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A qualitative investigation of work-family-supportive coworker behaviors

Alicia D. McMullan[a], Laurent M. Lapierre[b,*], Yanhong Li[c]

[a] University of Ottawa, School of Psychology, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada
[b] University of Ottawa, Telfer School of Management, Desmarais Building, Room 5129, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada
[c] University of Ottawa, Telfer School of Management, Desmarais Building, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6N5, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Employee experiences of work-family-supportive coworker behavior (WFSCB) were investigated in a qualitative, inductively driven study. WFSCBs involve any action that one or more coworkers can take to facilitate one or more employees' WF balance in the work unit. The results of a content analysis based on 22 semi-structured interviews revealed five categories of WFSCBs including: demonstrating an understanding of the value of non-work life, emotional support, sharing resources and knowledge, facilitating work adjustments, and proactively developing solutions. A detailed description of each category, the specific behaviors they each include, and representative quotes are provided. Six categories of WFSCB antecedents were also identified including: knowledge of the coworker situation, similarity with coworker(s), relationship with coworker(s), ability to contribute to a change or improvement, perceived benefits of providing support, and personal characteristics. The results of this inductive research provide unique, evidence-based insights not only into various possible behaviors that coworkers can engage in to help each other better manage the demands of work and family, but also why they would display them.

1. Introduction

Coworkers play an integral role in both the social and task environments of most organizations. In the United States, roughly 90% of employees have at least one coworker (Fairlie, 2004) – an individual with whom they work and interact on a regular basis, and who is typically in a similar role or working at a similar hierarchical level within the organization. In response to evolving global economic landscapes that demand collaboration to fuel innovation and competitive advantage, the prevalence of teamwork has increased (Cascio, 1998; Gordon, 1992; Mathieu, Maynard, Rapp, & Gilson, 2008; Salas, Burke, & Cannon-Bowers, 2000) and this has further reinforced the importance of the coworker in influencing workplace dynamics.

Current labour trends, including a greater representation of women in the workforce, an increase in the prevalence of dual-earner couples, and an aging population indicate that individuals are taking on additional life roles (e.g., mother, elderly caregiver, worker, volunteer) that demand an exertion of time and energy to fulfill. As the lines between work and family continue to blur, people are struggling now more than ever to find a balance (Aumann & Galinsky, 2009; Hoganson, 2011). This has ramifications for the individuals seeking balance (e.g., reduced mental & physical health), their employers (e.g., increased absenteeism, turnover intention, and health-related costs), and their families (e.g., decreased family functioning and family and marital satisfaction; Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Higgins, Duxbury, &

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: amcmu047@uottawa.ca (A.D. McMullan), lapierre@telfer.uottawa.ca (L.M. Lapierre), yli201@uottawa.ca (Y. Li).

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Lyons, 2008). Given their close proximity to one another and access to firsthand knowledge of workplace demands that may interfere with family responsibilities (Ray & Miller, 1994), coworkers are in an optimal position to provide one another with work-family (WF) focused support; a specific form of support directed at helping one another to better balance the demands of both work and family.

On a day-to-day basis, we often interact most frequently with our peers (Cascio, 1998; Fairlie, 2004; Gordon, 1992; Salas et al., 2000). This provides a direct window into each other's lives and offers our coworkers an opportunity to better understand us and to empathize with our situations due to shared experiences. As a direct result, our coworkers can effectively support us. Coworker support has been well documented in the occupational stress literature as a highly promising resource in stressful situations (Beehr, Jex, Stacy, & Murray, 2000; LaRocco, House, & French, 1980; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999), and has been related to reduced burnout (Halbesleben, 2006), improved attitudinal and behavioral outcomes (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008), as well as lower physical strain (Schwarzer & Leppin, 1989). More recent empirical research suggests that coworker support would benefit WF outcomes, such as more WF enrichment (when one domain provides resources that enhance the quality of life in the other domain), reduced WF conflict (when participation in one domain makes participation in the other domain more difficult), as well as enhanced life and family satisfaction (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000; Dolcos & Daley, 2009; Frone et al., 1997; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Major, Fletcher, Davis, & Germano, 2008; McManus, Korabik, Rosin, & Kelloway, 2002; Mesmer-Magnus, Murase, DeChurch, & Jimenez, 2010; Pedersen & Minnotte, 2012; Thompson & Prottas, 2005; Wang, Liu, Zhan, & Shi, 2010).

Although providing some evidence suggesting that WF-focused coworker support could be of value to employees, the small body of empirical work published to date has fallen short of providing a clear understanding of the potentially broad array of specific WF-focused support behaviors that coworkers could display to help one another more easily balance their work and family roles. Moreover, although some theoretical attention has been given to reasons why coworkers would provide each other with WF-focused support, empirical research has yet to directly address this question. Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2009) proposed antecedents of WF-focused coworker support that they logically deduced from broader literatures (e.g., Allen, 2001; Campion, Papper, & Medsker, 1996; Grandey, 2001; Judge & Colquitt, 2004; Wright & Duncan, 1986) that do not necessarily imply or specifically address this particular source and type of support. As a result, some of their proposed antecedents may not actually be as salient as hoped. Their work could also have missed antecedents that are unique to WF-supportive coworker support.

To address these gaps in knowledge, we used an inductive, qualitative approach to better understand *how* and *why* coworkers help each other better balance their work and family roles. For the purpose of this study, we define WF-supportive coworker behavior (WFSCB) as any action that one or more coworkers can take to facilitate one or more employees' WF balance in the work unit. WF balance has been defined as the feeling of being satisfied and effective in the work role as well as the family role (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). We chose to focus on behaviors enabling WFC rather than those specifically aimed at preventing WF conflict or at promoting WF enrichment because the notion of balance has been described as a broader construct that strongly implies lower levels of conflict and higher levels of enrichment (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006).

2. Review of the literature

In the late 1980's, after the topic of social support within the occupational stress field of research had gained popularity, Johnson and Hall (1988) described the protective effects of workplace support with respect to the prevalence of cardiovascular disease. The authors reported that low levels of coworker support accentuated the experience of job strain, whereby employees with the lowest levels of support experienced a higher prevalence of cardiovascular disease at each level of job strain. This was one of the first studies to support the buffering hypothesis for coworker support in relation to physiological strain in the work environment, and it is a hypothesis that has since been replicated (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Johnson, Stewart, Hall, Fredlund, & Theorell, 1996; Viswesvaran et al., 1999). Research has also highlighted the direct effects of coworker support on various occupational outcomes including benefits to job involvement, job satisfaction, employee effectiveness, organizational commitment, and lowered role ambiguity, role conflict, effort reduction, and withdrawal (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Viswesvaran et al., 1999). Since then, cumulative research findings in the WF literature strongly imply that coworker support can serve to alleviate work and family-related stress (Dolcos & Daley, 2009; Frone et al., 1997; Major et al., 2008; Matthews, Bulger, & Barnes-Farrell, 2010; Pedersen & Minnotte, 2012; Wang et al., 2010). To date, the WF literature has largely operationalized coworker support in its general form by using broadly worded items intended to capture whether individuals generally feel instrumentally assisted (e.g., “how much do your coworkers go out of their way to do things to make your work life easier for you”) and/or emotionally supported (e.g., “how easy is it to talk with your coworkers”) by their coworkers (Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975; Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

Such general coworker support does hold some promise in helping employees better manage the WF interface (Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011). However, the supervisor support literature implies that coworker support explicitly considering the intersection of work and family roles could be more useful and psychologically relevant in avoiding or overcoming challenges in balancing those two roles (Hammer, Ernst Kossek, Bodner, & Crain, 2013; Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009; Hammer, Kossek, Zimmerman, & Daniels, 2007; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011). Compared to those offering general support to their employees, some supervisors specifically strive to facilitate their employees' ability to jointly manage work and family demands. This more specific type of support has been labeled “family-supportive supervisor behavior” (FSSB). It is a multidimensional construct, which includes emotional (e.g., “my supervisor takes the time to learn about my personal needs”), instrumental (e.g., “I can rely on my supervisor to make sure my work responsibilities are handled when I have unanticipated nonwork demands”), role modeling (e.g., “My supervisor demonstrates how a person can jointly be successful on and off the job”), and creative WF management supportive behaviors (e.g., “My supervisor thinks about how the work in my department can be organized to jointly