Two Reviews: Integrating Work and Life

Work and Life Integration: Organizational, Cultural, and Individual Perspectives.
Ellen Ernst Kossek and Susan J. Lambert, eds. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005. 570 pp. $99.95, cloth; $42.50, paper.

Research in the work-family or work-life field is interdisciplinary, burgeoning, and growing exponentially every day. Despite a common substantive focus on the relationships among people’s workplace responsibilities and family and personal lives, this literature diverges wildly by disciplinary style, theoretical assumptions, and quality, as well as by emphasis on basic research versus policy. A tempting response to this cacophony is for researchers in this area to shut out all but a few others who share one’s own disciplinary or theoretical proclivities. Editors Ellen Ernst Kossek and Susan J. Lambert have chosen a different response. In their 23-chapter, 500-plus pages volume, they have composed some polyphony.

The editors succeed in establishing some coherence among the different voices in the work-life literatures. Their clear introductory chapter establishes a coherent set of themes, which resound in each chapter’s common framework. They reprise these themes in the editors’ conclusion, which points to unanswered questions and areas for future research. By imposing some order on the discordant work-life literatures, this volume immediately serves two useful purposes for academic researchers. First, the editors’ introductory and final chapters provide a critical review of a large portion of the work-life research area. Second, the individual contributions function as an encyclopedia of primarily U.S.-based research. In each chapter, contributors state their theoretical perspective and provide empirical applications or examples. These applications are often convenient summaries of the contributor’s larger studies, which may be published in scattered venues.

Are you interested in workplace flexibility? Then pick up this volume to quickly catch up on some of the newest findings, such as the study by Kossek, Brenda A. Lautch, and Susan C. Eaton on the psychological experience or “enactment” of flextime and telecommuting policies (chap. 12). If you are studying international variation in the interpretation of policies across establishments within a multinational firm, Winifred R. Poster provides an elegant research rationale and an efficient summary of her own research on this issue (chap. 17). And every work-life researcher should read Shelly M. MacDermid’s devastating account of measurement problems in this field (chap. 2). Kossek and Lambert explicitly state several additional goals for their volume. Among other things, the authors strive to (1) focus on the work side of work-life issues; (2) forgo an automatic assumption of work-life conflict for a consideration of many possible ways that the workplace, family, and personal commitments may interrelate; (3) integrate individual, organizational, and cultural approaches to the study of this topic; and (4) move beyond psychological, management, and role-theory approaches to...
work-family and work-life relationships. They successfully accomplish the first two goals. The volume documents myriad features of the workplace that are important for the work-life interface, including job quality, supervisor supportiveness, internal labor markets, harsh time demands, new technologies, and corporate restructuring. This emphasis is particularly useful for organizational researchers who read the *Administrative Science Quarterly*. The book also achieves its objective of broadening the inquiry beyond work-life conflict by considering work-family balance, shifting identities, coping, and alternative definitions of success.

The volume’s ability to meet the third and fourth goals is mixed. It would be challenging for the short contributions actually to integrate the three perspectives advertised in the book’s title. Most chapters address the individual and/or the organizational levels of analysis, while largely ignoring culture as a separate level in its own right. This omission is connected to the volume’s mixed success in achieving the fourth goal. The editors note, “...the extant psychological and management literatures...largely adopt an individual, psychological perspective that emanates out of role theory” (p. 3) and hope to build on this heritage yet also move beyond it. Nevertheless, individualistic and role-theory assumptions rumble like a basso continuo throughout much of the volume. Given that 27 of the 37 contributors work in business or management schools and another five identify as psychologists, this continuity is unsurprising.

I found these individualistic assumptions most frustrating in part 4, which is labeled “Cultural and Social Perspectives.” For example, Amy C. Edmondson and James R. Detert focus on individuals’ role-conflicts and need deprivations, while only thinly conceptualizing culture as a set of group norms and informal controls (chap. 18). Chapters 19 (by Sabir Giga and Cary Cooper) and 20 (by Karen Hopkins) emphasize the psychological health and the identities of individuals engaging in implicit cost-benefit analyses. Although these chapters are competent on their own terms, they do not take culture seriously and fit oddly within a part on cultural and social perspectives. More generally, the volume would have benefited from more selections that analyze the socially constructed, constitutive, and meaning-making qualities of supra-individual cultural and social structures, which are irreducible to individual dispositions and roles. An example of how this can be done beautifully is Suzan Lewis and Linda Haas’s piece on the social construction of fairness (chap. 16). Their contribution systematically conceptualizes individuals holding views shaped by the assumptions and expectations of firms and families, which are in turn embedded in their particular society’s cultural models of work, family, gender, and fairness. This contribution also provides a successful example of truly integrating individual, organizational, and cultural perspectives within one short analysis.

In sum, this book meets many of its ambitious goals. It focuses on the work side of work-life issues and emphasizes work-life balance, coping, and enrichment in addition to work-life conflict. The volume offers a strong collection of
studies that will help scholars stay current in a rapidly growing field.

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