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Considering the role of personality in the work–family experience: Relationships of the big five to work–family conflict and facilitation[☆]

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Abstract

Using a national, random sample ($N = 2130$), we investigated the relationship between each of the Big Five personality traits and conflict and facilitation between work and family roles. Extraversion was related to greater facilitation between roles but was not related to conflict, whereas neuroticism was related to greater conflict but only weakly related to facilitation. Conscientiousness was related to less conflict, presumably reflecting efficient time use and organizational skills. In general, conflict was negatively related to work–family outcomes (e.g., lower job and family effort and satisfaction) whereas facilitation was positively related to the same outcomes. Conflict and facilitation were shown, however, to be orthogonal rather than opposite constructs. Implications for work–family theory, for the understanding of personality traits, and for enhanced responsibilities of organizations are discussed.

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Keywords: Work–family conflict; Work–family facilitation; Big-five; Personality; Job satisfaction

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1. Introduction

All employees must balance the demands of their work and nonwork lives. Despite important advances in the work–family literature, two important gaps in our knowledge still exist. First, individual differences in the way people balance work and family have largely been ignored (Sumer & Knight, 2001). And, “few studies have acknowledged the possibility that work and family roles can have positive or enriching effects on one another” (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1999, p. 395). The purpose of the present study is to advance previous research in three ways. Using a large, nationally representative sample, we examine personality as an antecedent to conflict; we consider the facilitation employees may experience between work and family in addition to the more commonly studied conflict, and we examine the relation of conflict and facilitation to role outcomes.

Work–family research has relied almost exclusively on the scarcity perspective which suggests that engaging in work and family roles results in interrole conflict (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Work–family conflict (WFC) is defined as when participation in one role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The WFC model developed by Kopelman, Greenhaus, and Connolly (1983) and adopted by many researchers suggests that structural factors within work and family domains are of primary importance to the experience of WFC. We propose that although structural features may be the primary contributors, they are likely not the only ones and that personality of the individual is likely to be an important contributor. Researchers have begun to address the predictive power of personality variables and have found negative affectivity to be directly related to greater WFC (Carlson, 1999) and related to WFC through its indirect effect on job stress (Stoeva, Chiu, & Greenhaus, 2002). The results for Type A have been mixed (Burke, 1988; Burke, Weir, & DuWors, 1980; Carlson, 1999). Initial success with these few specific traits suggests it is time to use a comprehensive assessment of personality, such as the Big Five (McCrae & John, 1992), to more fully investigate the role of personality in WFC (Carlson, 1999).

Because of the focus on the conflict perspective, most researchers use scales that emphasize the negative implications of one role for the other (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Researchers, and particularly sociological theorists (e.g., Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974), however, have persuasively argued for the benefits of multiple role occupation such as providing security, a sense of purpose in life, enhanced self-esteem (Thoits, 1987), social support, and buffering against role failure (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Research documents the benefits of engaging in work and family roles to mental, physical, and relationship health (Barnett & Hyde, 2001), and the rewards of combining personal and professional lives may outweigh the costs (Barnett, 1998). Rather than experiencing only conflict, facilitation between roles may also occur which we define as occurring when participation in one role is made better or easier by virtue of participation in the other role. The degree to which an employee experiences facilitation is likely to be influenced by his or her personality. It would be informative to examine the personality antecedents to and the consequences of facilitation on work and family outcomes.

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