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Article:

Lam, W. W. Y. (2024) Review of 2024 Work and Family Researchers Network Conference. International Journal of Care and Caring. ISSN 2397-8821

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Review of 2024 Work and Family Researchers Network Conference

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The Work and Family Researchers Network (WFRN) Conference 2024 took place from 19 to 22 June at Concordia University, Canada. The theme of the conference was 'Big Questions in Work-Family', concerning contemporary changes in work, family, the work-life interface, how these affect the life course, and promising solutions in both policy and practice. The conference was multidisciplinary in nature, and offered over 150 sessions of activities, including TED-style Big Ideas Talks, paper sessions, poster presentations, workshops, author-meets-readers sessions, and networking sessions. Attendance provided unique opportunities to connect with scholars and practitioners who have a keen interest in work-family research, policy, and practice.

Unpaid care for a family member with a disability, chronic illness or ageing relative formed the focus of some whole sessions, and some parts of sessions. Supporting working carers formed a major theme, with researchers from different countries and fields of expertise showcasing research on this theme. The research presented revealed the additional efforts that are necessary to increase awareness of the needs of carers who are employed or looking for work, as well as to promote and support the implementation of carer-inclusive practices within organisations. For example, Bainbridge et al presented research into the job search barriers of carers in Australia, Lam et al presented a study of carer's individual and workplace resources, and Williams & Bank presented on the development of international standardised guidelines for supporting working carers in the workplace. The poster presentation of Chmiel & Williams on the Canadian context showed how the promotion and uptake of carer-inclusive guidelines can face challenges. The work of Audenaert & Van Herreweghe reminded me of the challenges that researchers can face in conducting research with carers, as care trajectories can be unpredictable and demanding, and individuals with care responsibilities may not always self-identify as carers for various reasons.

Subsequent sessions examined contours in the experiences of the work-care interface based on factors such as gender, age and the needs of the person receiving care. For example, in the sessions 'Parenting, Caregiving, and Peer Support' and 'Navigating the Work-Family Interface in a Post-Covid World: A Comparative Symposium on Employed Parents of Children with Disabilities in the U.S., Croatia, and Australia', scholars reflected on the gendered nature of care- and work-related attitudes and practices. For example, in a study of South Korea, Jae-yeon Lee revealed the disproportionate role that women play in carrying out care and other unpaid work in the household, and the poorer employment outcomes that ensue. Sellmaier et al and Simunic et al. revealed gender differences in that the health and wellbeing of carers and the ways in which these intersect with their employment status. Bainbridge & Poon's work highlighted the different challenges faced by parents of children with disabilities in combining care and employment, depending on the age of their children. The papers revealed the diversity of experiences of working carers and the need to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to carers in the workplace.

The use of technology has become a key area in care research and innovation, with the desire that technological innovation can effectively support care-receivers, carers, and care workers. However, the Big Ideas Talk given by Ariane Ollier-Malaterre asked some provoking questions regarding technology and care, for example, questioning the desirability and acceptability of robot providers of care and asking what care role they are assuming. Her questions made me reflect on whether, as

social robots and generative AI become more sophisticated, we will ever feel comfortable leaving the physical and emotional labour involved care practice in the hands of technology.

The discussion in the workshop 'Work-Family Research in the 21st Century and Beyond' raised critical questions about what is meant by 'work' and by 'family'. This prompted me to reflect on the use of the word 'family' in the English language, which usually means 'children', such as the phrase 'starting a family', which refers to having children. While childcare is a part of family care, other forms of family care (e.g., eldercare, caring for a person with disability or long-term illness) receive less attention at WFRN. Unpaid carers could receive greater representation research presented at future WFRN events, especially in light of social, demographic and policy changes that are seeing more people balance unpaid care and paid work, enabling researchers to more comprehensively debate the work-family interface beyond childcare at future events.

Overall, the WFRN Conference 2024 was a friendly, developmental, supportive, and stimulating conference. The multidisciplinary nature of the conference uncovered many nuances in work-family research and posed significant questions that will shed more light on future work-family studies, practice, and policymaking. I am looking forward to seeing more studies addressing the experiences of working carers under a range of caregiving, cultural, geographical, and economic circumstances.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.