

Chapter 9

Work and Family: In Search of a Relevant Research Agenda

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Research on the interdependence between work and family has a long and interesting history. A careful search of the literature will reveal some research activity on work and family in the 1930s and 1940s (see Barling, 1990). To some extent, this early research peaked in the 1950s, with the prevailing conclusion that work and family roles and function were interdependent, and that it was work that influenced family functioning, with maternal employment being inconsistent with effective or responsible mothering. At that point, Parsons (1959) challenged this prevailing perspective. He assumed the existence of a rigid structural differentiation between work and family, suggesting that balancing work and family demands was quite impossible.

By the early 1970s, the consensus seemed to be that work and family were indeed interdependent. However, it was assumed that men and women experienced their work and family roles differently (Hall, 1972): society expected women to enact these roles (e.g. worker, spouse, parent, self) simultaneously, while men were accorded the luxury of performing these same roles sequentially. Consistent with this assumption, perhaps the most frequent issue investigated was the presumed negative effects of maternal employment on children, on the spouse and only lastly on the mother herself.

Even though research on work and the family was firmly entrenched by the 1970s, it would be true to say that it exploded in the late 1970s and has continued unabated through the 1980s and into the 1990s. This surge of interest may have

been caused by, and was certainly paralleled by, the massive increase in the number of employed mothers and dual-income couples. Kanter's (1977) influential book, *Work and Family in the United States: a Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy*, further legitimized the area of work and family as a justifiable topic for study. During this period, several books and conceptual articles appeared (e.g. Barling, 1990, 1992a; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Piotrkowski, 1979; Voydanoff, 1987) which helped to consolidate the field and stimulate research even further. In general, the research findings that followed investigated and challenged the prevailing notions (see Barling, 1990), and we now know that (a) work and family affect other; and (b) work need not exert negative effects on the family. Instead, when work is experienced positively, beneficial effects emerge on the family.

THE CHANGING WORKPLACE

For the times, they are a-changing (Bob Dylan)

While both interesting and invaluable, all this research was conducted within a context of relatively stable work organizations (at least stable in retrospect!) during a relatively quiescent social period. However, these conditions simply no longer prevail. Instead, organizations and the nature of jobs have undergone fundamental changes in the past few years, while social events have resulted in major changes to family structure. We argue that these changes have rendered much of our knowledge of the interdependence on work and family outdated, and that a new research agenda is urgently needed. We present a brief examination of some of these major changes (see Figure 9.1 for a summary) to assist in understanding the research questions that we will pose.

Perhaps the single most important organizational event of the past decade has been the headlong rush of major organizations to downsize their workforces, a phenomenon that followed major changes to the process of production, which were themselves made possible largely by the introduction and increased sophistication of computerized technology since the early 1980s. This has allowed major corporations to achieve greater levels of efficiency and productivity with fewer and fewer employees, which is now being termed, somewhat oxymorically, a "jobless recovery". However, this downsizing phenomenon has not been limited to private organizations. Instead, government organizations are trying to cope with accumulated deficits by laying off massive numbers of civil servants, which exacerbates the rush to downsizing.

A major consequence of this is that organizations have moved from having full-time employees as their core to a "shamrock" structure (Handy, 1985), which has three "leaves", namely permanent core employees, subcontractors and part-time and temporary workers. Importantly, it is the last group that reflects the fastest growing segment of the economy (Hartley, 1995).

Several psychological consequences of this trend must be considered. First,

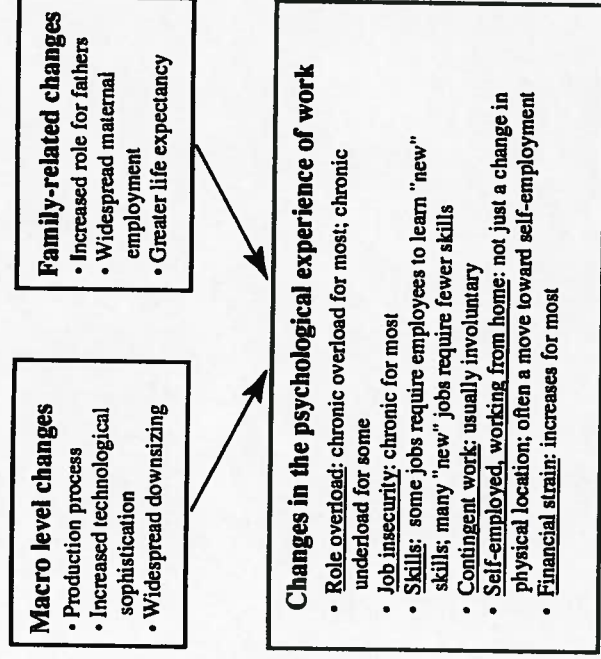


Figure 9.1 Summary of the effects of social changes on the experience of work

because there are fewer people employed, but there is the same or more work to be completed, role overload has increased for many. Second, perhaps not surprisingly, levels of job insecurity are increasing dramatically. While layoffs are by no means a recent phenomenon for blue collar workers, the extent of layoffs amongst middle and senior managers has led to more pervasive job insecurity. Third, jobs have tended to be "reskilled" or "deskilled", resulting in more challenging work for large groups of individuals, but more mundane work for many others. Fourth, the growth of contingent and key time work (Barker, 1995) has resulted in many contract employees—particularly those who would rather be employed on a full-time basis—to experience a decrease in perceived control in the workplace. Fifth, many laid-off employees are creating their own jobs, often working from home. As a result of these changes, many employees are now working harder for no more pay, with fewer resources available to them. Others no longer have as much work as they would want, or the work in which they are now involved results in "underemployment" (Feldman & Turnley, 1995). Lastly, several factors are combining together to result in increased financial strain. Quite simply, we are now engaged in a "new, ruthless economy" (Head, 1996), in which work has become more stressful for many people.

At the same time, three fundamental demographic shifts have continued, each of which will exert substantial effects on how people balance their work and family responsibilities. First, changes to the structure of the nuclear family are not recent. There are increasing numbers of single-parent and reconstituted families, and prior research on work and the family almost always assumed, erroneously as

we now know, that all families were nuclear families. Second, life expectancy in the industrialized world has been increasing steadily throughout the twentieth century (e.g. Hartley, 1995; Rosenwaik, 1985). Today, the fastest growing age group in any developed country is people over the age of 85 years old. As a result of this, there may already be more adults involved in elder-care than child-care. Third, as noted elsewhere (Barling, 1990), the influx of women into the workforce has continued steadily over the past 50 years.

Clearly, there have been numerous and significant changes within both the work and family contexts. As a result, findings from research conducted in earlier, more tranquil eras may no longer be generalizable. We now turn our attention to outlining some alternative directions and questions for research on work and the family.

CHANGING WORKPLACES, CHANGING QUESTIONS

As already suggested, the changing workplace has exerted its most pronounced psychological effects on role overload, job insecurity, reskilling and deskilling of work, contingent work, and the increase in people working from their own homes, whether for themselves or for others. We will consider each of these in turn.

Role Overload

Ever since the publication of Kahn et al.'s (1964) seminal work on role stressors, a considerable body of data has been generated on the nature and consequences of role stressors (e.g. ambiguity and conflict; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Within the work/family context, the role stressor that received the most empirical attention was *inter-role* conflict (i.e. the conflict experienced *between* salient roles such as parent and employee). As a result, the negative consequences of inter-role conflict on marital functioning and on children are now well understood. One specific aspect of inter-role conflict would be time-based conflict, where the amount of time required to fulfill one role precludes an individual from adequately fulfilling the requirements of a different role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). There is some recent research on the effects on family functioning of short-term role overload. Aside from its effects on physical and mental health (Lang & Markowitz, 1986), short-term role overload affects family functioning indirectly, through its effects on negative mood and withdrawal from the relationship (MacEwen, Barling & Kelloway, 1992; Repetti, 1989).

However, these studies focused on short-term role overload, and as such their findings may no longer be generalizable. Instead of short-term role overload, chronic or long-term role overload now appears to be the norm. For example, it is estimated that in the USA, employees now accomplish 1.3 times the amount of work that they used to a few years ago (Hancock et al., 1995). Also in

the USA, 34% of a random sample reported that they or someone in their families took on an extra job in the past 3 years (Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996), and 54% had to work more hours (i.e. overtime; Kleinfield, 1996). In Canada in December 1995, 65% of employed respondents in a nationally representative sample reported working more now than they did a few years ago (only 16% of whom received a salary increase for the additional work; Angus Reid Group, 1995).

There may well be important differences in how people cope with acute and chronic stressors in general (Pratt & Barling, 1988), and short-term and long-term role overload in particular. With short-term role overload, individuals would experience periods during which they were not overloaded when they could recover, a critical factor in coping with stress arising from overload (Sauter, Murphy & Hurrell, 1990). In addition, individuals could compensate in their interactions with the families during these periods. This would be markedly different from the unrelenting nature of long-term, chronic overload, as can be readily understood from interview data. One individual involved in downsizings reflected that "When I came back from this two years of hell and really looked at my house and started to do things . . . I couldn't believe some of the stuff that hadn't got done. Where was I? Like this took five minutes to do, why did I never have five minutes?" (Wright & Barling, 1996).

One question is whether with chronic overload, employees' abilities to cope with more mundane daily stressors could be threatened; these mundane daily work stressors may then serve as the "straw that breaks the camel's back" (Caspi, Bolger & Eckenrode, 1987). In this sense, chronic and daily stressors, which were formerly seen as distinct (Pratt & Barling, 1988), may now combine multiplicatively.

Job Insecurity

Given the frequency and extent of downsizings, it is not surprising that feelings of job insecurity are widespread. For example, in Canada, data from a nationally representative sample in December, 1995, showed that 24% of households were directly affected by a job loss or lay-off during 1995, and an additional 13% experienced an involuntary reduction in their work hours (Angus Reid Group, 1995). In the USA, close to 50% of a randomly selected sample of 1265 people were concerned that they or someone in their family may be without a job in the next year (Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996). Job insecurity is certainly a chronic stressor: In the same survey, 72% believed that layoffs reflect a permanent rather than a temporary problem. Added to this is the fact that most people who are laid off do not acquire an equivalent job in terms of responsibility and pay (Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996). There are already data showing that job insecurity exerts significant indirect effects on marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction and psychological aggression (Barling & MacEwen, 1992). Compounding this, job insecurity will affect marital and family functioning in the same way as other chronic work

stressors, i.e. through its effects on negative mood and reduced concentration (e.g. Barling, 1992a; MacEwen & Barling, 1991).

Children learn about the world of work from watching their parents; indeed, children's work beliefs are formed well before they embark on their first, full-time job (Barling, Kelloway & Bremermann, 1991; Hamper, 1991). Likewise, children learn about the experience of unemployment from observing their unemployed parents (Pautler & Lewko, 1987) and as adults learn about the nature and quality of retirement from viewing their retired parents.

Given this, what lessons might children learn from watching their parents' experiencing involuntary layoffs and reduced work hours, chronic job insecurity and simultaneously increased work loads? We suggest that children may well view the world of work with more cynicism and less trust if they perceive their parents as being insecure and overloaded. Similarly, if they see their parents as powerless to overcome this situation, they may begin to develop positive union attitudes and Marxist work beliefs (Barling, Kelloway & Bremermann, 1991). Two further questions can be raised. First, with heightened levels of youth unemployment, could children and adolescents delay thinking about their career plans and options, or worse still, implicitly or explicitly diminish their career aspirations and goals? Second, if indeed good jobs are more difficult to find, presumably teenagers might increase their chances of gaining access to good jobs by working harder? Ironically, this need to work harder might well emerge at the very time that their beliefs about work in general and their own motivation to work harder is negatively affected by watching their parents experience layoffs and job insecurity.

Reskilling and Deskilling

With downsizings and layoffs, a small group of surviving employees find themselves in an opportunistic situation: they now have access to jobs with increased scope and responsibility. In contrast, the norm for layoff victims is to find jobs with diminished scope, responsibility and pay. In the peculiar language of the 1990s, the former group find themselves "re-skilled", the latter "de-skilled". One study sheds some light on what the possible consequences of the "re-skilling" and "de-skilling" might be.

Crouter (1984) investigated the effects of an increase in participative decision-making on 55 blue-collar workers and supervisors. Despite the increased workload that is consistent with increased participation, some participants reported that they explicitly transferred what they had learned on the job (e.g. participative decision-making) to decision-making at home. This raises the question of what the effects of "de-skilling" might be on family functioning? While there is no empirical research on this issue, anecdotal evidence suggests that the de-skilled partner may lose respect in the eyes of other family members (Bragg, 1996). Intriguingly, there may be some support for this: Komarovskiy's (1940) early research showed that sexual activity within the marriage decreased when

male breadwinners lost their jobs, often because their spouses lost respect for them. The question of how laid-off individuals are perceived by their families could be addressed, because jobs help provide individuals with an identity and self-esteem (Jahoda, 1982).

Contingent Work

Together with the changing nature of organizations has come a change in the nature of jobs and work. Whereas full-time, core jobs were the norm for much of the twentieth century, the growing trend as we enter the twenty-first century is toward contingent work (Barker, 1995), which is also referred to as key-time work (Hartley, 1995). The central element here is for the provision and availability of work to be determined by the need for work; hence, employees would be offered work when and if it became available. Thus, contingent work is invariably offered on a part-time basis, with variable schedules, few if any benefits and lower wages than those accorded to full-time workers. Clearly, employees involved in contingent work do so out of necessity rather than choice. Just how common is contingent work? The largest single private sector employer in the USA is now Manpower Inc., with 767 000 contingent workers for hire (Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996).

Positive effects accrue when employees voluntarily choose their work schedule, including part-time employment (Barling & Gallagher, 1996). In this respect, the involuntary involvement of employees is one of the more troublesome aspects of contingent work from a psychological perspective. For example, negative effects accrue to the children and mothers employed on a full-time basis who would rather be employed part-time, or mothers employed on a part-time basis who would prefer to be employed on a full-time basis, compared to their counterparts whose employment status and employment volition are congruent (Barling, Fullagar & Marchl-Dingl, 1987; Hock & DeMeis, 1990).

Self-Employment, Working from Home

One question that should not escape our empirical attention is what job alternatives exist for people who have been laid off? There are several alternatives. Some become unemployed, while others may view this as an opportunity and go on to find better jobs, for example jobs with greater responsibilities (Cascio, 1993). However, we will not discuss these two alternatives further. First, there is already a large literature on unemployment and family functioning (e.g. Barling, 1990). Second, we know that jobs loaded with responsibility (whether in large or small organizations) are more likely to produce healthy and productive employees (e.g. Sauter, Murphy & Hurrell, 1990).

Many individuals who have been laid off find themselves moving from being employees in large organizations to owners of small businesses working from

their homes. Likewise, having employees working from home is becoming increasingly popular amongst larger organizations: many individuals who retain their employment are being encouraged to work from home, or "telecommute". What are the possible consequences of this trend? We argue that several outcomes of working from home could exert important effects on family functioning. First, work provides more to workers than simply pay (Jahoda, 1982). Instead, the workplace can also be a place where people fulfill social needs and a find a source of social support. While the *amount* of social support might remain constant when working from home (as is the case with unemployed individuals), the *type* of support changes (Jackson, 1988). The interactions between family members become more intense and emotionally charged. Consequently, the possible stress-buffering nature of social support is reduced, making it more likely that "reverse buffering" will occur, i.e. the greater the amount of support received, the worse any effects of stress (MacEwen & Barling, 1988).

Second, working from home might increase the inter-role conflict and family overload, especially for individuals with child-rearing or elder-care responsibilities. Despite the fact that individuals with family responsibilities are often advised to accept part-time work to increase their availability for family responsibilities (Heins et al., 1983), there is no evidence to suggest that this reduces inter-role conflict or role overload (Barling & Gallagher, 1996). Instead, we ask whether working from home would increase inter-role conflict and role overload.

Financial Strain

Individuals have perhaps always expressed concerns about financial strain. However, various factors occasioned by the social, organizational and demographic changes have undoubtedly increased levels of financial strain. First, as already noted, after a layoff, most people see substantial pay reductions in their next jobs; this is exacerbated because contingent work typically offers few if any benefits. Objectively, therefore, many people either have or may soon experience financial strain. Second, the psychological effects of this are made worse as most governments throughout the industrialized world are either reducing previous levels of income support, or publicly toying with the idea. Third, increasing life expectancy also combines with decreased income support from governments to cause even greater financial pressures and anxieties. Fourth, financial insecurity and strain is elevated in most single-parent families. Such an increase in perceived financial strain should be of some concern: research has consistently linked both objective and subjective financial strain with negative outcomes. For example, subjectively perceived financial hardship predicts the quality of parental functioning (Simons et al., 1992) and marital functioning (Conger et al., 1990).

In winding up this section on changes in workplace conditions, several issues warrant discussion. First, the nature of financial strain raises an important conceptual and practical issue. The workplace factors described here do not neces-

sarily act in isolation. Indeed, if anything, they probably interact. For example, becoming a contingent worker against one's wishes after holding a full-time job would probably also be associated with financial strain. From a research perspective, ignoring these interactions would result in a truncated perspective of the effects of work on the family. Practically, these interactions help understand why work may be experienced as so stressful. Second, any increase in overall work-related stress would be important, as Greenhaus & Beutell (1985) note the potential for strain-based inter-role conflict: Specifically, when the strain in one role domain (e.g. work) exceeds an individual's abilities to cope, the likelihood decreases that the same individual can function effectively in other roles (e.g. family-related roles). Third, the cross-national generalizability of any research results should be tested rather than assumed. This is especially important given differing cultural perspectives, for example on the role of women in the family, and the vigour with which public policy solutions to work-family issues are pursued in different countries (Richter, 1992). Similarly, countries' differing experiences with industrialization make it essential that the issue of cross-national generalizability is confronted (Lewis, 1992).

Lastly, a comment about the role of perceived control is justified. A major common factor underlying the perceived stressfulness of all these workplace factors is the felt lack of personal control. In fact, the very basis of job insecurity is a feeling of powerlessness (Ashford, Lee & Bobko, 1989). Many of these shifts in the workplace environment are occurring at the expense of personal control: employees are working longer hours because they have to, rather than because they want to; contingent work invariably occurs at the behest of the employer, not the employee; and the financial strain is a result of external factors. While there has been considerable previous research on the role of perceived control in organizations, the role of perceived control has not received as much scrutiny in investigating work and family linkages. Our knowledge of work and family might benefit from attention to the following questions: first, is perceived control a common underlying causal factor in the current experience of workplace stress?; second, if perceived control is indeed a major causal factor, does this assist in any way in helping people balance work and family issues?

CHANGES IN FAMILY DEMOGRAPHICS

Not only has the workplace environment changed in recent years, but so has our idea of the family unit. This leads to a fundamental question: what is our conceptualization of "family" when we write about and study work and family? With few exceptions (Barling, 1990; Futoran, 1992), an examination of the current literature on work and family could leave a reader with the erroneous assumption that all families are "nuclear" families! Demographic changes (e.g. the continuing increase in the number of single-parent families, homosexual partners and parents, or children returning home to a formerly "empty nest" because of financial pressures) demand that we now extend our focus beyond the

formerly normative or traditional "nuclear" family. As we move into the twenty-first century, relying on outdated stereotypes of the nature of the family will surely result in an irrelevant body of knowledge.

As one example, if single parents experience less social support, more financial strain and greater overload, the pressures they experience are potentially considerable. Despite the fact that the effects of both social support and financial strain have received considerable attention in studies on work and family (see Barling, 1990), this literature deals almost exclusively with traditional families. It would be critical to include single fathers in any future research focusing on single parents. This group is growing in size, and while there is a huge body of research on employed mothers, there is precious little research on employed fathers (Barling, 1992b)

While changes away from the "nuclear" family have been occurring for some time, a more recent demographic shift has been toward increased life expectancy (Scharlach, Lowe & Schneider, 1991). This might increase the stress on employees who may now be more likely to provide elder-care as well as fulfilling other roles and responsibilities. This stress is exacerbated by the fact that increased life expectancy does not guarantee good health (Hepburn & Barling, 1996), and social services to assist the elderly may be decreasing with government downsizing and budget deficits. Initial research findings show that eldercare responsibilities affect partial absenteeism (e.g. arriving late, leaving early; Hepburn & Barling, 1996). Two issues emerge from these findings: First, given the increasing number of employees likely to be involved in elder-care in the future, just how organizations as well as individuals confront the growing need for elder-care will be critical. Second, while most of the research on work and family focus on the way in which work affects family, this finding reminds us that family responsibilities also influence work. If successful enactment of family roles becomes more stressful, the question of how family responsibilities and strains influence work will gain in importance.

As noted earlier, there has been a steady increase in the number of employed mothers in the workforce in the past 50 years. One major lesson with both conceptual and practical implications has been learned from research on maternal employment. Despite social stereotypes to the contrary, maternal employment need not be negative for children (Barling, 1990); instead, where work role experiences are positive, positive effects accrue to the family. Other questions, however, can be raised. For example, there is a considerable body of research showing that sons' career choices are influenced by their fathers, although similar effects do not emerge for mothers and daughters (see Barling, 1992b). One positive possibility is that the limited number of employed mothers, combined with the limited range of jobs they held, mitigated against any statistical effects emerging. In addition, why would "modern" daughters want to follow mothers into "segregated" jobs? Now that mothers are not only entering the workforce but expanding the range and quality of jobs they are taking, do similar effects exist for daughters and their mothers as well? (Steele & Barling, 1996). In understanding how such values are transmitted across generations, it is also

possible that it not merely the gender of the parent and child that makes a difference, but also the psychological identification with the parent, irrespective of gender (Barling, Kelloway & Bremermann, 1991).

In closing this discussing on the changing structure of the family, perhaps the most important consideration for future research would be to start off with a consideration of precisely what is meant by "the family". Undoubtedly, the consequences of such a discussion could exert a huge effect on a future agenda for research on work and the family.

CONCLUSION

Major changes affecting organizations and their employees, and demographic changes that influence the family, suggest that we need to reconsider the research questions relevant to an understanding of the interdependence of work and family. We make no pretense to having provided a complete agenda for research. Rather, our goal in this chapter has been to initiate thinking about such a research agenda, and to offer some initial directions.

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