

Convergence between measures of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict: A meta-analytic examination

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Abstract

The overlap between measures of work-to-family (WFC) and family-to-work conflict (FWC) was meta-analytically investigated. Researchers have assumed WFC and FWC to be distinct, however, this assumption requires empirical verification. Across 25 independent samples (total $N = 9079$) the sample size weighted mean observed correlation was .38 and the reliability corrected correlation was .48. The pattern of external correlates for the two types of conflict was also examined. Both forms of conflict had similar (.41) reliability corrected correlations with measures of organizational withdrawal. WFC conflict correlated .41 ($k = 15$, $N = 4714$) with job stressors and .17 ($k = 13$, $N = 3312$) with non-work stressors whereas FWC conflict correlated .27 with job stressors and .23 with non-work stressors. Correlations between the two forms of work/family conflict and other variables such as organizational commitment, job and life satisfaction, and health were examined. Implications for the discriminant validity of the two types of conflict measures are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Given the increasing prevalence of dual-breadwinner families and single working parents, the challenges workers face in meeting demands of the work and family domain have become numerous and progressively more complex (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991). It is not surprising that the demands of work and family are not always compatible, leading to feelings of conflict between these domains. The potential for negative effects of work/family conflict have spurred research in this area. Researchers have found that workers facing high levels of work/family conflict are at increased physical and mental health risk, have less satisfactory job performance, poorer parental performance, more incidences of work withdrawal behaviors (e.g., tardiness, absenteeism, turnover, and low job involvement), decreased morale, and lower satisfaction with job, life, marriage, and family (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Hammer, Bauer, & Grandey, 2003; Leiter & Durup, 1996; O'Driscoll, Ilgen, & Hildreth, 1992).

Early research has employed measures of work/family conflict that did not distinguish between the direction of conflict. That is, distinctions were not made between conflict caused by work roles interfering with family from that of family roles interfering with work. Work and family are considered to be distinct spheres or domains of a person's life. As such, requirements in the work domain that impede performance in the family domain (work-to-family conflict; WFC) and family demands that impede performance in the work domain (family-to-work conflict; FWC) are conceptually distinct (Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). To better understand the antecedents and consequences of these two forms of conflict, researchers have begun measuring levels of work/family conflict using this bi-directional conceptualization (Frone et al., 1992).

But to what extent is this conceptual clarity reflected in the measures employed to assess these two forms of work/family conflict (WFC and FWC)? If individuals who score highly on one type of conflict measure (e.g., WFC) also obtain high scores in measures of conflict in the other direction (i.e., FWC), what are the implications for research and practice? To some extent an overlap is expected (Frone et al., 1992). Because each individual has fixed amounts of physical and psychological resources (e.g., time, mental energy, etc.), conflicts in one direction are likely to be coupled with expressions of conflict in the other direction. Further, to the extent there are stable individual differences in perceptions of role conflict, a positive overlap between measures of WFC and FWC is expected. The question is whether the overlap is so substantial that empirical distinction between the two directions of conflict becomes problematic. Individual studies have reported correlations between WFC and FWC that vary widely across samples [e.g., $r = .10$, $p > .05$ reported by Gutek, Searle, and Klepa (1991); compared with $r = .59$, $p < .05$ reported by Flye, Agars, and Kottke (2003)]. Researchers have proceeded as though the two types of conflict are distinct and no one needs to be convinced of their distinctiveness. However, such an assumption needs to be empirically verified. Thus, our first objective was to meta-analytically cumulate the correlations between measures of WFC and measures of FWC.

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