Examining the relationship between work-life conflict and burnout

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The present study empirically examines the overarching research question: what is the relationship between work-life conflict and career burnout in a general adult working population? A sample of eighty-nine participants completed an online questionnaire. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant, positive relationship between work-life conflict and burnout. For workplace implications, the results highlight the importance of employers understanding work-life conflict and career burnout among employees. For personal implications, the results capture the significance of engaging in recovery activities to decrease work-life conflict and career burnout. Counselling implications include facilitating client self-understanding of role importance to cope with work-life conflict.

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Introduction

Work-life conflict

Balancing work and personal life can be a complex task. Indeed, many individuals find it increasingly difficult to balance workplace demands with non-workplace related responsibilities and activities and thus boundaries between work and personal time may become blurred. This is known as *work-life conflict*, which is defined in the literature as 'a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and life domains are mutually incompatible in some respect' (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). According to the American Psychological Association (2017) 24% of employed Americans experience work-life conflict. Unlike, the more common concept, work-family conflict, which typically denotes family as a structure with a child and/or spouse, the term

work-life conflict encompasses work and family as well as other areas of life, which may include but are not limited to personal interests, leisure activities and socialization that is unrelated to family. In this study, the term work-life conflict is preferred, as it is more inclusive of individuals who do not live within a family structure that involves a spouse or child.

Current trends and changes in the workplace have altered the way many employees complete the duties and tasks of their role and may contribute to work-life conflict. Technological advances and organizational policies such as email, smartphones, internet access, video teleconferencing platforms and work from home policies allow for work to be completed at any time and from any geographical location. These changes in the workplace may diminish psychological and physical boundaries between work and life and increase the potential for work-life conflict and its related negative outcomes.

According to past research, work life conflict is related to numerous negative outcomes in four dimensions: work, psychological, physical, and interpersonal. Firstly, work-life conflict is correlated to negative work outcomes such as job dissatisfaction (Allen, et al., 2000), decreased job performance, workplace stress (Frone, et al., 1997), employee turnover (Yavas et al., 2008), and burnout (Dyrbye et al., 2011). Work-life conflict is also correlated to negative psychological outcomes such as life dissatisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998), psychological distress (Major et al., 2002) and substance abuse (Frone et al., 1993). Furthermore, work-life conflict is associated with decreased overall physical health outcomes (Frone et al., 1996). Lastly, work-life conflict is correlated to negative interpersonal outcomes, such as marital dissatisfaction and dysfunction (Bagherzadeh et al., 2016) and family difficulties (Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999).

Burnout

Burnout is an occupation related state of ill-being that is defined as a three-dimensional syndrome of exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach et al., 1996). Currently, burnout is not recognized as a clinical diagnosis in the 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or as a primary diagnosis in the *International Classification of Diseases (ICD)*. However, May 2019 the World Health Organization (2019) included burnout in the ICD-11 as an occupational phenomenon that influences health, but not as a primary diagnosis. According to Shanafelt et al. (2015) research which surveyed 5392 employed non-physician Americans, 28.4% of participants experienced burnout. Unfortunately, a significant replicated finding in the literature indicates that burnout is a relatively stable phenomenon, with longitudinal data indicating stability of burnout over five, ten and even fifteen years (Schaufeli et al., 2011).

Burnout is correlated to numerous negative outcomes in three dimensions: work, psychological and physical. Firstly, in terms of work consequences, burnout is correlated to job disssatisfaction (Shanafelt et al., 2009), turnover and turnover intention (Leiter & Maslach, 2009), absenteeism (Hallsten et al., 2011), presenteeism (Demerouti et al., 2009), diminished work performance. (Shanafelt et al., 2010) and work-life conflict (Dyrbye, et al., 2011). Psychologically, burnout is correlated to sleep difficulties. (Brand et al., 2010), depression, psychological ill-health (de Beer, et al., 2016; Madsen et al., 2015), suicide (van der Heijden, et al., 2008) and cognitive dysfunction. (Deligkaris et al., 2014). Lastly in terms of physical health, burnout is correlated to health declines (Kim et al., 2011), low levels of daily energy (Leone et al., 2009), cardiovascular disease (Toker et al., 2012), dysregulation of the neuroendocrine system (Michel, 2016), changes in brain structure (Savic, 2013), severe injuries (Ahola et al., 2013), mortality below the age of 45 years old (Ahola et al., 2010) and participation in unhealthy behaviours such as an unbalanced diet, sedentarism, smoking and increased alcohol consumption (Cecil et al., 2008).

Objective and hypotheses

The overall objective of this study is to empirically investigate the relationship between work-life conflict and burnout in a general adult working population. This objective is important as described above work-life conflict and burnout have extensive and robust negative correlates across multiple facets of an individual's life. This research could provide a more thorough understanding of the relationship among these variables and provide empirical research required for creating effective interventions.

Below is a breakdown of the operational hypotheses that will be tested. These hypotheses have been extensively supported by past literature; thus, the goal of these hypotheses is to replicate past study findings.

Hypothesis 1. A positive correlation between work-life conflict and burnout (total scale score and personal/work related subscales).

Hypothesis 2. A negative correlation between work-life balance and burnout (total scale score and personal/work related subscales).

Methodology

Participants

The final sample consisted of eighty-nine North American participants. Study participants were recruited through an online advertisement placed on Mechanical Turk. To be included in the study, participants had to be over the age of 21 and work at least twenty hours per week outside the home for pay.

Preliminary analyses of participants' demographic variables. One hundred and twenty-five participants initially completed the study. However, thirty-six participants were excluded in total; thirty-four participants did not work over twenty hours a week outside the home for pay, one participant failed two or more of the validity questions and one participant completed the survey twice.

The final sample consisted of eighty-nine participants, forty-nine of which were males and forty of which were females. The participants had an average age of 34.6 and completed on average 16 years of education. The sample consisted of 5 students, who spent an average of 16.2 hours per week on schoolwork and an average of 29.4 hours per week on paid employment and 84 employed individuals who spent an average of

42.3 hours per week on paid employment. In terms of relationship status there were 29 singles, 17 dating and living apart, 42 married or common law and 1 separated. Participants in a current relationship, had been with their current partner on average for 7.8 years. The sample consisted of 29 individuals with children with an average of 2 children in the household. Canadian gross annual income average = 63,977.00 (personal) and 99,397.00 (household) and US gross annual income average = 42,135.00 (personal) and 56,073.00 (household).

Measures

Background questionnaire. This was used to gather demographic information.

Adapted Work-Family Conflict Scale of Netemeyer et al., 1996 (Waumsley et al., 2010). This was used to assess work-life conflict. It contained 5-items with alpha coefficient of .94. Waumsley et al., (2010) adapted version of Netemyer et al., (1996) work-family conflict scale was used because a) it uses wording that is more inclusive of individuals who may not have a spouse and/or child and b) its factor structure supported the same two-factor solution as the wording developed and validated by Netemeyer, et al. (1996).

Work-Family Balance Scale (Allen et al, 2000). This was used to assess work-life balance. It contained 5-items with alpha co-efficient of .89. Based on the results from Waumsley et al. (2010) as discussed above, the wording of this scale was also adapted to be more inclusive of those who do not have children and/or a spouse.

Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al., 2005). The personal burnout and work-related burnout scales were used from this inventory. A composite score included thirteen items from these two scales with a alpha coefficient of .91. The client related burnout scale was not used as it is not applicable to participants who do not work with clients.

Instructional Manipulation Check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009). Four items were inserted to ensure participants were paying attention and not responding randomly. Participants were excluded from the study if they failed two or more of these items.

Procedure

Consenting participants completed the survey online. They first completed the background questionnaire and then all other measures in random order.

Results

Pearson product-movement correlations were computed to assess the below hypotheses. Descriptive statistics such as minimum, maximum, mean and standard deviation for all key study measures are presented in Table 1. The correlations between key study variables are listed in Table 2.

Hypothesis One: work-life conflict and burnout. For the first hypothesis, a positive correlation between work-life conflict and burnout was predicted, such that those high on work-life conflict would have higher levels of burnout. This analysis is a replication of past study findings, as this relationship has been well documented in the literature. Pearson product-movement correlations were computed to assess this relationship, with scores on the work-life conflict scale, and scores on the a) burnout full scale score, b) personal burnout subscale score, c) work-related burnout subscale score, as the dependent variable.

Work-life conflict scale and burnout full scale. As predicted, there was a positive correlation between the work-life conflict scale and the burnout full scale. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant, positive relationship between the two variables, r (87) = .66, p < .001, two tailed, such that increases in work-life conflict were moderately correlated with increases in overall burnout.

Work-life conflict scale and personal burnout subscale score. As predicted, there was a positive correlation between the work-life conflict scale and the personal burnout subscale. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant, positive relationship between the two variables, r (87) = .56, p < .001, two tailed, such that increases in work-life conflict were moderately correlated with increases in personal burnout.

Work-life conflict scale and work-related burnout subscale score. As predicted, there was a positive correlation between the work-life conflict scale and the work-related burnout subscale. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant, positive relationship between the two variables, r (87) = .67, p < .001, two tailed, such that increases in work-life conflict were moderately correlated with increases in work-related burnout.

Hypothesis Two: work-life balance and burnout. For the second hypothesis, a negative correlation between work-life balance and burnout was predicted, such that those high on work-life balance would have lower levels of burnout. This analysis is a replication of past study findings, as this relationship has been well documented in the literature. Pearson product-movement correlations were computed to assess this relationship, with scores on the work-life balance scale, and scores on the a) burnout full scale score, b) personal burnout subscale score, c) work-related burnout subscale score, as the dependent variable.

Work-life balance scale and burnout full scale score. As predicted, there was a negative correlation between the work-life balance scale and the burnout full scale. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant, negative relationship between the two variables, r (87) = -.60, p < .001, two tailed, such that increases in work-life balance were moderately correlated with decreases in overall burnout.

Work-life balance scale score and personal burnout subscale score. As predicted, there was a negative correlation between the work-life balance scale and the personal burnout subscale. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant relationship between the two variables, r (87) = -.49, p < .001 two tailed, such that increases in work-life balance were moderately correlated with decreases in personal burnout.

Work-life balance scale score and work-related burnout subscale score. As predicted, there was a negative correlation between the work-life balance scale and the work-related burnout subscale. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant relationship between the two variables, r (87) = -.62, p < .001, two tailed, such that increases in work-life balance were moderately correlated with decreases in work-related burnout.

Summary

As predicted there was a moderate, statistically significant, positive relationship between work-life conflict and a) overall burnout, b) personal burnout and c) work-related burnout, (hypothesis 1) and a moderate, statistically significant negative correlation between work-life balance and a) overall burnout, b) personal burnout and c) work-related burnout (hypothesis 2).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Work Family Conflict Scale Score	89	5	35.00	29.3371	8.08329
Work Family Balance Scale Score	89	5.00	35.00	21.7416	7.45826
Burnout Full Scale Score	89	16.00	58.00	36.7753	9.75117
Personal Burnout Subscale Score	89	7.00	29.00	17.6180	4.84652
Work Related Burnout Subscale Score	89	7.00	31.00	19.1572	5.56347

Table 2. Pearson's Correlations for Work-Life Balance and Burnout

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Work Family Conflict Scale Score	-				
2. Work Family Balance Scale Score	-.673**	-			
3. Burnout Full Scale Score	.662**	-.596**	-		
4. Personal Burnout Subscale Score	.563**	-.493**	.927**		
5. Work Related Burnout Subscale Score	.670**	-.615**	.945**	.754**	-

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

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Discussion

The overall objective of this study was to empirically investigate the relationship between work-life conflict and burnout in a general adult working population. More specifically the main research question is, is burnout negatively correlated to work-life balance and positively related to work-life conflict?

Theoretical Implications

These findings are expected and corroborate past research which has examined the association between work-life conflict and burnout. Numerous previous studies have reported an association between work-life conflict and burnout (Dyrbye et al., 2011; Farhadi et al., 2013; Lingard, 2004; Sholi, et al., 2011; Wang, et al., 2012). Overall, the results from this study replicate the findings from past research and suggest that work-life conflict is positively correlated to burnout.

Practical Implications

Workplace implications. The results obtained from this study may be beneficial to work-place administrators and human resource departments, which aim to understand work-life conflict and burnout among their employees. Stress-related illnesses, such as burnout are estimated to cost American businesses between fifty billion and one hundred and fifty billion dollars a year (Hatfield, 1990). Furthermore, research suggests work-life conflict and burnout are associated with

decreased job performance, absenteeism and turnover, all which contribute to financial loss for businesses (Allen et al., 2000; Demerouti et al., 2004; Frone, et al., 1997; Hallsten, et al., 2011; Leiter & Maslach, 2009; Shanafelt et al., 2010; Yavas, et al., 2008). Thus, it is in the best interest of employers to use the results from this study, which highlight the importance of reducing employee work-life conflict and burnout to instill an understanding of these concepts and develop interventions to prevent them. This will ultimately increase business revenue and employee well-being.

Employers may want to consider incorporating the following strategies in their workplace to decrease work-life conflict and burnout. Firstly, facilitating a workplace with supportive supervisors and coworkers and flexible and predictable work schedules is linked to lower work-life conflict and burnout (Byron, 2005). Research also suggests a relationship between decreased levels of burnout and servant leadership characterized by stewardship, empowerment, and accountability (Babakus et al., 2010). Increasing work engagement is also an effective method to reduce employee burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Work engagement can be increased, and thus indirectly decrease burnout, through job crafting, which involves customizing aspects of a job to improve the fit between a job and an individual's values, interests, personality or skills (Tims et al., 2013). This may include job crafting tasks, work relationships, the environment, or employee's perceptions of work

(Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Based on the cost of stress related illnesses for businesses, it is in a workplace's best interest to incorporate strategies to decrease work-life conflict and burnout.

Personal implications. Around 24% of Americans experience work-life conflict (American Psychological Association, 2017) and 28.4% experience burnout (Shanafelt et al., 2015). Work-life conflict and burnout are correlated to many negative personal outcomes such as life dissatisfaction, psychological distress, suicide, cognitive dysfunction, substance abuse, decreased physical health, sleep difficulties, marital dissatisfaction and dysfunction, and family difficulties (Bagherzadeh et al., 2016; Brand, et al., 2010; de Beer et al, 2016; Deligkaris et al., 2014; Frone, et al., 1993; Frone et al, 1996; Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Kim et al., 2011; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Madsen, et al., 2015; Major et al., 2002; van der Heijden, et al., 2008). Thus, in terms of personal implications, individuals may want to consider the following strategies to decrease work-life conflict and burnout. Firstly, engaging in recovery activities, which promote personal well-being is a critical strategy to decrease work-life conflict and burnout. Recovery activities include participating in self-care, low-effort activities, personal interests, physical activities, and fostering relationships. These activities facilitate relaxation and psychological detachment from work, which in turn increases future work engagement (Ten et al., 2012). Furthermore, while job crafting is an evidence based method to reduce work-life conflict, if this is not possible in a role, an individual may be able to reduce work-life conflict and burnout by adding new satisfying roles to their life, improving the interaction between roles and expanding, increasing or improving the quality of time in an existing satisfying role (Brown, 1995). In sum, because individuals experience various negative impacts of work-life conflict and burnout it is important to develop personal strategies to alleviate related outcomes.

Counselling implications. Counsellors can assist clients to reduce their work-life conflict and burnout. For work-life conflict, counsellors can help by first facilitating client self-understanding of values, role importance and role conflicts and then discussing how to prioritize time and energy when role conflicts arise (Perrone & Civiletto, 2004). While it is important for

counsellors to assist in self-understanding, it is also important to understand client role expectations and to help clients realistically negotiate competing roles and then facilitate the creation of realistic role expectations, goals and action plans that incorporate individual values, role salience, outcome expectations and goals (Sharf, 2006). Lastly, research suggests that time management skills, coping skills and training in mindfulness-based stress reduction is associated with lower levels of work-life conflict; thus, it would be helpful for counsellors to provide associated psychoeducation and skill training to clients who struggle with work-life conflict and burnout (Fortney et al., 2013).

Societal implications. Excessive work has been referred by Robinson (2000) as "the best dressed mental health and family problem of the 21st century" (p. 34). Similarly, Porters (2004) indicates that "society supports [excessive work], as it does no other addiction. One might question to what extent [excessive work] has become the new norm, making it even more difficult to determine whether anything in today's model can be labeled excess work" (p. 436). Together these quotes highlight how society valorizes productivity, busyness, and emphasizes the importance of work and deemphasizes the importance of work-life balance and considering the impacts of burnout. The societal acceptance of excessive work deters individuals from forming open dialogues about the negative impact of work-life conflict and burnout and further refutes acknowledgement or treatment of a behaviour that is so admired and sought after. Overall, the results from this study further emphasizes the consequences of engrained societal messages, which support excessive work and may contribute to work-life conflict and burnout.

Limitations

A limitation of this research is that online questionnaires through Mechanical Turk were employed to gather data. One of the limitations of using self-report measures is that participants may exaggerate their answers, answer in a way to portray themselves positively, forget pertinent details, be biased based on their mood during the survey or may not be fully paying attention to each question. Since participants can complete questionnaires at their

own convenience, they may be distracted by their environment and may not fully pay attention to each item in the questionnaire. However, this limitation has been addressed by incorporating instructional manipulation checks to assess reading attention and to ensure participants were not randomly responding. Participants that made two errors on the instructional manipulation checks were not included in the data analysis.

Furthermore, since the data was collected through an online sample, there may be reason to believe that the sample's attitudes and demographics are different than what would be expected from participants in an in-lab sample. However, a number of studies have now demonstrated that Mechanical Turk is a reliable and valid method for conducting psychological research (e.g., Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). In fact, the sample characteristics of Mechanical Turk is more diverse (in terms of age, education, socioeconomic status, and ethnic composition) than college samples, a group that is frequently recruited for psychological research.

Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the overarching research question: what is the relationship between work-life conflict and burnout in a general adult working population? A sample of eighty-nine participants completed an online questionnaire. The results suggest a moderate, statistically significant, positive relationship between work-life conflict and burnout. This research has important theoretical and practical implications for employers, individuals experiencing work-life conflict and burnout and counsellors who have clients experiencing these difficulties. This research furthers the literature which supports a relationship between work-life conflict and burnout. Thus, it is important for future researchers to extend these findings to identify further evidence-based interventions to address work-life conflict and other correlates of burnout.

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