

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR THE STUDY OF WORK-FAMILY RELATIONSHIP CONSIDERING COUPLES IN A ROMANIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: *The study of work-family relationship represents one of the favorite research topics of the last decades due to several determinants, as the growing interest of the scientific community and companies, the impact of personal and professional roles mitigation at multiple levels or the public discourse that continues to maintain this issue on the first page, for example. Previous analysis focused on the relation between the two sets of roles, the causes, moderators and effects of a poor or efficient management of the professional and personal issues on individual level or from an organizational perspective. Considering that south-eastern European countries are underrepresented in the existing scientific literature dealing with work-family relationship and given the specific context represented by Romania, a post-communist country and member of the European Union also, we argue that future analysis may exploit this valuable framework also. Moreover, the second direction set by the present paper regards the focus on couples, not individuals, when trying to capture the characteristics of work-family relationship in a comprehensive manner. Given the above-mentioned state of the art regarding the work-family relation, this paper brings in an integrative model for the study of this issue at another level of analysis – couples and suggests contextual determinants and moderators of the work-family relationship that could be considered by future research, given the specific Romanian context.*

Keywords: couples; dyads; work-family model; work-family relationship

1. Introduction

Work and family are two major domains that shape or define adults' lives, main resources reservoirs and identity anchors for both women and men. Although their existence as landmarks for individuals and communities goes back many years ago, scientific interest regarding the relation between personal and professional roles started to grow in the last fifty years. This increasing focus on the issue was assigned to the social changes that brought more women in the work force, the transformations of gender role ideology or technological development, for example (Pogan, 2019).

The classical models of men – breadwinners and women – homemakers diminish steadily (Oakley, 1974). Likewise, work contents and career models also suffer alert changes, determined by digitalization and technological jumps that blurry more than before the boundaries between work and non-work. These transformations regarding both family – personal sphere and work - professional domain determine the interests of academia, companies, governments and individuals towards the work-family interface.

Drawing the state of the art, we must say that the first studies dealing with work-family aspects used a functionalist approach (Goode, 1960; Kanter, 1977) that sees the professional and personal issues as belonging to two different spheres and the best functioning is acquired by specialization of each of the two family members on one of the main domains: women – work inside the home, men – work outside the house. From this perspective, obvious finding was that women's implication in paid work

outside the house will generate strain, conflict between the two sets of roles and here we can mention plenty of studies that show us the negative consequences of role accumulation (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Barnett and Baruch, 1985). Convergent to this perspective is the resources conservation approach, stating that personal resources such as time and energy are finite, or limited and engaging in more roles diminishes them and individuals will end-up in inter-role conflict (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999; Pogan, 2015).

We see the above-described approaches as enclosing, constraining a rather dynamic and always under-construction relation and consider more adequate an interactionist perspective on work-family interface. If we use the glasses of symbolic interactionism, we understand the two partners' engagement in different social arrangements as following their previous constructions on gender, but gender is also an emergent of such social interactions (West and Zimmerman, p.126). Meanwhile, researchers acknowledge flexible boundaries between genders and describe the trend towards convergence, as men spend now more time with childcare activities and even domestic duties, while women graduate higher forms of education and engage more often in jobs outside the house, compared to their predecessors (Thoits, 1992; Barnett and Hyde, 2001: 781; Kan and Gershuny, 2010; Pogan, 2019). Empirical findings also show us that joining family and work demands does not inevitably end-up in conflict, moreover, benefits of multiple-roles engagement as higher levels of well-being and satisfaction are brought to light (Barnett and Baruch 1985; Marks and MacDermid, 1996; Pogan, 2015). Such field results were conceptualized by the expansionist theory, according to which multiple roles are beneficial through buffering effect, added income, multiple sources of social support, expanded frame of reference, increased opportunities to experience success, similarity of experiences (Baruch, 1986; Simpson and England 1981; Barnett and Hyde, 2001: 785-788; Oppenheimer, 1997).

2. The context

Most of the existing literature studying the work-family relationship refer to western countries (Coltrane, 2000; Duxbury, Lyons and Higgins, 2007; De Miguel-Luken, 2019; Geurts et. al, 2005; Joplin et al, 2003) and do not relate to Romanian population. Becomes therefore obvious our preoccupation towards the facets of work-family relation in this given context. Furthermore, some specific features and societal changes regarding Romania entitle us to consider the topic (Abraham, 2000; Voicu 2005; Hăgăruș, 2007). Firstly, before 1989 Romanian was characterized by a full employment policy for the entire population, corroborated with laws that force natality, but the years that followed brought unemployment and drop in the fertility rate (Eurostat). Secondly, child and elderly care facilities reduced their number (INS), the maternity leave was prolonged from 120 days to 24 months and after 2010 European regulations that stipulate parental leave for at least 1 month were adopted in Romania also (OUG 111/2010). These social policies are expected to sustain work-family balance and also diminish the gap between the genders (Olah and Fratzak, 2013), but their effects have not been yet investigated.

A third aspect regards Romanians' massive immigration (more than 9 million Romanians are living abroad according to MRP (http://www.mprp.gov.ro/web/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Raport-IULIE-2019_site.pdf), a phenomenon with great implications when analyzing the interaction of family and work roles, if we consider

separated families that resemble to the single parent families and the remaining adult facing both roles' challenges (Portes, 2010; Porumbescu and Pogan, 2018). Furthermore, consistent part of the emigrant Romanians is involved in care providing activities in the destination countries, which has a positive effect considering remittances, but also has a negative impact for the ones remaining at home and sometimes bringing extra burden for their shoulders.

If we just take a glance at the demographic pyramid of Europe and Romania (see Eurostat) and corroborate this with the strong migration of young Romanians, it becomes obvious that the analysis of the work-family relation is a both actual and necessary research topic. Furthermore, the socio-economic importance of addressing work-family interface is highlighted at European level recommendations of the EU Council towards member states "to develop and to conduct adequate research to discover the factors affecting opportunities for women and men to harmonize their work and family life, their desire to have children and attitudes related within different age groups and generations" (Council of the European Union, European Pact for Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, 2011–2020, Doc. 7370/11 SOC 205, 2011: 9). Beyond the impact that interference of professional and personal roles has on family life, human resources research and practice abound of studies that mathematically prove the costs that poor management of the two domains regarding work (disengagement, professional illness, absenteeism, personnel fluctuation), all translated to economic loose.

Nevertheless, worth to be mentioned and emphasized is the cultural perspective that needs to be considered. The Romanian framework contributes to a deeper understanding of the work-family roles renegotiations in the context of shifting from a full employment policy to an economy where unemployment is part of everyday life. Another aspect influencing work-family balance is represented by access to childcare facilities, whose number decreased after 1989. A deeper understanding of resources relocation and gender roles renegotiations subsequent to migration, with impact on work-family balance is also critical. The cultural context is of great importance when studying both family and work aspects, as values attached to those main life domains, role prescriptions, gender-role ideology, expectations, positioning on the individualism-collectivism axis are profoundly social polished by soft, cultural background, together with other hard, economic aspects.

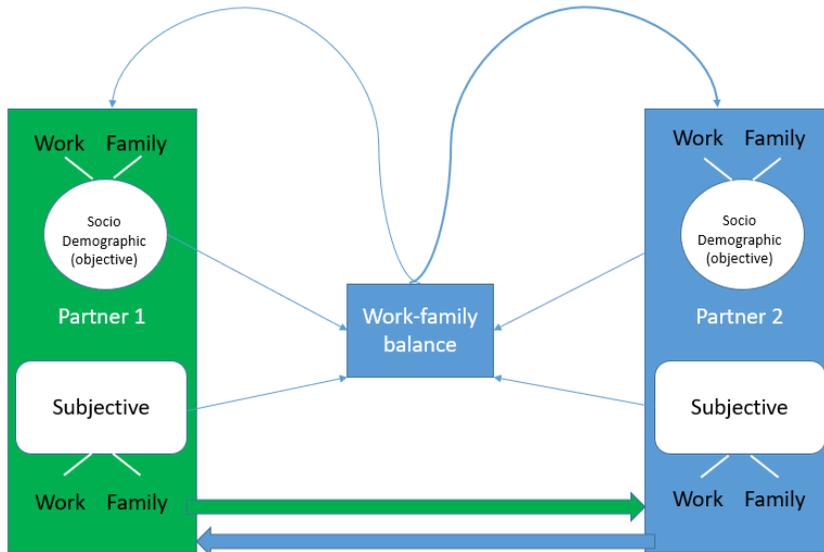
Trying to capture such a complex picture requires adequate strategies and a strong methodology, triangulating perspectives and methods, through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A macro level analysis, considering policies, major trends and administrative data should be doubled by a micro level perspective, with focus on individuals in couples, their subjective understanding and personal significations in order to foster a better understanding of the work-family relation.

3. Conceptual Framework

Analyzing the existing scientific literature, we can see that there are not so many studies regarding work-family balance focusing on an integrative perspective. Moreover, individuals are the ones analyzed, even if neither their family aspects nor their professional arrangements are some isolated, clearly delimited constructs, on contrary, couples may represent a necessary level of analysis (Voicu and Constantin, 2016). We argue that work and family influence each other both at objective and

subjective level, that this influences also affect the couple partner and the work-life balance of the dyad, and that such connections are better described as in a circular and continuous relation, influencing and building each-other (Abeysekeraa and Gahanb, 2017). This described interactions are better represented in the following model – figure 1.

Figure 1. Model of work-family balance – couple level



Source: author`s proposal

The presented model tries to conceptualize in a visual manner the interactions at the couple level regarding the work-family relationship. Colored in green and blue are the area corresponding to the two partners who come in this equation with both objective and subjective elements, at personal and professional level. Some examples of such issues are their type of job, professional demands, the time spent with different type of activities, the existence of children or other dependents like elderly or ill relatives, the social suport of the extended family, other close persons or the social support received from the organization, colleagues etc., the division of the domestic duties and care responsibilities between the two partners and the list can continue. Moreover, soft aspects, like gender-role ideology, personal values and beliefs, expectancies or subjective experience also come in this interaction from both partners and impact the couple as a whole and the partners as individuals. The arrows present in the model try to explain the bidirectional interactions between the two partners, their input regarding the work-family balance and the impact of the work-family functioning on individual level, as a reverse effect. This model tries to express a dynamic perspective, sustained by an interactionist approach, considering work-family relation not a fix one, unchangeable, but varying and shaped by day-by-day interactions.

We have noticed the growing body of research, since the 1950`s, concentrated on the antecedents and outcomes of efficient or poor management of the two roles

(Grzywacz and Bass, 2003; Haar, 2019) but what most of the studies miss, is that usually important decisions are made in pairs, and the behavior of the two partners is strongly influenced by her/his personal preferences and expectations towards the spouse's preferences. Therefore, we argue that this approach can contribute to building valid models and grounded theories in the field.

Moreover, this conceptualization may bring also methodological and empirical benefits. We consider that the above-presented model may contribute to identifying and analyzing strategies that foster work-family balance, seen as a dynamic construct. Given the fact that the relation between personal and professional roles is conditioned by objective and subjective determinants, research based on this model could be distributed at two levels: the first one, consisting of quantitative data could be completed by the second layer of an emergent, qualitative approaches. The above-described integrative, dynamic, interactionist model of work-family balance may represent a valid framework for both macro and micro level approaches.

4. Discussions and future directions

Building an actual, comprehensive framework of a complex and fluid social issue that engages private actors and has strong social echoes, as work-family relationship is, represents a major challenge for social sciences. Future research should try to explore the way personal and professional roles merge for members of dual-earner couples, focusing on outcomes (conflict, facilitation, enrichment) of the interaction between the two sets of roles, contextual moderators (gender-role ideology, expectations, preferences, social support) of this interaction and socio-demographic characteristics (number of children, number of working hours, sharing of domestic work and childcare responsibilities). The Romanian context brings a specific framework for the study of the work-family relationship. Thus, further analysis may consider finding out how is work-family balance renegotiated in Romania in the context of societal changes brought by post-communist transition, focusing on the impact of unemployment, public provision of care services and external migration. Future research can study specific issues as are the ways work-family balance changed over time in the past decades under the impact of aforementioned factors, the impact of changes on partners' position on labor market regarding work-family roles and the renegotiation of gender roles, from a longitudinal perspective.

We consider that understanding the mechanisms used by couples to balance personal and professional roles and which mechanisms are employed when changes in couple status and living conditions occur is another possible direction for future research. A qualitative approach, consisting of in-depth interviews with the two partners or extended family members, to see how adjustments concerning family and professional roles have changed between generations and within generation (couple level) may represent a valid and meaningful research strategy.

Social transformations impact all life domains and work and family are no exception. The actual context, defined by alert changes, blurrier boundaries between work and non-work, reducing differences between the two genders, and activities traditionally assigned to men or women, obviously represents a framework for valuable research of work-family interactions. Therefore, the present paper emphasizes the importance of addressing such issues through the analysis of dyads, shifting from the traditional individual approach to a "couple approach" strategy.

Through the analysis of hard (socio-demographic) and soft (subjective) determinants, moderators and outputs of work-family balance we consider that future research may offer pertinent answers to governments, companies, NGOs and individuals' preoccupations. Considering that work-family balance influences work force, family life, individuals, children upbringing, natality rates, health etc., we argue that a couple and family-level analysis is valuable, together with the study of such changes over time. Furthermore, such comprehensive analysis of the work-family relationship may represent a solid fundament for policy recommendations in order to ensure a better balancing of work and family roles in the context of restructuring economy and adopting the European regulations.

5. Conclusions

The elements of novelty and innovation proposed through this paper consist in understanding the mechanisms used by couples to adapt to the challenges they face in balancing work and family demands, in the context of societal changes occurred in the past decades. A mixed-mode methodology may enable researchers to obtain an overtime perspective, combined with a more profound, subjective understanding of work-family relation. Another worth-mentioning innovative element is introducing dyads - couples in analysis, compared to the consecrated approach of investigating individuals, sometimes the members of the couple, without considering the interactions between partners. Nevertheless, work-family balance is seen as a dynamic construct, containing both conflict and facilitation, shaped through day-by-day experiences. This perspective has the prerequisite for introducing a valid and comprehensive understanding of work-family relation.

Furthermore, changes in public policies with impact on work-family balance need the input of social research regarding these issues. Such changes should be considered in the actual context of blurry boundaries between work and non-work and between prescriptions attributed to the two genders, combined with governments', companies' and individuals' preoccupation towards a better work-family balance. One must acknowledge that Romania is under-represented in work-family research. We argue that country-specific information is needed in order to understand how European regulations regarding work-family balance can be adapted to the local context.

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