

Work, Family, and Gender: Elements for a Theory of Work-Family Balance

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Over last century, work was not only a means of economic survival, but also a very strong factor of psychological structuring and of organization of personal, family, and everyday life. The new world of work provides new challenges to the balance of work and family life. A questionnaire was administered to a sample of 453 people with the aim of analyzing the relation between variables such as family burdens and domestic responsibilities, and the appraisal of work and family, values involved in work-family balance. The results of this study show that, in the present economic and cultural context, assuming family burdens and domestic responsibilities increases the positive appraisal of work and family, both in men and women. This has theoretical and practical implications concerning the challenge of work-family balance.

Keywords: balance, work, family, gender.

A lo largo del último siglo, el trabajar ha funcionado no sólo como un medio de obtención de sustento material, sino también como un importante factor de estructuración psicológica y de organización de la vida personal, familiar y cotidiana. El nuevo entorno del trabajo plantea nuevos desafíos para la conciliación de la vida laboral y la familiar. Se aplicó un cuestionario a una muestra de 453 personas con el objetivo de analizar la relación de variables como las cargas familiares y las responsabilidades domésticas con la valoración del trabajo y de la familia, valores a su vez implicados en la conciliación de la vida laboral con la vida familiar. Los resultados del estudio muestran que, en el presente contexto económico y cultural, la asunción de cargas familiares y de responsabilidades domésticas aumenta al tiempo la valoración de la familia y del trabajo, tanto en hombres como en mujeres; lo cual tiene implicaciones teóricas y prácticas en lo que concierne al desafío de la conciliación trabajo-familia.

Palabras clave: conciliación, trabajo, familia, género.

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Throughout industrial modernness, work has acted not only as a means of material support, but also as a powerful psychological structuring factor, both in the individual sphere and in the family, providing salary, identity, certainty, and security (Álvaro, 1992; Blanch, 1990; Jahoda, 1982; Peiró & Prieto, 1996; Warr, 1987).

During the classic Fordian phase of the 20th century, the traditional sexual division of work is reinforced. This division assigns the role of economic provider of the family and the social function of producer to the male, and he is supposed to develop this function in the public sphere of employment, accepting remunerated work as a vital central role (MOW, 1987, 1991; Salanova, Gracia, & Peiró, 1996).

In contrast, the task of reproduction is assigned almost exclusively to the female, as the family caregiver, thus restricting her area of social action to the private world of domesticity (Carrasco, 1991; Dex, 1988; Durán, 1988, 2006; Eagly, 1987; Grossman & Chester, 1990). This pronounced social division of roles does not usually generate special problems of work-family balance, because it leads the males to assume, almost exclusively, the social responsibility of the breadwinner, and the females to “take care of the nest.”

In this scenario, there is relative consensus about the theories that defend that caring for the family and housework lead to reinforcement of gender role. This explains some empirically confirmed differences between men and women in the meaning of work, work behavior, choice of career, and work insertion itineraries (Austin, 1984; Casal, Masjuan, & Planas, 1989; Gerson, 1985; Grossman & Chester, 1990; MOW, 1987), and also in the degree of the psychological impact of unemployment (Banks, 1989; Blanch, 1990; Eisenberg & Lazarsfeld, 1938; Fryer & Payne, 1986; Fryer & Ullah, 1987; Hayes & Nutman, 1981; Kelvin & Jarrett, 1985). These differences are attributed to the buffering effect of the married woman’s status (Warr & Parry, 1982) and, ultimately, to the differential socialization of gender, which leads men to seek fulfillment in work and women at home (Eagly, 1987).

But the combined effect of the new productive order established by flexible, informational, and global Capitalism and of the neoliberal administration of the labor market (which frequently leads to a decrease in the buying power of the salaries) strengthens the contemporary metamorphosis of the scenario, the experience, and work relations, as well as the relation of work with other social and daily life settings (Antunes, 1995; Bauman, 1998, 2000; Beck, 1998, 2000; Beynon, 1995; Blanch 2003; Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; Giddens & Hutton, 2000; Gorz, 1988; Gracia, González, & Peiró, 1996; Méda, 2002; Sennett, 1998, 2006).

The massive incorporation of women in the labor market contributes to this general process of profound transformation of the labor world, which leads to the *detraditionalization* (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) of the structure and of family and couple dynamics, as well as of the relation between genders, and blurs the social differentiation between

the masculine agentic-cultural-work function and the feminine communal-natural-domestic function (Carrasco, 1999; Crompton, 1999; Díaz, Godoy, Stecher, & Toro, 2006; Díaz & Hola, 2001; Rivero, 2005; Todaro & Rodríguez, 2001; Todaro & Yáñez, 2004).

The new socio-labor environment thus turns into the matrix of a new kind of psychosocial tension, which is presented variously in the last decades as the individual problem of work-family balance and as a social issue of inequality in the use of time. The hub of the issue lies in the difficulty to reconcile the productive and reproductive tasks, specifically because of certain incompatible demands of the family and work roles in working women, who usually assume multiple roles, working days, careers, and lives (Alba, 2000; Andrés, 2006; Crompton, 1999; Durán, 1988, 2006; Folbre & Bittman, 2004; Gracia et al., 1996; Olavarria & Céspedes, 2002; Potuchek, 1997; Rivero, 2005; Tobio, 2005).

The debate about the social dimension of the process reveals the new frontiers in inequality and gender discrimination with regard to the social use of time and how it is distributed among men and women (Anxo & Boulin, 2005, 2006; Boulin, Cette, & Theys, 2003; Durán, 1999, 2006; Golden & Figart, 2001; Hufton & Kravaritou, 1999; Izquierdo, Del Río, & Rodríguez, 1988; Maruani, Rogerat, & Torns, 2001; Méda, 2002; Ramos, 1990).

The challenge of work-family balance is a complex issue combining social, work, family, and educational dimensions, thus requiring integrated coping of individual, family, and political strategies (Carrasco, 1991, 1999; Folbre & Bittman, 2004; Rivero, 2005; Tobio, 2005).

The macrosurveys of active population (European Comisión, 2007; Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2008; Parent-Thirion, Fernández, Hurley, & Vermeulen, 2007; Weiler, 2006) point to the collective of women with young children as presenting—in comparison with men in general and with the rest of the women—the lowest rates of work activity and the highest of part-time employment, thus concentrating more intensely the problem of family-work balance (Rivero, 2005; Tobio, 2005). But many different monographic studies have elaborated typologies of coping strategies for the work-family conflict. In this vein, Gracia et al. (1996) refer to those developed by the dual-earner couples.

Some contributions mention the need for conceptual divisions in this issue and the need to examine in depth the empirical knowledge of gender stereotypes as a basic reference for the development of policies aimed at cultural change (Anxo & Boulin, 2005; Durán, 1988, 1999, 2006; Rivero, 2005; Tobio, 2005; Todaro & Yáñez, 2004).

In the present study, we hope to contribute a complementary perspective to these predominant lines of research in the field of work-family balance, analyzing the relation of the variables family burden and domestic responsibilities with the values involved in work-family balance, and those pertaining to work, family, and money. We assume that, if taking on family burdens and domestic

responsibilities affects one's appraisal of family, work, and money, then a more positive appraisal of family accompanied by a decrease in the value attributed to work and money would also decrease the work-family balance problem and that if, in contrast, there is a more positive appraisal of work and money, this would produce an increase in the problem of work-family balance.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 453 people from the labor market of the metropolitan environment of Barcelona. We recruited them from the municipal census using stratified random sampling, taking into account the criteria of gender (243 women and 210 men), generation (people from 20 to 45 years of age, $M = 31$ years, both for men and women), and occupational situation (36% employed, 49% underemployed, and 15% unemployed). One third of the sample ($n = 146$) had family burdens (26% of the men and 38% of the women). With regard to domestic responsibilities, 8% of the men and 35% of the women assumed them exclusively, and 17% of the men and 23% of the women shared them, whereas 75% of the men and 42% of the women delegated these responsibilities to another person in a context where, because of age, studies, or job situation, a large part of both men and women lived habitually in the paternal domicile.

Procedure and Instrument

The main instrument of this empirical study was a pencil-and-paper questionnaire, administered individually in the participants' homes. The drafting of the censal items referring to family burdens and domestic responsibilities allows dichotomization (with/without) of the information about these variables and also qualification of the number of people being cared for or the exclusive, shared, or delegate nature of such responsibilities. Participants rated, on a 10-point scale, the importance of work, family, and money in their personal lives; the singular content of each value was

relevant, independently of the remaining scores of the inventory. Therefore, as this is a mono-item instrument, there was no point in calculating internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) or interrater reliability of this part of the questionnaire (Schmidt & Hunter, 1989).

With the current version of the scale "Centralidad del empleo" [Job Centrality], perceived job attraction, that is, the importance attributed to employment (as an instrumental value and its psychosocial valence) was measured (Blanch, 1990), the scale includes 17 items about expected results of work, such as, for example, a sense of security, capacity of consumption, personal accomplishment, etc. Factor analysis (principal components) revealed a single factor that explained 42.2% of the variance, and all the factor loadings were higher than .35, with a Cronbach's alpha value of .92 (Blanch, 2006). In the present sample, the value of alpha was .83

Results

Tables 1, 2, and 3 present the means and standard deviations of the appraisals of work, family, and money and of the Job Centrality Scale, as well as the significance of the differences between the mean scores of each response category of the censal variables managed in this study as independent (variables): sex-gender, family burdens, and domestic responsibilities. Before performing these analyses, we determined whether the variances between groups were equal, a prerequisite for contrasting means. The tables also show the effect size (expressed as Pearson's r and Cohen's d) of each independent variable on the values and job centrality.

Analysis by sex is shown in Table 1. From these results, it can be seen that the women valued family significantly more than the men. No statistically significant differences emerged between men and women in their appraisals of work and money, or job centrality.

In Table 2 is displayed the analysis of the differences as a function of family burdens. The people with family burdens valued family, work, and job centrality) more than those who did not have such burdens, but they did not differ significantly in their appraisal of money.

Table 1
Differences in Values (Family, Work, and Money) and Work Job Centrality according to Sex-Gender

| Variable | Men ($n = 210$) | | Women ($n = 243$) | | t | Effect size r (d) |
|---------------------|-------------------|------|---------------------|------|--------|----------------------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | |
| Family value | 8.93 | 1.46 | 9.29 | 1.43 | 2.68** | .13 (.26) |
| Work value | 7.62 | 1.75 | 7.67 | 1.84 | 0.26 | .01 (.02) |
| Money value | 7.27 | 1.56 | 7.55 | 1.74 | 1.79 | .08 (.16) |
| Work Job centrality | 6.82 | 0.95 | 6.89 | 1.12 | 0.66 | .03 (.06) |

** $p < .01$

Table 2

Differences in Values (Family, Work, and Money) and Work Job Centrality according to Family Burden

| Variable | Without family burden (<i>n</i> = 307) | | With family burden (<i>n</i> = 146) | | <i>t</i> | Effect size <i>r</i> (<i>d</i>) |
|---------------------|--|-----------|---|-----------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Family value | 8.89 | 1.51 | 9.61 | 1.19 | 5.05** | .23 (.46) |
| Work value | 7.36 | 1.84 | 8.25 | 1.56 | 5.09** | .23 (.46) |
| Money value | 7.32 | 1.63 | 7.62 | 1.74 | 1.90 | .08 (.16) |
| Work Job centrality | 6.66 | 1.11 | 7.17 | 0.85 | 5.16** | .24 (.48) |

***p* < .01

Table 3

Differences in Values (Family, Work, and Money) and Work Job Centrality according to Domestic Responsibilities

| Variable | Without domestic responsibilities (<i>n</i> = 307) | | With domestic responsibilities (<i>n</i> = 146) | | <i>t</i> | Effect size <i>r</i> (<i>d</i>) |
|---------------------|--|-----------|---|-----------|----------|--------------------------------------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | |
| Family value | 8.92 | 1.49 | 9.41 | 1.40 | 3.58** | .17 (.34) |
| Work value | 7.57 | 1.75 | 8.02 | 1.97 | 2.51* | .12 (.24) |
| Money value | 7.28 | 1.66 | 7.81 | 1.81 | 3.19** | .15 (.30) |
| Work Job centrality | 6.78 | 1.08 | 7.07 | 0.92 | 3.09** | .14 (.28) |

* *p* < .05. ***p* < .01.

In Table 3 are shown the results of the analysis in which the independent variable is assuming responsibility for housework (domestic responsibilities). The results indicate that people who assume some degree of responsibility for housework score higher than those who do not in their appraisals of family, work, and money and in job centrality, and these differences were statistically significant.

As mentioned, we also carried out an analysis of the effect size of each independent variable on the values and on job centrality. To interpret them, we shall use the rule suggested by Cohen (1988), according to which, effect sizes of $r = .10$ ($d = .20$) are considered small, effect sizes of $r = .30$ ($d = .50$) are considered medium, and effect sizes of $r = .50$ ($d = .80$) are considered large. The results of the analysis of the effect size are in the last column of Tables 1, 2, and 3. With regard to the variable sex, the only statistically significant value had a small effect size, although it was slightly higher than the limit suggested by Cohen. As for the variable family burden, the statistically significant results revealed effect sizes in all cases that approached the values considered medium. Lastly, in the case of the variable domestic responsibilities, all the values of the effect size were slightly higher than what is considered low.

Discussion

The fact that the family is highly valued by women and men—more by women than by men—and that this institution

(which usually occupies a privileged position in the ranking of social values) is especially valued by those people who are caregivers and who assume domestic responsibilities is in keeping with the perspective described in general by many different and traditional sociological barometers (Andrés, 1991, 1995; Harding, Phillips, & Focarty, 1986; Ros & Gouveia, 2001; Stoetzel, 1983; Super & Sverko, 1995) and also with viewpoints provided by reports that focus on the analysis of the meaning and the value of work (Blanch, 1990; MOW, 1987).

That having family burdens is also associated with a higher appraisal of work is a fact that has been sociologically normal for men, but is relatively novel in the case of women. In effect, in the 1980s, some empirical evidence had been accumulated (from studies carried out at the end of the high point of Fordism) about the proposal of the moderating role of gender in the psychologically positive impact of employment and the negative consequences of unemployment.

According to this tradition, it was habitually reported that the positive effects of employment and the negative effects of unemployment were observed with more intensity in men than in women in general, and also more in young, single women without children than in middle-aged, married women with children, because for the latter, the value of work decreased as the value of family increased (Blanch, 1990; Warr, 1987; Warr & Parry, 1982).

This contrast was attributable to the differential socialization according to gender and to the resulting

buffering effect of the status of the married woman, spouse, mother, and housewife (Blanch, 1994; Blanch & Salleras, 1987).

In view of these traditions, a new confirmation of gender stereotypes was to be expected: On the one hand, when men assume family burdens, the instrumental value they place on work will also increase, as it is a source of the money needed to keep their family, for which they feel they are the breadwinners. On the other hand, when women assume family burdens, they will increase the value they place on family and domestic roles, because of their role of caregivers, and at the same time, the value they allocate to working outside of the home will decrease.

However, in our sample, there were no indications of significant differences between women and men, which could imply some restructuring of the meaning of work in the women, and a tendency towards more gender equalizing of socio-work roles. This effect of men-women equalizing does not only appear in the women from the Spanish sample of reference for this article but also in the women of the international research sample that includes this sample. In effect, in the global sample, made up of about 2500 people from five Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Spain, and Mexico), women with children not only assign more value to family than do women without children ($p < .001$), but they also value work more than the childless women ($p < .005$). There is also some indication that women tend to place more value on money ($p < .06$) when they have children (Blanch, 2006).

The women and men with family burdens from the Spanish sample also scored higher in the job Centrality Scale than those with no burdens. Along these same lines, the people (women and men, with no statistically significant differences) who report assuming some degree of responsibility for domestic tasks value family, work, money, and the job Centrality more than people who report delegating these responsibilities to another person.

These appraisals contrast with the attitudes expressed by a sample of 1000 unemployed Spanish women from the early 1990s (Blanch, 1994), in which the married women showed less desire and less need to work than the single women ($p < .01$ in both cases).

Summing up, the results of the study show that, at present, assuming family burdens and domestic responsibilities not only increases people's appraisal of family, but also that of work and job Centrality, both in men and in women; this could indicate that, in the current socio-work environment, the instrumental function of work is reinforced in both men and women, as a source of the money needed to maintain the family. This implies that, in these circumstances, a more positive appraisal of family accompanied by a more positive appraisal of work exacerbates the issue of work-family balance.

Thus, in view of these data, the work-family balance issue can only be discussed, understood, and dealt with

adequately if it is placed not only in the general context of change in the socio-work scenario, but also within the specific framework of change in the value of work and of labor values held by people with family burdens and who assume exclusively domestic responsibilities.

We have focused on the work-family balance issue, referring to socioeconomic change and transformations in the sphere of values. The data presented also suggest metamorphosis in a crucial aspect of gender identity. From the times of the Genesis until Fordism, the sexual division of work based on gender criteria has been more or less plainly in force, leading, on the one hand, to the stereotypical masculine role of the man-producer who works by the sweat of his brow, and, on the other, to the feminine role of the woman-reproducer, who bears children with pain. But in the flexible, postmodern, and post-Fordist capitalism, not only is there a change in the scenario, but also a change in the script: that which, as a rule, the working woman-spouse-mother tended to establish in disjunctive terms of "or provider or caregiver" is yielding way to the emerging social norm of a conjunctive approach in terms of "work and family."

This fact leads to a new question and a new challenge for research on work-family balance, which could be addressed by some versions of the Moscovician theory of social representations (Abric, 1994a, 1994b; Flament, 1994a, 1994b; Valencia & Larrañaga, 2004): Is work-family balance a part of the *central node* of the social representation of the female gender (i.e., women, providers, and caregivers simultaneously) and, therefore, a first-order identity and moral mandate, or does it belong to the *peripheral system* of this social representation and, therefore, to the area of aspects that are open to negotiation with reality? An answer to this question would provide a clearer idea of the scope and sense of the work-family balance issue in the current context.

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