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Contributing to Work-family Domain Conflict: Exploring the Avenues



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ABSTRACT

This paper sets forth a number of theoretical propositions regarding the process and experience of work-family conflict. The paper reviews existing theoretical perspectives and engages with the new Border Theory of Campbell Clarke (2000). The paper proposes a number of operationalisations of Border Theory and a model of potential interactions is described.

Key Words: Work-Family Conflict; Border Theory

WORK-FAMILY THEORY

Minuchin (1974) proposed Family Systems theory which suggests that families are cultural systems that go through developmental stages which try to maintain a sense of continuity and equilibrium and enhance each member's growth. This theory and the related concept of family equilibrium suggest that pressures both outside and within the family can disturb the equilibrium of the family (Brett and Stroh, 1995).

Double ABCX theory (Hill, 1949; McCubbin and Patterson, 1983) suggests that three factors interact to produce a family's well-being: the stressor; the family's resources or characteristics to cope with the stressor, and the family's perception of the stressor. Wiggins-Frame and Shehan (1994) proceed to identify family support, family adaptability and family communication as predominant among characteristics that facilitate coping, with the latter identified as the characteristic that enables the evolution of the other two attributes of family functioning.

Another perspective on the process of work-family conflict has been made by the proponents of spillover theory (Aldous, 1969; Piotrkowski, 1979; Staines, 1980; Crouter, 1984). This theory suggests that a working spouse's experiences and affective states will carry over into the home and by the same token, home experiences and related affective states can influence a person's work life. These iterative processes can have both positive and negative consequences. Compensation theory, on the other hand (Staines, 1980), proposed that an inverse relationship exists between work and family such that people make differing investments in each in an attempt to make up for what one is missing in the other.

Most scholars have adopted a "depletion" argument in discussing the relationship between the domains of work and non-work (Rothbard, 1999). Central to the argument is that, by necessity, the domains conflict as they compete for the same finite resources, with the result of such competition involving threats to the well-being of those concerned (Judge et al., 1994; Tenbrunsel et al., 1995; Higgins, Duxbury, and Johnson, 2000).

New Perspectives

Contemporary researchers (Campbell Clarke, 2000; Thompson and Bunderson, 2001) are proceeding along more novel lines in relation to understanding the process of work-family balance. Campbell Clarke (2000) identifies one of the shortcomings of the earlier approaches as the lack of predictive ability that emerges from them. She suggests that these theories offered little guidance in relation to either predicting the experience of work-family conflict or helping solve problems that arise in trying to balance their responsibilities (see Lambert, 1990).

Drawing on the work of Wells and Major (1996) and Carlson and Kacmar (1996) among others, Campbell Clarke devised a number of propositions as to how the experience of work-family conflict gets underway. The main components of her theory include the work and home domains, the borders between work and home, those who cross the borders and those who keep the borders. She identifies certain

characteristics of the components that may mediate the experience of work-family balance (e.g. border strength) and then identifies a number of propositions surrounding the operation of such borders and the people within them (See Campbell Clarke, 2000).

Thompson and Bunderson (2001) also highlight the importance of temporal connections between work and family and the meanings people assign to their activities and engagements. They suggest that “the metaphor of seeking balance between the home and work domains is somewhat limiting in our understanding of the process in that it neglects the perceptual experience of time and the subjective meaning people assign to it” (p17). In its place, they suggest an alternative metaphor – time as a container of meaning – and suggest that less conflict is experienced when engaged in time-demanding activities that have significant meaning for the individual. Using self-devised measures, Campbell Clarke’s research has examined the role border quality (i.e. flexibility and permeability) and cross-border communication play in the experience of work-family balance (Campbell Clarke 2000b, 2000c). With a view to furthering the status of Border theory, Campbell Clarke has encouraged other researchers to interpret and measure the propositions of Border Theory.

Researching New Perspectives

Responding to Campbell Clarke’s call, the current research comprises an examination of a number of propositions of border theory. Studies vary in the tools deployed to measure the construct of experienced role strain, with some studies focusing on Balance and others on Conflict, and still others distinguishing between the direction of perceived role strain (Frone, Russell and Cooper, 1992; Voydanoff, 1988, Thomas and Ganster, 1995). This study will focus on the conflict that emerges not only from work interfering with family, but also family interfering with work, and will deploy a measure devised by Netemeyer, et al. (1996) which was designed to overcome the shortcomings of existing measures of the constructs.

This study advances the work of Campbell Clarke (2000) in a number of ways by unpacking some of her propositions as outlined below and depicted in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Individual Differences and Work-Family Conflict

In her article, Campbell Clarke (2000) makes the point that “the primary connection between work and family systems is not emotional, but human”, (p748). Given that one’s personality is an important determinant of how one thinks, feels and behaves, the current work incorporates two personality measures, namely Conscientiousness (McCrae and Costa, 1992) and Positive Affect (Watson et al., 1988) given their reported significance in the work environment (Digman, 1990). The purpose of their inclusion is to ascertain their impact on experienced work-family conflict.

Work-based Variables and Work-Family Conflict

(a) Tangible

Campbell Clarke suggests that support from domain members and within-domain autonomy reduce the experience of work-family conflict. With that in mind, the instrument designed by Rhoades, Eisenberger and Armeli, (2001) was employed to measure supervisor support, and a measure based on the work of Parasuraman, Greenhaus, and Granrose, (1992) was employed to measure instrumental support from significant other people in the lives of border crossers were included. Autonomy is assessed using a measure based on the work of Karasek and Theorell (1990).

(b) Subjective Workplace Evaluations

Campbell Clarke proposes that similarities between domains in terms of accepted behaviour patterns and ways of thinking reduce work-family conflict. Acceptable forms of behaviour rely on prevailing cultural norms which establish which derive from deep-seated values and assumptions (Schein, 1983). Value differences then may be seen as the basis on which different behavioural patterns emerge. Drawing on the work of McDonald and Gandz (1991), the current work examines value differences between the two domains which will in turn reflect one aspect of domain similarity or difference. Another facet of this congruence is in the measurement of domain identification, reflected in a measure based on the work of Mannheim and Dubin (1986) and Kirchmeyer (1992).

Work-Based Outcomes and Work-Family Conflict

In the current economic climate, where knowledge is seen as the key to competitive advantage in today's lean organisation, few firms can afford the risk of good people leaving. To that end, a measure of intention to leave one's current work organization (Van Ypren et al., 1996) is incorporated into the analysis. Finally, new research suggests that certain behaviours, although not specifically required of workers, are necessary for organizational survival and effectiveness (George and Brief, 1992). Such behaviours are above and beyond the call of duty and are collectively referred to as Organisational Citizenship Behaviours (Organ, 1988), examples of which include helping co-workers, protecting the organization from theft, fire, vandalism, making suggestions and spreading goodwill in the larger community. The measure, developed originally by Van Dyne, Graham and Dienesch (1994) is adapted and is employed in this investigation.

Finally, this research also reflects the view of many writers in the field by including reference to more than just the two domains, work and family. The study explores details of the two domains in the first instance, by pursuing within-domain roles such as parent and spouse, and goes on to incorporate an exploration of other life roles held by people, including community, religion, friends and politics.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Figure 1: Proposed relationship between individual and work-based variables and work-family conflict

