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Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry

Role Stress/Strain and Work-Family (2002)

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Date: April 11, 2002

Basic Concepts & Definitions

The nature of the interface between the workplace and the family is the keystone of the work-family construct. The interface can vary from positive to negative. Usually the term work-family connotes the conflict that arises when an employee tries to fulfill the responsibilities of roles in both domains. Although time limitations are the most common cause of work-family conflict, such conflict can arise because of incompatibilities due to the strain, energy, or behavioral requirements of these different roles. Also, work-family (WFC) has been disaggregated into two components: work interfering with family (WIF) and family interfering with work (FIW) (Gutek, 1991). Less frequently, work-family refers to the rewards that an employee accrues from simultaneously occupying roles in both arenas. Lack of consistency in the definition and the measurement of work-family conflict and work-family enhancement often make it difficult to compare findings across studies (MacDermid, et al, 2000).

Role stress (often referred to as role stressors) refers to the work or family conditions that are associated with feelings of role strain (or, alternatively, distress). Because of lack of consistency in the usage of the terms role stress and role strain, they are no longer in general usage. With respect to the job (family) role, the term role stress has been superseded by the term job (family) stressors, or more generally by the term job (family) conditions (Spielberger, 1979). The term "conditions" has the advantage of referring to role aspects that are either stressful (i.e., negative) or enhancing (i.e., positive). Role strain is now viewed as one of many potential outcomes of stressful job (family) conditions. Work-family conflict is one such outcome.

Although work/family conditions are most often conceptualized as "causing" work-family conflict/enhancement, it is also possible that the relationship is bidirectional. In other words, work-family conflict/enhancement can "cause" as well as be "caused" by work/family conditions.

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

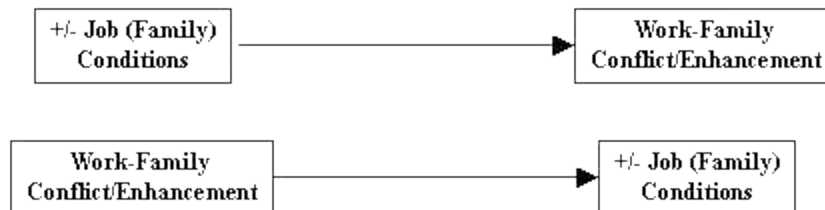
In addition to the general consensus that managing the often competing and formidable demands of paid work and family commitments may be the most central challenge in women's lives, there is growing

awareness that this challenge also confronts men. Several demographic trends suggest that this topic will be increasing in importance to women and men in the future. With dual-earner couples now the majority of all families in the United States, men and women are juggling the demands of their own and their partners' jobs while also managing their family responsibilities. Moreover, globalization, the 24/7 economy, downsizings, job insecurity, and the lengthening workweek, especially among highly educated workers, all increase the likelihood of work-family conflict.

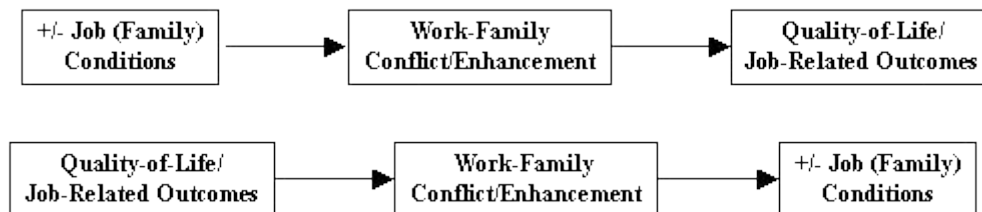
State of the Body of Knowledge

There is considerable interest in both the causes and consequences of work-family conflict (Frone, Barnes & Farrell, 1994). In addition, many studies address the processes linking these two constructs (Greenhaus, 1985). For example, positive experiences on the job buffer employed mothers from the negative mental-health effects of associated with childcare burdens (Barnett, Marshall, & Sayer, 1992). And, positive relationships with one's spouse and/or children buffer employed fathers from the psychological distress associated with an unrewarding job burdens (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992). Accordingly, work-family has been treated as a predictor, an outcome, and an intervening (i.e., mediating or moderating) variable (see Figure 1 below).

Direct Effects



Indirect Effects • Mediation



Indirect Effects • Moderation

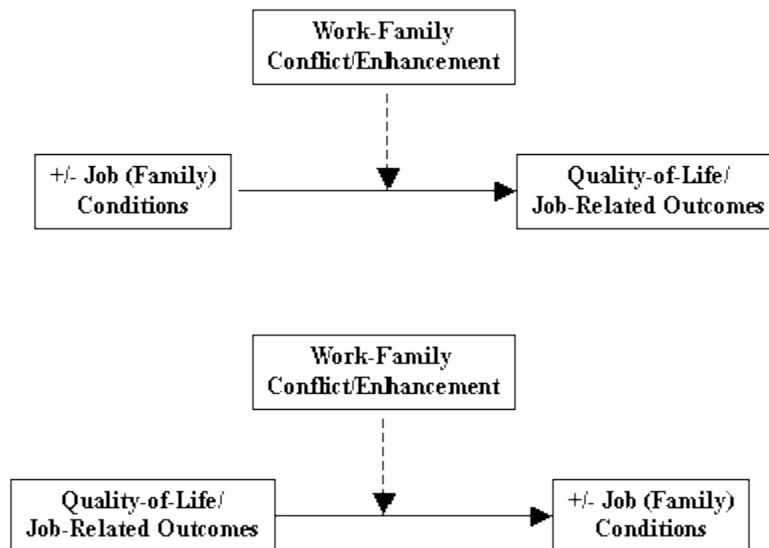


Figure 1. Graphic presentation of the various conceptualizations of the relationships among job (family) conditions and work-family outcomes.

As an outcome, most research focuses on the individual worker and on workplace stressors and suggests that such workplace conditions as flexibility and control reduce WFC, whereas long work hours and heavy job demands increase WFC. However, the effects are usually not especially strong and are not always found. As one example, arguments with one's spouse in the evening have been related to problems on the job, the next day, at least among men.

As a predictor, there is ample evidence that WFC is associated with such negative workplace outcomes as burnout and job dissatisfaction. WFC is also linked to such negative quality-of-life outcomes as life dissatisfaction, marital disruption, poor child outcomes, and substance abuse. There is some indication that WIF is a stronger predictor than FIW (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998).

Several studies indicate that other job and/or family variables mediate or moderate the relationships between job (family) conditions and work-family. For example: (1) the relationship between work hours and marital-role quality is partially mediated by the proportion of low-control household tasks that employed women perform; (2) the relationship between length of shift and incidence of job turnover is mediated by marital status and number of children living at home; and (3) the negative mental-health effects of childcare burden on employed mothers are offset by having a challenging job.

Implications for Practice & Research

New research designs are needed to deal with the reality that the increase in dual-earner couples means that each partner is exposed, either directly or indirectly, to the demands of both partners' job and family conditions. These designs must accommodate within-couple effects. For example, within couples, one partner's job conditions affect the other partner's quality-of-life (Barnett & Brennan, 1998). It follows that future research relating job (family) conditions to work-family conflict needs to adopt a within-couples strategy and to focus more on enhancement (see Figure 2 below).

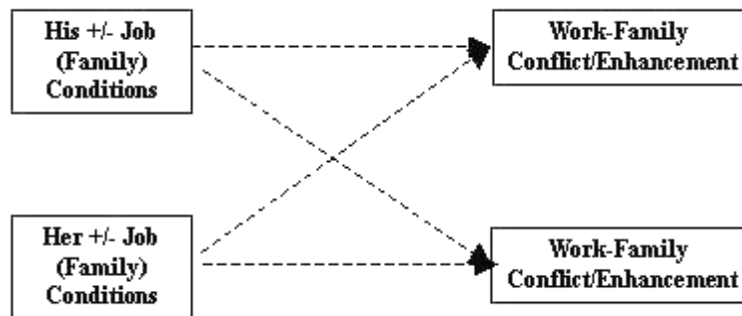


Figure 2. Graphic presentation of one design to capture within-couple effects.

Finally, research within the work-family conflict tradition needs to be integrated with the multiple-roles literature (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). The latter body of knowledge strongly suggests that multiple role occupancy is related to positive mental- and physical-health outcomes for women and men.

Work-place Policies

Workplace policies designed to decrease work-family conflict are increasingly prevalent. These policies (e.g., flextime, part-time, flexplace) are designed to increase flexibility, improve employee recruitment, retention, morale, and productivity and reduce employee distress, burnout, and unplanned absences. However, many employees hesitate to take advantage of such options fearing long-term negative career consequences (Perlow, 2001). These fears are reduced in workplaces in which there is strong top-down support (Barnett & Hall, 2001). This support needs to be reflected in a host of related policies addressing work design, performance review, promotion, seniority, and benefits (Bailyn, 1993). Without such a holistic approach, it is unlikely that policies to increase flexibility alone will have a salutary effect on work-family conflict.

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Perlow, L.A. (2001). Time to coordinate: Toward an understanding of work-time standards and norms in a multicountry study of software engineers. *Work and Occupations*, 28(1): 91-111.

Spielberger, C.D. (1979). *Understanding Stress and Anxiety*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:

(Click on the titles to link to citations/annotations in the Literature Database.)

Bailyn, L. (1993). *Breaking the mold: Women, men, and time in the new corporate world*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Barnett, R.C., & Hall, D.T. (2001). How to use reduced hours to win the war for talent. *Organizational Dynamics*, 29(3), 192-210.

Barnett, R.C., & Brennan, R.T. (1998). Change in job conditions and change in psychological distress within couples: A study of crossover effects. *Women's Health: Research on Gender Behavior and Policy*, 4(4), 313-339.

Barnett, R.C., Marshall, N.L., & Pleck, J.H. (1995). Men's multiple roles and their relationship to men's psychological distress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 358-367.

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Kossek, E.E., & Ozeki, C. (1998). Work-family conflict, policies, and the job-life satisfaction relationship: A review and directions for organizational behavior-human resources research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83(2), 139-149.

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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.

Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives	Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences	Domain C: Covariates	Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues & Experiences	Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts
Individual Antecedents	Individual Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Individual Covariates	Individual Decisions & Responses	Individual Outcomes & Impacts
Family Antecedents	Family Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Family Covariates	Family Decisions & Responses	Family Outcomes & Impacts
Workplace Antecedents	Workplace Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Workplace Covariates	Workplace Decisions & Responses	Workplace Outcomes & Impacts
Community Antecedents	Community Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Community Covariates	Community Decisions & Responses	Community Outcomes & Impacts
Societal Antecedents	Societal Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Societal Covariates	Societal Decisions & Responses	Societal Outcomes & Impacts
Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains				

About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network

Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

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-Catsouphes 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 need & 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)

Domain A: Antecedent Descriptives	Domain B: Work-Family Issues and Experiences	Domain C: Covariates	Domain D: Responses to W-F Issues and Experiences	Domain E: Outcomes and Impacts
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Societal Antecedents	Societal Experiences: Needs & Priorities; Problems & Concerns	Societal Covariates	Societal Decisions & Responses	Societal Outcomes & Impacts
Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains				