Gender differences in work-to-family facilitation in portuguese employees

Cláudia Andrade

College of Education - Polytechnic Institute of Coimbra

Marisa Matias

Faculty of Psychology and Education - University of Porto

Abstract

Challenging the assumption that work and family are incompatible, a growing body of studies focuses the positive relationships between these two roles. The present research is an exploratory study aimed at examining whether work characteristics (flexible supervision, job-loss risk and work satisfaction) are associated with work-family facilitation (WFF) and enable positive family outcomes (couple constructive problem solving and lower levels of family stress). Using data from the *EU FamWork Project* (Portuguese Employees $N = 306$), this study examined work-family facilitation models in male and female full-time employees with young children.

Results indicated that flexible supervision has a direct effect on work-family facilitation and job security has an indirect effect (via work satisfaction) on work-family facilitation, only for female employees. Results also offered support for the relation between work-family facilitation and positive familial outcomes (couple constructive problem solving and lower levels of family stress) for women. Men´s model was very modest and only flexible supervision was a predictor of work-to-family facilitation. Furthermore, no relations between work-to-family facilitation and positive individual outcomes were found in men´s group. Gender variations in the models suggest the importance of this variable for future work-to-family facilitation research agenda.

Key-Words

Work-to-family facilitation, Gender, Employees

Sumário

Apesar da maioria dos estudos sobre as relações trabalho-família centrar a sua análise nas interferências negativas entre o papel profissional e o papel familiar, cada vez mais estudos têm vindo a focar os aspectos positivos que podem advir da participação nas duas esferas. Este estudo, de carácter exploratório, procura analisar em que medida os aspectos associados ao papel profissional (flexibilidade na supervisão, ameaça de perda de emprego e satisfação profissional) contribuem para a ocorrência da facilitação trabalho-família. Procura-se também analisar em que medida a facilitação trabalho-família tem

um impacto no indivíduo ao nível do exercício do seu papel familiar (capacidade de resolução construtiva de problemas no casal e redução do stress familiar). Partindo dos dados da amostra portuguesa (n=306, profissionais a tempo inteiro com filhos em idade escolar) do Projecto Europeu *Famwork* este estudo analisou, separadamente para homens e mulheres, os modelos de facilitação trabalho-família.

Os resultados indicam que tanto para homens como para mulheres, a flexibilidade na supervisão tem um efeito directo na facilitação trabalho-família e que a ameaça de perda de emprego tem um efeito indirecto (via satisfação profissional), embora apenas para o grupo feminino. Os resultados também apoiam a relação entre a facilitação trabalho-família e efeitos positivos ao nível familiar, mas apenas para o grupo feminino. O modelo masculino apresenta resultados bastante modestos: por um lado, a flexibilidade na supervisão é o único antecedente da facilitação trabalho-família; por outro lado, a facilitação não está associada a qualquer efeito nas variáveis familiares. Não obstante, as variações em função do género nos modelos de facilitação trabalho-família reforçam a importância de se considerar esta variável na investigação sobre as relações positivas entre papéis profissionais e familiares.

Palavras-Chave

Facilitação trabalho-família, Género, Trabalhadores

Conceptual background

Work and family represent two of the most central roles of an adult life. Therefore, work-family relations have been identified as a priority area of research with direct links with both policies and practice (Gutek, Searle & Klepa, 1991; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). The ability to balance work and family life is related with work and non-work demands, with the availability of resources to deal with this balance and with the flexibility of these two areas of life. Research, in recent years, has suggested that work-family relations may be moderated by factors associated to "family friendly" workplaces as well as strategies used by individuals to cope with work and non-work demands.

The most frequently used concept to describe the interface between work and family is work-family conflict or negative spillover. In fact, work-family literature has been dominated by the role strain perspective. This perspective assumes that the demands from different and separate domains compete with each other in terms of time, physical energy, and psychological resources (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In this line of reasoning, spillover literature often focus on negative work-to-family spillover, such as the transfer of bad moods, low energy and fatigue from the work environment to the family (work-to-family spillover) or, in turn, examines negative family-to-work spillover, where family problems interfere with work performance (Frone, Russel & Cooper, 1992; Frone,

Yardley & Markel, 1997). However, spillover is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. A growing body of studies is focusing on the positive relationships between paid work and family life, challenging the assumption that these roles are irreconcilable.

These studies suggest that work and family domains may enhance one another and lead to positive outcomes, especially if one domain provides resources such as social support and skills that can be used to address demands in the other domain (Sieber, 1974; Tompson & Werner, 1997). This process has been labelled as work-family facilitation (Frone, 2003). Work-family facilitation highlights the role of experiences, skills and opportunities driven or developed at workplace that enhance home life (Frone, 2003; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Voydanoff, 2004). Grzywacz & Marks´ (2000) model of work-family facilitation is grounded on ecology theory (Brofenbrenner, 2005), which states that facilitation occurs due to both contexts and individual characteristics. As far as context is concerned, Grzywacz & Butler (2005) found that work-family facilitation is enabled by environmental resources, more precisely by individual's work arrangements. Thus, family friendly policies and supervisor support at workplace can promote organizational resources such as time, flexibility and recognition of family needs, as well as psychological resources such as self-acceptance (Grzywacz & Butler, 2005). Therefore, in line with Hill (2005), both a general supportive organizational environment and supervisor support may increase the amount of resources available for positive spillover between work and family. Despite work-family research primary focus on contextual and environmental factors, individual differences in the way people balance work and family cannot be ignored (Parasuraman & Greenhaus 2002). Namely, satisfaction with work performance is a key variable in the analysis of work and family relations. Work satisfaction is commonly typified as an outcome of the spillover process. However, individuals who are satisfied with their professional role perceive it as meaningful for their self esteem and may, therefore, assign resources from this role to the family. Moreover, individuals satisfied with their professional role may feel positively energized and transfer more often their skills and humour in a positive way to the family role.

In sum, both contextual and individual factors play a role in the work-family facilitation process. This exploratory study aims to test the influence of the organizational contextual factors such as flexible supervision and individual factors, such as work satisfaction and perception of work strain, in the prediction of work-family facilitation. Moreover, work-family facilitation will be considered as a mediator variable between work and family variables. Therefore, outcomes associated to the family role are also considered, such as constructive problem solving and perception of family stress.

Gender influences

Work and family are two domains with strong gender connotations. Thus, men and women may perceive and react differently to the work-family interface. Gender role ideology often assigns family responsibilities to women and ascribe men to the breadwinner role. Nevertheless, work to family negative spillover is usually stated as a women's concern. Women's wide integration in the labor market carried them more role overload, since they are expected to add their family responsibilities to their professional role. As a result, it is more difficult for them, than for men, to reconcile work and family life (Milkie & Peltola, 1999). These gender differences on inter-role conflict may also be expected regarding facilitation. However, studies focused on gender differences in the work-family facilitation process are scarce and present inconsistent findings: some studies find that women perceive more inter-role positive transfers than men (Aryee, Srinivas & Tan, 2005; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Grzywacz, Almeida & McDonald, 2002; Marshall & Barnett, 1993) and others do not find any gender differences (Hill, 2005; Kirchmeyer, 1992). Additionally, some other studies have found that workplace resources are related to work-family facilitation for both, men and women (Grzywacz & Butler, 2005). To sum up, the differential impact of gender on work-to-family facilitation process is not well established.

In our theoretical model (Figure 1), based on Voydanoff's (2004a) approach, work variables are expected to have indirect effects on individual outcomes and a direct effect on the perception of work- to-family facilitation. Thus, our aim is to test whether work characteristics (flexible supervision and job security) and work satisfaction are associated with work-family facilitation (WFF) and if WFF enables positive family outcomes (couple constructive problem solving and lower levels of family stress).
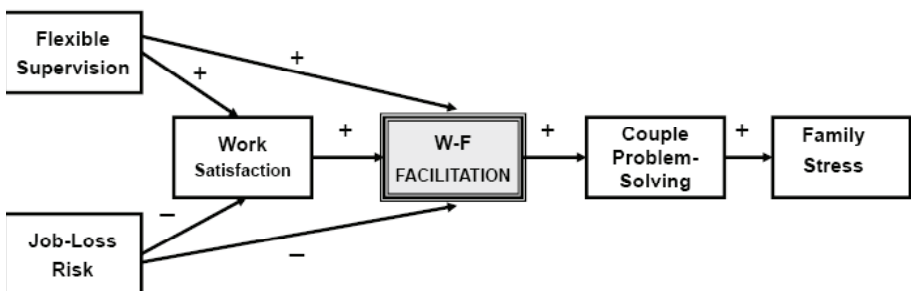
Figure 1: Theoretical model to be tested

We consider gender as a social category that may have effects on work-family facilitation. Thus separated models for men and women will be tested.

Each hypothesized relationship is represented by an arrow in the model and the direction of the relationship is shown by the sign. The entire model is one system, and the path coefficients will show the relative strength and significance of each hypothesized relationship.

Method

Sample and procedure

The sample is composed of Portuguese dual-earner couples that took part in ''*FamWork - Family Life and Professional Work: Conflict and Synergy*,'' an European Research Project carried out between 2003 – 2005 [2].

Several criteria were set up prior to recruiting the couples: (1) both partners should be willing to participate in the study, (2) both partners should be living together, (3) both partners should work at least 15 hours per week, (4) the partners should have at least one child in the age of one to five, and (5) the oldest child in the family should not be older than 12 years.

Respondents filled in a questionnaire at their homes and delivered it directly or by e-mail to the research team. The sample used in this study is composed by 306 individuals, with a mean age of 35 years and a relationship mean duration of 12 years. The maximum number of children is 4 (just one case) and the modal number is 2. The modal level of education was an university degree (67,8%). Individuals work, in average, 49 hours per week, including overtime and commuting time. Men work in average more 9 hours than women.

Measures [3]

Work to family facilitation (WFF) is the extent to which an individual's participation in the family life is made easier by the skills, experiences, affects and opportunities gained through the participation in the professional role. It was assessed using Grzywacz & Marks (2000) 3 items scale: a) "The things you do at work help you deal with personal and practical issues at home."; b) "The things you do at work make you a more interesting person at home."; c) "The skills you use on your job are useful for things you have to do at home" (α=.58). The subject has to rate each item on a 5-point rating scale.

Constructive problem solving refers to a positive style of marital conflict resolution. The participants are given a list of behaviour patterns and are asked to estimate how their partner is behaving in conflict laden situations. The scale is composed by 4 items assessed in a 6 point rating scale ranging from "never" to "ever". (sample item: "He is negotiating and makes compromises") (α=.64).

Family stress reflects strains associated to the familial role, namely regarding parent-child relationship. The scale is composed by 4 items on a 6-point rating scale with the two end poles "ever" and "very often". (sample item: "Difficulties in coming to terms with each other") (α=.69).

Work satisfaction reports to positive experiences in the participants' work life. It is composed by 3 items on a 6-point rating scale ranging from "not at all applicable" to "absolutely applicable" (sample item: "My professional work adds to my personal fulfilment.") (α=.84).

Flexible supervision addresses how individuals perceive their workplace as family friendly with a focus on the supervisor support. The scale includes 3 items on a 6-point rating scale with the two end poles "not at all applicable" and "absolutely applicable". (sample item: "My supervisor is considerate and understanding concerning my family situation (e.g. when splitting up work or vacations times, etc.)") (α=.82).

Job-loss risk is assessed by an item that refers to the degree of work strain associated to the threat of loosing the job.

Results

Descriptive analyses

Descriptive analyses and significant differences between the groups according to gender are presented in Table 1.

Men and women differ in their level of work satisfaction ($F(1,305)=6,78$; $p<.01$) and in their perception of family stress ($F(1,305)=10,53$; $p< .01$). Men feel more satisfied with their professional role while women perceive themselves as being more burdened with family strains. There were no gender differences in the degree of work-family facilitation. It is interesting to note that the majority of the individuals in our sample do not perceive a higher level of facilitation between their work and their family role (mean value, for both men and women, is below scale midpoint - mean <3).

The remaining variables, flexible supervision, perception of job-loss risk, and constructive problem solving do not present any significant difference according to gender.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for all variables

	Women (n=153)		Men (n=153)		Total	sample
					(306)	
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
1. Work satisfaction**	4,25	1,01	4,54	0,96	4,40	1,00
2. Flexible supervision	3,30	1,42	3,32	1,40	3,31	1,41
3. Job-loss risk	1,86	1,31	2,13	1,47	1,99	1,40
4. Work-family facilitation	2,43	0,81	2,53	0,82	2,48	0,82
5. Couple problem solving	3,65	0,98	3,63	0,90	3,64	0,94
6. Family stress**	3,17	0,94	2,83	0,84	3,00	0,91

Note: ** p<.01

Path analyses

The software AMOS (version 7.0) was used to estimate the causal model as a saturated design with all early variables modelled (flexible supervision, job-loss risk and work satisfaction) as having effect on all variables found on the second stage of the model (work-family facilitation, couple problem-solving and family stress) (see Figure 1). All measurement and structural parameters were estimated using maximum likelihood method. The fit of the hypothesized theoretical model to the observed data was tested with four indices, including the chi-square statistic ($\chi 2$), the goodness-of-fit index (GFI); the adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI); the comparative fitness index (CFI) and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The results indicate that the overall model fit indexes are satisfactory (table 2).

Table 2: Fit indices for Women´s and Men´s models of work to family facilitation

Model	χ^2/df	p	GFI	AGFI	CFI	RMSEA
Men	1.581	.136	.97	.94	.87	.06
Women	1.418	.165	.97	.94	.91	.05

Note: $\chi 2$/df, chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio; GFI, goodness of fit index; AGFI, adjusted goodness-of-fit index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation.

Both men's and women's models fit the data well ($\chi 2$ /df value is considered as good) and the indices of adjustment are also satisfactory.

Men's model clearly separates the work and family domain. Thus, WFF did not showed a mediation effect between work and family, contrarily to what was expected. Furthermore, only two direct paths were found between flexible supervision and work satisfaction and flexible supervision and WFF.

In women's model, flexible supervision has a direct influence on WFF and low job-loss risk has an indirect effect on WFF through work satisfaction. Additionally, it was found a direct effect of WFF on couple constructive problem solving which, in turn, has a direct effect on family stress. For women's model, the WFF hypothesized meditational effect was found.

Discussion and implications

This exploratory study, aimed to have a better understanding about work-family facilitation by analyzing how work experiences facilitate family performance among Portuguese employees and to compare this experience in men and women.

A first remark must be drawn about the small prevalence of work-family facilitation in our sample. It seems that individuals do not perceive their work as a facilitator of their family performance. In fact, family and work issues addressed at a policy level have mainly focused on the minimization of negative influences that one domain can exert in the other. As a consequence, there has been a limited focus on factors that can promote positive relations between work and family. Thus, this preliminary result points out that work-family policies and programs should address more how work can benefit family life and foster more supportive and positive work environments.

The finding that flexible supervision contributed to work-to-family facilitation and to work satisfaction is consistent with previous research (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Hill, 2005). Supervisory support is positively related to work-family facilitation because it enhances a family supportive work environment or culture (Kossek and Ozeki, 1998). As a consequence, it might help individuals cope better with family issues (Voydanoff, 2004). If we take into account that women are the major responsible for childcare and family tasks, it may help explain why this resource (supervisor support) was only relevant for them. In fact, women are usually the ones that have to cope with the majority of family responsibilities (the mediation effect of work-to-family facilitation was only found for the women's model).

Another environmental feature of the workplace was the strain associated to the threat of losing the job that showed a negative path to work satisfaction. In fact, it seems that the more women perceive their job is at stake, the less satisfaction they derive from it. This result can be easily understood if we consider that being emerged in an insecure work environment impacts individual's sense of personal fulfilment and, therefore reduces work satisfaction. Surprisingly, this result was only found for women. Somehow it seems that women are more sensitive to the risk of losing their jobs. Statistically, when it comes to unemployment, women tend to lose their jobs more often than men and tend to be in that situation for a longer time (women have higher long term unemployment rates than men) (Guerreiro & Abrantes, 2007). In spite of this fact, a methodological reason should also be considered. The work-family facilitation scale presented a low reliability coefficient that could have limited its power to assess the facilitation process on men.

Women's model showed a direct effect of work-family facilitation and familial outcomes. Furthermore, work family facilitation had a direct effect in positive conflict resolution styles which, in turn, buffered the family stress levels. Following Edwards & Rothbard (2000), we could argue that positive moods (like work satisfaction) enhance cognitive functioning, increase task activity, and promote positive interactions with others, each of which facilitates role performance. Furthermore, this relationship can be explained via the main processes of self-concept formation, where occupational achievements enable favorable appraisals from others that can impact positively in the couple dynamics (Gecas, & Seff, 1990). Nevertheless, since work-family facilitation and familial characteristics were not related in the men's subsample, it remains unknown whether these work experiences can be gained by Portuguese men and how they affect their individual and family performance. The result that work-family facilitation was a mediator variable only for women seems to suggest that men tend to segment their role engagements more than women. Women's work force participation does not imply that they are less involved with their family. In fact, it is often expected that they are able to integrate work and family participation. As a consequence the process of transferring resources from work to the family may be more easily done by women than by men.

Despite its exploratory nature some limitations of this study should be mentioned. The associations between the predictors and work-family facilitation were not very strong, may be due to a low reliability coefficient of the work-family facilitation scale. According to Hill (2005), measures of work-family facilitation are not as well developed or tested as the ones for work-family conflict. Thus, an obvious research implication is the need to develop strong measures of work-family facilitation.

Conceptually, while the present study included only work characteristics as predictors

of work-family facilitation, there are a number of other variables that could influence this process, namely family related ones. Work-family relations can, indeed, benefit from a sense of fulfilment with the familial roles. In fact, most of the analyses focused on the work domain tend to ignore outside forces or extra-organizational factors that can have an impact on the performance of the professional role. Moreover, individual, familial and organizational outcome variables such as well-being, marriage satisfaction, satisfaction with the parental role, organizational commitment and performance should also be considered. Hence, future research is encouraged to test a more complete model, namely using data from *EU FamWork Project*. Finally, in-person semi-structured interviews may help investigate how men think about their workplace arrangements in order to have a better understanding of the unpredicted results.

In spite of these limitations, the goal of this study was to test whether work characteristics' were associated with work-family facilitation and if facilitation worked as a mediating variable between the work and family sphere. The results found, encourage future research using larger samples and bidirectional models of influence in order to have a better knowledge of this process.

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Notes

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3) All measures were developed by *EU Famwork* Research Teams, unless referred otherwise.

Correspondência

Claudia Andrade

Escola Superior de Educação de Coimbra,

Praça Heróis do Ultramar – Solum

3030-329 Coimbra, Portugal

mcandrade@esec.pt

Marisa Matias

Faculdade de Psicologia e de Ciências da Educação da Universidade do Porto

Dr. Manuel Pereira da Silva,

4200-392 Porto, Portugal

marisa@fpce.up.pt