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Work-Family Interface - An Anomie Theory Perspective

Abstract

With organisations, as social institutions, becoming increasingly diverse and multi-cultural, understanding organisational behaviour from a cultural perspective is becoming increasingly important. Using institutional anomie theory, this paper explores the influence of culture on Work Family Interface.

Keywords: work-family, culture, institutional anomie

Introduction

The idea of culture conjures a great deal of interest amongst academics and practitioners. For academics, culture serves as a conceptual bridge between micro and macro levels of organisational analysis in addition to linking organisational behaviour to strategic management interests. For practitioners, it provides a less rationalistic way of making sense of the organisational world. Over a decade ago, Smircich (1983) examined the significance of the concept of culture for organisational analysis by demonstrating that the concept of culture takes organisational analysis into several directions. Others have called for a reframing of the literature exploring cultural perspectives on aspects of organisational behaviour such as the work-family (WF) construct (Spector, Cooper, Poelmans, Allen, O’Driscoll, Sanchez, Siu, Dewe, Hart & Lu, 2004, Korabik, Lero & Ayman, 2003). The growing cultural diversity represented in the workforce has heightened the relevance of balancing work and family roles (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 1997, Googins, 1997, Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1986, 1994). These developments have greatly increased the complexities of the interface between work and family, noting that WF and the influence of national cultural background are often inextricably intertwined, rather than completely separable entities that have no observable effects on one another.
Here we aim to extend research from a WF embeddedness perspective by calling attention to a rich and relevant body of literature that remains relatively untapped by academics and practitioners: the anomic influence of culture on WF interface. There are at least three reasons for integrating cultural research into WF interface construct and mechanisms: First, numerous studies indicate that the desire to attain a better balance between WF is influenced by cultural influences and social changes in family structure (Parasuram & Greenhaus, 2002). Second, other studies reveal that the achievement of WF balance remains an important goal and success criterion, well beyond the start up decision (e.g. Fischer, Reuber & Dyke, 1993; Orser & Riding, 2004). Third, research demonstrates that cultural background in the family domain has important consequences for the work domain (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Lambert, 1990; Powell & Graves, 2003), suggesting that models of WF processes and outcomes are, to an extent, incomplete without attention given to the influence of culture.

In addressing these issues, we introduce institutional anomie theory, developed by Messner & Rosenfeld (2001; Rosenfeld & Messner, 1997) as an innovative approach to guide our understanding of how both organisations, as social institutions, and culture affect the WF construct. We then proceed to provide a brief overview of the WF interface literature followed by a discussion on how culture may be perceived as an anomic pressure causing a spill over effect of family on work and work on family, thereby causing a state of imbalance or disequilibrium.

**Institutional anomie theory**

Institutional anomie theory is a sociological theory that explains deviance in social units on the basis of specific social and cultural values (Cullen, Parboteeah & Hoegl, 2004). The classical sociological notion of anomie has long been a conceptual tool to understand the relationship between social structures, culture and deviant behaviour. The sociological theory of anomie (Durkheim, 1893/1964, 1897/1966) provides the theoretical
roots for institutional anomie theory. Durkheim observed that institutional and cultural changes associated with modernisation encourages a decline in social controls that are based on family and social relationships. The result is anomie— the weakening of norms—and, in turn, increased rates of deviance in behaviour which spills over other areas of organisational life. Extending from Durkheim, Merton (1968) noted a pressure for deviance both in the institutional structure of society and in cultural values. Merton however focused on culture that emphasises achieving ends over legitimacy of the means to achieve these ends. On a cultural level, Merton, emphasises the lack of equilibrium between the means and ends of action. Anomie is caused by the imbalance that results when cultural goals (e.g., family spilling over work) are overemphasised at the expense of institutionalised means. Merton went on to argue that choice of a deviant means to achieve an end is particularly likely when a social stratification system prevents people from goal achievement in areas encouraged by cultural factors. On a similar note, Orru (1987) explains the features of anomie theory in reference to varying cultural orientations, example, social and cultural conditions in America differ greatly from Europe or Asia. It therefore attempts to comprehensively account for the interplay between the ‘fundamental’ features of social organisation, namely, culture and social structures-specific cultural values give rise to anomic pressures. Virtually all this work has employed a single explanatory model for the analysis of anomy: a specified socio-cultural condition which gives rise to specified feelings in individuals which in turn results in specified ‘deviant’ behaviour or behaviour that otherwise is considered to cause some sense of disequilibrium. Thus institutional anomie theory specifies both social institutions and cultural factors that affect behaviour (Cohen, 1965).

We contend that institutional anomie theory and its precursors provide strong theoretical and empirical explanations of organisational behaviour termed ‘deviant’. Whilst most prior research has focussed on outcomes generally accepted as deviant behaviour, we attempt to rather focus on variables, such as culture, in the reasoning process that lead to this state of disequilibrium in the WF interface.
An overview of the WFI Literature

Given our overarching interest in raising awareness of culture and WF interface research, we provide a brief overview of this rich & relevant literature. An exhaustive examination of all international WF literature is beyond the scope of this conference paper. We structure and limit our review to the relevant international literature that includes or covers a minimal analysis of culture, as a variable in the WF construct. As academic tradition requires, it is our intention to later extend this paper to include and focus on other family-work studies. We have attempted to include most applicable international research.

Work-family conflict is a form of interrole conflict that occurs when pressures associated with membership in one role interferes with membership in another (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964; Frone, 2003). It is defined as a ‘form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect’ (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985:77). Social science researchers have devoted considerable attention to examining the interrelationships between work and family. The growing diversity of family structures has heightened the relevance of balancing work with family. These developments have increased the complexities of the interface between work and family (Parasuram & Greenhaus, 2002). Therefore the WF interface is more complex than was envisaged initially. According to Barling & Sorenson (1997), changes in the nature of organisations, as social institutions, as well as social changes in family structure, have rendered much of the research-based knowledge of the interface of WF, outdated. Against the backdrop of these changes, and the projected growth in migration of workers across boundaries and cultures in the 21st century and the future, it is appropriate to assess the gaps in our knowledge.

Research to date, has been useful in explaining many of the relationships between family and work domains. The different perspectives studied by researchers have enriched the field, and have provided valuable insights into some facets of WF interface. However
variations in the conceptualisations, measurements, theorising, and application of variables across studies have contributed to discrepant results reported and the incomplete knowledge of WF connections. The main focal construct in the WF literature has been based on the experiences of the intersection between work and family.

*Experiences of the WF interface*

There are two competing perspectives regarding individuals’ experiences of the WF interface. The one view is known as the enhancement perspective (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). The essence of this view is that multiple roles can be beneficial with the potential of positive spill overs of behaviours.

The dominant view is known as the conflict perspective (Greenhaus & Bartuell, 1985). The essence of this view is that because work and family demands are mutually incompatible, the WF interface experience is inevitably perceived as problematic and fraught with tension. Proponents of this perspective tend to examine the degree of WF conflict experienced by individuals (Huang, Hammer, Neal & Perrin, 2004; Milkie & Peltola, 1999) as well as the spill over of negative emotions and behaviour from one domain to another (Sumer & Knight, 2001; Williams & Alliger, 1994). Embedded within the institutional anomie theory, one type of WF conflict identified is behaviour based conflict which results when the behaviours required in one domain are incompatible with those required in the other resulting in anomic or deviant behaviour. This conflict perspective has dominated the research on WF dynamics for the past twenty-five years (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 1997). The conflict perspective is embedded within the resource based theory in that it assumes that time and energy are fixed and that individuals who participate in multiple roles inevitably experience conflict between roles. This theoretical explanation has been reinforced by observations of individuals who are struggling to balance their work and family responsibilities (Marks, 1997; American Institute of certified Public Accountants, 1992).
Despite the negativity associated with WF research; there is also a vast body of research that has made valuable contributions into the WF construct.

Much of this research has focused on the determinants, such as time, gender, work stress, economics, social, technological and psychological factors with little or no attention given to national culture as an influential variable in the reasoning process (Spector, Allen, Poelmans, Lapierre, Cooper, O’Driscoll, Sanchez, Abarca, Alexandrova, Beham, Brough, Ferreiro, Fraile, Lu, Lu, Velazquez & Pagon, 2007; Lee & Hui, 1999; Joplin, Shaffer, Francesco & Lau, 2003).

**Integrating WF Interface into the Cultural literature**

To further the case of integrating WF factors into the cultural literature, we develop a conceptual model illustrating how the WF interface construct described above is influenced by national culture (represented as an anomic pressure), causing a spill over of family onto work. Although individuals within cultures will vary in terms of their cultural values and orientations, various cultural models and frameworks provide norms that are useful in describing and understanding organisational behaviour.

Following on the research of Yang, Cheng, Choi & Zhou (2000), we adopt individualism-collectivism (I-C) as the core element of our theoretical analysis because comparative research on WF interface finds support for it and also because it is a construct well researched in cross-cultural and cross national studies.

Cultural influences have been a major cornerstone of organisational behaviour and cross cultural studies. Underlying assumptions are that culture influences how individuals perceive feel and behave (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). Although individuals within cultures will vary in terms of their cultural values and orientations, various cultural models and frameworks provide norms that are useful in describing and understanding organisational behaviour. There have been few empirically based studies done linking work demands to work family variables in culturally dissimilar
countries (Yang, Chen, Choi & Zou, 2000; Yang, 2005; Spector, et al, 2004; Lu, Gilmore, Kao & Huang, 2006; Joplin, et al, 2003). However, the results of these investigations have proved to be inconsistent, indicating that much more needs to be done to study country differences.

An important cultural orientation that varies across nations is individualism – collectivism (I-C). Individualistic societies are societies in which people’s primary concern tends to be with the self, emphasising personal achievement and independence. Using Hofstede’s analysis, Anglo and western countries are considered individualistic (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). The United Kingdom, seen as an individualistic country is also perceived as a country where excessive workloads spill over family. This is not the case with a collective country such as Taiwan (Spector, et al, 2007). In accordance with arguments made by Yang, et al (2000), people in individualistic societies will view work demands as competing with family, whereas people in collectivistic societies will not. In individualistic societies, this sort of conflict may very well lead to family resentment and anomic pressure leading to deviant behaviour. Thus the individualist will view the needs of the self and the family as distinct and will experience conflict when there are demands made by both. Therefore the work and family domains are seen as exerting competing demands where addressing one will likely be at the expense of the other. As a result, when work time demands are high, individualists are bound to experience higher levels of work-family stressors and consequent strain than are collectivists (Spector, et al 2004). However when collectivistic moves across borders to an individualistic country, the WF stressors will be significantly higher due to the absence of the extended family support. This also means that the economic cycles imply that both adults must be employed to meet financial obligations.

In contrast, people in collectivistic societies see themselves as part of social networks including extended families and groups, emphasising interconnectedness with others and giving priority to family consecutiveness over individual needs. Therefore work roles are seen as serving the needs of the in group rather than the individual. People that put extra effort into their work will only do so with the support of their family. According to Yang (et al, 2000),

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work demands are greater in China than in Unites States, therefore the chances are greater for a stronger connection between WF conflict and work demands in China.

In Unites States, excessive work hours are seen as family neglect and viewed negatively. This then should produce a positive enhancement between work hours and WF interface. In order to provide a more definitive comparison of I-C societies, Spector, et al (2004), studied clusters of predominantly I-C countries and found support that work hours tend to compete for family hours in I-C countries due to their varying cultural differences. A characteristic of collectivistic societies is the availability of domestic help. Whereas people in individualistic societies tend to reside in nuclear families, collectivistic societies tend to extend their families comprising more generations. Also collectivistic societies tend to value highly, responsibility towards the elderly. Reductions in family demands may be due to greater access to domestic assistance due to greater income disparities. In addition, the centrality of family in collectivistic societies such as Hong Kong constitutes a major source of life satisfaction and activities that interfere with this facet of their lives will result in diminished levels of life satisfaction. According to one study including the influence of ‘utilitarian familism’ on WF, 64% of women and 59% of men in Hong Kong worry about how their work hours affect their personal life, as compared to 40% of British and 40% of Americans (Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002). Therefore the intrusion of work responsibilities on family may be perceived as more difficult to resolve in such societies. The differences in I-C societies therefore lead to expected differences in how family demands might lead to anomic pressure on the WF interface.

Therefore, the likely outcome of a collectivist person moving across borders and accepting employment in a highly individualistic society may be in the form of:

a) Economic pressures;
b) Social pressures;
c) Technological influences; and
d) Cultural influences.
This leads to our main broad proposition at this stage of study:

**Proposition 1**: Cross national work assignments will moderate the relation between WF stresses leading to anomic pressure and deviant behaviour; WF stress will be more significant when a collectivist moves across borders to an individualistic society.

As there has been very little comparative research upon which to base this proposition, this aspect of the study, at this stage, is exploratory.

**Revisiting Institutional Anomie Theory**

Institutional Anomie theory specifies certain arrangements that give rise to the emergence of anomic behaviour. This pressure emerges from institutional conditions that are a defining feature of modern society. The central tenet of this theory is that economic dominance stimulates the emergence of anomie at the cultural level (Bernburg, 2002). Messner and Rosenfeld’s portrayal of America is as an institutionally imbalanced society with primacy according to economic roles over familial, arguing that this imbalance generates ‘anomie’ or normlessness (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1997). While institutional anomie theorists argue that ‘the claims of economic roles are typically honoured at the expense of non-economic roles when conflicts occur’, it can be argued that a primary motivation for work is maintenance of the family and that societies that accord importance to family will tend to accord importance to work. Institutional anomie theory provides no evidence that conflicts are resolved in favour of the pursuit of wealth when other non-economic roles are jeopardised (Jensen, 2002). Recognising the limitations of institutional anomie theory vis-à-vis Merton- and the limitations of Merton vis-à-vis Institutional anomie theory, we believe that it is nevertheless an appropriate theory in that it calls our attention to societal processes with consequences such as deviant behaviour. This important contribution can inform empirical research on changes in institutional environments across societies and time periods.
There is certainly no dearth of evidence that culture influences the nature of WF conflict, however there is relatively few studies that have surfaced around how people accepting international assignments as well as individuals who migrate permanently to a country that has essentially a different cultural orientation to their own country, are affected by the WF intersection leading to anomic pressure. It is also unknown to what degree WF models are applicable to developing / less affluent countries.

This paper sought to briefly examine the influence of culture on the mechanisms through which experiences in the WF system influences employee behaviour. The purpose of this study was to begin exploring how WF experiences, affect individuals working across borders. At this early stage of study we believe that it is a plausible assumption that ‘if one’s work related problems and responsibilities begin to interfere with the accomplishment of one’s family related obligations, these unfulfilled family obligations may begin to interfere with ones day to day functioning at work causing anomic pressure from one domain to spill over into the other domain’. This will especially be the case when individuals migrate or work in a culturally different society to one they are used to.

**Summary and Conclusion**

It is clear that the WF construct has different significance and importance in different cultures. Therefore there are several reasons why cross cultural studies are important. First, with globalisation, the world is becoming increasingly confronted with employees with diverse cultural and socio-demographic backgrounds. These varying meanings of WF are determined by cultural and social factors, causing different anomic pressure or tension between work and family. This may be due to contradicting or ambiguous expectations which will certainly have consequences for organisational behaviour. In addition to having different expectations, individuals may cope in dissimilar ways. This phenomenon is especially true for individuals (with family) accepting international assignments. Second, many western democracies have been developing family friendly policies in order to alleviate the anomic
behaviour caused by the tension between work and family. However research seems to indicate that in addition to universally valid policies and practices, a contingent approach is necessary to address the varying needs of individuals (Poelmans, Spector, Cooper, Allen, O’Driscoll & Sanchez, 2003).

In our view it is critical that researchers and policy makers appreciate how different national cultural backgrounds shape the need for and likelihood of workplace modifications. Reports of such effects are only beginning to be published. Australia’s background report for the OECD review of family friendly policies (2002) is noted as exemplifying this.

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