Exploring the Links between Work and Family: Conflict or Facilitation?

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Abstract: The domain of work and family plays a significant role in sustaining an individual’s life, while at the same time endowing the individual with certain roles and affiliated responsibilities. The domains of work and family may conflict due to the following circumstances: being able to carry out different responsibilities related to multiple roles only at certain times and in certain places; contradictory behaviour and complications occasionally arising from these different roles; and various behaviour demands created by these different roles. However, sufficient resources of work and family roles to meet these demands, commitment to work and family roles, and positive participation in these roles may bring along participation in work and family roles as well as the work-family facilitation. This paper aims to evaluate both positive and negative aspects of the relationship between work and family by investigating the dimension of facilitation besides the dimension of inter-role conflict, a topic that is widely covered in the body of literature on the relationship between work and family.

Key words: work-family conflict, work-family facilitation, and multiple roles

1. Introduction

Work and family are considered as the two central spheres in an individual’s life [1, 2, 3, 4]. For instance, Bronfenbrenner [5, 6], in his Theory of Ecological Systems analyses the individual’s development within a wide conceptual framework. He investigates the environments effective in this development under 5 systems, which are hierarchically situated within each other in line with their proximity to the individual: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Microsystem is the nearest one to the individual and it is the environment that has the most direct and the closest effect on the individual’s biological and psychological development. Within the framework of this theory, family and work are domains, which have a direct and close effect on individual’s development. In other words, each is a microsystem.

Family, which has been observed in different forms throughout the history of humanity, is one of the basic activity domains of an individual. Within the conditions of modernity, it continues to be the central unit of society and retains its importance [7]. The importance and place of family in society is interrelated with its responsibilities and functions. For example, The Commission Report on Family and Children [8] in the 8th Development Plan of Turkey defines and holds family responsible in terms of meeting individuals’ sexual, psychological, cultural, and economic developments and ensuring their adaptation and integration to the society.

Family is the primary domain of socialisation, whereby the individual meets not only her own needs but also the needs of the society. A society cannot survive unless its needs (production, distribution, compliance with law, etc.) are fulfilled. It only reproduces itself as long as individuals are motivated to meet such needs. The sole domain where such motivation is created is the family.

Family, constituted by individuals, is a social unit and a part of larger social networks. The family is not an isolated and self-enclosed system. On the contrary, it is a special link bridging the individual with other social organisations (school, work, economy, etc.). Every day other social institutions realise that they are also involved with not “individuals”, but rather with “family members” [9].

Work, which is another social organisation, encompasses a large segment of the lives of family members. The reciprocal influence of family life and work is inevitable, because these two significant domains of an individual’s life ascribe certain roles and related demands and resources to the individual. In this way, these demands and resources make the interaction between these two domains unavoidable. For instance, characteristics related to the content of work (e.g. autonomy at work, flexible attitudes in the office, manager or friend support and self-management at work) are related with positive patterns of family life (e.g. marriage satisfaction, quality of parent-children interaction and less behavioural problems among
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working women after the industrial revolution led to an escalating number of families with dual incomes [20] and changing expectations about self-satisfaction [21]. According to this view, work and family are not two independent domains that need to be analysed separately. On the contrary, they are areas which both influence and are influenced by each other. And, this relationship is reciprocal. In other words, work does not affect family alone. Similarly, family does not influence work alone. Both domains have powers on each other [22, 23]. For this reason, changes in (work) family should be explored together with changes at work (in family) [19]. Indeed, studies on the linkages between work and family show that different dimensions of work influence various characteristics of family and family welfare, while certain characteristics of family affect work life. Accordingly, income – a structural pattern of work – influences adaptation to marriage and stability, time spent with children and children’s health positively. In contrast, long working hours, unstable working schedule, frequent relocations and work-related travel have an effect on the quality and stability of marriage, parent-child relationships and children’s developmental processes in a negative way [11, 12, 13, 14, 24].

After the argument that the relationship between work and family is reciprocal had been supported by different studies, subsequent research focused on how these two domains influence each other. Initially, it was argued that work and family roles influence each other negatively. This view was expressed with concepts such as adjustment disorder between work and family roles [25], work and family interaction problem [26], incompatibility of work and family [27], work-family tension [28], and lastly, work-family conflict [29].

At this time, the view that work and family affect each other in a negative way has remained as the dominant view, widely accepted in the literature on the relationship between work and family. This stance was generally supported by Role Strain Theory [30] and Role Conflict [31]. Role Strain refers to the difficulty in carrying out the responsibilities of a certain role. This difficulty stems from insufficient resources (time and energy) to meet role expectations, inability to carry out the responsibilities of different roles at the same time, contradictory behaviours required by different roles, conflicting responsibilities, and lastly multiple behaviour expectations of different roles [30]. Role conflict occurs when complying with two or more role expectations makes it difficult to comply with the other role expectations. There are various types of role conflicts one of them is inter-role conflict. Inter-role conflict refers to conflicting expectations of different roles. For example, when
the working individual brings work to her house or when she needs to work overtime, she focuses on her work during family time. This creates a conflict between individual’s work role and family role [31]. This paper explicitly addresses work-family conflict.

2.2.1. Work-Family Conflict

Greenhaus and Beutell [29], who adopt Kahn et al.’s [31] inter-role conflict approach, define work-family conflict as “the reciprocal incompatibility of certain aspects of role expectations arising from work and family domains”. They hold that participation in work (family) role will make it difficult to participate in family (work) role. Thus, Kahn et al.’s [31] example about the intervention of work role on the family role (working partner role) is described specifically as work-family conflict by Greenhaus and Beutell [29].

While defining work-family conflict, Greenhaus and Beutell [29] based on their literature review, state that there are four main types of work-family conflict. This classification explains the notion of “certain aspects” in the definition of work-family conflict. In other words, the classification includes the answer to the question of ways in which work and family conflict. The four types are time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, behavioural conflict and psychological conflict.

Time-based conflict stems from the fact that multiple-roles compete for time, because the time spent for the requirements of a role cannot be spent for the requirements of another role. Strain-based conflict refers to the case whereby a straining situation in a role negatively influences the performance of another role. In this case, the pressure created in a role makes it difficult to comply with the demands of another role, rendering these roles incompatible. Behavioural conflict refers to the case whereby specific behavioural patterns of a role are unsuited for the behavioural expectations of another role. If the individual does not have the ability to adapt to the behavioural expectations contradicting with his roles, she experiences behavioural conflict between his roles [29]. Finally, psychological conflict refers to “the psychological preoccupation with one role, while performing another role that interferes with one’s ability to become engaged in that last role”. For instance, a person keeps thinking about home-life problems at work which may make it difficult to concentrate on work [32, 33].

Frone et al. [34] argue that this conflict is twofold following Greenhaus and Beutell’s [29] classification of work-family conflict. It stems both from family towards work (family-to-work) and from work towards family (work-to-family). They developed a 4 points (2 points for each direction) scale and the result they obtained supports this twofold structure. Accordingly, the conflict that arises from the intervention of work in family matters is work-to-family conflict, while the conflict that stems from family intervention in work is family-to-work conflict. Furthermore, researchers highlight that both work-to-family-conflict and family-to-work conflict has unique and different primary causes and effects [34].

Netemeyer et al. [35] underline the need for a valid self-report scale in order to understand the interaction between work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict better. They developed a 10 points work and family conflict scale (5 points for each direction), which found a large place in the literature on work and family. In this way, they redefined work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts. Accordingly, work-to-family conflict refers to the intervention of general demands of work (time spent for work) and work-related stress in carrying out family responsibilities. Family-to-work conflict is an inter-role conflict that occurs as a result of the intervention of general demands of family (time spent for family) and family-related stress in work-related responsibilities [35]. As is evident in these definitions, while Netemeyer et al. [35]– just like Greenhaus and Beutell [29] – consider time and strain based conflict as a reason for work-family conflict; they do not conceive behavioural conflict as a source or reason for conflict. Therefore, their 10 points work-to-family and family-to-work scale includes time and strain based conflict factors [35].

Subsequently, Carlson et al. [36] pointed out the need for a more coherent, multi-dimensional and extensive scale to reveal the complicated structure of this conflict. They developed an extensive scale, made up of 18 points with 6 sub scales, which include the factors (time – strain – behaviour) measuring the nature of this conflict separately and in both directions (family-to-work, work-to-family). The distinctive feature of this scale is that it enables the measurement of conflict types separately and in both directions. For this reason, researchers who want to explore and measure work-family conflict together with all their different dimensions frequently use this scale.

2.2.2. Work-Family Facilitation

Work-family researchers have largely ignored the possibility that different roles benefit one another as well as the outcomes that might result from this experience [37, 38]. A theoretical alternative for Role Strain Theory [30] and Role Conflict [31], Role Accumulation Theory [39] and Role Expansion Approach [40] was proposed.

In Role Accumulation Theory, Sieber [39] opposes the argument that multiple roles may
create role strain, while criticising the one-sided elaboration of multiple-roles in the scholarly literature. Sieber [39] argues that having multiple roles brings so many benefits that it can halt research investigating the dysfunction of the relationship between work and family roles. Accordingly, there are 4 different benefits for having multiple roles: role privileges, general status security, the creation of resources for role development and performance, personal development, and ego satisfaction [39]. Sieber [39] notes that if individuals are motivated to diversify and expand role systems, researchers may shift their attention directly towards mechanisms that ease role accumulation, and the effects of role accumulation on mental health, social balance, and orderly social change. In summary, Sieber [39] underlines that Role Strain Theory, which argues that multiple roles lead to role strain, is an obstacle against the study of positive aspects of multiple roles, and adds that this obstacle needs to be tackled.

In Role Expansion Approach, Marks [40] accepts Goode’s [30] argument that multiple roles may lead to role strain; however, he notes that this situation cannot be generalised. Specifically he critically approaches Goode’s [30] Role Strain Theory, which argues that lack of time and energy for multiple role demands creates role strain. According to Marks [40], time and energy required for multiple role demands cannot be foreseen as insufficient for every individual. To be able to assert such a claim, first the individual needs to experience multiple roles. If the individual holds a positive attitude and an emotion of commitment, fulfilling role responsibilities may lead to an increase in individual’s energy, rather than its decrease. Furthermore, the individual who engages in her roles with an emotion of commitment tends to use time effectively and maximise it. Therefore, the individual schedules her responsibilities about different roles and tries to comply with this program. In this way, energy and time are not insufficient for the individual who positively participates in and is committed to her roles. On the contrary, commitment to a role makes the individual more creative about energy and time. Consequently, the view that time and energy are not sufficient to meet the demands of multiple roles should not be generalised [40].

Based on Role Accumulation Theory and Role Expansion Approach, positive effects of work and family are expressed through concepts such as role enrichment [41, 42], positive spillover [16, 23, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49, 50], role enhancement [51, 52] and work-family facilitation [45, 53, 54, 55, 56].

In this paper, work-family facilitation is explicitly explored. Different definitions have been advanced to specify facilitation. For instance, “A form of synergy in which resources associated with one role enhance or make easier participation in the other role” [38]; “the extent to which participation in one role is made easier by virtue of the experiences, skills, and opportunities gained or developed in another role” [53], and “the extent to which participation in one role is made better or easier by virtue of participation in another role” [56]. Role functioning, which is made easier by virtue of participation in another role is the main focus of these definitions.

Based on The Role Expansion Theory [40], and the previous empirical and theoretical studies on role facilitation [37, 51], Van Steenbergen et al. [57] suggested that individuals could also experience different types of facilitation, in parallel to the different types of conflict such as time-based, energy-based, behavioural, and psychological facilitation. Individuals experience time-based facilitation when the time devoted to one role stimulates or makes it easier to effectively manage and use the time in another role. Energy-based facilitation occurs when the energy obtained in one role makes it easier to fulfil the requirements of another role. Behavioural facilitation can be experienced when behaviour learned in one role makes it easier to fulfil the requirements of another role. Finally, psychological facilitation refers to the ability to put matters associated with one role into perspective by virtue of another role, which makes it easier to fulfil the requirements of the first role. A distinction has been made between different directions of work-family facilitation (WF and FW facilitation) as well as different types of facilitation by the researchers. Researchers have developed a scale to measure all types of facilitation, time-based, energy-based, behavioural and psychological facilitation [57].

3. Conclusion and Suggestions

The aim of this paper was to develop a better understanding of work–family interface. Approaches and theories about multiple roles constitute the theoretical infrastructure of the literature on work and family. Work–family research has relied almost exclusively on the scarcity perspective which suggests that engaging in multiple roles (work and family roles) results in interrole conflict. This is largely caused by the fact that the relationship between work and family has been analysed primarily within the theories of role strain and role conflict for many years. Because of the focus on the conflict perspective, most researchers use scales that emphasize the negative implications of one role for the other. Nevertheless, researchers have persuasively argued for the
benefits of multiple role occupation such as providing security, a sense of purpose in life, enhanced mental health, and social balance. As such, studies investigating the benefits of work and family roles gained a momentum which confirmed that work and family life can be integrated and harmonious. These studies highlight the need to focus on the positive consequences of multiple role occupation and to study how such positive consequences can be utilized to better understand work–family facilitation. This will require large representative samples which help to conclusively generalize findings to different types of organizations and families.

It is important that the concept of work-family facilitation be further researched and understood to help individuals, family members and organizations ensure that the balance between work and family domains is continually improved. Metalevel concepts such as work–family fit and balance are defined as the combination of conflict and facilitation [53, 58], which is an essential element of the broader concepts of work-family fit and work-family balance. Yet, future research in the work-family area must include more comprehensive models and frameworks including work-family facilitation as well as work family conflict so that a wide variety of relationships can be considered simultaneously. Longitudinal studies to determine the potential reciprocal effects among variables in such comprehensive models should be conducted how facilitation can be cultivated and how it operates in conjunction with conflict to shape individual, family and work-related outcomes. This would better capture better a more complete picture of the work–family interface by considering both conflict and facilitation in work-family research.

4. References


