Literature Review: Work-Family Conflict Associated with Expatriate Family Relocations

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Advanced Organisational Behaviour 114.722

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15 December 2012

**Work-Family Conflict Associated with Expatriate Family Relocations**

The positive correlation between work and family is that conflict exists. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) define the existence of work-family conflict as the situation that occurs when the time, the strain involved, and the behaviors required for one role make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of the other role. This divergence impacts on the performance of a person within their family and within their work situation. Managing conflict between work and family role demands is a critical challenge for individuals and organizations (Kossek and Ozeki, 1998). This challenge becomes greater when new situations are created that bring about more obstacles for all individuals within the family.

Many families today are faced with the situation, by choice or by necessity, of leaving their home country to resume work in another country. The globalization of business practices is leading to an increase in demand for expatriates and global mobility of human resources (Cole, 2011; Yang, 2007). Makela and Suutari (2011) conducted studies on expatriate work situations noting that time-based and strain-based conflicts exist but so do mobility-based conflicts. When looking at work-family conflict within an expatriate frame it is important to note that whole families are relocated when one member of the family takes a job position in another country. This literature review seeks to investigate the positive correlation of work-family conflict within an expatriate setting highlighting specific challenges unique to the working spouse, the non-working spouse, and the children in their ability to perform successfully within family and work situations.

**Definitions, Sources and Theories**

Specific words need to be defined when investigating the conflicts between work and family within an expatriate setting. ‘Host country’ and ‘host national’ are used where host refers to the country the job is based in. ‘Third country national’ refers to people who also work in the host country but are from another country that is different than one’s home country. ‘Third culture kids’ are often referred to as TCK’s. These are children raised in a culture different from that of their parents. The first culture is the home country culture of the family, the second culture is the host culture that they are raised in, and the third culture is created from their shared experiences and relationships with people from other countries (Limberg & Lambie, 2011). For the purposes of this review, a ‘non-working spouse’ is defined as the spouse that relocates because the other spouse takes a job in another country. This spouse may eventually work but for the purposes of this literature review it is significant to make the distinction between the two spouses within the context of an expatriate setting.

A range of journal articles was selected for this literature review. An initial survey of organizational behavior literature from 1980 – 2002 (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005) revealed specific sources related to international relocation. Shaffer and Harrison’s (1998) survey of expatriate employees and couples highlighted non-work and family related factors that affected job success. This was useful as it included a sample of 452 expatriates living in 45 countries. This article led to the location of a meta-analysis of models of international adjustment (Bhaskar-Shrinivas, Harrison, Shaffer, & Luk, 2004) that used data from 8,474 expatriates in 66 studies and confidently supported emerging themes in other literature. Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou’s (1991) model was included as a source as it was supported in the meta-analysis and referred to in other literature. Spillover theory was referred to throughout the literature and was investigated in studies such as Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk (2002). Sources also included Kossek and Ozeki’s (1998) meta-analysis as it provided a review of the relationship among work-family conflict, policies and job and life satisfaction. The spousal adjustment problem was initially investigated in the Cole (2011) and Bauer and Taylor (2001) articles. Expatriate adjustment of children was investigated in the Limberg and Lambie’s (2011) educational literature on third culture kids and Moore and Barker’s (2012) article.

**Work-Family Challenges Faced By Family Members**

**Family**

Whole families are moved when the working spouse commences a job in a foreign country. Businesses employing the expatriate worker are then directly affected if the worker’s family does not adjust successfully (Cole, 2011). Takeuchi et al. (2002) suggest that spillover between work and non-work domains is greater in an international than a domestic context. Expatriates interviewed suggest that non-work dissatisfaction is a consideration in termination of employment (Brown, 2008; Cole, 2011; Eby et. al, 2005; Shaffer & Harrison, 1998). Makela and Suutari (2011) evidenced that a global career is not a choice made by global careerists alone, but affects the whole family. Each role in the family is affected by an international move in similar yet different ways.

**Working Spouse**

The working spouse that has relocated to a foreign environment is challenged with time, strain, cultural and mobility based conflict. The challenges that they face include many of the challenges faced by their families. But, these workers are also challenged in their employment situation. Black et al. (1991) distinguish between differences and similarities of international and domestic adjustment in their meta-analysis. International job descriptions often assume more responsibility and a larger repertoire of skills than the previous domestic job (Black et al., 1991; Makela & Suutari, 2011). In addition, Bhaskar-Shrinivas’s et al. (2004) meta-analysis considered not only stress within domestic job situations but also work adjustment stress in international assignments. This was also strongly supported by Black et al. (1991). The prevalence of added stress and responsibility within international job settings is confidently supported through literature.

Research confirms that staffing global organizations is becoming significantly more difficult due to cultural and language differences between host country nationals and expatriates (Harvey et al., 2010; Shin, Morgeson, & Campion, 2007). Smaller studies highlighted stress in relation to cultural issues. Harvey, Hartmann, Mayerhofer, and Moeller’s (2010) recent study in the oil field industry discovered that professionals are confronted with complex cultural situations in the workplace. Expatriation is an important part of global workforce development and is seen as an ethnocentric staffing practice (p.260). Shaffer and Harrison (1998) developed a model of expatriates’ decisions to quit their assignments that cites difficulties in cross-cultural adjustment and the need for cross-cultural training. Often managers overseas are in charge of managing an array of workers from a variety of cultures. It was found that, in some instances, expatriates remain in assignments but psychologically withdraw incurring indirect losses for their firms. The pioneering but explorative Danish investigation (Lauring & Selmer, 2009) found that the Danish workers formed an in-group and isolated themselves from other cultural groups. This study supported the spill-over theory in that the Danish group formed at work also socialized together with their families outside of work. Cultural adjustment for expatriate workers is a challenge both in the work place and in the domestic situation.

**Non-Working Spouse**

Spouse relocation was investigated. Families on the domestic front are often dual-income families, however, the overseas initial posting only involves employment of one spouse. This leaves one spouse without work, working outside their chosen career, or taking jobs for much less pay if they are hired on a local salary. Factors relating to spouse adjustment have received research attention but are not well understood, according to Brown (2008) and Bauer and Taylor (2001). Shaffer and Harrison (2001) developed and tested a model of spouse adjustment from 221 couples working in 37 countries within a framework based on identity theory. It was noted that most studies assume that the non-working spouse is female and this study did not include enough male non-working spouses. Cole (2011) conducted a field study that indicated that the greatest need for families was networking information and practical settling in assistance for the spouse. In a small study, Bauer and Taylor (2001) interviewed expat spouses that had returned from assignments concluding that spouses do experience difficulties in adjusting and that job previews and pre-location training would be beneficial. Investigation in spouse relocation literature is an area for further research.

Spouse living situations in expatriate environments vary and it is important when analyzing the research to note these varying situations and the impact they have on results. For example, Lauring and Selmer (2009) conducted an ethnographic fieldwork exploratory study that brought to light specific issues of spousal adjustment within a compound living situation in Saudi Arabia. As this study was limited to 16 Danish business expatriates of a large Danish corporation and their families, it would be worthwhile to improve on such a study. It found that a tight knit group formed within this closed community and pressure to conform was strong. Personality traits of individuals upon arrival to the compound living area changed to accommodate the pressure to conform to social rules within the compound. One example given was that a wife/mother who chose to work was then socially isolated from the group as were her children and husband. Although this study was tightly focused it does confirm that any situation can create unique circumstances and should be considered in analysis of larger concepts.

**Children**

Children are an important and significant part of family dynamics. Within work-family conflict literature regarding expatriate placements there is little known research specifically on the adjustment of children and the impact this has on the performance of the family. Moore and Barker (2012) conducted a small study based on interviewing 19 participants in six different countries and concluded similar results to the educational research on third culture kids (TCK’s) done by Limberg and Lambie (2011). These studies confirm that TCK’s have unique characteristics that change through transitional stages in adjusting to and living within a new culture.

It is a concern that little information within management, human resource and psychology literature on work-family conflict within expatriate situations focuses on children and teenagers. Bhaskar-Shrinivas’s et al. (2004) meta-analysis, as well as, Black’s et al. (1991) meta-analysis considered non-work factors that included spouse and culture but left out an important ingredient in family, the children. Black et al. (1991) considered family but without specific reference to children. More research is needed as children are an integral part of family.

**Conclusion**

This literature review investigated conflicts between work and family that exist when whole families are moved to another country when one person is employed as an expatriate. It has been concluded that international relocation does produce similar yet different challenges than domestic relocation. Individual family members are each challenged in their new environment. Most significantly is that the research suggests that expatriate workers are successful when the whole family is able to adapt to the host country and live within a multi-cultural setting.

**Gaps**

Children of expatriate workers face different challenges than other family members, and importantly, their successful adjustment to a foreign environment affects expatriate workers and families. The literature regarding the adaptation of children was mostly found in educational and international journals except for the instance when it was mentioned in Shaffer and Harrison’s (2001) study. But to note, Shaffer and Harrison (2001) suggested that future studies should include interviewing children to further understand the family adjustment issues with regards to children. To fully understand work-family conflict in international expat situations, it is important to research expatriate families who’s children stay within the host country for schooling, as well as, teenagers that go to boarding schools back in their home countries. Each situation would be an area of research as the adjustment of the children and/or teenager in each case will impact the family situation in a different way.

In conducting this literature review there was an assumption by many authors that the international family is a traditional family. Parasuraman and Greenhaus (2002) examined the growing diversity of family structures represented in the domestic workforce and this should be extended to expatriate family situations. In need of consideration is that the expatriate family situation may change during a work assignment due to separation, divorce or death. This greatly impacts families living abroad and can lead to increase stress to expatriate workers. The variations and changing definition of family should encourage more research in this field.

**Future Research**

Positive interdependence between work-life and family-life is consistent with research in domestic situations and should extend to expatriate international situations. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) define work-family enrichment as the extent to which experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role. Research on international assignments highlights psychological and sociocultural adjustment as the vital construct underlying the rewards and costs of expatriate experiences to individuals, their families, and their firms (Bhaskar-Shrinivas et al., 2005, p. 257). Research involving work-family enrichment will be useful for HR departments assisting whole families to ensure that the expat employee is able to perform successfully in their new position.

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