



The Interplay of Work-Family Life and Psychosocial Adjustment for International Graduate Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to critically review the literature on the interplay of work-family life and psychosocial adjustment of married international graduate students to the United States, provide evidence for a complicated and integrated support mechanism for married international graduate students, and make specific recommendations. Empirical studies on student and expatriate work-family life and psychosocial adjustment are reviewed. Studies indicated a significant negative relationship between work-family conflict and (a) life satisfaction, (b) work satisfaction, and (c) family satisfaction. Moreover, studies signified a positive relationship between work-family balance and (a) psychological well-being and (b) sociocultural adjustment. Due to the difficulty of separating work and family domains for married international graduate students, it will be critical to find ways to support international graduate students' work and family life in an integrated way, which would help with their psychosocial adjustment to the United States. This support could be done through organizing seminars or workshops on healthy work-family balance, having their spouses involved in the graduate student orientation program, or discussing work-family issues and their influence on married graduate students' lives through group programs. The paper's implications would be of value to married international graduate students who are planning to study in a foreign country by helping ease their adjustment process.

Keywords: psychological adjustment, sociocultural adaptation, work-family, international graduate students

1. Introduction

The United States hosts the largest international student population in the world. According to the Institute of International Education (2016), a record high of 1,043,839 international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in the 2015-2016 academic year, indicating a 7.1% increase in the total number of international students from the previous academic year. Considering the students' education levels, 40.9% were undergraduate students, 36.8% were graduate students, 14.1% were students in optional practical training, and 8.2% were non-degree students (Institute of International Education, 2016). Taking into account the increasingly high number of international students in the U.S., it is important to focus on the international students' adjustment process, which could influence their performance and functioning (Duru & Poyrazlı, 2007). The current review specifically concentrates on the interplay of work-family life and psychosocial adjustment of graduate students due to the difficulty of differentiating personal and professional life particularly during graduate studies.

Considering the differential workloads of undergraduate and graduate students, married international graduate students have unique challenges in terms of dealing with their work and

family responsibilities. Even though both undergraduate and graduate students work on their classes and follow their programs' schedules, graduate students have additional work responsibilities. Depending on the appointment, many graduate students serve as research or teaching assistants and contribute to research productivity or teach courses to undergraduate students (Poyrazlı & Kavanaugh, 2006). Because work responsibilities are an integral part of graduate study and professional development and because it is difficult to separate professional and private lives in academia (Ott, 2007), individuals need to find a way to deal with work and family life simultaneously. Therefore, the interplay of work-family life, which refers to how work and family issues influence one another, could influence the psychosocial adjustment process of married international graduate students.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Psychosocial Adjustment

International student psychosocial adjustment includes students' adaptation to the psychological and sociocultural changes they go through during the cross-cultural transition process (Searle & Ward, 1990). Psychological changes are the changes that occur due to individual's mental health status in the adjustment process such as one's psychological well-being, self-esteem, or life satisfaction. Sociocultural changes, on the other hand, are the changes that occur due to changes in political, economic, linguistic, and social factors. Psychosocial adjustment in this paper refers to the students' psychological (e.g., well-being and life satisfaction) and sociocultural (e.g., ability to fit into a new culture) adjustment to the United States.

Research indicates that international students face a cultural adjustment challenge when they come to study in a foreign country (McGarvey et al., 2015; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Different factors influence psychosocial adjustment to a new country and to better understand cross-cultural adjustment, researchers have investigated the effects of several variables including acculturative stress (Crockett et al., 2007; Wei et al., 2007; Xu & Chi, 2013), social support (Atri, Sharma, & Cottrell, 2007; Crockett et al., 2007; Poyrazlı et al., 2004; Thomas and Choi, 2006), personality traits (Searle & Ward, 1990; Zhang, Mandl, & Wang, 2010), length of stay in the new country (Searle & Ward, 1990; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Ye, 2006), and English language proficiency (Poyrazlı & Kavanaugh, 2006; Sumer, Poyrazlı, & Grahame, 2008; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015).

Even though the international student adjustment process is known to be psychosocially challenging, research on international graduate students with accompanying families has been scarce. Furthermore, the adjustment process for international graduate students acculturating with spouses and family could be even more complex when compared to that of single students (Oropeza, Fitzgibbon, & Baron, 1991). Duru and Poyrazlı (2007) found that married international students were more likely than single international students to experience acculturative stress, thereby indicating that married international students may have some additional disadvantages during the cross-cultural adjustment process. Researchers emphasized that while single students cope mainly with academic problems, married students have to deal with academic and immediate family problems (Duru & Poyrazlı, 2007), which can further complicate their transition process. Based on these findings, married international students might experience the adjustment process differently than single students due to the importance of marriage in their lives (Poyrazlı & Kavanaugh, 2006). Therefore, in this paper we will review the literature on the psychosocial adjustment process of married international graduate students, by focusing on the interplay of their work and family life.

2.2. Work and Family Life

Family has been a key societal unit throughout history (Karakas, Lee, & MacDermid, 2004), and men and women have taken on different roles to meet the needs of the family. Social roles reflect

particular historical periods; therefore, they are subject to change according to changing experiences, expectations, and contexts (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). Work and family spheres were completely intertwined prior to the Industrial Revolution; however, following the Industrial Revolution the separation of the workplace from the home resulted in the separation of work and family roles for men and women in the U.S. (Stebbins, 2001). The two worlds collided during the 1970s when women entered the workforce in larger numbers (Stebbins, 2001). Starting from the 1990s, modern Western family life has been characterized as a “scene of continuous juggling of diverging multiple ambitions among occupational necessities, educational constraints, parental duties, and the monotony of housework” (Beck, 1992, p. 89). Nowadays, it is even more difficult to think about work and family life separately.

As work and family are two key elements of contemporary human life, married graduate students deal with academic demands and family responsibilities throughout their studies. As Curtis (2004) stated, “we are defined by the work we do” (p. 21). Therefore, being a graduate student and working toward a career is an important part of life for married graduate students. Nevertheless, it is difficult to think about human beings outside of close interpersonal relationships, especially those with our families, that enrich their lives by adding meaning to them. Accordingly, school life, academic work, and family life seem to be the most important elements of graduate students’ lives.

Graduate school can be anxiety provoking due to the number and intensity of program demands. When one’s job cannot be finished at the office and has to be taken home, which is common for graduate students, feelings of tiredness, stress, and burn out are experienced (van der Lippe, Jager, & Kops, 2006). From this perspective, juggling with school/work and family responsibilities seems to comprise graduate students’ multiple demands. Because there is an increasing need to help students manage the multiple demands (Hammer, Grigsby, & Woods, 1998), focusing on the interplay of work-family life is important. Different perspectives are used to investigate the interaction of work and family life. Carlson and Grzywacz (2008) identified three main viewpoints: negative (e.g., work-family conflict), positive (e.g., positive spillover, enrichment, facilitation), and integrative (e.g., balance, fit).

2.2.1. The negative perspective

The conflict perspective could be considered as the most widely studied approach in work-family research. Work-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict, in which the role pressures from work demands and family responsibilities are mutually incompatible in some respect (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). According to this perspective, conflicts arise when there is difficulty fulfilling the demands of work and family life. Research indicates that work-family conflict derives from and is linked to (a) work role stressors (e.g., role conflict, role ambiguity, work overload), (b) task characteristics (e.g., task autonomy, task complexity, task variety), (c) work salience (e.g., job involvement, career priority), (d) work schedule characteristics (e.g., work schedule inflexibility, work related travel; Greenhaus et al., 1989) and (e) family stressors such as parental stressors (e.g., parental workload, the extent of children’s misbehavior) and marital stressors (e.g., lack of spouse support, the degree of tension or conflict in the relationship; Frone, Rusell, & Cooper, 1992). Frone and colleagues (1992) demonstrated that there are negative consequences of stress associated with work and family demands. A meta-analysis investigating the relationship between work-family conflict and life satisfaction found a consistent negative relationship between the two (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Moreover, several studies indicated a negative relationship between work-family conflict and (a) work satisfaction (Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999; Googins & Burden, 1987; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996), (b) family satisfaction (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 1999; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992), and (c) life satisfaction (Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999; Goh, Ilies, & Wilson, 2015). In short, work-family conflict seems to add to stress and is negatively linked to work, family, and life satisfaction.

2.2.2. The positive perspective

The positive view of work-family interface (e.g., positive spillover, enrichment, facilitation) is based on the idea that work and family domains may be mutually beneficial and support, facilitate, or enhance each other (Carlson & Grzywacz, 2008). For example, work-family enrichment researchers indicate that work and family domains may each provide people with resources such as greater income and boosted esteem that support them in performing better at work and at home (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Previous research indicates that flexible and supportive work environments have been associated with higher marital quality and improved quality of parent-child interactions (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). Likewise, family support has been positively linked to career success (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). A meta-analysis by McNall and colleagues (2010) indicated that positive work-family interactions were positively related to job satisfaction and life satisfaction. Furthermore, Masuda and colleagues (2012) have validated that work to family positive spillover and work-family enrichment uniquely predicted job satisfaction and life satisfaction. Results of these and similar studies demonstrate the positive influence of work and family domains to each other.

2.2.3. The integrative perspective

Work-family balance refers to the extent to which an individual's effectiveness and satisfaction in work demands and family roles are compatible with the individual's life priorities (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Although few in number compared to the studies focusing on work-family conflict, there are studies indicating a positive relationship between work-family balance and well-being (e.g., Bourne, Wilson, Lester, & Kickul, 2009; Gröpel & Kuhl, 2009). Bryant and Constantine (2006) found that both multiple role balance and job satisfaction positively predicted overall life satisfaction of school counselors. Research also suggests that the absence of work-family balance may impair well-being and health (Frone, 2000; Frone, Rusell, & Cooper, 1997; Grzywacz & Bass, 2003). Marks and MacDermid (1996) found that individuals who are able to maintain balance across their roles have lower levels of depression, higher self-esteem, and more positive levels of well-being. In addition, a qualitative study investigating the meaning of good family life among professionals and managers who chose to work less than full-time, indicated six dimensions of family well-being: (a) spending high quality of time with family members, (b) relaxing in free time, (c) attaining emotional well-being and health of those in the family, (d) having high quality of communication and support among family members, (e) having high quality of child care and education, and (f) being satisfied with work and work load at home (Karakaş, Lee, & MacDermid, 2004). Because spending high quality time with family members and being satisfied with work and the work load at home are among the main factors contributing to happiness and well-being in the family, balancing work and family life appears to be very important.

2.3. Integrating Work-Family Life and Psychosocial Adjustment

Internationals' work and family arrangements change as they go through the cross-cultural adjustment process. During the adjustment process, internationals are faced with new work environments and roles, pressures to perform well, and increased challenges and opportunities for personal and professional growth in the work domain (Harvey, 1985). A study on 324 expatriates in 46 countries showed that intra- and inter-domain struggles to balance work demands and family responsibilities were strongly associated with expatriates' intentions to quit their job assignments (Shaffer, Harrison, Gilley, & Luk, 2001). The authors concluded that the heightened demands placed on employees and their families who relocate internationally and attempt to balance work-family relationships had consequences for the success of international assignments. A mixed-methods study on 47 middle-class dual-earner couples who perceived themselves as successful in balancing work and family highlighted that striving for marital partnership and equality was the couples' essential success strategy for work-family balance (Zimmerman, Haddock, Current, & Ziemba, 2003). Moreover, the study indicated that shared household, mutual and active

involvement in childcare, joint decision-making, equal access to and influence over finances, values placed on both partners' work/life goals, and shared emotion work were the main themes that emerged regarding work-family balance.

Furthermore, a longitudinal mixed methods study on 32 American, female expatriate spouses who relocated to Turkey found that the expatriate women perceived their occupational role to be less important when compared to the parental, marital, and homecare roles (Bikos et al., 2007). The results of the study also indicated that women had greater value than commitment to their occupational role, whereas more commitment than value to their marriage. The authors suggested models offering greater complexity to be used for further research on adaptation. Additionally, a study conducted on the married international student population investigated the influence of marital satisfaction and academic self-efficacy on student psychological adaptation to the U.S. Results indicated that marital satisfaction and academic self-efficacy accounted for 45.9% of variance in psychological well-being and 25.8% of variance in life satisfaction scores (Bulgan & Çiftçi, 2017). In addition, both marital satisfaction and academic self-efficacy made unique contributions to psychological well-being and life satisfaction. Furthermore, significant positive relationships were found between work-family balance and (a) psychological well-being and (b) sociocultural adjustment in a sample of 243 married international graduate students studying in the U.S. (Bulgan, 2011). In other words, as students' level of balancing their work and family life lives increased, so did their psychological and sociocultural adjustment to the new country.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Cross-cultural adaptation of international students involves adjusting to a new country, new university, new educational system, new people, new program, and new work responsibilities and demands. Identifying the factors influencing this transition and investigating their degree of influence in married international graduate student psychosocial adjustment are important in order to help this student population better adjust to the new culture and reach their goals of studying in the U.S. As work and family life are the two major domains for married graduate students, it is important to consider the influence of work-family life on the psychological and sociocultural adjustment of married international graduate students to the U.S.

Previous studies supported a positive relationship between work-family balance and well-being (e.g., Bourne, Wilson, Lester, & Kickul, 2009; Bulgan, 2011; Gröpel & Kuhl, 2009; Marks & MacDermid, 1996) and suggested that the absence of work-family balance could harm well-being and health (Frone, 2000; Frone, Rusell, & Cooper, 1997; Grzywacz & Bass, 2003). In addition, studies supported the negative relationship between work-family conflict and life satisfaction (Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998), work-family conflict and work satisfaction (Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999; Googins & Burden, 1987; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Netemeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996), and work-family conflict and family satisfaction (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 1999; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992). Therefore, it could be concluded that the interplay of married international graduate students' work and family lives would have a significant influence on their cross-cultural adjustment to the U.S.

3.1. Implications for Practice

As it is difficult to separate the work and family domains for graduate students, finding ways to support international students' healthy integration of work and family life could help ease their psychosocial adjustment to the U.S. For example, the universities and graduate programs, which have incoming new international graduate students who are relocating with their spouses, could include the students' spouses in the graduate program orientation process. Having their spouses' support right from the beginning and being involved in their university and program orientation processes could help international graduate students feel that they are not alone, which could indirectly influence their marital relationship. Being involved in the orientation process would also help the students' spouses get a feeling of the academic environment and better understand

what these students would be bringing into the marriage. Next, the interplay of work and family life could be even more salient when children are involved. Therefore, depending on the students' specific needs, graduate programs could also help international students get connected to useful resources such as day care facilities for students with children. Similarly, having early contact with international student organization offices, the university counseling center, or conversational language classes could also be helpful for international students. Furthermore, the university counseling centers could offer group programs focusing on work-family life and psychosocial adjustment for the married international students in their first year of study and their spouses. Having the opportunity to voice their difficulties, having the support of those going through similar struggles, and learning effective strategies to cope with work-family issues and challenges of cross-cultural adjustment could be helpful for the students and their spouses. Similarly, workshops and seminars on effective time management, how to healthily balance work and family demands during graduate studies, how to psychosocially better adjust to a new country and educational system would be helpful for international graduate students. Mental health professionals who provide counseling services to married international graduate students could also take into account how their clients' work and family life influence one another and help their clients more effectively balance their work-family demands and become aware of the positive influences of these two domains on their lives.

3.2. Directions for Future Research

The increasing number of international students in the U.S. requires that researchers focus on understanding the factors influencing the students' psychosocial adjustment process. More specifically, it would be useful to conduct quasi-experimental studies investigating married and single international and domestic students' psychological well-being in relation to different study variables such as academic self-efficacy, academic success, life satisfaction, coping skills etc. in order to observe the differences among the student groups. It would also be beneficial to conduct qualitative studies and get more in-depth information regarding the influence of married international graduate students' work-family life to their psychosocial adjustment to the U.S. Having in-depth information would enable to take more effective preventive measures, which could help ease the students' psychosocial adjustment process to the U.S.

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