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UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS OF WORK - FAMILY INTERFACE THROUGH THE BOUNDARY THEORY: A REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Balancing of work life and family life has emerged as a major challenge before the modern workforce and it is against this backdrop, research studies on Work-Life Balance (WLB) are gaining importance. This research paper makes an attempt to focus on understanding how modern employees manage their boundaries in order to strike a balance between the demands of work and home life. An attempt was made to evaluate the various research studies that were conducted across the globe by linking them to the relevance of the boundary theory. Boundary theory focuses on the ways in which people create, maintain, or change boundaries in order to simplify and classify the world around them. Although several theories are abound on explaining the balance between work and home, research studies on boundary theories are gaining importance against the backdrop of Globalization.

KEYWORDS

Boundary Theory, Work-Family Conflict, Work-Family Fit, Work-Family Interface and Work-Life Balance.

INTRODUCTION

The forces of Globalization and technology have brought profound changes into the ways people work in the modern organizational scenarios. In this context, several research studies have indicated that modern employees are currently working in office environments which are typically characterized by boundary less organizations and virtual workspaces. The issue of work-life balance has pervaded the business community for decades (Parsons, 2002; Spinks, 2004), and organization have responded with work-life policies to address the issues raised by their employees (Roberts, 2005). It has been agreed by several HR experts that work life and family life are inter-linked and interdependent (Carruthers, 2005). Balancing of work life and family life has become a major issue for today's workforce and it is against this backdrop, research studies on work-life balance are gaining importance. Intersection of work and family life is considered as work-life interface (MacDermid, 2005).

Several researchers made an attempt to address the issue of Work Life Balance (WLB) by linking it to the issue of work-home conflict component. Although research on the spillover and compensation models continues to be widely reported to understand the perspectives on WLB (Guest, 2001), the conflict model is most often used (Zedeck & Mosier, 1990; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Work and family conflict is considered as bi-directional, that is, work can interfere with family-life contributing to Work-family Conflict (WFC), and similarly family can interfere with work-life contributing to Family-Work Conflict (FWC) (Frone, 2003; Grzywacz & Bass, 2003). There mainly two aspects which are linked with work and life balance; first it is lack of time and scheduling conflicts, and the other is feeling overloaded or stressed by the pressures of multiple roles (Crooker, Smith & Tabak, 2002; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). According to Guest (2001) the conflict model proposes that with high levels of demand in all spheres of life and work, individuals has to make some difficult choices which may lead to work-life conflict. Individual working in any organization/industry feel additional stress when they decide what they feel is best for their families or what is best for their career (Poelmans, 2001; Jones et al., 2006; and Kossek & Distelberg, 2009). Some the negative consequences of WFC or FWC include psychological strain (Frone, 2003; Grzywacz and Bass, 2003), decreased job satisfaction, a diminishing impact on work performance (Frye and Breaugh, 2004; Aryee et al, 2005; Bass et al, 2008), and reduced marital satisfaction (Jones et al, 2006).

It is interesting to note that there is an abundance of literature review on WFC issues across the globe by using diverse samples from over a dozen countries (MacDermid, 2005). In line with the global research studies on the dynamics of work and home adjustment problems, WFC issue has been linked to other HR outcomes like stress, turnover, absenteeism, burnout, and dissatisfaction with job, family, and life (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Kreiner, 2006; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992). In this context, research study conducted by Kreiner (2006), has addressed the limitation of using the term "work-home conflict" (as opposed to "work-family conflict") and made an effort to redefine the terminology to incorporate the wide array of organizational dynamics. Work-home conflict occurs when the obligations and responsibilities of work and family roles become mismatched. Obligation of one can force an individual to neglect the other. Kreiner (2006) argued that studying this conflict is important, yet researching the outcome of work-home conflict alone helps us to understand achieving balance at organizational level, with an emphasis on studying human resource policies (such as family-friendly benefits, flexibility in work system, etc.). Recent research (Aryee S, Srinivas & Tan, 2005; Kreiner, 2006; Poelmans, Kalliath & Brough, 2008) has therefore begun to refocus attention on individual-level processes, as individuals play a fundamental role in affecting work-family outcomes. Hence this empirical study is taken to explore and understand the dynamics of work-family interface through the boundary theory.

WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE

Regardless of a growing multidisciplinary literature unfortunately the work-family interface is not well understood (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Jones et al, 2006). An increasing number of contemporary women and men are finding themselves involved in work and family arrangements which has directed to development of WLB (Guest, 2001). According to Kalliath & Brough (2008), one of the important dimensions to achieve WLB is to understand the interface between the work and family. Researchers (Aryee et al, 1999; Brady, 2002; Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000) framed the work-family interface as a socially

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constructed boundary between the life domains of work and family. Some work-family interfaces are studied through researching on conflict, strain, role pressure, incompatibility, overload, and spillover. Within the work-family interface, researchers study work-family relationship using a variety of terms and concepts, such as work-family conflict, work-family spillover, and work-home balance (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Work-life balance and Work-family fit are two additional dimensions of the work-family interface (Kreiner, 2006). Several studies on work/life conflict and the work-family interfaces used bi-directional method to measures the problems, but such method were very not effective to understand the work-family interface and determines solutions for work-family conflict. So, Matthews, Kath, and Barnes-Farrell (2010) constructed a multidimensional aspect of work-family interface (i.e., time, behavior, and strain based conflict). Consequently despite an almost exclusive focus on conflict, separate but related bodies of research suggest that the work-family interface can be characterized as both negative and positive (Hughes & Parkes, 2007). Some HR experts have observed that the widely accepted way to understand work/family interactions is to examine the transitions between the two domains of work and home through the boundary theory (Kossek & Lambert, 2005, Poelmans, 2005). Among various dimensions of work-life interface two recently identified dimensions like work life balance and work-family fit are taken into consideration for this study to understand the work family interface.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE (WLB)

Some of the traditional thinkers on WLB have observed that, creating and handling a balance between the work and family life was considered to be a woman's issue, but growing work pressures, globalization and technological advancement have made it not limited to woman's issues only (Roberts, 2005). Throughout the World, people are working at different levels in different organizations/industries and they face some work-life conflict (Ayman, & Antani, 2008) and achieving WLB is not as simple as it sounds (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002; MacDermid, 2005; Kossek & Lambert, 2005).

HR studies have addressed the challenges that are currently being faced by modern employees with regard to the issue of balancing between work and home life. According to Kalliath and Brough (2008), WLB can be defined as "the individual perception that work and non-work activities are compatible and promote growth in accordance with an individual's current life priorities" (p. 326). Greenhaus and Allen (2011) recommended a new definition of WLB as they equate work-life balance with the harmonious arrangement of work and family so that "effectiveness and satisfaction in these roles are consistent with life values" (p. 175). While it is obvious that in some situation, stress from one life setting (e.g., work or family) may spillover and weaken functioning in another. Although several research studies were conducted on understating the dynamics of work life balance, fewer studies have addressed the work life balance problem from the perspective of boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000).

WORK FAMILY FIT

Voydanoff (2005) views work-family fit in terms of demands and resources, arguing that the extent to which people feel there is a "fit" between their work and family domains depends on whether there is a fit between work demands and family resources and between family demands and work resources. (Boles, Howard, & Donofirio, 2001) noted that people tend to have consistent styles of dealing with home/work transitions, and these styles are affected by factors such as gender, type of work, and career stage. Further it was also noted that modern organizations are becoming more proactive in helping employees manage their home and work boundaries more effectively (Cooper & Murphy, L. 2000). In other words, examining the work/home relationship in terms of boundaries and transitions is instrumental in generating ideas that often run counter to traditional prescriptions of striking a balance between work and home (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Many employees are experiencing increased stress due to long working hours and overwork load; such situation is seen in nearly all occupations (Dex & Bond, 2005; Poelmans, 2008). On the other hand employer experience a rise in workplace violence, increased levels of absenteeism and deteriorating work performance (Voydanoff, 2007). All of these show the evidence of an unhealthy work life balance. As a result, the question arises as to whether career bound people are able to maintain a satisfactory work home balance.

Research studies conducted by Desrochers & Sargent (2003); Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer (2007) indicate that work family fit helps to understand looking at the daily transitions that people make as they cross the boundaries between work and home. The idea is that the best way to understand how the two domains affect each other is to look at them in their interface from angle of work-family fit (Clark, 2000), as these transitions between work and home capture the major issues in the general relationship between the two domains. Transitions across either with physical more from one domain to the other (the start to the end of the working day), or with the psychological shift that occurs when a person is physically in one domain and comes mentally concerned with the other. The former is called planned transitions and the other is termed as interposed transitions (Voydanoff, 2005).

BOUNDARY THEORY

Work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) and boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000) address the integration and blurring of boundaries in work and family life. These theories contribute to the study of work-family relationships by relating the conditions under which varying degrees of work-family integration are likely to improve or diminish individual well-being. Both address how people create, negotiate, manage and cross boundaries or borders, the "lines of demarcation" (Clark, 2000) between work and family. This article examines the Clark's Work-family border theory more closely.

The Work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) argues that people are daily border-crossers as they move between home and work. Work-family border theory not only restricts to work and family domains, the focus and outcome of this theory is work and home balance. Work and home balance refers to 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home, with a minimum of role conflict' (Clark, 2000, p. 751). The definition of borders includes not only those psychological categories but also tangible boundaries that divide the times, place and people associated with work versus family (Desrochers & Sargent, 2003).
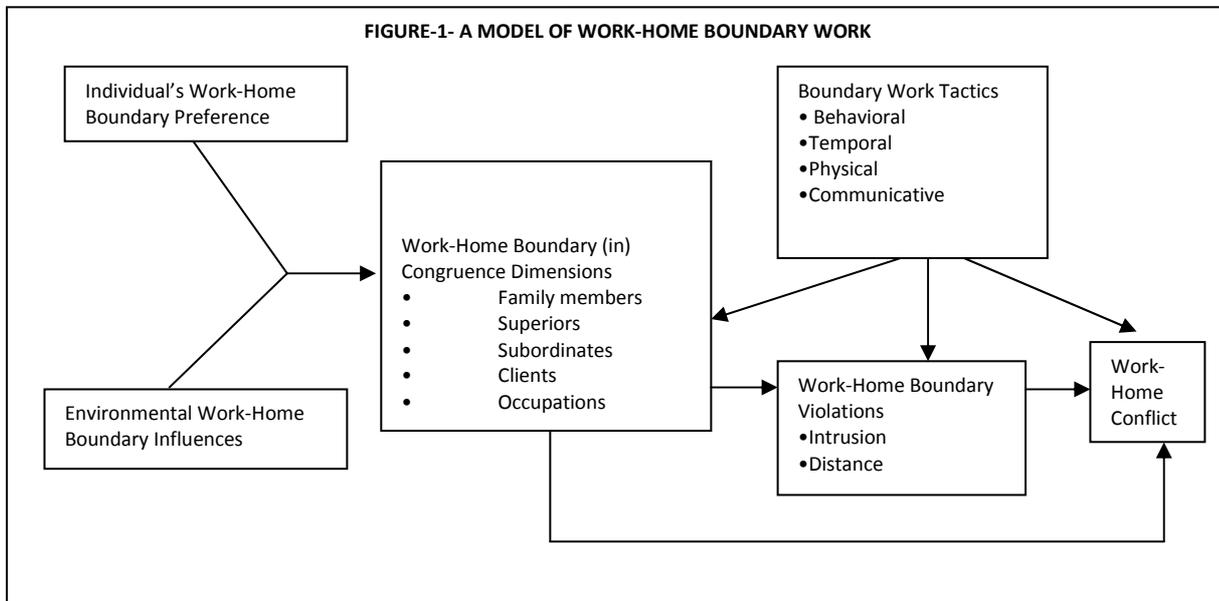
According to Clark (2000), work-family border theory "explains how individuals manage and negotiate the work and family spheres and the borders between them in order to attain balance. Central to this theory is the idea that 'work' and 'family' constitute different domains or spheres which influence each other. Given their contrasting purposes and cultures, work and home can be likened to two different countries where there are differences in language or word use, differences in what constitutes acceptable behavior, and differences in how to accomplish tasks" (p. 750-751) (Desrochers et al, 2005, citing Clark). The theory addresses how domain integration and segmentation, border creation and management, border-crosser participation, and relationships between border-crossers and others at work and home influence work/family balance.

The theory discusses a set of propositions (Clark, 2000; Kreiner, 2006) that is firstly keeping work and family separate makes it easier to manage work-family borders; secondly integrating work and family facilitates transitions between these domains and thirdly either strategy can improve the well-being of employees, depending on the characteristics of employees (e.g., time management skills, being a "self starter", or social influence at home and work). The theory discusses to what extent, an employee or individual prefer between integration and segmentation, which can be implied that an employees or individual manage their work-family interface via work-life policies, this implication is drawn based on the contextual factors discussed in the theory (Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006). For e.g., "family friendly" workplace norms and policies, long or irregular work hours, or social support from supervisors, coworkers and family help employees or individuals to create boundaries, that are clearer and more easily maintained when roles are separated (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Kreiner, 2006). The analysis of borders can support to focus on how far individuals are in control of issues determining balance in work and life.

RELEVANCE OF THE BOUNDARY THEORY

Boundary theory focuses on the ways in which people create, maintain, or change boundaries in order to simplify and classify the world around them (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Of late, boundary theory has been successfully applied in diverse organizational contexts in a multidisciplinary manner by linking it to art, architecture, psychology, political science, organization theory, and anthropology theories. Boundary theory emerged as a major response to answer a wide variety of research questions, which include those areas dealing with role transitions (Ashforth et al., 2000); the healthiness of interpersonal relationships (Kossek, & Distelberg, 2009) and the interface between individual and organizational identity (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). Boundary theory has grown tremendously over the years and did not limit itself to the boundaries of a given domain (e.g., a role, a country, a home, a workplace).

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Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep (2009) developed a grounded model of work-home boundary work and specified their findings, to show various dimensions of work-boundary incongruence and it was found that individual preferences for work-home segmentation or integration combine with environmental influences (such as work and home climates and other individual preference). The model then discusses how work-home incongruence leads to boundary violations and work-home conflict. The boundary violations also lead to work-home conflict and individuals invoke boundary work procedures to reduce and manage incongruence, violations and conflict (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep (2009) model (as presented in Figure-1) on work-home boundary work was developed to understand the dynamics of WLB through boundary issues. The model discusses how work-home incongruence leads to boundary violations and work-home conflict. The boundary violations also lead to work-home conflict and individuals invoke boundary work procedures to reduce and manage incongruence, violations and conflict. Literatures relating to work-family life (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Kossek, & Distelberg, 2009; Clark, 2000; Kreiner, 2006) have recognized the importance of employees' degree of control over how they perform their work and how they manage their multiple roles and responsibilities.

FIGURE-1- A MODEL OF WORK-HOME BOUNDARY WORK

Researchers have long acknowledged that work and family are not "separate spheres", but are interdependent domains or roles with "permeable" boundaries (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010; Williams & Alliger, 1994). Some have gone beyond recognizing this linkage to advocate initiatives that allow working families to integrate these domains (e.g., Hansen, 2002; Lero, & Lewis, 2008). According to Milkie et al (2010) the concepts of domain boundaries and role blurring have only recently been introduced into the work-family interface learning. The boundaries between work and family are viewed on a continuum ranging from segmentation to integration (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). High segmentation means that the boundary between employees' work and family roles is impermeable; that is, work and family exist as two distinct spheres (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Integration is believed to occur through two mechanisms: flexibility and permeability. Flexibility refers to the malleability of the boundary between two or more role/domains Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). An individual should have the ability to expand or contract or should be able to accommodate the demands of one domain or another (Clark, 2000; Hill, Darling, & Raimondi, 2003). Clark (2000) explains that if individuals are able understand their role/domains, the transitions difficulty is less, but they can also confound the demands of these roles, increasing the chance of imbalance in work and life. Work-family boundary ambiguity, is understood as the experience of confusion or difficulty in distinguishing one's work from one's family roles in a given setting in which these roles are seen as highly integrated, such as doing paid work at home (Desrochers, 2002). Permeability involves the extent to which a boundary allows psychological or behavioral aspects of one role or domain to enter another (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Hill, Darling, & Raimondi, 2003).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be inferred that work and family are not "separate spheres", but are interdependent roles within a prescribed boundary. Although there is an abundance of literature survey on how to evolve WLB, the relevance of boundary theory in explaining the work-home related conflicts is gaining importance in the modern organizational context. It has addressed the various issues that are related to work home influence and work family balance from a different perspective by focusing on contemporary issues. It has the potential to help modern organizations which are becoming more proactive in helping employees manage their home and work boundaries more effectively. The analysis of borders has the potential to guide modern employees in assessing how far the individuals are in control of the issues that have a bearing on the WLB issues.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research study has examined the basic issues that are related to the work-life interface and addressed the conflict between the work-family lives. However, this research study needs to be aligned with the cultural aspects of the work-life scenarios by linking it to the various levels of work-roles versus non-work roles and time preferences. There is greater scope for conducting an empirical study across middle-east countries in general and Oman in particular. Such empirical studies would enable the employee and organizations to draw a clear boundary between the work roles and non-work roles. The scope of the research may be enhanced by addressing the industry specific issues which may further help in developing an ideal framework for balancing work-life and family-life.

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