerstel and Clawson (2000), knowledge of and utilization of policies might increase. Related research could:

a Compare workplaces with similar corporate initiated as opposed to collectively agreed policies to ascertain whether policy utilization is higher in the latter case. For Australia, the value of such research would lie in identifying the importance of codifying such policies in agreements. For the USA, the value of such research would lie in establishing whether union membership facilitates family responsiveness in the workplace.

b Compare policies across workplaces covered and not covered by agreements with substantial family-responsive components to identify differences in the types of policies existing under the two different regimes. It seems likely that higher cost policies (e.g. subsidized or on-site childcare), are more likely to appear under agreements, while relatively low-cost arrangements favoring high-income employees (e.g. concierge services) may otherwise appear. Existing research can neither confirm nor deny this possibility.

5 The Division of Labor in the Home. There has been a marked increase in the USA in the time fathers spend on parenting during the last three decades. Efforts to promote a more equal division of labor in the home, particularly around childcare, would benefit from research doing the following:

a Identify the types of families where unpaid work is more equally divided, and the characteristics of men who do and do not spend time with their children in terms of education, occupation, ethnicity and country of origin, and working hours.

b Locate changes in this division of labor over time, and for whom those changes are taking place.

While the research opportunities outlined may help to provide some direction for future endeavors, the field of work/family is inherently interdisciplinary. Other disciplines could most certainly generate research of use for policy makers. For example, case law around the family provisions of the 1996 Workplace Relations Act is still developing, and is worthy of study. In the USA, legal challenges to wage and career structures that arguably discriminate against parents are currently being considered (see Williams, 1999). In both societies, many work/family policies have been structured around a gendered model of the labor market – through the Pregnancy Discrimination Act in the USA, and the combination of the Sex Discrimination Act and workplace awards in Australia. A comparative study of the legal and industrial relations developments could
shed light on opportunities to strengthen existing policies and practices, and to break down the gendered nature of work and family in the two societies.

Very differently, the language employed in conversations around work and family is, in both societies, very much contested (Maushart, 2001; Williams, 1999), leading to charges that work/family policies are unfair (Burkett, 2000). It is possible that less divisive and more fair and productive language could be discovered and promoted through comparative linguistic and ethnographic studies (see e.g. Lakoff, 1996 and Garey, 1999 respectively).

In sum, there exist numerous opportunities for comparative research to expand our understanding of the shape of work/family conflict, to enhance existing policies and practices, and to identify new opportunities to create better workplaces, homes and societies.

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Notes

1 Note that Australia has had a state funded age pension since the turn of the 20th century and more recently has introduced privately funded schemes for retirement referred to as superannuation. Superannuation schemes require employer contributions and thus are included in our more general discussion on the cost of pensions to employers.

2 The Clinton administration increased health care funding for poor children during the late 1990s, and individual states can implement different cut-offs for health care benefits under the 1996 PRWIA legislation, so the situation is slightly more complex than suggested in the text.

3 Access to sick leave for family/carers leave was a decision of the industrial tribunals in the mid-1990s in successive Family Leave test cases. Thus it is more than simply a corporate policy issue. Thank you to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.

References


Journal of Industrial Relations 49(1)


64
Drago, Pirvetti & Scutella: Work and Family Directions


Journal of Industrial Relations 49(1)


