

# CHAPTER

## 2

## 2

# OVERVIEW OF STUDIES ON ROLE CONFLICT AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

### 2.1 Introduction

Conflict between work and family demands, and its effects on employees, is an issue that is gaining importance in both popular and academic publications. The number of dual-career families and single-parent households are on the rise.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, work-family conflict occurs partly as a result of the employees' attempt to balance work and family responsibilities.

Work and family are interrelated spheres in a persons' life. Family life and work cannot be two separate domains because they impinge on each other in many ways, both negative and positive. To quote Rothman (1998):

*"Complex and enduring problems are created by the need to integrate the competing demands of work and family life. The sheer physical demands of work – the hours, the energy, the commitment – can make it more difficult to be a successful parent, husband or wife."*

Thus, conflict between work and family domains, has become an increasingly relevant issue in organizational environment. While conflict can occur in both directions, most organizational research has focused on work-family conflict, rather than family-work conflict (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). This chapter provides a brief review of literature relating to role conflict, work-family conflict and social support.

## **2.2 Role Conflict**

Role conflict was originally conceptualized as an incompatibility between demands of one life role with those of another (Kahn et. al., 1964). It occurs whenever a person is required to perform diverse social roles that demand incompatible behaviors. There is the potential for role conflict caused by inconsistent expectations between roles, especially when it is impossible to live up to the standards of both, simultaneously. For example, role conflict may arise from the dual responsibilities of the job and family. Both parenting and job roles demand a lot of energy, time and commitment. Time given to one domain, is time taken away from the other. In this respect, it can be suggested that dual roles place a heavy burden on women and they are potential sources of problems and stress.

There is also the possibility of problems at work intruding upon the other domain (and vice versa). This situation is referred to as spillover. For example, the sudden request to work outstation, the unexpected illness of a child, and the unanticipated closure of the childcare center, all may create a "crisis" in the other domain. People, who are

involved in disputes at home, are subsequently likely to have disputes at work – a case of negative spillover (Kirchmeyer, 1993).

*Role strain* is the result of contradictory expectations and demands attached to a single role (Merton, 1968); *role overload* refers to the general sense of having so many role demands or obligations that the individual feels unable to perform all of them adequately within the available time. The more roles one holds, the greater is the likelihood of experiencing role overload and role conflict.<sup>2</sup> According to Johnson and Johnson (1977), *role strain* occurs when people perceive a difficulty in fulfilling their obligations.

Kelly and Voydanoff (1985) categorized the role strain resulting from work-family conflict into two types: overload and interference. Overload results when the total demands on time and energy associated with the particular activities of multiple roles are too many for the roles to be performed adequately. When conflicting demands make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of multiple roles, interference occurs. Role overload is a practical issue involving time constraints; inter-role conflict involves psychological issues.<sup>3</sup> Inter-role conflict increases when either work role or family role increases.

In fact, both work and family have been characterized as “greedy institutions” that demand intense investments of time, energy, loyalty and commitment from individuals (Coser, 1974). People, however, generally have much less control over work conditions

than they do at home; thus, work tends to be the dominant institution. Conflicts between the demands of work and family can lead to a number of health problems (physical and psychological).

Many women find themselves doing "double duty" in the workplace and at home, causing them to experience role conflict and role overload (Etaugh, 1993). Thus, it can be suggested that women are more likely to experience inter-role conflict involving incompatible demands, which arise from performing multiple roles. Consequently, this in turn, may lead to strain.

### **2.3 Work-Family Conflict**

Work is likely to interfere with family life, rather than family, interfering with work<sup>1</sup> (Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1992). Williams and Alliger (1994) mentioned that unpleasant experiences, rather than pleasant experiences, are more likely to spill over into the other domain. However, negative family-to-work spillover is more common for men than for women (Kirchmeyer, 1993).

Kahn et al. (1964) saw work-family conflict as a form of inter-role conflict in which two (or more) sets of pressures occur simultaneously, such that, compliance with one would make compliance with the other more difficult.

Work-family conflict, according to Greenhaus and Beutell, (1985), is a kind of inter-role conflict, in which some responsibilities from the work and family domains are incompatible and have a negative effect on an employee's work situation. Role demands may be incompatible for the following reasons:

- i. time spent in one role may leave little time to be spent on other roles;
- ii. strain within one role domain may spill over into another; and
- iii. behavior suitable to one role domain may be inappropriate in another.

Consequently, the level of work-family conflict depends on variables that have an impact on time, strain or behavior.

Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1994) proposed two major forms of work-family conflict. They are time-based conflict and strained-based conflict. The following illustrates a time-based conflict. When one devotes time to one role (such as, the work role), the consequence is, he or she would face the difficulty in fulfilling the requirements of another role (such as, the family role).

Strained-based conflict occurs when the strain, which is a consequence of fulfilling one role, spills over or impinges into the other role. For example, a mother, who is under severe work pressure, is unlikely to participate wholeheartedly in family activities.

A decision regarding which role takes precedence depends on three major factors (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1994). First, the salience of each role and one's personal role definition would determine the priority of which role should take precedence. For example, a highly career-minded employee may easily accommodate a work demand, rather than a family demand. A family-oriented employee, on the other hand, will choose family over work.

Second, behavior may be influenced by the salience of the activity within each role. Between an urgent meeting with a business client after office hours, and a routine family activity, the former may provide a stronger stimulus to become an employee's first priority. An individual experiences the most severe psychological conflict when both the roles are highly salient, and performing the activities is deemed necessary in order to fulfill both roles. Thus, an employee who is both highly career-minded and highly family-oriented, will probably experience great conflict and emotional strain when faced with competing demands.

In short, role salience refers to the degree to which an individual identifies with the job or family. The higher the level of involvement in either role (work or family), the greater is the likelihood for conflict (Greenhaus et al., 1989; Higgins, Duxbury & Irving, 1994). As such, people who are more involved with one role or the other, often tends to put higher priority on that particular role, devote more time and effort to it.

Third, an individual is under great pressure to comply when he or she perceives that the consequence of non-compliance of any role expectations, are negative sanctions. For example, there will be greater pressure to comply with family demands than with work demands, if an employee's presence at an office function is optional, while his or her missing a family function would lead to strained relations with his or her spouse. An individual will experience the most intense psychological conflict when there are strong negative sanctions arising from non-compliance in both work and family roles.

An individual's personal belief system about women's role as mothers has a profound effect on women. In dual-career families, women assume most of the responsibilities of taking care of the home and children.<sup>4</sup> The primary responsibility for day-care arrangements (for childcare in general) lies with the mother. Inadequate childcare is frequently given as a reason for women not being in the labor force or for being restricted in their employment opportunities (Kamerman, 1985).<sup>5</sup> Paludi (1998) believes that even in marriages among the more liberal professionals, "egalitarian role relations in the workplace and the home are uncommon."<sup>6</sup>

Etaugh and Nekolny (1988) found that the perceptions people hold about working mothers is a stressor for employed mothers.<sup>7</sup> Employed married mothers were perceived as more professionally competent than non-employed mothers. However, employed mothers, were perceived to be less dedicated to their families and less sensitive to the needs of others in comparison to non-employed mother. Their research also found that



divorced employed mothers were rated as less professionally competent than married employed mothers.

McBride (1990) described the dimension and challenges encountered by employed married women:

*"Combining work and family does not mean juggling parenting and work outside the home. Increasingly, it means providing care for elderly parents and/or in-laws as well, and it is women who provide the bulk of this care... The costs to caregivers are many. Responsibilities may cripple a woman's climb up the ladder, while the burden of care (21-28 hours per week) can lead to emotional collapse, financial hardship, strained personal relationships, and declines in physical health."*

A study was conducted of men and women (who were parents) in managerial and professional jobs, and whose spouses held similar positions. It was found that both men and women reported difficulties in balancing work and family demands. Women, however seemed to experience greater stress. In addition, highly-job involved women (who wanted to spend more time at work or who thought about work while doing something else), experienced greater work-family conflict than women who reported low job involvement. They also felt more anxiety and guilt regarding whether they were carrying out family responsibilities adequately.

Women have "fewer options than men for achieving control over competing role demands" (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991). Subsequent researchers (Adams et al., 1996) found that there was a link between high job involvement and work-family conflict among men and women in managerial and non-managerial jobs.

A few studies attempted to evaluate conflict between multiple roles, such as, marital, parental, housekeeping and outside employment (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979; Ayree, 1992). Most research focused on conflict arising from an individual's attempt to meet the expectations of both work and family life. Kossek and Ozeki (1998) mentioned that conflict between work and family roles was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction for women than for men.

<sup>1</sup> In their research on 115 married working students, Beutell and Greenhaus (1983) found that 79 experienced at least one conflict between home and non-home roles (spouse, parent and worker). Sekaran (1986), found the level of stress among wives exceeded their husbands'; wives reported more multiple roles. Brett, Dornbush, and Yorgev (1988) studied a sample of 76 dual-earner professional couples with children at home.<sup>8</sup> It was found that women restructured their work more than men to accommodate family needs. Men with low self-efficacy, however, restructured more than men who indicated a higher score on this dimension.

Swiss and Walker (1993) conducted a survey of 902 female graduates of Harvard University's business, law and medical schools. The survey revealed the following findings:

- i. 85% felt that they had been successful in combining career and family,
- ii. 53% had changed their jobs or specialties as a result of family obligations, and
- iii. 25% of those with MBA degrees had stopped work.

This research indicates that even professional women, who have advanced degrees, encounter significant problems in their attempt to juggle work and family life.

Studies by Keith and Schaffer (1980), Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) and Loerch et al. (1989) have found that occupational commitment is positively related to work-family conflict. Two studies conducted in Malaysia documented the experiences of women, with regard to work-family conflict. A study by Aminah Ahmad (1995), found that her subjects – 82 married women researchers, experienced work-family conflict of varying intensities, as they try to combine careers and family life. Fatimah Abdullah (1985), who studied 100 professional women, also reported similar results.<sup>9</sup>

In their study of men and women psychologists and senior-level managers, Gutek, Searle and Klepa (1991) found that women believed their jobs interfered with family life,

rather than the opposite. They, however, reported little conflict between work and family roles, probably because they (average age=43) were already established in their careers.

To quote Rothman (1998):

*"Many aspects of these dual roles contribute to problems, but the typical sources of stress are time commitments, task characteristics and role salience."*

The characteristics of jobs are related to levels of stress. Jobs that are low on autonomy, variety and complexity can in turn spill over into family relations (Greenhaus et al., 1989). Time constraints, relocations and task characteristics are structural attributes of roles.

Pressures to expand the woman's work activities beyond the normal working day can cause conflict (Beutell & Greenhaus, 1983). Inter-role conflict increases more for women than men, as family role expectations expand through marriage and children since women tend to assume responsibility for household management and childcare. However, Crosby (1987) stated that many working mothers do not feel more stressed than do women with fewer roles and commitments. In their research, Williams et al. (1991) found that multiple role juggling was a stressor that had a negative impact on mood and emotional state, and on enjoyment of the tasks being performed.

## **2.4 Social Support**

Social support and coping behavior are coping resources that enable an individual to help cope with a stressful situation (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1995). Social support enables a person to reduce or manage the stresses, which result from the competing demands of work and family life.

Leavy (1983) as cited in Ganster et al. (1986) provides a general definition of social support. According to him, social support is the availability of helping relationships and the quality of those relationships.

Social support is defined as emotional concern, instrumental aid, information, and/or appraisal given to individuals (House, 1981). It is defined by Shumaker and Brownell (1984), as an exchange of resources between at least two individuals (the provider and the recipient), which is intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient. It denotes providing emotional support, as in indicating sympathy, liking, caring and listening (Beehr, 1995).

Albrecht and Adelman (1987) stated that social support refers to verbal and non-verbal communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about a situation. Ross and Altmaier (1994) viewed social support as the 'network' or web of social relationships that surrounds an individual within a period of time. Besides looking at it quantitatively (as in how many "friends" one has), they believe social support has a

qualitative dimension – an individual's perception of the degree to which the supportive relationships have met his needs.

Cohen and Wills (1985) identified several similarities in the definitions of social support:

- i. Emotional support. The main function of social support is provision of emotional support - having a person to turn to in difficult times.
- ii. Social integration. An individual feels that he is part of a larger group, in which interests and problems are shared.
- iii. Tangible support. Support provided may be in terms of financial, materials, time and energy.
- iv. Information. Advice may be given to help solve a problem.
- v. Esteem support. Social relationships can make a person feel good about himself.

Wortman (1984) identified the four functions of social support as follows:

- i. expression of positive effect or emotional support,
- ii. expression of agreement with a person's beliefs or feelings,
- iii. encouragement of expression or "ventilation" of feelings, giving of advice or information, and
- iv. provision of material aid.

Cohen and Wills (1985) classified social support according to structural and functional social support. The existence of a social network within which an individual is embedded, is referred to as structural support. An individual's connections with neighbors, relatives and community organizations are some examples.

Measures of social support, which gives an indication regarding how much the supportive individual (or people) serves a function for the focal person is called functional support. Providing information, companionship, or giving due recognition of the focal person's accomplishments are examples of functional support. Most studies of social support in relation to work-relation stress have used functional measures of social support. Two forms of functional support are tangible and emotional support. Barrera (1986) discussed three concepts regarding social support: social embeddedness, perceived social support and enacted support.

Individual cope much better with work and family demands if they are well supported by the people around them (Payne, 1980). Several researchers have suggested that the main or central organizing principle of women's lives is their relatedness to and mutual support and empathy with others.<sup>10</sup> Greenhaus and Parasuraman (1994) mentioned that researchers on work-family dynamics are of the view that social support enables an individual to reduce or manage stress that emerges as a consequence of balancing the demands of work and family life.

## 2.5 Sources of Social Support

Social support can be derived from sources at the workplace and outside the workplace (Caplan et al., 1975). The sources of social support at the workplace include the supervisor and co-workers. Sources of social support outside the workplace consist of family and friends. House (1981) showed the relative effectiveness of the different sources of work support – supervisor, co-workers, spouse, and friends – in buffering the effects of work stress. Research conducted by Ray and Miller (1994) indicated that the various sources of social support were able to reduce the strain of work-family conflict in uniquely different ways.<sup>11</sup>

An important element in successful dual-career families is the cooperation of partners. This includes positive attitudes toward maternal employment, as well as, greater spouse participation in household and childcare tasks (Gilbert, 1985, 1989; Bernardo et al., 1987). Research shows that women who receive little or no support from their spouses are stressed by their multiple roles (Ross, Mirowsky & Huber, 1983; Mederer, 1993; Perry-Jenkins & Folk, 1994; Noraini, 1997).

In their study of dual-career women with preschool-aged children, Elman and Gillbert (1984) found a significant negative relationship between role conflict and spouse support. Studies have also found that spouse support reduces perception of role conflict (Holahan & Gilbert, 1979; Berkowitz & Perkins, 1984) and increases job satisfaction (Kaufmann & Beehr, 1986). Several studies have found that greater support from



husbands to be significantly correlated with lower conflict between roles (Suckett & Barling, 1986; Aryee, 1992). Support from husbands may reduce role strain (Van Meter & Agronow, 1982) and some symptoms of depression (Ross, Mirowsky & Huber, 1983).

However, Parasuraman et al. (1992) did not find any significant effect of husband's support on a measure of life stress for women. Reifman et al. (1991) could not confirm their hypothesis that marital support would buffer women from the negative effects of stress. These contradictory findings may be due to the different conceptions of spousal support used. Both these studies used measures, which focused on emotional and informational support offered by spouses. Studies that used measures which focused on instrumental support (i.e. assistance with childcare or housework) or a mixture of instrumental and emotional support items, showed significant relationships between women's role strain and spousal support.

Beutell and Greenhaus (1983) found that husbands' sex-role attitudes did moderate the relationship between time demands of the wives' non-home role and the number of conflicts wives reported. The demands of the non-home roles created more conflict for women whose husband held traditional sex-role attitudes than women whose husbands held non-traditional attitudes.

As supervisors and co-workers understand the stressors present in the workplace, they are able to provide support to the employees who need them. Studies have indicated the importance of supervisory support (Ganster et al., 1986; Jayaratnee et al., 1988) and co-worker support (Jayaratnee et al., 1988; Ray & Miller, 1991).

Although previous research shows no relationship between co-worker support and role stress for women (Greenberger et al., 1989; Reifman et al., 1991), there is some indication that supervisors' support, particularly with regard to potential conflicts between work and family responsibilities, may have a positive influence. Hibbard and Pope (1987) suggested that support at work is an important resource for well-being and job satisfaction. Co-worker support has been found to be more salient for women's job satisfaction compared to men (Andrisani, 1978). Goff et al. (1990) found that supervisors' supportiveness around family-related problems was directly related to lowered role conflict for their women participants. Both Greenberger et al. (1989) and Warren and Johnson (1995) reported that supervisors' flexibility with regard to family responsibilities made a significant contribution to reducing women's strain.

Finally, two studies using a more global but different measures of perceived work or organizational support obtained mixed results. Parasuraman et al. (1992) found no effect of general work support on women's life stress. However, Greenhaus, Bedeian, and Mossholder (1987) reported a significant relationship between perceptions of a non-supportive work environment and increased work-family conflict.

Social support at work may help reduce work stress, as in the case of a supportive superior, who tries to make working conditions less stressful for the subordinates (Roskies & Lazarus, 1980). In their study, Russel et al. (1987) found that teachers who received greater of support from supervisors felt reassured of their worth and a greater sense of personal accomplishment; they also reported less emotional exhaustion at work. Similarly, a study of hospital nurses by Constable and Russel (1986) found that the nurses who received reassurance of their worth from their supervisors, experienced the least amount of occupational stress.

A study conducted by LaRocco et al. (1980) indicated that support from supervisors, co-workers, spouse, family and friends buffered job stress and mental health among men. Support from superior also reduced work stress among hourly paid male workers (House & Wells, 1978). In his study of bus drivers, Blau (1981) found that there was a negative correlation between superintendent support and job stress.

Thomas and Ganster (1995) found that supportive organizational practices led to positive employee perceptions of control over work and family matters. The belief that one was in control over work and family spheres was associated with lower levels of work-family conflict.<sup>12</sup> As a result of efforts, which are aimed at responding to the realities of home life, some companies have become more family-friendly. Family-friendly organizations may be able to create environments that allow people to focus on work rather than being distracted by family problems.

As organizations become family-friendly, work-family conflicts are reduced, job satisfaction and productivity increases and absenteeism reduces (Kossek & Nichol, 1992). In this respect, Rothman holds a rather pessimistic view. According to him: "... *a truly family-friendly organization remains an elusive goal for many workers.*" (1998: 222).

## **2.6 Conclusion**

From the preceding discussion, it can be concluded that work-family conflict has been given a much greater emphasis than family-work conflict. Most studies suggest that women, more than men experience greater stress, as they try to balance the demands of their multiple roles. The more highly involved a woman is in her career, the greater is the probability that she will experience higher levels of work-family conflict. Work-family conflict is detrimental to an individual's performance - personally and professionally. Social support at the workplace and outside the workplace may to some extent reduce work-family conflict and increase job satisfaction as well as productivity. Husbands, family members, friends, supervisors and colleagues are important sources of social support. At the workplace, supervisors and colleagues, play an important role in providing moral support to women employees.

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that only a few innovative companies are responding positively to the changing demands of the work force, namely, placing much emphasis on policies and practices that try to maintain a harmonious

balance between career, family life and leisure pursuits. Work/life balance or family-friendly policies are being developed with the intention of helping employees cope with work-family conflicts. However, the implementation of these policies and benefits is said to be rather slow.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The number of female-headed households has increased from 445,384 in 1980 to 895,000 in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Goode, W.J. (1960: 483-496).

<sup>3</sup> Role overload may lead to depression. Nolen-Hoeksema (1990).

<sup>4</sup> Married women with young children are associated with worse mental health than those without children. McLanahan and Adams (1987: 237-257).

<sup>5</sup> Research suggests that many women are not completely satisfied with their childcare arrangements and others cannot afford the kind of childcare they prefer. Many employed mothers experience anxiety about their child's welfare during working hours.

<sup>6</sup> In egalitarian marriages, both partners share power equally and traditional gender roles are absent. This is a feminist view. Men and women have been created differently. The roles assumed by husbands and wives should be viewed as complementary. However, husbands of employed women should learn to be more considerate, compassionate and supportive. Raising a family is the responsibility of both partners.

<sup>7</sup> Motherhood requires adjustment. Some new mothers feel overwhelmed by the increased responsibilities and demands of a new baby. A number of mothers feel "tied down".

<sup>8</sup> Young children also increased the total workload of women, thus increasing their level of depression. Brown and Harris (1978).

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<sup>9</sup> Fatimah Abdullah. (1985: 77-93).

<sup>10</sup> Review by Jordan, J.J. (ed.) (1997) in *Women's Growth in Diversity*.

<sup>11</sup> To be able to utilize the different types of social support, social skills are necessary.

<sup>12</sup> Studies have indicated that individuals who believed that they had control over certain events could cope better.

<sup>13</sup> There are, of course, constraints. The implementation of flexible work arrangements may not be feasible in all situations. Organizational cultures require time to change. Furthermore, the negative attitudes on the part of some supervisors might significantly affect a woman's willingness to utilize available family-friendly policies.