# Coping with multiple dimensions of work-family conflict

Denise M. Rotondo
*Perdue School of Business, Salisbury University, Salisbury, Maryland, USA*

Dawn S. Carlson
*Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA, and*

Joel F. Kincaid
*Perdue School of Business, Salisbury University, Salisbury, Maryland, USA*

**Abstract** *One way to reduce work-family conflict is for individuals to have the ability to effectively cope with the stressful demands. The relationships between four styles of work and family coping (direct action, help-seeking, positive thinking, and avoidance/resignation) and levels of work-family conflict are considered. Two different forms of work-family conflict (time-based and strain-based) were examined as well as the effect of direction (work interfering with family, family interfering with work) to examine the efficacy of different coping styles. Help-seeking and direct action coping used at home were associated with lower family interfering with work conflict levels. Avoidance/resignation coping was associated with higher conflict levels of all types. The results suggest individuals may have greater control and opportunity for positive change within the family domain compared with the work environment.*

This study examines the relationships between various styles of coping and perceived work-family conflict. The literature has clearly established the impact of work-family conflict on various organizational and individual outcomes (e.g. Frone *et al.*, 1992; Gutek *et al.*, 1991). Some of the common results of experienced work-family conflict are increased levels of stress, decreased performance at home and work, and decreased life and work satisfaction (Adams *et al.*, 1996; Allen *et al.*, 2000; Frone *et al.*, 1992; Higgins *et al.*, 1992; Kelly and Voydanoff, 1985; Voydanoff, 1987). Managing competing demands from the work and family domains represents a source of formidable stress for many employees; stress which, in turn, can lead to health risks and other adverse outcomes. Although this stress is believed to be most salient among female employees, there should be little doubt that males also experience stress resulting from conflicting roles and demands (Burley, 1994; Davidson and Cooper, 1992).

Research on work-family conflict has focused on defining the concept more explicitly to reflect its complex nature (Frone *et al.*, 1996; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). The applied and practical response has been a proliferation of suggested work-place strategies addressing family needs. The practitioner literature has focused on the ways organizations can "manage the situation" by creating flexible working policies or arrangements. Such flexibility is, clearly, a potential means of reducing stress associated with work-family conflict (Warren and Johnson, 1995). The fact remains, however, that such policies and arrangements are still not available to everyone.

Many employees, especially those working in smaller companies, do not enjoy benefits like flexitime, on-site day care, career-break schemes, and informal support networks. Further, many jobs are not suitable for alternative arrangements like job sharing. Often, the ability to cope with the stress created from the simultaneous demands of work and family is a function of the capabilities of the individual.

While research has supported the general, stress-reducing properties of coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), there is a lack of research examining which styles of coping are most effective in dealing with the particular stressor of work-family conflict. An understanding of the relationship between coping and work-family conflict is needed. The purpose of our research is to consider the efficacy of general styles of coping on various dimensions of work-family conflict. In particular, we examine four styles of coping (direct action, help-seeking, positive thinking, and avoidance/resignation) and two forms of work-family conflict (time-based and strain-based) viewed from a bi-directional perspective (work interference with family (WIF) and family interference with work (FIW)).

## Work-family conflict
Work-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are incompatible in some respect (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Originally believed to be unidimensional, research in the area of work-family conflict has recently focused on refining the conceptualization of work-family conflict (Carlson *et al.*, 2000; Frone *et al.*, 1996; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Indeed, much of the past research concerning work-family conflict has failed to take into consideration the complex nature of the work-family issues. This has led to a call for more consistency in measurement, more refined construct development of the measures, and better sampling techniques (Kossek and Ozeki, 1998).

Work-family conflict occurs in multiple forms because conflict can originate under various conditions (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Stephens and Sommer, 1996). Though there are many forms considered in the literature, most research directly or indirectly focuses on the forms of time and psychological strain. The work-family interface is also recognized as a permeable boundary. Demands at

work that interfere with the family domain (WIF) have been found to be independent of demands within the family that interfere with the work domain (FIW) (Frone *et al.*, 1996).

In this research, we combine these two perspectives and focus on four dimensions of work-family conflict: time-based WIF, time-based FIW, strain-based WIF, and strain-based FIW. Time-based conflict occurs when time devoted to one role makes it difficult to participate in, or comply with, the expectations of another role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). An example might be where a parent-teacher conference conflicts with an important meeting at work. Strain-based conflict is viewed as strain from the demands of one role intruding into and interfering with participation in another role (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Coming home from work so emotionally and physically exhausted that one cannot effectively function or fulfill role demands at home would be an example of strain-based conflict. In any form, conflict can originate in one domain and spill over into the other, causing experienced stress to the individual(s) affected. Effective coping ameliorates experienced stress, and our explanation of how coping styles may affect levels of work-family conflict follows.

### Coping with stress

Coping is defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts individuals use to manage taxing demands appraised as exceeding their personal resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Research shows that the elimination of distress is primarily achieved through effective coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). The chronic nature of most contemporary stressors (like work-family conflict) compels individuals to continually cope in order to attenuate the distress.

To some extent there is a similarity among the types of ongoing coping efforts an individual makes, and the individual can be described as using a particular coping "style." Though no coping styles are universally appropriate, some may be more useful than others when dealing with the specific stressor of work-family conflict. Alternatively, some styles may work better with specific forms of conflict or with specific directional influences than others.

In the domain of coping, effort is not synonymous with productive effort. Though coping is believed to moderate the effects of stressors on strain, the beneficial effect of coping on psychological stress occurs via its influence on the appraisal process (Lazarus, 1991). That is, the way the individual perceives his/her environment and its stressors becomes positively changed. Effective coping styles, therefore, should be associated with lower levels of perceived work-family conflict.

Given the multiple ways individuals cope with stress, our research separates coping actions into four distinct categories: direct action, help-seeking, positive thinking, and avoidance/resignation. Havlovic and Keenan (1991, p. 203) defined this conceptualization as encompassing "both focus (problem/emotion)

and method (cognitive/behavioral) dimensions as well as social versus solitary and control versus escape components". Direct action implies a problem-focused approach to coping whereby the individual takes specific action to eliminate the stressor. Help-seeking is similar; however, it refers to attempts to mobilize action and make changes in conjunction with others. Help-seeking is a behavioral manifestation of social support, which typically refers to the level of perceived support available from relevant others. Social support is associated with lower levels of conflict (Adams *et al.*, 1996) and the actions of asking for and receiving support from others (help-seeking) would utilize those available resources. Direct action and help-seeking are both behavioral, problem-focused attempts to exert control and solve problems.

Positive thinking and avoidance/resignation are both cognitive, emotion-focused approaches to coping where the individual seeks to manage the ill-feelings associated with stress. Using a cognitive escape process and/or a passive attempt to ignore stressors defines an avoidance/resignation coping style. Positive thinking, alternatively, suggests individuals exercise great control to manage their cognitions in an optimistic fashion. Neither style acts to change the stressor, but instead attempts to minimize the ill-feelings associated with distress.

### Coping with work-family conflict
To date, empirical research has not fully examined the relationship between general styles of coping with stress and the perception of work-family conflict, though they are clearly related. Among the few studies examining the effects of coping, many have failed to find significant results. Strategies such as time management behavior (Jex and Elacqua, 1999), individual differences related to self-esteem (Grandey and Cropanzano, 1999), and perceived social support (Carlson and Perrewe, 1999; Frone *et al.*, 1995) have failed to moderate the effects of work-family conflict on strain. And although problem and emotion-focused coping have been found to moderate the effect of WIF on job satisfaction, the same strategies were found to be unrelated to somatic complaints (Butler and Gasser, 2002).

At least one study using a sample of Japanese working women did find family-role redefinition (a form of problem-focused coping) to moderate FIW on life strain (Matsui *et al.*, 1995). Another study of Hong Kong Chinese found emotion-focused coping to moderate FIW on job satisfaction (Aryee *et al.*, 1999). These studies, however, conceptualized neither work-family conflict nor coping in a comprehensive manner. This fact, combined with restrictive samples of respondents, suggests more empirical work is needed to better elucidate the relationship between work-family conflict in its multiple forms and coping.

Owing to the sparse and contradictory research history, our hypotheses are more general than specific, even though work-family conflict and coping are conceptualized very specifically in this research. This specificity is needed

because one can imagine a scenario where one style of coping may be effective with one form of conflict but not with others. We chose to hypothesize general relationships while allowing for more specific findings in the research design.

If an individual is effectively coping, his or her perceived work-family conflict should be lower because the conflict is "under control," so to speak. Similarly, perceived conflict should be expected to be highest (i.e. most salient) in those who are ineffectively or inefficiently managing work-family conflict. Expanding this idea to the domain relationship at the heart of work-family conflict, we expect individuals may direct efforts to cope with work demands, and direct separate efforts to cope with family demands. Coping employed in the work domain should be expected to most directly affect WIF conflict. Similarly, coping at home should most directly impact FIW conflict. The general hypotheses we tested are developed in later paragraphs.

*Problem-focused, behavioral coping.* Whereas all styles of coping have the potential to reduce distress, some research suggests, when situations are amenable to change, problem-focused styles like direct action and help-seeking are likely to be more effective (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Bhagat *et al.* (1995), for example, reported that problem-focused coping was more efficacious in managing work-related stressors than emotion-focused coping. Along similar lines, Koeske *et al.* (1993) found control-oriented coping (similar to direct action) to act as a buffer to reported work stress where avoidance/resignation was related to negative outcomes in a longitudinal study. Schwartz and Stone (1993) found active coping to be used more frequently with daily work problems. Using the wrong strategy in a given situation will, at the very least, slow the time it takes to reduce distress and possibly impede the process altogether. In general, the use of a problem-focused coping style in work settings, such as direct action, seems to be associated with greater coping efficacy. We would extend this logic to the family domain, thus motivating our expectation that use of direct action at work (at home) will reduce perceived WIF (FIW) conflict in both time-based and strain-based forms:

*H1.* Direct action coping styles used with work stressors will be associated with lower perceived WIF conflict.

*H2.* Direct action coping styles used with family stressors will be associated with lower perceived FIW conflict.

Although many studies have not found social support to moderate the effects of work-family conflict on strain, the perceived availability of support may not be as powerful as the mobilization of that support (as occurs with the use of help-seeking coping strategy). Some research has, indeed, found family-related coping to have a positive effect on wellbeing and psychological adjustment. For example, family-role redefinition (a help-seeking strategy) has been found to moderate the relationship between work-family conflict and strain (Matsui *et al.*,

1995). Other research suggests efforts to mobilize social support lower distress at home and are important to healthy adaptation (Belle, 1991).

A supportive supervisor and a family-centered organization have also been shown to reduce work-family role strain (Warren and Johnson, 1995), and such an environment would enable a help-seeking coping style. Seeking help from others when managing family or work stressors is expected to be effective in lowering the evaluation of time and strain-based work-family conflict. These expectations mirror the hypotheses drawn from research on work-related problem-focused (direct action) coping:

*H3.* Help-seeking coping styles used with work stressors will be associated with lower perceived WIF conflict.

*H4.* Help-seeking coping styles used with family stressors will be associated with lower perceived FIW conflict.

*Emotion-focused, cognitive coping.* Managing the feelings and emotions associated with stress occurs via cognitive manipulations and positive-thinking efforts (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Emotion-focused coping in the form of humor or prayer has been found to be an effective stress reducer in situations with life stressors that cannot be removed or changed (such as terminal illness (see Lazarus and Folkman, 1984)). Studies have shown that emotion-focused coping does attenuate the effect of FIW and WIF conflict on job satisfaction (Aryee *et al.*, 1999; Butler and Gasser, 2002). However, in their study of the moderating effects of coping styles, Bhagat *et al.* (1995) note that emotion-focused coping reduced only one of the 14 relationships between stress and symptoms of life strain versus seven for problem-focused coping. This debate is particularly relevant to the issue of work-family conflict because most of the prior studies have not considered the dynamic interplay between work and family domains in a comprehensive manner. And no prior study has examined emotion-focused coping in different forms, such as positive thinking and avoidance/resignation, as they relate to work-family conflict.

In our study, attempts to view stress as "part of life" and something which can be overcome to one's advantage represent cognitions that are positive, and perhaps useful. Emotion-focused coping has been cited as an effective coping style with organizational stress because individuals often have little ability to change work-related stressors, making problem-focused styles ineffective (Aryee *et al.*, 1999; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). Family emotional support has been shown to reduce family stress and thus FIW conflict (Bernas and Major, 2000). The effectiveness of emotion-focused coping certainly may be the case with work-family conflict issues in organizations where flexibility is unavailable. Additionally, positive thinking may occur in conjunction with or prior to the use of other problem-focused efforts, because it may predispose an individual to view a situation as less than hopeless and likely to be improved. For these reasons, we expect:

*H5.* Positive thinking coping styles used with work stressors will be associated with lower perceived WIF conflict.

*H6.* Positive thinking coping styles used with family stressors will be associated with lower perceived FIW conflict.

Avoidance and resignation as a coping style put the individual into a frame of mind where he/she seeks to avoid the stress, hopes time will take care of the situation, and/or passively accepts the situation, no matter how stressful it is. In some situations, where the source of stress is unyielding, this type of coping can help the individual to manage the ill-feelings of distress. If employees have little control to change their work situations (especially compared with family situations), such a coping style might have stress-reducing properties. Work-family conflict may, indeed, seem like an unyielding, unchangeable life situation. A broad, "this too will pass" attitude could reduce perceived conflict.

On the other hand, work-family conflict may be exacerbated in individuals who rely on avoidance/resignation as a coping style. Avoiding stressors and/or believing that time will take care of things, for example, do not seem to be effective methods for managing conflicting time demands. Avoidance/ resignation often represents the abdication of control in the hope of escaping from one's conflicts. This style of coping could even make the individual perceive greater conflict levels, perhaps because nothing really seems to change, thus making the issue more salient. Failing to manage one's competing demands may add to feelings of being "out of control," which in turn may increase the perceived conflict level in the individual's life.

Research on coping with stress generally supports the latter view (see Koeske *et al.* (1993)), in large part owing to the importance of psychological control and self-efficacy on effective stress management. Although avoidance/resignation may have some stress-reducing potential, it is likely to be the exception not the rule. We expect avoidance and resignation to be used by persons coping ineffectively with work-family conflict, perhaps owing to psychological maladjustment or a lack of perceived control:

*H7.* Avoidance/resignation coping styles used with work stressors will be associated with higher perceived WIF conflict.

*H8.* Avoidance/resignation coping styles used with family stressors will be associated with higher perceived FIW conflict.

**Current study**
Our research examines the relative efficacy of coping styles on work-family conflict. These two streams of research have not previously been combined in this comprehensive manner. Recognizing that conflict has four dimensions (time-based and strain-based WIF, time-based and strain-based FIW), we examine if certain coping styles are associated with lower reported conflict. We

propose that direct action, help-seeking, and positive thinking will be associated with lower perceived conflict and avoidance/resignation will be associated with higher perceived conflict levels. Further, coping efforts used at work should most directly impact perceived WIF conflict, and coping efforts used at home should most directly impact perceived FIW conflict. The next section describes the methods used to test these propositions.

## Methodology

### Sample

The data were collected using respondents employed at numerous organizations in a midwestern city of the USA. Many of the respondents not only were working full-time but were attending school full-time in an evening program catering to full-time, working adults finishing their undergraduate degrees. These individuals were given five surveys. They were asked to complete one for themselves and to take four surveys to their places of employment and distribute them to individuals willing to complete a questionnaire examining work-family conflict. The only condition placed was that individuals working in full-time jobs complete all the questionnaires. Thus, the sample comprises individuals working in very different work settings at varying organizational levels. This sampling strategy allowed for a sample that was not influenced by the particular family-centered policies and benefits of any one organization. The use of homogeneous populations and firms in work-family conflict research was a criticism offered by Kossek and Ozeki (1998) in their review of the field. These authors encourage the use of heterogeneous populations and firms in future research, something our particular research design helps to satisfy.

In total, 315 surveys were distributed (five each to the 63 working students). Of those, 225 were returned from 50 of the students. The high response rate was, in part, due to the agreement that the student would receive one point per usable survey returned towards the grade on his/her final exam (final grades were not significantly affected). The data were then reduced further by selecting for the analysis only those respondents who were married or who had at least one child (i.e. eliminating respondents who both were single and had no children). This was done to increase the likelihood that work-family conflict was a relevant issue to the individual and to increase accuracy in response to the work-family conflict questions. This selection process yielded a sample of 173 individuals whose responses were used in the analyses.

The total sample of 173 individuals consisted of 61 percent females and 39 percent males. Further, 82 percent were married, while 80 percent had children living at home with them. The average age was 37 years, while the average tenure with their organization was six years. The respondents were all employed in full-time jobs. Varying professions and organizational levels were

represented (operational, supervisory, managerial) from many different
organizational types (manufacturing, service, government/non-profit).

*Measures*
The collection of data using a survey instrument is consistent with past
research in this area. To increase the accuracy of the responses, each survey
was distributed with a cover sheet guaranteeing anonymity. Most research on
work-family conflict has been performed using self-report questionnaires items
under the assumption that self-reports accurately reflect objective
circumstances (Near *et al.*, 1980). To this extent, the individual's present level
of perceived work-family conflict is captured.

*Work-family conflict.* The work-family conflict scale consists of 12 items and
is measured on a five-point Likert-type agreement scale such that greater
scores represented more perceived work-family conflict. More specifically it
included three items to measure each of the four dimensions of work-family
conflicts – time-based work interfering with family (TBWIF), time-based
family interfering with work (TBFIW), strain-based work interfering with
family (SBWIF) and strain-based family interfering with work (SBFIW). The
scale was developed and validated by Carlson *et al.* (2000).

Some sample items are listed with the respective internal consistency
measure: "The time I must devote to my job keeps me from participating
equally in household responsibilities and activities" (TBWIF, $r = 0.87$), "My
personal life takes up time that I'd like to spend at work" (TBFIW, $r = 0.86$),
"The stress from my job often makes me irritable when I get home" (SBWIF,
$r = 0.86$), and "Owing to stress at home, I am often preoccupied with family
matters at work" (SBFIW, $r = 0.92$).

*Coping.* The coping measure used was developed and validated by Havlovic
and Keenan (1991), and contains four sub-scales that consist of six items to
measure each of the four styles of coping: avoidance/resignation, positive
thinking, direct action, and help-seeking. The coping-style items ask
respondents about generalized responses to recent work stressors and, then
later in the questionnaire, responses to recent family stressors to allow for the
potential that styles differed in the two domains. Respondents were asked to
think about stressful situations they have faced at work (or at home) and
indicate how they reacted in response to such situations. These instructions
were identical to those used by Havlovic and Keenan (1991). Items were
reworded as needed to correspond to the family domain and additional sections
of questions not used in this research separated the two scales to avoid
confusion. Clear directions were included to ensure respondents were focusing
on the relevant domain while responding to the questions. A five-point Likert-
type frequency scale with anchors of "hardly ever do this" to "almost always do
this" was used such that a higher score represented greater use of the
coping style.

Sample items measuring avoidance/resignation include: "I tell myself that time takes care of situations like this" and "I accept the situation because there is little I can do to change it." Positive thinking was measured with items such as "I remind myself that other people have been in this situation and that I can probably do as well as they did" and "I tell myself that I can probably work things out to my advantage." Direct action was measured with items including "I try to work harder and more efficiently", and "I throw myself into my family situation (or work) and work harder to tackle problems." Finally, help-seeking was measured with items such as "I decide what I think should be done and explain this to the people who are affected", and "I request help from people who have the power to help me." The reliability coefficients for the coping at work scales are as follows: direct action, $r = 0.72$; help-seeking, $r = 0.63$; positive thinking, $r = 0.77$; and avoidance/resignation $r = 0.76$. Reliability coefficients for the coping at home scales are as follows: direct action, $r = 0.81$; help-seeking, $r = 0.75$; positive thinking, $r = 0.82$; avoidance/resignation, $r = 0.57$[1].

*Demographic variables*
Respondents were asked to indicate their gender and marital status (which were dummy coded), as well as the number of children presently living with them. Given that all of these variables have been shown to be related to work-family conflict and have been controlled for in other studies (Eagle *et al.* 1997; Frone *et al.*, 1996; Kinnunen and Mauno, 1998), they were included here.

*Analysis*
The data were analyzed using hierarchical regression techniques. The control variables of gender, marital status, and the number of children living at home were entered in the first step, followed by the hypothesis variables. The independent variables entered represented work coping styles for the WIF conflict models and the family coping styles for the FIW conflict models. The change in $R$-squared was tested in each step. In total, four regressions were run to identify which coping variables were associated with higher or lower levels of work-family conflict (TBWIF, SBWIF, TBFIW, SBFIW).

**Results**
The means, standard deviations, and correlations for the variables of interest can be found in Table I. Conflict levels were, in general, negatively associated help-seeking, direct action, and positive thinking coping styles and positively associated with avoidance/resignation. Note that the levels of reported conflict were higher for WIF than for FIW. *T*-tests revealed significantly higher levels of WIF conflict for both time ($t = 10.78, p < 0.001$) and strain-based ($t = 10.74$, $p < 0.001$) conflict compared with FIW conflict. Consistent with past research, women and those with children living at home reported higher conflict levels. Marital status was not significantly related to conflict. Women, too, reported

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Direct action – work | 3.72 (0.59) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Help-seeking – work | 0.34** | 3.60 (0.58) | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Positive thinking – work | 0.54** | 0.43** | 3.61 (0.68) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Avoidance resignation – work | −0.13 | −0.35** | −0.11 | 3.01 (0.74) | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Direct action – family | 0.55** | 0.32** | 0.51** | −0.02 | 3.81 (0.60) | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Help-seeking – family | 0.32** | 0.46** | 0.34** | −0.05 | 0.63** | 3.71 (0.65) | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Positive thinking – family | 0.42** | 0.36** | 0.63** | −0.05 | 0.69** | 0.52** | 3.47 (0.70) | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Avoidance. resignation – family | −0.07 | −0.19** | −0.07 | 0.52** | 0.02 | −0.07 | 0.09 | 2.88 (0.58) | | | | | | | |

*(continued)*

**Table I.**
Means, standard
deviations, and
correlations

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9. Time-based WIF | 0.02 | −0.15* | −0.01 | 0.14 | −0.15* | −0.18* | −0.09 | 0.06 | 2.95 (1.1) | | | | | | |
| 10. Time-based FIW | −0.19* | −0.09 | −0.12 | 0.001 | −0.25** | −0.28** | −0.17* | 0.17* | 0.24** | 1.94 (0.90) | | | | | |
| 11. Strain-based WIF | −0.03 | −0.18* | −0.15* | 0.21** | −0.17* | −0.24** | −0.23** | 0.12 | 0.48** | 0.37** | 2.75 (1.1) | | | | |
| 12. Strain-based FIW | −0.21** | −0.05 | −0.12 | 0.09 | −0.27** | −0.24** | −0.17* | 0.30** | 0.19** | 0.61** | 0.36** | 1.87 (0.80) | | | |
| 13. Gender | 0.03 | −0.05 | −0.14 | 0.20** | 0.08 | 0.18* | −0.03 | 0.15* | −0.02 | 0.18* | 0.18* | 0.20** | 0.61 (0.49) | | |
| 14. Children at home | −0.08 | −0.08 | 0.001 | −0.07 | −0.10 | −0.14 | −0.11 | −0.07 | 0.24** | 0.19** | 0.18* | 0.20** | 0.004 | 1.11 (1.04) | |
| 15. Marital status | 0.04 | 0.02 | −0.04 | −0.04 | −0.11 | −0.07 | −0.09 | −0.01 | 0.03 | 0.004 | 0.06 | 0.02 | 0.15* | 0.004 | 2.14 (0.49) |

**Notes:** Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) are along the diagonal; $n = 173$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

**Table I.**

higher use of avoidance and resignation coping both at home and at work as
well as more help-seeking at home.

Two regression analyses were conducted using work interference as family
as the dependent variable: one for TBWIF and one for SBWIF. The models are
summarized in Table II. For TBWIF, the model explained 6.6 percent of the
variance. Of the work coping variables tested, only the use of avoidance/
resignation at work was associated with higher conflict levels ($B = 0.14$,
$p < 0.043$).

Similarly for SBWIF conflict, avoidance/resignation coping at work was
associated with higher conflict ($B = 0.18$, $p < 0.014$). The adjusted $R^2$ was 0.09.

Next, two similar analyses were done using FIW as the dependent variable:
one for TBFIW and one for SBFIW. Table III reports the final models. Using
TBFIW conflict as the dependent variable, family coping variables explained
virtually 16 percent of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = 0.155$). Higher conflict
levels were reported by those using avoidance/resignation coping at home

| Variables in the equation | Step 1 | | Step 2 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Effects of coping on TBWIF conflict* | | | | |
| F | 3.55** | | 2.73** | |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.043 | | 0.066 | |
| df | 3,169 | | 7,165 | |
| $\Delta R^2$ | | | 0.023** | |
| | $\beta$ | $t$ | $\beta$ | $t$ |
| Gender | −0.03 | −0.38 | −0.07 | −0.87 |
| Marital status | 0.03 | 0.41 | 0.04 | 0.55 |
| Number of children living at home | 0.24*** | 3.21 | 0.25*** | 3.31 |
| Avoidance/resignation − work | | | 0.14* | 1.72 |
| Positive thinking − work | | | 0.001 | 0.01 |
| Direct action − work | | | 0.10 | 1.12 |
| Help-seeking − work | | | −0.13 | −1.45 |
| *Effects of coping on SBWIF conflict* | | | | |
| F | 3.84** | | 3.45** | |
| Adjusted $R^{2.}$ | 0.047 | | 0.128 | |
| df | 3,169 | | 7,165 | |
| $\Delta R^2$ | | | 0.081*** | |
| | $\beta$ | $t$ | $\beta$ | $t$ |
| Gender | 0.17** | 2.27 | −0.11 | 1.41 |
| Marital status | 0.03 | 0.40 | 0.04 | 0.53 |
| Number of children living at home | 0.18** | 2.40 | 0.19** | 2.64 |
| Avoidance/resignation − work | | | 0.18* | 2.22 |
| Positive thinking − work | | | −0.13 | −1.47 |
| Direct action − work | | | 0.11 | 1.23 |
| Help-seeking − work | | | −0.08 | −0.95 |

**Notes:** All reported betas are completely standardized coefficients; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$;
*** $p < 0.001$; Significance levels reported are based on one-tailed tests

**Table II.**
Work interference
with family

| Variables in the equation | Step 1 | | | Step 2 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Effects of coping on TBFIW conflict* | | | | | | |
| F | 4.21** | | | 5.51** | | |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.053 | | | 0.155 | | |
| df | 3,169 | | | 7,165 | | |
| $\Delta R^2$ | | | | 0.102*** | | |
| | β | | t | β | | t |
| Gender | 0.86** | | 2.38 | 0.22*** | | 2.96 |
| Marital status | −0.02 | | −0.33 | −0.06 | | −0.87 |
| Number of children living at home | 0.19*** | | 2.62 | 0.16** | | 2.28 |
| Avoidance/resignation – family | | | | 0.13* | | 1.80 |
| Positive thinking – family | | | | 0.07 | | 0.71 |
| Direct action – family | | | | 0.18* | | −1.61 |
| Help-seeking – family | | | | −0.22** | | −2.33 |
| *Effects of coping on SBFIW conflict* | | | | | | |
| F | 4.87** | | | 7.62*** | | |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.063 | | | 0.212 | | |
| df | 3,169 | | | 7,165 | | |
| $\Delta R^2$ | | | | 0.169*** | | |
| | β | | t | β | | t |
| Gender | 0.21** | | 2.74 | 0.21** | | 2.87 |
| Marital status | −0.02 | | −0.21 | −0.05 | | −0.65 |
| Number of children living at home | 0.20*** | | 2.64 | 0.18** | | 2.63 |
| Avoidance/resignation – family | | | | 0..28*** | | 3.94 |
| Positive thinking – family | | | | 0.05 | | 0.50 |
| Direct action – family | | | | −0.26** | | −2.45 |
| Help-seeking – family | | | | −0.09 | | −0.98 |

**Notes:** All reported betas are completely standardized coefficients; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Significance levels reported are based on one-tailed tests

**Table III.**
Family interference
with work

($B = 0.13$, $p < 0.037$). Help-seeking at home was associated with lower conflict ($B = -0.22$, $p < 0.01$) as was direct action at home ($B = −0.17$, $p < 0.05$).

Using SBFIW as the dependent variable, the model explained 21 percent of the variance. Avoidance/resignation coping at home ($B = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$) was associated with higher conflict. Direct action at home was associated with lower conflict ($B = −0.26$, $p < 0.007$).

Examining the pattern of results, it can be seen that – in general – lower levels of FIW conflict appear when help-seeking or direct action coping is used at home (supporting *H2* and *H4*). These two strategies when used at work did not result in lower reported WIF conflict (contrary to *H1* and *H3*). *H5* and *H6*, which predicted positive thinking would lower conflict, received no empirical support. Higher conflict levels are reported among persons using avoidance or resignation, supporting *H7* and *H8*. The findings will be discussed further in the next section[2].

**Discussion**

This study examined the relationship between various styles of coping and the presence of work-family conflict using comprehensive conceptualizations for both coping and work-family conflict. Our results are consistent with past research on coping with work stress and with research on the nature of work-family conflict. In particular, two sources of conflict (time and strain) were considered in a bi-directional framework (WIF and FIW). This typology reflects the complex nature of competing work and family demands as a source of significant stress. Our primary interest was to examine how various coping styles affect this conflict. Avoidance/resignation, positive thinking, direct action, and help-seeking were treated as potential coping styles, and we allowed for the possibility that individuals could employ different styles in the work and family domains.

The ability of an individual to effectively cope was expected to reduce his or her level of work-family conflict. Holding constant gender, marital status, and the number of children living at home, the results suggest that all styles of coping are not equally effective with managing work-family conflict. We found that problem-focused, behavioral coping styles used at home seemed to be associated with lower FIW conflict levels. Help-seeking at home was associated with lower perceived time-based FIW and direct-action coping used at home was associated with lower time- and strain-based FIW conflict. These results support our expectations about the positive effects of direct action and help-seeking on perceived conflict in part. We did not find these coping styles to be associated with lower WIF conflict when used with work stressors.

An avoidance/resignation coping style was associated with higher perceived conflict. When used at work, WIF conflict was higher and, when used at home, FIW conflict was higher. This was true for both time- and strain-based conflict.

Positive thinking was not significantly associated with lower conflict. Although others have found emotion-focused coping (like positive thinking) to be associated with lower strain, we did not find work-family conflict to be lower among those employing a positive thinking style of coping.

Overall, *H2* and *H4* (family-related direct action and help-seeking on FIW) received good support, as did *H7* and *H8* (avoidance/resignation). *H1* and *H3* received no support (work-related direct action and help-seeking on WIF), nor did *H5* and *H6* (positive thinking). These conclusions are important in understanding the role of the individual in managing the demands of work and family.

*Coping with work-family conflict*

It was expected that the coping styles of direct action and help-seeking would be associated with lower conflict levels. These styles were associated with lower perceived FIW conflict when used with home stressors. It was surprising,

though, that these styles had no significant association with WIF conflict when used with work stressors.

Though related to the concept of social support, a help-seeking coping style as defined in this study involves more proactive efforts to mobilize support from others (versus the availability of emotional and instrumental support). Time-based conflict (FIW) was lower among persons reporting the use of a help-seeking coping style at home. Clearly, soliciting and receiving help from others in the family can eliminate or mitigate time conflicts. This type of coordinated and collaborative support among spouses and extended family clearly seem to reduce conflict stemming from incompatible time demands where family interferes with work functioning. Women reported more frequent use of help-seeking with family stressors, a finding consistent with past research which shows women are more likely to mobilize supportive resources than men (Belle, 1991).

Both time-based (FIW) conflict and strain-based conflict (FIW) were lower among persons employing direct-action coping at home. Direct-action coping involves individually motivated effort toward the resolution of family problems that may cause work to suffer. This coping style reflects the tendency to tackle the problem and do what needs to be done within the family domain so that conflict is reduced. These efforts help eliminate time where FIW, which in turn may help alleviate strain conflict (FIW), which can intensify under extreme time pressures.

As a whole, coping styles like help-seeking or direct action, when used at home, may result in lower FIW conflict (both time- and strain-based). These styles require the individual to engage in behavioral efforts to solve problems and eliminate stressors. Direct action and help-seeking presume the efficacy necessary to effectuate change and take action. These styles can be viewed as relatively efficacious in the work-family conflict arena, at least with FIW conflicts. One must wonder, then, why these same styles did not associate with lower WIF conflict when used with work stressors.

In this study, the cognitive, emotion-focused styles of coping included positive thinking and avoidance/resignation. The intent of the former is to place the conflict in a positive cognitive framework (expected to lower perceived conflict) and, of the latter, to foster feelings of acceptance or escape (expected to raise perceived conflict).

Positive thinking was not associated with lower conflict. The lack of findings, however, should not suggest positive thinking could not, contribute to wellbeing. It may be associated with greater satisfaction or it may represent a complementary activity to the engagement in problem-focused, behavioral coping efforts. Given that such possibilities were not tested in this research, we can only speculate on alternative roles for positive thinking.

Avoidance/resignation coping used either at home or at work was found to be generally associated with higher reported conflict[3]. Simply put, those

saying that they dealt with stressors by avoiding them or seeing them as unchangeable seemed to perceive greater conflict. These activities may have exacerbated the appraisal process, making conflict appear to be ongoing and never-ending, thus more problematic to the individual. Our findings add to the conclusions of those suggesting avoidance coping is less effective by demonstrating this adverse effect in both the work and family domain.

*Domain control*
An ongoing debate about the nature of the work and family interface revolves around the perceived ability of individuals to control stressors stemming from these two domains. Some theorize that individuals have more control over family than over work (Bolger *et al.*, 1989; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978), suggesting problem-focused, behavioral efforts may be more useful at home. Others argue that some individuals (primarily females) cannot trade off family involvement for work (Tenbrunsel *et al.*, 1995). This suggests there may be less ability to make family changes to accommodate work demands, something that would make problem-focused, behavioral coping difficult at home. Thus, there are overlapping lines of theory that offer competing conclusions about where individuals have more control and where certain coping styles are most effectively employed.

Recall that respondents reported significantly higher levels of conflict from work that interfered with family, which could reasonably imply more coping efforts should be directed at work. We found that this was not the case. *T*-tests revealed significant individual differences in the reported frequency of coping styles. Help-seeking ($t = -2.21, p < 0.03$) and direct action ($t = -2.03, p < 0.04$) were reported with less frequency at work compared with home, and more avoidance/resignation was reportedly used at work compared with home ($t = 2.66, p < 0.008$). This can lead to the curious conclusion that styles which seem more efficacious at home (i.e. help-seeking and direct action) are used less frequently in the domain, putting greater demands and stress on the individual (i.e. work). In addition, the coping style that is least productive (avoidance/resignation) is used more frequently in the work domain, perhaps adding to the problem of higher WIF conflict levels. Given that females reported higher conflict levels and greater use of avoidance/resignation coping, this apparent mis-match of effort is even more troubling. It is a finding consistent with recent research showing women report more overload and conflict yet employ less effective coping skills than men (Moen and Yu, 2000).

Our findings could suggest attempts to exert control via problem-focused means may not always be possible at work. At the very least, it would appear help-seeking and direct action are costly coping strategies (in the sense that they require cooperation, action, and extra effort) and individuals may be electing to use less costly methods (such as avoidance). Though speculative, this offers limited support to the argument that many individuals do not

necessarily have control to negotiate changes in their work environment (especially when compared with their family environment). The difficulty in changing the work environment may be insurmountable for some individuals (especially females), and it may be more efficacious for those individuals to focus on the family domain to manage competing demands. One could also argue that those employing an avoidance/resignation coping style should be encouraged to be more proactive and assertive in requesting help, taking action to reduce stressful demands in a meaningful way.

Clearly, we did not measure perceived control in this research, and can only draw tentative conclusions. However, for all practical purposes, problem-focused, behavioral coping requires the ability and autonomy to effectuate change in order to reduce stress. Our findings are consistent with those of Ayree *et al.* (1999), who concluded coping efforts were not efficacious in moderating the negative effects of WIF conflict. It seems likely that many workers simply cannot or will not make work changes and find family accommodations easier.

## Conclusion

Despite pressure for companies to develop policies and provide benefits that build flexibility into the employer-employee relationship, the reality for many employees is one of relying on individual resources to balance competing and conflicting demands from work and family domains. Many individuals work for companies that are simply too small to provide tangible or financial benefits to working families. Although many employers offer real understanding and *ad hoc* support for worker conflicts, a small number fail to offer even that. Individuals are stretched tighter and tighter to balance work and family demands, and grasp for advice and ideas that help them cope with these struggles.

Our findings indicate that help-seeking and direct action used at home may help reduce FIW conflict effectively. These conclusions are underscored by the fact that the respondents in this study represented a heterogeneous cross-section of job types, job levels, and organizations. This helps eliminate the possibility that the relative efficacy of coping styles could have been dependent on the unique work situation of the respondents, as may be the case in a homogeneous sample.

Perhaps the best alternative for employers unable to funnel resources into the more costly flexible-benefit options would be to provide training or information which would help employees identify the specific sources of their work-family conflict and understand how to overcome these conflicts by focusing on the family rather than the workplace. Helping individuals to shed the tendency to use avoidance/resignation as a coping style may also reduce perceived conflict. Additionally, training managers in problem-solving skills and techniques that could be used to help employees work through conflict in a

productive manner would be valuable because it would not only focus on solving the problem at hand but provide social support as well.

## Limitations and future directions

This research is not without limitations. First, we note that this is a cross-sectional survey research design, which imposes limitations from such concerns as common methods variance and causality. Whereas this is a concern that cannot be completely alleviated, the design used is consistent with previous research in the area. Second, males and females were not sampled in percentages equal to their representation in the general population; and, in fact, women reported significantly greater conflict levels in this study. Entering the respondent's gender in the hierarchical regression models eliminates the concern that the significance of other partial regression coefficients can be explained by gender differences. It is not known for certain that the individuals surveyed will continue to utilize their reported coping styles in the future with the same outcomes. However, at the point in time at which these data were collected, persons reporting the use of certain coping styles were found to report significantly different conflict levels from those who did not utilize those styles.

Future research efforts should seek to expand this study and identify effective coping strategies for managing work-family conflict. More specifically, what particular behaviors or changes are the most useful in reducing WIF conflict? Our study, like others, has not adequately identified the coping strategies which effectively target work interference conflict. Further, what individual variables may affect the choice of coping styles used with work and family problems? The use of longitudinal methods and/or qualitative efforts would greatly help to further our understanding of how employees can effectively cope with work-family conflict. The reality of competing work and family demands is becoming increasingly more complicated. The relative efficacy of coping styles on work and family conflicts is of great academic, managerial and public interest.

### Notes

1. The internal consistency coefficient for the avoidance/resignation coping at home scale is low. However, item analysis indicated the reliability would not be significantly improved by deleting scale items. Thus, because the work coping items performed acceptably, all of the items are included from the previously validated scale.

2. There is some indication that multicollinearity among the independent variables limits our ability to distinguish the statistical significance of the independent variables. For WIF models, the variance inflation factor (VIF) is 34 and, for FIW models, the VIF is 32. The literature suggests that VIFs above 30 are problematic. Notwithstanding this proviso, even in the presence of multicollinearity, the parameters of interest are consistently estimated. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewer who brought this to our attention.

3. Recall the avoidance/resignation coping at home scale had poor reliability in this study. Although it has been previously validated, conclusions reached in this study should be interpreted with some caution.

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**Further reading**

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