CONFLICTS BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY AND FATHERS' MENTAL HEALTH

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OVERVIEW

Fathers today are often expected to fulfil the traditional role of 'breadwinner' while taking a more active role in child care. These competing demands can create work–family conflicts. Using data from the *Growing Up in Australia* longitudinal study we explored these conflicts and any effects they may have on fathers' mental health.

KEY MESSAGES

- Fathers who reported high work–family conflict also reported high psychological distress.
- When fathers can 'escape' *out of* high work–family conflict their mental health shows significant improvement.
- In the workplace, access to flexibility, job security, reasonable work hours and control over work scheduling and tasks can protect fathers from work–family conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of long work hours, and the slow progress on fathers' access to flexible or part-time work, Australian fathers continue to be tied to their work and workplaces. What does this mean for fathers' wellbeing and, more broadly, for their capacity to foster warm and nurturing relationships with their children?

Contemporary expectations for fathers continue to prioritise a 'breadwinner' model, where fathers' jobs and income are seen as vital resources for families, in the same way that mothers' *un*paid work is viewed. However, fathers also want, and indeed are expected, to be warm, caring, involved and equal carers for infants and children. These competing demands and dilemmas create conflicts for fathers between their job demands and family care – referred to as work–family conflicts (Goode, 1960).

In scientific terms, work–family conflict is a well-established construct in occupational health and organisational psychology literature, capturing parents' experiences of 'felt strains' that arise when work and family demands are incompatible in core ways (Goode, 1960; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). These can include 'time-based strains', when fathers' miss out on family events due to work commitments or miss opportunities at work due to caring responsibilities. They can also include the more daily and incremental experiences of divided attention or distraction, exhaustion and lack of energy – these are vital resources for family wellbeing and parenting. While the 'work–family' juggle has typically been viewed as a problem for mothers, Australian research has shown that one in three fathers' report work–family conflict (Strazdins, O'Brien, Lucas, & Rodgers, 2013).

What implications do these conflicts have for Australian fathers' mental health and wellbeing? Which are the most 'risky' jobs for fathers and how can we promote fathers' wellbeing at work?

METHOD

Our program of research (Cooklin et al., 2016; Dinh et al., 2017) has sought to address these questions using data from the Kinder (K) cohort of parents participating in *Growing up in Australia*: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (growingupinaustralia.gov.au). LSAC has gathered data from families every two years, starting in 2004, when children in the K cohort were aged 4–5 years. In this study, we used data from five waves of couple families, spanning fathers of children aged 4–5 to 12–13 years. Fathers provided data on their own work and family characteristics; and their health and wellbeing using the following items:

- *Mental health* was assessed via the Kessler-6 (Kessler et al., 2002), a standardised way of capturing experiences of psychological distress and symptoms of depression or anxiety (e.g. 'I feel nervous' or 'I feel worthless').
- *Work–family conflict* was reported by fathers' responses to validated items capturing their family-to-work strains (e.g. 'Because of my family responsibilities … the time I spend working is more pressured') and their work-to-family strains (e.g. 'Because of my work … I have missed out on home or family activities that I would have liked to have taken part in') (Marshall & Barnett, 1993). Fathers who reported an average response to all four items of '(almost) always' were classified as having 'high work–family conflict'.
- *Fathers' work characteristics* (income, occupation, work hours) were recorded, as were four indicators of 'job quality' – flexibility, security, autonomy over workload and access to paid family-related leave.
- *Fathers' age, education, number and age of children and general physical health* were also included in analyses.

RESULTS

This study included data from 3,460 LSAC fathers who were employed and living in a couple household. Over half (55%) were working more than 50 hours per week. The sample was diverse: about half were in a non-professional, semi-skilled occupation, the remainder worked in professional roles. Twenty-six per cent had a low household income relative to the overall sample, 23% a medium household income, the remainder high.

Our longitudinal analyses showed that:

- When fathers moved *into* high work–family conflict, from one wave to the next, their mental health also deteriorate.
- Fathers who reported *persistent* high work–family conflict over two waves reported the highest psychological distress.
- When fathers 'escaped' out of high work–family conflict (i.e. from high work–family conflict in one wave to low/no conflict in the next) their mental health also showed significant improvement.

These findings were the case even when we controlled for prior mental health for fathers, and all other work and family characteristics. This strengthens the evidence that these changes to mental health (improvements, deteriorations) were a direct outcome of changes or persistence in work–family conflict.

What job factors were associated with more 'risk' for persistent work–family conflict? In fully adjusted analyses, when a range of father and family covariates were included, the factors associated with *persistent work–family conflict* and poor mental health were very long work hours (>50 hrs/week); no access to flexible work; no job security; no control over workload; and not having access to paid family-related leave.

IMPLICATIONS

This research shows that fathers' work–family conflict is powerfully linked to fathers' mental health. Specifically, *changes* to work–family conflict prompts corresponding changes to fathers' mental health, either improving or eroding fathers' wellbeing. These findings provide a strong impetus to focus on how we redress work–family conflict for the one-in-three Australian fathers for whom this is a problem. Not only is this urgent for fathers but also employers. Work–family

conflict is linked to lower productivity and higher burnout, stress and job turnover in employees (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011).

There is a consistent pattern for fathers about the key job features that can potentially be protective against entrenched work–family conflict, thereby promoting their mental health. These factors – access to flexibility, job security, reasonable work hours, control over work scheduling and tasks – are modifiable via policy and workplace change. This evidence gives good guidance about the priorities to promote the proper implementation of optimal job conditions for employed fathers (and mothers) (Cooklin et al., 2016). We highlight the importance of ensuring, particularly while fathers do spend long hours at work, that they have access to the conditions and workplace entitlements that help them to manage combining work and care in ways that don't undermine their mental health.

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