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Work-family conflict

An exploration of the differential effects of a dependent child's age on working parents

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this article is to explore the impact of life cycle stage, specifically parenting stage, on work-family conflict among working parents to determine whether discernible differences are evident among those individuals at the early stage of their parenting cycle compared with those with older children.

Design/methodology/approach – An explorative study was undertaken among parents employed within the Irish hotel sector. The questionnaire was distributed to 22 hotels and 76 individuals who reported having children responded. A number of measures were used to assess the impact which a number of factors, namely job stress, job involvement, managerial support and colleague support, may have on working parents' work-life conflict. Correlation and regression analysis are performed to test the hypotheses proposed.

Findings – The research findings provide initial support for the possibility that the factors influencing work-family conflict differ for each of the parenting groups analysed. For all parents with dependent children it was found that job involvement, job stress and colleague support all have predictive powers in terms of explaining the antecedents of work-family conflict.

Research limitations/implications – The findings provide a compelling case for the need to begin to address work-family conflict in a more holistic manner, examining both the immediate and long-term consequences for employees with childcare responsibilities.

Practical implications – The ability to design and implement specific, targeted responses to employees' work-life needs is an area where HRD can make a real and significant contribution. Strategic HRD has the potential to reduce the misappropriation of organisational resources by ensuring a focused and targeted response, thereby minimising the fruitless pursuit of "one size fits all" approaches to this complex issue.

Originality/value – The paper seeks to lay the first key foundation-stones in framing the debate in relation to work-life balance in terms of the entire working lives of individuals and not just specific snapshots during the course of that employment. The paper is critical of current organisational thinking in relation to employees' work-life balance needs and challenges HRD professionals to begin to examine this important and complex issue in a more holistic manner.

Keywords Family life, Parents, Human resource development

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

An ideal work/life balance coordinates and balances private needs such as family, hobbies, vocational interests (such as further education and training) or activities beneficial to society (such as voluntary work) with paid work both at specific stages in an individual's life as well as over their entire lifetime (Naegele *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, achieving a work life balance was ranked as the number one personal challenge facing Irish managers in a recent survey conducted by Irish Management Institute (O'Connor, 2003). De Cieri *et al.* (2005) argue that in the current highly competitive labour market, where the attraction and retention of valued employees is difficult, greater awareness needs to be given to employee work-life balance concerns. Balancing work and non-work domains is an important work-related concern which has the potential to affect a broad range of employee work related factors such as employee turnover, stress, job satisfaction, and productivity (Rice *et al.*, 1992, Parasuraman *et al.*, 1996; Veiga *et al.*, 2004; Thomas and Ganster, 1995).

Changes impacting on the work environment over the past ten to 15 years such as globalisation of competition, changes in the patterns and demands of work, and the fast pace of technological innovations have put extra time demands on employees (Coughlan, 2000; DFEE, 2000; Fisher, 2000). Coupled with these organisational and work design changes are increased female participation rates (Houston, 1999; Bates *et al.*, 2002), growth in the diversity of family structures (Duxbury and Higgins, 2001), long commuting journeys (Coughlan, 2000), and changing worker expectations (Zemke *et al.*, 2000; Greenblatt, 2002). The latter have created demands for time to meet social needs such as time for learning and caring, personal, family and community activities. This has forced policy makers and organisations to re-examine the options made available to employees to assist them in achieving a healthy balance between their work and non-work obligations.

These changes have been far reaching and have impacted upon all industries and sectors and the Irish hospitality sector is no different in this regard. Although a number of commentators have argued that there is a need for the hospitality industry as a whole to address employee work-life balance issues (Dermody and Holloway, 1998; Stalcup and Pearson, 2001), very few studies have empirically attempted to do so. Harris *et al.* (2003) argue that the hotel industry would benefit from close examination of conflicts faced by employees regarding their work and non-work life commitments. They argue that, based on the challenges and difficulties the hospitality industry has historically faced with work-family conflict, "individual hotel organisations may be able to achieve strategic advantage by effectively addressing work-family issues" (p. 1).

From a human resource development perspective the issue of work life balance offers the profession an opportunity to contribute at the highest possible level within organisations. Human resource development (HRD) professionals, in partnership with organisational leaders are continually attempting to find ways to improve the performance of their organisation and employees. Increasingly the role of the HRD professional encompasses effective change management in order to effect greater performance potential through the design and introduction of interventions which have the potential to reduce the negative impact of work family conflict (Madsen, 2003). The ability to design and implement specific targeted responses to employees work life needs is an area where HRD can make a real and significant contribution. Strategic HRD has the potential to reduce the misappropriation of organisational resources by

ensuring a focused and targeted response thereby minimising the fruitless pursuit of "one size fits all" approaches to this complex issue. The ability of organisations to support both employees and managers through not only the introduction and availability of such initiatives but crucially by providing training at a number of levels will impact upon the effectiveness of such a strategy.

This paper seeks to examine the impact of life cycle stage, specifically parenting stage, on work family conflict. The research examines work family conflict among working parents within the hotel sector to determine if discernable differences are evident among those individuals at the early stage of their parenting cycle compared to those with older children. It is proposed that individuals with younger children, pre-school age, are likely to report higher levels of work family conflict and that this conflict reduces as the age of the youngest child increases. In addition the research attempts to explore the different factors which impact upon work family conflict for these differing groups of parents and so examines the impact of job stress, job involvement, managerial support and colleague support to ascertain if these factors have an impact and if so, is it the same for all parents irrespective of their stage in the parenting cycle.

In doing so it is hoped that the first key foundation stones will be laid supporting the importance of framing the debate in relation to work life balance in terms of the entire working lives of individuals and not just specific snap shots during the course of that employment. In addition the findings raise important policy and practical implications for both organisations and policy makers and further add to our knowledge and understanding of the antecedents of work family conflict among this particular group and sector. The hospitality sector has been specifically identified as one where there is a lack of theoretical and empirical research (Harris *et al.*, 2003). This combined with the importance of the hospitality sector to the Irish economy underscores the contribution that this paper makes to the area.

Work-family conflict

Work family balance has been defined as "the degree to which an individual is able to simultaneously balance the temporal, emotional and behavioural demands of both paid work and family responsibilities" (Hill *et al.*, 2001, p. 49). Work family conflict on the other hand has been described by Kahn *et al.* (1964) as a form of inter-role conflict in which demands from the work role conflict with demands from the family role. The extent to which participating in one domain (work or family) interferes with an individual's ability to adequately meet the responsibilities and obligations in relation to the other role is termed as work family conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). It is generally accepted now in the literature that this conflict is bi-directional, which is to say that it gives equal emphasis to the impact that work can have on family and the impact that family can have on work (Frone *et al.*, 1997; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Gutek *et al.*, 1991; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1996). Work to family conflict, i.e. work interfering with family occurs when "the participation in a work activity interferes with participation in a competing family activity" (Frone *et al.*, 1997). Conversely, family-to-work conflict, i.e. family interfering with work, occurs when "participation in a family activity interferes with participation in a competing work activity" (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

High levels of conflict have been found to result in dissatisfaction and distress within work and family domains (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1996; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1996; Frone *et al.*, 1997) and limit ones overall quality of life (Higgins *et al.*, 1992; Frone *et al.*, 1992). Moreover, according to Frone (2003), work has more negative effects on family than the family has on work because work-to-family conflict is reported more frequently than family-to-work conflict. This study takes its cue from the previous research and focuses only on work-to-family conflict.

Life cycle concept

The majority of research undertaken in relation to work life balance has tended to focus solely on a particular life phase and the associated working time arrangements. The research has tended to examine the issues pertaining to individual specific factors at one particular time in an employee's life cycle without reference to what has happened prior, or more importantly, the impact it subsequently will have. In this way the research to date has had a limited focus as it fails to capture differences in terms of the factors influencing work family conflict as an individual progresses through their working life. It is proposed that only an explicit life cycle perspective can allow us to better understand the variables which impact upon work family conflict and recognise the changes that take place in relation to these as one's working circumstances and family responsibilities change.

Adult life can be characterised by a series of development stages that have unique and considerable impact on the manner in which people relate to major life decisions (Hill and Miller, 1981). Levinson *et al.*'s (1978) research outlined how life stages carry with them differing and competing sets of work and family responsibilities (McLaughlin and Cullen, 2003). As the areas of overlap grow, individuals are forced to make choices as to which area of their life imbalance will occur. In order to advance this approach, the research proposes modifying Levinson *et al.*'s (1978) basic model of adult life stages as the starting point to building a new individual organisational life stage model. The model specifically aims to capture and group key work family issues as they relate to an individual employee as they move through their working life. The research hypothesises that as an individual moves through each parental life stage, the challenges they face in relation to their work family balance differs. If this is indeed the case, then the implications for organisations and government policy are significant. For example to persist in offering "a one size fits all approach" to work family problems is certain to result in costly failure for the organisation and resentment on the part of employees. The findings from this paper will offer an opportunity to analyse the antecedents of work family conflict for each parental grouping thus beginning the debate regarding our ability to develop targeted policies to improve the ever-increasing demands placed on employees who seek to combine both work and family life.

The research to date has established that work family conflict increases as one's obligations to the family expand through marriage and the arrival of children (Cooke and Rousseau, 1984). It has also been argued that many of these conflicts will diminish, or at least decrease, as the age of the youngest child increases. Staines and O'Connor (1980) found that parents with children under six years of age had the highest levels of work-family conflict, followed by parents of school-age children. Employees with no children reported the least amount of work family conflict. This research examines the experiences of parents working in the Irish hotel sector and groups them into three

categories depending on the age of their youngest or only child to test this hypothesis. The three categories are pre-school age children (those aged five or less), school-aged children (6-12 years of age) and young adults (13 years of age and over). It is therefore hypothesised that parents of younger children are likely to report higher levels of work family conflict. In addition it is hypothesised that each grouping of parents experience differing antecedents in relation to their work family conflict.

In order to further explore the antecedents of work family conflict among this group of working parents a number of independent variables were examined. The variables selected were derived following an in-depth literature review. They are job involvement, job stress, managerial support and colleague support. A brief discussion of each and the proposed hypotheses derived as a result follows below.

Job involvement

Research tends to point to high levels of conflict amongst those individuals who are very involved in their work (Kossek and Ozeki, 1988). Several researchers have found a positive relationship between job involvement and work conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Higgins *et al.*, 1992). High work involvement and high family involvement have been shown to be positively related to the number of hours spent in work and family activities respectively (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). These hours in turn have been linked to increased work and family conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) resulting from role overload (Duxbury and Higgins, 1991). Secondly, Pleck (1979) suggested that psychological involvement in a role acts primarily as a sensitizer to interference effects, making the individual more aware of problems within that role. This awareness, in turn, increases perceived role conflict (Duxbury and Higgins, 1991). Kossek and Ozeki (1988) concluded from their review of relevant research that workers who have higher job involvement tended to experience somewhat more work family conflict. This finding runs counter to the popular myth that workers who have high involvement in their jobs are likely to have less concern for their family issues (Kossek and Ozeki, 1988). Therefore it is hypothesised that high levels of job involvement will increase the likelihood of an individual experiencing work family conflict. This is likely to increase as an individual becomes more involved in their role and thus advances up the promotional ladder:

H1. Job involvement is likely to increase as an employee becomes more involved in their role and advances up the promotional ladder.

H1a. High job involvement is likely increase work family conflict at all parenting stages but more so at the early parenting stage.

Job stress

Work family conflict has also been linked to higher levels of stress (Frone *et al.*, 1996; Thomas and Ganster, 1995). Social support has been identified by stress models as a resource or coping mechanism that can reduce the negative effects of stressors (Thomas and Ganster, 1995). It has also been found to affect the influence of conflict on outcomes such as job satisfaction, absenteeism levels (McCarthy and Cleveland, 2005). Furthermore, the work-stress burnout relationship has been found to be moderated by supportive relationships that employees may have within the work environment such as supportive supervisor and work colleagues (Etzion, 1984). Social support can be

defined as "an interpersonal transaction that involves emotional concern, instrumental aid, information or appraisal" (Carlson and Perrewe, 1999). Carlson and Perrewe (1999) argue that the whole stress process can be affected by the level of social support an individual has available to them in a situation. For example, if an employee perceives that on the job conflict is occurring but has a large amount of social support from work colleagues, then the resulting strain from the experienced role conflict may not be realised. It is worth noting however that social support is not just limited to the work domain but crucially can come from non-work domains most notably the home (McCarthy and Cleveland, 2005).

Lazarus and Folkman (1984) found that a supportive supervisor can make the domain of work less stressful for employees by discussing problems related to family with employees and being sympathetic and flexible if problems or emergencies occur. It has been found that this form of social support moderates the situational stressor effects on work-to-family conflict. Employees who have supportive supervisors have reported lower work-to-family conflict (Goff *et al.*, 1990). Conversely, higher levels of work-to-family conflict have been reported where there is a lack of social support (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). However, it must be noted that although social support can reduce the negative effects of job stress it is clear that it does not completely remove it (Carlson and Perrewe, 1999). In line with previous research (Anderson *et al.*, 2002), it is hypothesised that job stress and work family conflict are positively related. That is to say that as job related stress increases so too does the likelihood of an individual experiencing higher levels of work family conflict:

H2. High levels of job stress will increase the likelihood of an individual experiences work family conflict.

H2a. Job stress will have a negative effect on work family conflict irrespective of the parenting stage of the employee.

Managerial support

While there has been a notable increase in the number of organisations offering formal work life or family friendly policies this has not been met with a reciprocal increase in the uptake of these policies. The company culture, and more specifically the views of managers and colleagues appear to present a barrier to the utilisation of such policies (Allen, 2001; Lambert, 2000; Lewis and Taylor, 1996; Thompson *et al.*, 1999). Strongly held informal cultural values can have the effect of negating any formal family friendly policies which may be in place within an organisation (Poelmans and Sahibzada, 2004). Indeed, a supportive workplace has been identified as being critical to the successful implementation and uptake of family friendly policies (Galinsky *et al.*, 1996; Thomas and Ganster, 1995; Thompson *et al.*, 1999) and the role of direct supervisors or managers has been established as a particularly significant factor in this regard (Galinsky *et al.*, 1996; Thomas and Ganster, 1995). Frankel (1998) argues that an antagonistic workplace culture in terms of family friendly policies can see even the most innovative and sophisticated work family policies falter.

The role of managerial support and attitude is therefore an important variable in determining employee uptake of family friendly policies and hence can be seen to have a direct impact on work family conflict (McCarthy and Cleveland, 2005). It is

clear that managers and supervisors have a role to play in terms of translating any family friendly work policy into practice. The level of perceived support an individual employee receives from their direct line manager may vary considerably as a direct result of their managers own personal beliefs and attitude towards such programs. It is highly unlikely for example that a manager who believes that hard work and long hours are a necessary and vital demonstration of an individual's commitment to the organisation is likely to reward someone who decides to avail, however short term, of family friendly work policies. Thompson *et al.* (1999) found that without a supportive organisational family friendly culture, employees might be reluctant to take advantage of work family benefits. Similarly Brannen and Lewis (2000) reported many employees in their UK study were reluctant to use work family benefits especially when these benefits were dependent on their manager's discretion and might be considered favours rather than entitlements. It is therefore hypothesised that high levels of managerial support will decrease the likelihood of an individual experiencing work family conflict, particularly in the early stages of childcare responsibilities:

H3. High levels of managerial support will decrease the likelihood of an individual experiencing work family conflict.

H3a. Managerial support will have a negative effect on work family conflict at all parenting stages but more so at the early parenting stage.

Colleague support

The informal culture of the organisation as defined by the values held by managers in relation to family friendly policies has been discussed in terms of the impact that this can have on an individual's likelihood of availing of a formal family friendly policy. However the impact of colleagues opinions in relation to such policies can be equally, if not more, important. Colleagues without children can feel resentment towards those who avail of such policies as it may result in an increased work load for them or they may feel a sense of resentment towards the preferential treatment resulting in what Rothausen and Gonzales (1998) termed "family friendly backlash". Often employees without children cite feelings of discrimination by virtue of the fact that they simply do not have children. Young (1996) reported on the growth of backlash to work-life policies in the US. The research showed serious negative colleague support for such initiatives particularly among staff members without childcare responsibilities who considered such initiatives as discriminatory. These colleagues felt they were expected to "take up the slack" of absent colleagues which resulted in significant negativity towards those colleagues who opted to take advantage of such policies or initiatives. It is therefore hypothesised that high levels of colleague support will decrease the likelihood of an individual experiencing work family conflict, particularly in the early stages of childcare responsibilities:

H4. High levels of colleague support will decrease the likelihood of an individual experiencing work family conflict

H4a. Colleague support will have a negative effect on work family conflict at all parenting stages but more so at the early parenting stage

Research methodology

The hotel industry in Ireland

As of July 2005, there were 856 registered hotel premises in Ireland, with a total capacity of 43,197 rooms (Fáilte Ireland, 2006a). A total of 44 hotels were one-star rated, 194 were two-star rated, 315 were three-star rated, 85 were four-star rated, and 21 were five-star hotels. Of the 856 hotels in Ireland, 116 are unclassified and the remaining cohort is either newly appointed, under renovation or have had their grading rescinded. The estimated total number of people employed in the hotel sector for 2005 was 54,164 with seasonal staff accounting for 10 per cent of the workforce. Women represent 57 per cent of permanent hotel employees, compared with 58 per cent in 2004 and 59 per cent in 2002 (Fáilte Ireland, 2006b).

Sample selection and questionnaire distribution

Hotel HR managers or general managers were contacted to seek access to distribute the research survey along the western seaboard in the southwest, west and northwest regions from a list generated from Fáilte Ireland (the National Tourism Development Authority). Hotels in the Belfast region were also contacted to enable a Northern Ireland sample. A total of 24 hotels agreed to participate in the study. Questionnaire packs were delivered to the contact in the hotel, distributed to employees, and collected by the researchers between September 2004 and January 2005. The research questionnaire was accompanied by an envelope to ensure responses remained confidential. The completed questionnaires were placed in a box in a central location and collected some time later by the researchers. Two hotels subsequently withdrew from the study. In total, 1,235 questionnaires were distributed to the 22 hotels and 214 questionnaires were returned generating a response rate of 17 per cent. A total of 61 questionnaires were completed by employees in five-star graded hotels, 91 in four-star hotels, 54 in three star hotels, and eight in one and two-star hotels. As the nature of the research question being addressed by this paper sought to understand the impact of parenting life stage on work family conflict a sub-sample of those respondents who reported having children was used for this analysis. This reduced the sample size to $n = 76$ individual responses.

The analysis undertaken examines data in relation to the youngest child reported by respondents. In line with previous research, the age of the reported children was used to operationalise the three parenting life cycle groups as follows:

(1) Parent with preschool child, i.e. child five or less years of age.

(2) Child aged between 6 and 12 years of age.

(3) Child aged 13 years or more (Higgins *et al.*, 1994).

In order to avoid confusion, where a parent reported having a number of children in different categories the youngest child only was included in the analysis.

Measures

Scales were either adapted from previous research or developed specifically for the study. Table I set out the scales and items used in the study and the Cronbach alpha coefficients for each.

Scale item	Reliability coefficient Cronbach's α
Job involvement scale (Frone and Rice, 1987)	
Most of my personal life goals are job-centred	
To me, my job is only a small part of who I am ®	
I am very much involved personally in my job	0.74
I live, eat and breathe my job	
Most of my interests are centred on my job	
I have strong ties with my present job which would be very difficult to break	
Job stress scale (Karasek, 1990)	
My job requires me to work very fast	
My job requires me to work very hard	
Usually, there is not enough time during my shift/workday to get my job done	0.70
Usually, there is excessive work to be done during my shift/workday	
I am regularly faced with conflicting demands in my job	
Managerial support (Mauno *et al.*, 2005a, b)	
In general, managers in this organisation are quite accommodating of personal needs	
Senior management in this organisation encourage supervisors/line managers to be sensitive to employees' personal/non-work concerns	
Middle managers and executives in this organization are sympathetic toward employees' responsiblities/commitments outside work	0.78
In the event of conflict, managers are understanding when employees have to put their personal lives first	
In this organization, employees are encouraged to strike a balance between their work and non-work lives	
Colleague support (Mauno *et al.*, 2005a, b)	
In general, my colleagues/co-workers are quite accommodating of my personal needs	
My colleagues/co-workers are sympathetic towards my personal needs	0.71
My colleagues/co-workers would be unhappy if I took time off during the day to take care of personal responsibilities (R)	
Work-family conflict (Netemeyer *et al.*, 1996)	
The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life	
The amount of time my job takes up makes it difficult to fulfil family responsibilities	
Things I want to do at home do not get done because of the demands my job puts on me	0.84
My job produces strain that makes it difficult to fulfil family duties	
Owing to work-related duties, I have to make changes to my plans for family activities	

Table I.
Items and scales

Findings

In total 76 respondents indicated that they had childcare responsibilities and only these parents were included in the analysis. Data pertaining to the youngest child was included in this study however it must be noted that a number of respondents reported

having more than one child. A total of 28 respondents reported that their youngest child was five years old or less, 30 parents reported their youngest child between the ages of 6 and 12 while 18 parents stated that their youngest child was aged 13 years or over.

A total of 33 per cent of respondents were male, 59 per cent female and 7 per cent failed to indicate their gender which is broadly representative of data from the hotel sector in Ireland and the UK (McCarthy and Cleveland, 2005). The mean age for respondents was 38 with the youngest parent aged 23 and the oldest parent 63 years of age. The majority of respondents worked in the front office/management area of the hotel (32.5 per cent), the food and beverage section (31.1 per cent) and the accommodation section (19 per cent). The remaining respondents were spread across finance, sales and marketing, leisure and conference and banqueting.

Nearly 82 per cent of all respondents were either married or living with their partner. Only 9.2 per cent were single parents. A total of 7.9 per cent reported that they were separated or divorced while 1.3 per cent stated they were widowed.

Table II presents the scale means and standard deviations for the variables of interest in the current study. A seven-point Likert rating scale was used with 1 representing strong disagreement with the statement and 7 representing strong agreement. Respondent parents felt that they experienced quite high levels of work family conflict as represented by the high mean of 5.91 (SD 1.09). The respondent group as a whole indicated that job involvement was not a key issue for them as represented by a mean of 3.8 (SD 1.16) however both job stress and managerial support were viewed as more important and received higher mean scores 4.9 and 4.6 respectively. Colleague support however received a high mean score of 5.41 (SD 1.10) indicating that for the respondent group they were experiencing reasonably high levels of colleague support in their day to day activities.

Analysis

A number of statistical tests, including correlations and regression analysis, were undertaken to uncover the nature of any relationships that may exist among the dependent and independent variables. In doing so a number of significant relationships were uncovered which provide some support and shed further light on the antecedents of work family conflict when examined from a parenting life cycle stage perspective of working parents.

Correlation analysis was used to discover and describe the strength and direction of the linear relationship between two variables. Table III presents the correlation analysis for the variables of interest. The analysis presents the findings as they relate to each parental sub-group. It includes both male and female parents within each category.

Scale	Mean	Standard deviation
Work-family conflict	5.91	1.09
Job involvement	3.8	1.16
Job stress	4.9	1.02
Managerial support	4.6	1.13
Colleague support	5.41	1.10

Table II. Scale means and standard deviations

Table III. Interrelationships of variables for each parental life stage under examination, i.e. parents with a child at pre-school, 6-12 years old and 13 years old or more

		Work family conflict	Job involvement	Job stress	Managerial support	Colleague support
Work family conflict	Pre school	–				
	6-12 years	–				
	13 years or more	–				
Job involvement	Pre school	−0.096	–			
	6-12 years	0.528**	–			
	13 years or more	0.571*	–			
Job stress	Pre school	0.239	−0.059	–		
	6-12 years	0.321	0.081	–		
	13 years or more	0.479*	0.204	–		
Managerial support	Pre school	−0.173	0.461*	−0.333	–	
	6-12 years	0.249	0.458*	0.142	–	
	13 years or more	0.011	0.057	0.249	–	
Colleague support	Pre school	−0.572**	0.341	−0.104	0.552**	–
	6-12 years	0.303	0.291	0.180	0.705**	–
	13 yrs or more	−0.072	0.221	−0.050	0.520*	–

It is clear from Table III that differences do exist among the three separate parenting stages. Job involvement was found to be highly positively correlated to work family conflict among those parents with children aged between 6 and 12 years of age ($r = 0.528, p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that for parents of children aged between 6 and 12 years of age in our sample, they reported higher levels of work family conflict as they became more involved in their jobs. This is also true of those parents whose youngest child is over 13 years of age, albeit to a lesser extent ($r = 0.571$, $p < 0.05$). This contrasts directly with those parents of young pre-school children where job involvement was not found to be related to work family conflict. It is only possible to speculate why this finding may have occurred however we can postulate that it may be related to age, i.e. that older parents may be further on in their career and hence be higher up their chosen career ladder leading to greater emotional ties to their work.

Job stress was found to be positively correlated to work family conflict only among those parents whose child was 13 years of age or more ($r = 0.497$, $p < 0.05$). This finding may suggest that for those parents whose youngest child is becoming increasingly more independent, they are more likely to experience increased job involvement and increased job stress.

Significantly, colleague support was found to be highly negatively related to work family conflict among those parents with pre-school children ($r = -0.572$, $p < 0.01$). This finding suggests that for this particular group of parents, colleague support is seen as critical to avoiding work family conflict and points to the importance of a supportive work environment for those wishing to avail of family friendly workplace practices.

Interestingly and somewhat surprisingly, managerial support failed to display any significant relationship to work family conflict among any of the parental groups. However managerial support was found to be highly positively related to job involvement for both pre-school parents ($r = 0.461$, $p < 0.05$) and those of children aged between 6 and 12 years old ($r = 0.458, p < 0.05$). This would suggest that for the population under analysis that as managerial support increases so too did their job involvement. It is advised to apply caution when examining the significance of this finding as the causal nature of the relationship has yet to be explored.

As expected managerial support and colleague support were found to be highly positively related to each other for all categories of parents that is only logical. It is understood and accepted that individuals look to their direct line managers for cues on socially acceptable behaviour and therefore one would expect that where a culture of managerial support exists that you would also find a supportive collegial environment.

The results of the correlation analysis provide tentative support for the hypotheses proposed however these findings must be treated with extreme caution given the sample size and the absence of causation. Stating this however, the tentative findings do provide support for undertaking further analysis and indeed further research in this area.

Further analysis

A series of standard multiple regression analyses were conducted on the data to further explore the true nature of the relationships found. In doing so it is hoped to produce a number of models that will allow us to better predict the factors that influence work family conflict among the three parental life stages.

Firstly we began our analysis by examining the antecedents of work family conflict among all working parents within our sub-sample. In order to do so all independent variables namely job involvement, job stress, managerial support and colleague support were enter simultaneously as suggested by Studdenmund and Cassidy (1987) to be the only appropriate method for theory testing. As can be seen from Table IV below a number of factors were found to have significant predictive powers in relation to work family conflict among all parents. Firstly, job involvement was found to significantly predict work family conflict ($p < 0.01$). The positive sign of the regression coefficient reveals that the greater the degree to which parents feel that they are highly involved in their working roles, the more likely they are to experience high levels of work family conflict at home.

Job stress was also found to have significant predictive powers in relation to work family conflict among all parents within the sample ($p < 0.01$). Again the positive sign of the regression coefficient suggests that the greater the degree to which parents feel that they are experiencing high levels of job or role stress the more likely they are to experience work family conflict at home.

Finally colleague support was found to have predictive qualities also ($p < 0.05$). Indeed the negative sign of the regression coefficient suggests that the greater the degree to which the parents feel that they have the support of the fellow colleagues the less likely they are to experience high levels of work family conflict.

The proposed model accounts for some 26 per cent of explained variance in the antecedents of work family conflict for all parents of children in this study. This is a significant finding in and of itself and while there are limitations to the model, it certainly provides a solid foundation upon which to build.

The purpose of this study was to further our understanding of work family conflict by examining the parenting life cycle stage of different groups. In doing so it was proposed that the factors influencing parent's work family conflict changes as their child ages and distinct cycles can be identified therein. In order to test this hypothesis it was necessary to undertake some further regression modelling to examine the factors influencing work family balance for each of the three parental cycles identified. Given the sample size it is advised to treat these findings as tentative and use caution when drawing firm conclusions from them. The findings are presented to provide insight into possible future research strategies and therefore should be treated as indicative only.

Table V presents the findings of this analysis for those parents whose children are pre-schoolers, i.e. children less than five years of age. The results of the analysis provide indicative support that for this particular grouping, colleague support is the key influencing factor in terms of predicting work family conflict ($p < 0.01$). The

Table IV. Standard regression analysis for work-family conflict as predicted by job involvement, job stress, managerial support and colleague support for all parental stages

Predictor variable	beta	SE	β	t	Sig.	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Job involvement	2.22	0.69	0.36	3.21	0.002	0.261	0.261**
Job stress	2.28	0.73	0.33	3.15	0.002		
Managerial support	0.25	0.86	0.04	0.285	0.777		
Colleague support	−1.62	0.85	−0.25	−1.92	0.050		

Notes: $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $n = 72$

negative sign of the regression coefficient suggests the greater the degree to which the parents feel that they have the support of the fellow colleagues the less likely they are to experience high levels of work family conflict. It is worth noting that the other three factors considered were found to have no predictive qualities for this group of parents.

When we examined the group of parents with children aged 6-12 years of age we found that job involvement was the key predicting variable in terms of individual's work family conflict ($p < 0.01$). As job involvement increases so too does work family conflict. These findings are presented in Table VI. This finding provides some initial support for our hypothesis that individuals move through different stages of child rearing and that each stage presents different challenges for the individual and consequently results in very different needs for the individual.

Finally we examined the group of parents with children aged 13 years or older and again found indicative support that job involvement was the key predictive variable in terms of individual's work family conflict ($p < 0.05$) albeit at a slightly lower level. These findings are presented in Table VII.

Table V. Standard regression analysis for work-family conflict as predicted by job involvement, job stress, managerial support and colleague support among parents with pre-school age children

Predictor variable	beta	SE	β	t	Sig.	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Job involvement	0.18	9.40	0.03	0.15	0.883	0.420	0.319**
Job stress	2.04	1.21	0.27	1.56	0.132		
Managerial support	1.80	1.30	0.30	1.39	0.179		
Colleague support	−4.61	1.24	−0.72	−3.74	0.001		

Notes: $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $n = 28$

Table VI. Standard regression analysis for work-family conflict as predicted by job involvement, job stress, managerial support and colleague support among parents with children aged 6-12 years old

Predictor variable	beta	SE	β	t	Sig.	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Job involvement	2.93	1.02	0.53	2.87	0.005	0.387	0.281*
Job stress	1.74	1.09	0.26	1.59	0.126		
Managerial support	−1.19	1.47	−0.20	−0.81	0.425		
Colleague support	1.37	1.31	0.24	1.05	0.305		

Notes: $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $n = 30$

Table VII. Standard regression analysis for work-family conflict as predicted by job involvement, job stress, managerial support and colleague support among parents with children aged 13 years old and older

Predictor variable	beta	SE	β	t	Sig.	R^2	Adjusted R^2
Job involvement	3.28	1.30	0.53	2.52	0.025	0.491	0.335*
Job stress	2.38	1.39	0.37	1.71	0.111		
Managerial support	−0.31	2.39	−0.03	−0.13	0.899		
Colleague support	−1.33	2.14	−0.15	−0.62	0.544		

Notes: $^{*}p < 0.05$; $^{**}p < 0.01$; $n = 18$

Discussion and conclusions

These findings shed new light on our understanding of the antecedents of work family conflict. Support was found for the majority of the hypotheses proposed and notably for the key proposition that depending on the age of an individual's child they are likely to experience differing antecedents of work family conflict, albeit tentative support. It is clear from the correlation analysis that differences did exist within our sample population between the reported antecedents of work family conflict among the three parenting groups. It was found that work family conflict was highly negatively related to colleague support among parents of pre-school children (those aged five or less). However work family conflict was found to be highly positively related to job involvement only among those parents of children aged 6-12 years of age. Both job involvement and job stress were found to be significantly positively related to work family conflict among those parents of children aged 13 years or more. These findings suggest that, certainly among our sample, that parents experience differences as their children age and that the factors which influence work family conflict are not static but rather change over the course of a dependent child's life. The findings provide support for undertaking further research to discover the potential causal nature of the relationships suggested by this initial analysis however given the sample size of the current population it is suggested that these findings are treated as indicative and that suitable caution is applied in the interpretation and analysis of any such findings.

Further analysis was undertaken to establish if any of the factors highlighted could be seen to predict work family conflict. Overall for all parents with dependent children it was found that job involvement, job stress and colleague support all had predictive powers in terms of explaining the antecedents of work family conflict. Upon further analysis of each of the parenting groups it was found that the factors influencing work family conflict differed. For those parents of children of pre-school age colleague support was the key factor influencing their work family conflict. It is likely that during the early years of child rearing greater work flexibility is required in order to deal with unforeseen problems in relation to illness and general medical visits such as vaccinations, developmental tests etc. In addition it is likely that those individuals who avail of flexible working arrangements do so when their children are very young. Given this situation it is clear to see the importance of colleague support to these parents.

For parents of children aged 6-12 years job involvement was found to be the key predicting variable in terms of an individual's work family conflict. It was found that as job involvement increases so too does work family conflict. Further research is required to examine the fundamental nature of job involvement, i.e. is it cyclical in nature whereby a new parent opts to recede from the level of involvement they have in their work when they have young children only to return to a more engrossed stage once their children are older and they have more time and energy to expend. For now we can only hypothesise but it would appear likely that those parents of older children tend to work longer and would appear to have more time to invest in their jobs leading to higher levels of involvement.

Finally we examined parents of children aged 13 or more. As with the parents of children aged 6-12 years of age, job involvement was found to have predictive qualities in relation to work family conflict. Again this relationship was found to be positive so as an individual becomes more involved in their job, the more likely they are to

experience higher levels of work family conflict. It would be interesting to examine the issue of job involvement both from a gender perspective to ascertain if male and female parental experiences are similar. It was not possible to do so with this particular data set as the sample sizes proved too small when separated into male and female parents.

These findings have implications for both organisations and policy makers alike. While this research is seen as a foundation block it is clear that examining work family conflict and indeed work life balance from a life cycle perspective can produce valuable insights. It is essential that we begin to move towards examining the work life balance issues in a more holistic manner, examining both the immediate and long term consequences of availing of any one policy or approach.

Our analysis suggests that organisations need to re-think what they offer their staff in terms of family friendly policies and move away from the "one size fits all" approach. Organisations that persist in adopting such a "one size fits all" approach run the risk of failing to directly meet the needs of their employees but are also likely to incur a considerable waste of valuable financial resources. Organisations need to get smarter in terms of how they approach the issues and complexities of modern day living for their employees and begin to target specific groups with tailor made work life balance initiatives.

HRD has the potential to make a significant contribution in this regard. The need to design and roll out focused and targeted responses to this complex issue falls within the remit of the strategic HRD function. The role of the function is not simply limited to designing such initiatives but crucially is required to ensure that training is provided at a number of levels within the organisation to ensure that the initiatives developed do not remain a policy document but rather are actively absorbed into the daily life and values of the organisation. Training should not be restricted to those contemplating availing of such initiatives but need to embrace both colleagues and supervisors/managers. If we are to move away from the common misperception that work life balance initiatives are the sole preserve of female employees or that by opting to for such an initiative an individual is signalling that they are no longer fully committed to the organisation, we need to ensure that all members of the organisation are fully trained in both the practical implications of managing and working in a diverse workplace and the culture implications of developing a family friendly workplace.

Indeed the current research suggests the importance of nurturing a supportive culture in terms of embracing work life balance concepts. Without the implicit, as well as explicit, support of managers and colleagues it is clear that most work life balance initiatives will fail to deliver their desired results. Organisations would be wise to pay particular attention to the views of those individuals who are not eligible to avail of certain family friendly policies. They need to work with them in order to ensure that resentment is minimised by shifting the emphasis to outputs and performance rather placing it on presenteeism and long work hours. The role of training in this regard should be emphasised.

There a number of limitations to this study not least of which is the limited sample size. In addition, the youngest child of each working parent was considered for analysis however future research would benefit from an analysis of working parents in terms of all of their children and not simply limited to the youngest.

The study did not attempt to segregate male and female parents for separate analysis due to the relative small sample size and the danger of over analysing the current sample. However an interesting finding from recent research is that no gender differences were found between men and women's experiences of conflict. Men and women reported experiencing similar levels of both work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict (Anderson *et al.*, 2002; Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 2002). Future research should focus on examining the possible gender issues inherent herein and also developing a model to incorporate all children of a working parent.

It would also be desirable and interesting to examine job involvement and stress within this context to ascertain if, as suspected, it is cyclical in nature. It would also be instructive to replicate the study in different sectors and different countries.

Finally it is the authors' intention to broaden out the debate further and begin to examine all aspects of both work family conflict and work life balance using the life cycle approach and we would encourage others to do likewise.

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