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Community as Context for the Work-Family Interface

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Workplaces, families, and individuals attempt to coordinate work and family opportunities and responsibilities within the context of communities. Workplaces and families are embedded in the communities in which they are located. Work, family, and individual relationships are intertwined with relationships among members of various communities. Communities may both help and hinder the efforts of work organizations, families, and individuals to enhance work-family integration. Communities are of two types: territorial and relational. For example, Phillips (1993, p. 14) defines community as "a group of people who live in a common territory, have a common history and shared values, participate together in various activities, and have a high degree of solidarity." Small and Supple (2001, p. 162) state that community refers to "social relationships that individuals have based on group consensus, shared norms and values, common goals, and feelings of identification, belonging and trust."

These definitions of community are too broad to be useful for viewing community as a context for work-family role coordination. Therefore, Voydanoff (2001) has formulated six aspects of community that may be useful for this purpose. They include community social organization, social networks, social capital, formal volunteering and informal helping, sense of community, and community satisfaction. These aspects of community operate on different levels of analysis. Community social organization, social networks, and social capital are community-level concepts. Formal volunteering and informal helping, sense of community, and community satisfaction are individual-level concepts.

Community social organization generally refers to local territorial communities, most commonly neighborhoods. As defined by Sampson (1999, p. 253), community social organization refers to "the ability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls." Examples include community supervision and control of teenage peer groups, informal local friendship networks, and local participation in formal and voluntary organizations (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

Social networks are linkages among defined sets of persons, such as kin, friends, neighbors, or co-workers. They differ according to characteristics such as size, composition, heterogeneity, and density. Wellman (1999) describes contemporary community networks as narrow specialized relationships rather than broadly supportive ties; as sparsely knit, loosely bounded, and frequently changing; and as supportive and sociable although spatially dispersed rather than

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[1] Material in this article also appears as part of the Sloan Work-Family Encyclopedia at
http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/wfnetwork/rft/wfpedia/wfpCACent.html

neighborhood-based. For example, virtual communities or computer supported social networks provide relatively specialized support through intimate secondary relationships and weaker ties that may span large distances and create global community networks (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Some believe that social networks at work may be replacing other types of communities such as neighborhoods and reducing the time and commitment given to family life and other community activities (Hochschild, 1997).

Social capital brings together the basic elements of community social organization and social networks. The resources inherent in networks are combined with the realization of collective goals associated with community social organization to create social capital. Social capital also includes cultural processes such as trust and norms of reciprocity that facilitate social action (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 1998). Social networks and community social organization provide resources that can be used to facilitate actions and create social capital. Social capital in turn may generate further resources that contribute to formal volunteering and informal helping and generate a sense of community. Social capital consists of objective (participation in formal and informal associations) and subjective (trust in institutions and individuals) elements (Paxton, 1999).

Volunteer work is time and effort devoted to helping others without remuneration or coercion (Wilson & Musick, 1998). It encompasses two types of activity--formal volunteering and informal helping (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Formal volunteering is assistance provided through organizations, either mutual-benefit associations in which the beneficiary is the membership (e.g., professional and union groups) or community-oriented service organizations that benefit clients or others outside the organization (e.g., church-related or fraternal organizations) (Janoski & Wilson, 1995). The work of volunteers provides substantial assistance to nonprofit formal support organizations. Informal helping or support is assistance given to friends, neighbors, and extended kin. It includes instrumental aid such as money, goods, and services; emotional support; companionship; and information such as advice and feedback. Formal and informal supports may substitute for each other or complement each other in meeting the needs of families (Kagan, Lewis, Heaton, & Cranshaw, 1999).

Sense of community is a multidimensional concept that includes a feeling of belonging, the sense that the individual and the group matter to each other, the feeling that members' needs will be met through group resources, and shared history and experiences (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Although most research has investigated sense of community from the perspective of individual members, it also is an aggregate variable operating on the community level (Sonn, Bishop, & Drew, 1999).

Community satisfaction reflects the subjective evaluation of a community as a whole or the evaluation of specific aspects of a community. It can refer to satisfaction with community services, safety, the attractiveness and upkeep of the physical environment, and satisfaction with community participation, social relationships, and social support. As with sense of community, community satisfaction can be conceptualized as a collective property. Formal volunteering and informal helping, sense of community, and community satisfaction are interrelated.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Only recently have scholars and practitioners begun to include community characteristics in analyses of work-family role coordination. Resources and demands that may influence the interconnections between work and family roles accompany membership and participation in a community. Resources include access to instrumental and emotional social support, companionship, value consensus, role models, identity maintenance, sense of belonging, and the reward of helping others. These resources may facilitate work-family role coordination by helping families adapt to work-related demands and by assisting work organizations meet the needs of families. However, community membership and participation also may be associated with demands such as disadvantaged communities, lack of community supports, excessive obligations, lack of reciprocity, and relationship conflicts. In addition, community participation is a fixed resource in that time spent in community activities is unavailable for other activities. Thus, communities also may hinder the coordination of work and family activities.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Ecological systems theory provides a useful framework for the examination of relationships among work, community, and family (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). From this perspective, microsystems of face-to-face relationships are connected to each other to form mesosystems in which one or more microsystems influence another microsystem.

Research on how the six aspects of the community domain affect work-family role coordination is sparse. Most studies focus on individual-level community variables and examine the combined effects of work and community characteristics on family outcomes. Community characteristics can influence relationships between work and family in three ways.

- community and work variables may have additive effects on family functioning and well-being. A recent study finds that maternal employment, parents' membership in community organizations, and their involvement in children's activities are positively related to adolescents' grades (Bankston & Zhou, 2001). Another study reports that mothers' limited paid work hours and mothers' and adolescents' moderate to high involvement in youth activities are positively related to adolescent adjustment. Parents' negative work spillover and adolescents' peer-based school problems are negatively related to adolescent adjustment (Voydanoff, 2004).

- Community characteristics also may mediate relationships between work characteristics and family outcomes. For example, sense of community partially explains the positive effects of organizational and supervisor support on family adaptation (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003). In addition, satisfaction with friends and parents' school involvement counteract the negative effects of economic strain on family satisfaction and adolescents' grades (Gutman & Eccles, 1999; Voydanoff, Donnelly, & Fine, 1988).

- Community characteristics may moderate relationships between work characteristics and family outcomes. However, no studies were located that examine such relationships.

Research on the effects of community characteristics on relationships between family characteristics and work outcomes is even more limited. One study finds that business discussion networks spanning multiple domains of social life facilitate business start-ups, whereas a high proportion of kin in these networks reduces the likelihood of business start-ups (Renzulli, Aldrich, & Moody, 2000). Immigrants and ethnic minorities use their social networks as resources for establishing and maintaining small businesses in particular neighborhoods or industries. However, in some groups the networks are neither strong nor extensive enough to support such businesses (Portes, 1998). Ethnic communities also may promote work and family values that conflict with those of the dominant culture and make it difficult to coordinate work and family responsibilities (Rana, Kagan, Lewis, & Rout, 1998). Family support networks are positively related to young women's employment, whereas the community unemployment rate shows a negative relationship (Parish, Hao, & Hogan, 1991). In addition, formal and informal instrumental support buffer the negative effects of family caregiving overload on work strains (Pearlin, Aneshensel, Mullan, & Whitlach, 1996).

Our knowledge of community as a context for the work-family interface is in its infancy. However, initiatives are underway that promise to increase our understanding. For example, Pitt-Catsouphes and MacDermid (personal communication) are studying the ways in which dual-earner families with children in middle school use work and community resources to develop and implement strategies that promote family well-being. Ann Bookman (2000) has reported preliminary findings from a qualitative study of the complex relationships among work demands and schedules, caring for children and elders, community supports, and diverse patterns of community involvement.

Implications for Practice and Research

Research on the interconnections among work, community, and family is still in its early stages. Additional studies are needed that document the conditions under which community resources and demands influence the ability of workplaces and families to coordinate work and family opportunities and responsibilities. Hopefully, such research will lead to the development of workplace, community, and government policies and programs that enhance rather than hinder the integration of work, community, and family life among working families. These three major institutions need to work together to provide such policies and programs. As Googins (1997) has pointed out, corporations cannot be expected to accept sole or major responsibility for such a broad-based issue. Others need to be more involved, including the government, informal community supports, and formal community organizations in the nonprofit sector.

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