

Organizational and Family Social Support and Work-Family Conflict

Work-family conflict creates several challenges for individual, organization and society. In this context, social support, as a coping strategy for individuals to conciliate between work demands and family responsibilities, has become an interesting field of study and research. The role of social support from both intraorganizational (supervisor) and extra organizational (spouse) sources in reducing or buffering the work-family conflict was examined. Specifically, psychological and demographic factors affecting perceptions of work-family conflict and the impact of various sources of social support were studied. Two modes of influence (Main model effect and Buffer model effect) and four types (emotional or affective, evaluative, informational and instrumental) of social support were examined. Our research question was: How does social support influence work-family conflict? Data were collected via questionnaires from professionals in the field of HRM and analyzed using hierarchical regression techniques. Results suggested first, that participants with perceived job overload, unusual schedule, more children in one's custody, difficulties in dealing with children, more hours worked by the spouse and finally difficulties met in dealing with the spouse were particularly vulnerable to work-family conflict. Results also indicated that both main model effect and buffer model effect were revealed not strong enough to relieve the strain of work-family conflict. Implications of this research for both managers and theorists were discussed in light of these results.

Family life and professional life are more and more difficult to reconcile. Several changes in professional life and in family life are at the origin of more and more incompatibilities between these two spheres of life. It becomes more and more difficult for many employees to reach a balance between the two (Kanter, 1977; Zedeck, 1992; Cantin, 1994), hence the prevalence of work-family conflict.

According to Greenhaus and Beutel (1985), work-family conflict can take three forms: 1) a conflict due to the incompatibility of time slots allowed to family and professional responsibilities ("Time-based conflict"); 2) a conflict due to the sum of efforts which the individual must provide in the field of job and in the field of family ("Strain-based conflict"); and 3) finally, a conflict due to the incompatibility of behaviours which the individual must adopt in both spheres. In other words, a behaviour which is functional in one sphere can turn out to be dysfunctional in the other one ("Behaviour-based conflict").

On the job side, new requirements have brought an increased workload. Some of the factors which stimulate tension and even create a true conflict between requirements of professional life and responsibilities of family life are the following: downsizing, strategies of participation, professional lives characterized by more and more challenges, frequent changes of assignment, work and time schedules redesign, job insecurity and frequent relocations (Kopelman and al., 1983; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Frone and al., 1992).

On the family side, the increase in the number of dual-career or single parent families, the special cases where particular care is to be given to members of the family (handicapped child, old parent), care to the youngest children, babysitting of the children outside the hours of school, unpredictable events (illness of the children, absence of a babysitter, etc), conjugal dissension are some of the factors, all of which complicate situation and augment difficulties of reconciliation of worker's and parent responsibilities (Beutell and Greenhaus, 1980; Rice and al., 1980; Kopelman and al., 1983; Frone and al., 1992).

This stress damages not only the quality of life and the health of those who are victims (Parasuraman and Greenhaus, 1992; Rice and al., 1992; Aryee, 1992); it can also drive to unsatisfactory behaviours at job: delays, absenteeism, lack of motivation, reduced output (Beutell and Greenhaus, 1980; Kelly and Voydanoff, 1985; Bedeian and al., 1988; Bacharach and al., 1991) and in more difficult relations within the family (Duxbury and Higgins, 1991; Parasuraman and al., 1992; Frone and al., 1992).

Social support

In this context, social support which the individual can enjoy to reconcile his professional life and his family life, has become an appropriate field of study and preoccupation. Nevertheless, social support is among the research subjects which introduce most difficulties of conceptualization. Indeed, approaches vary from investigations on social integration up to studies examining private relations between individuals, to other studies considering perceptions of social support. (Ray and Miller, 1994).

Among the more recent studies which tried to define the concept of social support, one can identify, following the example of Vaux (1988), the contribution of many authors, considered to be the founders of this research sector. The first one is John Cassel (1974a, 1974b, 1976) whose publications were centered on the importance of psychosocial processes for the understanding of diseases. Another one is Gerald Caplan (1974) who, while being influenced by Cassel and more specifically his notion of « social feedback », noted the importance of three types of activities that can characterize social support: 1) help by the stimulation of psychological resources to overcome problems of emotional disorder, 2) sharing of tasks which the individual must perform and 3) providing the material and financial resources, skills and supervision necessary to face up the stressful situation. Pinneau (1975), who also attempted to define social support, differentiated three forms of social support: material help, evaluative/informational help and emotional help. Sidney Cobb (1976) is another writer for whom social support is, as for Cobb and Caplan, a moderating factor for the effects of stress. Gottlieb (1978) defined four types of support: emotional, instrumental, indirect help which is only a more general form of emotional support and finally, any action undertaken directly on stress factors surrounding the affected individual. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) defined social support as all interpersonal transactions involving one or many of the following dimensions: affection, affirmation, and help. Finally, James, S. House (1981) proposed that social support would be better approached by the following questions: who brings what, to whom and to resolve which problems? He also proposed that social support be considered as an interpersonal transaction involving four types of support: emotional (feelings and emotions), instrumental (goods and services), informational (facts and data), and finally judgmental or evaluative (judgement, appreciation).

This proliferation of interpretations given to the notion of social support shows that support may come from a diversity of sources and may take different forms. Among these interpretations, we opted for the choices made by House (1981) because they represent well the majority of the interpretations made of this concept, and also, because his model combines sources and forms of social support in the same matrix (House, 1981; p. 23). In accordance with the typology worked out by this author, the notion of social support can be defined following a matrix of two axes: 1) the (horizontal) axis of the formal (e.g. organization, superior, institutions) and informal sources (e.g. spouse, family, friends, neighbours) who are likely to provide social support, and 2) the (vertical) axis of forms (emotional, evaluative, informational and instrumental) which the support emanating from the above sources can take. Inside that matrix (House, 1981; p. 23), one can identify almost all other definitions given to the word support: the general support versus the one focalized on a specific problem (emotional, instrumental, etc), the objective support – which is

seldom examined in the literature and could be organized around the comparison of three sources of answers: perception of support such as expressed by the subject, perception of support such as represented by the provider (the spouse, the superior, etc) and observation by the researcher of correlation between the giver and the receiver of support - versus the support by subjective nature – which characterizes the majority of the studies made nowadays in this field and that consists of the fact that the receiver specifies simply up to which point he perceives that he receives support from his supervisor, among others, or from his spouse, and what effect that brings to him or her.

Research question and models

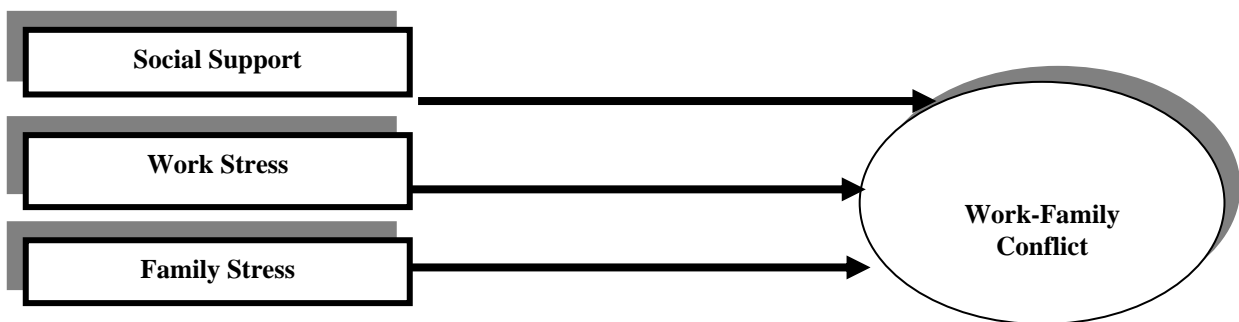
Having said that, the question which matters here is the following: Is the association found between social support and work-family conflict, due more to the advantageous effect of support as an independent variable (“Main Model Effect”) or as a moderating variable (“ Buffer Model Effect”)?

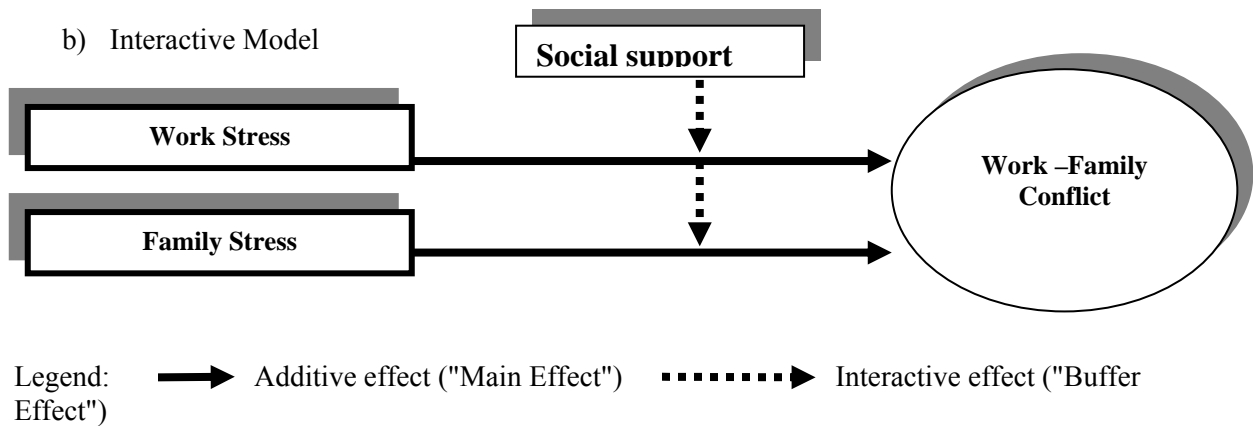
In their review of the literature, Cohen and Wills (1985) underlined that a controversial debate characterizing results recorded in this field of study articulates around the question of knowing if support is more effective in a independent way (Reis, on 1984; Jemmott and Locke, 1984; Wills, 1985; Krantz, Grunberg and Baum, 1985) or as a moderating variable (House, 1981; Cohen and McKay, 1984; Lazarus, 1996). In the present research, we favoured the examination of two sources of support at work and in the family: the immediate supervisor and the spouse. Only a few researchers studied the impact of these sources of support on relations between professional and family stress and work-family conflict (Ray and Miller, 1994). The immediate supervisor and the spouse are in a favourable position to know the extent to which this conflict can have adverse effects; so they can try to reduce it by sharing information and resources, by offering suggestions and by helping the worker to realize that he is not alone to face up these problems. The effectiveness of such support is not without having an impact on the profitability of the organization, given that human resources represent more and more a competitive advantage in the current context.

Our research is therefore concerned to measure the effectiveness of social support according to two sources (spouse and immediate supervisor) and four types (emotional, evaluative, informational and instrumental) of support likely to be provided by these sources. Moreover, and as shown on the following figures, two models of influence of social support will be examined: the (independent) additional model and the (moderating) interactive model.

Figure 1: Research Models

a) Additive Model





Methods

The testing of hypotheses derived from these two research models was made by means of a questionnaire filled by members of a local association of professionals in the HRM field. At the time of the inquiry (1998), that association counted 3713 members. The questionnaire was distributed to the largest possible number of members of this population. The only condition to participate was to have at least one child living with oneself. Given that an important part of the target population did not turn out the questionnaire within the prescribed delays, our final sample included only 536 cases, representing an answer rate of 14.4 %. For all the accepted questionnaires, 46 were rejected (4 for missing data, and 42 others, simply, because they did not meet the precondition of admissibility to this inquiry, that is, to have at least one child living with oneself. The rate of rejection was therefore in the order of 8.58 %. In other words, the final sample of this research includes 490 cases. We limit ourselves in the present communication to results in dual-career families (351 cases, which is 72 % of the final sample). The distribution of the main characteristics of our respondents (without cases of non-answer) can so be listed: 63.8 % are women, the medium age is of 39.1 years, 61.5 % of respondents have obtained a first university degree, 52.8 % are managers. 34 % are professionals and finally, 58.7 % work in Montreal.

Work-family conflict was measured in the direction from work to family (7 items, $\alpha = .87$), as well as from family to work (7 items, $\alpha = .88$). In order to do that, we used scales developed by Kopelman et al., (1983) and by Frone et al. (1992). However, in this communication, work-family conflict is considered as being the sum of these two dimensions (14 items, $\alpha = .88$).

As for the stressors of professional life, nine variables were measured including two by direct measurements (number of hours worked in a week, time taken to commute to and from work) two with Likert scales (frequency of displacements outside the city and insecurity of occupied job), and five on the basis of scales of attitudes at 6 levels: ambiguity of role ($\alpha = .85$), role conflict ($\alpha = .80$), perceptible overload ($\alpha = .76$), enrichment of working tasks ($\alpha = .78$) and the fact of working outside normal hours ($\alpha = .70$).

As for the family stressors, fifteen variables were measured, among which six in a direct way (number of children living with the respondent, children of 3 and less years old, from 3 to 6, from 6 to 12, and from 12 to 18, number of worked hours in a week by the spouse), five by means of dichotomous variables (presence of other children living with the respondent, handicapped children, old and/or handicapped persons, spouse, job of the spouse), two with closed questions

(occupational status of the spouse and perceptible misery of the household) finally, two in form of Likert type scales of attitudes with 6 points of evaluation: difficulties met with the children ($\alpha = .73$) and difficulties met with the spouse ($\alpha = .80$).

Support provided by the supervisor as well as by the spouse was measured according to Likert type scales of attitudes. For the spouse, the internal coherence of these scales was the following: emotional support ($\alpha = .73$), evaluative support ($\alpha = .76$), informational support ($\alpha = .81$) and instrumental support ($\alpha = .83$). Also, scales of attitude measuring support by the supervisor remain satisfactory on all plans: emotional ($\alpha = .90$), evaluative ($\alpha = .72$), informational ($\alpha = .92$) and instrumental ($\alpha = .89$). Finally, total measurements are also satisfactory: support by the spouse ($\alpha = .85$) and support by the supervisor ($\alpha = .93$).

Finally eight psycho-demographic characteristics were measured among which four by opened or closed questions (sex, age, education, occupational category) and four according to scales of attitudes including each 6 points of evaluation: involvement in family life ($\alpha = .82$) and in professional life ($\alpha = .83$) (these two scales were based on Kanungo, 1982), self-management or self-leadership ($\alpha = .82$) (based on the scale developed by Manz, 1992), and finally, social desirability ($\alpha = .68$) according to the Marlowe-Crown scale used by Ballard, 1992.

Five types of statistical analyses were performed on data: 1) a simple analysis of the distribution of the variables included in our research models; 2) a two-way analysis (simple correlation) to examine the pattern of associations between the different variables of our research models; 3) a multivariate analysis (partial correlation) to examine the validity of formulated hypotheses; 4) a multivariate analysis (hierarchical regression) to examine the validity or robustness of the research models (explicative power); and 5) factorial analyses to test the validity of our attitude scales.

Results

a) Correlational analyses

Results of the analyses of simple correlation showed us that social support is negatively and strongly related to work-family conflict (that is, it reduces work-family conflict). However, analyses of partial correlations signalled us that social support is not that strong in that association. In other words, when we control for the effect of the psycho-demographic characteristics of the respondents and the stressors in professional and family life, social support is no longer an effective mechanism to reduce significantly the intensity of the aforementioned conflict. Indeed, if support by the spouse proves to be ineffective, support by the immediate supervisor produces an ambiguous effect on work-family conflict. Actually, the evaluative type of support turns out to represent an effective mechanism ($\beta = -.145, p \leq .05$), but the instrumental type of support appears to exacerbate or intensify the conflict ($\beta = .202, p \leq .01$).

b) Hierarchical regressions

Testing the additive model effect. Analysis of the multiple regressions of types of support given by the spouse towards work-family conflict (by controlling for the effect of the psycho-demographic characteristics of the providers and stressors), led us to find no significant effective effect of this source of support. On the other hand, support provided by the supervisor appears effective to limit work-family conflict directly in that it contributes to an increase of 2.3 % in the explanation of the dependent variable. However, it is necessary to note the presence of a counter -

intuitive effect of instrumental support ($\beta = .174$, $p \leq .01$) while the effect from evaluative support goes in the expected direction ($\beta = -.209$, $p \leq .01$).

Testing the interactive model effect. To test the moderating effect hypothesis we had to decide on the choice of types of support to be introduced into every performed analysis (Ganster, et al., 1986). Indeed, as these authors specify such decision: «involves making some trade-off between sacrificing power by putting all variables into one analysis and tolerating some amount of type I error inflation by examining separate models». We therefore chose to regress the interactive effect of only one type of support at the same time (block 3 according to the "stepwise" method) by controlling for the effects of the psycho-demographic aspects of the providers (block 1) and for professional and family stressors (block 2) in accordance with the Cohen and Cohen method (1983) (block 3).

This being, data in table 1 allow us to report the following findings: first, support by the spouse appears to have three significant interactive effects on work-family conflict. However, two of these effects prove to be in a direction contrary to our hypotheses. It concerns the evaluative support which appears to have a significant influence on the intensity of work-family conflict caused by difficulties met with the spouse ($\beta = .642$, $p \leq .01$) and by the perceptible risk of losing current job ($\beta = .666$, $p \leq .05$). Instrumental support also appears to have a significant but negative effect on work-family conflict caused by the same perceptible risk of losing current job ($\beta = -.130$, $p \leq .05$). As for support provided by the supervisor, we note that three interactive effects turn out to be significant though they contribute not at all to increase the explicative power of the model. All significant correlations concern the effect of instrumental support on the intensity of work-family conflict caused by the following factors: working outside normal hours ($\beta = .222$, $p \leq .01$), the perceptible risk of losing current job ($\beta = .123$, $p \leq .05$) and difficulties met with the spouse ($\beta = -.217$, $p \leq .05$). In other words, we have two effects out of three which seem to intensify instead of weakening work-family conflict.

*Insert Table 1 about here.

Discussion

Before starting the discussion of the salient points deduced from the analyses performed on our data, we notify the reader, as a recall, that in the present research, we proposed to test impact (additional and interactive) that the support by the spouse and the supervisor can have, according to four forms (emotional, evaluative, informational and instrumental), on work-family conflict. What conclusions can we then deduct from results obtained in this research?

First, let us note that stressors, especially professional stressors, represent the main source of explanation of work-family conflict. Indeed, variables related to work explain the strongest proportion of the variance of this conflict, above all, the perceptible overload and at a lesser degree ambiguity in job and role conflict (although these variables are strongly correlated with overload). Length of working week, work outside normal hours and length of commuting time are three other stressful factors (again however, the last two are strongly interrelated).

On the family side, one important stressor is the perceptible importance of difficulties met with the children. Less significant but more objective, the number of children of less than three years old living with the respondent. Also, difficulties met with the spouse are particularly linked up with conflict. At a lesser degree, number of hours in a week worked by the spouse (notably when he or she is a manager) adds an additional stress. However the sum of all stressors coming from family explains a less important part of conflict than stressors linked to work. It is possible that

the family stressors (which harm job) are felt less grievously than the work stressors (which harm the family) because of the greater importance than the respondents give to the family. This lower influence of the family stressors as compared to the professional stressors, can, also, derive from the fact that people have more known control on the way they organize their family life than their life at work.

Second, group differences observed in the analyses can, for the most part of them, be easily explained. For example, relations with age or with the fact of being a manager or a professional disappear when we take into account respectively the number of children of less than three years or the workload. However, one characteristic, namely being a woman, is, as expected, strongly related to work-family conflict. All things being equal, women perceive a work-family conflict stronger than for men. They feel responsible, more than men, for the education of the children and for the maintenance of the home (Pleck, 1985). They also fear not to satisfy some essential needs of their child (or children) (Wiersma, 1990).

Moreover, self-management capacity (self-leadership) is a quality which reduces conflict significantly. Finally, persons sensitive to social conventions (to know how to listen, to be courteous, not to say words that hurt, not to rebel against authority, to know how to forgive, etc.) have a tendency to underestimate the importance of work-family conflict. To control this bias, the social desirability effect was maintained constant in our results.

Thirdly, — and more in direct relation with our research question — we can assert that some forms of support are effective to reduce work-family conflict. It is not however the case of emotional support which proves to be ineffective, whether it comes from the spouse or the supervisor. However, evaluative support proves to be a rather effective mechanism to reduce (when it comes from the supervisor) the intensity of work-family conflict. However, that effect goes in a direction contrary to our hypotheses when support comes from the spouse. The same remark can be made for the informational support by the spouse. Finally, instrumental support appears to have practically no effectiveness on work-family conflict. Indeed, the immediate supervisor alone seems to be concerned by this type of support, and the influence goes in a direction contrary to hypotheses in an additional as well as in an interactive way.

Fourth, our question related to “Main Model Effect” or “Buffer Model Effect” appears finally more as a choice made by the researcher than as an opposition between two different models. When a support is significant, it can be represented as well according to the additional model as according to the interactive model. In the second case, the explicative power of the model is only a bit superior (respectively, 5 %, 7 % and 1, 8 %) but that gain is reached out of an added complexification of the model of analysis). Then, these two effects seem not very effective faced with work-family conflict, considering results that they are supposed to produce. Having said that, it would be appropriate to test the effectiveness of various sources and types of support as part of the same research, according to different modes of influence of social support, in a way that would go beyond additional and interactive models. In this respect, two other modes of influences could be examined: the antecedent model (preventive) and the intermediate model (Carlson and Perrewé, 1999). In order to do that, the analysis of causality (“Path Analysis”) remains the most valid means to undertake such a test.

By way of conclusion, we add that although this research constituted a contribution in the process of understanding modes of influence of social support in the context of work-family conflict, it contains several limitations. Here are the most important of those limitations. First, we did not take into consideration the structural definition of social support considered by some (Cohen and Wills, 1985) to be more appropriate to test the relevance of the hypothesis of the additional effect

of the social support (" Main Effect Model "). Second, it would have been interesting to explore work-family conflict in a bidirectional approach in order to understand more profoundly: 1) stressors specific to the "work to family" conflict, 2) stressors specific to the "family to work" conflict and finally, 3) stressors likely to exercise simultaneous effects on these two types of conflict. This approach would have probably allowed us to better understand the dynamics of links between sources of stress, support and mode of influence on the intensity of work-family conflict. Also, the fact that we measured support along four types (emotional, evaluative, informational and instrumental) instead of two as suggested by some authors (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1994) crystallizes another important limitation. Several cases of strong correlation between these types gave rise to results sometimes difficult to analyse and to interpret. It is the case, as an example, of evaluative and emotional support both by the spouse and by the supervisor. Finally, this research having involved only one association and specific subjects (managers and professionals), carries a bias at the level of its external validity. As a consequence, observed results cannot be generalized to men and women in different economic areas, belonging to other occupations, and chosen randomly (instead of being part of a convenient sample).

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Table 1 : Results from regression analyses

Variables	Spouse				Supervisor			
	Affect.	Eval.	Inform.	Instr.	Affect.	Eval.	Inform.	Instr.
	n = 254	n = 257	n = 257	n = 253	n = 252	n = 244	n = 241	n = 240
Sex	,179**	,168**	,207**	,174**	,199**	,169**	,174**	,156*
Age								
Schooling								
Self-leadership	-,169**	-,198**	-,230**	-,226**	-,217**	-,145*	-,151**	-,191**
Desirability	-,155**		-,117*	-,119*	-,122*	-,137*	-,146**	-,121*
Manager								
Professional								
Overload	,179**	,149**	,180**	,199**	,168**	,162**	,182**	,204**
Ambiguity	,150**						,128*	
Scheduling								
Hours worked	,229**	,185**	,209**	,182**	,210**	,218**	,202**	
Hours worked by spouse	,186**	,152*	,153*	,169**	,161**	,169**	,188**	,215**
Children	,133*	,146*	,135*	,127*	,145*	,600**	,137*	,150*
Difficulties with children	,199**	,166**	,205**	,228**	,153**	,156**	,141*	,136*
Difficulties with spouse					,196**	,129*	,154**	,191**
Lack of resources	,158**	-,566*	,120*	,118*	,108*	,146**	,140**	,253**
ADDITIVE								
Support						-,209**		,174**
INTERACTIVE								

** : $p \leq 1\%$, * : $p \leq 5\%$.