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Dyadic perspectives on work-family conflict and balance

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Abstract

Actual societies are described in most situations by dual-earner couples, a context that brings the debate regarding work-family interactions on the research agenda of domains like family and work psychology, health, sociology, or organizational studies. More than that, the general public and policymakers are also interested in the matter of work-family relations due to the multi-faced consequences of efficient or poor management of these interactions on individual well-being, couple and family dynamics, work outcomes, and organizational input.

Considering this existing context, the present paper intends to delve into the intricate dynamics of work-family relationships capturing the dyadic perspective in this analysis and the mechanisms associated with the intersections between the two sets of roles.

Keywords: couples, dyads, roles, work-family conflict, work-family balance

Introduction

The context

The study of work-family conflict and balance represents a major challenge for organisational and family research, psychology, health and management also. Traditionally, the scientific perspective captures an individual's experience regarding the work and family domains. Nevertheless, an increasing interest is now noticed regarding the analysis of couples and bidirectional and mutual interactions between the two domains. Given this framework, the present study intends to explore the existing models regarding the work-family relation from a dyadic perspective. In pursuit of this aim, the paper starts with an introductory section that tries to introduce the context, followed by a theoretical and conceptual analysis of major approaches in the domain and a summary of the main findings in the discussion part.

Many societies are nowadays confronted with the challenge of a considerable part of the working-age population being a so-called "sandwich generation", as they provide care for their children and for their parents or other close ones dependent. Moreover, the norm is the dual-earner couple, as both partners have jobs "outside the house", sometimes even more than one, each of them. Social transformations, triggered by technological development, are the major factors that favour such changes. Technological development has a strong impact on the work domain (Pogan, 2021), helping employees with some dangerous or difficult activities, enabling them to perform their tasks easier (Stanescu, 2022), and also staying connected and always informed.

This is considered to bring both advantages and disadvantages in terms of blurry boundaries between work and non-work, increasing the impact of one of the two domains, work or family, on the activities in the other one and thus the possibility of increasing work-family conflict (Pogan, 2021). Besides the changes encountered at the organizational level, as caused by technological transformations, house activities have also been restructured by the presence of various types of equipment and software products aiming to ease humans' work in cleaning, cooking, surveilling or even interacting and taking care of others (Pogan, 2019). Furthermore, another phenomenon with a great impact on work-family interactions is the massive migration: on the one hand, many families are confronted with the absence of one spouse due to work contracts outside the country of residence, and, on the other hand, in many situations tasks usually associated with gender roles are being externalized to people outside of the family circle (Porumbescu, 2023).

Besides these types of transformations regarding the interactions between personal and professional roles generated by technological triggers, economic or demographic factors, one can certainly acknowledge the presence of some soft-level mechanisms that also influence work-family relationships, like changes in value orientation, the increase in more egalitarian perspectives on gender roles and activities associated with them, more flexible boundaries between gender roles expectations and a trend towards convergence (Kan and Gershuny, 2010, Thoits, 1992).

Conceptual framework

Given this context above described, the work-family relationship started to gain attention and became an increasingly addressed concept by both psychologists and sociologists, and organizational, economic, management, and even health professionals are preoccupied with understanding the dynamics of this relationship, possible outcomes, and possibilities to facilitate these interactions.

The work-family relationship is usually approached through the concepts of work-family conflict and work-family balance. Work-family conflict was described as being a form of role conflict that emerges when job and family demands are incompatible, and they interfere or even restrict fulfilling any or both of the roles (Greenhouse and Beutell, 1985). We can distinguish between two directions of the conflict, from work to family and from family to work, and two types of conflict - based on time and based on strain. This approach is born from the resource conservation theory (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999), assuming that each individual has limited resources of time and energy and that involving in more activities will consume these resources and this is the mechanism that leads to work-family conflict (Pogan, 2015).

The negative consequences of the work-family conflict may interact with the family life, job performance, well-being, marital satisfaction, health, and the list may continue as previous studies have extensively analysed the impact of the work-family conflict on several variables, at both personal and professional levels (Barnett, and Baruch, 1985, Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Contrary to the conservation of resources theory, the expansionist perspective regarding the interactions between personal and professional roles brings a different understanding of the matter. Merging family and work roles has positive consequences, according to the expressionist theory (Barnett and Hyde, 2001, Oppenheimer, 1997, Baruch, 1986).

Contraposed to the work-family conflict, work-family balance might be understood in terms of efficacy in managing professional and personal roles, despite their strains, and challenges, without neglecting or negatively impacting any of the roles.

Moving the level of analysis from the individual perspective to the couple, several concepts and models are proposed. The "crossover" concept (Westman, 2001) tries to explain how the two partners are influenced by the subjective experience of each other. For example, the stress experienced by one of the members of the couple is transferred to the other one also. Thus, the work pressure or family challenges of one are expected to interfere with the other one's work performance, satisfaction, and well-being. This interconnection described both the relations between domains – work, and family, and also the ones inside the couple.

When analysing the work-family conflict from a dyadic perspective, it becomes easy to understand that the strain experienced by one of the partners does not remain only at the individual level, but it affects both of them. Baker and Demerouti (2013) introduced the "spillover - crossover" model and distinguished between direct and indirect conflict. Spillover, at the direct level, refers to the emotional contagion of the two partners, and the indirect one targets changes in the family dynamics, functioning and responsibilities. Other studies also showed that the work-family conflict experienced by one of the partners also affects the other one, causing stress and low marital satisfaction (From, 2003).

Nevertheless, the work-family interactions don't have only negative consequences. The literature comes to propose the concept used to describe the positive interactions between the two sets of roles as "work-family enrichment" (Carlson et al, 2006). According to this approach, participating in one role may have positive consequences in the other domain. Moreover, the authors showed that an enriching work-family relationship for one of the partners has positive consequences for the other partner as well, regarding both family and professional roles functioning.

Social support is one of the key factors associated with work-family balance (Michael et al, 2011, Hammer et al, 2005). Both forms of support, emotional and instrumental, have a positive impact on the work-family relationship. Giving and receiving support is also conditioned by social norms and gender prescriptions. According to the more traditional perspectives, men are expected to work more outside the house, being the breadwinner, while women should take care of the house, children, and family (Oakley, 1974). Social changes have diminished

such traditionalist views but differences regarding these aspects between the two partners might still have a negative influence on offering and receiving support. Furthermore, even in modern developed societies where gender equality policies are in place, gaps in treatment are still persistent (Porumbescu and Pogan, 2021). As previous research showed, sharing more egalitarian views on family roles and professional ones has positive consequences for the family interactions and contributes to work-family balance (Carlson et al, 2006).

Discussions and future directions

Balancing professional and family roles has undeniable consequences on individuals, their professional performance and satisfaction, health and well-being, family dynamics, work functioning, and marital satisfaction, and also impact organizations in multiple ways and at various levels. As revealed by research, efficient management of the complex interactions in the work-family dynamics requests support between the two partners, from close ones, and from the organization, through family-friendly practices. Also, balanced work-family relations are being facilitated by egalitarian views on gender roles. Organisations can support a more balanced work-family relationship as well. Among the strategies that employers may apply, and previous research showed that they have a positive impact, are flexible organizational policies, like the possibility of working remotely or having a flexible program (Kossek et al, 2011), or family-friendly practices (Allen et al, 2013). Flexibility brings benefits not only at the individual level for the employee but has a positive impact on family well-being also (Kossek et al 2011). Some examples of family-friendly practices that might help employees to better manage personal and professional roles are paid leave for parents, childcare facilities on site, or support for accessing such facilities (Allen et al, 2013). As emphasized by previous models of crossover and spillover, the benefits of such family-friendly practices and policies at personal level will favourably influence work-related aspects also.

A worth mentioning contribution of this study is the dyadic perspective when studying work-family relations, as partners mutually influenced their professional and family roles through the above-described crossover and spillover mechanisms. Analysing the interactions between personal and professional roles through these lenses helps understanding how the support coming from the organizations has a positive impact on work-related variables and, more than that, positively influence family-related outcomes. Vice-versa, positive interactions inside the family, the support coming from the partner, relatives or other close persons, sharing of family duties or the ones related to children has a direct positive relation with family satisfaction, but also influences in a positive direction indicators related to the professional role.

Although the models that take into account the dyadic perspective and the crossover and spillover mechanism when studying the work-family relation might rise more difficulties than the analysis of individuals and their work-related and family related strains together with the intersections of the two types of roles, such an approach provides the opportunity for a better and deeper understanding of this type of dynamic and profound topics. Future studies might use such comprehensive approaches when trying to address the intricate matter of interactions between personal and professional roles, challenges, strains and even conflicts.

This study contributes to the development of knowledge related to the work family relationships at several levels, as follows. Bringing together the dyadic perspective and the approaches related to conflict and balance understood through the mechanism of crossover and spillover, this paper makes steps towards a comprehensive theoretical framework that enables future research. Furthermore, at methodological level, these insights might be leveraged in both qualitative, quantitative and even mixt research-designs that allow investigators to capture information at large scale and also deepen the understanding of the work-family dynamics. These contributions at theoretical and methodological level might sustain a better-grounded understanding of the issues related to personal and professional interactions, allowing thus practitioners to tailor their organizational strategies and policies scientifically based.

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