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Conversations with the Experts

Striking a Balance: Work, Family, Life



Robert Drago

Bio: Robert Drago is Professor of Labor Studies and Women's Studies at Penn State University, is a Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne, is a co-founder and co-chair of the Take Care Net, is past president of the College and University Work-Family Association, and moderates the Workfam newsgroup on the internet. He holds a Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and was a Senior Fulbright Research Scholar. The author of four books and over 70 articles, his most recent book is *Striking a Balance: Work, Family Life*, published by Dollars & Sense in 2007. His research, largely funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, concerns working time flexibility, biases against caregiving in the academic workplace, the decline of women in intercollegiate coaching, and public policies for working families. He is a frequent contributor to major media outlets, and has provided Congressional Briefings sponsored by Senators Clinton, Kennedy, and Obama, among others. He was the 2001 recipient of the R.I. Downing Fellowship from the University of Melbourne, serves on the board of the Berger Institute for Work, Family and Children, and is a member of the Council on Contemporary Families and the International Association for Feminist Economics.

An Interview with Robert Drago

By Karen Corday and Judi Casey

Corday: How does your definition of work-family balance differ from the ones that are already out there?

Drago: I read a lot of the current studies, and was unhappy with the way we had defined balance. If you define balance as work and family, what about people without family commitments? When I read about what was actually going on, the evidence wasn't that strong to limit the discussion to work and family; the other piece of the puzzle was leisure. Everybody needs leisure; the role of family is about unpaid commitment or unpaid work. Most people seem to want a mix of paid employment, unpaid work for family and community, and leisure. If you take any of those components away, people tend to experience poor psychological health, stress, and anxiety.

Casey: So your definition adds in the leisure component?

Drago: Yes. If you look at the literature, people were talking about either work and family or work and leisure. However, a lot of family commitments are not leisure; they're work, especially when you have, for example, an infant or a parent with Alzheimer's.

Corday: Could you please describe the care, income, and gender gaps and their effects on work-family conflict?

Drago: All three of these gaps are about the devaluing of care. For those of us in the work-life field, this is the opposite of what we've been working towards for the past thirty years. We've tried to make family supports

more important in the workplace and the political sphere. Instead, we ended up with a lot more children and adults who are in need of care living in poverty. We ended up with women who provide most of the caregiving, both in the labor market as well as in the home, more likely to end up in poverty. We ended up with extreme rewards for anyone who has no commitments outside of employment. Thirty years ago, we had far fewer children living in poverty, women who were going into the workplace weren't penalized for having children, and committed professionals didn't work on weekends, were home for dinner, and took vacations. Now we penalize care providers, who tend to be women, so we wind up with a care gap because we're less able to care for Americans in need, a gender gap, which is now not so much around men versus women, but about anyone who provides care, and an income gap because those with no family commitments can work very long hours and make exorbitant amounts of money.

Corday: What are "norms" and how do they negatively affect workers' lives?

Drago: Norms are what have prevented us from solving work-family conflict. For example, if we introduce a reduced hours program, women tend to use the reduced hours and get penalized for doing so. That's all about norms. Even if a woman is more productive than a man on an hourly basis, if she's working reduced hours, she's not taken seriously. It's not the quality or quantity of work that she's rewarded for; she's penalized because she's doing caregiving and isn't seen as a fully committed worker. Norms tend to blind us to why we treat women who are caregivers differently than we treat women who are not, and why we expect such long hours from workers. We don't really need people to work these crazy hours; it wasn't done historically, and most countries in the world don't have the number of workers working long hours that we do. If we can see past the norms, we can change things. If we don't think about norms, we'll think it's all about economics, which was what people believed for a long time. They thought we just needed to change the reward system to get things right. As Arlie Hochschild noted back in the 1980's, we're really stuck. There's a lot of policies and programs, but women do most of the caregiving, paid and unpaid, and get rewarded poorly for it. That's about norms.

Casey: Do the norms go the other way too? For example, if a company offers reduced hours and men wouldn't even think about taking them because it would equal career suicide?

Drago: Yes, norms extend to men; men aren't "supposed" to be caregivers. However, fathers have presented the greatest challenge to norms in the last twenty years. We now expect fathers to spend a lot of time with their children and to be involved and committed. Young men often expect to be equal partners with their wives in raising children. They aren't quite equal partners, but they've really ramped up the amount of time they spend with their children and often want careers that allow them to do so. All of a sudden, it's not just women saying they don't want to work sixty hours a week—men don't want to do it either.

Corday: Please discuss the definition and importance of inclusion.

Drago: Inclusion comes out of the diversity movement. If you can create an environment in which people feel free to speak up about their needs, you'll have an environment in which ethnic and racial diversity works. What I discovered, and what the evidence suggests, is that if you create an inclusive environment, it will also be a good environment for work and family. The importance of inclusion is that by talking to each other, we discover what kinds of norms are affecting our behavior. Otherwise, we don't see norms; they act invisibly and force us into roles where we're either ideal workers or caretakers. By opening up the discussion in the workplace, people become whole individuals who are not just workers or parents, but people with religious and community ties, partners, friends—all the things that make up a balanced life. Without inclusive processes, we'll never get policies right. You can't think through what people need in the absence of asking them. The places you see inclusion working most clearly are small workplaces that offer flexibility. Small business owners will often tell you, "I can't pay people a lot to work here, but I give them all the flexibility they need, and they love working here."

Corday: What further research needs to be done on this topic?

Drago: I think we need to see how much more fathers are doing now and what promotes father involvement. We know a lot about mothers and employment and we know what's good for kids, because the research goes back so far in terms of how maternal employment affects children. We don't have a lot of research on what allows fathers to be involved with their kids. If we can promote father involvement, it will be all right for mothers to be involved, too!

Corday: How can workplaces promote balance? What are the benefits of interventions at the work group level?

Drago: This is where inclusion comes in. Workers often believe they have to hide their non-work issues from their co-workers. A good example is bereavement. Men in particular, historically, believed they should just continue with work, even when they lose a loved one. Mental health studies show that men suffer severe emotional trauma when they are widowed, and this is especially true of older men. They suffer heart disease, stress, and sleeplessness. They should be able to cut back on work at that time; not permanently, but they need some time off. If they don't feel free to talk about their needs, they won't. If you create an environment where anyone can come in and say, for example, "I need to leave early to take my dog to the vet. He's sick, and the vet closes at six," then other problems such as bereavement or child care may be taken care of as well.

The real advantage of work group interventions around inclusion is that you force the workgroup to prioritize. Everything is not equally important; people will recognize that. The backlash that's gone on around work-family programs when childless workers feel taken advantage of is due to a lack of inclusive processes that value everyone. Inclusive processes create a sense of fairness and allow people to integrate work and the rest of their lives.

Corday: What can policy makers do to assist workers and workplaces with family-friendly initiatives? How should state and national governments respond to the work-family balance challenge?

Drago: I think many of us realized around four or five years ago that where the work-life field actually started, with onsite child care, was a failure. It was a failure for purely economic reasons; there is no good economic justification for employers to provide child care. The same is true for paid family leave, particularly for small employers. If we believe that new parents should be home with their children for a certain amount of time, employers can't afford to foot that bill. The government has to step in and support families. We're seeing this with health insurance, we're seeing it with the living wage movement, and we're seeing it with child care supports. The largest single chunk of money going for welfare programs is currently going to child care, because that's where the government needs to help. If they don't, we won't have quality child care, which is very expensive. According to the National Study of the Changing Workforce, only one-half of one percent of all parents of young children who need child care have access to on-site child care. Are employers going to realize this as well? It's beginning to happen at the state level—California has paid family leave, Maine will have universal health insurance by 2010, we have paid leave bills in Congress, and the state of New York spends tens of billions of dollars a year in child care.

Corday: Anything else?

Drago: I think it's crucial that we recast the business case for balance. Businesses are increasingly recognizing the value of flexibility and inclusion. These practices are win-win, and help with productivity, commitment, and retention. But the flip side is that we need employers to get behind public supports for families, including paid family leave, child care, living wages, and universal health insurance. Many businesses, and particularly large corporations such as the big three auto makers, understand that we cannot be competitive without universal health insurance. They would benefit from all of these policies, and we're beginning to see signs that at least some businesses are becoming supportive. Indeed, this logic provided the impetus for the creation of Corporate Voices for Working Families, but is also the basis for many public-private partnerships emerging around child care, and the unprecedented state-level expansion of minimum wages in the last few years. None of this is terribly difficult, and there is a genuine sense of hope around these issues today that is both new and deeply rooted. It is an exciting time for all of us in the field.

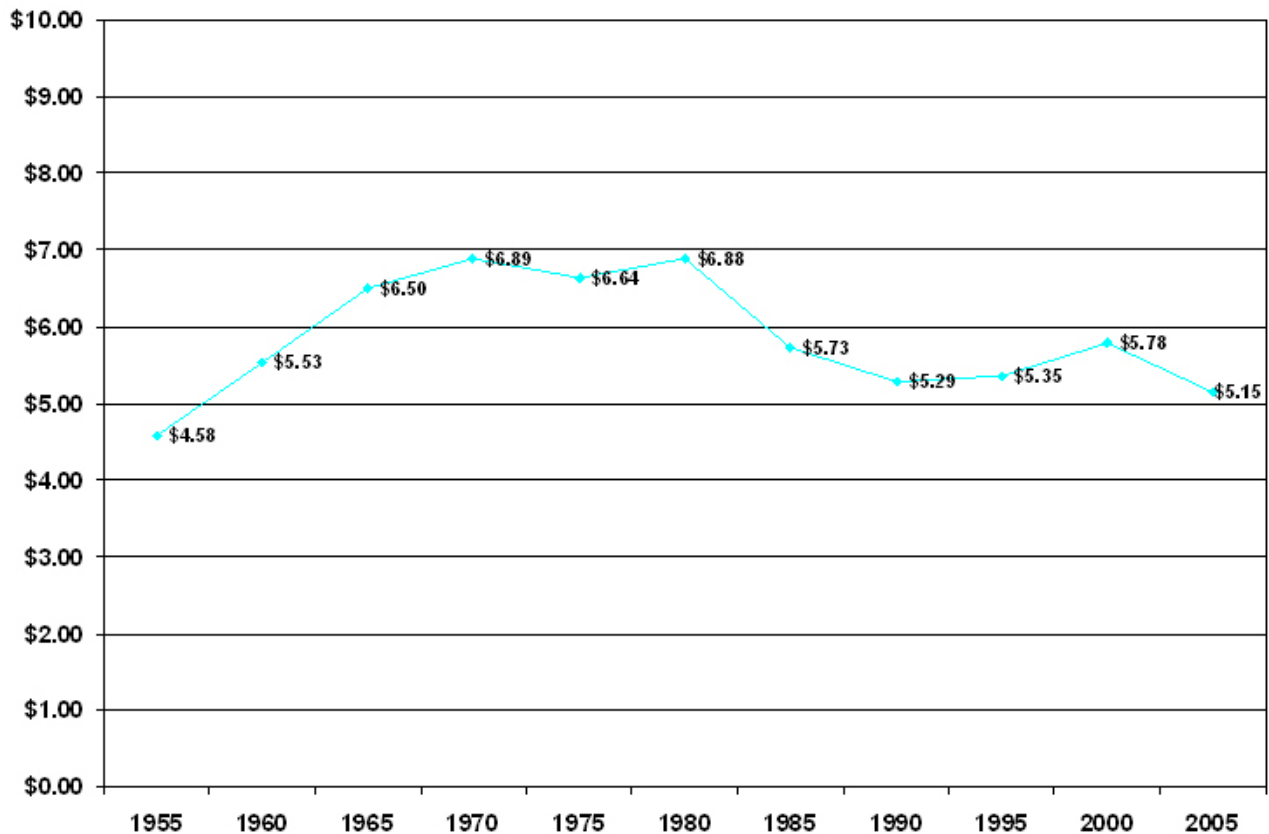
Learn more about *Striking a Balance: Work, Family, Life* and order the book: <http://www.strikingabalance.org/>

Bob's *Striking a Balance* book tour for November, 2007:

November 6th: Workplace Center, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 1:00 pm

November 7th: Graduate School of Social Work, Boston College, McGuinn Hall 5th Floor Lounge, 11:30 am

November 8th: "Workshop on Work and Family," Women in Science and Engineering Program, Boston University



Source: Drago, R.W. (2007). *Striking a balance: Work, family, life*. Boston, MA: Dollars & Sense. Source: Economic Policy Institute, Minimum Wage, Table 5. Calculations based on data from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Additional Resources Related to Government Interventions and Work-Family



Global Perspectives - Australian Institute of Family Studies: "The Australian Institute of Family Studies is an Australian government statutory authority... established in February 1980 to promote the identification and understanding of factors affecting marital and family stability in Australia."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.aifs.gov.au/>



Global Perspectives – Human Resources and Social Development: "HRSDC's mission is to build a stronger and more competitive Canada, to support Canadians in making choices that help them live productive and rewarding lives, and to improve Canadians' quality of life."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/en/home.shtml>

Mathmatica Policy Research: "The company offers policymakers a unique combination of evaluation expertise, direct data collection services, and insight into the socioeconomic issues that drive public policy. Its clients include federal agencies, state and local governments, foundations, universities, professional associations, and businesses."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/>

National Conference of State Legislators: "NCSL is a bipartisan organization that serves the legislators and staffs of the nation's 50 states, its commonwealths and territories. NCSL provides research, technical assistance and opportunities for policymakers to exchange ideas on the most pressing state issues. NCSL is an effective and respected advocate for the interests of state governments before Congress and federal

agencies."

- To access the site, click here: <http://www.ncsl.org/>

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E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-9202

www.bc.edu

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