Effects of Husbands’ Work Experiences on Wives’ Marital Satisfaction

JULIAN BARLING
Division of Industrial Psychology
University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

ABSTRACT. Despite persistent suggestions that excessive work involvement or negative work-related experiences would have an adverse influence on the marital relationship, no conclusive empirical data support this assumption. The association between husbands’ work-related experiences (job involvement, job satisfaction, and perceptions of organizational climate) and their wives’ marital satisfaction was assessed. Multiple regression analysis revealed that husbands’ perceptions of the organizational climate and their job satisfaction were related to their spouses’ marital satisfaction in a significant, positive, and linear manner.

THE IDEA THAT HUSBANDS’ WORK exerts a negative impact on their wives’ marital satisfaction is not new (cf. Orden & Bradburn, 1969). The titles of a sample of some relevant articles, for example, Divorce: The Price of Success? (Humphreys, 1978), Trade-Offs: Executive, Family and Organizational Life (Grieff & Munter, 1981), ‘Til Business Us Do Part? (Walker, 1976) Must Success Cost So Much? (Bartolome & Evans, 1980), and What Price Success? (Steiner, 1972), attest to the presumed negative effect of work involvement on marital functioning. Moreover, theoretical arguments suggesting the inevitable incompatibility or conflict of these two aspects of an individual’s existence have been posited (Rohrlich, 1980). Yet an evalu-
tion of this literature reveals that the status of the work experience/marital satisfaction relationship remains equivocal at best.

One line of research has focused on the effects of husbands’ job involvement (Clark, Nye, & Gleas, 1978; Ridley, 1973). In such research (e.g., Clark et al., 1978) work involvement was conceptualized as the number of hours worked per week and was arbitrarily categorized (viz., 1-14, 15-39, 40, 41-48, 49-59, and 60 or more hours). Collapsing the number of hours worked per week into arbitrary categories, however, (a) ignores the different psychological processes involved in and reactions resulting from involvement in one’s work (cf. Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977) and (b) invokes all the problems associated with dichotomizing data (cf. Humphreys, 1978). Although it is not surprising that the total amount of time worked is related inversely to the amount of time spent on household chores or with one’s children (cf. Clark et al., 1978; Gerstl, 1961), it is the psychological experience of work and the quality of interactions at home, rather than the amount of time worked or spent at home, that should be assessed. Indeed, assessing husbands’ job-related experiences is crucial and may provide a different pattern of results from research focusing on the fact (i.e., full-/part-time employment, voluntary or involuntary nonemployment) of one’s employment status (e.g., Barling, 1982a, 1982b; Barling & Van Bart, in press).

Burke and Weir (1976) studied the influence of occupational demands or characteristics on the quality of life, one aspect of which was marital satisfaction. Because the same individuals’ work experiences and marital satisfaction was studied, however, the issue of the impact of husbands’ work experiences on spouses’ marital satisfaction remains unanswered. Burke, Weir, and Du Wors (1979) demonstrated a relationship between husbands’ self-reported Type A behavior and their wives’ marital satisfaction and between wives’ perceptions of the extent of their husbands’ Type A behavior and their own self-reported marital satisfaction (Burke, Weir, & Du Wors, 1980). Type A behavior does not, however, relate exclusively to the work environment despite the voluminous research conducted within this context (cf. Price, 1982). Again, therefore, the issue of the specific influence of husbands’ job-related experiences on wives’ marital satisfaction remains unresolved, particularly since earlier findings (Burke et al., 1979) have not been replicated (Burke, 1982).

Using a different paradigm to assess the influence of a particular spouse’s work experiences on the other spouse’s marital satisfaction, research findings have been inconsistent. There is evidence showing that wives’ employment status and interest in their work has no influence on husbands’ marital adjustment (Locksley, 1980). Burke and Weir (1976) found that husbands of working women are less satisfied in their marriage than their counterparts of nonworking wives, and Booth (1979) essentially found no differences in marital distress between the husbands of employed
and nonemployed wives. Again, this research does not address the effects of husbands’ subjective reactions to their work lives on their wives’ marital satisfaction.

Method

Procedure

To obtain a heterogeneous range of husbands’ educational levels, occupations, and organizations for which they worked, subjects were selected for the present study by contacting fathers of children attending a middle-class school as part of a larger study (Barling, 1982a). After participation was elicited from 72 fathers once the nature of the research had been explained, their consent was obtained to approach their wives. Fifty wives (69% of this sample) agreed to participate.

Subjects

The 50 wives (M age = 34.23 years, SD = 3.49) completed the 15-item Short Marital Adjustment Test, SMAT, (Locke & Wallace, 1959); the mean score on the SMAT was well within the range typically considered as non-distressed or not at risk, M = 115.21, SD = 27.35 (O’Leary & Turkewitz, 1978). The average age of the 50 husbands was 37.54 years (SD = 3.81), and they had completed an average of 12 years of formal education (range = 7–19 years). Thirty were professional/semiprofessionals, 5 were skilled workers, and 14 were semiskilled or unskilled workers. The husbands of the 50 wives who agreed to participate did not differ from the 22 who declined to participate in terms of age, educational level, and job position (p < .05).

All husbands and wives were white, English-speaking South Africans. There is no research suggesting that white South Africans differ from their counterparts, for example, in the United States. Consequently, their national origins are not regarded as a confounding variable, and the results of this study perhaps can be generalized to groups other than white South Africans.

Assessment

Husbands’ work experiences. To obtain a comprehensive perspective of husbands’ work-related experiences, four questionnaires were administered: first, Taylor and Bowers’ (1972) Survey of Organizations, from which five subscales were derived, namely, decision making, human resources primacy, technological readiness, communication, and motivation; second, Mowday, Steers, and Porter’s (1979) 15-item Organizational Commitment
cale; third, Jans' (1982) Job Involvement scale, which yields information on three subscales—general job involvement, self-esteem arising from work, and work specialization; and finally, the Job Description Index (Mith, Kendall, and Hulin, 1975), which provides data on five indices relevant to job satisfaction, namely, people, pay, promotion, supervision, and work itself. All these scales are adequate from a psychometric perspective.

Because the number of wives responding (n = 50) could not justify the use of each of these 14 aspects as separate predictors, the factor structure yielded from the larger study (Barling, 1982a) was used. Three relevant predictors were yielded—job involvement, job satisfaction, and perceived organizational climate (see Barling, 1982a, for a detailed discussion of this factor analysis). Because the 50 husbands now constituted a nonrandomly selected group, it is important to note that their job involvement, satisfaction, or perceptions of the organizational climate did not differ significantly (p > .05) from those husbands whose spouses chose not to participate in this search.

Wives' marital adjustment. Although both the SMAT (Locke & Wallace, 1980) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) are reliable and valid indicators of marital adjustment, the 15-item SMAT was used in this search: Although it is far shorter than the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, its reliability and validity are retained (O'Leary & Turkowitz, 1978).

Results

To establish whether husbands' job-related experiences predict their wives' marital satisfaction, multiple regression analyses were computed. The regression analyses showed that husbands' perceived organizational climate, F(3, 46) = 4.47, p < .025, and job satisfaction, F(3, 46) = 2.98, p < .05, positively predicted their wives' marital satisfaction. Job involvement, F(3, 46) = 2.67, p > .05, however, did not. That perceptions of the organization and job satisfaction were related positively to spouses' marital satisfaction contrasts with the large majority of anecdotal reports suggesting that excessive work involvement would be negatively associated with wives' marital satisfaction.

Discussion

The present results show a linear relationship between husbands' job satisfaction and perceptions of the organization and their spouses' marital satisfaction. Yet the stereotypes presented in the literature suggest that
work-related experiences inevitably exert a negative impact on the marital relationship. These two patterns may not be incompatible. The nature of the job involvement reflected in the literature is more consistent with an obsessive-compulsive approach to work (Schwartz, 1982), which would be more characteristic of the workaholic (Oates, 1971) or the Type A behavior pattern (Price, 1982). On the basis of these anecdotal suggestions and the present results, it is possible that a curvilinear relationship exists between job-related experiences and marital functioning. When work-related experiences are negative (e.g., poor perceptions of the work environment or low job satisfaction) or excessive (as reflected in extreme Type A behavior, e.g., Burke & Weir, 1976, 1981), spouses’ marital satisfaction suffers. When work experiences are positive or constructive, however, marital satisfaction is enhanced.

One issue that remains equivocal in such an explanation is the precise nature of the work-related experiences that might influence spouses’ marital satisfaction/adjustment. Although the results of this research suggest that perceptions of organizational climate and job satisfaction are associated with spouses’ marital satisfaction, job involvement was not, despite previous anecdotal suggestions. Possibly the meaning of job involvement within this framework is not synonymous with the more specific use of the term (Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977). Because outcomes from work may be many and varied, future research should clarify the exact nature of work-related processes and outcomes that are associated with varying levels of marital functioning.

A further possibility is that husbands’ work experiences per se do not influence their wives’ marital satisfaction. Based on Baer’s (1983) cogent argument, from which it follows that work experiences in this situation represent a “marker variable,” indicating the need to search further for some behavior influencing wives’ marital satisfaction, it is suggested that husbands’ differential work experiences lead them to behave differently at home. It is this behavior at home that influences wives’ marital satisfaction, and research might profitably assess this hypothesis.

In searching for alternative theoretical explanations for the results obtained, it must be noted that “spillover” (or compensatory) hypotheses (Evans & Bartolome, 1980) are not relevant. Such explanations account for the association of different aspects of satisfaction (e.g., job, marital, leisure) of the same individual. Likewise, research focusing on the impact of occupational demands on one’s own marital satisfaction (e.g., Burke & Weir, 1976) is not relevant. The present research focuses on the impact of the husbands’ job-related experiences on their spouses’ marital satisfaction, which may make clear why the amount of variance explained by the husbands’ job satisfaction (3.67%) and perceptions of the organization (3.54%) in wives’ marital satisfaction is relatively low. Given the multiple
influences on marital satisfaction (cf. Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974), that
husbands' work-related experiences account for 7.21% of spouses' marital
satisfaction may be clinically and conceptually significant, particularly if
the incremental value of other work-related predictors are accounted for.

To assess the true causal influence of a husband's employment expe-
riences on his wife's marital satisfaction, however, a refinement in
methodology would be in order. Specifically, some time lag should occur
between the assessment of husbands' work-related experiences and their
wives' marital satisfaction to account for the presumed causal
predominance of the former. One relevant and plausible moderator
variable, even in a causal analysis, could be the wife's employment status.
Finally, the influence of wives' job-related experiences on their husbands' 
marital satisfaction should be investigated, particularly because research in
this area has produced inconsistent results and because the number of wives
in the labor market is increasing.

REFERENCES

Parent training. New York: Guilford Press.

Manuscript under review, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Barling, J. (1982b). Fathers' subjective work experiences and their interactions with
their sons and daughters. Manuscript under review, University of the Witwaters-
rand, Johannesburg.

Barling, J., & Van Bart, D. (in press). Mothers' work-related experiences and the
behaviour of their nursery school sons and daughters. Journal of Occupational
Psychology.

Review, 58, 137-148.

Coordinator, 28, 445-450.

Burke, R. J., & Weir, T. (1976). Relationship of wife's employment status to hus-
band, wife and pair satisfaction and performance. Journal of Marriage and Fam-
ily, 38, 279-287.

Burke, R. J., & Weir, T. (1976). Relationship of wives' employment status to hus-
band, wife and pair satisfaction and performance. Journal of Marriage and Fam-
ily, 38, 279-287.

Burke, R. J., & Weir, T. (1981). Impact of occupational demands on nonwork ex-
periences. Group and Organization Studies, 6, 472-485.

Burke, R. J., Weir, T., & Du Wors, R. E. (1979). Type A behavior of administrators
and wives' reports of marital satisfaction and well-being. Journal of Applied
Psychology, 64, 57-65.

Burke, R. J., Weir, T., & Du Wors, R. E. (1980). Perceived Type A behavior of hus-
bands and wives' satisfaction and well-being. Journal of Occupational Behavior,
1, 139-150.


Received February 21, 1984