Sex Role Orientation, Work Family Conflict and Satisfaction of Married Working Couples

Uma Bhowon, Associate Professor

Nashad Auchoybur, Lecturer
Faculty of Social Studies & Humanities, University of Mauritius, Reduit, Mauritius.

Abstract

The study looked at sex role orientation and experience of work-family and family-work conflict and work and family satisfaction of ninety-nine married working couples. The aim was to match couples on their sex role attitudes and study the effect of similarity or differences in their attitudes on experiences of work-family conflict and satisfaction. Significantly more men than women reported having an egalitarian attitude. However, when couples were matched on sex role attitudes, there was more similarity than difference in their attitudes. Couples were therefore matched on low, moderate and high similarity. No significant differences were found between couple type and husbands and wives experience of work-family and family-work conflict and their satisfaction with work and family.

Keywords: Sex role orientation, work-family conflict, work and family satisfaction

Introduction

In the last two decades, economic and social changes across the world have led to dramatic shifts in the world of work and the family. One of the most striking change in the nature of work force and families is the steady rise in women’s participation in paid work across the world.

This change has introduced new challenges for most families (Davidson & Burke, 2004). Dual career-couples and working mothers with young children have increased the likelihood that both male and female employees will have substantial household obligations as well as major work responsibilities (Allen, Herst, Bruck & Sutton, 2000; Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg, 1998). Rosin (1990) defines dual- career status as a household where both spouses hold jobs that are personally salient, have a developmental sequence and require a high degree of commitment. This change however, has created both opportunities and challenges, mostly for females, as the primary responsibility for managing the home continues to rest with the women. Aldous (1981) avers that outside employment for a women in a dual -career marriage results in two careers or a double shift. The problem of the dual-earner couple has typically been framed as a women’s problem. However, traditional notions that the wife should stay at home and take care of the family while the husband should be the sole breadwinner have begun to decrease and more egalitarian notions have increased among both men and women (Botkins, Weeks, & Morris, 2000). In general, research shows some change in the traditional role of most women. One explanation for this comes from the gender role theory. Gender roles are shared cultural expectations which are performed by individuals based on their socially identified gender (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Kidder, 2002). Gender role theory suggests that “individuals internalize cultural expectations about their gender because social pressures external to the individual favour behavior consistent with their prescribed gender role” (Kidder, 2002, p.630). Gender role orientation is defined as a form of compliance with these expectations, or the degree to which one identifies with the traditional expectations of his or her gender roles (Livingston & Judge, 2008). In work family research, gender refers to biological sex, but gender role orientation addresses an attitudinal identification with a role and is distinct from gender itself (Hochschild, 1989; Larsen & Long, 1988) and beliefs individuals have about roles of men and women in fulfilling family and work responsibilities. Conceptually, gender role orientation is seen as ranging from traditional (distinct roles of men and women) to non-traditional or egalitarian (role sharing). Evidence suggests that men with egalitarian attitudes accepted more responsibility for childcare, meal preparation and cleaning than men who hold traditional attitudes (Bird, Bird & Scruggs, 1984). Perry-Jenkins and Crouter (1990) found that men’s attitudes are important predictors of household division of labour. High levels of role sharing are also found to be related to egalitarian ideologies (Haas, 1982), and men are more likely to share family roles if they are ideologically committed to it (Sibberstein, 1992). Much research suggests that attitudes affect only one’s own labour, with men’s attitudes affecting husband’s share of family work and women’s attitude affecting wives (Baxter, 1992; Huber & Spitz, 1983; Ross, 1987). However, some research finds that both partners’ attitudes influence wives and husbands labour (Baruch & Barnett, 1987; Hardey & Bokemeier 1989; Kamo, 1988). Atkinson and Huston (1984) found significant correlations between both husbands’ and wives’ gender role orientation and the proportional contributions of husbands to feminine tasks. In line with this, the first aim of the study is to examine gender role attitudes of married working couples. Our motivation for the study stems from an observation that the existing literature on work and family has not examined gender role orientation at the couple level and the consequence of similarity or differences in couples’ attitudes on work and family. Decisions regarding work and family are not taken in a vacuum and are subject to joint decision making and negotiations between the couple. In order to understand the experience of couples, their marital coexistence needs to be viewed as the psychological space within which people act. Specifically, this study looks at similarity (match) or differences (mismatch) in couples gender role orientation.
Another aspect of work-family important to couples is satisfaction – with work and with the family. Despite a growing body of literature on the link between couple similarity and satisfaction, the evidence is equivocal (Gaunt, 2006). While some studies find spousal similarity to be associated with greatest marital satisfaction (e.g. Blum & Mehrabian, 1999; Caspi and Herbener, 1990; Robins, Caspi & Moffitt, 2000; Russell & Wells, 1991), others have found no association between the two (Gliksohn & Golan, 2001). One reason is that most studies (e.g. Nemecek & Olson, 1999; Robbins et al, 2000) have focused exclusively on similarity in personality traits. Other important dimensions, such as, values, attitudes and beliefs have been largely ignored. Couples were matched on sex role attitudes because it is a key variable affecting various aspects of life such as personal adaptation and coping (Giankos, 2000; Kulik, 1999), and spousal dynamics such as intimacy, communication and power relations (Kitachiik, 2001). Following this, the third aim of the study is to examine the effect of similarity or differences in the sex role attitudes of couple on their work and family satisfaction. It is expected that couples who have similar sex role attitudes will have experiences of work family conflict and work and family satisfaction that are significantly different from couples who have different sex role attitudes.

Context of the Study

The social realities in Mauritius are changing with more and more women entering the work force. The joint family system is dismantling giving way to nuclear families. Dual-earner families are the norm rather than the exception. This has, on the one hand, given more choices to women but has, on the other hand, also increased burden, particularly familial responsibility. Although studies have been carried out on the work-family interface in Mauritius, none has specifically dealt with the dual-earner couple (Work and Family Report, 2002). As noted by Teelock (2001), “the social impact of paid employment on the lives of women has not been sufficiently addressed by policy makers in Mauritius” (p-118). The Mauritian Social Attitude Survey (2002) indicates that in many respects there is evidence of a strong adherence to stereotypical beliefs about the more traditional roles of women and men. Paid work for women has to fit into the pattern of family life. Three quarters of all respondents (N= 1,399) believed that family life suffers as a result of women working. Most domestic work was seen as a women’s responsibility. The Work and Family Report (2002) highlighted the fact that although many male respondents see some household tasks as a dual responsibility on paper, in reality relatively few women say that this attitude translated into action on the part of their spouse. In essence, men have not increased their participation in domestic chores and childcare at the same rate at which women, almost fifty percent of the workforce, have increased their participation in paid work. The study is conducted in the context of this background.

Although couples can be matched on many dimension (e.g personality, values, religiously) their attitudes are considered to be an important predictor of work and experiences and satisfaction. Ajzen and Fishbien (1977) proposed that in order for an attitude to predict behaviour it must be specific to that behaviour. Similarity or
differences regarding the husband’s and wife’s sex role may therefore be more suitable for the study of couples work-family conflict and work and family satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 101 dual-earner married couples living together at the time of data collection. The average age of the sample was 35 years. More than two third had a two children family with the youngest child having a mean age of 7.98 years. The couples had, on an average, 11.9 years of service. Data from two couples, which was incomplete was excluded from the final analysis resulting in a sample size of 99 dual-earner married couples.

Measures

A self-administered questionnaire in English consisting of various scales and measures was used in this study.

Work-family conflict

The 10 - item scale developed by Netmeyer, Boles and McMurran (1996) was used to measure work-family conflict and family work conflict. Sample items include “The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life” and “Family related strain interferes with my ability to perform related duties”. The response scale was a 5 – point, Likert scale from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(strongly agree).

The alpha value for work – family conflict was .85 for males and .77 for females and for family – work conflict these values were .68 for both males and females.

Sex Roles Orientation

Sex role orientation was assessed with the 20 – item Traditional – Egalitarian Sex Roles scale by Larsen and Long (1988). Sample items include. “The man should be more responsible for the economic support of the family than the women” and “Having a challenging job or career is as important as being a wife and mother”. Items were assessed on a 5 – point Likert scale from 1(Strongly disagree) to 5(Strongly agree), which created a scale score on a continuum from 1(egalitarian gender roles) to 5(traditional gender roles). Reliability for the scale was .70 for males and .64 for females.

Work and Martial Satisfaction

Work satisfaction was measured with a 5 – item scale developed by Greenhaus, Parasuraman and Wormley (1990). Sample item includes” I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career”. Alpha value for the scale was .79 for males and .84 for females. Family satisfaction was assessed with a 5 – item Satisfaction with Life scale of Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985). Sample item includes” I am satisfied with my marital life”. One item was dropped from the analysis to enhance” reliability value. Alpha value for the scale was .87 for males and .83 for females. For both scales, responses were assessed on a 5 – point scale ranging from 1(strongly disagree) to 5(Strongly agree).

Results

Before computing a dyadic index to match couples in terms of similarity and difference in their sex role attitudes, means and standard deviations for husbands and wives for all study variables were calculated. Table 1

Independent samples t-test showed significant differences between husband and wives only in their sex role attitudes: t(df=198)= -3.42; p.001).

More husbands than wives reported having egalitarian sex role attitudes. Next, Pearson Correlations between husband and wives measures of sex role attitudes, work-family and family-work conflict and work and family satisfaction were calculated. Husbands sex role attitudes were positively and significantly correlated with their own marital satisfaction, to marital and work satisfaction and sex role attitudes of their wives. Husbands work-family conflict was positively related to their own and their wives family-work conflict. Wives work-family conflict was positively related to their own family-work conflict but negatively related to their husbands and their own work satisfaction. Family-work conflict of both husband and wife was negatively related to their own work satisfaction. Similarly work satisfaction for both was positively related to their marital satisfaction.

Table 2

Computing a dyadic index

As the main focus of this study is on couples, the focus was on classifying couples according to the degree of similarity or differences in sex role attitudes of husbands and wives at the couple level.

In the context of dyadic data analysis, measures of similarity (or dissimilarity) are called dyadic indexes (Cronbach & Glaser, 1953). There are several types of indexes such as discrepancy, distance, correlations and intra-class correlation. Prior to choosing and computing an appropriate dyadic index for our data, the following were ensured:

1. All the 20 items were measured at the same (interval) level of measurement and on the same scale, that is, a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
2. All the 20- items measured one construct only, that is, sex role attitudes of dyadic members.
3. Higher scores indicate more egalitarian sex role attitudes.

The choice of which dyadic index to calculate depends to a large extent on the mean level, spread and shape of scores across items. Figure 1 illustrates the concept of level, spread and shape across items taking the first couple in the sample as an example. The twenty items measuring sex role attitudes are on the x-axis and the score ranging from 1 to 5 are on the y-axis. Husband and wife are represented by the square and diamond symbol respectively. From the summary statistic below the figure, it is clear that the level (mean) and the spread (standard deviation) differ to some extent while the line graph shows different shapes of scores (patterns of ups and downs across items) for the husband and wife of the first couple in the sample.

Since the shapes of scores, the level and dispersion are all important in this study intra-class correlations as measure of similarity were used. However, the mean and dispersion of the scores between husbands and wives did not show much difference, to the calculated Pearson correlation coefficient. Hence, the more familiar Pearson correlation coefficient as measure of similarity was chosen. In half of
the couples (52 dyads) husband and wives were not similar regarding the sex role attitudes ($r = 0.0 - 0.3$); roughly one fifth (21) had moderate similarity ($r = 0.4 - 0.5$) and the remaining (26) had high similarity ($r = 0.6 - 1.0$).

A one-way ANOVA was carried out to study the effect of level of similarity in sex role attitudes of husband and wife on their work-family conflict, family-work conflict and work and family satisfaction. Contrary to expectations, no significant differences were found between couple types and the outcome variables of work family conflict, family-work conflict and work and family satisfaction of both husbands and wives.

**Discussion**

The present study aimed to match married couples on their gender role attitudes in an attempt to determine whether they account for differences in experiences of work-family conflict and work and family satisfaction for both husband and wife. We chose this variable because the division of social roles along gender lines creates differential expectations of men and women and is a key variable affecting various aspects of life such as personal adaptation and coping (Gianko, 2000; Kulik, 1999), as well as spousal dynamics such as intimacy, communication, and power relations (Kitaichiik, 2001). In line with results of previous studies (eg. Kulik, 2006; Livingstone & Judge, 2008) it was expected that husbands and wives will differ in terms of sex role attitudes with more women reporting an egalitarian and more men reporting a traditional attitude.

Although a significant gender difference was found, it was contrary to what was expected. More men than women reported having an egalitarian attitude. One explanation for this may be that even traditional men who may not consider their wives work as their central role may perceive the economic benefits of the wives role as essential to family functioning. Consequently, being a dual earner-couple, they should think and act as those who value both work and family. Their attitude then is similar to that of their wife who is equally aware of the economic benefit of their work. Consequently egalitarian sex role attitude of both husband and wife match the normative expectation of dual earner couples. Because couples sex role attitudes are more similar than dissimilar in our study, they do not account for significant difference in the work family conflict and satisfaction experiences of either husband or wives. Consistent with Blumstein and Schwartz’s (1983) suggestion, similar gender ideologies provide couples with almost pre-determined solutions to stresses that they may encounter; whereas couples with differing ideologies have no such solutions to rely on.

Additionally, sex role ideologies may only matter in conjunction with other variables such as actual division of household chores in shaping couples work family conflict and satisfaction experiences. An alternative explanation comes from the normative interaction theory. Consistent with the theory, Wheeler and Arvey (1981) found that there was a positive correlation between liberal attitudes of husbands and responsibility for women’s tasks. Husbands of wives with liberal attitudes tended to assume female tasks and wives of husbands with liberal attitudes tended to assume male tasks. Spouses appear to assume responsibility for tasks through interactions between spouses on the basis of attitudes of the other spouse (Ahmad, 1999). Although not explicity investigated in this study, sex role attitudes of spouses measured through division of household labour could be a better predictor of work-family conflict and satisfaction experiences of couples. Future research should focus on division of household labour among husband and wives and on the relationship between gender role orientation, division of household chores, work-family conflict and satisfaction.
Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Study Variables for Husbands and Wives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex Role Attitude – H</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Role Attitude – W</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Family Conflict – H</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Family Conflict – W</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Work Conflict – H</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Work Conflict – W</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Satisfaction – H</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Satisfaction – W</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction – H</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction - W</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 99 Couples
H = Husband; W = Wife

Table 2: Inter-correlations among variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex role attitude H</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex role attitude W</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Family Conflict H</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Family Conflict W</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Work Conflict H</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Work Conflict W</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Satisfaction H</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
<td>-.37**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Satisfaction W</td>
<td>.24**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.31**</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction H</td>
<td>.23**</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Satisfaction W</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.31**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 99 Couples  ** = 0.01*  = 0.05

Figure 1 - Patterns of ratings for the husband and wife in first couple

Average score: husband (3.4), wife (4.0)  Standard deviation score: husband (0.99), wife (0.65)

References


