MANAGING MULTIPLE CHALLENGING ROLES:
FAMILY, WORK AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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In the modern society, as researchers remarked, it is common to work and study at the same time, thus, academic and work domains are interdependent and influence each other continuously, frequently provoking inter-role conflict situations. In some cases, the conflict of the role can acquire a three-dimensional nature when *work*, *family,* and *education* come at play concomitantly. The strain may arise in this case from the difficulty to juggle these three roles and manage time properly while trying to pursue studies successfully, accomplish professional tasks in an efficient manner and fulfil responsibilities related to parenthood, marriage or private life. In this paper, we have proposed a case study of such triple role conflict (work-family-education) in the local academic context. We have conducted 14 in-depth interviews with junior members of academic staff that experience this three-dimensional conflict (PhD students with teaching duties, married, having small children). Our interest was to identify their perceptions concerning these conflictual experiences, the level of one or another role commitment, and their evaluations with reference to severity of conflict and its consequences on the academic results and efficiency, as well as the strategies used in order to manage this conflict.

Keywords: work-family-education conflict, work-life balance, university, academic career, PhD students.

GESTIONAREA PROVOCĂRILOR MULTIPLE DE ROL:
FAMILIE, MUNCĂ ȘI DEZVOLTARE PROFESIONALĂ

În societatea modernă, relevă cercetătorii, este un fapt obișnuit să lucrezi și, în același timp, să urmezi un program de studii. Astfel, domeniul muncii și cel academic sunt interdependente și interferează continuu, creând, deseori, situații de conflict de rol. În anumite cazuri, acest conflict poate avea chiar o triplă solicitare concurențială de rol, care vine dinspre domeniile muncă, familie și studii. Conflictul, în acest caz, poate să apară ca urmare a dificultății de a gestiona timpul și eforturile necesare pentru a continua cu succes programul de studii, a realiza eficient sarcinile profesionale și a-și îndeplini responsabilitățile aferente rolului de părinte, soț/soție. În această lucrare, propunem un studiu de caz din mediul universitar autohton privind manifestarea acestui triplu conflict de rol (muncă-familie-studii). În acest scop, au fost intervievați 14 asistenți universitari care se confruntă cu asemenea situații de triplu conflict (doctoranzi, având și sarcini didactice, căsătoriți, cu copii mici). Interesul nostru a fost de a identifica percepțiile lor cu referire la aceste experiențe conflictuale, nivelul angajamentului față de un rol sau altul și evaluările pe care le fac cu privire la severitatea conflictului și consecințele acestuia asupra rezultatelor și eficienței academice, implicit strategiile pe care le utilizează în vederea gestionării solicitărilor de rol.

Cuvinte-cheie: conflict muncă-studii-familie, echilibru muncă-familie, universitate, carieră academică, doctoranzi.

> „I want to be a good scientist but that means I can't be anything else,
> as all my time is taken up trying to find contracts"
> (*The Guardian,* 02.12.2016)

Introduction

The university reforms from the recent years, which triggered more academic pressures, prompted also further research interest to examine the work-family conflict among employees of higher education institutions. Even if this conflict has been studied intensively in the last years, yet, very few studies have examined academics' ability to balance challenges related to their professional and family roles and overcome the work-family conflict [1,2]. Ironically, Bell *et al.* [3] have remarked, academics keenly researched other professional groups, but rarely take time to study their own group.

Currently, academic staff is expected to fulfil multiple role demands within universities: teaching, research, consultation and supervising students' projects research [4]. In addition to that, academics deal with the pressures of competing demands, such as balancing teaching with research, or combining traditional workloads with new challenges, such as teaching internationally or via online methods [5]. Also, one can add here the need for continuous life learning and professional development, permanent update of knowledge and integration

of new scientific results, as well as intellectual, physical, and, often, financial investments in research activity in order to obtain an academic position or a superior scientific level.

In some cases, the multiple role conflict can acquire a three-dimensional nature when *work*, *family* and *education* come at play concomitantly. We refer in this case to professions that require lifelong learning and continuous professional development, as a response to the socio-economic changes or educational reforms. In the modern society, it is common to work and study at the same time, thus, academic and work domains are interdependent and influence each other continuously [6]. The strain may arise in this case from the difficulty to juggle these three roles and manage time properly while trying to pursue studies successfully, accomplish professional tasks in an efficient manner and fulfil responsibilities related to parenthood, marriage or private life. In particular, academic work and striving for achievements entails high expectations and sets conditions for potential conflict with non-work domains [7]. Research shows that currently the high level of stress faced by academics `erode` their ability to cope with their role pressures, causing work-family strain [8]. The intensity of conflict varies according to the amount of time that needs to be invested in fulfilling professional, research and home responsibilities, as well as according to the level of role commitment and value attributed to this role [9].

Methodological aspects

Based on the typology of work-family conflict [10], university environment, characterised as "a culture of excellence" [11], may be considered as an organizational context with an increased intensity of strain and stress at the workplace; moderate flexibility with reference to work programme and the time needed for fulfilling the tasks; as well as, moderate compatibility of the behaviour patterns associated to the role. O'Laughlin and Bischoff [12] claim that high numbers of work hours usually determine time-based conflict, multiple and diverse tasks generate strain-based conflict, and behaviour-based conflict is provoked by multiple and urgent tasks and pressing deadlines, thus, academics have to work also at home, in detriment of the time for family members.

In this context, we have proposed a case study of the triple role conflict (work-family-education) in the local academic context. We have conducted 14 in-depth qualitative interviews with junior members of academic staff that experience this three-dimensional conflict (married, with small children, PhD candidates with teaching duties). Besides this reason, we have selected junior, rather than senior academics, because as Fox *et al.* [13] observed, academic rank is a positional resource, junior rank being associated with less autonomy and less job security. Moreover, most of the previous studies show that inter-role conflict contributes to attrition among early career academics, and, then only the most persistent of them prevail in attaining high-level academic career [14]. Afterwards, we used thematic content analysis to identify the interviewed persons' perceptions concerning these conflictual experiences, the level of one or another role commitment, and their evaluations with reference to severity of conflict and its consequences on the academic results and efficiency, as well as the strategies used in order to manage this conflict.

Results and discussion

Perceptions concerning these conflictual experiences and level of role commitment

Respondents admitted that they confront regularly with such situations and usually they tend to prioritize academic tasks to the detriment of domestic chores which are carried out in a haste and superficially way and sometimes to the detriment of the PhD thesis which is put on hold for later `when time will be good`. As each of the role involved (marital/parental, academic or PhD student status) is concomitantly demanding, but equally important for them, they face difficulties in prioritizing them:*'I often do not know what to do, to devote more time to work, to family, or to spend more time in front of the computer with readings and papers`*. However, even if the role commitment is very high with regard to each of them, usually individuals tend to choose in favour of professional tasks, which seem more urgent and cannot be postponed. To put it differently, as interviewees say, whichever task `can wait` it is left for another time.

Given the fact that teaching responsibilities are usually the ones that are prioritized, it can appear that individuals value work more than family. However, each role is important to them, as they mentioned, so they endeavour to do `well` in all, alternating the time when they prioritize one role or another: *`I strive to be good at work, thus, I take work to do at home; at home, I try to be a good wife and mother, so, after everyone goes to sleep, I work on my professional tasks and PhD thesis.`*

Conflict's evaluation and its consequences on academic results and efficiency

The simultaneous accomplishment of tasks specific to each role is not a good solution: `*if you focus on all of them, you cannot do any of them properly*` According to respondents, activities should be ranked in order of importance and urgency. Even if they try to balance them, as they noted, `*I was trying somehow to work on the thesis during working hours, sometimes after or even in the morning, but this made me feel so exhausted, so I decided to allocate separate time only for this*`.

The lack of time is one of the main reasons for the delay in completing the PhD program in addition to caring for children and financial costs (including research expenses): `*I have to work extra hours at another institution…, many of the conferences I have attended are paid partially and sometimes totally by myself*`. Generally, the deficiency of time, is somehow a familiar topic in the academia [15], as well as the fact that very often, pursuing research interests is hampered by the need to engage in various side activities to finance their studies, mostly through full time employment [16]. Since, writing a doctoral thesis is a full time job, the one of the causes that can determine failure in finishing and defensing the PhD thesis in time might be insufficient income (stipend) that motivates working outside and being not fully engaged with dissertation leads to subsequent failure [17].

Strategies used in order to manage this conflict

Even if interviewees acknowledge that the _flexibility_ allowed by the university programme has its advantages, they are also aware of the risks of not keeping a rigorous division between work and private life - `*…when you go home with your bag full of students' papers, you easily exceed 8 hours of work. But, the amount of work is not equally distributed, I have to admit, some days I work 3 hours, on other days we can work 12 or even 15 hours out of 24".* Or, as interviewees narrated, they have to work at nights, on holidays or usually every weekend.

Other qualitative researches show that usually academics value university flexible work time, and are not willing to switch up this program with a fixed one from 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.; many of them entered academia because of it flexible nature [18]. In the same key, despite the high level of stress in university environment, all participants from one study reported a great passion for academic life and praised the flexibility academia offers in combining professional and caring children duties [19]. However, with regard to the role conflict, in general, many researches has reported variable and inconsistent findings between flexible work arrangements and work-family conflict [20]. The main disadvantages, as in our case study, are that they have feeling of working all the time, revealed O'Meara and Campbell (2011), and difficulty of distinguishing between work and family lives, as Penney *et al.* (2015) concluded [21]. According to Beigi *et al.*, the moderators of this relationship are boundary management preferences, time management skills, nature of academic work, and family-friendly workplace culture [22].

Although, _time management_ is an efficient tool, recommended for such situations, it does not always work, provoking time-based conflict. As one respondent confessed, `*I try to manage my time, I've read a lot about this, how to efficiently order the tasks, but sometimes something comes up and even some tasks you thought were a priority need to be treated as secondary."* In other words, this strategy is efficient in alleviating the role's conflict, when persons have a clear list of tasks and responsibilities, in order to make a schedule and distribute time for each of them.

Therefore, they use different _strategies of postponement_, for imagined freer times, when supposedly they will have more available time (`*on the second semester, when I will have fewer teaching hours*`) or delegating these tasks to antisocial intervals such as night time, even if they might be less productive and therefore use more effort and time (`*staying up at night working on paper is more exhausting than during the day, but I do not have a choice; I try to find time even in public transport to revise some papers or articles.*`).

Prioritizing work to the detriment of family life is one of the highest emotional costs that interviewees mention with feelings of remorse. In order to compensate the absence, they resort to _counterbalance strategies_, meant in some way to `offset the absence` - `*prepare something special on weekends, read at least a novel in the evening for child, before bedtime…*`

Conclusion

The work-family conflict may negatively affect the individuals' academic outcomes, while the incapacity to dedicate sufficient time also to family life always generates dissatisfaction and attrition. The lack of optimal strategies to balance work-education-family requirements, as well as the attempt to achieve excellent results

in multiple activities, often provoke failures, and consequently regrets and abandonment. Thus, even if academic staff have a moderate work flexibility, this fact does not diminish the tension and stress they experience. Work overload is still very common, only the modality of work suffered some modifications because of technological and economical progresses. As in other studies, participants highlight the importance of family support, which provides both emotional support and share some of household tasks.

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