Work-Family Role Conflict (2003)

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Date: May 12, 2003

Basic Concepts and Definitions

Work-family conflict is a type of inter-role conflict in which the role demands stemming from one domain (work or family) are incompatible with role demands stemming from another domain (family or work) (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964).

According to Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964), roles are the result of expectations of others about appropriate behavior in a particular position. Role conflict is described as the psychological tension that is aroused by conflicting role pressures. Role theory suggests that conflict occurs when individuals engage in multiple roles that are incompatible (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Work-family conflict can be time-based, strain-based, or behavior based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Time-based conflict occurs when role pressures stemming from the two different domains compete for the individual’s time (e.g., requiring employees to work late with little notice might make it difficult for employees to meet family obligations, like picking up a child at daycare). Strain-based conflict occurs when the strain experienced in one role domain interferes with effective performance of role behaviors in the other domain. For example, a father who is anxious about his child’s illness might not be able to fully concentrate on his job as copy editor, causing him to make mistakes in his work. Behavior-based conflict is described as conflict stemming from incompatible behaviors demanded by competing roles. For example, a manager in a financial services firm might be expected to be aggressive, unemotional, and hard-driving, but these same behaviors in the family domain would most likely lead to conflict with family members. Time-based conflict, the most common type of work-family conflict, is based on the scarcity hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that the sum of human energy is fixed and that multiple roles inevitably reduce the time and energy available to meet all role demands, thus creating strain (Goode, 1960) and work-family conflict (Marks, 1977).

As can be seen in the examples above, work-family conflict is bi-directional. That is, work can interfere with family (referred to as work-to-family conflict) and family can interfere with work (referred to as family-to-work conflict).
These dimensions of directionality have been identified as distinct, reciprocal constructs that have independent antecedents and outcomes (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). For example, some research has demonstrated that work-to-family conflict is primarily caused by work-related stressors and characteristics and that it predicts family-related affective and behavioral outcomes, while family-to-work conflict is caused by family-related stressors and characteristics and predicts work-related outcomes (e.g., Frone et al., 1997).

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

This is an important area of study for both researchers and practitioners, as more and more employees are struggling with multiple roles (e.g., employee, parent, student, caretaker of elderly parents). Research to date suggests that high levels of work-family conflict are related to dysfunctional outcomes for the individual (e.g., life dissatisfaction, anxiety, depression, poor health), for relationships (e.g., increased interpersonal conflict, divorce), and for the organization (e.g., absenteeism, tardiness, loss of talented employees).

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

Work-family conflict has been related to important individual and organizational outcomes, such as absenteeism (Barling, MacEwen, Kelloway, & Higginbottom, 1994; Goff et al., 1990; Hepburn & Barling, 1996; Kossek, 1990; Kossek & Nichol, 1992; MacEwen & Barling, 1994; Thomas & Ganster, 1995), intentions to leave work (Aryee, 1992; Burke, 1988) and decreased job, family, and life satisfaction (Bedian et al., 1988; Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997; Burke, 1988; Higgins, Duxbury, & Irving, 1992; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Thomas & Ganster, 1995; Wiley, 1987). Additionally, negative mental and physical health outcomes have been related to high levels of work-family conflict and work-to-family conflict (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Boles et al., 1997; Frone, 2000; Frone et al., 1997; Thomas & Ganster, 1995).

Much of the research on work-family conflict has been based on the premise that multiple roles inevitably create strain (e.g., Chapman, Ingersoll-Dayton, & Neal, 1994; Frone et al., 1992; Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990; Hammer, Allen, & Grigsby, 1997), as suggested by role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978) and role scarcity (Goode, 1960). However, there is a growing body of research which has found evidence of positive spillover, both from work to home and from home to work. The results of some of these studies support the enhancement hypothesis, which proposes that an individual's supply of energy is abundant and expandable (Marks, 1977). Multiple roles may be life enhancing in that they provide additional sources of social support, increased skills, and heightened self-esteem and well being. Baruch and Barnett (1987), for example, found that women who had multiple life roles (e.g., mother, wife, employee) were less depressed and had higher self-esteem than women and men who had fewer life roles.
However, it is the quality of roles that is important. That is, the greater the quality of a person’s multiple roles (e.g., having an interesting, challenging job and a happy home life), the greater their self-esteem. See Barnett and Hyde (2001) for a comprehensive overview of this line of research.

Several researchers have commented on the importance of understanding factors that are associated with (and/or are antecedents of) work-family conflict. For instance, it has been documented that employees with significant dependent care responsibilities (e.g., employees who have responsibilities caring for young children, employees with large families, employees who care for dependent elders) tend to report higher levels of work-family conflict (see Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; and Scharlach & Boyd, 1989). Some studies have found that women experience greater work-family conflict (see Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1992). Research has also examined organizational factors (e.g., characteristics of the employee's workplace) that can affect work-family conflict. For example, the impact of workplace culture on employees' perception of work-family conflict has been widely noted (see Galinsky et al., 1996; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999).

Recently, work-family conflict has been examined from a systems perspective demonstrating that one member of a couple's experience of work-family conflict can significantly impact their partner's experience of work-family conflict (Hammer et al., 1997). These work and family "crossover effects" of stress and strain from one member of a dyad to the other have been recently presented in a theoretical model developed by Westman (2001).

**Implications for Practice and Research**

Practitioners are interested in the extent to which various interventions, such as family-friendly policies and programs, and the supportiveness of the work-family culture (Thompson et al., 1999), actually reduce employees' work-family role conflict and how this can have significant impact on a number of work, family and personal outcomes, as mentioned above. Therefore, future research should be aimed at examining the effectiveness of such interventions.

**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**
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
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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