



## Work, family and life-course fit: Does control over work time matter? ☆

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### ABSTRACT

This study moves from “work-family” to a multi-dimensional “life-course fit” construct (employees’ cognitive assessments of resources, resource deficits, and resource demands), using a combined work-family, demands-control and ecology of the life course framing. It examined (1) impacts of job and home ecological systems on fit dimensions, and (2) whether control over work time predicted and mediated life-course fit outcomes. Using cluster analysis of survey data on a sample of 917 white-collar employees from Best Buy headquarters, we identified four job ecologies (corresponding to the job demands-job control model) and five home ecologies (theorizing an analogous home demands-home control model). Job and home ecologies predicted fit dimensions in an additive, not interactive, fashion. Employees’ work-time control predicted every life-course fit dimension and partially mediated effects of job ecologies, organizational tenure, and job category.

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### 1. Introduction

Two lines of scholarship have pursued parallel but, for the most part, independent theoretical and empirical tracks, yet we contend and find that both are necessary for understanding life-course fit, defined as employees’ cognitive assessments of various dimensions of resources, resource deficits, and the match or mismatch between resources and resource demands. Such appraisals capture a sense of the quality of employees’ lives (Grzywacz & Bass, 2003; Moen, Kelly, & Huang, 2008; Voydanoff, 2005).

One line of scholarship, drawn from occupational health psychology, has followed the *job demands–job control model* (also called the *job strain model*) developed by Karasek and Theorell (1990). This model claims that psychosocial work environments— especially high psychological demands and low job control—negatively impact employee health and well-being. This model, as extended and developed over the last several decades, has been enormously influential (e.g., Butler, Grzywacz, Bass, & Linney, 2005; de Jonge, Bosma, Peter, & Siegrist, 2000) despite the fact that some studies do not support Karasek and

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Theorell's job strain thesis in certain populations or with certain health outcomes (e.g., Evans & Steptoe, 2002; Marshall, Sayer, & Barnett, 1997).

A second line of scholarship has examined the work-family interface, and in particular, *work-family conflict* and *negative spillover* as consequential for employee health and well-being and family processes (e.g. Byron, 2005; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley 2005; Hammer, Cullen, Neal, Sinclair, & Shafiro, 2005). Scholars have also theorized positive aspects of both work and family roles (variously termed “balance”, “enhancement,” “enrichment,” or “facilitation”) as well as the bidirectionality of work-family interconnections (see Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006; Clark, 2001; Frone, 2003; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2007). Work-family scholars have no single overriding theory of actual conditions predicting positive or negative work-family spillover and conflict, with the possible exception of *role strain theory* (Goode, 1960), suggesting that occupying two or more roles creates competing demands and expectations, and *role expansion/enhancement theory* (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974) arguing that occupying multiple roles provides a greater number of opportunities and resources.

There are good theoretical as well as pragmatic reasons for considering these two approaches as complementary, with each offering potential “value-added” to the other. First, work-family scholars tend to concentrate on particular types of employees (women, parents, or single-parents), paying less attention to the *conditions under which employees work* (with the exception of work hours or shift work; e.g., Fenwick & Tausig, 2001). Yet, as Hertz (1999, p.17) pointed out, “Employers are the silent partners in the life of all families,” meaning that working conditions may be as important as family conditions for understanding life quality. Second, occupational health scholars using the job strain model focus almost exclusively on job conditions. While they often include family data in their models, it is usually as controls, not fully theorizing their impacts. Such “work environment” research tends to target men or else employees as a group, often without hypotheses about gender, family circumstances, or life stage effects. And yet it could be argued that employees’ families are the silent partners in the life of every organization. Third, the work-family literature focuses on competing demands and resources separately, while the job strain literature focuses on the interface between job demands and the key resource of job control. Neither line of research has explicitly theorized analogous home demands and home control. Fourth, while work-family scholars increasingly emphasize the importance of control over work time and flexibility as ways of reducing work-family conflict, job strain scholars theorize job control (or autonomy) but not control over work time.

The goals of this study were to further integrate the occupational health (job strain) and work-family literatures by (1) introducing the concept of *life-course fit* to describe employees’ cognitive assessments about their work-family resources and the match or mismatch between resources and demands; (2) evaluating the impacts of constellations of both job and home conditions as *ecological systems*, rather than as variables operating “net” of other variables; and (3) examining the direct and mediating effects of employees’ *control over working time* on various dimensions of life-course fit.

These goals motivated the empirical research questions we addressed: are there distinctive identifiable patterns (ecologies) characterizing employees’ demand/control conditions at home as well as their conditions on the job? Do job and home ecologies equally predict employees’ assessments of various dimensions of life-course fit, and are their effects additive or does one moderate the other? Do employees’ job ecologies predict the theoretically key resource of control over work time? Does control over work time function as a mediator between job and home ecologies, on the one hand, and various dimensions of life-course fit, on the other?

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual contributions of a combined reframing

### 2.1. From work-family to life-course fit

The concept of *life-course fit* broadens our focus from traditional measures of the work-family interface to include as well employees’ sense of time and income adequacy and their assessments of work schedule fit. Doing so moves beyond analyses of only conflicting demands and overloads between work and family roles (the resource inadequacy of work conflict and negative spillover), and/or of only the resource enhancements each provides the other (such as positive spillover), to include employees’ appraisals of the *combination*—and specifically the fit or misfit—of demands and available resources. Equally important, the concept of life-course fit is applicable to employees of all ages and life stages; whereas work-family concepts are often limited to employees who are married or raising children.

Life-course fit is rooted in the cycles of control formulation of shifting resources and needs over the life course, leading individuals to feel more or less vulnerable and able to cope with the exigencies at hand at different points in their lives (Moen, Elder, & Lüscher, 1995). It also aligns with another theoretical approach for understanding stress in organizational settings, the person-environment fit model (Edwards & Rothbard, 1999). The life-course fit concept includes the person-environment fit at both work and home by gauging employees’ cognitive assessments of the fit or misfit between their needs and resources in both environments (see also Lewin, 1935).

### 2.2. Job and home ecologies

We built on and extended both the job strain and the work-family role strain/enhancement models to conceptualize job conditions and family conditions as socially structured systems (ecologies) occurring in a limited number of identifiable con-

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