



Cross-cultural work and family research: A review of the literature



Kristen M. Shockley^{a,*}, Jill Douek^b, Christine R. Smith^b, Peter P. Yu^b,
Soner Dumani^{c,1}, Kimberly A. French^{d,1}

^a University of Georgia, United States

^b The Graduate Center and Baruch College, City University of New York, United States

^c University of South Florida/American Institutes for Research, United States

^d University of South Florida, United States

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ABSTRACT

Research aimed at understanding the intersection of employees' work and family lives has blossomed over the past few years, and, in more recent times, has begun to have an increasingly global focus. Conducting research in diverse cultural settings is important given that work and family dynamics are entrenched in larger societal contexts, such as gender role norms, national policies, and cultural values. However, the literature has not developed in a programmatic way, making it difficult to build upon the current knowledge base. The goal of this study is to review extant cross-cultural work and family published research in an effort to synthesize and assess the current state of the literature, with a focus on theoretical logic and methodology. We do this by reporting descriptive statistics regarding which global regions have received the most attention, the way culture is considered analytically and theoretically, and information about measurement. Through this review we aim to provide scholars with a more complete understanding of the state of cross-cultural work-family knowledge and offer recommendations for future research that will facilitate theoretical advancement.

Over the past three decades, academic, organizational, and popular press interest in understanding the intersection of employees' work and family lives has flourished (Allen, 2012). Early research in the area was mostly conducted in the U.S., but more recently there has been an increase in studies conducted in other countries and those that include samples from multiple nations (Casper, Allen, & Poelmans, 2014). Given that work and family dynamics are entrenched in larger societal contexts, such as gender role norms, national policies, economic stability, and cultural values, this expansion is merited (Ollier-Malaterre, 2016; Poelmans et al., 2003). Further, understanding cross-cultural variations of work-family (WF) interactions has important implications for human resource practices in this era of increasing globalization.

Despite a growing literature on global and cross-cultural WF research, there have been few attempts in the literature to integrate findings. The few narrative reviews that do exist (Aycan, 2008; Ollier-Malaterre, 2016; Poelmans, O'Driscoll, & Beham, 2005; Shaffer, Joplin, & Hsu, 2011) have not been comprehensive in including all available studies, nor have they comprehensively assessed the theoretical rationale used to expect cultural differences in WF constructs or the methodological rigor of studies. Instead, they have aimed to synthesize results, which is rather challenging given that the expansion of research in this area has generally not been programmatic in nature. Furthermore, one quantitative review also exists (Allen, French, Dumani, & Shockley, 2015), which synthesized findings related to mean differences in one construct, WF conflict (both work-to-family and family-to-work directions),

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: kshock@uga.edu (K.M. Shockley).

¹ These authors contributed equally. Authorship is alphabetical.

but also neglects to provide a systematic review of extant theory or methodology.

With this in mind, the goal of this paper is to provide the first known comprehensive review of all extant cross-cultural WF research with a focus on a) the prevalence of research in different regions across the globe, b) the content and theoretical focus of studies, and c) the methodologies employed. We define cross-cultural as studies that include at least two distinct cultures, and we use the term culture broadly to refer to “the shared way of life of a group of people” (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002, p. 2). Components of this shared way of life include many facets, such as shared values, language, institutional factors, and economic conditions (Taras, Rowney, & Steel, 2009). Following previous researchers (Schaffer & Riordan, 2003), we largely rely on nation as a proxy for delineating distinct cultures, though we acknowledge that it is an imperfect proxy given cases of large within-country variation in these factors as well as cases where countries are quite similar (e.g., U.S. and Canada).

Our review has clear and important theoretical implications. We identify not only the theoretical perspectives that have been promulgated by researchers in terms of their predictions but also the “why” behind each of these perspectives. This gives a rich sense of the theoretical state of the literature, uncovers contradictions, and provides future researchers with a single place to easily identify current theoretical perspectives, rather than having to comb through a disjointed literature. In addition, our review gauges the level of scientific rigor on which our current understanding rests and identifies theoretical and methodological weak points that can be developed in future research. Such improvements are critical for building firm footing for cross-national work-family inferences. Moreover, we offer additional suggestions of cultural values that have so far been neglected but have potential to advance the field. Apart from extending theory, we also give researchers direction in terms of specific study ideas, as we highlight empirical gaps and inconsistent findings in the extant literature.

Beyond the theoretical importance of such a review, there are also important applied implications. In its current state, the literature gives practitioners no clear recommendations about the best WF practices and policies that cater to employees from a diverse array of cultures. With the parallel increase in globalization and use of expatriates by many organizations, this is an important oversight. Without a full understanding of how WF practices vary across cultures, companies may be misinformed about best practices. This could have grave implications for expatriate well-being and early return rates, given the critical role of WF issues in adequate adjustment of these employees (Lazarova, Westman, & Shaffer, 2010).

1. Method

1.1. Literature search and inclusion criteria

Articles for the review were identified via three methods. First, English-language articles published from before May 2016 were identified via database searches (PsycINFO, Web of Science) using the search terms “work-family,” “work-life,” and “work-nonwork” along with “cultur*,” “cross-cultur*,” and “nation*.” Next, we perused the reference section of chapters and articles focused on cross-cultural WF issues and WF issues in a particular region (i.e., Aycan, 2008; Bardoel, De Cieri, & Santos, 2008; Ollier-Malaterre, 2016; Poelmans et al., 2005; Shaffer et al., 2011) to locate any previously unidentified cross-cultural WF studies.

Studies were included in the review if they included at least two samples from different countries or distinct cultural groups within a country (or if they provided data from one sample and made explicit quantitative comparisons to previous research based on another sample, e.g., Anderson, Coffey, Liu, & Zhao, 2008; Aryee, Fields, & Luk, 1999; Hassan, Dollard, & Winefield, 2010) and quantitatively assessed a construct that involved interaction between work and family domains (i.e., WF conflict, enrichment, facilitation, fit, positive spillover, negative spillover, pressure, balance). This decision was made to create clear boundaries for the review, as many topics could be considered within the realm of WF studies, such as national fertility, workplace flexibility, or percentage of women in the labor force. Furthermore, we eliminated studies that included participants from multiple cultures but collapsed across cultures for analyses involving WF constructs ($k = 13$). We also excluded studies of expatriates ($k = 4$).² This resulted in the inclusion of 73 published articles, which represented data from 58 independent datasets. The studies came from a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, family studies, human resources, public health, and medicine. The full list of studies is available in Supplemental materials.

1.2. Overview of the coding process

Each primary study in the review was coded by one of this study's six authors. The coding training process entailed a detailed discussion of the coding spreadsheet, which included the variables described below. All coders then worked through a single article, coding it together. Next, the coders separately coded three identical articles and subsequently met to review. Any discrepancies were reviewed to confirm mutual understanding of the coding process. This step was repeated with three more articles. At this point, consensus was deemed sufficiently high (> 90%) to proceed with one coder per article.

1.2.1. National origin of sample(s)

We recorded the national origin of the sample(s), including distinct cultural groups within a single nation (e.g., Arab and Jewish Israelis). Nations were further combined into regional clusters based on the grouping from the GLOBE project (e.g., Confucian Asia, Latin Europe, Latin America; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). GLOBE is a wide-scale study of cultural values in

² A list of the excluded studies is available from the first author upon request.

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