Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry


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Basic Concepts & Definitions

The majority of work-family studies have been conducted in the United States and other Western countries (e.g., Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). There is a growing recognition, however, that larger social, cultural, and political contexts may affect individuals’ perceptions and experiences within the work-family domain (Ishii-Kuntz, 1993; Lewis, 1992, 1999; Lobel, 1991; Schein, 1984; Westman, 2002). Consequently, there is an increasing number of studies that examine work-family issues in a cross-cultural context. We will first discuss major characteristics of studies that are often included under the umbrella of cross-cultural psychology and the different levels of analysis and measurement associated with this research. We will then move on to discuss specific cultural values that are of particular importance in the study of work and family. Importantly, the present entry is predominantly limited to the review of the psychological research on work-family issues across cultures. For further insights and different perspectives on this topic, the reader should consult sociological literature.

Cross-cultural psychology includes both studies that examine cross-cultural differences and similarities between two or more cultural and ethnic groups, as well as those that often provide a non-Western perspective from one country (Aykan & Kanungo, 2001; Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 1992). Alternatively, cross-national studies usually include examination of two or more populations that are closely related culturally (e.g., Scots-Irish comparisons) (Berry et al., 1992).

One of the central distinctions in cross-cultural psychology is the difference between individual and cultural levels of analysis and measurement. The individual level of analysis usually refers to correlations computed at the individual level regardless of the cultural group the individual came from (e.g., correlations between individual perceptions of social support and work-family conflict calculated at the individual level across different cultural groups). The cultural level of analysis usually refers to ecological correlations based on means obtained from individuals in each cultural group (e.g., obtaining means on social support and work-family conflict within 10 cultures, and then correlating 10 pairs of means) (Aykan & Kanungo, 2001; Leung & Bond, 1989).
The distinction between the levels of analysis is critical because findings may not coincide at different levels of analysis. For instance, since individualism and collectivism value dimensions appear to be semantic opposites, early research conceptualized these dimension to be the opposite ends of the continuum (Leung & Bond, 1989; Kemmelmeir, Burnstein, Krumov, Genkova, Kanagawa, Hirshberg, Erb, Wieczorkowska, & Noels, 2003). In other words, cultures that were found to be high on individualism were considered to be low on collectivism (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Hui, 1988). However, the analysis at the individual level revealed that these value dimensions are not orthogonal, and individuals that score highly on individualism do not necessarily score low on collectivism (e.g., Shafiro, Himelein, & Best, 2003; Trafimow, Triandis, & Goto, 1991; Triandis, 1995).

Many existing work-family cross-cultural studies analyze variables at the individual level. It is often not feasible to conduct cultural level analysis, because it requires a large number of cultures to be included in a study (Leung & Bond, 1989). Although it is preferable to examine variables of interest at both levels, even the individual level of analysis may shed some light on the cultural differences in regards to individualism, collectivism and other variables (Leung & Bond, 1989; Triandis, 1995). However, it is important to take caution in making cultural-level generalizations based on individual-level data analysis and vice versa.

In terms of the conceptualization, current cross-cultural work-family studies can be subdivided into two categories. These studies either assess micro-level constructs (e.g., perceptions of work-family conflict) or they concentrate on the macro-level variables (e.g., public policy), but rarely both (Korabik, Lero, & Ayman, 2003).

Cultural values are often used in cross-cultural psychology to hypothesize and explain group differences. Cultural values are frequently associated with the work done by Hofstede (1980). Hofstede examined data from more than 60 countries of IBM employees. From 116,000 completed surveys matched by occupation, age, and sex at different time periods, Hofstede’s (1980) derived four factors based on the cultural-level (using country means) factor analyses. Out of the four value dimensions (masculinity-femininity, power distance, uncertainty-avoidance, individualism-collectivism), individualism, collectivism and masculinity-femininity constructs appear to be the most relevant for studying work-family issues across cultures (Westman, 2002).

People in individualistic cultures tend to be less interconnected and more independent, focusing on personal rather than group goals and preferences. Such qualities as uniqueness, independence and self-reliance are very important for highly individualistic people. Additionally, individualists value power, achievement, hedonism, and self-direction (Schwartz, 1992). Generally, in collectivistic cultures, people define themselves according to their group membership (e.g., family, country), and they emphasize group
norms, goals, and needs over personal ones (e.g., Triandis, 1995). Additionally, collectivists value benevolence, tradition, and conformity (Schwartz, 1992). Finally, there is a strong sense of obligation to close others combined with an apparent distinction in the way in-group and out-group members are regarded.

The existing work-family research has used different characteristics of individualism and collectivism to hypothesize and explain differences among individuals from different cultural groups. However, no published empirical research actually assessed levels of individualism and collectivism and the relationship between these constructs with work-family variables.

Although there is no research examining the relationship between masculinity-femininity and individuals' work-family experiences, this construct may also be useful in understanding cross-cultural differences and similarities in work-family issues (Westman, 2002). Cultures characterized by masculinity show greater work centrality, and focus on achievement (defined in terms of recognition and wealth). Individuals from these cultures prefer higher salary to shorter working hours. There are high levels of job stress, and earning, advancement and challenge are relatively more important. In contrast, individuals in cultures characterized by femininity show less work centrality and lower job stress; they focus on achievement defined in terms of human relationships and living environment, and cooperation, friendly atmosphere are relatively more important.

The differences in masculinity-femininity may contribute to the differences in gender role ideology, which may impact individuals' work-family experiences (Westman, 2002). In fact, cultural differences have been found in gender roles across the globe (e.g., Williams & Best, 1990). Egalitarian gender role ideology is ensured by equal opportunities for men and women in education, professional training, employment, and equal share of family responsibilities. Traditional gender role ideology is characterized by inequality in work and/or family spheres between men and women (e.g., Williams & Best, 1990).

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

Studying work and family from a cross-cultural perspective is important based on its contributions to both research and practice. The scarcity of work-family cross-cultural research is surprising given the importance attributed to values and beliefs and their potential to color individuals’ perceptions and experiences in work and family roles (e.g., Carlson & Kacmar, 2000; Lobel, 1991; Westman, 2002). In fact, individuals from different cultures have been found to hold different values, beliefs, and social expectations (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1991). Although work and family are almost universally recognized, cultural differences are found in the meanings attributed to work and family roles by individuals (Yang, Chen, Choi, & Zou, 2000). For example, people from collectivist cultures may view work primarily in terms of securing family's well-being, and people from individualistic
cultures may consider work to be one of the main sources of self-actualization (Yang et al., 2000). In addition, various cultural groups may have different role expectations. For instance, women in Ukraine were found to hold more traditional gender role ideology characterized by lower egalitarianism between men and women than women in the U.S. (Shafiro et al., 2003). The traditional role ideology may be related to more family responsibilities expected from and taken by women in Ukraine than women in the U.S. Furthermore, individuals in different countries may have different amounts of resources (e.g., higher income; more extended family social support) available to them (Spector, Cooper, Poelmans, Allen, O'Driscoll, Sanchez, Siu, Dewe, Hart, de Moraes, Ostrognay, Sparks, Wong, & Yu, 2003). For example, people in collectivistic countries characterized by higher interdependence between close others are believed to receive more extended family social support than people in individualistic countries (e.g., Triandis, 1995). Higher levels of assistance received from close others may help people to balance their work and family responsibilities better.

Furthermore, political and economic spheres of life may contribute to variations in work-family experiences across the globe (e.g., Drobnic, Blossfield, & Rohwer, 1999; Lewis, 1999; Lewis, Izraeli, & Hootsman, 1992; Lewis & Smithson, 2001). For instance, in some countries (e.g., Germany, Ukraine) state is responsible for providing work-family supports (e.g., childcare arrangements) and in other countries (e.g., U.S.) companies are the primary providers of work-family assistance to employees. Hence, examining work-family experiences in light of such cultural variables as values, gender role ideology, social support available to individuals, political and economic systems, should help researchers to understand differences and similarities in work-family experiences across the globe.

The work-family cross-cultural research is also important from a practice perspective as it is related to the increased globalization of the world economy, a growing number of multinational companies, and a more diversified workforce on both national and international levels. As a consequence of these new features of the work interface, many managers and employees have to operate in several cultural environments, which may be characterized by different approaches to work and family. For example, a multinational company may need to adopt different human resource practices to accommodate cultural expectations and values, as well as country's policies and practices. Therefore, cross-cultural research examining work-family issues will not only enrich literature in this area, but it will also provide practitioners with knowledge about universal and culturally specific work-family experiences that should help employees and employers operate in a multicultural environment (e.g., Ayree, Fields, & Luk, 1999; Yang et al., 2000).

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

Pioneering work-family research outside the United States and Canada has been predominantly conducted in Asian cultures (e.g., China, Hong Kong, Singapore). Moreover, only with a few exceptions
(e.g., Yang et al., 2000; Spector et al., 2003), the existing cross-cultural research is not comparative, that is it presents results from only one country. Finally, work-family conflict is one of the commonly studied variables in the psychological work-family literature. Hence, many of the cross-cultural studies examine either antecedents and/or consequences of work-family conflict.

The cross-cultural work-family studies conducted within one country usually test a Western phenomenon in a different cultural group. For example, the generalizability of findings from the U.S. based model of the work-family interface proposed by Frone et al. (1992) was tested by Aryee et al. (1999) in a sample of 320 Hong Kong employees. It was shown that some of the relationships among work and family constructs in the Hong Kong sample were similar to those found by Frone and colleagues in the U.S. sample. For example, consistent with Frone et al. (1992), Aryee and his colleagues (1999) found a positive relationship between work-to-family conflict (WFC) and family-to-work conflict (FWC). However, life satisfaction of employees in Hong Kong was predominantly influenced by WFC, while life satisfaction of the U.S. employees was primarily affected by FWC. Aryee et al. (1999) explained these differences with the great importance assigned to family roles in Chinese culture.

Other examples of work-family research from one country include studies examining the relationships between work-family roles and women's well-being in Malaysia (Noor, 1999); the impact of antecedents on work-family conflict and consequently on well-being among married professional women in Singapore (Aryee, 1992); work-family influences on career satisfaction among dual-earner couples in Hong Kong (Aryee & Luk, 1996); antecedents and outcomes of work-family conflict among employees in Finland (Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998), and characteristics of dual-earner families in Finland (Kinnunen & Mauno, 2001); men's perceptions of work and family lives in India (Larson, Verma, & Dworkin, 2001); work-family conflict, spousal support and coping behavior among Japanese married working women (Matsui, Ohsawa, & Onglatco, 1995); and role conflict and perceptions of gender roles among Israeli teachers and professors (Moore & Gobi, 1995).

There are few cross-cultural work-family studies which include two or more countries. One salient feature of these studies is the hypothesized relationships of collectivistic and individualistic values with work-family roles. People in collectivistic cultures are believed to view work as a means of enhancing the family's well-being, while people in individualistic cultures are believed to regard work as a means of enhancing self-improvement and self-actualization.

The idea that work may be viewed as a contribution to the family's well-being instead of competing with family time (e.g., Yang et al., 2000) has been tested in several studies (Bu & McKeen, 2000; England & Misumi, 1986; Spector et al. 2003; Yang et al., 2000). For instance, England and Misumi (1986) assessed work centrality among different occupational groups of 3,226 Japanese and 1,002 U.S. employees and found that work was significantly more important for every occupational group in the Japanese sample.
when compared with the U.S. counterparts. The researchers suggested that the collectivistic nature of the Japanese society contributes to work importance socialization.

In another cross-cultural comparison between 129 U.S. and 181 Chinese employees, it was found that U.S. employees experienced greater family demands, which had a greater impact on work-family conflict than did work demands, whereas the Chinese experienced greater work demands, which had more influence on work-family conflict than did family demands (Yang et al., 2000). Again, the Chinese tendency to sacrifice family time for work was viewed as self-sacrifice for the benefit of the family. In the United States, however, sacrificing family time for work is often perceived as a failure to care for significant others (Yang et al., 2000).

In a recent study Spector et al. (2003) tested the idea of different meanings assigned to work and family among people from collectivist and individualistic cultures proposed by Yang et al. (2000) in a multinational comparative study of work-family stressors, working hours and well-being. The sample included 2,487 managers across 15 samples who were placed into three different groups based on the regions. Five samples were from English-speaking countries: Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and U.S. Three were Chinese samples from Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan. Finally, seven were from Latin American countries: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Uruguay. They hypothesized that although there would be a relationship between work hours and work-family stressors among Anglos (who are believed to be high on individualism), this relationship would not be significant among Chinese and Latin cultural groups (who are believed to hold collectivistic values). In fact, the moderational effect of the region on work hours and work-family stressors was found, and it was in the predicted direction.

In addition to cross-cultural work-family research that examines individual-level or micro-level phenomenon (studies described above), there is a set of studies, mostly from European countries, that describe how public policies and cultural expectations (macro-level) impact women's labor participation (Drobnic et al., 1999; Treas & Widmer, 2000) and women's earnings over the life span (Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2001), maternal and paternal leave policies (e.g., Deven & Moss, 2002; Rostgaard, 2002), and the impact of organizational policies and practices on individual's work-family experiences (e.g., Lewis, 1999; Lewis & Smithson, 2001; Lewis, Smithson, & Brennan, 2002).

To summarize, the existing work-family cross-cultural research in psychology may be divided into three major categories. The first category, which is applicable to the majority of work-family cross-cultural research, includes studies examining work-family interface in a culture other than the U.S. or Canada. The common approach adopted in within-one-culture research is to test a Western phenomenon in a different cultural context. The second category includes a small number of comparative studies. One salient feature traced throughout a number of these studies is hypothesized relationships of collectivistic
and individualistic values with work-family roles. Although people in collectivistic cultures are believed to view work as a means of enhancing family's well-being, people in individualistic cultures are believed to regard work as means of self-improvement and self-actualization. The differences in work-family roles attributed to individualism and collectivism have not been assessed, but rather inferred. Finally, the third category includes research from mostly European countries that examined individuals' work-family experiences in light of state as well as organizational policies and practices.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The cross-cultural work-family research discussed above has several limitations. First, the majority of the present research is done within one cultural group. Second, although many studies hypothesized the relationship between cultural values (e.g., individualism and collectivism) and work-family variables, none of the published studies actually assessed this relationship. Third, the present cross-cultural work-family research presents findings either at the micro-level (e.g., work involvement) or macro-level (e.g., public policies), but there are no studies that combine these two levels in one theoretical framework. Finally, the majority of present cross-cultural work-family research in psychology focuses on individual-level analysis of data versus cultural-level analysis.

Based on the limitations, future research should examine both micro- and macro-level phenomenon across many cultural groups. This research will help to understand how cultural characteristics (e.g., values, political and economic systems) impact individual experiences of the work-family interface. Studies that include more than one cultural group will shed some light on the generalizability of Western work-family concepts and they will reveal some culture-specific work-family findings. Additionally, more studies that present data analysis at the cultural-level will contribute by discovering universal work-family trends. Finally, more studies examining macro-level constructs such as cultural values, political and economic spheres will help researchers to better understand the mechanisms that connect such commonly studied variables as work-family conflict, social support, etc.

With increased globalization and a growing number of multinational companies, practitioners will benefit from the knowledge that can be gained from cross-cultural research. For example, cross-cultural examination of workplace and public policies can enrich our knowledge on culturally general and specific ways of alleviating negative effects of combining work and family (Korabik et al., 2003). In addition, learning about global approaches to work and family, may contribute to the development of better policies and practices at the national level.

**References**


Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:


Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. (More about the Matrix ...).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry’s topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.

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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains
Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for
determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

**Process**

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsoupes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. **Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term “work-family” to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves.** Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term “work-family” (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. **It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver-caretaker-relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal.** Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family needs & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
• Workplace Antecedents
• Community Antecedents
• Societal Antecedents

**Covariates:** The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

• Individual Covariates
• Family Covariates
• Workplace Covariates
• Community Covariates
• Societal Covariates

**Decisions and Responses:** The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

• Individual Decision and Responses
• Family Decisions and Responses
• Workplace Decisions and Responses
• Community Decisions and Responses
• Public Sector Decisions and Responses

**Outcomes & Impacts:** The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

• Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
• Outcomes & Impacts on Families
• Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
• Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
• Outcomes & Impacts on Society

**Theoretical Foundations:** The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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