WORK-FAMILY BALANCE IN A NEW AGE- AN AFRICAN 'MILLENNIAL'S' CONUNDRUM

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January 18, 2024

Abstract

The work-family interface has been an area of increasing scholarly interest, especially within the second half of the 21st century. Researchers in this field have attempted to define and shape the manner in which the work and family components interact, resulting in a growing body of dyadic theorizations. At the same time, generational categorizations of employees on the basis of their ostensible peculiarities continues to fuel an entire corpus of workplace research, broadly informing curricula and establishing consultancy organizations designed to empower organizational leadership in managing different generations in the workplace. Both of these research trajectories are important in responding to the evolving concepts of work and family, but they largely frame a Western experience. The goal of this paper is to contextualize the two strands of discussion within an African context, providing an empirical examination into the ways in which digitization and rapid urbanization are radically shaping the understandings of work and family.

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Submission declaration statement

This paper is not under consideration elsewhere and has not already been published and will not be submitted for publication elsewhere without the agreement of the Managing Editor.

Conflict of interest statement

There is no conflict of interest to be declared.

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Human Participants No human participants were involved in the study.

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ABSTRACT

The work-family interface has been an area of increasing scholarly interest, especially within the second half of the 21st century. Researchers in this field have attempted to define and shape the manner in which the work and family components interact, resulting in a growing body of dyadic theorizations. At the same time, generational categorizations of employees on the basis of their ostensible peculiarities continues to fuel an entire corpus of workplace research, broadly informing curricula and establishing consultancy organizations designed to empower organizational leadership in managing different generations in the workplace. Both of these research trajectories are important in responding to the evolving concepts of work and family, but they largely frame a Western experience. The goal of this paper is to contextualize the two strands of discussion within an African context, providing an empirical examination into the ways in which digitization and rapid urbanization are radically shaping the understandings of work and family.

Key Words: **African** ; **Digital** ; **Employment** ;**Millennial** ; **Work-family** ;

INTRODUCTION

The work-family interface has been an area of vibrant research, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and more so during the recovery phase. The origins of this research focused on the ways in which family roles and work roles almost often tugged in different directions, breeding work-family conflict. At the time, it was hypothesized that work and family roles occupied mutually exclusive domains, so that the devotion of the finite resources of time and energy to one role correspondingly diminished their availability to the other. Subsequent research sought to dispel the foundational conclusions of work-family incompatibility by exploring the possibilities for work-life balance. Although the precise definition of work-life balance is still in flux, it is thought to signify a personal fulfillment with the performance of salient work and family roles through the devotion of equitable time to the two segments. At the same time, research opines that the balance is better achieved if the worker invests psychological capital in the shape of optimism, resilience and efficacy. acknowledge the impossibility of completing all the tasks involved in the two domains and insist that the balance is achieved when there is a possibility of meaningful engagement on both sides of the divide.

Critics of the work-family balance dimension argue that it is impossible to devote equal time to the competing dimensions of work and family, on the basis of changing demands. Further, that the exact computation of the balance is difficult to achieve because of its highly subjective measure. Others contend that the 'family' component of the balance is constructed too narrowly, leaving out other life elements such as friends, leisure and personal health, which are equally important. Still, others are unhappy with the construction of the 'family' as working parents with children, arguing the marginalization of elderly, single and childless workers. During the tenure of the Covid-19 pandemic and the current recovery phase, emergent work arrangements have greatly blurred the hard line between work and family segments, contributing heavily to the impractical nature of the uncompromising divide..

Discontent with the conceptualization of work-family balance has produced additional dyadic theorizations. Work-family fit has been proposed as a viable alternative portending a situation where the demands placed upon the worker are designed to correspond to their family responsibilities, allowing them to perform optimally in both roles. It is contended that a good 'fit' results into a win-win scenario in both the job and family fronts. An obvious drawback, especially for large organizations is the endless number of addendums that will have to be made to the worker's role and the assumption that while family needs fluctuate, work demands are somehow static. The next revolution brought with it the concept of work-life harmony which sees work and life as integrated components, differing from the disjointed work-family balance perspective. Within this construction, work and life weave into a single strand of life, with each portion feeding into the other. Although conceptually distinct from work-family balance, validation of the practical differences do not have a strong literature backing. Associated with the harmony concept, other framings such as work-family enrichment and positive-spill over involve a bi-directional mutual benefit between the work and family facets, with the inherent hypothesis that one role, such as spousal support enables better coping in the workplace . Most recently, work-family integration is an emerging concept whose aim is to generate greater fusion between the integrants. Practical examples, which appear alive to the changing work contexts, include completing chores around the house while simultaneously attending to a conference call or bringing children to the office when schools are closed. The practicability of these examples across sectors provides an obvious challenge, as is the level of concentration requisite to straddle both segments. It is indisputable that these emergent conceptualizations enrich the understanding and appreciation of the work-family interface, although their nascence means that they are discussed largely alongside the dominant work-family balance concept. In addition, proponents of the work-family balance are also revising the concept's scope, arguing that the balance is basically an attitude relating to the manner in which work and family roles combine and therefore a representation of the extent of fit, integration or co-existence.

While in agreement that the work-family interface will benefit from further research and refining, the paper takes a step back to argue that the exact nomenclature of the relationship constitutes a secondary discussion. The primary question is not one of balance, but of redefinitions at both ends of the equation. The 21st century work context is undergoing massive changes and departing in many ways from the way work has always been

conceptualized. At the same time, the reinforcements that held up the family, especially within the African space, are coming down and a reconceptualization of this second component is fraught with urgency.

At the confluence of these dramatic shifts is the 'Millennial' who is assuming greater responsibility at the work place and at the home front and who is expected to navigate both waves and succeed. are credited with coining the sobriquet of the generation which entered adulthood at the turn of the millennium, the 'Millennials' ascribing their birth years to the 1985 to 1995 span. Although 'Millennials' currently occupy the dominant share of the global workforce, the world does not seem to have a lot of confidence in this *Me, me, me,* generation. Millennial workers are often contrasted with previous generations of workers and often come out as disloyal, self-absorbed, entitled and non-committal job-hoppers . And that is not a great starting point. Already, a growing corpus of research findings indicate that young employees are now facing a higher level of age discrimination in comparison to old employees, referred to as reverse ageism. The generational stereotypes developed in the pursuit of rationalizing age-related qualities are engendering an 'us versus them' mentality, with the ironic effect of undermining the very harmony that research of this kind seeks to build in the workplace . And it is not just 'Millennials' who are troubled with the burgeoning generation-directed research. The entire body of generational theories upon which ever-growing numbers of research, comparative studies and entire organizations perch, critically lack scientific backing . The term 'generation' itself is problematic, because different meanings are assigned to it depending on the specific field of research. Semantic dissonance aside, the intersectionality of age, race, colour, wealth, gender, culture and an infinite list of other considerations apart from birth year and shared experience cannot possibly be studied contemporaneously on a global scale. In addition, the labelling of generations uncovers a highly informal and haphazard process, undertaken by any number of players including the media, marketing executives and even the general public. Given this unsystematic labelling, it is little wonder that the start and end year of each generation varies significantly from one research to the next, sometimes with up to a decade. In addition, the generational labelling has largely been an American exercise and to a lesser extent a European and Australian one . The considerations upon which these generations derive identity, the World Wars, the Great Depression, Post-war birth spurts and technological leap-frogging are essentially a Western experience. In most cases, some of these 'global' phenomenon have marginal or significantly different nuances within the African context. For example, although roughly 1% of the African population was involved in the 1st World War in the position of soldiers, carriers and recruits to fill positions vacated by foreign conscripts, this effort was merely a reinforcement to colonial powers in a war that had little to do with progressing welfare at home. And while the outcome of the 2nd World War was obviously significant to the belligerent powers, with Africa again, playing second fiddle, the significance of this global event had perhaps the most far reaching gains, in the shattering of 'white supremacy' and laying a ground for decolonization campaigns. Even where people experience common events on a global scale, their level of participation and the impacts imprinted are variedly nuanced, and not enough to characterize a generation. Within the African continent for example, the colonization period, the fight for independence and the exercise of that independence under various political regimes mark the most significant milestones, glaringly missing from the ongoing generational labelling and stereotyping. Additionally, even within a continental scale, the journey to independence and the post-independence experience varies very greatly from country to country. Rwanda's experience during the genocide, South Africa's struggle with apartheid, Somalia's battle against Al-shabab and the continued civil war and internal conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo are powerful forces, shaping the lives of those present and those yet to come. The possibility of creating an African generational construct, leave alone a global one is extremely fanciful. All in all, emergent studies including , although noting various variations between employees in the course of their careers, conclude that employees are essentially generic, making the generational dissections unnecessary.

That said, the ubiquity of generational research especially with reference to 'Millennials' in the workplace has already framed a construction through which employment is already being analyzed . The paper uses the term 'Millennials' strictly referring to an age cohort of those between 28-38 years, without importing the requirement for shared experience. The hope is to set a foundational understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented within the contextualization of current work and family interfaces, particularly

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within the African continent.

What work?

The crippling reality of unemployment

While the work-family discourse has made as its starting point those already in the workplace, the significant number of those not in the workplace and whose plight ought to inform interventions and policies ongoing in the workplace, has become of pressing concern. Global unemployment numbers, already at their highest in many countries, are projected to inch up by another 3 million in 2023 to total to 208 million. Of this share, the U.S is projected to witness a 1.2% increase in unemployment rates above the current 3.4%, with Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Spain projected to struggle with 17%, 15% and 12.7% unemployment rates respectively. The situation is much grimmer on the African continent, where South Africa leads the global unemployment rates at 30%,1.2 million graduates in Uganda remain unemployed and the Continent's unemployment rate more than triples global averages. The brunt of these statistics is disproportionately borne by young people, whose unemployment rate is often higher than that of adults, by up to three times. The intersectionality of race, age and gender precipitates an especially disadvantageous employment outcome for African young women. The advent of the pandemic worsened an already bad situation because young people again faced higher job losses or in other instances were altogether barred from entry into the workforce at a time of massive business losses and closures. While studies continue to recommend stronger academia-industry relations, entrepreneurship infused scholarship and diversifications into green, blue and orange economies as a panacea to unemployment, little evidence exists as to the practical reorganizations and resources directed at realizing these outcomes. In the absence of consistently targeted efforts at both the domestic and international fronts in narrowing the youth unemployment gap, poverty, inequality and unsustainability will continue to shape our world.

The contours of the new age of work

Offices, bosses, hierarchies, work hours, and other once easily recognizable work-place features are collectively becoming artefacts of a passing age. The new age of work is largely influenced by the dominant 21st century themes, pluralism and preference. Thanks to the 4th industrial revolution characterized by near real-time cooperation and communication of production systems, work is no longer a monolithic concept. In addition to technological advancement, rapid globalization and changing demographics are shaping the current understanding of work.From digital nomadic workers to crowd-workers, the employment terrain appears lined with plentiful opportunities upon which the employee is to exercise their preference. In order to achieve a coherent classification of the multitudinous work arrangements, categorizes them under three subtypes of work flexibilities; flexibility of work scheduling; flexibility of work location and flexibility of the employment relationship. Flexible scheduling transfers agency to the employee to determine how long and when to work. It encompasses concepts such as flextime, in which employees can vary when they arrive and leave work around a core time band when all employees are present and compressed weeks where employees elect to work longer on some days in a week in order to get longer offs within the week. The flexibility of work location denotes the ability to work remotely or to telecommute, away from the organization's premises. It was originally thought that remote work translated directly to working from home and thereby only offering temporal flexibility. Now, other possibilities for greater geographic flexibility, detaching the work place from the home are emerging in concepts such as co-shared workplaces and work-from-anywhere arrangements. These location flexible orderings are observed to lower, or in certain instances, eliminate, the costs associated with purchasing, building or maintaining a physical office while at the same time increasing productivity from employees who cut back on commute time and are able to craft work environments that are quieter and more comfortable. However, these arrangements have been observed to cast a dark shadow on work-family balance by blurring the divide, increasing work intensity and employee isolation and hiking home

office costs. For employers, managing, monitoring and providing the necessary support for remote workers has been challenging. Hybrid work, in which work is done remotely but with the additional requirement to go to the physical workplace in agreed intervals, has been suggested as a happy middle ground between traditional work arrangements and remote work. Flexible employment arrangements cover concepts such as on-demand platform work, crowd work and jobs haring, all reliant on digital platforms to match workers with consumer demands, provide uniform tools towards the provision of the work and set rules governing the work done by rewarding good services and discouraging poor ones.

The digitalization of the labour market, whether through the incorporation of digital software into current jobs or creation of unique digital jobs is realizing monumental impacts. credits digital labour platforms with the generation of at least US$52 billion in 2019, although 70 percent of these revenues were concentrated in the United States (49%) and China (23%) with Europe's share coming a distant third at 11%. The rest of the world accounted for 17% . In terms of employment digital workers are comprising a significant category of the labour force, with the jobs requiring digital knowledge more than tripling in the US for the period between 2002-2016, and rapidly rising in Europe. Of note is the fact that digital employment continues to provide employment opportunities for workers who were marginalized within the traditional labour systems such as persons living with disabilities, migrant workers and refugees.

The seemingly endless flexible employment arrangements notwithstanding, trends in the digital labour market are eliciting concern. The unregulated development of AI, robotics and nanotechnology for example continues to heighten the fear of increased joblessness. While this argument has often been countered with the idea that many more forms of digital jobs are in the offing, and that humans are being set free to pursue more creative engagements, the already existent inequalities make the equitable realization of the technological dividends highly unlikely. Some of these concerns are laying the foundation for the next industrial revolution, industry 5.0 aimed at returning the human and his concerns at the center of the industrial revolution . Although credited for great advancements in digitalization and the emergence of AI technologies portending great potentials for production efficiency and flexibility, industry 4.0 paid little focus on sustainability and the welfare of workers. It is hoped that this reorientation will achieve human centricity, achieve sustainability and build a more resilient industry.

The challenges posed by the new age of work within the African context

Numerous studies have already documented the pitfalls associated with the new age of work. Within the African context, participation in the digital labour market remains disappointingly low, primarily on account of the huge gap in digital infrastructure, insufficiency of digital skills and the sparse ownership of personal computers. found that only 17 per cent of the African population could afford one gigabyte of data, compared to 37% in the Latin American region and Asia's 47%. This reality places the vast majority of Africa's digital labour participation firmly in the lowest cadre jobs, such as e-hailing. Although unemployment is of pressing concern in Africa, the quality of employment opportunities available, especially in the digital space, is equally unsettling. Because a significant category of people falling within the 'Millennial' category, that is ages 28 to 38, usually fall outside the definition of young persons as conceptualized by organizations such as the UN, it is assumed that they are not plagued with the same unemployment hardships as their 15-24 year counterparts. However, just because they are not under the microscope as a specified vulnerable group does not mean that they are faring better. The extensive ILO study on Platform work found that the dominant age group within the digital workforce falls within the 28-35 age brackets. Of this category app-hailing drivers, the segment where most of Africa's platform workers fall, average 36 years. And because of poverty and limited access to social protection, this category of Africa's workforce is vulnerable to exploitation. Extant literature shows how the promise of employment has recruited candidates for human trafficking from the continent who are then forced into the highly lucrative criminal web of labour exploitation While app-hailing services such as Uber offer income to a large number of 'Millennial' workers, these drivers struggle to reach a minimum income.In addition, platform work is considered mostly as a supplement to other employment engagements in developed economies while developing countries see these opportunities as alternatives to unemployment.

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In addition, the loosely defined employment relationship means that the App owning companies have no obligation at all beyond provision of the platform. In essence, all the gains made for the benefit of the worker, such as work hours, provision of social protection, provision of occupational safety and health infrastructure are being rolled back on the platform. Often, the combination of constantly battling traffic congestion, irregular job allocations, long working hours, the pressure to drive quickly and constant surveillance takes a toll. And the gender gap in terms of job opportunities and wages has no hope of narrowing, when the women representation in app-based and delivery sectors is less than 10%.

With all the opportunities promised by the new age of work, serious cut backs on human rights in the workplace are taking place on Platforms every day. Slavery and servitude, scarcity of decent work opportunities, privacy infringements, long work hours, gender inequality, little to no social protection and almost no collective bargaining power are the frightening hall marks of the current digitally mediated work.. Although humanity was once in this position, the current situation is compounded by the fact that platforms are privately owned spaces and this shifts the power from governments, as was the case, to absolutely powerful private entities.. And so it is that the current workplace absolutely demands that workers upskill, Chat GPT is a good example of this necessity, but at the same time have to grapple with rewriting the liberties of digital workers, a category all workers will soon belong to in the not so distant future. Within the African context the additional challenge of leapfrogging digital infrastructure and skill endures, as does the struggle against systemic discrimination and inequality in machine learning. And it is the dominant workforce, those 28-38 year-old 'Millennials' who are required to lead these interventions.

What family?

Fewer marital unions, higher cohabitations and rising dissociation rates

While the concept of work-family has mostly been preoccupied with the conflicting roles of each domain, and now increasingly how to integrate them, the positive impacts of family in providing belonging and support are less studied. In addition, the work facet of the relationship has received more attention than the family facet, so that there have been more interventions and reorganizations in the former than the latter. This could be because work relations are easier to regulate than are family relations, or on the basis that family issues fall within the private domain. However, the rising number of mental health issues around the globe actively call for research into contributors of well-being. Family support has always been singled out as a means of providing psychological resources for individuals and within the work context, are important in buffering the stress of work, leading to better coping. As already observed, the new age of work guarantees a fair amount of stress, whether with uncertainty, the pressures associated with upskilling or even with finding meaning. This is where it gets a little complicated for the 'Millennial' worker. The last half of the century has seen a sharp decline in marriage rates, almost globally. argue that 'Millennials' are getting married much later than preceding generations. at the time of her study observed that the average age of entry into marriage for Americans had increased from 23 to 29 for men and from 20 to 27 in women. Within sub-Saharan Africa, marriage was thought to be universal and a requisite for adulthood. No longer. South Africa's documentation of declining marriage rates, an exercise that has been ongoing since the 1960s, places the current median age of marriage for both genders at 30. In Kenya, the median age of marriage for women is 22 while that for men is 26, up from 21 and 24 respectively.

Some of the reasons ascribed to the growing trend include a reversal of the education gap in favour of women, crippling student loans, an increase in unwed births, which lower women's marriageability, and the fact that attaining the benchmarks thought to be necessary predecessors to marriage, that is, employment stability, accrued savings and financial security, are taking longer to realize. Although these statistics might paint a picture of disinterest in marriage, the situation is far from accurate. In place of marriage, cohabitation is the new form of unionization for this age group . In addition, marriage and parenthood are increasingly viewed as detached concepts, so that for example in most 'Millennials' ranked the desire to be a parent higher

than the desire to have a successful marriage. In come the proliferation of all kinds of alternative family concepts such as "living apart together," "cocooning." and "helicopter parenting", which has nothing to do with the aircraft. And these forms of cohabitation are differently nuanced from the previous understanding of cohabitation as a preparatory stage to marriage. In fact, 's study shows that not only is marriage not a consideration at the onset of cohabitation, it now serves as a waiting point for breaking up, because the cohabiting couple envision a future date when the relationship will end. The concept of an expiry date for love springs from the high rates of divorce witnessed by the parents of this 28-38 age cohort, the commoditization of love on factual television shows such as 'Love is Blind' or 'Married at First Sight' and online dating and matching sites which fail in their promise to deliver the perfect spouse.

The result is an upsurge of single-parent families, mostly female-headed with the elderly also brought in, especially in the African set-up to care for children. In essence then, the 'Millennial' worker, is deprived of the support component from the family set up, making the challenges at work particularly devastating.

Thinning family support and higher care burdens within the African context

One of the most recognized attributes of African culture is the centrality of family or kinship. Far from the common conceptualization of family as a nuclear institution, the African family casts a wide net of membership to include in-laws, grand-parents, grandchildren, unborn children and even intermediaries like ancestors. Even the idea of personhood derives from the place of fitting within the community, so that a person feels seen and knows that they belong. This communal understanding of family creates a center of learning, enables family members to counsel the younger generation, provide mediation when domestic conflicts arise, act as a source of financial support during crises and provide attendance to joyous events such as births and weddings. argues that the traditionally low incidences of suicide in Africa stem from the feeling of belongingness and the assurance that others are concerned with the welfare of the person involved, making life worth living. In order to perpetuate the culture of cooperation and friendship, African communities look for any odd reason to meet and share a meal. So central is this idea of kinship, that various ties are less 'God's truth' relationships, extending to assumed, analogous, or just plainly fictitious ties, such as when Africans meet abroad and formulate some sort of communal tie. But those days are slowly coming to an end. Rapid urbanization has seen many young people concentrate in cities, slowly lose use of their local dialects and begin to consider family in nucleated terms. The reduced contact between family members, on account of the business presented by the new age of work, ultimately weakens family ties, leaving the 'Millennial' worker to figure out life with little support. At the same time, the burdens to which the community traditionally came in to intervene are now squarely falling on the 'Millennial' worker who in most cases has no family of their own or who is within a family setup that is waiting to disintegrate. The upshot of sub-Saharan Africa's non-communicable disease burden by 67% within two decades and the fact that African countries have now a higher burden of NCDs compared to global averages means that 'Millennials' are devoting a substantial part of their paycheck to support ailing relatives.

At the apex of these responsibilities is parenting in a digital age. Even though the internet has made parenting easier in some ways, such as through providing parenting skills and allowing for greater communication between parents across country lines, it presents challenges in other quotas. Internet safety and technology addiction are prime examples. Parents have a primary obligation, even in the digital age, to be good role models of internet usage, and then, just like in the workplace, to inform their understandings on social media and other digital spaces, enough to safely guide their children. Providing alternative activities offline for children so that they grow in healthy and interactive ways is also critical. However, urban housing especially in high density neighborhoods, compounded by the obliteration of green spaces to create more real estate space is challenging the feasibility of extra-curricular activities.

Recommendations

This paper might have painted a grim reality of the evolving concepts of work and family within the African continent for the 'Millennial' worker. That was never the real intention. The purpose was to highlight the fact that both work and family are facing critical reorganizations and that 'Millennials' are uniquely placed to seize the opportunity presented to shape the eventual outcomes of both concepts for the betterment of our time and of those to come.

The first of these opportunities lies in a race, not for greater technological advancement in the work place, but for outdoing each other in infusing humanity into the age of automation.. The numerous interventions necessitous in realizing this outcome portend, in my view, a veritable solution to the joblessness. The largely unregulated state of the digital labour market affords the precious opportunity to re-think the interests of the worker and to conceptualize the meaning and place of work, building on the gains that have already been achieved and dealing definitively with the loose ends which continue to perpetuate inequality. Part of this inequality is a by-product of the stereotypes fermented by generational theories. Instead of lazily labelling the characteristics of age cohorts on a global scale, serious research within individual workplaces will cast light on the needs and challenges faced by workers across a lifespan in order to cater effectively and accumulatively to them. Some organizations are already catching onto the fact that the traditional incentives are no longer attractive, driving up competition towards incentive packages that actually make sense to the here-and-now workplace. Assistance with offsetting some of the student loan is a good example.

Within the education sector, major curriculum shifts toward greater compatibility between pedagogy and the real-time requirements of industry are needed. Emphasis on education that allows active and competitive contribution to the green, blue and orange economies is critical. At the same time, these curricula amendments will allow for greater indigenization of education, especially within the African context to promote and ingrain those positive cultural dimensions of a synergetic community. If the necessary human, monetary and time resources are allocated to this enterprise, meaningful work opportunities will be immediately emergent.

Within the family context, an appreciation of the unsustainability of current family formation patterns is needful. Abundant family research, counselling and training will be useful in shaping better family outcomes especially among young people. Causes of conflict, challenges to parenting, work benefits sensitive to unique family set-ups such as single parents or the elderly need constant exploration.

5. Conclusion

If sufficient work is put into defining the workplace and the family space towards a better result, the question of balance, integration or fit will be made undoubtedly easy.