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Toward a Model of Work and Family Balance: How Families with Children Having Serious Emotional Disorders Manage Caregiving and Worklife

Julie M. Rosenzweig  
*Portland State University*

Alice Myrth Ogilvie  
*Portland State University*

Eileen M. Brennan  
*Portland State University*

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Employed parents of children with serious emotional disorders must manage the competing demands of home and job. Although every situation is unique, all parents cope daily with the interface between employment and home. As the number of single employed mothers and dual-worker households has increased, so has the research on work and family. A review of this literature offers an examination of the different ways work and family relate within the busy lives of employed parents. Three primary models emerge from the review that describe experiences of mothers and fathers challenged by meeting both the needs of family members and the responsibilities of work-life. The literature does not identify whether or not the parents have children with any special needs. This review serves as a foundation for research that will specifically focus on parents of children with serious emotional disorders.

The conflict model of work and family describes the pressures occurring due to role conflict. Work-family conflict has been defined as the extent to which a person experiences incompatible demands due to role pressures in the work and family domains (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). In examining the incompatible demands, three forms of work-family conflict have been suggested: (1) time-based conflict, in which the time spent in one domain is seen as taking away time that might well be spent in the other domain; (2) strain-based conflict, in which the strain experienced in one domain affects the performance of roles in the other domain; and finally, (3) behavior-based conflict, which refers to the incompatibility of behavioral styles appropriate for each domain (Loerch, Russell, & Rush, 1989).

The spillover model of work and family describes how an individual’s activities and psychological experiences in the domains of job and home influence each other. The influence, commonly referred to as “spillover,” may have neutral, positive, or negative consequences for the employed parent. In other words, the events and resultant feelings in one domain may enhance or compromise the individual’s performance and affective experience in the other domain. For some individuals, the spillover is primarily unidirectional, from family-to-work or work-to-family. Many individuals, however, who report spillover, experience the flow in both directions. The occurrence and experience of
spillover are determined by personal, familial, organizational, and sociocultural factors. The spillover of stress from one domain to another may enhance or inhibit role functioning in the recipient domain. The extent and nature to which the stress from one domain influences the relationships, roles, and performance of activities in the other domains varies across the multiple combinations of family and employing organizational structures, type of stressors, and coping resources (Eckenrode & Gore, 1990).

The third model, segmentation, postulates that the work and family environments are distinct in the areas of activity and effectivity and that each exists and functions without influence from the other. The two environments are separated by where the person is located, what the person is doing, and the positive or negative satisfaction derived from the activity (Evans & Bartolome, 1984; Payton-Miyazaki & Brayfield, 1976; Ledeck & Mosier, 1990; Judge & Watanabe, 1994). Zedeck and Mosier (1990) summarize Piotrowski (1987) by stating that “the family functions as the realm of effectivity, intimacy, and significant ascribed relations, whereas the world of work is viewed as impersonal, competitive, and instrumental rather than expressive” (p. 241).

Each work-family model suggests a different set of consequences for the well-being of the individual, the family, the employing organization, and the community. The areas of family relationships, psychological functioning, health issues, job satisfaction, and role quality are all impacted by the challenges of balancing job and home. The literature describes a limited number of strategies that buffer and lessen the negative effects of conflict and stress experienced by working parents. Couple and family-centered strategies include division of household chores, maintenance of social relationships, and role-cycling. Organizations are beginning to assume their responsibility by instituting family-friendly policy initiatives, such as parental leave, flextime, job sharing, and part-time work.

Work-family experiences unique to employed parents of children with serious emotional disorders need to be explored. The successful coping strategies and advocacy efforts generated by these parents should be included in the work-family literature and shared with other parents in similar situations.

REFERENCES


