Work-Family Conflict: Coping Strategies to Optimize Well-being in Working Couples

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Abstract

Traditional Indian families have observed diversified non gender role due to women participation in labour force in recent decades. In process of enhancing self-confidence and gaining gender identity, career oriented modern women not only try to fit in the shoes of their counterparts but also perform expected customary/family roles and responsibilities such as child rearing, elderly care, and household chores. Today, emerging and diverse work area has reported significant increase in women, single parents and dual career couples as employees. Working couples not only look for their own career prospective but also nurture their children and contribute to their future prospects as well. Work and family responsibilities along with long working hours in professional setup has resulted in conflict which in turn has affected the overall well-being of individuals. In dealing with multiple roles and work pressure and for enhancing well-being, working couples use coping strategies depending on their individual experiences. Effectiveness of coping strategies is a subject of unique experience and personal characteristics. The present paper tries to explore a holistic approach towards the role of work-family conflict and coping mechanism in determining the well-being in working couples.

Key Words: Well-being, WFC, FWC, Coping strategies, working couples.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Indian society have witnessed a shift in traditional gender roles to non- traditional gender roles due to women empowerment and increase in dual career couples with young children. Variations in family structure have resulted in corresponding change in work and family accountabilities for husbands and wives (Allen, Herst, Bruck and Sutton, 2000) Work and Family are two central and independent sphere of life for dual career couples, imbalance in one system may subsequently influence the other as well (Pleck, 1997).The work life balance is a pertinent issue in present time. It has become imperative to understand the influence of change in work and family domain on wellbeing of employed parents because people performs several roles in life and dodging is not an option and thus consequences for individual are imminent.

Well- being

It is the most commonly accepted belief as specified in WHO charter that model of mental health emphasizes on an ideal state, comprising "Positive Well-Being" rather than on disease, or other adaptive criteria.

The study of wellbeing is guided by two primary notion of positive functioning (Bradbum's & Caplovitz, 1965), which differentiates the positive and negative aspects and describe happiness as a stability between the two. Secondly, it endorse life satisfaction as the key indicator of well-being. It is easy to evaluate psychological well-being on negative aspects through different self-report measures of depression, anxiety and frustration, etc., but assessment of positive aspects on ground of subjective well- being is relatively challenging. Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976) wrote;

"It may be necessary to distinguish between satisfaction which is associated with an experience of rising expectations and one which is associated with declining expectation. An individual who has achieved an aspiration towards which he has been moving may be said to experience the satisfaction of resignation. The two individuals might be equally satisfied in the sense of fulfilled needs but the affective content associated with success and resignation may well differ. The difference may be less significant in experiences of dissatisfaction where affective. Content of disappointment and frustration might be expected to accompany any failure to achieve one's expectations".

Multiple Discrepancy model of well-being

According to multiple discrepancy model of well-being, individuals relate their emotions and experience to some ideal state. Wilson (1967) argued that satisfaction from the accomplishment of needs rest on to the degree of individual's expectations and adaptation with particular standard. Individual observes negative effects when experiences incongruities between one's 'ideal self' and 'ought self'. According to Michalos (1985) individuals perceives life in a consistently positive or negative manner by comparing themselves with other peoples, past experiences, ideal level of satisfaction, needs and goals. People may face upward comparisons which involves better expectations than attained one and observes diminishes satisfaction, whereas downward comparison (expectations are inferior that the actual) results in an increase in satisfaction.

Likewise, inappropriate balance between work and family domain results in dysfunctional consequences for individual's physical and psychological and subjective well-being.

1) Psychological well-being

When faced with traumatic conditions at work and home people tend to experience reduced level of psychological well-being and greater health related issues (De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003; Sonnentag & Frese, 2003). Several studies proposes that work-family conflict bring negative physical health related outcomes at larger magnitude (Frone, 2000; Carlson et al., 2000), greater depression, hypertension, high cholesterol levels, and greater alcoholic consumption (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). Pressures and hassles due to multiple roles not only bring marital struggles but are also evidenced to be major sources of anxiety particularly among women (Aleem & Danish, 2008).

2) Subjective well-being

The concept of subjective well-being has three components. Firstly, it is *subjective*, it exist within the experience of the individuals (Campbell, 1976). Secondly, it is not just the lack of negative aspects but also include positive measures. Thirdly, measurement criterion of well-being includes a global assessment of all features of a person's life. Hence an individual is likely to have improved subjective well-being if she or he perceives life satisfaction and infrequently experiences unpleasant emotions such as sadness and anger. Inversely, a person experiences diminish subjective well-being if he or she is not pleased with life, and experiences and often feels undesirable emotions such as anxiety and anger. The cognitive and affective components of subjective well-being are highly interrelated.

Inter role conflict and well–being

The inter role conflict occurs since it is not possible for individuals to fulfill all expectation of his or her work and family roles as each role requires resources.

Role conflict theory proposes that when experiencing conflict and/or ambiguity within a role will result in an undesirable state and produces symptoms of strain (Cooke & Rousseau, 1984). It states that executing multiple roles lead to stressors (work overload/inter-role conflict) as it becomes more difficult to perform each role successfully, due to conflicting demands on time, energy, and incompatible behaviors (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999). Biernat (1997) explained that "role strain or difficulty in meeting role demands is inevitable" and a person "must continually make role decisions and bargains in order to meet role requirements" (p. 9).

Researchers have confirmed work-family conflict as one of the major stressors for both men and women in both work and home realm (Allen, Hertz, Bruck, & Sutton 2000; Frone, 2003). The Kahn et al., (1964) defined work-family conflict "as a form of inter-role conflict in which the pressure generated from work and family realm are mutually incompatible".

WFC has been conceptualized by Greenhaus & Beutell (1985) on the basis of sources of conflict:

1) Time based Work family conflict -it occurs when time devote to one sphere reduces available time to participate in another sphere. Because individuals have limited time and energy thus it assumes work and family time as overlapping.
2) Strain based work-family conflict results due to role stress that can induce strain and stress. Work related strain can influences work interfering with family whereas, family related stress such as marital conflict, child care responsibilities induce family interfering with work.
3) Behavior based work-family conflict –it arises when behavior in one sphere unfavorably affect another sphere due to discordant behavior for another domain. Some studies suggests that work and home behaviors became common across boundaries.

Frone, Russell and Cooper (1992) have identified two types of WFC:

1) Work-to-family conflict (WFC) or work interference with family (WIF) which happens when work is interfering family sphere and,
2) Family-to-work conflict (FWC) or family interference with work (FIW). , happens when family is interfering work sphere.

Work and family domains are the most important areas and have adverse consequences on employee's health and well-being. (Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976).

Inter role conflict; WFC and FWC have been negatively associated to employee's satisfaction in numerous domains, specifically with complete life satisfaction (Aryee, Fields & Luk, 1999a; Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999b; Bedeian, Burke & Moffett, 1988; Hill, 2005; Allen, 2001), comprising job satisfaction and family satisfaction.
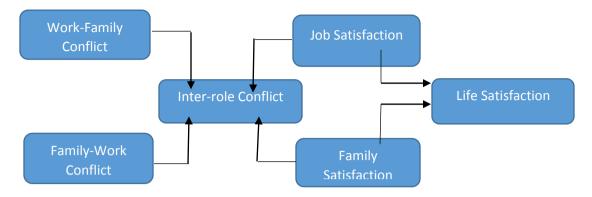
Fig 1: A Model of Work, Family and Inter-Role Conflict. Source: Kopelham et, al., (1983, p.201)

Coping and well-being

Parasuraman et al., (1992) have approved the notion that work family conflict and overall life stress are closely associated. Hence, accomplishing a balance life style has been a significant concern for employed couples (Skinner, 1980; Lambert, 1990). Numerous studies has focused on the effects of multiple roles on well-being among young working employees and deficient attention was paid on how they cope (Doress-Worters, 1994).

Transactional model of stress and coping.

The Transactional Model of stress and coping outline the assessing processes of coping with stressful events. Stressful experiences are interpreted as person-environment transactions and these transactions rest on to the influence of the external stressor.

According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), "coping refers to the constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and internal demands". Coping is believed to be a function to elucidate hassles and difficulties by distracting from stressful resources. Transactional model of stress and coping includes of the following steps:

The first step is *appraisal*, consists of determining the significance of a situation or events and its effects on one's well-being. In the second step, *assessing* and selection of effective coping strategies is administered. The third step includes *executing* the selected coping strategy. Finally, the fourth step comprises *evaluating* one's coping efforts with regard to their effectiveness in eliminating or reducing the stressor or managing one's response to the stressful event (Smith & Carlson, 1997).
A recognized approach has been suggested by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), who then distinguish between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Problem focused coping

Actions that are directly involved with the purpose of solving the problems in hand by either changing, altering or removing the circumstances which are perceived as threatening (Thoits, 1986). In prior studies it was revealed that people uses problem-focused coping strategies when identify situations as changeable (Lazarus, 1991; Folkman et al., 1986; Coyne, Aldwin, & Lazarus, 1981; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; 1985).

Emotion focused coping

Emotion-focused coping is related to regulate the undesirable negative emotional distress as a consequences of perceived stress through means of actions or thoughts (Thoits, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Problem-focused coping style is proved to be effective in dealing with adverse situation and people reported positive well-being. Couples reported higher level of conflict when used high avoidant coping mechanism and results in lower life satisfaction. Women employ a number of coping strategies to buffer the effect of work-family conflict (Ugwu, 2013). When direct action is possible, people found problem focused style promising and when direct action is not approachable, emotion focused coping is effective (Lazarus, 1999).

Conclusion

Working couples holding multiple responsibilities may easily succumb to harmful stressors effects in work-family domain resulting in decreased well-being. The intention of the present paper was to integrate the importance of work and family perspective in concerns of perceiving well-being. Dual career couples are characterized by numerous aspects such as multiple responsibilities, organizational pressure, frequent burnouts, increasing workload, family involvement, child/elderly care and attaining satisfaction is an important concern. Conflicting linkage between work and family has been shown to have dysfunctional consequences for individual's physical and psychological and subjective well-being.

Most employee attempt to use different coping strategies to deal with conflict and family- work pressure. Previous studies revealed, coping may increase or decrease negative effect of work-family conflict on well-being. Problem focused coping styles are more effective in relation to well-being as compared to emotion focused coping.

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