
Work and family: in search of the missing links

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Abstract

Despite widespread agreement that work and family roles are interdependent, there is little consensus as to how work affects family functioning. Presents a framework to account for this. First, articulates two hypotheses critical to this framework. It is the quality of the employment experience, and not employment status nor the quantity of employment, that is critical to understanding the effects of work on the family. Thus, the traditional assumption that employment is uniformly beneficial for men and detrimental for women is of little explanatory value. Work exerts an indirect effect on family functioning, and the variables that link work and family are pivotal in understanding the interdependence of work and family. Presents research conducted explicitly to test this framework. Identifies conceptual ramifications and implications for organizational interventions and personal counselling.

Since the 1970s, the assumption that work and family roles are interdependent has received widespread acceptance (Barling, 1990). From a historical perspective, it is worth noting that this was not always the case. Although earlier research such as Mathews' (1934) study on the effects of maternal employment (see also Friend and Haggard, 1948; Hoppock, 1935) explicitly assumed an overlap between work and family, by the 1950s this pervasive assumption was being challenged. For example, Parsons (1959) proposed a rigid structural differentiation between roles, including occupational and family roles, and questioned whether it was even possible to achieve role integration. Later, Hall (1972) postulated that women experienced their work and family roles simultaneously, but that society still allowed men to erect barriers between their roles. Today, substantial agreement exists concerning the overlap and interdependence of work and family roles (Barling, 1990; Crosby, 1987; Kanter, 1977; Voydanoff, 1987).

Despite widespread acceptance of the notion that work affects family functioning, an understanding of just how work affects the family is lacking. The aim of this article is to present an integrated framework of the ways in which work comes to affect the family. In doing so, it is nonetheless recognized that family factors also influence how individuals experience their work (see Kriegsmann and Hardin, 1974). However, this is a separate question, because the process might be different when family factors affect work; certainly any implications for intervention or prevention would differ.

First, to examine the effects of work on family, two hypotheses that are critical to this framework will be presented. Following that, a series of studies that were conducted to test this framework empirically will be described. Finally, conceptual and

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intervention implications of the framework will be drawn.

H1: It is the quality, not the quantity, of work that is important.

To date, the most frequently researched topic in the area of work and family has been the effects of maternal employment. The most pervasive research design has been to contrast groups of employed and non-employed mothers in terms of a variety of outcomes, such as their own or their partners' marital satisfaction or their children's behaviour (Barling, 1990). This research design is consistent with the social stereotype that employment is detrimental for women and their families. Likewise, it should be noted that research contrasting employed and unemployed men, with the expectation that unemployed men will fare worse than their employed counterparts, is consistent with the belief that employment is beneficial for men and their families. The results of these studies have been consistent: essentially, no meaningful differences accrue when such comparisons are made. This point should not be surprising, as it was made some three decades ago (Hoffman, 1961; Stolz, 1960). Hoffman (1961), for example, argued that maternal employment was not so powerful a factor as to result in such substantial effects. Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1982) reached the same conclusion in their review and went on to argue that research contrasting employed and non-employed mothers had reached a point of diminishing returns. Nonetheless, an obvious and intriguing question is why this research continued and indeed proliferated in the two decades following the publication of these two seminal reviews. Perhaps the most plausible reason is that the vast majority of this research was driven by ideological beliefs and social stereotypes of the employed mother, rather than by a rigorous examination of empirical findings. This is aptly illustrated by Jensen and Borges' (1986) comment a quarter of a century later with respect to differences between employed and non-employed mothers: "...the failure to find significant differences between these two groups does not mean that there are no differences" (p. 659).

Arguing for a decreasing emphasis on maternal employment status and against a linear metric of the number of hours worked by employed mothers, Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1982) likened the way mothers' workplaces were being treated to a "social

address": either mothers were present at work or not, and that was all the information required. Instead, Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1982) called for a focus on the quality of the mothers' occupational role and work experiences, arguing that this would enable an examination of the specific job characteristics that influence employed parents.

Therefore, the first of the two major hypotheses that guide the conceptual framework linking work and the family explicitly follows from Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1982) and suggests that the quality of the work experience, rather than a focus on employment status or employment quantity, will assist in understanding the differential effects of work experiences on family functioning. The "traditional" approach assumes that the within-group similarity in the work experiences of employed mothers on the one hand, and non-employed mothers on the other, outweighs any differences between these two groups. From an empirical perspective, the first hypothesis differs from the "traditional" approach in that there is substantially more within-group variance in the experience of employed mothers (and fathers) than between-group variance when non-employed (or unemployed) and employed parents are contrasted. Certainly, research on job characteristics shows considerable variance in the way in which people experience their work, and that the differences are predictive of psychological wellbeing (Kelloway and Barling, 1991).

H2: Work exerts an indirect effect on the family.

Historically, the first integrated set of hypotheses that were offered to account for the relationship between work and family concerned the possibility of "spillover" from one role to the other (Wilensky, 1960). The spillover hypothesis accounts for positive relationships (e.g. Barling, 1984; Barling and Rosenbaum, 1986; Haavio-Mannila, 1971) that emerged between job satisfaction on the one hand, and life or non-work satisfaction on the other. However, the spillover hypothesis is insufficient explanation for the relationship between work and family, because some studies yielded negative correlations between work and non-work satisfaction (e.g. Miller and Weiss, 1982) or even null relationships (Iris and Barrett, 1972; Ridley, 1973).

Later theorists (Bartolome and Evans, 1980; Near *et al.*, 1980; Staines, 1980; Zedeck, 1987) extended the notion of spillover; six different hypotheses were offered to account for the different relationships that were being yielded between job satisfaction and marital satisfaction (see Table I). The spillover, instrumental and integrative hypotheses provide different explanations for positive relationships between work and marital satisfaction. The compensation and conflict hypotheses offer different reasons for negative relationships between work and the family, while the segmentation or independence hypothesis suggests why no relationship may emerge.

The question that arises is whether any of these six hypotheses can be used to understand and predict how work affects the family. As argued elsewhere (Barling, 1990, pp. 75-80), these hypotheses are of limited value for this purpose for several reasons. Most importantly, all six hypotheses assume that work exerts a direct effect on family functioning, and merely seeks to reveal the conditions under which positive, negative or null relationships will emerge. As such, the research on which these six hypotheses are based seeks to find variables that moderate the direct relationship between work and family. While interesting, the conceptual and/or practical significance of any findings from such research will be limited. In this context, moderator variables assume a direct effect of work on family, and determine the direction and magnitude of the work/family relationship.

Instead, the second of the two critical hypotheses for understanding the effects of

work on the family suggests that any effects will be indirect. More specifically, variations in the quality of the work experience will influence individual wellbeing, which in turn will affect interpersonal interactions.

Parents' employment, parent interactions and children's behaviour

As already noted, there is a considerable body of research on maternal employment status, the findings of which show no consistent negative effects accrue to the families of employed mothers (Barling, 1990). Research also shows that it is possible to focus on within-group analyses of employed mothers, who vary widely in terms of their employment role experiences or job experiences (Barling and MacEwen, 1988). Moreover, unlike research on maternal employment status, maternal employment role experience research predicts children's behaviours (e.g. Barling *et al.*, 1988) and school adjustment (Farel, 1980). Thus, consistent with the first hypothesis, the first study to be described (see MacEwen and Barling, 1991), focuses on two conceptually distinct employment role experiences (Barling and MacEwen, 1988), namely interrole conflict and employment role satisfaction.

The second hypothesis suggests that interrole conflict and role satisfaction would exert indirect effects on children's behaviour through their effects on mothers' psychological wellbeing (MacEwen and Barling, 1991). Thus, following research showing that stress heightens arousal and decreases attention (Motowidlo *et al.*, 1986), it is predicted that, as a stressor, interrole conflict would decrease attention. Likewise, there is research across a

Table I Classifying the relationship between job satisfaction and marital satisfaction

Nature of the relationship	Direction of the relationship	Hypotheses underlying the relationship
Spillover	Positive	Positive feelings in one domain spill over into others
Instrumental	Positive	One role is used as a means of satisfying others
Integrative	Positive	Requirements for success in different roles are fundamentally similar
Compensation	Negative	Fulfilment sought in one role because of lack of gratification in others
Conflict	Negative	Activities required for success in one role are incompatible with success in others
Segmentation/ Independence	Null	Job and family roles are completely unrelated

Source: Barling (1990, p. 77)

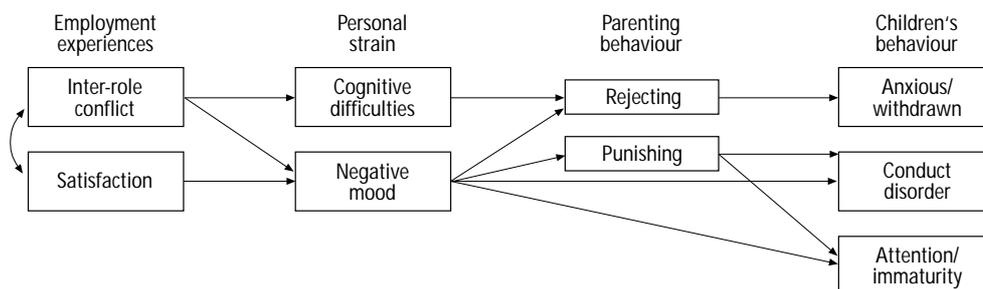
wide variety of settings showing that work stress also affects mood (e.g. Barling and Kryl, 1990; Barling and MacIntyre, in press); hence, interrole conflict should predict negative mood. Unlike interrole conflict, which is stressful, role dissatisfaction may be unpleasant but will not cause the same time pressure and feelings of overload as interrole conflict. Hence, it is predicted that dissatisfaction with the role of employed mother would predict negative mood, but not cognitive difficulties.

The next set of links in the model concerns the effects of maternal wellbeing (cognitive difficulties and negative mood) on mother-child interactions (rejecting and punishing behaviours). In short, it is argued that cognitive distraction would predict rejection, because a mother who is distracted will be less attentive to her children. In contrast, as is apparent in the clinical literature, negative mood would affect both rejection and punishment. Finally, it is hypothesized that parenting behaviour has a direct effect on children's problem behaviours (namely, conduct disorders, anxiety/withdrawal and attention/immaturity). This model is presented in Figure 1.

Based on a sample of 147 employed mothers (average age 36 years) and their children (average age eight years), strong support was found for the model. This study showed that taking explicit cognizance of the two hypotheses enunciated above does indeed help to explain any effects of work on the family. Nonetheless, numerous questions were raised (e.g. do the same effects emerge for fathers? What if work experiences rather than role experiences are considered? Can the results be explained by the fact that all the data emerged from mothers' self-reports?), prompting a continuation of the search for the links between work and family.

For several reasons, it is crucial to examine whether the same process describes the effects, if any, of fathers' employment on their children's behaviour; first, any effects of fathers' and mothers' employment on their children have invariably been examined separately because of the social assumptions that traditionally perceive the employed mother as neglecting her children in some way (see Barling, 1990). Stated somewhat differently, society has expected fathers to be employed. Moreover, fathers' employment is believed to be beneficial for children, whereas their unemployment is thought to exert negative effects. In contrast, society has expected mothers to remain at home. Hence, employed mothers have been perceived to exert negative effects on their children, while homemakers have been customarily seen as positive influences on childrearing. Second, recent studies do not support these stereotypical views of employed mothers. Instead, it is the quality of the mothers' employment role experience that is the critical variable in understanding how maternal employment affects family functioning in general (Barling *et al.*, 1988; MacEwen and Barling, 1991). Third, there is precious little empirical information with respect to the effects of employed fathers on family functioning. Because fathers are expected to be employed, between-group contrasts of voluntarily employed and non-employed fathers are virtually impossible owing to the difficulty of obtaining a comparable group of voluntarily non-employed (as opposed to unemployed) fathers. Even if it were possible to obtain a group of voluntarily non-employed fathers, it is highly likely that socio-economic status would be a major confounding variable. Finally, even though the results of studies using univariate data indicate that fathers' subjective work experiences do influence children's behaviour (Barling, 1986a), it

Figure 1 Process model linking maternal employment role experiences and children's behaviour



remains to assess whether fathers' employment indirectly influences children's behaviour.

Stewart and Barling (1992) conducted a study to address these issues and the data they obtained again strongly support the model. First, this study shows that fathers' subjective work experiences indirectly predict children's behaviour. More precisely, four major work experiences are investigated: the two central components of Karasek's job strain model, namely decision latitude and work demands (Karasek and Theorell, 1990), as well as job insecurity and interrole conflict. These four work experiences directly influenced fathers' affect (negative mood, satisfaction and anxiety), which in turn predicted punishing, rejecting and authoritative parenting behaviour. Finally, these parenting behaviours predicted children's acting-out and withdrawal behaviours, as well as children's school competences. There were no direct links between fathers' work experiences and children's behaviours. What is also notable is that unlike similar studies (e.g. MacEwen and Barling, 1991) where all data were obtained from a single source, teachers provided additional reports of the children's behaviours. As a result, the possibility that the observed pattern of relationships is a function of self-report biases can be excluded.

Spouses' subjective work experiences and marital functioning

The previous two studies focused on the interdependence of parents' employment and children's functioning. An equally important issue, and one which has received less attention in the literature, is whether the quality of spouses' work (rather than role) experiences exerts any influence on marital functioning. We conducted several studies to investigate this.

In our first study linking work experiences and marital functioning (Barling and MacEwen, 1992), we chose to focus on specific work experiences (namely intrarole conflict and ambiguity, job insecurity and job dissatisfaction) that exert perhaps the most profound effects on psychological wellbeing (Sauter *et al.*, 1990). Most studies that have examined role conflict have focused on the conflict experienced in simultaneously completing both work and family demands (i.e. conflict between roles, e.g. see Barling,

1986b; Greenhaus *et al.*, 1987; Suchet and Barling, 1986). Yet it is clear that intrarole conflict and ambiguity are pervasive in the workforce (Kahn *et al.*, 1964) and exert widespread personal and organizational problems (Fisher and Gitelson, 1983; Jackson and Schuler, 1985). It should be noted at this stage that there is some research on the relationship between intrarole stressors and marital functioning. Burke *et al.* (1980) showed that husbands' role conflict and ambiguity were associated with their wives' negative marital behaviours, but the magnitude of the relationships was modest at best. One possibility for this could have been Burke *et al.*'s (1980) expectation that this relationship was direct, rather than indirect, as we postulated in our study. The final work stressor studied was job insecurity, because it is now such a pervasive fear, and is associated with poor personal and organizational functioning (Ashford *et al.*, 1989).

We also focused on job dissatisfaction as an indicator of the quality of work experiences. As early as 1956, concern was expressed that job satisfaction was related to marital satisfaction (Dyer, 1956). Job satisfaction remains a frequently researched variable when investigating work/family linkages.

We again postulated that the effects of subjective work experiences will differentially influence concentration and depression. Specifically, the role stressors and job insecurity will be over-arousing, and therefore will influence cognitive distraction. In contrast, job dissatisfaction is affective in nature and therefore will influence depressive symptoms but not concentration. We expanded our focus on marital functioning in this study by assessing sexual satisfaction, psychological aggression, and marital satisfaction as indices of marital functioning. The results of this study (Barling and MacEwen, 1992) again provided strong support for the two hypotheses articulated above.

We subsequently replicated and extended these findings in a study of the indirect effects of daily role overload on marital functioning (MacEwen *et al.*, 1992). The previous study focused on chronic work stressors, in the sense that they were enduring. However, it is also possible that there is considerable variation in the extent to which different work stressors are experienced on any given day (Warr and Payne, 1983). We focused on one variable that is perhaps most likely to vary on

a day-today basis, namely role overload. If the argument about daily variation is supported, then daily fluctuations in marital functioning would be expected (Repetti, 1989). This could then explain why some studies of chronic role stressors and marital functioning have not yielded significant findings.

We hypothesized that because of its over-arousing properties, role overload would result in anxiety. We also suggested that depression would be a consequence of role overload, because of research showing that depression is associated with interrole conflict (MacEwen and Barling, 1991). However, depression and anxiety were predicted to result in different marital behaviours. While anxiety would result in withdrawal from the marital relationship (Repetti, 1989), depression would predict anger and negative marital interactions (Beach *et al.*, 1990).

In general, the results of this study (MacEwen *et al.*, 1992) provide strong support for the hypothesized process leading from daily role overload to marital anger and withdrawal through depression and anxiety respectively (see Figure 2). One aspect of this study is worth noting. Self-reported withdrawal predicted partners' perceptions of withdrawal, and partners' own withdrawal. Similarly, self-reported anger predicted partners' perceptions of anger, and subsequently partners' own expressions of anger. This pattern was evident whether males or females were experiencing daily role overload. Hence, daily role overload experienced by one partner has indirect consequences on the marital behaviour of the other partner.

Non-employment roles and family functioning

Until this point, we have examined the effects of employees' subjective work experiences on their family functioning. A central hypothesis characterizing this research is that an under-

standing of role experiences, rather than role status, is necessary to understand the interdependence of two roles, in this case, employment and family roles. If indeed the hypothesis is defensible, then non-employment role experiences should also predict family functioning. We have conducted three separate studies to test this prediction.

In the first of these three studies, we chose to focus on unemployment and marital functioning (Grant and Barling, 1992). In this study, several features of the two hypotheses enunciated earlier were readily apparent. First, there were no significant differences in the marital functioning (i.e. negative interactions, physical aggression or marital satisfaction) of employed and unemployed individuals. Stated somewhat differently, employment status exerted no significant effects on marital functioning. Instead, we hypothesized that unemployment experiences would be linked with marital functioning via depressive symptoms. We used Jahoda's (1982) theory of the manifest and latent functions of employment to identify the factors critical to the experience of unemployment. Thus, financial strain, time use, negative life events and external attributions for the causes of unemployment were all taken as indicators of the experience of unemployment (see Figure 3). Previous research certainly shows that each of these variables discriminates between employed and unemployed individuals' depressive symptoms (Feather, 1990). These variables also discriminated between these two groups in our study, providing support for the notion that together they capture the psychological experience of unemployment. While there were no direct links between unemployment experiences and marital functioning, time use, negative life events and financial strain predicted depressive symptoms (external attributions did not). In turn, depressive symptoms predicted negative spousal interactions, physical aggression and marital dissatis-

Figure 2 Process model linking daily role overload and marital functioning

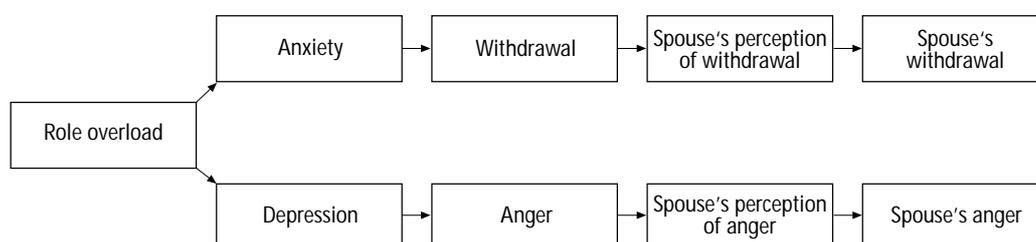
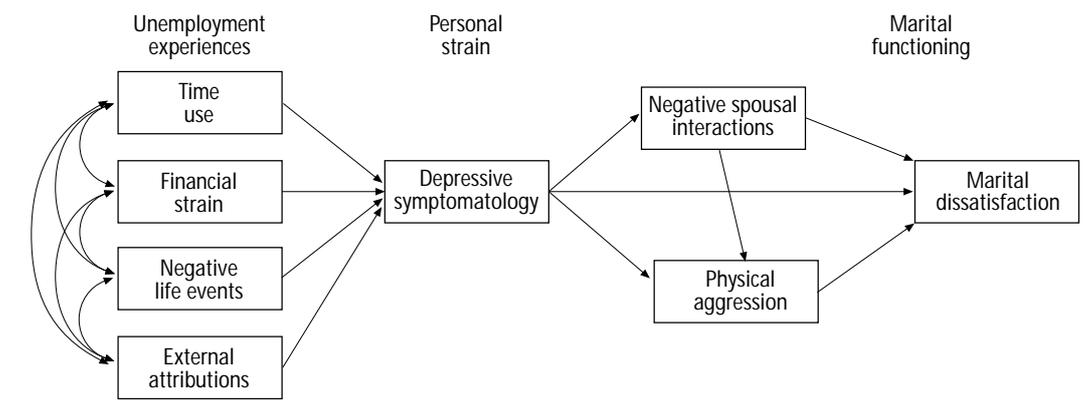


Figure 3 Process model linking the experience of unemployment and marital functioning



faction. Importantly, despite conventional wisdom that financial issues are of prime concern during unemployment, the effects of time use on depressive symptoms was twice as great as that of financial strain on depressive symptoms. As will be discussed later, this comparison has important conceptual and intervention implications.

In the second study in this series, we focused on the relationship between retirement experiences and marital satisfaction (Higginbottom *et al.*, 1992). Again, research in this area has traditionally concentrated on retirement status, contrasting the marital satisfaction of retired and pre-retired individuals. In contrast to this, we generated a model of the retirement experience again based primarily on the theorizing of Jahoda (1982). Thus, two factors reflected the experience of retirement: financial strain and the quality of the retirement experience (characterized by time use, interpersonal contacts and collective purpose). As predicted, retirement experiences predicted retirement-specific satisfaction. Depressive symptoms were predicted by retirement satisfaction, and both depressive symptoms and retirement-specific satisfaction predicted marital satisfaction. Two aspects of these findings are striking. First, retirement-role experiences again did not exert any significant direct influence on marital satisfaction. Second, one potential criticism of the research in our programme has been the reliance on cross-sectional data. In the study on retirement experiences, we collected longitudinal data. Cross-lagged regression analyses showed that retirement satisfaction and depressive symptoms both preceded marital satisfaction. However, hypotheses about reverse causality (e.g. marital dissatisfaction

predicts depressive symptoms) were not supported by the data.

Our third and final study in this series focused on the effects of homemakers' role experiences on their toddlers' behaviours (Barling *et al.*, in press). We chose to focus on homemakers and their toddlers for specific reasons. First, with increasing social and economic pressures on mothers to seek and hold employment, homemakers have become a neglected group, who if anything, now attract some of the scorn previously reserved for employed mothers. Second, toddlers spend considerable time with their homemaker mothers. Thus, any effects of their mothers' role experiences would be particularly pronounced because of the amount of mother-toddler contact. In constructing the model for this study, we largely replicated that of MacEwen and Barling (1991) with one important modification. MacEwen and Barling (1991) focused on maternal strain (negative mood and cognitive difficulties) as an outcome of employment role experiences and negative parent-child interactions (punishing and rejecting behaviours). However, such an approach suggests that only negative effects of role experiences are expected; we included homemaking satisfaction as a role experience, and positive mood as an indicator of homemaker well-being, and also investigated the predictors and outcomes of positive parenting behaviour.

The results of this study using path analysis again showed strong support for the model of how maternal role experiences affect children's behaviour. Thus, further backing is provided for the notions that: (employment) role experiences are more important predictors of diverse aspects of family functioning

than role status, and role experiences exert indirect effects on family functioning.

Some conceptual and practical implications

Several studies have been described above focusing on the nature of the relationship between work and family. The pattern of results is consistent across all studies: role experiences (rather than role status) influence family functioning indirectly. More specifically, employment (and non-employment) role experiences exert direct effects on different aspects of personal wellbeing. Personal wellbeing influences parent-child and inter-spousal interactions, which in turn affect child behaviours and marital functioning respectively. It is argued that these results are robust for several reasons. First, the findings generalize across several role domains, and, within specific roles, different role experiences (e.g. time use) exert consistent effects. Second, arguments about reverse causality can be excluded because longitudinal data were used to examine temporal ordering (Higginbottom, 1992), and the plausibility of reverse models was explicitly tested and empirically excluded in some studies (Higginbottom *et al.*, 1992). Third, important extraneous variables were controlled statistically in other studies (e.g. the duration of unemployment; Grant and Barling, 1992). Fourth, the possibility that the direct and indirect relationships are a function of the reliance on self-report data can be excluded, because the same pattern of results are yielded when external ratings of behaviour are obtained (e.g. teacher ratings of children's behaviour; Barling *et al.*, 1988; Stewart and Barling, 1992).

To date, the literature on work and the family consists primarily of anecdotal or speculative articles and correlational studies. Glaring in their absence are controlled outcome studies aimed at either prevention or intervention. If the external validity of the model can be accepted, some important practical implications emerge, particularly with respect to the design of intervention or prevention programmes. Specifically, the model derived from the above studies suggests that work experiences influence personal wellbeing, which then affect parent-child interactions and children's behaviours and/or spousal interactions and marital satisfaction.

The most obvious practical consequence from the studies we have conducted derives from: the finding that it is the quality of the role experience that is critical; other findings showing that the belief that work is uniformly advantageous for men, but damaging for women, is of no explanatory value (Barling, 1990); and the burgeoning literature explicating exactly what factors create a psychologically healthy work environment, and its effects (Karasek and Theorell, 1990; Sauter *et al.*, 1990). In this sense, it is instructive to examine the preventive strategy proposed by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (Sauter *et al.*, 1990). They identify several factors in the work environment (e.g. work pace and schedule, work roles, job future, social environment factors, job content, and perhaps most importantly, participation and control) that are critical for psychological wellbeing, and hence critical for prevention and intervention. Research since the publication of their proposed prevention strategy, for example on work schedule (Pierce and Dunham, 1992) and job content (Wall *et al.*, 1990) certainly shows that changes in any of the work characteristics along the lines suggested by Sauter *et al.* (1990) do have meaningful effects on psychological wellbeing. In short, preventive strategies could be enhanced with a greater focus on the quality of the role experience, irrespective of the role. Thus, whether organizational psychologists are charged with the responsibility of designing "healthier" jobs, or whether attempts are made to ensure that unemployed or retired people enjoy better quality role experiences, family functioning could be enhanced by a greater concentration on the quality of the role experience.

However, such preventive strategies are simply not always feasible. Where prevention is not achievable, consistent support for the indirect effects of role experiences on family functioning also offers ideas for intervention strategies. Our studies isolating the factors that mediate the relationship between work and family offer some positive clues for intervention.

Our study on unemployment (Grant and Barling, 1992) can be used to illustrate this. Assuming that it is not possible to enact prevention strategies to ensure that the quality of the role experience is not negative, it might then be possible to focus on depressive symptoms in a counselling perspective. Given that

depressive symptoms emerge consistently as the link between work or role experiences and family functioning, attempts to alleviate depressive symptoms may be one of the most practical means of ensuring that work does not negatively influence family functioning.

Conclusion

A framework to account for the inevitable interdependence of work and family was offered in this article. Two hypotheses are central to this framework. First, the quality rather than the quantity of employment is the variable most likely to affect family functioning; and second, work affects family functioning indirectly, through its sequential effects of psychological wellbeing and parent-child or inter-partner interactions. Numerous studies were presented, all of which support the proposed framework. The framework is important, not only because it advances our conceptual understanding of the interdependence of work and family, but perhaps more importantly because it offers direct suggestions for both prevention and intervention strategies.

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