

WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT AND SOURCES OF SUPPORT AMONGST MALAYSIAN DUAL-CAREER EMPLOYEES

Meera Komarraju

Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University,
Carbondale, IL 62901-6502
e-mail: meerak@siu.edu

ABSTRACT

As the number of dual-career employees entering the workplace increases, it is important to understand how the integration of work and family responsibilities influences work outcomes. The current study examined occupational role salience, work-family conflict, basic understandings, spousal support, and organizational support as predictors of work satisfaction. One hundred and sixteen dual-career faculty and staff from three Malaysian universities completed a survey questionnaire. Results from stepwise regression analyses showed that across all employees, work-family conflict was the most significant predictor of work satisfaction. More specifically, for male employees, spousal support was the most important predictor of work satisfaction followed by work-family conflict. Interestingly, for female employees, work-family conflict was the most significant predictor followed by organizational support. These results suggest that dual-career employees who find family responsibilities intruding into their work activities are likely to experience lesser work satisfaction. Dual-career employees receiving support and encouragement from a spouse or from the employing organization are more likely to experience increased work satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

During the last 50 years, there has been a growing acknowledgement that the lives of employed men and women need greater attention from employing organizations. This is because the traditional model of the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker has given way to a dual-career model where both husband and wife are employed. As a consequence, working parents face the unique task of effectively integrating work and family responsibilities. There are numerous factors that influence this interface between work and family domains (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Pitt-Catsouphes & Christensen, 2004; Warfield, 2005). While a majority of the research examining work-family conflict and its consequences in the workplace has been done within western countries (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991; Jacobs & Winslow, 2004; Noor, 2004; Voydanoff, 2004), there is not much research on this phenomenon in a non-Western context. This gap in the literature needs to be addressed, as there are

a rising number of multinational corporations that employ individuals from various parts of the world. The current research was designed to examine occupational role salience, work-family conflict, basic understandings, spousal support, and organizational support in relation to work satisfaction in a sample of Malaysian dual-career employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on work-family conflict, its relation to work satisfaction, and the role of support mechanisms is presented in the following three sections: (1) work-family conflict in the Western context, (2) work-family conflict in non-Western settings, and (3) role of organizations in supporting work-family integration.

Work-Family Conflict in the Western Context

Some of the early research (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991) examined gender differences work-conflict as experienced by male and female managers and professionals. It was found that society's perceptions of work being more important for men, and family being the domain for women, prevented the redistribution of family responsibilities causing employed women to become overburdened. Gutek et al. (1991) attempted to offer a rational explanation for work-family conflict by stating that the more number of hours spent in a domain (work or family) resulted in more conflict in that area. However, they also found an effect of gender roles in their study as women reported greater "work-interferes-with-family" conflict relative to men, even though they spent the same amount of time in paid work as men. In probing further into the nature of work-family conflict, Frone, Russell, and Cooper (1992) proposed a comprehensive model to show that there was a reciprocal relationship between the domains of work and family. They explained how pressures from work increased "work to family conflict" and family stressors increased "family to work conflict." Further, they identified "family to work-conflict" being responsible for increasing work distress and "work to family conflict" increasing family distress.

In explaining how social support may alleviate stress and strain within dual-career couples, Granrose, Parasuraman, and Greenhaus (1992) identified factors such as personal characteristics of the provider as well as the recipient, being in a supportive environment, being committed to the family and the children, having time and information as determinants of whether social support is offered in the relationship. Empirical evidence that social support does make a difference in the effects of work-family conflict is offered by Burley (1995). In this study, work-family conflict was associated with poorer marital adjustment for dual-career

couples; however, this effect was mediated by perceived spousal social support and fairness in distributing household. Phillips-Miller, Campbell, and Morrison (2000) found that compared to men, women reported a stronger negative association between marital/family stress as well as lack of spousal support and career satisfaction. Similarly, Grandey, Cordeiro, and Crouter (2004) found that work interfering with family had a negative association with job satisfaction while controlling for family, personal, and job characteristics in a cross-sectional sample of men and women. However, when looking at longitudinal data, they found that work interfering with family predicted negative job satisfaction for women, but not for men, perhaps supporting gender role theory. More recently, Voydanoff (2004) examined the role of organizational support and reported that since work-family was positively associated with time and strain based work demands, organizational policies that were supportive of family needs tended to lower work-family conflict.

Work-Family Conflict in Non-Western Settings

While a majority of the research on work-family conflict has been conducted in Western settings, there is an emerging body of literature that has begun to examine this phenomenon in non-western countries. For example, Bharat (1995), and Wagner, Kirchler, Clack, Tekarslan, and Verma (1990) found that in societies that are more traditional, such as India or Turkey, there is a greater segregation of gender roles with women fulfilling the homemaker role even if they are employed full time. While this may place a heavier burden on employed women, they are happier as they feel they are adhering to cultural norms in performing their duty towards the family and it also reduces conflict as it clarifies who is in charge of the home. Similarly, in a study focusing specifically on working fathers in India, Larson, Dworkin, and Verma (2001) report that they maintained a clear separation between work and family life. There was a shared understanding at home that the wives would run the home and manage the children while men were in charge of shopping and banking. Further, Indian fathers protected their families by not bringing their stress and tension from work when they returned to their families at the end of the day. This traditional separation of work and family duties is supported by Komarraju (1997) who reported that working Indian women preferred to independently handle family related responsibilities by taking help from relatives and hired domestic help rather than their spouses.

In research done in the Israel, Feldman, Masalha, and Nadam (2001) examined how dual-earner couples handle work-family conflict while making the transition into parenthood. They report that Arab-Palestinian fathers tend to be more traditional and expect their working wives to handle childcare responsibilities while receiving help from the extended family. Quite in contrast, Israeli-Jewish

couples are more likely to live in nuclear families and fathers are more egalitarian sharing housework and childcare with their wives. Similarly, Kulik and Rayyan (2003) found that Arab fathers were more traditional in their orientation towards gender roles and tended to take care of tasks outside the home while Jewish-Israeli fathers tended to help more with household tasks. However, both Arab and Jewish dual-career couples provided each other mutual spousal support.

In a study of employed women in Malaysia, Noor (1999) found that those who had more control over their work requirements, those who received support from their spouses, and those who were more religious tended to experience lesser work-family conflict. In another study of Malaysian women researchers, Ahmad (1996) reports that those who experienced greater work-family conflict were likely to experience less job satisfaction. Similarly, Aryee (1992) found high levels of work-family conflict in a sample of professional women in Singapore as they faced pressures from traditional expectations to fulfill their combined roles as spouse, parent, and professional. Those who had to work longer hours and received less spouse support experienced greater work-family conflict, and lesser job and life satisfaction.

A few other studies also highlight the role of cultural expectations in the Asian context influencing the work-family conflict experienced by employed women. In a study of dual-earner couples in Hong Kong, Aryee and Luk (1996) emphasize that the Chinese Confucian philosophy considers the family as the most important aspect of their lives. Both parents are devoted to the family and think of work as a way of providing for the family. When work responsibilities did not allow them to fulfill family obligations they experienced greater distress that in turn reduced life satisfaction. Chan and Lee (1995) reiterate the importance of the family unit as well as filial piety and obligations of elder care in Hong Kong society. In testing whether a Western model of work-family conflict could be generalized to a sample of Hong Kong employees, Aryee, Fields, and Luk (1999) report that in the United States (US), the life satisfaction of employees is influenced when family interferes with work, while in Hong Kong, life satisfaction is influenced when work interferes with family. They recommend that organizations in Hong Kong should support employees' efforts to integrate work and family responsibilities by providing flexible work hours, childcare facilities, and family responsive parental leave policies.

Regarding the role of spousal support, Natdoo and Jano (2003) report that South African female managers in dual-career families experienced greater work-family conflict when their husband/partner failed to be involved in household chores and this posed an impediment to their career progress. Similarly, Aycan (2004) found that women managers in Turkey were able to advance in their careers when they

were confident, determined, and received support from their family and organizations. These studies suggest that there are some interesting similarities as well as differences in how work-family conflict is experienced and handled in Western and non-Western contexts.

Organizational Support of Work-Family Integration

Given that dual-couple employees are increasing in the workplace, organizations can no longer ignore their unique needs; in fact employers who make efforts to implement supportive policies are experiencing more benefits than costs. Thomas and Ganster (1995) found that organizational policies and practices such as flexible scheduling and supportive supervision had an indirect influence on work-family conflict as it made employees perceive greater control over their work and family responsibilities. This in turn was associated with lower levels of work-family conflict, job dissatisfaction, and health complaints. Similarly, in a study of employees across 48 countries, Hill, Yang, Hawkins, and Ferris (2004) found that those who perceived their jobs as having greater flexibility were likely to experience less work-family conflict and greater job satisfaction. In another study across 25 countries, Polemans, Spector, Cooper, Allen, O'Driscoll, and Sanchez (2003) found that managers experienced lesser stress when they were working in countries where the government implemented family friendly policies in the workplace. In a study of working men and women in Australia, Elloy (2001) found that employees who had to combine various roles (as worker, spouse, and parent) did not necessarily experience conflict between these roles when the employer had supportive policies. Aryee et al. (1999) argue that organizations employing working parents need to accept that the family is an important aspect of their lives, especially in an Asian country, and provide supportive mechanisms to reduce their stress. Thompson, Beauvais, and Lyness (1999) make the important point that not only should organizations provide family friendly policies but they should also nurture a culture that encourages employees to make use of such policies. In their study of US managers and professionals, they found that employees were more committed to the organization, less likely to leave, and experienced less work-family conflict when they perceived the organization's culture as supportive of work-family integration. Quite surprisingly, in a more recent study of local government employees in New Zealand, Haar (2004) found that while high levels of work-family conflict were associated with a higher likelihood of turnover, perceptions of work-family support from the organization did not have a moderating effect. Clearly, further research is needed to clarify the role of organizational support in relation to work-family conflict.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Consistent with prior research, the thrust of this study was based on the reasoning that dual-career employees experiencing work-family conflict will be less satisfied with their work while those who receive support (spousal as well as organizational) will experience greater work satisfaction. The following hypotheses were developed for this study: First, work-family conflict will be negatively associated with work satisfaction. Second, dual-careers employees who experience higher levels of spousal support will experience higher work satisfaction. Third, dual-career employees perceiving the organization as being supportive are likely to experience higher levels of work satisfaction. Fourth, dual-career employees sharing a basic understanding of their dual roles will experience lower levels of work-family conflict. Finally, dual-career employees who consider their occupational role to be more salient will experience greater satisfaction from their work.

METHOD

The participants in this study consisted of 116 dual-career faculty and staff from three universities. Regarding demographic details, the sample included 46 men and 70 women, 76 Malays, 25 Chinese, and 10 Indian, with 2–3 children on average. Data were collected using a survey questionnaire and were measured based on a 5-point Likert scale as follows:

1. Four items measuring Occupational Role Salience (Amatae, Cross, Clark, & Bobby, 1986; alpha value = 0.74) with a sample item, "Having work/a career that is interesting and exciting to me is my most important life goal."
2. Five items measuring Work Satisfaction (Bunker, Zubek, Vanderslice, & Rice, 1992; alpha value = 0.89) with a sample item, "The extent to which you are satisfied with your ability to be the kind of worker you would like to be."
3. Six items measuring Work-Family Conflict (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 1992; alpha value = 0.85) with a sample item, "Because of family responsibilities, the time I spend on my job is less enjoyable and more pressured."
4. Eleven items measuring Basic Understandings (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 1992; alpha value = 0.68) with a sample item, "Both partners (my spouse and I) agree on how to take care of the children."

5. Eight items measuring Spousal Support (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1992; alpha value = 0.85) with a sample item, "To what extent does your spouse participate in the housework and/or childrearing activities?"
6. Six items measuring Organizational Support (Sekaran, 1986; alpha value = 0.63) with a sample item, "My organization allows for flexibility in work scheduling."

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

The results of this study based on correlation and stepwise multiple regression analyses supported four of the five hypotheses.

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis (Table 1) revealed a number of significant relationships that were consistent with the hypotheses: work-family conflict will be negatively associated with work satisfaction; dual-career employees who experience higher levels of spousal support will experience higher work satisfaction; dual-career employees perceiving the organization as being supportive are likely to experience higher levels of work satisfaction; and dual-career employees who consider their occupational role to be more salient will experience greater satisfaction from their work.

Specifically, Occupational Role Salience was positively related with Work Satisfaction; Work-Family Conflict was negatively related with Work Satisfaction, Spousal Support, and Organizational Support; Basic Understandings was positively related with Spousal Support; and finally, Spousal Support was positively related with Work Satisfaction, and negatively related with Work-Family Conflict.

TABLE 1
CORRELATIONS BETWEEN OCCUPATIONAL ROLE SALIENCE, WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT, BASIC UNDERSTANDINGS, SPOUSAL SUPPORT, ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT, AND WORK SATISFACTION

Occupational role salience	Work-family conflict	Basic understandings	Spousal support	Organizational support	Work satisfaction
Occupational role salience	-0.04	0.03	-0.06	0.18	0.22*
Work-family conflict		-0.06	-0.21*	-0.29**	-0.42**
Basic understandings			0.33**	0.18	0.12
Spousal support				0.09	0.35**
Organizational support					0.38**

Note. N ranges from 94 to 114
*p<0.05
**p<0.01

Regression Analyses

Stepwise multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify the variables that were the strongest predictors of Work Satisfaction for the combined data and separately for male and female participants. Occupational Role Salience, Work-Family Conflict, Basic Understandings, Spousal Support, and Organizational Support were the predictors, and Work Satisfaction was the dependent variable. Tables 2, 3, and 4 identify the significant predictors from each regression model.

TABLE 2
STEPWISE MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS (MALE AND FEMALE PARTICIPANTS) WORK SATISFACTION = F (OCCUPATIONAL ROLE SALIENCE, WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT, BASIC UNDERSTANDING, SPOUSAL SUPPORT, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT)

Dependent variable	Step	Predictor	Beta	Change in R ²
Work satisfaction	1	Work-family conflict	-0.313	0.21**
	2	Spousal support	0.30	0.08**
	3	Organisational support	0.23	0.04*

*p<0.05
**p<0.01

TABLE 3
STEPWISE MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS (MALE PARTICIPANTS ONLY) WORK SATISFACTION = F (OCCUPATIONAL ROLE SALIENCE, WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT, BASIC UNDERSTANDING, SPOUSAL SUPPORT, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT)

Dependent variable	Step	Predictor	Beta	Change in R ²
Work satisfaction	1	Spousal support	0.54	0.30**
	2	Work-family conflict	-0.41	0.17**

*p<0.05
**p<0.01

TABLE 4
 STEPWISE MULTIPLE REGRESSION (FEMALE PARTICIPANTS ONLY)
 WORK SATISFACTION = F (OCCUPATIONAL ROLE SALIENCE,
 WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT, BASIC UNDERSTANDING, SPOUSAL
 SUPPORT, AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT)

Dependent variable	Step	Predictor	Beta	Change in R ²
Work satisfaction	1	Work-family conflict	-0.41	0.24**
	2	Organizational support	0.29	0.08*

*p<0.05

**p<0.01

For all the dual-career employees, 33% of the variance in Work Satisfaction was explained by three predictors (Work-Family Conflict, Spousal Support, and Organizational Support), $F(3, 87) = 14.34$ $p < 0.001$. Work-Family Conflict was negatively related with Work Satisfaction (beta = -0.31) whereas Spousal (beta = 0.30) and Organizational Support (beta = 0.23) were positively related with it. Work-Family Conflict was the strongest predictor, explaining 21% of the variance in Work Satisfaction, followed by Spousal Support at 8%, and Organizational Support at 4%.

For male dual-career employees, 47% of the variance in Work Satisfaction was explained by two predictors (Spousal Support and Work-Family Conflict), $F(2, 36) = 15.30$ $p < 0.001$. Spousal Support was positively related with Work Satisfaction (beta = 0.54) whereas Work-Family Conflict was negatively related with Work Satisfaction (beta = -0.41). Spousal Support was the strongest predictor, explaining 30% of the variance in Work Satisfaction, followed by Work-Family Conflict at 17%.

For female dual-career employees, 32% of the variance in Work Satisfaction was explained by two predictors (Work-Family Conflict and Organizational Support), $F(2, 48) = 11.13$ $p < 0.001$. Work-Family Conflict was negatively related with Work Satisfaction (beta = -0.41) whereas Organizational Support was positively related with it (0.29). Work-Family Conflict was the strongest predictor, explaining 24% of the variance in Work Satisfaction, followed by Organizational Support at 8%.

DISCUSSION

These results suggest that work-family conflict and sources of support (Spousal and Organizational) are strongly related to work satisfaction. The correlation analyses indicate that work satisfaction is significantly related to several work

and family variables. In particular, employees for whom the occupational role has greater salience in their lives are likely to experience greater rewards from their contributions in the workplace. They may spend more time at work and be more involved in their job and take greater pride in their accomplishments. Employees who receive support from a spouse or from the organization are likely to experience less work-family conflict and greater work satisfaction.

The regression analyses add further information about the relative importance of each of these variables in explaining work satisfaction while also revealing gender differences. First, across all the dual-career employees, the greatest amount of variance in work satisfaction is explained by family responsibilities that seem to conflict with work activities. This conflict is associated with decreased pleasure and satisfaction from work. Further, employees who receive some degree of support from their spouse and their employing organization are more likely to enjoy their work experiences. Perhaps the support they receive helps to relieve some of the pressure and facilitates the work they can put forth. When a spouse steps in and assists with chores or listens to problems and offers advice, the employee may experience some relief and may feel freed of some responsibilities at home allowing him/her to concentrate at work without feeling guilt or strain.

Second, amongst male dual-career employees, spousal support emerged as the most significant contributor to work satisfaction followed by work-family conflict. These results suggest that for male employees to find satisfaction and pleasure from their work, they need to receive the support of their spouses. Perhaps in the Malaysian context, the traditional gender role distribution of responsibilities still exists and male employees can count on their wives to fulfill most of the home responsibilities associated, thus allowing them to concentrate more at work. When wives are willing to listen to their problems and provide them with supportive feedback and praise it allows the male employees to more freely engage in their work responsibilities and enjoy a sense of fulfillment through career contributions.

Third, for female dual-career employees, the conflict between work and family responsibilities plays a significant role in reducing work satisfaction. Faced with a traditional division of labor, employed women perform more than their fair share of work. Not only do they shoulder most of the responsibilities associated with supervising the cooking, childcare, and housework, they are also full-time employees. While at work they continue to worry about things that need to get done at home such as care of a sick child, an elderly relative, or running an errand. Hence, the time spent at work is not as enjoyable and satisfying, or guilt free. However, when the organizations they work for are responsive to the needs

of female dual-career employees they are likely to reduce some of the tension they experience leading to higher levels of work satisfaction.

Put together, these multiple regression results suggest that the conflict between work and family responsibilities experienced by dual-career couples can decrease the level of work satisfaction they experience. However, when these employees receive support and encouragement from a spouse or from the workplace the effects of this conflict can be reduced. Hence, employees involved in dual-career relationships can help and encourage each other so that both members benefit. They can express concern, offer advice, listen to problems, and provide feedback or information that is comforting and encouraging. Further, organizations can do their part by offering flexible work hours, childcare facilities, and family leave policies that accommodate the needs of dual-career employees, and try to be understanding of the difficulties faced by employees balancing work and family roles as this is likely to result in employees who are more satisfied with their work.

A clear implication of these findings is that as organizations continue to hire a larger number of employees engaged in dual-career relationships, they need to find ways of addressing the unique needs of such employees. By implementing a wider variety of leave options, flexible scheduling of work hours, quality childcare facilities, and other family friendly resources needed by dual-career employees, organizations can provide much needed support. Employees working in such environments can be more productive and benefit the employer while at the same time feel more satisfied and fulfilled.

Though this study addresses some very important problems faced by current employees, it does have some limitations, as the sample was restricted only to university employees. The problems of dual-career employees in other types of organizations (such as banks, hospitals, factories, etc.) may be different and may produce different results. However, this study is one of few that extends work done in Western countries to the Asian context. It is hoped that additional research will be conducted to further our understanding of challenges faced by dual-career couples in Asian countries.

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