



Professional work load and work-to-school conflict in working-students: The mediating role of psychological detachment from work

Cláudia ANDRADE

College of Education, Polytechnic of Coimbra

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ABSTRACT: In recent years there Portuguese higher education institutions have been aiming to attract more people to the educational system that are either in the labor market by offering evening and weekend graduate academic programs. Blending work and school is a demanding task and, so far, at the country level this phenomenon has received relatively little empirical attention. The purpose of the study is to build on existing work-to-school conflict literature and to explore a possible relationship between professional work load on work-to-school conflicts among working students enrolled in a master program. Moreover we test the role of psychological detachment from work as mediator in this process. This model was tested, through path analysis, using 152 working students, 88 women and 64 men, enrolled as fulltime students in evening and weekend master programs.. The model showed an adequate fit to the data, suggesting that the influence of professional work load on work-to-school conflict is fully mediated by psychological detachment from work. These findings unveil a new perspective on working students enrolled in postgraduate school, pointing out the importance of psychological detachment from work to a better understand the impact of blending work and school. Contributions to the work-school literature, future research directions, and limitations of the study are discussed.

Keywords: Professional work load; work-to-school conflict; psychological detachment from work; working-students

*Trabajo profesional y conflicto trabajo-escuela en estudiantes-trabajadores:
El papel mediador de distanciamiento psicológico del trabajo*

RESUMEN: En los últimos años, las instituciones de enseñanza superior portuguesas han intentado atraer a más personas al sistema educativo que se encuentran en el mercado laboral ofreciendo programas académicos de posgrado nocturnos y de fin de semana. La combinación del trabajo y la escuela es una tarea exigente y, hasta ahora, a nivel de país este fenómeno ha recibido relativamente poca atención empírica. El propósito del estudio es basarse en la literatura sobre conflictos de trabajo a escuela existentes y explorar una posible relación entre la carga de trabajo profesional en los conflictos entre el trabajo y la escuela entre los estudiantes que trabajan matriculados en un programa de maestría. Además, probamos el papel del desapego psicológico del trabajo como mediador en este proceso. Este modelo fue probado, a través de análisis de trayectoria, utilizando 152 estudiantes de trabajo, 88 mujeres y 64 hombres, matriculados como estudiantes de tiempo completo en programas de posgrado

de tarde y fin de semana. El modelo mostró un ajuste adecuado a los datos, sugiriendo que la influencia de la carga de trabajo profesional en el conflicto entre el trabajo y la escuela está plenamente mediado por el desapego psicológico del trabajo. Estos resultados revelan una nueva perspectiva sobre los estudiantes que trabajan y que frecuentan la escuela de posgrado, señalando la importancia del desapego psicológico del trabajo para comprender mejor el impacto de la mezcla de trabajo y la escuela. Se discuten las contribuciones a la literatura de la escuela de trabajo, las direcciones futuras de la investigación y las limitaciones del estudio.

Palabras clave: carga de trabajo profesional; conflicto trabajo-escuela; distanciamiento psicológico del trabajo; estudiantes-trabajadores

Correspondencia: Cláudia Andrade. Department of Communication and Business, College of Education, Polytechnic of Coimbra, Rua D. João III, 3030–329 Coimbra, Portugal. Email: mcandrade@esec.pt

Introduction

The numbers of working adults enrolled in master programs are increasing in Portugal (Pordata, 2016). Several factors have been prompting the participation of this population in postgraduate school. First, changing expertise requirements related, among other factors, with information technologies have increased the need for supplementary training for many employees (Creighton & Hudson 2002). Second, the postgraduate level education opportunities have spread in the country becoming more accessible as a result of the increased effort of higher education institutions to meet the needs of diverse populations, like the employees, offering master programs in evening and weekend sessions (Amorim, Azevedo, & Coimbra, 2010). The simultaneous participation in postgraduate education alongside with being a worker remains understudied. Research with working students enrolled in higher education report the occurrence of conflicts and experiences of stress from the competing demands related with professional and school roles (Creighton & Hudson, 2002; Hammer, Grigsby, & Woods, 1998). In this article we argue that professional work load felt by working students can create tensions and difficulties that can lead to work-to-school conflict. Moreover, since these programs run on the evenings, after a work-day or a work-week there is also the chance that lack of time to detach work demands can make the integration of worker and student roles demanding and perhaps conflicting. This paper intends to fill the gap in literature by analyzing the relation between professional work load and work-to-school conflict considering psychological detachment from work as mediating variable between professional work load and work-to-school conflict. The model is tested with a sample of Portuguese working students enrolled in graduate school.

Work-to-school conflict

Lingard (2007) states the conflict between one's student role and other life roles is a crucial aspect on the analysis of the relationships between study and non-study life.

According to role conflict theory, demands from different domains compete with each other in terms of time and energy (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Following this assumption Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) proposed a model for work and family conflict and it discusses the negative effects of being engaged in multiple roles. The authors claimed that there are different types of inter-role conflict: time-based, strain-based and behavior-based (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Furthermore, Frone, Russell, and Cooper (1992) demonstrated that work-family conflict is bi-directional: work can interfere with family and family can interfere with work. Negative consequences of work-family conflict have been identified by several studies and include burnout, depression, poor physical and mental health (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Frone, Yardley & Markel, 1997), decreased professional commitment and decreased job and life satisfaction (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). This concept of inter-role conflict has been broadly used in work-family interface literature. The same conceptual framework can be applied to the intersection of the work and student roles. Work-to-school and school-to-work conflicts are concepts similar to those describing the inter role conflicts from work to family. Work-to-school and school-to-work conflict refers to situations in which students experience work as reducing their ability, energy, and time to meet school demands (Hammer, Grigsby, & Woods, 1998; Park & Sprung, 2013). Turning to the work-family literature, Voydanoff (2008) conceptual model of the work-family interface differentiating demands and resources is useful. On one hand demands are role requirements, expectations and norms, which individuals must respond to with physical or mental effort. On the other hand resources are instrumental or psychological assets used to enable performance, diminish demands or generate further resources. When demands and needs exceed abilities and resources, strain (or conflict) is created (Voydanoff, 2008). In this regard, work-school conflict has been shown to be predicted by extensive work schedules and high job demands and by low levels of job control (Butler, 2007). Research by Markel and Frone (1998) reported that work-school conflict is inversely related to student's engagement and academic performance. Research by Lingard (2007) found that long working hours were related with less time available to study, more classes missed due to work demands and feelings of exhaustion for working-students when compared to the other students. Other authors, that compared working students with traditional students found that working-students often report low investment in study and low school satisfaction (Butler, 2007) and poor mental health (Park & Sprung, 2013).

Professional work load and psychological detachment from work

Workload is operationalized as a subjective appraisal (e.g., "I have too much work to do" (Spector & Jex, 1998), or through a quantitative indicator (e.g., number of hours worked per day/week). High workload implies that one has to complete a high amount of work within little time. Workload is often experienced as time pressure and there are several reasons why high workload is negatively related to psychological detachment from work. According to Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) when facing high work load one will feel strained from work even during off-work time. This is what Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) describe as not been able to psychologically detach oneself from work. To stay healthy and keep well-being, in non-work time, resting is important in order to restore the resources that have been used during work time. For this to happen research highlight the importance of being mentally disconnect and detached from work during non-work time (Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010; Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010; Zijlstra & Sonnentag, 2006). Beneficial effects of psychological detachment from work have been identified by several studies and include, among others, experience of vigor (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009; Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010). Psychological detachment from work is defined by Sonnentag, Kuttler and Fritz (2010) as "both

refraining from job-related activities and not thinking about job-related issues during off-job time” (p. 114). Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) claim that continuing mentally engaged with work during non-work time prevents effective recovery and reduces well-being. A study by Sonnentag et al. (2010) found that psychological detachment from work partially mediated the relationship between workload and exhaustion. Moreover, a high workload is one of the most common organizational antecedents of reduced detachment from work. Many studies found that, whether is subjective or quantitative assessed workload impacts psychological detachment during non-work hours (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007; Sonnentag et al., 2010). Etzion, Eden and Lapidot (1998) presented a definition of psychological detachment as “the individual’s sense of being away from the work situation” (p. 579). It should be noted that psychological detachment involves more than just being physically away from the workplace. It entails that one is not occupied by work-related issues or tasks. For example, being at home after work, but completing job-related tasks, makes psychological detachment from work difficult to achieve. According to Fritz and Sonnentag (2006) for psychological detachment from work to occur it is necessary to free oneself psychologically from work. Thus, Fritz and Sonnentag (2006) claim that psychological detachment refers to an individual’s experience of being mentally away from work, to make a pause in thinking about work-related issues, in other words to “switch off from work”. This implies ceasing to think about or think over work issues and tasks. Research from Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) with a daily survey study found that psychological detachment from one’s job during leisure activities resulted in a better mood and less fatigue.

In this line of reasoning attending classes after a work-day might have a detrimental impact on to students' ability to immerse on the student role. Previous studies found that working 20 hours or more per week was shown to negatively affect academic performance and lower quality student relationships (Furr & Elling, 2000; Lundberg, 2004). Thus, we consider that attending a master program, during the evening and/or weekend can interfere with the ability of the professional to detach from their work since, in some cases, they may approach experiences, while in the classroom, related with their own work. The literature about recovery experiences points out that the lack of psychological detachment during after-work hours is characterized by remaining cognitively occupied with stressful events experienced at work. During this continued preoccupation with work-related events and experiences, no recovery can occur (Meijman & Mulder, 1998), and the strain process will continue. In other words, when not detaching fully, stressors may remain mentally present, and as a consequence, negative activation and fatigue will increase. While past studies have revealed that strains and pressures from work domain impact other life roles, no research has yet systematically examined how psychological detachment from work can impact work-to-school conflict in working students. Given the limitations of prior research, the goal of this study is to test the relations between professional work load and work-school conflict considering psychological detachment from work as a mediator. Work-school conflict is defined as the extent to which work interferes with employees' ability to meet school-related demands and responsibilities. Work load is defined according to Frone et al. (1997) mirroring a situation in which an individual has too much to accomplish and not enough time. As a result, high levels of workload may lead to psychological preoccupation with unfinished work, even when an individual is trying to accomplish the demands of another role, in this case the student role. Thus, past research documents that high levels workload is likely to cause

psychological and physical fatigue that may weaken an individual's ability or motivation to meet the demands of other roles (Frone et al., 1997). Consequently, we hypothesized that professional workload would be positively related to work-school conflict and this relation is mediated by psychological detachment from work.

Method

Sample and Procedure

To take part in the study individuals should work at least 20 hours per week and should be enrolled full-time in a master program. Sample was composed by 152 working-students, 88 women and 64 men, enrolled as fulltime students in evening and weekend master programs from a higher education institution from the center of Portugal. Students were asked to participate after the goals of the study were explained and the participation criteria were clarified via email. Students who were willing to participate were then asked for their availability to complete a survey after classes. Research assistants distributed and collected the questionnaires after classes or during the class break.

Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 52 years old ($M_{age}=34.42$, $SD=1.36$). The majority were single (67%), 30% were either married or living with a partner and 3% were divorced. For the employment status, 59% reported working in full-time job (from 35 to 40 hours/week) and 41% in a part-time job (working at least 20 hours/week). The participants reported spending an average of 12 weekly hours ($SD= 2.21$) attending classes and an average of six weekly hours ($SD=1.27$) studying and preparing class team work assignments.

Measures

Because all of the scales in the survey were written in English, a back translation procedure was used. First, bilingual speakers translated the survey from English into Portuguese. Second, different bilingual speakers then translated these scales back into English. Some discrepancies in the translated scales were then discussed and corrected.

Professional Work Load

Professional Work load was measured with five items scored on a 5-point Likert scale, (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Items used were taken from the time pressure scale developed by Zapf (1993). Sample items were "How often do you work under time pressure?" and "How often does it happen that you do not take a break or take a break late because of a high amount of work?" Varimax factor analysis of the five items used in this study showed a unidimensional scale with an acceptable reliability score (Cronbach's alpha was .78).

Work-to-School Conflict

Work-to-school conflict was measured with 6 items adapted from the Work-to-Family Conflict Scale by Carlson *et al.* (2000), a self-report questionnaire scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). To measure work-to-school conflict, the family-related

wording was changed to school-related (i.e., work was changed to school and supervisor to instructor). Sample item “I have to miss school activities due to the amount of time I must spend on work responsibilities” and “The time I must devote to my work keeps me from participating in school responsibilities and activities”. Varimax factor analysis of the five items used this study showed a unidimensional scale. The reliability score calculated showed a Cronbach’s alpha of .82. which is considered good.

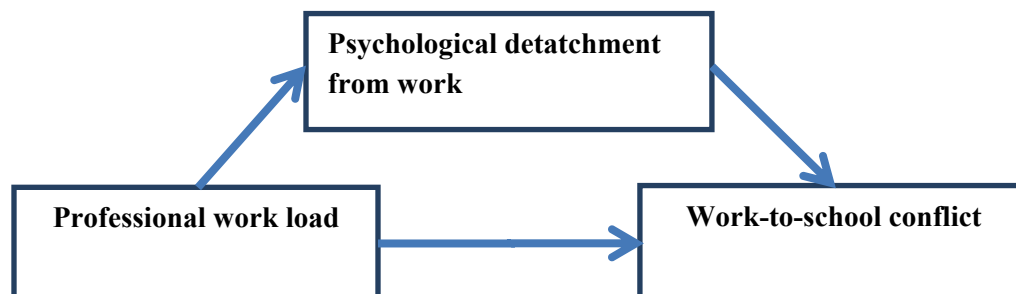
Psychological detachment from work

Psychological detachment was measured with four items from a sub-scale of psychological detachment taken from the Recovery Questionnaire developed by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007). Items had to be answered on a 5-point Likert scale, (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Sample items were: “During evenings, I gain distance to my job requirements” and “During evenings, I don’t think about work at all”. Varimax factor analysis of the four items showed a unidimensional scale with a good reliability score (Cronbach’s alpha was .81).

Analytic strategy

A path analysis was conducted by testing the hypothesized model depicted on Figure 1 through examining the relation of the antecedent variable, professional work load and the outcome variable work-to-school conflict, considering psychological detachment from work as a mediating variable. Following the recommendations of Kline (2011), the overall fit of the hypothesized model was evaluated based on the following set of indices and their reference values for an acceptable fit: ratio $\chi^2/g. 1. < 5$ (Arbuckle, 2008); Bentler Comparative Fit Index – CFI > 0.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation - RMSEA < 0.08 (Arbuckle, 2008) and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual - SRMR < 0.10 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Figure 1. Theoretical Model



Results

Table 1 shows the means, SDs and intercorrelations among the study variables.

The proposed theoretical path model showed in Figure 1 was tested using AMOS 20 (Arbuckle, 2011). This model showed a good fit to the data: $\chi^2/df = 1.275$, $p < .001$; GFI= .96, RMSEA $<.001$, CFI= .97 and TLI= .95. As hypothesized professional work load was not

significantly related to work-to-school conflict. ($\beta = .18$; $p = .134$). Professional work load was negatively related psychological detachment from work ($\beta = .61$; $p < .001$) and psychological detachment from work was negatively related with work-to-school conflict ($\beta = .59$; $p < .001$).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3
1. Psychological detachment from work	4,22	1,31	-		
2. Professional work load	4,13	1,45	.45**	-	
3. Work-to-school conflict	3,64	1,14	.69**	.31*	-

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate, with a sample of working-students enrolled in a master program, the relationship between professional work load and work-to-school conflict, considering the mediating effect of psychological detachment from work. This study extends the currently literature on work and school relations by directly testing the mediating effect of psychological dimension related with work calling the attention for the importance of other work related factors associated with work-to-school conflict that, so far, did not have been considered in other studies.

The present study provide evidence that professional work load is related with the work-to-school conflict with psychological detachment from work as an mediating variable in the process. The results clarifies that work-to-school conflict reflects a process whereby demands in the work domain deplete personal resources, which in return results in diminished outcomes in the school domain. More specifically, our contribution indicates that working-students who experience professional work load face depletion of personal resources like time and energy to devote to student role. According to Sonnentag and Bayer (2005) when facing high work load one will feel strained from work when being at way from work and it is difficult to psychologically detach oneself from work. Having too many things to do and not having enough time to do them can lead to exhaustion which may prevent one from adequately participating other roles. Work overload may lead to psychological preoccupation with one role, such that even while an individual is physically in the second role, he or she is mentally concerned about the first role. In this case psychologically detachment from work is difficult and this might add strain that can account for the perception of work-to-school conflict. This result corresponds with the assumption that psychological detachment from work is concept that claims that being physically away from the workplace in not enough to psychologically detach oneself from job-related tasks (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006). Furthermore research identified the importance of moving beyond number of work hours, such as work load, that may affect school-related outcomes other than absence or class cutting (Markel & Frone, 1998). Turning into the work-family literature research claimed about the importance of mediating factors, such as employee's physical and psychological well-being in the analysis of work-family conflict (Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1997). Along with the effects on work-to-

school conflict working students' ability to "switch-off" from work seems to play an important role in work-to-school conflict.

Limitations and Future Research

The results from the study need to be considered in the light of some limitations. The first limitation of this study concerns its cross-sectional, using a sample of a single higher education institution. The generalizability of the results is thereby limited. Hence, we encourage to test the model with larger samples, from diverse higher institutions and master programs. Second, in this study we focused on professional work load and work-to-school conflict and the possible impact of psychological detachment from work as mediator. Future research is needed in order gain a broader insight about the workplace dimensions that account for the perception of workload, as well as their relation with low psychological detachment from work during off-job hours. It would also be interesting to conduct a similar study with students who are employees that make the decision to go back to school to learn particular skills, as opposed to the participants in the current sample that, in are mixed: some work full-time others work part-time. In fact, in the sample we can have two different employment status and this can be translated into different burdens of coping with dual roles, at the physical and psychologically levels. Future research should also explore deeper not only work related dimensions but also individual related factors that act as barriers to psychology detach from work. Future studies should also include school related factors and test for possible relations that include also school-to-work conflict. Using a longitudinal design can also provide a deeper insight about the persistence of this effects during the course of the master program and during specific periods (eg. during exams). Although working students face challenges in terms of combing work with study, enrollment in graduate school is growing in numbers in the light of their future career potential. Hence, working-students themselves need to be aware of these possible negative effects. Moreover, the findings of this study call the attention for the important to create work environments that support working-students in reducing work-to-school conflict and that help working-students to maintain positive involvement with postgraduate school enhancing their career prospects. Working students may benefit from human resources policies, at their workplaces that are "school friendly" based on work environments that support career development as an important and challenging goal both workers and organizations (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2015).

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