Work-Family Guilt (2005)

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Basic Concepts and Definitions

With the large body of research addressing the concept of work-family conflict (WFC), there has been an increased interest in the impact of guilt. Although individuals frequently discuss the topic of guilt in relation to balancing their work and family role responsibilities, it remains an area that is under researched.

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) were the first to identify WFC as a specific type of interrole stress, defined as two (or more) sets of pressures that occur simultaneously. Conflict arises when compliance with one role makes it more difficult to comply with the other (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), and this can have negative effects on the quality of life in each domain. The relationship between work and family has been examined with a comprehensive, bi-directional approach (Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1992). Thus, a distinction has been made between work interference with family (WIF) and family interference with work (FIW), as it is believed that WFC may originate in either domain of life (Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991). Much of the research in this area has since shown that WIF and FIW have unique antecedents and outcomes (Frone et al., 1992; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Gutek et al., 1991).

Guilt refers to the thoughts and feelings of remorse and responsibility that occur due to real or imagined wrongdoings (Zahn-Waxler, Kochanska, Krupnick, & McKnew, 1990). Specifically, guilt can be defined as an unpleasant feeling that stems from the belief that an individual should have thought, felt, or acted differently based on a set of internalized standards (Kubany, 1994).

Kubany et al. (1996) state that the extent to which an individual experiences guilt after a negative event is a function of the presence and magnitude of five factors: a) the perception of responsibility the individual has about the occurrence, b) the lack of justifications the individual has for his or her actions, c) the extent to which the individual's values are violated, d) the degree to which the individual believes he or she could have foreseen the event, and e) the extent to which the individual could have prevented the event from occurring. These factors can apply to guilt related to WFC. When someone has an imbalance between
two roles and therefore has to choose one role over the other, the individual may recognize that he or she is causing harm and feel responsible (e.g., a manager must choose between missing an important meeting at work or attending her daughter's soccer practice). Further, even though the choice was made to follow this course of action, the individual may not feel this decision is fully justified, and depending on the importance of the role, she may violate internally held values (e.g., she values her family very highly, and therefore even though she decides to stay for the meeting, she does not feel that she can justify this choice). Finally, when the individual feels the action was foreseeable and could have been prevented (the individual knew that her daughter's soccer practice was being held, and so should have left), feelings of guilt would likely occur.

Importance of the topic to work-family studies

The topic of work-family guilt (WFG) has not been studied extensively in the WFC literature, but has more recently become an area of interest (e.g., Aycan & Eskin, in press). Balancing both work and family lives is an increasing problem in today's society in which there are more dual-earner couples, elder care responsibilities, and single parent families (Duxbury & Higgins, 2002). It has been suggested that the conflict that individuals experience from this lack of balance will lead to feelings of guilt. These negative feelings may have a variety of repercussions that are detrimental to the quality of individuals' work and family lives.

State of the body of knowledge

Guilt is considered to be the painful affect that arises from the belief that one has hurt another (O'Connor, Berry, & Weiss, 1999). It is believed that guilt serves a wide variety of positive functions in everyday life. Guilt can be seen as a highly adaptive emotion when it helps to maintain the attachments and interdependencies that are essential for comfortable and productive lives (O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush & Sampson, 1997). It is thought that guilt will check aggressive impulses and encourage people to undo harms in order to restore social harmony (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990), which is why some researchers have linked guilt to altruism and the tendency for an individual to feel empathy towards the suffering of another (O'Connor et al., 1997). However, when guilt becomes excessive or irrational, it can lead to great distress, distorted relationships, and psychopathology. Further, guilt can be problematic when it becomes exaggerated and inhibiting, when it is generalized, or when it is repeatedly linked to shame (Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1988). This type of pathogenic guilt-related behavior includes heightened levels of empathy, misplaced sense of responsibility, or unrealistic ideas about the ability to reduce or produce another's predicament (Ferguson, Stegge, Eyre, Vollmer, & Ashbaker, 2000). When guilt is experienced, it may encourage behaviors that minimize the consequences of the actions, derogate their victim, or treat the event like an isolated incident (Ausubel, 1955; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Conversely, the individual may try to somehow acknowledge and rectify the transgression. This can be done by
inhibiting the behavior, putting herself down, punishing herself, or trying to even the score by putting others ahead of herself. The individual may also try confessing, atoning, apologizing, or performing some sort of reparation (Ferguson et al., 2000).

Currently there are many different theories, definitions, and conceptualizations of guilt (Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1988). According to Hoffman’s (1982) theory, guilt has three components. The affective component consists of the unpleasant feelings that are experienced when there is a realization that one’s actions have had harmful consequences. The motivational component refers to the impulse to make reparations or attempts to undo the harm. The cognitive dimension includes the awareness that other people have independent inner states, and the recognition that one has caused harm to an individual.

There have been three main approaches to the measurement of guilt (Jones, Schratter, & Kugler, 2000). In the first guilt is viewed as an affective state (state guilt), while in the second guilt is portrayed as a continuing dispositional tendency (trait guilt). The third assesses the potential for experiencing guilt by measuring the strength of one’s moral beliefs (moral standards). Research has shown that both state and trait guilt are inversely related to level of education, and significantly correlated with measures of resentment, suspicion, depression, anxiety, and anger (Kugler & Jones, 1992). Interestingly, although these authors state that it is too early to dismiss the theoretical differentiation between state and trait guilt, their research did not show strong support for maintaining the distinction. In examining guilt in relation to WFC, it is expected that levels of guilt will change as the individual experiences more or less WFC, and therefore the focus should be on state guilt. However, one’s internal standards regarding proper role behavior also may be important.

**Difference between guilt and shame**

Guilt and shame are terms that are often used interchangeably. This has created some disagreement in the literature about the theoretical and empirical differences between the two concepts. Some authors still believe that there is not enough evidence to claim that guilt and shame are different constructs (e.g., Kugler & Jones, 1992), while others contend that the two concepts are quite distinct (e.g., O’Connor et al., 1999).

Guilt has been defined as the negative evaluations an individual makes regarding particular behaviors. Shame, on the other hand, refers to the negative evaluations an individual makes about her entire self. Although an individual may momentarily believe that she is a bad person when she is feeling guilt, the focus remains on the specific behaviors and thus, her self-concept remains intact (Tangney, 1990).

Guilt and shame are both considered to be emotions that serve to maintain attachments - first to parents and siblings, and later to others in a person’s social environment (Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1988). However, because guilt involves the belief that an individual has done something "wrong" or "bad"
(Leskela, Diepernick, & Thuras, 2002), it often leads individuals to make amends for their behavior (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992). In contrast, because shame involves the belief that the entire self is bad, it often leads to depression due to the belief that the individual “can not be changed”. This results in disturbing self-scrutiny and feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness, which can therefore lead to a painful reaction with a desire to hide or escape from others (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992). This differentiation has made many view guilt as primarily adaptive, while shame has been linked to psychological problems.

Gender differences in guilt

It has been found that differences in guilt between genders can start as early as 33 months. In a study by Kochanska, Gross, Lin and Nichols (2002), girls were more affected by their wrongdoings than were boys. Further, many other studies have reported stronger guilt in women than in men (e.g., Kubany & Watson, 2003). It is believed that this may stem from females being more interpersonally sensitive than males (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990). Because females are more sensitive to the emotional states of others, it may make them more vulnerable than males to feelings of guilt (Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1988). Interestingly, even pre-school aged children (especially girls) will exhibit guilt-related behaviors when they either observe or commit a transgression (Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1988).

In summary, the construct of guilt has received relatively limited attention (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). Much of the research that exists with respect to guilt focuses on the development of guilt in children or examines the guilt that is experienced in response to traumatic events (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990). There is, therefore, no consensus regarding what factors are the necessary and sufficient causes or determinants of guilt (Kubany & Watson, 2003).

Guilt in relation to work-family conflict

Empirical research on guilt and role conflict dates back almost thirty years. In one of the earliest studies, Nevill and Damico (1975) did not find a significant relationship between the number of children a woman had and the level of guilt she reported due to the stress of role conflict. However, in a later study, the same authors found that women between the ages of 25 and 39 reported significantly higher levels of guilt due to the stress experienced from competing role demands than women at other ages (Nevill & Damico, 1977). It was suggested that because their children were older and required less supervision, women over 39 pursued their individual goals without feeling that these goals were at the expense of others.

Over the years, guilt arising from balancing work and family demands has remained a frequent topic of interest in both the media and the business literature. The cover story of Fortune magazine in the late
1980s (Chapman, 1987) addressed “executive guilt”. The article stated that employees were experiencing guilt due to a perceived failure to fulfill their prescribed gender roles. Moreover, Chapman argued that working parents may try to reduce their guilt by cutting corners in the workplace. Because guilt could then potentially have a considerable impact on employee productivity, it is surprising that this area of study has received so little attention. More recently, there have been articles discussing the guilt that arises from attempts to deal with the double standards that are placed on women when compared to men (Banarjee, 2003; Bui, 1999), and guilt arising from having to choose between work and family (Conlin, 2000; Cook, 2001; Pollock, 1997). Further, there has even been a recognition that fathers are now experiencing guilt from having to deal with the stresses of balancing work and family (Grover, 1999).

In the empirical literature on WFC, WFG is also frequently discussed as being an important phenomenon. Surprisingly, however, these studies rarely include a direct assessment of guilt as a variable. For example, Matthews, Conger and Wickrama (1996) state that experiencing job-related time constraints may result in negative feelings such as anger, guilt and loneliness for both the worker and the spouse, but they offer no research findings to substantiate this (emphasis added). Also, Duxbury and Higgins (1991) explain their finding that women who are highly involved in their work role have more WFC by referring to the increased anxiety and guilt employed women may have regarding their ability to perform traditional family roles (i.e. spouse and parent) (emphasis added). Moreover, in a discussion of gender differences in societal expectations for role performance, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) contend that sanctions such as guilt may arise when individuals do not comply with the gender norms put forth by society (emphasis added).

Thus, despite a tremendous interest in the issue of WFG, recent empirical research on this topic is very limited. Moreover, the research in this area suffers from a number of methodological limitations. Firstly, most of the research on WFC in which guilt has been investigated has only addressed topics relating to the impact of multiple roles (e.g., maternal employment or role conflict/spillover) on women. This may be due to the fact that WFC has traditionally been considered to be a woman's problem (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991). Although men are now more likely to engage in a larger set of roles within the family than in the past (Frone & Rice, 1987), studies still indicate that women's family roles continue to be less closely tied to employment than men's. It follows that employed wives are more likely than employed husbands to experience role conflicts and feelings of guilt from having work spillover into the family sphere, and to evaluate themselves as less successful parents and spouses as a result (Simon, 1995). This may be particularly true in light of the research indicating that women are generally more prone to feelings of guilt than are men (Kubany & Watson, 2003). However, it would also then be expected that men would experience higher levels of guilt stemming from family spilling over into the work sphere based on their historical role as the breadwinner.
Second, many of these studies have employed a qualitative/focus group methodology. For example, one study examining American Native Indian working women (Napholtz, 2000) had participants offer explanations for their feelings of guilt that developed from their multiple roles. One participant stated that women feel obligated to fix everything, and they feel guilty when they can't handle their multiple roles. Another respondent admitted that guilt had driven her to spend more time with her family, because she constantly felt as though she should be doing more. She went on to admit to being so preoccupied with guilt that she was unable to properly complete the tasks that she was working on. Some of these women tried to make amends for this guilt by being a "cool" mother, or by trying to spend more time with their children.

In another study, Simon (1995) compared the perceptions of men and women. This sample consisted of full-time dual-earner couples with a child under 18 living at home. During the focus groups, one woman stated: "Guilt is probably the number one emotion because if I didn't work, that time could be devoted to my kids or my home life or my wifely duties, or whatever" (Simon, 1995, pg. 186). Men, on the other hand, did not report feeling guilty or a feeling of being pulled in different directions. Instead, in this study, women reported feeling WFC because their job prevented them from "being there" for their children, while men felt WFC because they were unable to attend their children's extracurricular activities. Wives were also more likely than husbands to feel guilty because they thought they were neglecting their spouse (Simon, 1995). This is consistent with research that has shown that the majority of men still believe that providing economic support is a key component of their family roles, while only a minority of women view this as important for wives and mothers (Simon, 1995).

A face-to-face survey methodology was used for a study that focused on Pueblo Indian family caregivers. Many of these participants felt that guilt was related to not providing their parents the type of care they felt was necessary (John, Hennessy, Dyeson, & Garrett, 2001). The authors used a two-item measure to assess guilt related to caregiving responsibilities which had a satisfactory Cronbach’s alpha. The participants in this study indicated that they had feelings of inadequacy concerning the extent and effectiveness of their caregiving activities. Other research has found that in these types of situations, symptoms of guilt in caregivers can make them unusually sensitive to issues of suffering, blame, and responsibility, and therefore made ordinary tasks and responsibilities overwhelming. These individuals are more prone to experience guilt and irritability in their relationships with their children as well (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990). There may, however, be cultural differences in the values underlying the experience of guilt in communal versus individualistic cultures. Research by Matsumoto, Kudoh, Scherer, and Wallbot (1988) indicates that the evaluation of, and reactions to emotional antecedents are universal. However, Stipek (1998) has found that Chinese college students’ emotional responses to situations involving affiliated others are more intense than American students’. This was believed to stem from the fact that the Chinese culture focuses more on conformity than the American culture.
Preliminary findings from a multi-national study of WFC in dual career professionals have revealed that women from a variety of countries around the world bring up the issue of guilt during focus group discussions about work-family balance (Ayman, Ishaya & Velgach, 2005; Bardoel, 2004; Desai & Rajadhyaksha, 2004; Drach-Zahavy & Somech, 2004; Huang, 2004; Korabik & Lero, 2004). However, women in different countries tend to emphasize somewhat different themes. According to Bardoel (2004), Australian women were most likely to report experiencing guilt due to their inability to be superwomen. Women in the US mentioned feeling guilty about having to put their jobs before their families and their inability to be in two places at one time (Ayman et al., 2005). By contrast, women in India appear to experience guilt more when they feel that they have ignored the academic achievement of their children. All six of the Arab women in Israel who were interviewed spoke about feeling guilty for not fulfilling their traditional gender roles. Four of the seven Jewish Israeli women, however, felt that they had moved from guilt to positive spillover as a function of their stage in life (Drach-Zahavy & Somech, 2004). While these early results are intriguing, further analysis of these data will certainly serve to elaborate on and clarify these findings.

Recently, some researchers have begun to conduct quantitative examinations of guilt in relation to WFC. Aycan and Eskin (2002) used a self-developed employment-related guilt measure to examine Turkish dual-career professionals who had children under the age of seven. They found a significant positive correlation between WFC and employment-related guilt. Although women experienced significantly higher levels of guilt due to WFC than men, the relationship between WFC and guilt was also significant for men. Although the measure that was used in this study had high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = .88), it was incomplete because it only focused on the work-related component of WFG.

A second study by Aycan and Eskin (in press) also examined employment-related guilt in Turkish dual-earner couples with young children. The bivariate correlations indicated that employment-related guilt was significantly negatively related to emotional spousal support, supervisory support, organizational work-family practices, life satisfaction, satisfaction with parenthood, and satisfaction with time spent with children. Guilt was positively related to time demands and inflexibility, WIF conflict, and depression. Interestingly, employment-related guilt was not significantly related to FIW conflict. Given that the questions focused only on work-related guilt, this finding is not surprising and therefore provides evidence for the need to examine guilt separately for the WIF and FIW components. Further, once again, employment-related guilt had significant gender differences. Women were more likely to experience employment-related guilt than men.

In a recent study, a new measure of WFG was developed that assesses both WIF and FIW guilt (McElwain, Korabik, & Chappell, 2004). Consistent with research by Aycan and Eskin (in press), a significant positive correlation between the WIF conflict and WIF guilt as well as the FIW conflict and FIW
guilt subscales was found. This suggests that WFG is an outcome of interrole conflict. This study also examined WFC and WFG with respect to gender-role orientation (for a detailed discussion of gender-role orientation, see Korabik, 1999). Interestingly, WFG was significantly related only to the instrumentality aspect of gender-role orientation, such that those higher in instrumentality (masculine and androgynous individuals) had significantly lower levels of FIW guilt than individuals lower in instrumentality (feminine and undifferentiated). There were no significant differences between those in the different gender-role groups in their levels of WIF guilt, however.

Implications for Research and Practice

Thus far, most of the existing research on WFG is exploratory and atheoretical. This area could certainly benefit from more theory development as well as a greater attempt to integrate the guilt and the WFC literatures. Furthermore, little has been done to develop quantitative measures of WFG. Because previous research regarding WFC has shown that both WIF and FIW are important, future research should be directed at constructing a domain-specific measure of WFG in order to more fully understand its relationship in the work-family interface. The examination of WFG seems to be an important avenue for future research given that it is a theme that continues to emerge in the work-family literature. Understanding WFG within the general stress model provides an idea of how diverse the effects can be for employees. Hopefully, gaining a deeper knowledge of how WFG operates, will aid in comprehending the complex relationships operating in the work-family interface and will lead to more useful policy recommendations to help employees balance their work and family roles.

References


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