

International Perspectives on Work and Family: An Introduction to the Special Section

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As hours worked and women's workforce participation increase globally, employees around the world are faced with the challenge of combining work and family roles. The growth in dual professional couples working for multinational firms has also led to work-home conflict in many parts of the world (Hill, Yang, Hawkins, & Ferris, 2004). Despite the global importance of work-family issues and repeated calls to study this topic in unique cultural contexts (Allen, 2013; Poelmans, 2003, 2005; Powell, Francesco, & Ling, 2009), work-family research has predominantly been conducted in Anglo societies. In fact, a review found that 75 per cent of work-family studies were based on data entirely from US workers (Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood, & Lambert, 2007). The lack of studies on the work-family interface from countries outside the US is problematic given that the legal context in which individuals and organisations manage work-family concerns varies substantially. Cultural differences may also have an important influence on work-family issues as they impact both family and work values, interactions among family members, expectations associated with gender roles, and which relatives are defined as in-group family members. In this special section, we bring together four papers with the overarching goal of disseminating knowledge about how the work-family interface is both different and the same across distinct national contexts. Each of the papers contained in this issue examines work-family issues in at least five distinct national contexts.

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The special section opens with Allen et al.'s (2013) paper, which examines the link between national paid leave policy and four dimensions of work–family conflict in 12 different industrialised nations. Paid parental leave, paid sick leave, and paid annual leave were investigated among working married parents with children under the age of 5. Of the leave policies investigated, only paid sick leave demonstrated a beneficial relationship, albeit a small one, with work–family conflict. Some evidence was found to suggest that paid leave policies may be most beneficial when informal perceptions of support (e.g. family-supportive organisational perceptions) are stronger than when they are lower. Both family-supportive supervision and family-supportive organisational perceptions were associated with less work–family conflict. The paper draws attention to the need to examine organisational and national contexts in tandem in developing work–family conflict solutions.

Next, Beham, Drobnič, and Präg (2013) examine the work–home interference and satisfaction with work–family balance among service workers in five different European countries varying in welfare state regimes and their level of gender egalitarianism. Results revealed both similarities and differences across these national contexts. Use of organisational supports for work–family balance was highest in countries with higher levels of gender equality (Sweden and the Netherlands) and lowest in Portugal, where gender equality is lower. With regard to similarities, across all five countries, professional workers reported more work-to-home interference and less satisfaction with work–family balance than did non-professional workers. The magnitude of this professional/non-professional difference in work–home interference was smaller in the UK and Sweden than it was in the Netherlands, Portugal, and Germany. However, the gap between professionals and non-professionals in satisfaction with work–family balance was invariant across cultures.

The paper by Billing and colleagues (2012) examines the role of decision latitude as a moderator of the work–family conflict–psychological strain relationship across five distinct countries. Countries examined included both individualistic low power distance countries (the United States, Canada) and collective high power distance countries (India, Indonesia, South Korea). The authors explored the degree to which decision latitude, which the job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979) suggests should ameliorate the effects of work–family conflict on psychological strain, would operate similarly across national contexts. Notable cross-cultural differences were found. In individualistic, low power distance cultures, decision latitude ameliorated the effects of work–family conflict on psychological strain, but this effect was not replicated in any of the more collective, high power distance countries.

Finally, Lyness and Judiesch (2013) examined work–life balance perceptions of both employees and their managers in 36 distinct countries varying in their level of gender egalitarianism. Drawing from extensions of social role

theory to a cross-national context (Eagly & Wood, 2012), society's normative gender roles were expected to be reflected in self-perceptions, and societal gender role stereotypes should be reflected in supervisor perceptions. In low egalitarian national contexts, women reported less work–life balance than men, but this effect did not exist in high gender-egalitarian contexts. However, there were few differences in self-reported perceptions of balance that were based in the gender egalitarianism of the cultural context, relative to the differences in supervisors' ratings of balance, which were much more culture dependent. Results suggest that the degree to which the cultural context embraces equality for women relates to how supervisors perceive women's work–life balance more than how women actually see themselves.

Taken together, results from these four studies underscore the importance of considering the national and cultural context in which employees cope with work and family demands. Notable cultural differences that influenced results across these studies include national gender egalitarianism and individualism/collectivism and power distance. On the other hand, national policy for paid family leave did not have the anticipated effects. The special section sheds light on the potential insights that can be gained by viewing work–family relationships through a variety of contextual lenses as well as from testing assumed relationships. We hope these studies motivate further research that advances our understanding of work–family relationships across the globe.

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