CHAPTER 5

Work and Family: In Search of More Effective Workplace Interventions

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The interdependence of work and family has become an extremely popular subject for study and speculation over the past decade or so, although research on this topic is by no means a recent phenomenon (Barling, 1990, 1992). The earlier research assuming an overlap between work and family roles (e.g. Hoppock, 1935; Mathews, 1934) was followed by contrary suggestions that there was a rigid structural differentiation between work and family roles (Parsons, 1959). Later, Hall (1972) suggested that work and family roles overlapped for women, but not for men.

Currently, there are no challenges to the notion that work influences family functioning. The literature is replete with examples of how (negative) work experiences are associated with (detrimental) influences on family functioning. Organizational scholars and researchers also acknowledge that family functioning influences work, but they have devoted substantially less attention to this notion.

Given the consistency of findings relating work and family, and the social importance of this issue, it is not surprising that numerous interventions have been designed and implemented to enable people, usually women, to be able to balance the needs of work and family more

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effectively. Certainly, there have been numerous attempts to do just this. To date, most organizational responses to the challenge of helping employees better balance the demands of work and family life have been structural in nature. Perhaps the two most frequent interventions would be flexible shift schedules, and different forms of child care arrangements.

It is important from the perspective of this chapter to examine the implicit assumptions on which such interventions are based. First, interventions designed to rearrange work schedules to be more compatible with family demands would be predicated on the assumption that work only exerts negative effects on the family in the extent to which it keeps people away from their families. Hence, if work can be rearranged (as with flexible work schedules) to allow people to spend more time with their families, employees would be able to better balance the often competing demands of work and family life. Second and somewhat similarly, on-site child care arrangements are based on the assumption that if work can be arranged to allow employees to be closer to other family members, many of the family problems occasioned by work could be overcome.

In this respect, therefore, such interventions find their basis in a "deprivation" framework (Barling, 1990). In the extent to which work takes employees away from their families, work necessarily plays the role of the villain.[1] The longer one is away from the family, the greater the negative effect of the work. The consequences of empirically validating this assumption would be somewhat pessimistic, inasmuch as it is doubtful whether people have the flexibility to reduce the number of hours they work because of the close association between the number of hours worked and pay, and because organizations might not be willing to reduce the number of hours worked by most of their employees.

ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVES

A more fundamental and optimistic understanding of the literature linking work and family, however, would suggest that such structural attempts at intervention may not be sufficient to effect an appropriate balance between work and family. This is because the basis underlying these assumptions may not reflect the work–family balance or the needs

[1] This is not to say that, in understanding the interdependence of work and family, the family cannot also fulfil the role of villain. It can and under some circumstances does, such as when individuals experiencing a divorce find their work negatively affected (Kriegsmann & Hardin, 1974). However, this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

of employees and families appropriately. An understanding of why this is the case rests on the acceptance of several alternative assumptions, each of which have wide support in the empirical literature (see especially Barling, 1990, 1992).

Assumption 1: The quality of the work, rather than the amount or timing of work, is critical to understanding the balance between work and family.

The earliest research linking work and family was driven by the assumption that the more time a mother or wife devoted to employment, the more she was drawn away from her maternal or spousal duties, which would necessarily exert a negative effect on the family (e.g. Mathews, 1934). This can be seen clearly if the research strategy used most frequently in research investigating the presumed consequences of maternal employment is examined. Most such research simply contrasted employed and non-employed mothers. Some of this research went one step further, focusing specifically on the number of hours worked by mothers (see Barling, 1990, Chapter 7). Reviews over a four decade period have noted that this strategy has failed to yield consistent effects associated with the quantity of employment (Barling, 1990; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982; Hoffman, 1961, 1986; Stolz, 1960), despite the continuing belief that such effects do exist (Jensen & Borges, 1986). This is illustrated well by Jensen and Borges' (1986) comment after several decades of research searching for any negative effects of maternal employment, that "... the failure to find significant differences between these two groups does not mean that there are no differences" (p.659).

Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1982) likened this earlier research contrasting employed v. non-employed mothers with a focus on a mother's "daily social address". Together with other commentators (e.g. Barling & Van Bart, 1984; Hoffman, 1986) Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1982) called for researchers to move beyond this traditional "deprivation" approach that equates employment with a linear metric of time, to focus instead on the *consequences* of the subjective meaning of employment. Our recent research has been guided by such calls, and has yielded results that support the assumption that it is the quality, rather than the timing or amount of work, that helps us understand any effects of work on the family. In addition, these studies also go further in identifying *which* work experiences indirectly affect diverse aspects of family functioning.

Some earlier studies had started to show a significant relationship between mothers' job satisfaction and mother–child interactions (Harrell & Ridley, 1975) and children's behaviours (Barling & Van Bart, 1984).

MacEwen and Barling (1991) took this perspective further, however, by showing how different work experiences, namely role dissatisfaction and work–family conflict, exert different indirect effects on children's behaviours. Specifically, consistent with the initial hypotheses, interrole conflict as a stressor was cognitively and emotionally distracting, and therefore affected both concentration and negative mood respectively. In contrast, role dissatisfaction is not cognitively overloading, and hence only affected negative mood. As will be noted in discussing the assumption that work exerts indirect effects on family functioning, each of these two consequences affects different aspects of parent–child interactions and children's behaviours.

Because it appears as though the effects of work experiences on children's behavior may be gender specific (i.e. mothers' *employment* but fathers' *unemployment* exerts negative effects on children and the marital relationship; see Barling, 1990), it must be noted that fathers' employment experiences exert similar effects on their children. While there is considerably less research and speculation focusing on fathers' work and family well-being, fathers' job satisfaction is associated with positive father–son interactions and their sons' social behaviours, and different working experiences influence parent–child interactions and children's behaviours differently (Barling, 1986a; Stewart & Barling, 1993).

The same pattern holds when the relationship of work experiences and marital functioning is investigated. Work stressors affect one's own marital functioning and marital violence (Barling, 1986b; Barling & Rosenbaum, 1986) as well as one's spouse's marital functioning (MacEwen & Barling, 1993). However, as will become apparent in discussing the second assumption, the indirect effects of work stressors on marital functioning are far more significant than any direct effects.

Three related studies have lent support to our notion that the *quality* of one's role experience is critical to understanding the interdependence of work and family, rather than one's role status. First, we showed that while unemployment *status* is not associated with marital functioning (Grant & Barling, in press), one's experience during unemployment (e.g. time structure) does indirectly predict marital satisfaction and marital aggression. Second, homemakers' role experiences (e.g. level of perceived skill use, role overload, perceived financial equity and satisfaction with the homemaker role) indirectly predict parent–toddler interactions, and toddlers' behaviours (Barling et al, 1993). Lastly, retirement experiences (e.g. time use) also indirectly predicts marital satisfaction (Higginbottom, Barling & Kelloway, 1993).

The findings of these latter three studies are important, because if the general hypothesis about the quality of the work experience is tenable,

then the quality of non-employment role experiences should also affect family functioning. In this sense, these three studies certainly provide additional support for this first assumption.

Assumption 2: Work experiences exert indirect effects on family functioning.

Conceptual models (e.g. spillover model; Barling, 1990, 1992) classifying the relationship between job and life satisfaction on the one hand, and marital satisfaction on the other hand, are based on the assumption of a direct link between work and family, an assumption that would not require intervening or mediating variables to fully explain the relationship between work and family. Similarly, research that seeks zero-order correlations between the amount of time spent at work and family functioning, or even the quality of work experiences and family functioning, and interventions that restructure work to allow employees greater access to family members, are based on the same assumption of a direct relationship between work and family.

Beginning with a study on maternal employment experiences (MacEwen & Barling, 1991), our research programme on employment and non-employment roles has now accumulated sufficient data to cast serious doubt on the assumption of a direct relationship between work and family. Instead, we now suggest that, in general, work stressors affect personal well-being (e.g. mood, concentration), well-being in turn affects parent–child interactions, which then influence children's behaviour. In our earlier study (MacEwen & Barling, 1991), we argued that because of their overarousing nature, work stressors would heighten arousal and decrease attention; and therefore interrole conflict should influence cognitive distraction. Consistent with a large body of research, we also maintained that work stressors have a detrimental effect on mood, an affective manifestation of personal well-being. Along the same lines, we argued that role satisfaction would only predict mood, and not cognitive distraction, because dissatisfaction is not overarousing (Figure 5.1). These hypotheses were strongly supported.

From the perspective of the assumption that work experiences exert indirect effects on family functioning, it is important to note that negative mood and cognitive distraction then exerted distinct effects on aspects of family functioning (MacEwen & Barling, 1991). Specifically, mothers who were cognitively distracted were perceived as being rejecting by their children, probably because of an inability by the mothers to concentrate on the issues that were salient to the children. In contrast, negative mood is associated both with rejecting and punishing parenting behaviours. In turn, these different parenting styles

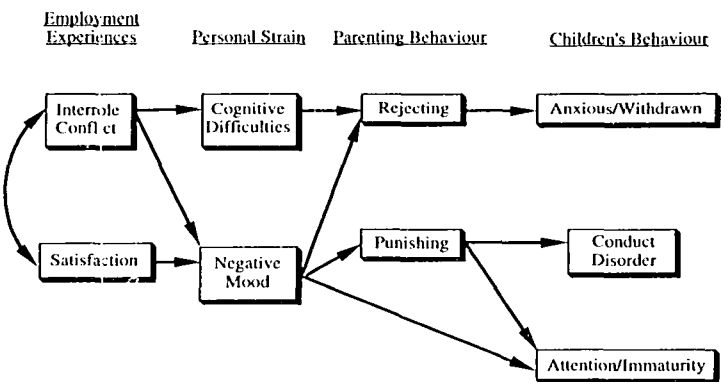

Figure 5.1 Process model linking work experiences and family functioning

differentially predict children's behaviours (conduct disorder, anxious/withdrawn behaviour and attention/immaturity).

We have replicated this general trend in several other studies. For example, fathers' work experiences are indirectly associated with their children's behaviour (Stewart & Barling, 1993), while the relationship between work experiences and marital functioning is mediated by negative mood (or depressive symptoms) and cognitive distraction (Barling & MacEwen, 1992; MacEwen & Barling, 1993). Similarly, eldercare-based interrole conflict indirectly affects marital functioning (Barling et al, in press).

Again extending this focus, non-employment roles such as homemaking (Barling et al, 1993), unemployment (Grant & Barling, in press) and retirement (Higginbottom et al, 1993) are also linked with marital functioning via negative mood. What is also important to note is that in some of these studies (e.g. Barling & MacEwen, 1992; MacEwen & Barling, 1993), the indirect effects of work on family are more salient than the direct effects. Indeed, in some cases there are no direct effects at all (e.g. Barling & MacEwen, 1992) yet there is still strong support for indirect effects of diverse work stressors on marital functioning. Consequently, empirical support is provided for this second assumption.

Assumption 3: The quality of parent–child interactions is more important to children's well-being than the amount of time spent together.

This third assumption is as important in driving the argument

presented in this chapter. We will not devote much attention to this third assumption, however, for two primary reasons. First, it lies beyond the realm of organizational behaviour (but for a discussion, see Barling, 1990, especially Chapters 4, and 6–8). Second, and perhaps more importantly, it is widely accepted as self-evident in the fields of clinical, developmental or family psychology.

Suffice it to reiterate, however, that the quality of parent–child interactions is substantially more important to the long-term well-being of the child than mere access to a parent.[2] Obviously, the same argument holds true for spousal interactions and the quality of the spousal relationship.

TOWARD MORE EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

To reiterate, the majority of interventions currently invoked to help employees balance the often competing needs of work and family have invariably been focused on the notion of restructuring work to give employees more time with their families, or greater access to their children during work (e.g. through on-site child care). As already noted, this strategy is based on the assumption that work is detrimental to the family in the extent to which it keeps employees away from their families.

The results of the studies presented above, and the arguments put forward against the current assumptions, do not necessarily mean that strategies or interventions such as on-site day care are ineffectual. Instead, they suggest that such strategies by themselves will not be sufficient to effect long-term and meaningful changes. The rationale for this argument is derived from the fourth major assumption, namely:

Assumption 4: It will avail little to restructure work to ensure more contact between family members if work experiences are sufficiently negative to lead to negative affect and negative interactions, and thereby exert a negative and indirect effect on family functioning.

Over-and-above any interventions designed to increase the time family members spend with each other, therefore, what is required is an attempt to ensure that work enhances personal well-being. Certainly, when children come into contact with their parents, research findings

[2] Of course this does not imply that access is unimportant—rather it is a necessary but insufficient factor in understanding the effects of parent–child interactions.

suggest that children as young as eight years old are aware of what their parents do at work, *and* how they feel about their jobs (Abramovitch & Johnson, 1992; Hamper, 1991). Thus, if the findings from our research (e.g. Barling & MacEwen, 1992; MacEwen & Barling, 1991, 1993; MacEwen, Barling & Kelloway, 1992) can be used as a guide, work that enhances positive mood and personal satisfaction will be most likely to lead to positive interactions between family members, and parenthetically will also lead to young children holding positive views about the world of work in general. As Piotrkowski and Stark (1987, p.7) note: "As they listen to their parents talk about their jobs, as they see their parents come home tired after a hard day at work, as they spend time at parents' workplaces, they may develop feelings and ideas about work."

Recent research on job redesign shows that changes in work-related psychological well-being can be achieved with minimal changes in job design, and this enables an optimistic perspective about the possibilities of designing interventions to balance work and family demands more effectively. One example of a field study on job design in which careful assessment of mental health and productivity effects took place will suffice here. Wall et al (1990) studied a situation that was characteristic of specialist control and therefore low in autonomy. Operators loaded, monitored and unloaded machines in an advanced manufacturing technology environment, and when operating problems arose, they were obliged to call on a specialist (identified by the organization) to correct the problem. The job was then redesigned by the workers and one of the authors of the study to be more consistent with an operator-controlled system, in which the operators became more responsible for correcting operating problems at their source without recourse to the "expert". Consistent with this, the design of the job changed from one in which little autonomy was offered, to one that afforded the employee greater autonomy, skill variety, task identity and task significance, the hallmarks of a well-designed job (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

The effects of the change on psychological well-being were certainly noteworthy. There were statistically significant increases in intrinsic job satisfaction and decreases in job pressure as the design of the job changed from specialist to operator control. What is also important is that these changes occurred at the same time as there were clear increases in productivity, despite the fact that there were no pay or any other extrinsic job changes. This suggests strongly that relatively modest and inexpensive changes in job design can lead to positive changes in psychological well-being on the job, which we assume will promote more positive family interactions.

But the question still remains: Do such changes in the job environment

necessarily spill over into the home? Aside from empirical findings over a few decades showing positive correlations between job satisfaction and marital satisfaction (e.g. Barling & Rosenbaum, 1986; Dyer, 1956; Haavio-Mannila, 1971), Crouter (1984) reports on a qualitative study which suggests that this carry-over effect does indeed take place. She conducted interviews with 55 blue-collar and supervisory personnel which showed how access to a work environment that provided participation in decision-making led to enhanced family functioning and greater effectiveness as a spouse and parent. As one employee in her study stated: "Working here takes more time away from my personal and family life, but it has helped in terms of dealing with my family. I'm more willing to get their opinions. We hold `team meetings' at home to make decisions." (Crouter, 1984, p. 82.) This suggests that while employees were aware of the greater time demands placed on them by more "participatory" work, the benefits in terms of interactions within the family were equally visible.

It seems, therefore, that it is possible to design work that enhances well-being, and that some changes may lead directly to improvements in family functioning.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the traditional framework within which the link between work and family is understood was discussed initially in this chapter, after which a series of alternative assumptions about the effects of work on family were presented. If the reasoning behind these alternative assumptions is accepted, it would follow that the customary ways of trying to balance the needs of work and family would be incomplete. Instead, it was argued that what is required is a combination of the structural changes (e.g. flexible work schedules) with attempts to redesign jobs so that employees' psychological well-being is enhanced by their work. In attempting to alleviate any negative effects of work on the family, interventions that focus on job design should be encouraged, and their effectiveness should be evaluated empirically with the scrutiny given to other interventions (e.g. Wall et al, 1990).

AUTHOR NOTES

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