Meta-analysis of work–family conflict mean differences: Does national context matter?

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ABSTRACT

Work–family conflict continues to be a topic of considerable interest to researchers and practitioners across the globe. In the current study, meta-analysis is used to compare cross-national mean differences in work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict across cultural, institutional, and economic aspects of context. No significant differences in work-to-family conflict were detected. Reports of family-to-work conflict were higher in more collectivistic versus more individualistic cultures, in countries with a higher versus a lower economic gender gap, and in countries other than the U.S. versus the U.S.

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A topic that has long captured the attention of work–family scholars is the prevalence of work–family conflict. For example, research reports such as those prepared by the *Families and Work Institute* include percentages of respondents who report experiencing work–family conflict (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009). Moreover, within the work–family field there is an enduring interest in demographic factors, particularly gender, as determinants of who experiences more or less work–family conflict (e.g., women or men) (Byron, 2005; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). As interest in work–family issues continues to grow, studies emanating from all corners of the globe are increasing in frequency (Poelmans, Greenhaus, & Maestro, 2013). This is no surprise in that the simultaneous management of work and family roles is an issue that impacts workers across most segments of society (Allen, 2012).

Individuals across countries can find it challenging to meet both work and family demands, yet they do so under a variety of different national contexts (Trefalt, Drnovšek, Svetina-Nabergoj, & Adlešič, 2013). Thus, there is a need to understand differences in work–family conflict cross-nationally. In order to gain insight into the contextual factors that underlie mean differences in work–family conflict, the objective of the current study is to meta-analytically examine differences across multiple macro-level factors. Specifically, we investigate country-level cultural, institutional, and economic factors thought to influence work–family experiences (Ollier-Malaterre, Valcour, Den Dulk, & Kossek, 2013).

This research makes several key contributions to the literature. Lack of awareness of the effects of national context has been referred to as "an elephant in our field" (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013, p. 434). Although cultural differences have received some attention in the work–family literature (e.g., Yang, Chen, Choi, & Zou, 2000), little research has been conducted concerning institutional and economic variables in relation to work–family conflict (see Allen et al., 2014 for an exception). By investigating multiple aspects of context (cultural, institutional, and economic), we contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the relative degree of work–family

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conflict reported by individuals across national boundaries. Thus, our study not only explores new macro-level predictors, but also allows us to see if a particular category of macro-level factors tends to predict level of work–family conflict more so than others. This is important in that institutional and economic macro-level factors might have more proximal roles than national culture. By studying them, we can identify potentially changeable aspects of macro-level contextual factors to reduce work–family conflict.

To date, meta-analytic research on work–family conflict has primarily focused on individual and organizational predictors. Multiple meta-analyses exist that have examined predictors such as work and family role stressors (Byron, 2005; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005; Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011), dispositional variables (Allen et al., 2012; Michel, Clark, & Jaramillo, 2011), workplace flexibility (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006), supervisor and organizational support (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011; Michel, Clark, et al., 2011; Michel, Kotrba, et al., 2011), and dependent care supports (Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013). Meta-analysis has yet to be employed in cross-national work–family research, resulting in a gap of comprehensive knowledge regarding the role that national-level contextual factors play in shaping work–family experiences. Given the difficulty in collecting data from multiple countries, meta-analysis seems particularly relevant for such questions, allowing for comparisons on a more extensive scale. Specifically, because cross-cultural work–family research is typically conducted on a single non-U.S. sample or on samples from just two countries (Ollier-Malaterre, 2015), theoretical progression of the literature has largely been stunted (Shockley et al., 2014). The piecemeal examination of various countries, which vary on numerous dimensions, makes it difficult to see systematic and theory-driven explanations for observed differences. Meta-analysis permits systematic comparisons of multiple countries on multiple dimensions, facilitating a more holistic perspective on the role of national context and work–family conflict.

Much of the cross-national research to date has treated culture/context as a moderator. An examination of relative levels of work–family conflict is also important. For example, existing moderator research demonstrates that relations between work–family conflict and predictors such as work demands and outcomes such as job satisfaction are weaker in collectivist societies than in individualist societies (e.g., Spector et al., 2007). Because collectivism has been shown to attenuate relationships between work–family conflict and other variables, there may be the tendency to conclude that work–family is less of a concern in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures. By meta-analytically examining relative differences in levels of work–family conflict, we can better distinguish differences in levels versus moderating effects. This is important to the theoretical development of cross-national work–family research.

In sum, investigating multiple macro-level context factors is important for multi-level theory building in work–family research, for understanding the possible implications of national policy and norms, and for global human resource practice. For example, if we know that mean levels of work–family conflict are greater in certain cultural contexts than in others, we can develop theory that captures such variation and identify policies that may be implicated. Moreover, such information would be of value to organizations that operate cross-nationally.

1. Work–family conflict

Work–family conflict is "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). For the purpose of clarity, in the current research we use work–family conflict as an umbrella term intended to recognize research on the topic in general. Moreover, we underscore that our focus is on work–family conflict, rather than work–nonwork conflict. The term WIF is used to designate work–family conflict/interference that flows from the work domain to the family domain while the term FIW is used to designate work–family conflict/interference that flows from the family domain to the work domain. It is important to note that measurement of work–family conflict is based on self-reports by individuals and thus should be considered as a perceptual variable. Understanding factors that relate to the prevalence of work–family conflict has been a key research and practice aim in that greater work–family conflict has been associated with a wide variety of detrimental work, non-work, and health-related outcomes (e.g., Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011).

1.1. Hypotheses

Multiple macro-level factors may play a part in work–family experiences. To facilitate a comprehensive investigation of mean differences, we conducted multiple comparisons that incorporated several aspects of macro-level contextual factors. Work–family researchers have grouped these macro-level factors into three categories: cultural, institutional, and economic (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013; Poelmans, O'Driscoll, & Beham, 2005). We discuss each in turn.

1.2. Cultural factors

Culture refers to the values, assumptions and beliefs shared by individuals within a country (Hofstede, 1984). Cultural norms and values are thought to play a role in shaping the work–family interface (Powell, Francesco, & Ling, 2009). We include two cultural factors that have received the most attention in the work–family literature, *individualism/collectivism* and *gender egalitarianism* (e.g., Lyness & Kropf, 2005; Spector et al., 2007; Yang et al., 2000).

Individualism/collectivism refers to the way in which individuals within a society relate to one another (Triandis, 1995). Societies in which individuals are closely linked are referred to as collectivistic. Collectivists tend to focus on others and are more embedded in social networks that include extended family and groups (Markus & Kitayama, 1998). Societies in which individuals see themselves as