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-----Original Message-----

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Psychological
 Well-being of
 Working
 Women: A
 Cross-cultural
 Perspective

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Outline

Abstract

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Although the literature on the relationship between work and the family has grown substantially over the past 20 years, it is based primarily on studies conducted with white, middle-class workers. Thus, it is questionable whether findings can be generalized to nonwhite populations. This paper addresses the situation by utilizing a diverse sample. Semi-structured interviews about work, family, and work-family interactions were tape-recorded with eight minority and 13 white school counselors from a large southwestern city. Qualitative analysis of the tapes revealed reports by both white and minority workers of bi-directional influences between the work and family domains, as well as work-derived psychologic, cognitive, and social benefits. However, there were distinct differences between minority and white workers in their reports of workplace and family experiences, and in coping strategies. The most distinct findings were a difference between the two groups in their perceptions of work as a 'choice' (white workers) versus an 'obligation' (minority workers), and a dichotomous model of work family interactions among minority workers in which they compartmentalized their work and family lives. These results have implications for workplace policies and procedures, and point to the necessity of including the perspectives of minority subjects in future work-family research.

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Introduction

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Over the past three decades, there has been a growth in the literature devoted to the work and family relationship [1,2,3]. This comes in response to a range of socio-economic and cultural factors, but particularly to the rapidly increasing number of women in the workforce, and the efforts of many of these women to combine job and family care responsibilities. Over the past decade, there have been a number of legislative and organizational responses to the needs of workers with family responsibilities, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, increased availability of flextime and job sharing, and child and elder care resources [9]. Yet questions remain about the impact of the work and family domains on each other, and

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Literature Review

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whether, generally, the well-being of a worker is enhanced or negatively affected by combining work and family responsibilities [8,9]. Also, since very few work-family studies have included culturally diverse subject populations, there is a dearth of knowledge about the experiences of ethnic/minority workers, and it is unclear whether the findings of most work-family studies can be generalized to these populations. Given the growing diversity of the workforce, this has very important implications for the applicability and usability of interventions targeted to the work-family interface.

There are two separate bodies of literature that are relevant to the work-family debate: the work-family literature, and the job stress/organizational behavior literature. The latter contains studies on job and organizational characteristics that affect worker health and productivity. The focus is on the workplace, and nonwork variables, if they are examined, are generally treated as moderating or mediating variables. While very important for understanding which job and organizational characteristics create stress for workers, this area of research has traditionally given short shrift to the impact of workplace demands and stressors on workers' families [2].

The work-family literature, on the other hand, has as a focus the relationship between the work and family domains. Studies in this area have generally been guided by two theoretical approaches: those that derive from theories of role behavior [13], and studies that examine 'spillover' or 'crossover' from the work domain to the family domain or vice versa. Role-behavior studies are based on the premise that individuals inhabit a number of roles based on personal, familial, or societal expectations and obligations (eg, worker, parent, spouse, etc.). The most popular of the role theories is the role conflict theory or 'scarcity theory.' This theory assumes that an individual has only a certain amount of time and energy to apportion to the various roles he or she inhabits, and that role conflicts can arise when performance of some roles results in time and/o energy deficits for the other role(s) [14]. Spillover theory also postulates an inter-action between the work and family domains in that experiences in one domain 'spill over' into the other domain and influence experiences there [8]. So, for example, stresses created by inflexible work hours or a lack of autonomy at work may affect relationships with family members. Conversely, workplace opportunities for personal growth and development may result in skills that can be used in other, nonworkplace settings [5].

The majority of studies that have investigated maternal employment have utilized the role conflict model [16]. These studies assume a competition between the demands of the family and the demands of the organization, and generally view the working mother as the primary caregiver within the family. Thus, work is viewed as negatively impacting the family through maternal role conflict. However, this assumption is predicated on traditional gender and family roles, and may not be as valid today with the move toward gender equality both in the workplace and within marriages [17]. Additionally, these studies often do not characterize job and organizational demands adequately enough to determine what effects the workplace is truly having on the worker's family.

Our understanding of the work-family interface is impaired by the lack of study samples that are racially and ethnically diverse. Minority women, particularly African-Americans, have a long history of participation in the workforce [18], yet their experiences are rarely voiced in the work-family literature. This can lead to the assumption that the experiences of white, middle-class individuals are the norm, when this may not be the case. In fact, a handful of studies seem to indicate that the workplace experiences of minority women are different. Bell [19], for example, reports that minority working women experience job stressors differently, and engage in different coping strategies than their white counterparts. A recent study points out the negative impact of workplace racial discrimination on the lives of minority women [20], which has important implications for maternal health and functioning within the family environment.

In sum, there is a need for a more inclusive examination of the workplace factors that can influence family life, and of the family factors that can influence work life. In addition, there is a need to examine the work-family perspectives and experiences of other ethnic/racial groups.

The present study was conducted in order to elucidate the relationships between the work and family domains, particularly for minority dual-earner couples. Qualitative methods were used in order to gather details on how work affected family life, and vice versa, how dual-earner couples negotiated their roles and relationships across and within the work and family domains, and what factors inhibited or promoted the ability of these couples to successfully combine work and family. This research makes a critical contribution by presenting a minority perspective on work and family. In addition, the research attempts to present an integrated picture of the work-family dialogue by capturing the subjective experiences, perceptions, and outcomes of working women. Through the voices of the participants, findings portray interesting and creative cognitive processes engaged in by women as they juggle demands within and across the work and family domains. Finally, this research attempts to provide a framework for exploring the work-family topic cross-culturally, and suggests directions for continuing this research cross-culturally.

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Methods

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Sample characteristics

Participants were recruited from a pool of school counselors and support staff ($n = 115$) employed in a school district in a large, southwestern city. These workers were already participating in an organizational study investigating quality of life and job satisfaction during a communication system-change process. The following criteria were used to select potential participants for this study. Participants needed to be living with an employed spouse or partner, parenting at least one child under the age of 6, and have an employment tenure of at least 1 year. The population of the larger group contained only 13 minority staff, including one Hispanic-American, and one Asian-American. Given the limited number of minorities, and to ensure a representative sample, all 13 were invited to participate in the study. Thirteen nonminority participants were selected to participate as well. The final study group contained 21 employees consistent with the demographics of the area, following two withdrawals and four disqualifications based on the above criteria. Each participant was mailed a letter detailing the rationale of the study, the usage of findings, human subject and confidentiality issues, and participants' rights to withdraw without penalty. A requirement for signed agreements was explained.

The final sample consisted of 13 whites (including one male), seven African-Americans, and one Hispanic-American. All were school counselors; the mean education was a masters degree in counseling psychology. The mean participant income was \$80,000, and the mean household income was \$110,000. Each household represented included a child of at least 6 years of age, and participants' average employment tenure was 7.5 years.

Procedure

A quasi-pilot study was conducted with four staff members, who were asked, within a group context, to share information about their lives as married, working parents. Topics addressed in the study were drawn from this discussion and were used to develop an interview guide.

Semi-structured interviews lasting an average of 2 hours per person were conducted in the study participants' offices. Participants were given a questionnaire containing the questions posed during the interview, and the interviews were tape-recorded with their permission. Topics of discussion included work, the family, social support, work-family relationships and interactions, marital quality, nonwork life, and health within the past 6 to 12 months. Participants were asked to define each factor, then to share their perspectives on each factor based on work, family, community, and spousal relationships.

Reliability was addressed in several ways. The researcher kept a journal depicting daily events, perspectives, and experiences throughout the data-collection period in order to detect potential researcher biases during collection and analyses. Additionally, translations of interviews were presented throughout the data collection process to the participants for verification and validity determination, and for further exploration or factor construction. A final assessment of the data revealed 700 pages of double-spaced typed notes, and two journals of researcher notes, including margin-based comments on observations collected during the interviews.

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Data Analyses

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An inductive analytical methodology was used, which was guided by the work of Glaser and Strauss [21], Strauss Corbin [22] Lincoln and Guba [23], and Cole [24]. First the tapes were transcribed, and then text was chunked and coded into patterns and themes. Next, the data were analyzed to identify contextual structures linked to building 'meaning' within the participants' lives within and across work and family domains. A rigorous process of cross-checking with journal notes was conducted to determine accuracy and purity of findings. With the emergence of relationships and typologies, and with further refinement of these themes and categories, an integrated story emerged. This story was used to develop hypotheses regarding the relationships between work and family, and a tentative framework for these hypotheses. A further stage of refinement was activated to ensure final reliability and integrity of the findings by presenting the constructed story and the framework underpinning the proposed hypothesis to the participants. Through this process of data gathering, analyses, participant confirmation, further refinement, and hypotheses construction, the processes and meaning of experiences across the work and family domains were identified for this participant group.

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Results

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While both white and minority workers reported bi-directional influences of the work and family domains on each other along with psychological, cognitive, and social gains from participating in the workforce, there were distinct differences in their report of workplace and family experiences, and in their coping strategies.

The impact of the workplace on the worker

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White workers reported that employment was a choice centered around personal gratification and their ability to manage workplace and family demands. They felt that they possessed a similar set of values as their organization and coworkers, which facilitated workplace relations, performance, and psychologic well-being. Lack of role clarity, limited decision latitude, and low job control were reported to be associated with reduced performance and psychologic distress.

Minority workers reported that their employment was obligatory rather than a choice, and was linked with quality of life. They felt culturally isolated at work, and reported that these perceptions affected the quality of their work experience as well as their health. They reported a need to succeed at work in order to challenge and/or disprove societal stereotypes of minorities

The impact of the family on the worker

White workers reported a fluidity of roles at home based on the negotiation of duties, and labor sharing between the partners. They also reported that the use of technology for parenting was critical for managing home demands and for their psychologic well-being. Minority workers reported that they and their partners engaged in more labor division without negotiation at home than their white counterparts, and that socializing their children to participate in the labor division at home was central to successful family functioning.

The impact of work on the family

White workers cited organizational policies and practices aimed at workers with families as critical for managing work and family demands. Such programs were perceived to be related to increased commitment, quality of performance, and positive health outcomes. The quality of interpersonal relations with coworkers and supervisors was perceived to be linked to their own quality of work life as well as the quality of their family functioning. Job satisfaction was based both on the contribution of the job to the workers' own well-being and their family's quality of life. Psychologic distress was reported when the job limited the availability of the workers to their families.

Minorities reported a lack of, or unequal access to, organizational work-family policies, which they linked with psychologic distress and negative family functioning. However, they also reported that they chose to dichotomize or compartmentalize their work and family lives in order to reduce the likelihood of psychologic distress. Additionally, they used work experiences and training resources at home to socialize their children for adult roles in the workplace.

The impact of the family on work

Minority workers reported that support from their families was more valuable in mediating work-family conflicts than organizational resources.

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Discussion

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The results of this study support an integration of the work-family and job stress/organizational behavior models in order to provide a more complete picture of the workplace and family factors that influence worker health and well-being. The participants provided details about workplace and family factors that affected their well-being, and there was evidence of both role conflict and spillover effects at the work-family interface.

More importantly, this study yielded a rich body of data on the subjective work-family experiences of a diverse subject population. The qualitative approach that was taken provided details about the processes and practices underlying family functioning, work performance, and health outcomes in a dual-earner home. While there were some commonalities in the experiences of the white and minority participants, there were also a number of distinct differences in their experiences. The issue of 'choice' versus 'obligation' in employment was a very important distinction between the two sets of participants, and was central to understanding their construction of positive family functioning within the work and family domains. For example, one minority worker reported that, 'in order to achieve successfully, both family members must become and remain employed.' Furthermore, 'If black persons do not plan their lives carefully, they are often left without choices for themselves and their families. That's why there is no question about my being employed, and both of us share whatever [household chore] is necessary to care for the family and for each other.'

Minorities noted that understanding the drive of obligation, refuting stereotypical expectations, and socializing their children for adult roles in a nonintegrated society was vital to understanding how they attained and sustained effective family and individual functioning.

There were substantial differences in the reports of family functioning of the white and minority participants. The minority participants reported a more egalitarian sharing of family duties between spouses that often did not require negotiation, as did the labor sharing in the families of white participants. There was also an emphasis in the minority families on children participating in family labor, and of children being socialized early on to the work experiences of adult minority workers. The minority participants felt that it was essential for their children to be prepared for a workplace not yet free of ethnic/racial discrimination. Minority workers looked to their families for support, particularly in resolving work-family conflicts, to a much

greater degree than they looked to the organization for such support. White participants, on the other hand, cited coworker and supervisory support as essential for resolving work-family conflicts.

An interesting discovery was the dichotomous model of work-family interactions among minority workers, in which the minority participants reported compartmentalizing their work and family lives. This formed a coping strategy that appeared effective in reducing minority participants' psychologic distress, and is supportive of Bell's [19] 1990 finding that minority women engage in different coping strategies than their white counterparts. However, this finding does raise questions about the viability for minority workers of some organizational policies aimed at reducing role conflict or spillover effects between the work and family domains. Furthermore, organizations must investigate how policies and practices enacted by leaders are perceived by minority workers, as the minority participants in this study did not necessarily feel that they shared the same vision as their organization, felt culturally isolated at work, and reported that they did not have as ready access to organizational work-family policies-/programs as white participants. There may be good reason why the minority workers 'sealed off' their work experiences from their family experiences as a strategy to remain psychologically healthy.

Study Limitations

Although subjects were selected from one job category and school district in order to reduce the possibility of variability due to different management or political structures across different school systems and jobs, still political and hierarchical aspects embedded in this school system may have influenced the results. This, plus the small sample size, means that care is needed in generalizing the results beyond the study sample.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study provides support for a more integrated model of work-family research, and provides important insights into the ways in which minority workers negotiate the work-family interface. These results have important implications for organizational work-family policies and practices, and point out the need for further inclusion of minority subjects in future work-family research.

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"Ambition is that grit in the soul that creates disenchantment into the ordinary and puts the DAR
into dreams."

Max Lucado