
Implications of Overqualification for Work–Family Conflict: Bringing *Too Much* to the Table?

SATORIS S. CULBERTSON
Kansas State University

MAURA J. MILLS
Hofstra University

ANN H. HUFFMAN
Northern Arizona University

In their focal article, Erdogan, Bauer, Peiró, and Truxillo (2011) note that, “in cases where employees have chosen jobs for which they are overqualified so that they can handle their nonwork responsibilities and interests, overqualified employees may experience lower levels of work–family conflict. A high-level employee may want to leave behind a high-paying corporate job demanding 60-hour work weeks in favor of spending more time with family and friends and devoting more time to hobbies, which would result in lower levels of work–life conflict and higher satisfaction with life.” Certainly, they are not alone in their view, as Kalleberg (2008) recently stated that, “Alleviating work–family conflict may require that people obtain more flexible jobs that do not fully utilize their educational qualifications or that do not pay as much as they would like” (p. 27). Thus, there appears to be a growing viewpoint that underemployment (of which overqualification is a facet) would result in lower levels of work–family conflict (WFC). We

suggest, however, that this notion is perhaps too simplistic and possibly misleading. Considering there is evidence that suggests that the individuals opting for underemployment to minimize their WFC tend to be predominantly female (Cloutier, Bernard, & Tremblay, 2009; Trappe & Rosenfeld, 2000), this (potentially) erroneous stance could have far-reaching implications.

We counter Erdogan et al.’s supposition and suggest that overqualification may be more likely to *create* WFC, depending on several important factors. First, it is important to clarify the type of WFC the individual is experiencing, whether it is more strain or time based in nature, as this likely contributes to the direction and intensity of the relationship. Second, it is important to consider the source of such conflict, as overqualification may be more likely to lead to work interfering with family rather than family interfering with work. Finally, and related to the source of conflict, how employees view their employment situations is important, with potential differences existing depending on how much they value their different life domains.

Time- and Strain-Based WFC

WFC can be conceptualized as being either time or strain based. Time-based conflict

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Satoris S. Culbertson.
E-mail: satoris@ksu.edu

Address: Department of Psychology, Kansas State University, 421 Bluemont Hall, 1100 Mid-Campus Drive, Manhattan, KS 66506-5302

occurs when individuals spend an excessive amount of time in one role, leaving insufficient time to physically fulfill the responsibilities in another role. Strain-based conflict, however, occurs when individuals are affected by the physical or emotional demands (e.g., fatigue and irritability) of engaging in one role to the point where they are unable to attend to their other role. It appears that Erdogan et al. were referring to time-based WFC, as their description of demands was time related (i.e., working 60-hour weeks). Although we would agree that time-based WFC might be less of an issue for the overqualified, we argue that overqualified employees are not immune to strain-based conflict, and in fact, might be more likely to experience this type of conflict. Indeed, research has suggested that strain-based WFC is both more common and also the more detrimental type of WFC (Kelloway, Gottlieb, & Barham, 1999).

Strain-based WFC is influenced by several psychological job stressors related to overqualification. First, as Erdogan et al. suggest, overqualified employees often hold negative job attitudes. Research has shown that negative job attitudes are related to WFC (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2000). Second, although Erdogan et al. stated that overqualified workers would experience less conflict because of the potentially fewer hours they would work, we propose that although the hours (work demand) might decrease, job control might also decrease. Researchers have suggested that low job control is a job stressor, and research has shown that low job control is related to WFC (Thomas & Ganster, 1995). Thus, time-based WFC might be decreased through underemployment (of which overqualification is a facet), whereas strain-based WFC would increase to the extent that overqualification is related to negative attitudes and low job control. Finally, research has suggested that there is a wage penalty that is often associated with underemployment, which can lead to decreased marital satisfaction as well as affect the quality of parental relationships with children (Feldman, 1996). Certainly,

these problems would in turn lead to strain-based WFC.

Work or Home as the Source of Stress

Another important contribution for the relationship between overqualification and WFC is where an individual's source of stress lies. That is, researchers (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) have acknowledged that the conflict between work and family can originate in either or both domains and should be conceptualized as two distinct components. Thus, the conflict between work and family can originate at work and interfere with personal responsibilities or it can originate at home and interfere with work responsibilities.

The importance of the distinction between work-to-family conflict and family-to-work conflict can be seen in that the antecedents differ depending on the source of the conflict. Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) proposed that role conflict comes from the intensity of the forces in the home and work domain. Beyond the actual demands (work hours), Greenhaus (1988) stated that these forces are generated or affected by societal, interpersonal, and personal characteristics of the individual. The distinction between work-to-family and family-to-work conflict is crucial because if this situation is examined at the simplest level, it would likely appear that the domain with few demands (work) would not interfere with other domains (e.g., family). In terms of an overqualified employee, this would suggest (as Erdogan et al. stated) that unqualified employees would experience less WFC. We argue, however, that this is a complex relationship and conditional depending on the salience of the role.

Work and Family Role Salience

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) proposed that WFC is most likely to occur when both work and family roles are important. With this in mind, we suggest that the work-life

conflict of overqualified employees may be dependent upon the importance, or salience, an individual places on a particular role. Role salience refers to the nature of one's personal and work role expectations. According to Amatea, Cross, Clark, and Bobby (1986), salience beliefs are defined as "internalized beliefs and attitudes about (a) the personal relevance of a role, (b) the standards for performance of a role, and (c) the manner in which personal resources (i.e., time, money, and energy) are to be committed to performance of the role" (p. 831). As such, these variables are likely to predict the degree of involvement in particular roles.

This notion of role salience is critical to the prediction of whether overqualified individuals are likely to experience greater (or lesser) work-to-family conflict (or family-to-work conflict). Erdogan et al. provided the caveat that they were assuming overqualification would lead to lower levels of work-to-family conflict "in cases where employees have chosen jobs for which they are overqualified so that they can handle their non-work responsibilities and interests" (p. 20). This is a critical caveat, as an individual will determine the importance of each role, or how salient it is, and rank each role in relation to other roles. As a result, people construct hierarchies to determine their degree of personal investment in each role. Once an individual decides how committed he or she is to various roles, he or she can subsequently set emotional levels, attitudes, and levels of participation in and commitment to each.

From this perspective, the individuals Erdogan et al. describe (i.e., those who choose to enter positions for which they are overqualified in order to have more time for their family and other personal endeavors) would presumably place lower salience on their work as compared to their nonwork roles. As such, any conflict they experience between the two domains will likely be seen as hindering their families, as opposed to their work. Thus, although we would expect one type of WFC, family-to-work conflict, to be less of a concern for these individuals,

we would expect the other type, work-to-family conflict, to be increased.

These expectations are likely to be further complicated by how an individual views his or her work. Not all employees view their work in the same way or work for the same reasons. Although many people work for financial reasons, many work for reasons that go beyond mere income, with some viewing their work as an extension of their identity or their primary purpose in life (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). One way in which perceptions of work have been differentiated is in terms of whether individuals view their work as being a *job*, a *career*, or a *calling*. According to Wrzesniewski et al. (1997), *jobs* hold the least personal meaning and involvement for individuals, *careers* have considerably more involvement and meaning, and *callings* have the most personal involvement and attachment to one's self-image.

By definition, individuals who view their work as careers and callings (vs. jobs) assign a higher level of salience to their work role than to other roles. Therefore, these individuals would be more likely to view any conflicts between work and family as being an impediment *on* work, rather than *from* work. On the other hand, individuals who view their work as mere jobs (vs. careers or callings) assign less salience to this role. Thus, these individuals would be more likely to view work as being a source of any conflict that may be occurring between work and family.

This high importance that career-oriented individuals (as opposed to job-minded individuals) place on work is also likely to influence how much time is spent at work versus at home. According to scarcity theory (Marks, 1977), human energy is fixed and therefore too much time or energy dedicated to work results in less left for nonwork roles such as family. As individuals add roles to their lives, the likelihood of overload, conflict, and strain increases (Marks, 1977). Therefore, career-oriented individuals may experience more stress for failing to fulfill work-related goals, whereas

individuals who view their work as merely a job may experience more stress and strain when they fail to fulfill commitments *outside of work*, such as obligations to family members. When such stress occurs, the individual is likely to place the blame for any conflict on the domain that is of less importance to the individual (family for career-oriented individuals and work for job-minded individuals).

In conclusion, we believe that Erdogan et al. touched upon an important aspect of the potential relationship between overqualification and the work–family interface. However, we also believe that their assessment of the likely relationship between the two was too simplistic. We urge researchers interested in pursuing this relationship to consider the issues raised herein when formulating and testing their hypotheses.

References

- Amatea, E. S., Cross, E. G., Clark, J. E., & Bobby, C. L. (1986). Assessing the work and family role expectations of career-oriented men and women: The Life Role Salience Scales. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *48*, 831–838. doi:10.2307/352576
- Cloutier, L., Bernard, P., & Tremblay, G. (2009). Job quality and gender inequality: Key changes in Quebec over the last decade. *Studies in Social Justice*, *3*, 191–212.
- Erdogan, B., Bauer, T. N., Peiró, J. M., & Truxillo, D. M. (2011). Overqualified employees: Making the best of a potentially bad situation for individuals and organizations. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *4*, 215–232.
- Feldman, D. C. (1996). The nature, antecedents and consequences of underemployment. *Journal of Management*, *22*, 385–407. doi:10.1177/014920639602200302
- Greenhaus, J. H. (1988). The intersection of work and family roles: Individual, interpersonal and organizational issues. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, *3*, 23–44.
- Greenhaus, J. H., & Beutell, N. J. (1985). Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review*, *10*, 76–88. doi:10.2307/258214
- Johnson, G. J., & Johnson, R. W. (2000). Perceived overqualification, positive and negative affectivity, and satisfaction with work. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, *15*, 167–184.
- Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. N., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, D. A. (1964). *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: Wiley.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2008). The mismatched worker: When people don't fit their jobs. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *22*, 24–40.
- Kelloway, E. K., Gottlieb, B. H., & Barham, L. (1999). The source, nature, and direction of work and family conflict: A longitudinal investigation. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *4*, 337–346. doi:10.1037/1076-8998.4.4.337
- Marks, S. R. (1977). Multiple roles and role strain: Some notes on human energy, time and commitment. *American Sociological Review*, *42*, 921–936.
- Thomas, L. T., & Ganster, D. C. (1995). Impact of family-supportive work variables on work-family conflict and strain: A control perspective. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *80*, 6–15. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.80.1.6
- Trappe, H., & Rosenfeld, R. (2000). How do children matter? A comparison of gender earnings inequality for young adults in the former East Germany. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *62*, 489–507. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.00489.x
- Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P., & Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, careers, and callings: People's relations to their work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *31*, 21–33. doi:10.1006/jrpe.1997.2162