

A Cross-cultural Research Project on the Work-Family Interface:

Preliminary Findings

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### Abstract

This paper presents some preliminary data from an international research project on work-family conflict. The data were collected from Canadian English-speaking white collar, dual earner men and women employees with children. The qualitative data were collected via on-line focus groups. The quantitative data were collected either by paper and pencil or via an on-line web-based survey. The qualitative and quantitative results are discussed in terms of what they indicate about work-family conflict in the Canadian context and how they compare to those of the other countries involved in the larger project.

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Preliminary Findings

The purpose of this paper is to present quantitative and qualitative findings regarding work-family interface from a sample of English-speaking Canadian dual earner employees with children. These data were collected as part of a large-scale international study of the work-family interface. This research project is being undertaken by a collaborative, multicultural team composed of indigenous researchers from countries that were selected based on theoretically important dimensions. The research utilizes a multi-level, theoretically-based approach and consists of four empirical components: 1) qualitative focus groups, 2) a quantitative pilot study, 3) a quantitative two-wave survey, and 4) a social policy analysis. A more complete description of the project can be found in Korabik, Lero, and Ayman (2003). In the present paper we present the preliminary findings from the Canadian subsample from first two stages of the project (i.e., the qualitative focus groups and the quantitative pilot study).

Research over the last two decades has provided ample evidence of continuing and increasing rates of work-family conflict and workplace stress for men and women (e.g., Duxbury & Higgins, 2001). Such stress has been shown to result in distress and dissatisfaction at work and at home, as well as mental and physical health problems (Frone 2002; Frone, Yardley & Markle, 1997; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). This has serious consequences, both for workers and their families, and for organizations that fail to benefit from talented employees and incur additional costs in absenteeism, turnover, recruitment costs, and lost productivity. An understanding of the individual and organizational variables, workplace policies, and mechanisms of support that can ease work-family conflict

can guide the formulation of public policies and organizational practices aimed at reducing these negative consequences.

### Quantitative Pilot Study

A pilot study was carried out for the purpose of pre-testing the quantitative survey. Some selected results from this pilot study are presented below.

#### Sample Demographics

Seventeen individuals (11 women and 6 men) participated in the pilot study. Eleven of these had both child(ren) and an employed spouse or partner; four had an employed spouse/partner, but no children; and two had children, but no spouse or partner. Eight participants had one child and five had two children. The age range of the children was from 3-18 years.

The participants worked an average of 50 hours per week (range 40-60 hours). They reported spending an average of 42 hours per week on family tasks. Their spouses/partners were employed 40 hours per week on average.

#### Quantitative Methods

The data were collected via a survey that was administered either on-line or in a paper and pencil format. The survey contained the following scales (among other measures): *Work Overload* was assessed using the role overload subscale from Peterson et al.'s (1995) measure of cross-cultural role conflict, ambiguity, and overload. A *Family Overload* scale was made up by adapting items from the from work overload measure. Two aspects of work-family conflict and guilt were assessed. The first related to Work Interference with Family (WIF) and the second to Family Interference with Work (FIW). *WIF and FIW Conflict* were assessed with the scale developed by Carlson, Kacmar and Williams (2000).

*WIF and FIW Guilt* were measured with a new scale that had been created by McElwain (2003). The coefficient alphas for all measures were excellent: work overload ( $\alpha = .92$ ), family overload ( $\alpha = .96$ ), WIF conflict ( $\alpha = .88$ ), FIW conflict ( $\alpha = .91$ ), WIF guilt ( $\alpha = .97$ ), and FIW guilt ( $\alpha = .81$ ).

### Quantitative Results

Greater work overload was correlated with both higher WIF conflict,  $r(15) = .59$ ,  $p < .01$ , and higher WIF guilt,  $r(15) = .73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Likewise, greater family overload was associated with higher FIW conflict,  $r(15) = .51$ ,  $p < .04$ , and with higher WIF guilt,  $r(15) = .61$ ,  $p < .01$ , and higher FIW guilt,  $r(15) = .51$ ,  $p < .04$ . WIF conflict and WIF guilt were positively correlated,  $r(15) = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ . FIW conflict was positively related to both WIF guilt,  $r(15) = .54$ ,  $p < .03$ , and FIW guilt,  $r(15) = .79$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Qualitative Focus Groups

Qualitative focus group data were collected to supplement the quantitative data so as to give more depth to the findings and to see if any emic issues were being overlooked.

### Sample Demographics

Seven individuals (5 women and 2 men) participated in the focus groups. They were all members of dual earner couples with at least one child under the age of 18 living at home with them. On average they had 1.86 children. Their children ranged in age from 3-15 years.

The average age of the participants was 41 years. They held primarily managerial or technical occupations. On average they worked 39 hours per week. Their spouses/partners were employed for an average of 44 hours per week.

### Qualitative Methods

Data were collected via on-line focus groups with 2-4 same sex participants in each

group. A moderator posted a series of questions to a website on a daily basis. Participants were asked to sign on for ten minutes each day for a one week period at any time that was convenient to them and to respond to the moderator's questions and to comments posted by the other focus group members.

### Qualitative Results

Reasons for work-family conflict. The primary reasons given for having experienced work-family conflict were: long hours (4 women), lack of flexibility (3 women, 2 men), child care problems (3 women, 1 man), lack of family support (1 woman), and difficulty enforcing boundaries (3 women). As an illustration of this last point, one participant said, "Children need you when they need you, they are not projects to be completed on time and in a predictable task oriented way."

Negative outcomes. The participants noted a number of negative outcomes that had resulted from their experience of work-family conflict. These included: lack of time for partner/children (5 women, 1 man), arguments with partner (1 man), tiredness (2 women), stress (2 women, 1 man), negative emotions and distraction (5 women, 2 men), guilt (5 women, 1 man), lack of time for self (1 woman, 1 man), and lack of professional growth (3 women, 1 man).

Positive outcomes. Some positive outcomes were also reported. One woman said, "It strengthens my relationship with my husband when [we]...provide support for each other in coping with workplace overload. It is good to need each other, and to feel you can trust each other to understand and to go the extra mile to make things work out." Two women believed that by being involved in the workforce they were providing a positive role model. As one noted, "My working outside the home has established a positive female role model

for my son.”

Coping strategies. The participants spoke about a variety of strategies for coping with work-family conflict. These included: compartmentalizing work and family (2 women, 1 man), making family a priority (2 women, 2 men), negotiating roles with their partner (3 women, 1 man), choosing a family friendly job (0 women, 2 men); self-care (3 women, 1 man), and using workplace policies like flextime (5 women, 1 man) and job sharing (1 woman, 0 men).

Social support. In terms of support for dealing with work family-conflict, 5 women and 1 man spoke about receiving support from members of their family; 5 women and 2 men talked about having supportive friends; 2 women and 1 man cited support from paid helpers; and 2 women and 2 men acknowledged the support they received from their bosses. Although 4 women said their spouse/partner provided them with social support, 3 women said that they needed more support from their spouse/partner.

Suggestions for helping to alleviate work-family conflict. The following were the suggestions that participants gave regarding how to best alleviate work-family conflict: provide more organizational policies and programs (e.g., wellness/exercise); provide universal, affordable, accessible, high quality childcare; place more value on parenting and caregiving; and provide special arrangements. For example, one participant came up with an innovative idea that would help her achieve greater work-family balance. She remarked, “Let me take 3-4 years of retirement now (give me an advance on my pension) in exchange for a commitment to work 3-4 years after my planned retirement age.”

## Discussion and Conclusions

The results from the quantitative analyses indicated that greater work and family overload was associated with higher work-family conflict. This is consistent with previous findings from the work-family literature (Frone 2002; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). Moreover, consistent with Frone et al (1997) there were domain specific effects. Thus, work overload was related to WIF conflict, whereas family overload was related to FIW conflict.

Both the quantitative and the qualitative results showed that guilt was an important issue. Although guilt is frequently discussed in the work-family literature, empirical investigations in this area have been rare. In addition to the results from the Canadian subsample, guilt has come up as a theme in the focus group findings from both Turkey and Israel. Future research should be directed at more specific comparisons to see if guilt is being constructed similarly in different cultures as well as by men and women. The quantitative results presented herein indicate that work-family guilt and work-family conflict are related, but not redundant, constructs. Hopefully, the newly created Work-Family Guilt Scale (McElwain, 2003) will stimulate more research on this topic.

It is interesting to note that many of the coping strategies discussed by participants in this study were similar to ones that came up in the data from Israel and Spain. Although the numbers are low, the data appear to indicate that women may be better able to mobilize support from non-work sources (e.g., family, friends) than are men. Women also appear to be somewhat conflicted in regard to their satisfaction regarding the support provided to them by their spouses/partners.

These preliminary findings provide an intriguing introduction to the larger project. This project should advance our understanding of the work-family interface in a multi-national context.

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