

41. Work-family conflict and coping among a sample of social workers and their partners in India: A qualitative study

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Abstract

There has been an increasing research interest in investigating work-family conflict and coping in non-Western settings. Much of the research to date has occurred in Western settings using quantitative research methodology and individual data. Some scholars have also questioned the validity of this stream of research when the work-family conflict phenomenon occurs within couple relationships. The present study investigates work-family conflict and coping in a sample of seven social workers and their spouses in Bangalore, India using a qualitative research methodology. Three themes emerged from our couple interviews, including (a) widespread experience of work-family conflict and its reported consequences including job stress, job dissatisfaction, and reduced quality time with family; (b) religious coping as a primary mechanism for dealing with work related stress; and (c) spousal support and support from colleagues and family as a mechanism for coping. We discuss our findings in relation to extant findings in the literature.

Introduction

We live in an era of astonishingly fast paced change in the work and family roles of women and men (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Social trends such as the increasing participation of women in the work force, greater numbers of working single-parent and dual-earner families are providing new responsibilities and challenges to both women and men to blend work and family commitments (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). The increasing participation of women in paid work alongside unpaid responsibilities such as caring for children, and in some cases grandchildren, and the ageing parents/relatives has put an increased burden on them to juggle work and family lives (Noor, 2004; Voyandoff, 2004). In India the changing social dynamics over the last two decades has seen a growing number of dual earner families. However, India still remains a traditional society where the patterns of family life and role-structure have not changed sufficiently and women on average still have more responsibility for home, family life, and child care than men (Aziz, 2004).

For social workers the interaction between work and family can present challenging problems because both these life domains can be emotionally charged and the mental, physical, and emotional demands of roles within each domain may exceed a worker's coping abilities (Leiter & Durup, 1996). Social work has also long been considered to be complex work involving working with intricate problems of human experience, and engaging with vulnerable and powerless members of society (Trevithick, 2005). While early researchers had treated work and family systems as if they operated independently, there is now a growing body of research which demonstrates that work and family domains are linked and interdependent and emotions and

behaviours developed in one domain (work or home) can flow into the other (Frone, 2003). This then raises the question *can work-related stress be contained in the workplace without it flowing into family life? And how do social workers cope with this stress?* Research studies focusing on stress and social workers have given limited attention to coping (Collins, 2007). Coping has been defined as “the person’s constantly changing cognition and behavioural efforts to meet specific external/and or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person (Lazarus, 1998). A study by Fineman (1985) found internalization of difficulties, and reappraising of the situation more positively to be ways of coping used by social workers. Support from supervisors, colleagues and family/friends have been documented as an important coping strategy (Grzywacz, & Marks, 2000). The focus of the present investigation was work→family conflict and the mechanisms of coping used by social workers and their spouses in an Indian context.

What is Work-Family Conflict?

The most widely cited definition of work-family conflict is by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) in which they define work-family conflict as “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role” (p.77). According to Carlson and Frone (2003) work-family conflict is caused by two types of interference between work and home domain: internal and external interference. Internal interference is created when an individual is preoccupied with work performance which then hinders their participation in the home life and vice versa. External interference occurs from a source external to the individual. Example when work deadlines may prevent or delay participation in family life activities, example attending to children’s homework or sports activities, and similarly when family responsibilities for example, caring for a sick child at home may prevent attendance at work. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) discuss three forms of work-family conflict: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict and behaviour based conflict. *Time based conflict* occurs when an individual devoting time to the demands of one domain consumes time needed to meet the demands of the other domain. *Strain based conflict* occurs when strain, dissatisfaction, anxiety and fatigue from one domain makes it difficult for the individual to meet the demands of the other domain. *Behaviour-based conflict* occurs when the certain behaviours which an individual develops in one domain are incompatible with the role demands in the other domain. The research question of interest was:

Do social workers as a professional group experience work→family conflict? If so how do they cope in managing the demands of their work and family lives?

Work-Family Conflict and Social Work Practice

This question is of significance because as Sheafor and Horejsi (2003) note “a social worker’s professional responsibilities and personal life are inter-twined. Most social workers cannot simply go work, do their job, and then leave their thoughts and feelings about work at the office when returning home. While they may try, to keep their professional concerns separate from their other roles and responsibilities, the nature of the work makes this difficult” (p.17).

A study by Jayaratne, Chess, and Kunkel (1986) on burnout and its impact on child welfare workers and their spouses found that higher levels of stress experienced at work exacerbated stress in the marriage and contributed to less satisfaction in marriage. The authors also found that those workers who scored high on the burnout scale were seen by their spouses as displaying more anxiety, depression, irritation, and somatic complaints at home. These findings suggest that pressures and tensions experienced by workers in the job can spill over into the family life. Similarly Leiter and Durup (1996), in a study of health care professionals including social workers in the USA, explored the effects that working in a helping profession may have on the family. Their findings indicate that supportive relationships at home and at work enhanced an employee's well-being and helped these professionals manage demands in both domains. The study also found that work interference with family was strongly related to marital satisfaction.

To date as per the knowledge of the authors, no study has been done in India that has investigated whether the social workers experience work → family conflict and how they deal with it. With growing number of women in this profession the aims of the present study were to understand the existence and nature of work → family conflict experienced by the social workers and their spouses, and to understand how social workers coped in managing their work and family demands in the midst of every day challenges.

Research Design

This research was made possible from a funding received by the second author from the Australian National University. India was chosen as a site for two reasons: (1) the rapid growth in the Indian economy has seen an increase in the number of women in the work force. While this change has occurred over the last two decades, India still remains a traditional society and women continue to shoulder most of the responsibilities at home (Aziz, 2004). (2) a study in an Eastern culture would enable comparison of our findings with extant literature sourced in the West. The study was located in the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, South India. Two research assistants were hired locally for purposes of recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and transcribing of data. These activities were carried out under the supervision of the researchers.

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was chosen for the present study. This methodology was chosen because it was important to understand the cultural meaning attached to 'work' and 'family' by the participants in the Indian context. According to Sarantakos (2005), qualitative researchers consider reality to be subjective, constructed, multiple and diverse. Reality is experienced internally, and resides in the minds of the people who construct it (p.41). This methodology enabled the researcher to hear the 'stories and lived experiences' of the participants as they constructed and experienced it in balancing and managing their work and family lives.

Sample

The sample consisted of four female and three males social workers and their partners. The age range of the social workers was between 28 and 52 years. All the social workers were in full time employment in non-government agencies with years in employment ranging between four to

twenty-four years. These agencies were approached through contact of the researchers. Two of the social workers (one male and one female) had spouses who were also social workers with one in full-time employment (male partner) and one part-time employment (female partner). All the other five participants had spouses who were in full time employment in various occupations such as accountant (1), engineer (1), ophthalmologist (1), drug inspector (1), and tailor (1). Majority of the social workers (6) held a Bachelors qualification and one had completed a Masters in Social Work. The social workers worked six days a week clocking 8 to 9 hours of work per day. All of them had between one to two children with an age range of 9 to 22 years. None of the social workers had any other member staying with them.

Method

In-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide were conducted. The interviews aimed at capturing the experiences of the participants and their partners in combining work and family life and the strategies adopted by them in coping with the demands of work and family. The average length of the interview was about one hour. To ensure cultural sensitivity the male participants were interviewed by a male interviewer and female participants by a female interviewer. The couples were interviewed individually but at the same time to maintain objectivity and to avoid any sharing of information between the couple prior to the interview. Each couple was paid Rs.1000 as an incentive for participation. The location of the interviews had to be adjusted to meet the diverse needs of the participants in terms of availability of transport and child care needs. Majority of the participants were interviewed in the Indian Institute of Management to allow for minimum disruption. However some of participants were interviewed in their homes due to difficulty with child care and transport arrangements. A pilot test was carried out with two couples. This provided feedback to the interviewers in terms of their own interviewing skills and improvement of the interview questions.

Data Analysis

The interviews were taped using a digital tape recorder. These were transcribed and a thematic analysis was performed for identifying, analysing, and patterns (themes) within the data (Brawn & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of the participants (Brawn & Clarke, 2006). In undertaking the analysis the following process was used as proposed by Brawn and Clarke (2006). In the *initial phase* the researchers spent time in familiarising themselves with the data. In the *second phase* the researchers generated an initial list of ideas about what was interesting in the data. Initial codes were generated to organise the data into meaningful categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The *third phase* involved sorting the different codes into potential themes. Tables were used to map out overarching themes and arranging codes that best represented the theme. The *fourth phase* involved reviewing of the themes to see if all the themes had sufficient data to support them or if some themes could be collapsed into each other. The *final phase* involved defining and naming the themes.

Results

Work→family conflict: All the participants and their partners reported working in stressful jobs and experiencing work-family conflict, in particular time-based and strain based conflict. Work→family conflict was more prevalent than family→work conflict. The dominant theme for the female participants was not being able to spend time with their children. One female participant reported *“what my mother has done for me, I have not given to my child, because my mother fully engaged and spent more time with us”*. Another female participant said *“children are a precious thing that God has given. It is a woman’s responsibility to care for them, because men cannot bear children”*. The partners of these participants commented more on not being able to spend time with the family rather than focussing only on children. For example one of them commented *“I can’t give time to my family, that’s the main problem. My wife always fights with me because I am not available in the family”*. Another male participant reported *“sometime I am not able to come home because lot of work in the office. Then I may not be able to reach home 9pm, or 10pm or even 11pm because of traffic and hectic work”*. When asked about being able to spend time together as a family a female participant said *“I feel mentally stressed from work and need rest. There are 24 hours per day, I want 48 hours. There is so much of work we can’t spend time together”*. Another female reported *“when I am tensed, I’ll make some mistakes while cooking food and I can’t concentrate on daughter’s home-work”*. When asked about being able to spend time together as a couple a male participant said *“if I am fully working then I won’t be able to concentrate much at home. This is one area we are lacking now and both are feeling it....we both are sensing it, like we are not able to spend time together”*. The male participants considered work to be more important than family as one of them commented *“yeah I think career is very important to each one of us and we want to give little more importance to career”*. However the partner of this participant considered family life to be more important *“compared to job life my family life is very important. I would like to spend more time with my family”*.

Mechanisms of coping: some interesting themes emerged when the participants were asked on how they coped with work and family demands. These themes have been identified as: Belief in God, attitude to life, strength gained from helping others, support from spouse, and support from work colleagues. Belief in God was a dominant theme from both the male and female participants and their partners. Some of the responses were *“belief in God is one major part in coping with stress....like when I come home we pray together. If anything comes up we settle it immediately, we don’t keep it for the next week. We talk it over, and then pray over it and then reconcile”*. One male participant said *“whenever we have difficulties or whenever we are very happy or whenever we need a support not only from family we have to pray to God”*. His partner held the same belief when she said *“you should not worry about work but we should have full faith in God, he will help us”*. A female participant said *“I get 90% strength through belief in God. I will not feel frustrated”*. Her partner’s response was *“we try to understand each other from God’s perspective”*. General attitude to life was also identified as a mechanism for coping. For example a male respondent said *“We should always think positive that’s very important. When we think positive then we can grow and then our life will be happy. See when we have negative thinking I am telling you they will not be satisfied and they will destroy others also”*. Another response was *“see sometimes what we think may not happen, but at the same time we must not be disgusted or you should not feel bad because what is happening is good for the*

well-being of our people and for my family". A female participant noted *"the life which God gave me is not only to live for myself, but that I may be useful to others"*. Strength gained from helping others was also identified as a way of coping. One respondent said *"we help community people. They are all very poor and have problems. When we reach out, people will be very happy. I can see it in their faces. This makes me very happy to help them"*. Another respondent said *"at the end of the day when you come back home, relaxed and say I have done a good job today, I have helped somebody, and that's the most important thing for a person to be happy"*. Support from spouse was also identified as a way of coping. Interestingly this was more so by the male participants and to a lesser extent by the female participants. As one male respondent said *"I have an understanding wife who understand me, and we both share similar vision of serving people"*. The spouse of this participant who was also in full-time employment said *"my work is to my family but **his** (bolded for emphasis) work is for society" (bolded for emphasis)*. Another response was *"we are together and we both know what is happening, what is life even through difficulties we are together"*. Support from colleagues was also identified as an important way of coping. A female participant said *"I have a nice team, we are like a family, and we share what ever happens at home and at work"*. A male participant said *"we have our team meeting and we allow some time for sharing our personal concerns which is very helpful"*. Sharing of concerns with colleagues whether these were work or family related was considered to be important by most participants.

Discussion

There is accumulating evidence from work-family research done in the West that it is a widespread phenomenon with unfavourable consequences such as stress (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000), job dissatisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1999), lowered performance and commitment and increased turnover (Kossek & Ozeki, 1999). However, the bulk of these studies are based on North American samples using a quantitative design that tapped experiences of individuals rather than couples. Poelmans (2001) points out that there are a number of deficiencies in this stream of research including (a) overwhelming emphasis on North American samples; (b) its primary quantitative design; and (c) the unit of analysis is individual, as compared to couples. The present study was intended to fill this research gap by investigating work-family conflict experienced by social-work couples employed by social work agencies in Bangalore.

Work → family conflict. An important contextual note to this research is the centrality of family as an institution in Indian society, which generates gender based social pressures on female respondents to be a 'good mother' by taking care of family even if she is working in a full-time job. In the traditional Indian family, male members have the responsibility to be 'bread winners', and they are expected to work long hours in the office. Father's contribution to raising a family is limited to income generation and general oversight of family needs. Social work couples we interviewed reported experiencing widespread work → family conflict, and its consequences in the form of stress, job dissatisfaction, and reported lowered work performance. Female respondents were upset because of the intrusion of work demands into home life that resulted in neglect of parental duties. Some typical comments included the following: *"I can't give time to my family, that's the main problem"*; and *"I would like to spend more time with my family"*.

Family and colleague support. If the working women are seen as being ambitious about her career, she risks blame in neglecting her primary role at home--raising a family. Thus women have to be very careful in not upsetting the delicate balance between home and career. It was clear from the comments made by male and female respondents in this survey that spousal support played an important role in providing a sense of security and stability at home, and in reducing work→family conflict for women. In a study assessing the wellbeing of married working women, Rao, Apte and Subbakrishna (2003) found that the availability of spousal support was a significant predictor of women's wellbeing. In the present investigation, the importance of spousal support was an underlying theme, the following comment captures this theme: "*we are together and we both know what is happening, what is life even through difficulties we are together*". Rao et al study reported that women respondents in their study would not have been able to continue working after marriage but for the support from their spouse and parents, which was consistent with findings of Rajadhyaksha and Bhatnagar (2000). Ramu (1987) observed that husbands in dual-earner families in India enjoy the economic benefits of their wives' employment, along with the public image of being benevolent, liberated men who have permitted their wives to work outside the home. Support from colleagues/friends was also identified as an important way of coping. One female participant said "*I have a nice team, we are like a family, we share what ever happens at home and at work*"

Religious coping. An important finding of this study is the widespread use of religious coping among Indian social work couples to deal with stressful situations at work and home. Both male and female respondents reported that they relied on their faith in God to deal with adverse circumstances of their work and home life. This finding is in concordance with recent investigations among White/European-American, Black/African-American and other ethnic samples that show religion as the single most important influence in their lives. In a recent meta-analysis involving 49 studies (N=13,107) investigating the influence of religious coping in psychological adjustment to stress by Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) found that 72% of those surveyed identify religion as the single most important influence in their lives. The declared religious affiliations of individuals in these samples were Protestant (57%), Catholic (13%), Judaism, Buddhism and Islam (2%). The meta-analysis showed that individuals who used positive religious coping strategies experienced less depression, anxiety and distress. Note that Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (2000) makes a distinction between *positive religious coping* strategies and *negative religious coping* strategies. The positive strategies included (1) religious purification/ forgiveness; (2) religious direction/conversion; (3) religious helping; (4) seeking support from clergy/ members; (5) collaborative religious coping; (6) religious focus; (7) active religious surrender; (8) benevolent religious reappraisal; (9) spiritual connection; and (10) marking religious boundaries. The negative strategies included (1) spiritual discontent; (2) demonic reappraisal; (3) passive religious deferral; (4) interpersonal religious discontent; (5) reappraisal of God's powers; (6) punishing God reappraisal; and (7) pleading for direct intercession. Although our interview data indicate that social work couples were using positive religious coping strategies to deal with life stressors, further investigation using quantitative methodology is recommend to tease out if the use of positive coping strategies resulted in better mental health, as reported by Ross (1990).

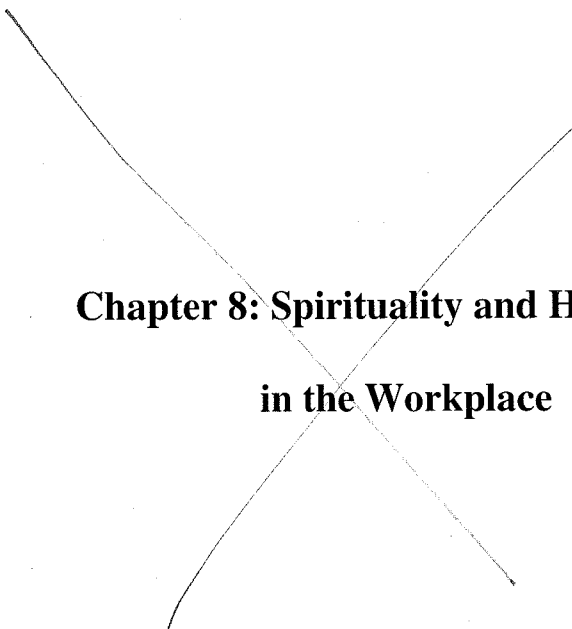
Conclusion

In our investigation of work→family conflict and the mechanisms adopted for coping by social worker couples, three dominant themes were identified (a) the widespread experience of work-family conflict and its reported consequences including stress, job dissatisfaction, and reduced time with family; (b) religious coping as a primary mechanism for dealing with work related stress; and (c) spousal support and support from colleagues and family as a mechanism for coping. Our findings are in concordance with the findings in the extant literature sourced in the West in a number of respects. However, the use of religious coping as a mechanism for dealing with life stresses appeared to be more widespread among Indian couples. The dominance of family as an institution in India makes it impossible for Indian women to work, without strong spousal support and support from extended family. Further research to establish link between positive religious coping and mental health is recommended.

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**Chapter 8: Spirituality and Humanism
in the Workplace**