

# The work–family interface and turnover intentions over the course of project-oriented assignments abroad

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## Abstract

The work–family interface is a highly relevant, yet underexposed issue in project management. When projects require family-separation, work demands are likely to conflict with family life and the consequences may be neither beneficial for (project) organizations nor for families. The aim of this study was twofold: a) to assess within-person changes over time in employees' work–family conflict experiences, relationship satisfaction, and turnover intentions and b) to examine the interrelations between these variables, over the course of a project that requires family-separation. Quantitative data were collected among military personnel before and after their four to six months assignments abroad. The results revealed that relationship satisfaction among military personnel had decreased significantly and turnover intentions had increased significantly over time. Moreover, employees who experienced higher levels of work–family conflict reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction and higher levels of turnover intentions. Understanding the interrelations may help managing projects in a way that benefits project organizations as well as employees and their families, who are critical to its performance and success.

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*Keywords:* Project-related separation; Work–family conflict; Relationship satisfaction; Turnover intentions

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## 1. Introduction

At present, the interdependency of the work and family domain is widely recognized. Economic and social developments, such as the increasing numbers of women in the workforce, the rising numbers of dual-income families, and more egalitarian distributions of family responsibilities, have fundamentally altered work and family roles and have introduced “new challenges for balancing work and family life” (Story and Bradbury, 2004, p. 1140). In most contemporary Western societies, both men and women face the challenges of managing work obligations and domestic responsibilities and boundaries between work and family life dissolve. Just as the family,

work often is central to individuals' lives and can be rewarding in various ways. However, just as the family, work can also be demanding, requiring the workers' time, presence, and psychological involvement. Conflict arises when work and family demands are incompatible (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Projects that involve job-induced family separations, such as for instance among oil platform workers, fishermen, or expatriates, increase the likelihood of work–family conflict as such absences take up all the worker's resources (e.g., time, energy, involvement) making it difficult to meet family demands for a considerable period of time.

Military deployments, which are an important aspect of today's military organizations, can also be regarded as such projects that require family separation. They are characterized by the temporary nature of the work, the often tailor-made organizations shaped to realize the specific task, and the dynamic environment in which they function (De Waard and Kramer, 2008). These all pose additional challenges (or pressures) on employees and their families; in terms of training and preparation, for instance, which

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require employees to be away from their families even more. The question how to combine participation in projects that require family separation with family life in such a way that tensions are manageable, is highly interesting and important, given that tensions between work and family life are neither beneficial for organizations nor for families. Hence, employers should be concerned with how work demands affect employees' work and nonwork lives. Still, this is an underexposed issue in project management.

Despite the abundant research in the field of the work–family interface, work–family experiences in the course of job-induced separations have rarely been studied (an exception is Westman et al., 2008). Furthermore, knowledge in the work–family field predominantly relies on research using cross-sectional designs. This study endeavors to contribute to existing knowledge by employing a longitudinal design over the course of project-oriented assignments abroad. This enables us to provide information about within-person changes over time and it gives insight into the interrelations between work–family conflict and work (i.e., turnover intentions) and nonwork (i.e., relationship satisfaction) variables over time. Hence, the aim of this study is twofold: a) to assess within-person changes over time in employees' work–family conflict experiences, relationship satisfaction, and turnover intentions and b) to examine the interrelations between these variables, over the course of a project that requires family-separation. This resulted in the formulation of two research questions that guided this study:

Research question 1 Are there any significant changes in work–family conflict, relationship satisfaction, and turnover intentions over the course of a project-oriented assignment abroad?

Research question 2 How do work–family conflict, relationship satisfaction, and turnover intentions interrelate over the course of a project-oriented assignment abroad?

## 2. Work–family conflict

Researchers studying the work and family interface have predominantly focused on the construct of work–family conflict, which is a bidirectional concept distinguishing work interfering with family (work–family conflict, or WFC) from family interfering with work (family–work conflict, or FWC) (e.g., Boles et al., 2001; Carlson et al., 2000; Frone et al., 1992, 1997; Gutek et al., 1991; Netemeyer et al., 1996; Parasuraman et al., 1996). For the purpose of our study, we focus exclusively on work–family conflict, that is, the extent to which job demands interfere with family life.

Three forms of conflict between work and family life can be identified (e.g., Carlson et al., 2000; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Stephens and Sommer, 1996). First, conflict may arise when performing demands in one domain (e.g., work) is time consuming to such a degree that it impedes role performance in the other domain (e.g., family). This is referred to as *time-based conflict*. Job-induced separations absorb employees'

time for a certain period of time, making them unavailable for the family. Second, *strain-based conflict* occurs when meeting the demands of one domain (e.g., work) produces strain that complicates meeting the demands of the other domain (e.g., family). Thus, irrespective of work being time-consuming, one's job can be stressful and the employee might arrive home exhausted or tensed, being unable to adequately fulfill family duties. Finally, *behavior-based conflict* concerns behavior developed in one domain (e.g., work) interfering with the behavior that is required to properly perform role responsibilities in the other domain (e.g., family). For instance, one's job can involve certain rules of conduct, such as strictly obeying or giving orders, which may be considered undesirable in family life.

Both work and family factors can be antecedents or outcomes of work–family interference (see, for instance, Adams et al., 2006, for a review of the literature). Nonetheless, empirical research suggests that work demands interfering with family life are more strongly related to work-related outcomes than with family-related outcomes, whereas family–work conflict is found to be more strongly related to family-related outcomes than to work-related outcomes (see for instance Amstad et al., 2011, for a meta-analysis). Divergent theoretical perspectives have been applied to studying and explaining processes and experiences of work–family conflict. Predominant are the perspectives presuming that resources can be limited and the inability to adequately apply resources in one or both domains (i.e., work and family) causes conflict or strain (see for instance Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999). For instance, in the course of projects that involve job-induced separations, such as military deployments, one is likely to perceive conflict between work and family demands as one needs to devote resources (e.g., time) in the work domain to such an extent that it causes a loss of resources available for the family domain. That is, it prevents individuals from adequately fulfilling family responsibilities or spending time together with the family (thus, interfering with family life), which may produce negative emotions and feelings of distress in both the work and family domain.

## 3. Work–family conflict, relationship satisfaction, and turnover intentions

A number of studies have shown that increased levels of work–family conflict are associated with decreased levels of relationship satisfaction (e.g., Allen et al., 2000; Amstad et al., 2011; Bedeian et al., 1988; Durand et al., 2003; Leiter and Durup, 1996; Voydanoff, 2005). It has been assumed that work–family conflict can influence the quality of employees' family (or intimate) relationships as spending large proportions of time in work restrains high involvement in one's relationship (e.g., Bedeian et al., 1988). This corresponds to theoretical assumptions that posit that applying resources (time, psychological involvement) in one domain (e.g., work) can produce a loss of resources available for another domain (e.g., family) which produces strain, among which in the family domain, such as relationship dissatisfaction. It is therefore likely to presume that relationship satisfaction decreases as a result of work–family

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