

Ursula Henz

Work-life conflict in Britain: demands, resources and family circumstances

Long abstract

Changes in the structure and organization of paid work and women's rising labour-force participation have led to a keen interest in the tensions between paid work and family life among researchers and policy makers. In recent decades, changes in the nature of work and family have arguably led to a blurring of the boundaries between work and family, increasing opportunities for flexible adaptations to work or family demands but also increasing the risks of stress. Schieman and his co-authors (2009) have identified one form of these new stresses in form of the 'stress of higher status', which professionals experience when flexible strategies of combining work and family lead to increased blurring of the boundaries between work and family and increased interference of work with family life. A useful way of conceptualizing the complex relationship between the two life domains has been provided by 'border theory' (Clark, 2000) that focuses on the flexibility and permeability of the border between work and family. Among others the theory explains how significant others like supervisors and spouses affect the scope that individuals have in treating their boundaries as flexible and permeable.

The research draws on these recent discussions in two ways. Firstly, it focuses on the role of family circumstances for the conflict between work and family in addition to the characteristics of paid work. Secondly, it addresses the interdependencies between work and family by simultaneously modelling family-to-work and work-to-family conflict. Simultaneous models can take account of correlated unobservables like for example psychological dispositions or planning and organizing abilities, which might affect both the extent of objective conflict and the subjective experience of conflict between family and work. In addition, there could be a reciprocal relationship between work-to-family and family-to-work conflict. Family overload could for example impact on work

performance and thereby increase work pressure. This work pressure can in turn affect the performance of family roles, which indicates the presence of work-to-family conflict.

These issues are analysed with data from the *Working in Britain 2000* (WIB2000) survey. It provides unusually detailed information about working conditions for a sample of 2,466 employed or self-employed people aged 20 to 60 in Great Britain (McGovern et al., 2007). The response rate was 65 per cent. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face and also filled in a self-completion questionnaire. The analysis includes only individuals who are employed and partnered. After excluding cases with missing values there are about 600 men and 600 women left for the analyses.

The measure for work-to-family conflict is a factor score derived from three items: 'After work I have too little time to carry out my family responsibilities as I would like'; 'After work I have enough time to pursue other interests as I would like' and 'My job allows me to give the time I like to my partner or family'. The measure for family-to-work conflict is the single item 'Household or family responsibilities interfered with your ability to devote full attention to your job'.

WIB2000 provides comprehensive information about job demands – time demands, strain-based demands and boundary-spanning demands – as well as job resources, including organizational, social and boundary-spanning resources. WIB2000 is unusual among employment surveys in providing considerable information about family circumstances, comprising the presence of children and providing care for elderly relatives as well as information about partner's job and the division of household work and childcare between spouses. Effects of these co-variables are estimated from a linear regression and a probit model, respectively, and suitable specifications of error terms.

Initial analyses suggest that women's work-to-family and family-to-work conflict is strongly affected by the presence of children but not by characteristics of the partner whereas men's work-to-family and family-to-work conflict is not affected by the presence and age of children. There are some weak indications that both types of conflict are the more likely for men the lower their partners' engagement in paid work. These latter findings are predicted by border theory because wives with few or no hours of paid work might defend the family border more strongly than other wives.

According to the initial analyses, the division of household work and childcare does neither affect work-to-family nor family-to-work conflict.

References:

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- Schieman, S., Milkie, M. A. and Glavin, P. (2009). When Work Interferes with Life: Work-Nonwork Interference and the Influence of Work-Related Demands and Resources, *American Sociological Review* 74, 966-88.