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Work-family conflict from the perspective of the family: Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

Objective: To introduce the readers to the Journal of Family Research's Special Issue (4/2022) about "work-family conflict from the perspective of the family".

Background: Research on work-family conflict rooted in family research and with an explicit focus on family issues has been comparatively rare compared to a more work-centered view.

Method: Except for the review article, all contributions of this Special Issue are quantitative analyses of large-scale data from Germany, i.e., the "pairfam" study, the "LEEP-B3" study, and the "Growing up in Germany" survey.

Results: The seven studies are innately heterogeneous and show the range in which family research may contribute to the understanding of work-family conflict, and vice versa. Work-family conflict was studied in the context of the transition to parenthood, parenting practices, the composition of working environments, scaling back, mental health, and fertility preferences.

Conclusion: Explicitly discussing family issues and their implications for work-family conflict is necessary to understand the interdependencies between family and work, and to pave the way towards a much broader understanding of the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict in the context of family living.

Keywords: family dynamics; gender; labor market; reconciliation of family and work; well-being



1. Introduction

Work-family conflict has been a topical issue for decades and in several fields of social science research (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). Not least, this is because work-family conflict is arguably natural to every individual. Work-family conflicts arise when “role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). Interdependencies between family and working life, therefore, induce inter-role strain, from work to the family and from the family to the working sphere.

Over the last decades, significant changes in family living and the working sphere have challenged traditional patterns of reconciling family and work on the individual and societal levels (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Goldscheider et al., 2015). On the one hand, developments concerning family demographics, e.g., having fewer children and having them at older ages, as well as family diversity, e.g., divergence from the bourgeoisie family model in virtually all possible ways, have altered the way women and men think of families and the customary practice of family living. This goes hand in hand with progressions in terms of gender convergence regarding the division of labor between women and men in society, i.e., higher labor market participation of women and slightly smaller gender gaps in time use for unpaid work in more recent cohorts.

On the other hand, workplaces and employment situations have also become increasingly diverse over the last years and decades. Besides changing employment rates, flexible forms of work spread among women and men, e.g., working from home, irregular working hours, or other variants associated with the 24/7 economy (Presser, 2003). During the current phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, these flexibilities seemed to have received a boost, giving rise to the diffusion of new models of reconciliation of work and private life (Schieman et al., 2021). Naturally, these new possibilities have come at the expense of the necessity to arrange with the new situation without being able to rely on traditional patterns.

Even though welfare states keep trying to react to these developments by establishing social, family, and labor market policies to support women’s and men’s work-life balance, for example, through childcare opportunities, the conflicting expectations of the private and the working sphere create tensions for basically all individuals. Consequently, work-family conflict is arguably one of the main determining factors of well-being, presumably the more other family members are involved. Although work-family conflict is associated with other aspects and indicators of well-being, e.g., health or satisfaction, it is a unique phenomenon that deserves its own attention.

In light of this, several review articles have documented the broad research activities and the remarkable progress in understanding the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict from various perspectives, most notably from the side of work and employment issues (Allen et al., 2000; Allen & Martin, 2017; Amstad et al., 2011; Byron, 2005; Michel et al., 2011; Molina, 2020). Surprisingly, research on work-family conflict rooted in family research and with an explicit focus on family issues has been comparatively rare (Reimann et al., 2022, *in this issue*). Therefore, the aim of this [Special Issue in the Journal of Family Research](#) was to put current research activities together that shed light on work-family conflict from the perspective of the family.

2. Content of this Special Issue

This Special Issue comprises seven original articles that focus on work-family conflict in the context of the family: one review article, two articles on the antecedents, and four on the consequences of work-family conflict.

2.1 Review article

In the first article, *Mareike Reimann, Florian Schulz, Charlotte Marx and Laura Lükemann* (2022) reviewed the international and interdisciplinary empirical literature on family antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict in their contribution titled [“The family side of work-family conflict: A literature review of antecedents and consequences”](#). The authors followed the “PRISMA” guidelines for literature reviews and

identified 100 quantitative empirical studies from 1988–2021 that dealt with work-family conflict from the perspective of the family. Although the included studies were very heterogeneous in their topics, their respective scopes, and their findings, they shared the view that family issues, not least in terms of demands and resources, need to be addressed directly to better understand the interdependencies between the working and the private sphere, and the consequences in terms of inter-role conflict. By and large, the review suggested that work-family conflict was more pronounced among women and men with caregiving responsibilities, with young children, in earlier stages of the family cycle, with high family involvement, and with higher family or parental strain. Furthermore, work-family conflict was found to be negatively related to marital and family satisfaction, as well as to family performance and parenting behavior. The authors closed by arguing that family processes deserve as much attention as work processes when trying to understand the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict.

2.2 *Studies on antecedents of work-family conflict*

In the article [“Transitions to parenthood, flexible working and time-based work-to-family conflicts: A gendered life course and organisational change perspective”](#), Anja-Kristin Abendroth (2022) analyzed how arrangements of flexible working time and flexible working place moderate the consequences of the transition to parenthood for women’s and men’s work-family conflict. The author argued that flexible working arrangements may contribute to organizational change towards more family friendliness, and that flexibility in when and where to work may reduce conflict when women and men become parents. The empirical analysis used data from the “LEEP-B3”-study and applied longitudinal regression models. The author found gendered patterns of time-based work-family conflict associated with the transition of parenthood, i.e., increasing conflict for fathers and decreasing conflict for mothers, which are mainly triggered by reductions in mothers’ working hours. Flexible work times were found to reduce work-family conflict for mothers but not for fathers. Flexible work places, however, did not influence perceptions of work-family conflict. In closing, the author concluded that rather “flexitime” than “flexiplace” can be regarded as a resource to more family friendliness for expectant parents.

In the second article of this section, titled [“Parents’ experiences of work-family conflict: Does it matter if coworkers have children?”](#), Florian Schulz and Mareike Reimann (2022) studied how women’s and men’s perceptions of work-family conflict related to the share of parents in their coworking environments. Contextualized in the framework of relational demography and based on data of the “LEEP-B3”-study, the authors found that similarity between the members of working environments regarding parenthood seemed to reduce mothers’ but particularly fathers’ assessments of work-family conflict. The authors argued that the subtle and cohesive mechanism of a perceived “common ground” – i.e., having children and trying to reconcile this demanding lifestyle – may counter the “ideal-worker norm”, decreasing its relevance at least informally, and stronger for fathers than for mothers. Compared to the other contributions in this Special Issue, this article showed that characteristics of the (direct) environment matter beyond individual characteristics.

2.3 *Studies on consequences of work-family conflict*

The article [“Work-to-family conflict and parenting practices: Examining the role of working from home among lone and partnered working mothers”](#) by Janine Bernhardt and Claudia Recksiedler (2022) focused on parenting practices of single and partnered mothers and how working from home, as an example of workplace flexibility, influenced emphatic and supportive mother-child interactions. Based on empirical data from the “Growing up in Germany”-study, the authors found that higher levels of work-family conflict related to more hostile and less responsive parenting practices. This association was not moderated by working from home. However, a mediation analysis showed that mothers who did not work from home reported less emphatic behavior through higher levels of work-family conflict. If mothers worked from home during their contracted working time, this arrangement reduced the impact of work-family conflict on negative parenting practices. In this respect, working from home may supply a resource for a more successful work-life balance. If, in contrast, working from home was used to handle additional demands from the working sphere, this arrangement rather backfired in the form of higher distress and increased pressure and, thus, in more unfavorable parenting practices.

In their article [“Employed parents' reactions to work-family conflicts: Adaptive strategies of scaling back in Germany”](#), *Ayhan Adams and Katrin Golsch* (2022) analyzed data from the German Family Panel “pairfam” to study if employed mothers or fathers reacted to work-family conflict by adapting their working hours. Drawing on the idea that scaling back is one possible strategy in parents' effort to reconcile work and family living, the authors reported that scaling back did not seem to be a widespread strategy to encounter work-family conflict. Mothers and fathers rather tried to alleviate job pressures but did not reduce their working hours when reacting to work-family conflict. They concluded that several personal or structural variables influenced parents' decisions about how to react to work-family conflict, e.g., gender ideologies, career trajectories, or work hour mismatches.

The article [“Good mental health despite work-family conflict? The within-domain and cross-domain buffering potentials of family and work resources”](#) by *Mareike Reimann and Martin Diewald* (2022) focused on the possible mental health consequences of work-family conflict. The authors raised the issue of work-family conflict as an unavoidable or even consciously accepted concomitant of role expansion. Instead of focusing on ways to avoid the emergence of conflict, the authors analyzed how resources from the family and the work sphere might help to avoid adverse effects. Using longitudinal data from the “LEEP-B3” study, the authors showed that all sub-dimensions of work-family conflict are negatively related to mental health. They found evidence for within-domain buffering (family resources mitigate the negative mental health effects of family-to-work conflict; work resources those of work-to-family conflict) and cross-domain buffering (family resources mitigate the negative mental health effects of work-to-family conflict; work resources those of family-to-work conflict). For instance, the authors reported that having a partner helped mitigating both directions of conflict. However, particularly dual-earner partnerships with a balanced negotiation relationship within the partnership were disadvantaged in dealing with existing conflict. *Reimann and Diewald* concluded that the family should be viewed not only as place where work-family conflict arises or where it is transferred to, but that it also provides resources to deal with conflict.

In the fourth article of this section, titled [“Work-family conflict and partners' agreement on fertility preferences among dual-earner couples: Does women's employment status matter?”](#), *Beth A. Latshaw and Deniz Yucel* (2022) studied the association between work-family conflict and couples' fertility preferences using data from the German Family Panel “pairfam”. The authors identified work-family conflict as a hitherto underestimated source of couples' disagreement on fertility preferences. They documented several crossover and spillover, as well as actor and partner effects that also varied by women's employment status, but they did not find gender differences in these patterns. Most generally, *Latshaw and Yucel's* study supports the view that lower levels of agreement in fertility preferences are associated with higher work-family conflict, indicating that role conflict and problems in reconciling family and work may have meaningful consequences for family processes.

3. Conclusion

Drawing on the observation that research on work-family conflict from the perspective of the family has been comparatively rare, particularly compared to more work-centered studies (*Reimann et al., 2022, in this issue*), this Special Issue assembled current research that discussed several issues of work-family conflict grounded in family research. Although empirically restricted to Germany, the studies of this Special Issue addressed gaps in the literature that will stimulate the international discussion in this field. The seven studies were innately heterogeneous and, therefore, show the range but certainly not the frontiers in which family research may contribute to the understanding of work-family conflict in the future.

Notwithstanding this heterogeneity in research foci, the studies of this Special Issue shared the assumption that considering family aspects of work-family conflict requires more than just controlling for family-variables in multivariate approaches. Instead, it needs a more complex evaluation of possible antecedents and outcomes located in the family because of their multifaceted interrelations with work-family conflict. To put it differently, the contributions supported the idea that family research could benefit from a closer look at work-family conflict with regard to other family-related research topics. Explicitly discussing family issues and their implications for work-family conflict is necessary to rationalize and understand the interdependencies between family and work, and to pave the way towards a much broader understanding of the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict in the context of family living.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Disclaimer

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Information in German

Deutscher Titel

Vereinbarkeitskonflikte zwischen Arbeit und Familie: Einleitung zum Schwerpunktheft

Zusammenfassung

Fragestellung: Zur Einleitung in das Schwerpunktheft des Journal of Family Research (4/2022) über Vereinbarkeitskonflikte zwischen Familie und Arbeit.

Hintergrund: Bisher gibt es nur verhältnismäßig wenige Forschungsarbeiten, die sich aus einer Familienperspektive mit Konflikten zwischen Arbeit und Familie befassen.

Methode: Abgesehen von der einführenden Überblicksarbeit handelt es sich bei allen Beiträgen dieses Schwerpunkthefts um quantitative Analysen großer Datensätze, nämlich „pairfam“, „LEEP-B3“ und „Aufwachsen in Deutschland“.

Ergebnisse: Die sieben Studien dieses Schwerpunktheftes untersuchen Vereinbarkeitskonflikte zwischen Arbeit und Familie im Kontext des Übergangs zur Elternschaft, von Erziehungspraktiken, der Zusammensetzung des direkten Arbeitsumfeldes, von Reduzierung der Arbeitsanforderungen, von mentaler Gesundheit und von Fertilitätspräferenzen. Damit zeigen sie das heterogene Spektrum an Fragestellungen auf, das von einer Familienperspektive auf Vereinbarkeitskonflikte profitieren kann.

Schlussfolgerung: Die Forschung zu Vereinbarkeitskonflikten zwischen Arbeit und Familie kann stark von einer Familienperspektive profitieren, die nicht nur relevante Variablen kontrolliert, sondern ausdrücklich die Interdependenzen zwischen Familien- und Arbeitsleben thematisiert.

Schlagwörter: Arbeitsmarkt, Familiendynamiken, Gender, Vereinbarkeit von Familien und Beruf, Wohlbefinden

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