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Anticipated Regret in Time-based Work-family Conflict

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Anticipated regret in time-based work-family conflict

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Abstract

Purpose – The primary purpose of this research was to investigate the role of anticipated regret in time-based work-family conflict decisions.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 90 working parents responded to a decision making problem describing a time-based conflict between a work event and a family event. Participants’ preference for which event to attend constituted the dependent variable. Independent variables were participants’ work and family centralities. Anticipated regret for choosing the work option and anticipated regret for choosing the family option were measured as hypothesized mediators.

Findings – Structural equation modeling revealed that anticipated regret for choosing the family option mediated the relationship between work centrality and preference for the family option. Similarly, it was found that anticipated regret for choosing the work option mediated the relationship between family centrality and preference for the family option.

Originality/value – This article contributes to work-family and decision making literatures by studying the intersection of the two fields. Although most work-family research studies ongoing conflict, this study focuses on one decision event. The findings suggest that anticipated regret plays a significant role in how individuals resolve time-based work-family conflict.
Introduction

For most people, family and work represent the two most important domains in their life (Mortimer et al., 1986). Considerable research has suggested that positive outcomes such as enhanced performance and mental and physical well-being may accrue with the participation in both family and work roles (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Ruderman et al., 2002). However, taking on dual roles may also create tension as individuals are confronted with the difficult challenge of competing time demands from home and work (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). When faced with such a conflict, people are required to make a difficult trade-off between two competing options, as no available alternative perfectly satisfies the demands of both roles.

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) proposed that conflict between work and family may occur as a result of competing demands on workers’ time (e.g. an individual is not able to attend a conference and go on a family vacation at the same time), stressful conditions and resulting strain in one domain that spills over to the other domain (e.g. an individual experiences stress at home because he is not able to meet sales goals at work), or, incompatible behavioral requirements in work and family roles (e.g. an individual becomes rather directive in her interaction with her spouse because she is used to giving direct orders to her employees). In the present study, we focus on time-based work-family conflict decisions, where time demands from one domain clash with time demands from the other domain (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000). A basic challenge with time-based decisions is that they are often “zero-sum” in nature. That is, the more time that is spent at work, the less time is available for family activities, and vice versa.

Time allocation between roles may be related to work and family centralities, defined as the importance that individuals assign to those roles (LeBoeuf et al., 2010). Identity theory (Burke and Stets, 2009; Stryker, 1980, 1987; Stryker and Serpe, 1982) proposes that individuals tend to allocate resources to more central roles than to less important roles because success in important roles appears to be more psychologically rewarding than success in less important roles. Therefore, when work centrality is high, individuals are expected to commit more resources to work than to family. On the other hand, when family centrality is high, individuals are expected to commit more resources towards family than to work (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985).

Past research has linked work and family centralities to variables such as work-family conflict and job performance (Bagger et al., 2008; Day and Chamberlain, 2006; Wayne et al., 2006), demonstrating their potency for predicting long-term outcomes that tend to occur on a continuous basis. However, it is much less clear whether and how role centralities may be related to discrete decisions that individuals make when they face conflicting time demands from the two roles (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001). For example, an individual may face a conflict between spending time at his child’s soccer training on a Thursday evening and working on a business report at work which is due Friday morning. These are everyday decisions working parents make to navigate the different roles they hold, and the relationship between role centralities and their decisions is one of the subjects of this investigation.
In addition to examining the proposition that individuals may make time-allocation decisions in a manner congruent with their role centrality, we also examine the process through which these decisions are made. One possible process variable is anticipated regret, referring to the feeling of regret that decision makers imagine or expect they would experience if they were to make a certain decision (Mellers et al., 1997). Past research has suggested that anticipated regret is significantly related to decision making (Connolly and Zeelenberg, 2002). Although the role of anticipated regret has been explored in other behavioral decision making contexts, such as vaccination and shopping (Connolly and Reb, 2003; Simonson, 1992; Wroe et al., 2004), its application to work-family decisions has yet to be examined. Drawing on research on regret regulation theory, we investigate whether anticipated regret serves as a psychological process through which work and family centralities are related to the preferences for the work/family option.

In the sections that follow we review the literature on identity theory, based on which we hypothesize the relationship between role centrality and individuals’ preference for how they choose to allocate their time (between work and family). We then review the literature on anticipated regret and hypothesize how it may mediate the relationship between centrality and individuals’ preference for time allocation. We then describe a study that tests these hypotheses. We conclude with a discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, and avenues for future research.

**Theoretical development**

**Role centrality**

Identity theory (Stryker, 1980, 1987; Stryker and Serpe, 1982) posits that the self can be considered a collection of discrete roles that a person occupies. Each role is associated with a set of behavioral expectations, such that if individuals know what role they play, they also exhibit a set of behaviors that are viewed as being appropriate for the role (Thoits, 1991). A central concept of identity theory is the notion of identity, which answers the existential question: Who am I? When individuals answer the question in reference to a specific role, they develop a set of self-concepts defining their identity (Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 1991, 1992). Therefore, identity is the self-perception based on specific roles and the behavioral expectations defining those roles. Individuals may simultaneously acquire several identities as a result of the different roles that they play in the social world.

Although a complete self is made up of many identities, these identities are not valued equally by an individual (Ashforth and Johnson, 2002; Stryker and Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 1983). Identities that are considered more important tend to occupy more central positions in the definition of the self, whereas those that are less valued are peripherally located (Thoits, 1992). This notion is consistent with research on central life interest (CLI) conducted by Dubin (1956), referring to individuals’ preferences for where they spend their time and carry out activities. Dubin’s research has demonstrated that although individuals may participate in several different social settings, only those settings where their CLI is located have significant psychological implications to them (Dubin and Goldman, 1972). This point is underscored by his statement that “Most [people] have certain central life interests at any given time focused in one, or at most, several institutional settings. They have to participate
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in other institutions, but do so in terms of behaviors required in them” (Dubin, 1961, p. 78). Two roles that most people primarily identify with are work and family (Bagger and Li, 2012; Werbel and Walter, 2002). Work centrality refers to the importance that is ascribed to the work role, whereas family centrality refers to the importance ascribed to the family role (Bagger and Li, 2012; Bagger et al., 2008; Bielby and Bielby, 1989; Rosenberg, 1979).

Hypotheses development

According to identity theory, individuals develop role expectations for each of the role identities and devote resources to these roles in order to meet expectations (Hirschfeld and Field, 2000). However, individuals also face the constraints of having a fixed amount of resources – such as time – at their disposal, limiting their ability to meet the expectations associated with each role (Goode, 1960). As such, when confronted with conflicting time demands from family and work, this decision rests on the level of centrality for each role. Roles that are high on centrality have significant implications for individuals’ self-esteem and well-being, creating the incentive for more time investment into these highly identified roles (Simon, 1992). In contrast, roles that are low on centrality only have marginal implications, even if role expectations are not met (Wayne et al., 2006). This argument is consistent with Dubin and Champoux (1977, p. 367) who stated that “if an environment is salient to an individual, he may have considerable affective investment in it.” Dubin et al. (1975) found that where employees oriented their CLI predicted their organizational commitment, such that those with job-oriented CLI were more committed to their organization than their counterparts with nonjob-oriented CLI. As such, we predict:

H1. Work centrality is negatively related to preference for spending time with family.
H2. Family centrality is positively related to preference for spending time with family.

Role centrality and anticipated regret

In this section, we explore the mechanism through which work and family centralities are related to time-allocation preferences between work and family. Traditional approaches to decision making have been heavily influenced by assumptions of rationality and emphasized the role of cognition, and most empirical research has been within this tradition (Mellers et al., 1998). However, recent conceptual and empirical work has pointed to the important role that regret plays in decision making processes (Weber and Johnson, 2009).

According to regret regulation theory (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2007), people try to regulate regret because experiencing regret is unpleasant. Anticipating possible regret before making a decision is a common regret regulation strategy allowing the decision maker to choose the option which is expected to lead to less experienced regret in the future. Consistent with regret regulation theory, past research has shown that decision makers try to avoid experiencing regret and that anticipated regret for the available options predicts people’s preferences and choices. For example, in a field study, Wroe et al. (2004) compared different potential predictors of actual immunization decisions. These authors found that anticipated
regret had the strongest effect on the probability of parents immunizing their child, explaining 57 percent of the variance (demographic variables, in contrast, explained 1 percent of the variance). Anticipated regret has also been found to impact decisions in domains such as negotiations (Larrick and Boles, 1995), consumer behavior (Simonson, 1992), and sexual behavior (Richard et al., 1996).

There are conceptual reasons to expect that anticipated regret may also be related to work-family decisions. Janis and Mann (1977) argued that anticipated regret is particularly likely to influence decisions that are important but have no clearly dominating option (i.e. no option is better in at least one aspect and at least equal in all other aspects) and in which decision makers receive feedback on the outcomes of both chosen and foregone options soon after the decision. At least some of these conditions are likely to be present in the time-based work-family conflict decisions we are interested in. As both work and family roles are central to most people’s identities (Mortimer et al., 1986), the decision is likely to be experienced as important. As each option (i.e. allocating time to work or family) has some advantages and disadvantages, no option is dominating. Further, feedback on the consequences of one’s choice for relevant others – partners, colleagues, or bosses – is often readily available.

In the context of time-based work-family decisions, in which both work and family domains place demands on a specific time slot, regret may be anticipated for allocating the time to family or to work. Consider an employee who is asked to work overtime on a weekend. At the same time, a family member’s birthday party is taking place. In such situations, choosing either option carries the potential of experiencing subsequent regret. Deciding to go to work, the employee may later regret having disappointed his/her family. Deciding to join the family activity, the employee may later regret having let down his/her colleagues. According to regret regulation theory, decision makers solve such problems by preferring the option that minimizes anticipated regret (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2007). Said differently, the more individuals anticipate regret for spending time at work, the more will they prefer spending time with family; conversely, the more individuals anticipate regret for choosing to spend time with family, the less will they prefer spending time with family. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3. Anticipated regret for choosing to spend time at work is positively related to preference for spending time with family.

H4. Anticipated regret for choosing to spend time with family is negatively related to preference for spending time with family.

Acting as a psychological process, the intensity of anticipated regret associated with time allocation between work and family may mediate the relationships between work and family centralities and work-family preferences. Past research has suggested that identities are associated with role expectations that are normative (Thoits, 1991). Individuals are more likely to anticipate regret participating in work activities when their family centrality is high, as they deviate from the behavioral norms which prescribes that they should place family ahead of work. Similarly, when individuals strongly identify with their work role – high work centrality – they may anticipate more regret spending time with their family instead of being at work because they fail to meet the obligations in a domain that is more central. The
anticipated regret associated with how they allocate their time, as we discussed previously, may be related to the preference they express in terms of how they actually spend their time. Therefore, we propose:

H5. The negative relation between work centrality and preference for spending time with family is mediated by anticipated regret for choosing to spend time with family.

H6. The positive relation between family centrality and preference for spending time with family is mediated by anticipated regret for choosing to spend time at work.

**Method**

**Design, procedure, and participants**

Participants were presented with a decision making problem involving a time-based conflict that required a choice between either working overtime to finish a project with a looming deadline on a weekend (the work option) or attending a family birthday party (the family option). Participants’ preference for which event to attend constituted the dependent variable. Participants’ work and family centralities were measured as independent variables, and anticipated regret for choosing the work option and anticipated regret for choosing the family option were measured as hypothesized mediators. The overall model is depicted in Figure 1.

![Figure 1 Hypothesized model](image_url)

Student participants received course extra credits for identifying qualified participants for this study (Bagger and Li, 2011; Li and Bagger, 2011). To be eligible, participants (who the students recruited for the study) had to work full-time (i.e. work at least 30 hours per week). In addition, they could not be employed at a family business. They had to able to read English, be married or live together with someone in a committed relationship, and have at least one child. Participants included 100 working parents from the US. Of these, ten (10 percent) were excluded because they did not complete the entire survey. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 90 participants. In the final sample, 43 percent of respondents were male. The average age was 39.58. The average number of children living at home was 1.46 and the
average weekly hours of paid work were 42.2. Participants held a wide variety of occupations, such as accountant, warehouse manager, office manager, engineer, and truck driver. A total of 21 percent of the participants held middle or upper level management positions.

Participants who met the stated criteria received a letter informing them of the purpose of the study and providing them with a web address and an identification number with which they could access the study online. To check data quality, we called 15 percent (n=14) of respondents to verify their participation. These participants were asked a number of demographic questions from the survey and every respondent (i.e. 100 percent) who was contacted verified his or her study participation by accurately answering the questions. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of one of the authors where data collection took place. All participants, including the students who recruited the actual participants for the study, indicated their informed consent before participating in the study.

**Materials and measures**

Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to learn about “how people think about work and family life”. Participants were asked to read the decision making problem carefully, to “imagine yourself in the following situation”, and to respond to the questions based on what they thought they would do in the situation described. The scenario, adapted from Greenhaus and Powell (2003), described the time-based work-family conflict as follows:

You are planning to attend a surprise family birthday party for your parent to be held at your home this Saturday. However, you are also asked to work this Saturday with other project team members to meet a deadline for a significant project on which you play an important role. You cannot participate in both activities.

Participants were asked to respond to the following measures.

**Work and family centrality.** Work centrality was assessed on a five-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) using 12 items from Hirschfeld and Field (2000). A sample item from the work centrality scale is “In my view, an individual’s personal life goals should be work oriented.” Family centrality was assessed on the same scale with ten items based on the work centrality items, replacing the word “work” with the word “family.” Two items did not transfer well (“I would probably keep working even if I didn’t need the money;” “If the unemployment benefit was really high, I would still prefer to work”) and were excluded from the family centrality measure.

**Anticipated regret.** Anticipated regret for choosing the work option was assessed with five items from Connolly and Reb’s (2001) anticipated regret scale, using a five-point scale (1=not at all, 5=a lot). We adapted the instructions of the scale to match the present context. Participants were asked to consider going to work instead of attending the birthday party. They were then instructed to rate how much regret they anticipated experiencing as a result of their decision to choose work over family. The five regret related items were regret, self-blame, guilt, shame, and dissatisfaction with self. These items were embedded in other emotional indicators different from regret (e.g. sadness, embarrassment) to reduce the
Table I presents descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities (Cronbach’s alpha), and inter-correlations among the study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>4</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Sex</td>
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<td>-</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>11.54</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
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<td>Work centrality</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-0.23*</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family centrality</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>-0.46</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated regret for family option</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.13</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.20**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated regret for work option</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>-0.45</td>
<td>-0.31**</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.46**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for the family option</td>
<td>2.23</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>-0.23</td>
<td>-0.31**</td>
<td>0.23*</td>
<td>-0.26**</td>
<td>0.46**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Values along the diagonal are Cronbach’s alphas. Sex: 1=male, 2=female. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

Results

The work and family preference measure includes three items specifically developed for this study. The first item was “Assuming that neither activity could be rescheduled, in which activity would you participate?”. Response options were “overtime work project session (the work option)” or “surprise birthday party (the family option)”, coded as −3 or 3, respectively. The second item asked “How strongly are you leaning towards one of the two alternatives” and the scale was anchored at −3=”strongly leaning towards going to work” and 3=”strongly leaning towards attending birthday party.” The third item asked “How strong is your preference towards one of the two alternatives” and the scale was anchored at −3=”strongly prefer going to work” and 3=”strongly prefer attending birthday party.” The three ratings were averaged into a preference index, which provides a balance between a dichotomized measure that emphasizes behavioral consequences (e.g. that one of the two options ultimately has to be chosen) and a pure strength measure of the preference (e.g. how much more does one person prefer going to work over attending the birthday party?). Values larger than zero indicate a preference for the family option, and values smaller than zero indicate a preference for the work option. To control for order effects, half of the participants were presented with the family option first before they were presented with the work option, whereas the other half of the participants were presented with the work option first before being presented with the family option. In both conditions, participants were instructed to choose which one (work or family) they preferred. We collapsed the analyses across both conditions as the order effect did not influence the results.

Control variables. We included two control variables. First we controlled for age (in years), as prior research has reported mixed findings on the effects of age on work-family conflict (Grandey and Crotapanzano, 1999; Matthews et al., 2010). Second, we controlled for sex (1=male, 2=female). The traditional gender role perspective prescribes that women are socialized to assume the role of homemaker whereas men are socialized to assume the role of breadwinner (Bagger et al., 2008).
Confirmatory factor analyses

We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to address concerns about the common source nature of our data. We created parcels of items for each construct (except for work-family preference which was indicated by three items described previously) due to the large number of variables and paths that needed to be estimated relative the small sample size (Little et al., 2002). We randomly assigned items into the parcels for each construct. We then compared two measurement models. In Model #1, we examined a one-factor model whereby all of the items and item parcels loaded onto one factor. Model #1 provided a poor fit to the data ($\chi^2=399.05$, df=65, NFI=0.87, CFI=0.89, IFI=0.89, RMSEA=0.24). We then examined Model #2 whereby items and item parcels loaded onto their theoretically expected latent constructs. Model #2 provided a much better fit to the data ($\chi^2=83.97$, df=55, NFI=0.97, CFI=0.99, IFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.077). The difference between the two models was statistically significant ($\Delta \chi^2=315.08$, df=10, $p < 0.05$). These results provide evidence that these variables were distinct from each other.

Hypotheses tests

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was employed to test the hypotheses. We also used bootstrapping to examine the significance of the direct and the indirect relations.

The hypothesized model (Model #1, see Figure 1) provided a good fit: $\chi^2=111.31$, df=82, NFI=0.97, CFI=0.99, IFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.06. We then compared this model with Model #2 (see Figure 2) that removes the direct paths from the independent variables to the dependent variable. Model #2 provided a good fit: $\chi^2=115.37$, df=84, NFI=0.97, CFI=0.99, IFI=0.99, RMSEA=0.06. The difference between Model #1 and Model #2 was not statistically significant ($\Delta \chi^2=4.06$, df=2, ns). The rule of parsimony dictates that Model #2 should be preferred over Model #1. We also tested a few other alternative models and none of them was superior in fit than Model #2. Readers can obtain results of these comparisons from the first author.

![Final path model](image-url)

*Figure 2 Final path model*
Because our hypotheses are all directional, we used one-tailed tests for hypothesis testing. H1 states that work centrality is negatively related to preference for spending with family whereas H2 states that family centrality is positively related to preference for spending with family. We ran a model with work and family centralities as predictors and preference for the family option as dependent variable (but without the two mediators, which come into play only for the subsequent hypotheses). The relationship between work centrality and preference for the family option was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.35, p < 0.05$). In contrast, the relationship between family centrality and preference for the family option was not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.13, \text{ns}$). Therefore, H1 was supported, but H2 was not.

Recent research has suggested that the requirement that the independent variable has to be related to the dependent variable in order to establish mediation is too conservative (Kirkman et al., 2009; MacKinnon et al., 2002). Therefore, we proceeded with the remainder of our analyses. H3 states that anticipated regret for choosing to spend time at work is positively related to preference for spending time with family whereas H4 states that anticipated regret for spending time with family is negatively related to preference for spending with family. The relationship between anticipating regret for choosing the work option and preference for the family option was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.50, p < 0.05$). The relationship between anticipating regret for choosing the family option and preferring the family option was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.57, p < 0.05$). These findings support H3 and H4.

Finally, H5 states that the negative relation between work centrality and preference for spending time with family is mediated by anticipated regret for choosing to spend time with family. The indirect relation of work centrality and preferring the family option with anticipated regret for choosing the family option as the mediator was negative and statistically significant ($\beta = -0.13, p < 0.05$). Hypothesis 6 states that the positive relation between family centrality and preference for spending time with family is mediated by anticipated regret for choosing to spend time at work. The indirect relation of family centrality and preferring the family option with anticipated regret for choosing the work option as the mediator was positive and statistically significant ($\beta = 0.19, p < 0.01$). Therefore, H5 and H6 were supported.

**Discussion**

The present study extends the literature in several ways. First, we respond to the call for more investigations into decisions involving competing demands from work and family by examining the role that centrality plays in reconciling these differences (Greenhaus and Powell, 2012a). Second, past research in decision making has demonstrated that role centrality may be related to individuals’ satisfaction with their choice that is either congruent or incongruent with their identity (post-decision regret, LeBoeuf et al., 2010). We advance the literature by showing that centrality may also shape pre-decision emotions such as anticipated regret, thus orienting individuals towards identity-congruent choices.
Implications for theory and research

Past research on role centrality tends to focus on its direct link to important variables, such as work performance and work/family satisfaction (e.g. Day and Chamberlain, 2006; Wayne et al., 2006). The psychological mechanisms through which these relationships occur have not received sufficient empirical and theoretical attention. Drawing on the decision making literature, we posited that one mechanism is the level of regret that individuals anticipate when they participate in activities that are incongruent with their role expectations.

The anticipation of future regret has important implications as past research has shown that individuals tend to eschew options that may elicit more regret in the future in favor of other options that are less likely to elicit regret (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2007). Consistent with past research, we found that anticipated regret for choosing the family option was negatively related to the preference for the family option whereas anticipated regret for choosing the work option was positively associated with the preference for the family option. More importantly, we found that anticipated regret mediated the relationship between work and family centralities and the preference for allocating time to work or family. That is, individuals who were high on family centrality were more likely to choose the family option because of the regret that they anticipated if they were to choose the work option. Similarly, individuals who were high on work centrality were less likely to choose the family option because of the regret that they anticipated if they were to choose the family option. These findings are consistent with the central tenets of identity theory (Stryker and Serpe, 1982) and regret regulation theory (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2007). Specifically, the more centrally a particular role is used for self-definition, the greater the consequence should be if individuals fail to meet the expectations for that role. Choosing a behavioral option that does not satisfactorily meet the demands of a centrally identified role may incur significant psychological cost (lower self-esteem and psychological strain), and individuals can avoid this potentially painful experience by choosing the option (family or work) congruent with the more central role in their life. Therefore, our study helps uncover another reason why role centrality is related to positive results, i.e. because individuals may be less likely to choose actions that they may feel regret about down the road.

This study shows the promise of drawing on theories and concepts from the behavioral decision making literature to shed light on the dynamics between work and family (LeBoeuf et al., 2010). Although the concept of anticipated regret has been used to predict the health and medical decisions individuals make, among others (Connolly and Reb, 2003), its implications for everyday decisions such as how to resolve the competing demands from work and family have not been explored. The present research also adds to the converging view questioning the assumption that an individual’s decision making process is a purely cognitive exercise whereby decision makers carefully and methodically weigh the merits and drawbacks associated with available choices before a rational decision is rendered (Mellers et al., 1998). Instead, the picture painted by the present results suggests that work-family decisions can be substantially emotion-laden, as the anticipated regret for choosing one option over another is factored into the decision making process.
Implications for practice

As research on decision making suggests (e.g. Damasio, 1994; Reb, 2008), the role of anticipated regret is not necessarily detrimental. Taking such anticipated emotions into account may actually allow individuals to make choices that are more consistent with their true underlying preferences. Regret regulation theory (Zeelenberg and Pieters, 2007) argues that people experience regret as aversive and therefore try to regulate it using three broad regulation strategies: Decision-focused, alternative-focused and feeling-focused. Decision-focused strategies are concerned with the decision process (e.g. making a more careful decision), alternative-focused strategies deal with alternative options (e.g. ensuring decision reversibility), and feeling-focused strategies aim at the experience of regret directly. Managers can help employees successfully apply these regulation strategies and as a result minimize, or at least reduce, regret. For example, by providing full information about the consequences of choosing family over work, managers can help employees make more informed and justifiable decisions (a decision-focused strategy), which has been shown to reduce regret (Connolly and Zeelenberg, 2002). By giving employees the opportunity to reverse their work-family related decisions as much as possible, managers can enable an alternative-focused regulation strategy. For example, an employee who may have chosen to work full-time may be given the opportunity to change to a part-time schedule with sufficient advance notice. Further, by helping employees identify a silver lining in a regretful experience, they can support a feeling-focused strategy. Perhaps most importantly, managers should strive to establish a culture which values work-family balance and as a result reduce tough choices between work and family. Such a culture could go a long way in reducing both anticipated and experienced regret.

Implications for society

A growing body of research has linked work-family conflict to health outcomes (Frone, 2000; Frone et al., 1997). One possible explanation for this link is that tension between work and family increases the stress that individuals experience, resulting in physiological symptoms and mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and high blood pressure. The negative impact of work-family conflict on mental and physical health of citizens adds fiscal strains to many countries that have seen skyrocketing health care spending in recent years (Snapshots Health Care Costs, 2011). This argument suggests that helping employees overcome the conflicting demands from home and work should be an important priority that has significant financial and health implications at the societal level. As the results from this study suggest, when individuals are confronted with difficult decisions pitching family against work, taking a step back to reflect on possible regret may allow them to make decisions aligned with their most central role, potentially increasing their levels of subjective well-being. In addition, when employees are able to successfully manage their work and family responsibilities, they are more likely to become productive citizens who can benefit their employer and the society as a whole.
Limitations and directions for future research

The limitations of the present study should be noted. First, participants were recruited by students who received extra credit for their effort. Thus, we had less control over the recruitment process in comparison to a more traditional data collection procedure where data are collected from a single organization. However, all the participants in this study were working parents who are assumed to be familiar with the situation described in the scenario. In addition, previous studies using this procedure have shown that the data collected are of comparable quality to data collected via more traditional collection procedures (e.g. Hazer and Highhouse, 1997).

Second, participants were instructed to respond to a hypothetical decision problem – a design admittedly suffering from limitations such as limited realism and unknown external validity and generalizability. However, these concerns are somewhat alleviated for two reasons. First, the stimulation materials used in the present study are akin to the everyday experiences many working parents encounter. Second, our purpose was to test theoretically grounded hypotheses concerning work-family preferences. As such, our results provide initial empirical evidence for the theoretically plausible mechanism underlying individuals’ decision making process. Additional studies should examine the generalizability of our findings by using other methods. For example, future research could employ stimulus materials depicting other types of conflict, such as conflicting behavioral expectations from family and work. Also, to increase realism, future research can use diary studies to capture individuals’ decision making process and outcomes as they face conflict demands in life (Greenhaus and Powell, 2012b). Until additional studies that provide convergent evidence are available, we urge our readers to exercise cautions in attempting to translate our findings into organizational policy changes.

Third, our focus was on the individual decision maker, ignoring the role of other parties relevant to work-family decisions (family members, coworkers, or supervisors). Greenhaus and Powell (2012a) argue that the influence of other relevant parties may also be observed in decision making contexts. For example, individuals faced with the task of choosing between spending time with their family and spending time at work may find it less challenging to make the decision in favor of the family option if their supervisor is supportive of work-life balance, in comparison to when they work for an organization that champions a culture of prioritizing work over family obligations.

Fourth, the use of SEM does not mean that we can make causal inferences from our results. In addition, we cannot make clear inferences regarding the mediators in this study. There may be many other mediating relations in our model, and future research should replicate these findings and assess other mediators. Fifth, the sample size of our study is rather small, potentially reducing the power to detect significant relations. Fortunately, most of the hypotheses were supported in the study, thereby reducing the potential concerns with Type II errors. In addition, our sample is relatively homogeneous, excluding people who are single, childless, or widowed. The generalizability of our findings to other populations should be determined in future research.

Finally, our study takes a more monochronic view of time, whereby individuals think about time as divisible into units (Cotte and Ratneshwar, 1999) and concentrate on tasks or events sequentially. An alternative view of time, the polychronic view, suggests that time is more fluid and individuals can engage in multiple activities simultaneously (Kaufman et al., 1991).
According to this view, participation in activities occurring in one domain does not automatically rule out one’s participation in activities occurring in a different domain, even if these activities take place simultaneously. Modern technologies have made it increasingly convenient for the polychronic use of time (see also Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). For example, the popularity of the home-office in recent years provides the potential for attending to work demands without the need to sacrifice pleasurable time spent with family members (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). The various strategies that individuals employ to combine competing activities and their implications for work/family satisfaction represent a fruitful avenue for future investigations.

References


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Anticipated Regret in Time-based Work-family Conflict


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