Sport Management Review, 2005, **8**, 227–253
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Perspectives on Work-Family Conflict in Sport: An Integrated Approach

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KEY WORDS: work-family balance, organisational behaviour, organisational policy

The overall literature concerning work-family conflict is growing rapidly, but has failed to incorporate multiple theoretical levels. Instead, researchers have examined the construct from either an individual, structural, or social relations perspective. Investigation of work-family conflict by integrating multiple theoretical levels provides valuable insights regarding the processes and products of work-family conflict, as well as the larger structural and social meanings behind work, family and their interface. Further, sport offers an ideal context for the study of work-family conflict due to the long, non-traditional work hours and significant travel. This article reviews three commonly used theoretical approaches to the study of work-family conflict—individual, structural, and social relations. It then demonstrates within a sport context how the three approaches can be integrated both from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective to better understand the causes, consequences, and interpretation of work-family conflict as an individual experience bounded by and shaped in organisational and social realities.

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Over the past 25 years, work-family conflict has received increasing attention from both scholars and practitioners. As the numbers of dual income partners and single parents continue to increase in the workplace, organisations have attempted to respond with more flexible systems and practices that address the need to fill both roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). At the same time, scholars have made considerable strides at understanding the complexities of work and family roles and how individuals combine them.

Work-family conflict is defined as a type of inter-role conflict wherein at least some work and family responsibilities are not compatible and have resultant effects on each domain (Boles, Howard, & Donofrio, 2001; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Although work can encompass paid and unpaid labour, most work-family conflict research focuses on paid employment, and family is typically defined as "two or more individuals occupying interdependent roles with the purpose of accomplishing shared goals" (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brimley, 2005). Research has established that work and family interact and that the interaction is bi-directional, with work affecting family (work-to-family or WTF conflict) and family affecting work (family-to-work or FTW conflict) (Boles et al., 2001; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus, Collins, Singh, & Parasuraman, 1997; Parasuraman, Purohit, Goldshalk, & Beutell, 1996). Outcomes from work-to-family and family-to-work interaction include both positives such as job satisfaction, job performance, family satisfaction, and life satisfaction; and negatives such as conflict, poor health, stress, and job or family exit (Anderson, Coffey, & Byerly, 2002, Boles, et al., 2001; Carlson & Kaemar, 2000; Greenhaus, Parasuraman, Granrose, Rabinowitz, & Beutell, 1989; Hammer, Bauer, & Grandey, 2003). Wilson (2003) and Cutler and Jackson (2002) futher asserted that work-family conflict can also lead to a lack of advancement, job turnover, and change of occupation.

The Need for an Integrated Approach

While the overall literature concerning work-family conflict is growing rapidly, some have argued it has advanced at the empirical level much faster than at the theoretical level, and that theory development is critically needed. Echoing comments by other scholars in this area, Eby and colleagues (2005), after reviewing over 200 work-family conflict studies from the past twenty years, concluded that the field would be enhanced by more theory building and particularly by theoretical models that integrate perspectives from various levels and disciplines (see also Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). This need for theory development extends from the general work-family literature into sport management as well. Certainly unique findings from the sport context could be highly valuable in theory building, especially as they help place boundary conditions on existing literature—demonstrating where more general theories do and do not work in specific contexts (Chalip, 2005).

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