Choosing Between Work and Family: Insights into the Antecedents of the Work-Family Decision Making Process

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Work and family roles have the potential to enrich lives, enhance functionality, and improve the life quality for individuals and family units (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). However, when the demands from work and family are contradictory in some respect, it is possible for role conflict to occur (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kahn et al., 1964). When competing role demands are inharmonious, participating in one role over the other can result in an individual experiencing heightened stress, tension, reduced functionality, and conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999). The directionality of this felt tension is important to consider, as it is possible for work to conflict in the family role (WFC), just as it is possible for the family role to conflict with the work role (FWC) (Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999).

However, less is understood about an individual's decision making process as a factor in the directionality of role interference (Kahn et al., 1964). Periodically, individuals must choose which life role they will pacify, work or family. Role interference on either side is only perceived by the individual once a decision to participate in the family or work role has been made (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). For example, an assistant coach that must choose between a game-planning meeting and family time experiences a global sense of role conflict as they face the initial dilemma. This general role interference becomes solidified, acute, and directional only after the coach makes a decision to participate in one of the competing activities.

There are still many unanswered questions about what influences the decision making process regarding work and family. Consequently, two research questions guided this study. First, how do the constructs of role pressure, role support, and role saliency influence an individual's decision to choose family or work? Second, do general demographic factors impact one's decision to participate in work or family? In order to answer these research questions, NCAA Division I, II, and III university coaches from all sports were invited to participate in an online survey. Collegiate coaches were targeted as the research population as they have consistently shown high levels of WFC and FWC (Dixon & Sagas, 2007; Schenewark & Dixon, 2012). The survey was institutionally approved and pilot tested, then sent to 26,852 college coaches nationwide. Although responses are still being collected, approximately 2,504 respondents (9.33%) have already participated. After accounting for incomplete responses, 2,479 (9.23%) were used for the initial analysis presented here.

In the survey, respondents were given a hypothetical vignette that presented a scenario with inflexible and simultaneous events, a planned family outing and an unexpected meeting with an influential program donor. In each vignette, the amount of role pressure from work and from family was manipulated to be either strong or weak (e.g., strong work pressure, “Your athletic director insists that your meeting with this donor is critical to the department.”) In addition, support from work and family was adjusted to be either strong or weak (e.g., strong family support, “Your family has generally been supportive of your need to meet your work responsibilities.”) This resulted in a 2 (work pressure) by 2 (family pressure) by 2 (work support) by 2 (family support) design with a total of 16 different variations of the vignette. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the 16 iterations of the vignette (n=144-166). After reading the vignette, coaches were asked to choose which activity they would participate in.

Role saliency was measured for both work and family utilizing a modified two item Lodahl and Kejner (1965) job involvement scale. The scales were modified by replacing “job” with “work” or “family” for each item. A five-point Likert scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree was used to measure agreement with the items. The two item scale proved reliable for both work saliency (α=.74) and family saliency (α=.89). Classification and regression tree (CART) analysis was then used to analyze a set of complex interactions (Breiman et al., 1984). To
date, CART analysis has not been widely used among work-family scholars, but is frequently utilized in medical science. The CART decision tree was restricted to three levels, and 14 potential predictor variables were entered into the equation, including the following: pressure from work and family, support from work and family, work and family saliency, age, gender, race, division, coaching position, sport, marital status, and presence of children.

The final CART analysis produced six significantly impactful variables and had a 68.4% prediction accuracy rate. Work pressure \( (2=235.351, p<0.000) \) was the strongest predictor at the first level. When work pressure was strong, 76.9% chose to attend the work meeting, whereas when work pressure was weak, 47% chose to attend the work meeting. In level two, family pressure interacted with work pressure for both strong work pressure \( (2=46.199, p<0.000) \) and weak work pressure \( (2=19.722, p<0.000) \). When pressure from work and family were both strong, 68.8% chose the work meeting. However, when work pressure was strong and family pressure was weak, 85% chose the work meeting. In the case when both work and family pressure were weak, 53.3% chose the work meeting. However, when work pressure was low and family pressure was high, 40.6% chose the work meeting. In the third level, the NCAA Divisions \( (2=10.867, p=0.001) \), having child(ren) \( (2=11.855, p=0.001) \), marital status \( (2=12.952, p<0.000) \), and family saliency \( (2=12.991, p=0.001) \) were all significant predictors as they interacted with family pressure. The remaining eight variables produced no significant interactions. When work and family pressure were both strong, 77.2% of Division I coaches attended the work meeting and 64.4% of all other coaches attended the work meeting. When work pressure was strong, but family pressure was weak, 79.9% of coaches with one child or more attended the meeting while 89.7% of coaches with no children attended the work meeting. When work and family pressure were both weak, family role salience significantly predicted the decision. Forty-six percent of coaches with high family saliency attended the work meeting, while 61.3% of coaches with moderate or low family saliency attended the work meeting. Finally, when work pressure was weak, but family pressure was strong, those who were married attended the work meeting 34% of the time, whereas 48% of coaches who identified as single, divorced, or widowed attended the work meeting.

The study is ongoing, but preliminary findings extend the work-family literature in regards to potential antecedents of WFC and FWC in the decision making process. The results confirm that when an individual is faced with an inflexible decision, the pressure from role senders can be very influential (Kahn et al., 1964). Work pressure and family pressure dominated the model above and beyond all other possible variables. This is not to say that these factors are direct antecedents for WFC or FWC. Rather, the CART analysis indicates how the strength of role pressures can interact to influence the way individuals make decisions about allocating personal resources, such as time, to work or family. In addition, the model signals that marital status, the presence of children, family role saliency, and coaching at the Division I level also significantly impacted individual's decisions about work and family. This ongoing study will continue to explore additional interactions by extending the CART analysis to take into account potentially impactful variables at the fourth level. As additional analysis is conducted, this study will provide further insight for managers in the sport industry, and extend the literature for sport management scholars examining the work-family interface.