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Work-Family Conflict Not Just a Women's Issue: Helping All Employees Find Work-Life Balance

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Work-Family Conflict Not Just a Women's Issue: Helping All Employees Find Work-Life Balance

Abstract
KEY FINDINGS

* If employees feel their family life interferes with their work, they tend to feel guilty. They're actually less likely to feel guilt when they feel work interferes with their family life, possibly because it's increasingly acceptable for work to spill over into our private lives.

* People with traditional gender role views (i.e., believe men should be primarily responsible for work, and women for family) tend to experience more guilt when their family interferes with their work, regardless of gender.

* People with more egalitarian gender role views (i.e., feel men and women can equally share work and family roles) tend to experience more guilt when their work interferes with their family time.

* Men with the most traditional gender attitudes experience the most guilt when their family conflicts with their work, compared to women, and compared to more egalitarian men.

* Contrary to the popular perception that only women are affected by work-family conflict, men also experience guilt from this conflict—sometimes even more so than do women.

Comments
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ResearchLink

Work-Family Conflict Not Just a Women's Issue: Helping all employees find work-life balance

THE TOPIC: GENDER-ROLE ORIENTATION AND FEELINGS OF GUILT WHEN WORK AND FAMILY CONFLICT

As the number of dual-earner couples grows, women work longer hours while maintaining primary responsibility for the family, and the workplace increasingly encroaches on one's private life, employers and employees continue to seek an optimal "work-life balance." In the past, most organizations' solutions for helping workers cope with work-family conflict have focused on women, because the common assumption is that women are more affected by the conflict than are men.

However, recent research (e.g., Byron, 2005; Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991) suggests that gender is not the only factor determining how work-family conflict affects employees.

Another important factor is gender role orientation (GRO), or one's feelings about the responsibilities of men and women at work and at home. An individual with a traditional GRO believes that men should be the main breadwinners and women should be the main caretakers of children and their homes. An egalitarian person has a more relaxed view about the gendered separation of work and family, believing that men and women can take varying degrees of responsibility in both spheres.

KEY FINDINGS

◇ If employees feel their family life interferes with their work, they tend to feel guilty. They're actually *less* likely to feel guilt when they feel work interferes with their family life, possibly because it's increasingly acceptable for work to spill over into our private lives.

◇ People with traditional gender role views (i.e., believe men should be primarily responsible for work, and women for family) tend to experience more guilt when their family interferes with their work, regardless of gender.

◇ People with more egalitarian gender role views (i.e., feel men and women can equally share work and family roles) tend to experience more guilt when their work interferes with their family time.

◇ Men with the most traditional gender attitudes experience the most guilt when their family conflicts with their work, compared to women, and compared to more egalitarian men.

◇ Contrary to the popular perception that only women are affected by work-family conflict, men also experience guilt from this conflict—sometimes even more so than do women.

This study looked specifically at the circumstances under which employees feel guilt as a result of work-family conflict, and how that guilt is affected by three key factors: gender-role orientation, gender, and the two combined. The researchers looked at the two types of work-family conflict: work interfering with family (WIF) and family interfering with work (FIW). They hypothesized that traditional women and egalitarian men, because of their emphasis on the family, would feel more guilt as a result of work interfering with family, while traditional men and egalitarian women would feel more guilt from family interfering with work.

A significant contribution of this study is the introduction of gender role orientation to the work–family literature. Gender, as it affects the importance of life roles and work–family conflict, is not a strong predictor of conflict (Byron, 2005; Cinamon & Rich, 2002). Therefore, the addition of gender role orientation is a step toward better explaining and managing the effects of work–family conflict.

THE STUDY QUESTIONS

In this study, researchers asked the following questions:

❖ **If employees feel conflict between their work and family roles, do they experience guilt about being unable to uphold "ideal standards" of work and family life?**

❖ **Does the extent to which a person feels that life is divided into separate spheres of work and family responsibilities affect his or her feelings of guilt when those spheres collide?**

❖ **How does one's attitude toward gender roles affect his or her feelings of guilt when work and family conflict?**

❖ **Do men and women experience guilt differently as a result of work-family conflict?**
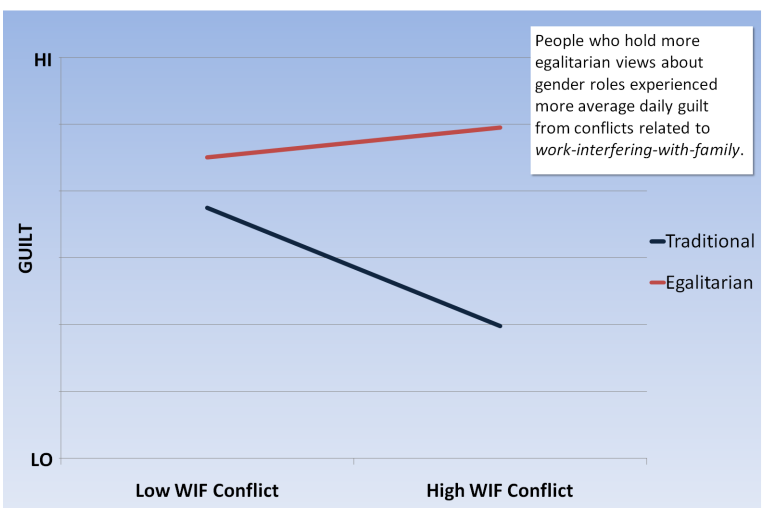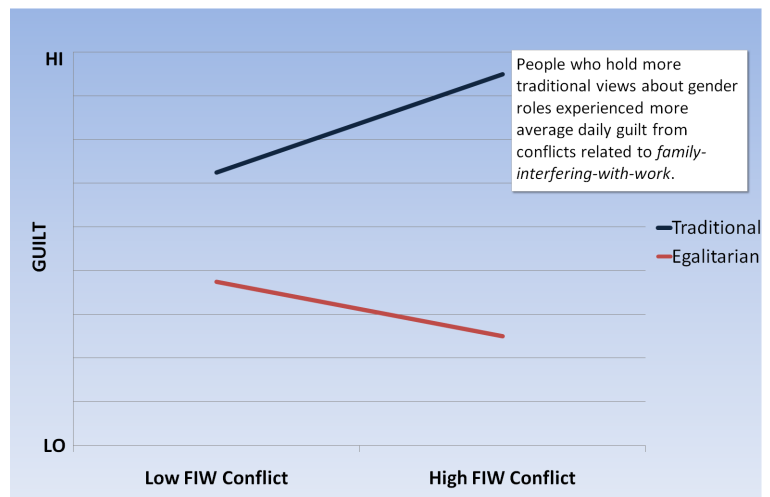
THE RESULTS

The researchers found that employees do feel guilt when family interferes with work, but not always when work interferes with family.

Employees with a more-traditional gender-role orientation tended to feel more guilt when family interfered with work, and, to a lesser extent, more egalitarian employees felt more guilt when work interfered with family. These two effects suggest a similar theme: that, gender aside, guilt can stem from work-family conflict.

Traditional men felt more guilt from family interfering with work than egalitarian men, or egalitarian or traditional women. This is likely because the work role is perceived as being separate, and more important, to the well-being of employee and the family unit than is "family time." If this separation is valued in a workplace, organizations might consider methods to help alleviate employee guilt when conflict occurs.
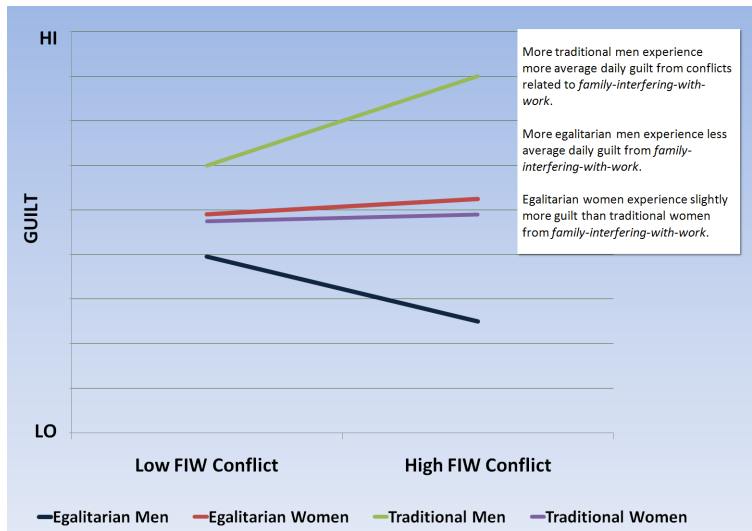
The Conflict-Guilt Equation: Beyond gender, family status

The theory that work–family conflict is significantly related to guilt is a connection often assumed in the literature (Gilbert et al., 1981; C. L. Johnson & Johnson, 1977) but rarely investigated (Judge et al., 2006). This study's results suggest that FIW conflict is positively associated with higher levels of guilt, while guilt and WIF conflict don't seem to be directly

People who hold more traditional views about gender roles experienced more average daily guilt from conflicts related to *family-interfering-with-work*.

Traditional
Egalitarian

GUILT

HI
LO
Low FIW Conflict   High FIW Conflict

People who hold more egalitarian views about gender roles experienced more average daily guilt from conflicts related to *work-interfering-with-family*.

Traditional
Egalitarian

GUILT

HI
LO
Low WIF Conflict   High WIF Conflict

related. Instead, WIF conflict appears to interact with a person's gender role orientation to predict the level of guilt they feel.

Why do workers on the whole experience less guilt from work interfering with family, regardless of gender or gender-role orientation? The researchers speculate that the universal encroachment of work on one's private life may have led to greater acceptance of work interfering with family. In addition, they point out that, while people may not specifically feel guilty about work interfering with family, they do feel stressed.

The graph shows GUILT (LO to HI) on the y-axis, with Low FIW Conflict and High FIW Conflict on the x-axis. Legend: Egalitarian Men, Egalitarian Women, Traditional Men, Traditional Women.

More traditional men experience more average daily guilt from conflicts related to *family-interfering-with-work*.

More egalitarian men experience less average daily guilt from *family-interfering-with-work*.

Egalitarian women experience slightly more guilt than traditional women from *family-interfering-with-work*.

The researchers also point out that a small percentage of their sample was partnered, and an even smaller percentage had children. When one's family responsibilities do not include childcare duties, one may not feel guilt if work invades one's private life.

However, the researchers' sample (see The Data Source) included men and women in a variety of industries, both partnered and single, and with and without children. The researchers controlled for several variables, including hours worked, marital or cohabitation status, number of children under 10 years of age, home-maintenance hours, gender, gender-role orientation, and gender-role orientation plus gender. *They found that guilt resulted from work-family conflict across the board—regardless of partnership or parenthood status.* Thus, all employees, not just those with families, may benefit from work-life options that help them balance work and private time.

Pinpointing guilt as a result of work-family conflict

Guilt may seem like an obvious reaction to not being able to satisfy the demands of both work and family; however, this is not necessarily true (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). The researchers specifically studied guilt as a response to work-family conflict because the literature on work-family conflict is notably lacking in research on specific emotional responses to conflict.

Past studies have shown that negative moods spill over from one sphere into another, and that juggling multiple roles can negatively affect mood (Williams & Alliger, 1994); that work-family conflict results in life stress (Parasuraman, Purohit, Godshalk, and Beutell, 1996); and that such conflict is associated with

higher levels of anxiety, depression, psychosomatic symptoms, and hostility (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Mauno & Kinnunen, 1999; Vinokur, Pierce, & Buck, 1999).

Guilt, specifically, is the unpleasant and remorseful feeling associated with the recognition that one has violated a moral or social standard (Jones & Kugler, 1993). Work-family conflict prevents an individual from fulfilling the demands of either the work or the family role. Thus, the researchers proposed that work-family conflict evokes guilt if an individual feels that he or she has violated a social standard—either a "good worker" or a "good family member" standard. For instance, some women succumb to the "mommy myth," which dictates that they should be able to work full-time hours while serving as primary caregivers for their children, and experience guilt when they cannot.

If the inability to perform optimally in either of one's key social roles results in guilt, then work-life options to alleviate that conflict—and thus guilt—may significantly help increase employee productivity.

THE TAKEAWAY

How can this study's explanation of how employees are affected by work-family conflict help HR practitioners proactively address these issues?

- **Work-family conflict does not only affect women; providing work options to help cope with work-family conflict could be useful for all employees.**

- **Guilt brought on by work-family conflict can lead to negative moods, anxiety, depression and other counterproductive symptoms—effectively reducing employees' effectiveness on the job.**

- **Traditional men, possibly including many upper-level managers, seem to be most negatively affected by family interfering with work. If this separation is valued in a workplace, organizations might consider methods to help alleviate employee guilt when conflict occurs.**

- **For example, providing options to relieve the pressures of family interfering with work, such as flexible work options or increased vacation time, may help reduce conflict—and the consequent feelings of guilt—as well as increase employee effectiveness.**

THE DATA SOURCE

The researchers surveyed 196 people, most working full time in a variety of jobs, from two sources: a small organization in Florida (13%) and online management classes (87%). Participation was voluntary, and respondents were compensated monetarily or with class credit. Sixty-three percent were women and 37% were men, 36% were married or cohabitating, and 23.7% had one or two children aged under 10 years.

Participants were surveyed on demographic attributes (e.g., queried on their marital or cohabitation status, number of children under age ten, hours spent on home maintenance, hours worked outside the home) and gender-role orientation.

Over five work days, the participants were asked daily to rate their agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale of such statements as "The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life," and "The demands of my family or partner interfere with my work-related activities." The participants also described daily their feelings of guilt, on a five-point scale ranging from "very slightly" to "very strongly."

THE RESEARCHERS

This study was conducted by:

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- Beth A. Livingston, Assistant Professor, Human Resource Studies, ILR School (Industrial and Labor Relations), Cornell University

For an in-depth discussion of this topic, see:

Livingston, B.A., & Judge, T.A. (2008). Emotional responses to work-family conflict: An examination of gender role orientation among working men and women. Journal of Applied Psychology, 93, 207-216.

◊ **Questions about this research should be directed to Beth Livingston at bal93@cornell.edu.**