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<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0326-8638> (2020) Community, work and family in diverse contexts
and changing times. Community, Work & Family, 23 (5) . pp. 497-502. ISSN 1366-8803 [Article]
(doi:10.1080/13668803.2020.1832264)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Community, Work and Family in Diverse Contexts and Changing Times

Anna Borg, Laura den Dulk, Suzan Lewis, and Clarice Santos

Introduction

The 8th International Community, Work and Family conference took place in Malta at the Valletta campus of the University of Malta between the 23rd to the 25th May 2019. In a pre-COVID-19 world with no travelling restrictions, the conference brought together over 100 experts, academics, and students from a broad range of countries and disciplines to focus on the theme of Community, Work and Family in Diverse Contexts and Changing Times.

The research presented during the conference highlights some of the challenges that communities, organizations and families are facing in the 21st century across diverse and rapidly changing contexts. The topics presented spanned from broad studies that analyze the work-life interface of well-studied groups such as fathers and mothers, to other clusters that are generally less well-researched such as the police and the military, migrants, solo entrepreneurs, the LGBTIQ community, and those who work with people with special needs.

The recurrent theme of the gendered division of labor and work-life measures was discussed by various researchers, as were the issues of flexible work, family policy, and the impact of technology. It was refreshing to note that various researchers focused on the issue of community as a source of support, whilst others explored how peer, supervisor and management support impacts work-life issues. Overall, the conference provided a diverse and rich range of scholarly material upon which to develop this special issue for *Community, Work & Family*

Despite the proliferation of studies across contexts and scholars' efforts to integrate global research and knowledge, diversity within contexts remains a pertinent topic in the community, work and family field. Legal, economic, and social structures, in addition to culture, have a significant impact on the work-life experiences of individuals (Ollier-Malaterre & Foucreault, 2017). The availability of social support through public policies, societal norms around the gendered division of labor and family roles, and the distribution of opportunities across groups, contribute not only to an understanding of the community, work and family interface, but to the broader view of social inequalities within a country context.

Much has changed since the 8th International Community, Work and Family conference took place in Malta. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global health crisis have instigated a series of overdue debates. Amongst discussions that COVID-19 may be a future accelerator as it promotes innovation in technology and in the world of work, it is clear that, by and large, "COVID-19 is *not* a great leveler" (Fisher et al., 2020, p. 247). As the fragility of health systems, infrastructure and governments are exposed, persistent inequalities are revealed and perhaps accentuated, in several contexts. The full impact of the pandemic on communities, workplaces, and families is yet unknown (Fisher et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the crisis has already demonstrated how particular under-privileged groups such as informal workers, temporary workers, and solo self-employed workers are more vulnerable to the consequences of uncertainties accentuated by the pandemic. Some of the papers in this special issue provide alternative perspectives to examine current and future scenarios. For example, the paper by Yerkes, Hoogenboom and Javornik (in

this issue) suggests a community-based approach to examining work-life processes and how local policies and services, and local relationships may be important resources, particularly in the COVID-19 context. Furthermore, the current crisis emphasizes the need for more active engagement of, and collaboration among, academics towards social justice, as is argued by Baird, as well as Halvorsen, Saran and Pitt-Catsouphes in this issue.

The content of this special issue is a small sample from the wide range of papers presented at the 8th International Community, Work and Family conference. Although the papers included report on studies conducted before the pandemic, all of them offer valuable insights and future avenues for research in the field. While each of the seven articles stands on its own, we believe there is a thematic and logical flow as they address relevant and timely topics in community, work and family from diverse contextual and methodological approaches.

The series of papers in this special issue begin with a theoretical perspective from the Global South by Jaga (in this issue). A valuable contribution, since the theoretical frameworks from the Global North tend to dominate the research field. Using Connell's 'Southern Theory' to analyze breastfeeding support at work among low income mothers in South Africa, Jaga argues that the intricate relationships that tie community, work and family together are context specific and globally diverse. Yet, she notes that the importance of local context, a better understanding of local knowledge, and the complexities surrounding them, often passes under the radar. Drawing on emerging theory from the Global South, she suggests researchers should challenge the status quo, enrich and stimulate new theories, raise pertinent questions, and bring about altered perspectives that promise a better understanding of community, work and family.

The following two papers in this special issue focus on the community dimension in the work and family interface, albeit from different perspectives – one conceptual and one empirical. Yerkes, Hoogenboom and Javornik (in this issue) present a new conceptual framework, based on the capabilities approach, that clarifies the various ways in which communities influence work-family experiences. Their framework opens new avenues to conceptualize the role of communities and to study the role of community in the work-family interface. The paper by Sellmaier, Stewart, and Brennan (in this issue) is an empirical study on the role of community resources, or the lack of them, on the workforce engagement of parents of children and youth with mental health difficulties. The study shows that when parents with children with more severe mental health issues experience frustration in accessing related services, they have no option but to reduce their working hours or to stop working completely. The study highlights the importance of acknowledging the additional challenges that such parents face and in ensuring that community supports are strengthened.

After the focus on community, the special issue contains three papers with a stronger emphasis on the role of the work context, with one conceptual paper addressing diversity and social justice and two papers with more specific empirical scopes. The paper by Halvorsen, Saran and Pitt-Catsouphes (in this issue), examines how the assessment of fit and usability of work-life supports may be related to an employees' demographic, social and cultural identities as well as their perception of fairness in the workplace. The authors provide a conceptual framework that may help scholars to connect diversity with perceptions of fairness through organizational justice. The work by Halvorsen and colleagues stimulates future scholarship to consider the key role of the context of diversity when addressing workplace fairness, particularly the importance of identities and intersectionality in the work-family field.

Next, a qualitative study analyzes the considerations of male and female PhDs to leave or stay in academia. In her study, Grönlund (in this issue) shows that both men and women academics in Sweden struggle with job insecurity and care involvement when making decisions about their career. While gender differences play a role, the academic career context presents both men and women with complex dilemmas around work and family despite generous work-family policies in Sweden.

The paper by Abendroth and Lott (in this issue) examines to what degree cultural barriers may contribute to the non-use of telework. Their approach provides an alternative lens, as most studies tend to be based on users of telework, thus focusing on a potentially privileged group. Abendroth and Lott consider gender and occupational differences as well as workplace context to shed light on a very timely issue as the COVID-19 situation has led to an increase of work from home. Their findings highlight the central role of perceptions of cultural barriers, particularly for women, and the need to strengthen opportunities to work from home as a path towards social and gender equality.

The final paper in this issue is from Marian Baird. Baird provides an insight of her own experience as an academic and activist whilst striving to improve parental leave in her country of birth – Australia. In her paper, she urges academics to use their research to inform and shape public policy. While warning about the perils that this may involve, she argues it is a risk worth taking.

Implications for future research

As these papers illustrate, our field has come a long way from an earlier focus on experiences of largely homogenous populations in a limited range of contexts. The papers all highlight, in different ways, the complexity of communities, workplaces and families. The focus on context, including, geographic location, workplace and family is important for uncovering such complexities, as is recognition of diversity within contexts. Taken together, the papers suggest a number of new perspectives and avenues for future research to broaden our understanding of, and challenge assumptions about, experiences of community, work and family. Below we explore three possibilities: focus on intersecting layers of context; collaboration and dialogue to challenge hierarchies of knowledge; and academic activism.

Intersecting layers of context and bringing in the global layer

The importance of context-sensitive research on community, work and family is increasingly recognized. This involves an understanding of diversity within as well as between contexts. For example, Grönlund's paper in this issue demonstrates how (Swedish) national policy intersects with occupational context (academia) in their impact on work and family. Future fine-grained analysis and theory development calls for more context-sensitive research with diverse populations focusing on multiple and intersecting layers of context that include not only local (e.g., culture, policy, economic, ideology, resources), but also the global layer of context within which community, work and family play out. In a rapidly changing, highly interconnected and interdependent world, temporal context, that is historic and contemporary time, is also key to context-sensitive research. The pandemic and subsequent economic crises, climate change and mass migration from certain parts of the world all have implications for communities, work and families, and illustrate the crucial importance of considering the global layer of context. Wider understandings and diverse perspectives are likely to uncover and make visible social inequalities. As the

impacts of global and local crises on community, work and family tend to be highly gendered, a gender sensitive lens is also essential as well as addressing other multiple forms of diversity.

Context-sensitive research could explore questions about how the global contextual layer of the pandemic impacts diverse communities, work and families and gender in/equalities in different parts of the world with different levels of egalitarianism, social structures and approaches to managing the virus. For example, what are the long terms impacts of the growth in working from home during the pandemic in some contexts? Working from home may be changing communities, work and families as boundaries are blurred with possible benefits and challenges, but the effects will differ across different sectors of societies. The growth in home-based work for relatively privileged workers to reduce the spread of COVID-19 may legitimate a more effective way of working for those whose work makes this possible, challenging ideal worker norms for some (see Abendroth & Lott, in this issue), although this is likely to be gendered where childcare is involved. However, those with precarious work, or who rely on passing trade or tourists for income, are likely to find they have little work, with devastating impacts on families and communities. Research cannot always take account of multiple layers of context, but awareness of diversity of experiences and how practices benefitting some groups may disadvantage others can highlight the bigger picture.

Dialogue and collaboration, challenging hierarchy of knowledge

A theme emerging directly or indirectly from many of the papers is the importance of future research involving dialogue between researchers from different standpoints, whether based on geographic, economic and cultural location, or disciplinary backgrounds, or between academics and practitioners. This could lead to cross pollinations of ideas and open up new thinking and ways of collaborating. It has the potential to challenge existing hierarchies of knowledge (e.g., often assuming universality of perspectives from the Global North) and the methods by which such knowledge is produced (see Jaga, in this issue). This is not just a call for more cross-national research or even for more diverse research teams, important though this is. For such strategies to be effective, there will need to be non-judgmental openness and willingness to learn from other perspectives in such exchanges and a willingness to question dominant understandings of community, work and family and their intersections on a wider stage.

This approach not only has the potential to help to understand experiences within local societal contexts, but also to shed light on the assumptions on which much research in the globe is based, as well as to deepen understanding of certain global processes. For example, radical feminist writers from the Global South reflecting on diverse feminisms have highlighted how gendered inequalities and oppression contributed to and reinforced global economic and ecological connections (Ruppert et al., 2020)

Academic activism: the role of academia and research in current times

Another vital collaboration highlighted in this issue is between researchers and practitioners. Academic activism, as Baird argues in this issue, provides a fruitful direction going forward. Baird outlines the intrinsic rewards as well as the challenges of academic activism. We join her in encouraging more scholars in diverse contexts to seek ways of using their research to make a difference to policies and practices affecting peoples' lives within communities, work and families, and "if necessary, make the sometimes

difficult and daunting leap from the academy to the applied and practical world” (Baird, in this issue). In fact, academic activism in our field already exists around the world, although accounts of these processes are not always published in academic journals. More publications of such experiences including barriers, facilitators, and strategies in specific local contexts, even if they have not yet had tangible success in changing policy and practice, would be very useful in informing debates about how our research can have a real impact.

Conclusion

There is a need for a research agenda which reflects the complexity of the changing nature of communities, work and family in diverse contexts of time and place. The current crisis demonstrates that there are no simple sources of knowledge in relation to global problems and that collaborative knowledge creation and learning from each other – questioning taken for granted assumptions – has never been more important as the world deals with the COVID-19 pandemic. While collaborative medical research is obviously crucial, social research on the diverse experiences and inequalities in community, work and family highlighted by the recent editorial in this journal (Fisher et al., 2020) is also important. Despite a recent surge of social scientific research on COVID-19, there remains an urgent need to understand how to influence policy affecting community, work and family in the pandemic and beyond. This special issue seeks to contribute to the task of advancing our field by applying an increasing global lens to those domains and recognizing the complex contexts in which community, work and family are embedded.

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