Interrole conflict and marital functioning amongst employed fathers

JULIAN BARLING

University of the Witwatersrand

SUMMARY

While the influence of maternal interrole conflict on marital functioning has been investigated, the issue of fathers’ interrole conflict has been neglected. Consequently, 67 fathers’ (M age = 38.51 years) interrole conflict and marital adjustment are investigated. In addition, the moderating role of personality hardiness is assessed. Using multiple moderator regression and sub-group analyses, hardiness was shown to moderate negative effects of interrole conflict on marital adjustment. Conceptual and practical implications of these findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Interrole conflict, which concerns the conflict experienced between diverse life roles, has attracted considerable attention over the past two decades (Bailyn, 1970; Goode, 1960; Richardson, 1981). Most of the research on interrole conflict has focused on the working mother, who enacts at least four major roles, viz. worker, mother, wife and self. The primary impetus for this specific focus may be the influx of married women into the labour force in significant numbers, and the subsequent change in women’s roles over this same time period (Campbell, 1981).

Working mothers and fathers may experience interrole conflict differently (Hall, 1972). Hall (1972) suggested that working mothers experience their roles simultaneously, while fathers perform their roles in a sequential manner, i.e., father’s various roles (parent, self, worker and spouse) become salient at different times. As a result, it is hypothesized that employed mothers suffer more from interrole conflict. Possibly as a function of this supposition, most relevant research has focused on the correlates or consequences of employed wives’ and mothers’ interrole conflict (Barling and Van Bart, 1984; Beutell and Greenhaus, 1982, 1983; Suchet and Barling, 1984). Recent findings, however, suggest there may be no differences in the level of interrole conflict in dual-career couples (Holohan and Gilbert, 1979a), university faculty employees (Herman and Gyllstrom, 1977) or clerical workers (Barling and Janssens, 1984). However, interrole conflict may be more a result of work experiences for fathers and family expectations for mothers (Cooke and Rousseau, 1984).

1Current address for correspondence and reprint requests: Department of Psychology, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6, Canada.

0142-2774/86/010001-08S01.00
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Received 5 November 1984
Revised 8 March 1985
One specific consequence of interrole conflict is impaired marital functioning (Blood and Wolfe, 1960). Maternal interrole conflict is negatively associated with marital adjustment and verbal communication (Suchet and Barling, 1984). Consistent with recent trends focusing on moderator rather than linear relationships between stressors and strains (e.g. House, 1981; Kobasa, 1982), Suchet and Barling (1984) showed that where high spouse support prevailed, employed mothers’ interrole conflict was not associated with lowered marital functioning.

The present study extends previous research on interrole conflict and marital functioning. First, the consequences of fathers’ interrole conflict is assessed. Second, the research on interrole conflict and marital functioning is extended in terms of the nature of the moderating variables assessed. Whereas Suchet and Barling (1984) assessed the moderating role of spouse support, the present research focuses on the role of ‘personality hardness’ (Kobasa, 1982) as a possible moderator of fathers’ interrole conflict. The ‘hardy personality’ comprises three existential dimensions: commitment, control and challenge. Commitment (rather than alienation) reduces vulnerability to stress since it predisposes individuals to active involvement in specific events. Control reflects the belief that life events remain under personal influence and therefore feelings of helplessness are minimized. Challenge predisposes an individual to view stressful events as an opportunity for development, and avoidance behaviour would be reduced (Maddi and Kobasa, 1984). In numerous retrospective and prospective studies, Kobasa and her colleagues have shown that personality hardness consistently buffers the negative consequences of work stressors on illness (e.g. Kobasa, 1982; Kobasa and Puccetti, 1983). Given that interrole conflict is primarily a work-associated stressor for fathers (Cooke and Rousseau, 1984), the present research investigates whether personality hardness moderates the negative effects of fathers’ interrole conflict on their own marital functioning.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

Questionnaires were administered within a random sample of 73 men living in three diverse socio-economic areas (upper, middle and lower SES groups) in metropolitan Johannesburg. Six of the questionnaires returned in the door to door survey were incomplete and therefore unusable. All 67 of the fathers who participated were from currently intact marriages (M length = 13.03 years, S.D. = 9.12), and had at least one dependent child living with them (M number of children per family = 2.14, S.D. = 0.93). The mean age of the fathers was 38.51 years (S.D. = 9.5), while their wives’ mean age was 36.91 years (S.D. = 9.65).

**Assessment**

Interrole conflict was measured using Holohan and Gilbert’s (1979a, 1979b) 34-item scale. From these items, six subscales are extracted by assessing the amount

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2Both hardness and family support are treated as moderating rather than mediating variables in this research, following James and Brett’s (1984) conceptual distinction.
of interrole conflict between each pair of the four major life roles, viz. worker, spouse, parent and self. Each subscale (viz. worker versus spouse, worker versus parent, worker versus self, spouse versus parent, spouse versus self, parent versus self) has been shown to be both reliable and valid (Holohan and Gilbert, 1979a, 1979b).

Personality hardiness was measured by the 20-item short form of Kobasa’s hardiness scale (e.g. Kobasa, 1979, 1982). This short form replicates findings obtained using the original questionnaire, while evidence of its reliability and validity are available for the shortened form (Kobasa, 1979, 1982). The reliability of the short form was shown to be adequate for this sample (alpha = 0.76).

Global marital adjustment was assessed using the Locke–Wallace Short Marital Adjustment Test (SMAT) (Locke and Wallace, 1959). The SMAT is a 15-item questionnaire focusing on diverse aspects of marital life such as communication, sexual compatibility, affection and value differences. Both reliability and validity have been shown in previous studies to be highly satisfactory, and the SMAT remains the most widely-used measure of marital adjustment or satisfaction (O’Leary and Turkewitz, 1978). A major advantage of the use of the SMAT is that it is possible to differentiate satisfactory and clinically distressed marriages. Scores less than 90 are typically indicative of a marriage ‘at risk’ (Rosenbaum and O’Leary, 1981).

Data analysis

Two analytic strategies were used to assess whether hardiness moderates the effects of fathers’ interrole conflict on marital adjustment. First, a moderated multiple regression (MMR) analysis was computed to assess whether hardiness moderates any negative effects of fathers’ interrole conflict on marital functioning. MMR was used since it allows for unequal cell sizes, examines nonlinear moderator effects, and eliminates the need for arbitrarily defined sub-groups. More importantly, MMR assesses interactional effects most adequately by using the hierarchical linear strategy which first partials out the separate contributions of all independent variables. Even if the interactional term accounts for a significant proportion of the variance in the relevant dependent variable, a ‘moderating’ hypotheses is not necessarily supported (Zedeck, 1971): An examination of the mean scores of the dichotomized groups must show that the high interrole conflict/low hardiness group yield higher marital distress than the high interrole conflict/high hardiness group (Thoits, 1982).

The second analytic strategy used was the sub-grouping procedure (e.g. La Rocco and Jones, 1978), whereby the sample is dichotomized on the basis of a median split on hardiness (i.e. the moderator variable). The moderating hypothesis achieves further support if the interrole conflict/marital distress relationship is significantly greater in situation of low hardiness. However, even though MMR and sub-group analyses are computed, the analysis conducted is neither causal nor confirmatory. Rather, any results obtained should be regarded as exploratory only which is consistent with the cross-sectional data of the present research (James and Brett, 1984).
RESULTS

Before computing any of the MMRs, however, two fundamental assumptions of regression analyses, viz. multicollinearity and the requirements of a linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables were assessed. The multicollinearity assumption was violated. Ten of the possible 15 correlations between the six interrole conflict subscales yielded Pearson correlation coefficients greater than 0.50 (\( M r = 0.58 \)), and all 15 correlations were significant (\( p < 0.01 \) in all instances). A principal components analysis was computed to establish any underlying communality amongst the six subscales. Replicating the results of Suchet and Barling (1984), a single component (\( M \) item loading = 0.77; range = 0.68–0.84) emerged, further suggesting the homogeneity of the six subscales. Consequently, fathers’ interrole conflict was treated as a unidimensional construct, and the six items yielded substantial internal consistency (alpha = 0.89). Using this global interrole conflict score as the independent variable, the assumption of the linear relationship between the dependent and independent variables was satisfied. Pearson correlations between and descriptive statistics on the independent, moderator and dependent variables are presented in Table 1.

Personality hardness moderated the interrole conflict/marital adjustment relationship significantly (\( F(1,66) = 6.63, p < 0.01 \)) accounting for 6 per cent of the variance (see Table 2). Specifically, when both interrole conflict and hardness were high, scores on the SMAT indicated satisfactory marital adjustment (\( M = 105.61 \)). However, the marital adjustment of fathers with high interrole conflict and low hardness (\( M = 81.92 \)) is indicative of a marriage ‘at risk’ (see Figure 1), and the marital adjustment of these two groups differed significantly (\( t(29) = 2.78, p < 0.01 \); one tailed).

Additional support for the moderating role of personality hardness derives from the sub-group analysis. The correlation between fathers’ interrole conflict and marital adjustment was significantly greater (\( z = 2.31, p < 0.05 \)) for individuals

| Table 1. Intercorrelation matrix of independent, moderator and dependent variables (\( N = 67 \)) |
|-----------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| \( M \) | \( S.D. \) | \( 1 \) | \( 2 \) | \( 3 \) |
| 1. Interrole conflict | 33.50 | 12.08 | 1.00 |
| 2. Personality hardness | 35.46 | 7.05 | -0.27* | 1.00 |
| 3. Marital adjustment | 109.00 | 28.29 | -0.49* | -0.25* | 1.00 |

*\( p < 0.05 \).

| Table 2. Summary table of the MMR analysis using personality hardness as the moderator variable |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| \( R \) | \( R^2 \) | \( R^2 \) change |
| Interrole conflict (A) | 0.49 | 0.24 | 0.24 |
| Hardiness (B) | 0.51 | 0.26 | 0.02 |
| A \( \times \) B | 0.57 | 0.32 | 0.06 |
low in hardness \(r(26) = -0.70\) than their counterpart high in hardiness \(r(35) = -0.28\).

**DISCUSSION**

The results obtained suggest, firstly, that focusing on interrole conflict amongst employed mothers only may provide a truncated perspective of the experience and consequences of interrole conflict. Clearly, men also experience interrole conflict, and recent studies suggest there may be no sex differences in the experience of interrole conflict (Barling and Janssen, 1984; Holohan and Gilbert, 1979a; Herman and Gyllstrom, 1977). One factor accounting for this could be the prevailing zeitgeist. Hall’s views were generated in the first part of the 1970s. In contrast, far more mothers are now employed outside the home, while fathers are taking on more household and childrearing responsibilities. This may increase fathers’ interrole conflict (Cooke and Rousseau, 1984). An additional observation is that the consequences of interrole conflict may be the same for fathers and mothers. The association between father’s interrole conflict and marital functioning yielded in the present study replicates the phenomenon for mothers obtained previously (Suchet and Barling, 1984).

Of greater importance, however, are psychological processes moderating any negative effects of stress. Previous research shows consistently that personality hardiness reduces the effects of stress on health (Kobasa, 1982; Kobasa and Puccetti, 1983), and that hardiness moderates the influence of life event stress on depression (Ganellen and Blaney, 1984). The results of the present research suggest that the role of hardiness as a moderator goes beyond the influence of life event stressors on health. Specifically, hardiness moderated the effects of fathers’ interrole conflict on marital adjustment. Importantly, the support for the moderating role of personality hardiness in the present study derived from two
different analytic strategies. In considering the role of hardness, however, it should be noted that at least two of the hardness components (commitment and challenge) are related to social support (Ganellen and Blaney, 1984), whilst modest but significant relationships between perceived control and social support have been reported (Sandler and Lakey, 1982). Since both hardness and social support are necessary for transformational coping, i.e. positive stress inoculation (Maddi and Kobasa, 1984), future research must focus specifically on the joint and relative moderating role of each of these processes.

Despite the consistent trends in this study for hardness to moderate the negative effects of interrole conflict on marital adjustment, the generalizability of the results obtained may be limited. First, a cross-sectional design only supports conclusions regarding the strength and direction of the fathers’ interrole conflict/marital adjustment relationship. The possibility that reverse causation exists (e.g. that low marital satisfaction leads to increased interrole conflict) cannot be excluded. A longitudinal design is required, therefore, to establish any causal properties, especially the buffering (rather than moderating) role of hardness (James and Brett, 1984; Thoits, 1982). Second, it might be argued that the sample size ($n = 67$) is relatively small. However, with only one independent and one moderator variable, no statistical assumptions are violated in an analysis based on 67 respondents. Third, whether mothers experience greater levels of interrole conflict than fathers must be questioned (Barling and Janssens, 1984; Holohan and Gilbert, 1979a; Herman and Gyllstrom, 1977). The related issues of whether mothers’ experience of interrole conflict differ from that of fathers (i.e. simultaneous versus sequential experience of roles (Hall, 1972)), or whether the work or family dilemma is of greater importance to the mother or father’s interrole conflict (Cooke and Russeau, 1984) warrant further attention.

Nonetheless, the results obtained contain numerous applied implications given the significant negative relationships between interrole conflict and marital functioning, and the importance of hardness as a moderator of this relationship. First, in cases where fathers’ interrole conflict was high and hardness was low, fathers’ SMAT scores suggest that their marriages are ‘at risk’ (cf. Rosenbaum and O’Leary, 1981). Consequently, an absence of hardness in conjunction with interrole conflict exerts a statistical and an applied/clinical effect. Second, like work stress, interrole conflict might be particularly difficult to reduce or eradicate. The fact that high levels of interrole conflict exert no detrimental effect on marital functioning when hardness was high suggests an alternative prevention or treatment approach may be feasible. Attempts might be made to induce hardness in individuals experiencing high levels of interrole conflict, thereby reducing any subsequent effects. Indeed, efforts to enhance hardness through direct training have recently been initiated (Kobasa, 1983; Maddi and Kobasa, 1984). The general aim of hardness counselling involves interpreting for the ‘client’ in what way alienation, powerlessness, threat and regressive coping dominate his/her current psychological functioning and how transformational coping, which would emphasize perceived control, commitment and challenge would enhance psychological functioning. To do this, Maddi and Kobasa (1984, pp. 60–75) suggest four interrelated techniques: focusing, situational reconstruction, compensatory self-improvement and paradoxical intention.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses appreciation to Ann Meyerowitz for her invaluable assistance in all aspects of this research; and to Clive Fullagar, Stephen Bluen and Cora Smith for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this manuscript. Portions of this research were presented at the Canadian Psychological Association Conference, June, 1985.

REFERENCES


