Gender and the Work–Family Interface: Exploring Differences Across the Family Life Course

Giuseppe Martinengo¹, Jenet I. Jacob¹, and E. Jeffrey Hill¹

Abstract

This study examines gender differences in the work–family interface across six family life stages using a global sample of IBM employees in 79 countries (N = 41,813). Family life stage was constructed using the age of respondent and age of youngest child. Results revealed that having young children at home was the critical catalyst for gender differences in the work–family interface. The greatest gender differences were found in the central stages of life when children require more temporal and economic resources from their parents. When life stage was not considered, the first and last stages tended to offset each other, concealing major gender differences during the central stages of family life. These findings signify that life stage is an important concept to consider in research related to gender and the work–family interface. Implications to the development of work policies attentive to shifts in work–family linkages during the life course are discussed.

Keywords

gender, work–family interface, life stage, family life course

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Introduction

Issues of gender have been a central focus of work–family scholarship in the past three decades. Yet explorations of gender differences in work–family conflict to date have been inconclusive. Many studies indicate that men and women report similar levels of work–family conflict (Barnett & Gareis, 2006) but seem to exhibit different behavior patterns in response to this conflict (Mennino & Brayfield, 2002; Mennino, Rubin, & Brayfield, 2005). Other studies have identified gender differences in work–family stress, generally showing significantly more conflict for women than for men (Dilworth, 2004; Duxbury & Higgins, 1991).

Recent work–family research has called for “a life course reframing,” concluding that gender may best be understood in the context of family life stage (Moen & Sweet, 2004, p. 209; Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002). Findings from a range of research studies support this perspective. Entering parenthood, for example, presents striking changes in roles and responsibilities that is a harbinger of significant differences between men and women in work and family life (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000). Across the intensive child-rearing years gender differences in caregiving responsibilities, and the increase in work responsibilities associated with career building, have also been associated with significant gender differences (Moen & Roehling, 2005). Changes in family responsibilities, as well as goals of personal development as workers take on eldercare responsibilities and children leave the home, suggest continued gender differences as workers age (Staudinger & Bluck, 2001).

Yet further research is needed to empirically validate the extent to which family life stage is associated with gender differences in the strengths of relationships among variables in the work–family interface. Studies have largely treated life stage as a noise variable rather than a focus issue in explorations of gender differences (Barnes-Farrell & Matthews, 2007). Studies that have explored gender differences across life stages have generally focused on differences in one life stage, or differences between workers with and without children (Dilworth, 2004; McElwain, Korabik, & Rosin, 2005; Mennino et al., 2005). These weaknesses reflect the challenge of accessing data with sufficient size and range to allow for statistical comparisons between men and women across multiple life stages on the same work and family variables.

The purpose of this study is to empirically evaluate how men and women in six family life stages (before children, transition to parenthood, preschool child[ren], school-age child[ren], adolescent child[ren], and empty nest stages)
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The model used for comparison explores conflict in the work–family interface, and the work, personal, and family outcomes associated with that conflict. Conflict is defined as a type of interrole stress that results from incompatible demands in the work and family domains (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Because interrole conflict may originate from either the work or family domain, a distinction has been made between work–family conflict and family–work conflict (Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). Work-related factors, such as job responsibility, are explored as sources of work–family conflict, conflict in which work pressures are incompatible with family demands. Family-related factors such as household labor are explored as sources of family–work conflict, in which pressures from family life are incompatible with work demands.

This study distinguishes between time-based work–family conflict, in which work responsibilities compete with time and attention for family responsibilities, and family–work spillover, in which workers experience emotional drain at work because of family pressures. The combination of time-based conflict and emotional spillover from one domain into another
provides a more comprehensive view of conflict in the work–family interface (Moen & Roehling, 2005). Work–family conflict and family–work spillover are explored as predictors of work–family fit, an assessment of the difficulty of managing work and family life that consider both sources of conflict. Work–family fit is explored as a predictor of work, personal, and family success.

**Conceptual Framework**

The concepts of family life cycle are useful for exploring gender differences in the experience of work and family life across the life course. From a family life cycle perspective, families in the same stages experience similar events, face similar crises, and accomplish similar developmental tasks (Mattessich & Hill, 1987). Stages are distinguished by their structural complexity, which are defined by the numbers of persons involved; the number of interpersonal relationships and density (age homogeneity); the cognitive and prosocial competency of the members; the allocation of power, tasks and affection; the ratio of instrumental and expressive resources to member needs; efficiency in the management of time, energy, and space; and links to work, schools, and support systems of kinship and friendship networks (Mattessich & Hill, 1987, p. 458). These life stage factors are reflected in work and family role demands.

Gender is a central concept in the factors that define the complexity of each family life stage (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Indeed, biological sex and social–psychological gender create a context that permeates every aspect of the unfolding work and family life course. As a result, the connection between work and family is likely to operate differently for men and women across the life course (Hinze, 2000). The social expectation of women-as-caregivers and men-as-providers, for example, presents a context that continues to exert a strong, normative influence on the experience of work and family life (Orrange, 1999). Furthermore, the linked nature of men’s and women’s lives means that the work and family expectations and experiences of one may support and constrain the work and family lives of the other (Elder, 1996).

The context of gender is closely tied to the cultural and national context, which presents socially constructed and institutionalized norms for work and family roles and relationships (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Societal norms around maternal employment, for example, create a context that influences public work–family policies and trends in mothers’ labor force participation (Treas & Widmer, 2000). The current study does not analyze cross-cultural differences but attempts to empirically validate gender differences across family life course stages for individuals from a range of nationalities. This lays the
ground work for future analyses of the influence of national context on gender differences across the life course.

Related Research

The following review presents empirical and theoretical evidence for gender differences across family life stages. Previous studies have not explored the same variables in the work–family interface and the strength of the relationships among these variables for men and women across the spectrum of family life stages. But findings from previous studies provide a framework of hypotheses for empirically validating gender differences in the work–family interface across family life stages. Research and theoretical perspectives on the work and family experiences of workers in the following life stages are reviewed: transition to parenthood, preschool child(ren), school-age child(ren), adolescent child(ren), and empty-nesters.

Transition to Parenthood

Explorations of the relationship between parenthood and the work–family interface suggest that parenthood transforms the work and family lives of men and women (Moen & Roehling, 2005). For women, the transition to parenthood has been associated with striking increases in the amount of time spent on family care and a prioritization of the family role by adjusting work identities “to accommodate” family responsibilities (Bielby & Bielby, 1992, p. 784; Hinze, 2000). For men, parenthood has been associated with increased work hours and stronger prioritization of work roles (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000; Nock, 1998). New fathers who have not established themselves financially and occupationally in their careers may experience particular pressure to work longer hours to provide for their families (Lundberg & Rose, 1999). Employed new mothers may experience a “double bind”: increased responsibilities for care work and the simultaneous expectation to build career to obtain income and advancement (Moen & Roehling, 2005).

Research findings indicating a drop in marital satisfaction in the transition to parenthood suggest that negotiations of increased household labor and child care responsibilities put additional strains on marital quality that may in turn influence work and family life (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Negotiations in household labor and child care responsibilities have been negatively associated with marital quality for both men and women, and marital quality has been related to the conflict in which family concerns intrude on the capacity to perform work responsibilities (Aryee, 1992; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003).
The exposure to increased role responsibilities in both work and family domains suggest the potential for increased conflict in the work–family interface in the transition to parenthood. Previous studies have not distinguished work–family conflict for men and women in the transition to parenthood stage from those with preschool- and school-age children. But findings indicated that new mothers and mothers of young children were more likely to experience increased family–work spillover, including feeling drained at work because of caregiving demands (Higgins, Duxbury, & Lee, 1994). In contrast, new fathers may be likely to experience work–family conflict in the form of time and energy constraints as they prioritize work responsibilities and work longer hours (Nock, 1998).

Job flexibility and work–family programs that enable new parents to more successfully meet role demands have been identified as more important for new parents, relative to workers who are not parents, and particularly for mothers of young children (Hill et al., 2008). The current analysis will expand on these findings by exploring whether the strength of those relationships differs for women and men in the transition to parenthood stage and how those relationships compare with later stages.

Preschool-Age Child Stage

Studies exploring work–family conflict for parents with preschool-age children suggest that work and family role demands may increase for men and women in this life stage. Men and women with a child under the age of 6 years had higher levels of negative spillover from family to work associated with caregiving responsibilities than parents of older children (Grzywacz et al., 2002). Mothers with preschool-age children seemed to be particularly vulnerable to work–family and family–work conflict (Moen & Roehling, 2005). The presence of preschool children predicted significantly greater family–work spillover for self-employed mothers (Hundley, 2001), and mothers of young children were more likely to miss work as a result of family demands than men or women in other life stages (Dilworth, 2004). Fathers’ reports of conflict, however, were not related to ages of their children (Higgins et al., 1994; Marshall & Barnett, 1993).

Caregiving and housework responsibilities were identified as important predictors of greater family–work spillover for mothers of young children (Crouter, 1984). But recent analyses of the National Study of the Changing Workforce indicated that hours in housework and caregiving were not significant predictors of family–work spillover for mothers (Dilworth, 2004). The current analysis will allow further exploration of the relationship
between mothers’ household labor and perceptions of conflict across family life stages.

Theoretical perspectives suggest that perceived success in meeting work and family demands during this life stage is likely to be strongly related to perceptions of success in other dimensions of life (Jung, 1971; Staudinger & Bluck, 2001). Mothers of young children, in particular, may experience more negative perceptions of life and personal success when they do not feel they are effectively meeting family role responsibilities. Women reported more emotional distress than men when they felt work prevented them from spending enough time with their spouse or children, and more so than men (Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005). But the relationship between work–family conflict and family and life satisfaction was equivocal for men and women in research on full-time professionals (McElwain et al., 2005). The current analysis will allow further exploration of how the context of family life stage may influence the relationship between work and family conflict and perceptions of success.

Access to and use of flexible work arrangements has consistently been associated with reduced conflict in the work–family interface but further research is needed to analyze whether flexibility is more effective for men and women in particular family life stages (Hill, Jackson, & Martinengo, 2006; Hill, Martinson, & Ferris, 2004). Men and women from a large sample of employed and self-employed workers who had greater access to flexible work arrangements were significantly more likely to report low levels of work–family conflict (J. T. Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Pratts, 2002). Job flexibility was identified as particularly valued by mothers with young children, but it is not known whether its effectiveness reducing conflict in the work–family interface differs by gender and life stage (Hill et al., 2008; Jacob, Bond, Galinsky, & Hill, 2008).

**School-Age Child Stage**

Studies of workers with elementary school–age children indicated lower caregiving demands relative to workers with preschool-age children. But as Moen and Roehling (2005) concluded, having school-age children may require “a real juggling act” for employed parents (p. 95). Finding appropriate child care, for example, becomes more complicated as children move into elementary school and child care needs become less consistent from week to week (Moen & Roehling, 2005). These and other factors may help explain why women with school-age children experienced higher rates of family–work conflict than childless workers or workers in later family life stages (Higgins et al., 1994; Moen & Roehling, 2005).
Work–family conflict, however, may actually be lower for mothers and fathers of school-age children. Women who were parents of school-age children reported lower work–family spillover than workers of comparable ages who did not have children (Roehling, Moen, & Batt, 2003). Women with children in elementary school “may have learned to compartmentalize the stresses and strains of their jobs,” strengthening their ability to prevent negative spillover from work to family (Moen & Roehling, 2005, p. 96). Workers without children may have greater difficulty justifying the protection of personal and family time from the intrusion of work responsibilities. Whether or not workers have children, success in managing work and family is likely to continue to be strongly related to other perceptions of success (Jung, 1971).

**Adolescent Child Stage**

Entering the adolescent child family life stage has been associated with a decrease in conflict in the work–family interface for both men and women relative to earlier family life stages. Roehling et al. (2003) found that for highly involved families, family life can serve as “a haven” to escape the pressures of work when children enter the teenage years and no longer require constant care. Some evidence suggests a “life course” for work–family conflict, with decreasing conflict as workers’ youngest children enter adolescence (Grzywacz et al., 2002; Higgins et al., 1994). Women in the adolescent child stage reported less work–family spillover and family–work spillover than women in previous family life stages, and the same levels as their male counterparts (Higgins et al., 1994).

But concerns about adolescents may also predict greater conflict in this stage, particularly for men. The presence of older children was associated with greater family–work conflict for men, whereas preschool-age children predicted greater family–work conflict for women (Hundley, 2001). At the same time, workers in this family life stage may be more focused on subjective perceptions of role experiences rather than meeting societal work and family role expectations (Jung, 1971). As a result, perceived success in fulfilling work and family roles may not be as strongly related to perceived success in other domains compared to earlier family life stages.

**Empty Nest Stage**

Workers who no longer have dependent children have reported less conflict in the work–family interface than workers in earlier family life stage. Recent trends, however, suggest that older workers face a great deal of change in
their family lives including children moving out, parents or spouses becoming ill, and possible divorce and remarriage that contribute to greater family role demands. Mature workers today are more likely than any other age group to have an elderly parent needing care and also be responsible for young children or grandchildren (Simon-Rusinowitz, Krach, Marks, Piktialis, & Wilson, 1996). Women have been most likely to shoulder these caregiving responsibilities. Entmacher (1999) found that nearly 75% of caregivers of the elderly were women, and most likely to be ages 50 to 64. Men who were caregivers were as likely as women who were caregivers to experience family–work conflict due to caregiving, but women were much more likely to be caregivers (Barrah, Shultz, Baltes, & Stoltz, 2004).

Nevertheless, work and family role demands that have been related to conflict in the work–family interface for younger workers may not be as strongly related to conflict for mature workers. Mature workers are also likely to have developed more effective coping mechanisms throughout a lifetime of communicating, solving problems, and integrating knowledge with practical experience (Baltes & Young, 2007; Sterns & Huyck, 2001). Changes in central life interests and emotional functioning contributed to a decrease in negative affect among mature workers as they adjusted from overly idealistic aspirations to realistic ones (Sterns & Huyck, 2001).

Marriage may also be particularly beneficial in reducing conflict in the work–family interface for workers in the empty nest stage. Married workers had reduced conflict in the work–family interface in an analysis of a large multinational sample (Hill et al., 2004), and mature workers reported paying more attention to their marriages than younger workers who reported focusing more on challenges with children (Baltes & Young, 2007). But male mature workers are more likely to be married or living with a partner than female mature workers who are more likely to be divorced or widowed (Bond, Galinsky, Pitt-Catsouphes, & Smyer, 2005). Mature workers who are women may be less likely than men to benefit from a marriage relationship in which there is a spouse or partner at home taking care of home and family responsibilities.

Flexibility in the work domain may become increasingly important in later family life stages. Surveys of both male and female mature workers have consistently identified a strong preference for being able to use a range of different “flexible work options” (Pitt-Catsouphes & Smyer, 2006). Evidence suggests that mature workers want to do meaningful work but do not want to work long hours and have inflexible demands in their work role responsibilities (Moen, Erickson, Agarwal, Fields, & Todd, 2000). Thus, flexibility may be more strongly related to reduced work–family conflict and family–work
conflict and success in meeting work and family role expectations for workers in later family life stages.

Research Hypotheses

In the current study, potential differences in the work–family interface by gender and family life stage are explored through the following research questions and hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1:** The means of work–family interface model variables will differ for men and women at different family life stages. Differences across family life stages will reflect a curvilinear dynamic in which work and family role demands increase across early family life stages and then decrease as children leave the home. Gender differences will be smallest prior to parenthood, will increase during the family life stages of early parenthood, and then decrease as children grow and leave the home.

**Hypothesis 2:** The strength of the path coefficients in the work–family interface model will differ for men and women at different family life stages. Work and family role demands will be more strongly related to work–family and family–work spillover during the family life stages of early parenthood. Work role demands will be more predictive of work–family conflict for men in the early parenthood stages, and family demands will be more predictive of family–work spillover for women in the early parenthood stages.

Method

The source for the data in this study is the IBM 2004 Global Work and Life Issues Survey. It consists of more than 100 questions asked of 97,644 employees in 79 countries designed to help IBM address employee needs related to work and personal and family life. Altogether, 41,769 responded, for a participation rate of 43%. Participants were from Europe (42%), the United States (26%), Asia/Pacific (19%), Latin America (8%), and Canada (6%). Respondents from Latin America had a higher response rate (55%) than the overall average (43%), whereas respondents from Asia had a lower response rate (37%). The overall sample was 60% male and 40% female, with an average age of 43, an average tenure with IBM of 13 years, and an average of 1.97 children. The sample represented the distribution of job levels among IBM employees: professionals (77%), managers (13%), and executives (9%). The
types of jobs reported were indicative of the high level of skills needed: hardware, software, and other engineers (25%); information technology professionals (19%); sales and marketing (11%); product support (11%); finance (5%); consultants (5%); human resources (3%); manufacturing (3%); and other job categories (18%). These jobs typically require high levels of university education and are generally compensated with above-average salaries.

**Measures**

**Family life stage.** Family life stage was operationalized into six groups: before children (workers age 35 years or less without children), transition to parenthood (only one child age 1 year or less), preschool-age child (youngest child age 2 to 5 years), school-age child (youngest child age 6 to 12 years), adolescent child (youngest child 13 to 17 years), and empty nest stage (workers age 50 years or more without children living at home). Individuals between ages 35 and 50 years with no dependent children were not categorized into any family life stage because of the ambiguity of their life stage characteristics. Although they had no dependents, their age and experience precluded their being categorized in the same life stage as those who were younger than age 35 years without dependents. They could not be categorized in the empty nest stage because of the difference in age and experience and their potential to yet have dependents in the future.

Most methods for determining family life cycle stages use the age of the oldest child in addition to a measure of the age of the parent(s). The current study used the age of the youngest child to demarcate family life stage. Previous findings have suggested that as the youngest child gets older, child care demands decrease, resulting in increased levels of control and lower stress for parents (Dilworth, 2004; Higgins et al., 1994). As a result, the youngest child’s age has been identified as a better predictor of the work–family interface than the oldest child’s age.

**Work characteristics.** Job responsibility was measured by the question “Which of the following best describes your job?” Responses were coded 1 = professional, 2 = manager, or 3 = executive. Professionals included employees such as programmers and marketers who had no people management responsibilities. Managers supervised groups of employees, and executives supervised groups of managers. Job hours was measured by the question “How many hours per week do you TYPICALLY work for IBM? (Please make an average per week estimate covering the last 6 months)?”

Job flexibility was a latent construct with three indicators ($\alpha = .75$). The first indicator was measured by reverse-coding the question “How much
flexibility (personal control) do you have in selecting WHERE you do your work (home customer, IBM office, etc.)?” Ratings ranged from 1 = no flexibility to 5 = complete flexibility. The second indicator used this same response scale and asked, “How much flexibility (personal control) do you have in selecting WHEN you do your work (scheduling the hours you work, the time of day, etc.)?” The third indicator was measured by the question “Working from home at least one day per week is acceptable in my work group.” Ratings ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Knowledge and use of work–family programs was measured by reverse-coding the question “Which statement best describes your awareness and use of company ‘work/life’ options?” (1 = I am aware of them and have used them, 2 = I am aware of them but have not used them, 3 = I am not aware of IBM’s work/life options).

**Family characteristics.** Time spent in household chores was measured by the question “Estimate how many hours you spend in [household chores] during a typical week. (Make an average per week estimate covering the last 6 months.)” Marital status was measured by the question “Which best describes your current relationship with a spouse or partner?” (0 = not married or remarried, 1 = married or remarried).

**Outcomes.** Work–family conflict was a latent construct with five items (α = .75). The question stem was, “In the last 6 months, how many times, if any, have the following happened to you?” Items included: missed a significant personal/family obligation for work reasons; missed all or part of a scheduled vacation for work reasons; been interrupted at home by phone calls during weekends or off hours on work-related matters; missed dinner-time because of work; and missed sleep because of work-related stress. Frequency ranged from 1 = never to 2 = once, 3 = twice, 4 = 3-4 times, 5 = 5-9 times, 6 = 10-19 times, 7 = 20-29 times, 8 = 30-49 times, and 9 = 50+ times. Family–work spillover was measured by a single item: “How often do you feel drained when you come to work because of pressures and problems at home?” Ratings ranged from 1 = never to 5 = always.

Work–family fit was measured by a single item: “How easy or difficult is it for you to manage the demands of your work and personal/family life?” Ratings ranged from 1 = very easy to 5 = very difficult. Job satisfaction was measured by reverse-coding the question “Considering everything, how satisfied are you with your job?” Ratings ranged from 1 = very satisfied to 5 = very dissatisfied. Work success, Life success, Marital Success, and Parenting Success were measured with single items following the stem “All in all, how successful do you feel in each of the following: (1) your work life, (2) your personal life, (3) your relationship with your spouse/partner, (4) your
relationship(s) with your child(ren).” Items were reverse coded and rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 = extremely successful to 7 = extremely unsuccessful.

**Plan of Analysis**

An effect size cutoff of .20 was used to determine meaningful differences by gender and life stage on the variables included in the model. The large sample size meant differences in means may have been statistically significant but not meaningful (Cohen, 1988). Effect size (ES) was calculated using the formula $ES = (M_2 - M_1) / SD_p$, where $M_1$ and $M_2$ represent the means of variable for the two groups and $SD_p$ represents the pooled standard deviation.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to estimate the work–family interface model proposed in this study and make comparisons across gender and family life stage groups. First, a single-group model was estimated with all the respondents ignoring any heterogeneity in the paths that could stem from gender or life stage. The models’ goodness-of-fit indices, comparative fit index (CFI > .90) and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA < .05), indicated that it was generalizable to the total sample of all IBM employees. The model was then reestimated with the two gender groups. The freely estimated model without equality constraints on the paths across the gender and life stage groups served as the baseline model to be compared with the subsequent equality model (in which all paths were the same for the groups) and with subsequent models that each had one path constraint and the others freely estimated. The chi-square differences between the baseline model and other models provided the tests of the path equality across gender and life stage groups.

**Results**

**Hypothesis 1**

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of the variables modeled for each of the six family life stages. Effect sizes of mean differences between men and women at each family life stage were calculated. Gender differences with effect sizes greater than .20 were identified for all of the predictors except job flexibility.

**Work characteristics.** Gender comparisons for job responsibility across the six life stages found significant differences between men and women with a
Table 1. Means Comparing Men and Women in Different Life Stages on Variables of the Work–Family Interface

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>No children (age &lt; 35 years), n = 9,949</th>
<th>First parenthood (child ≤ 1), n = 1,009</th>
<th>Youngest child preschool (2-5 years), n = 6,827</th>
<th>Youngest child elementary school (6-12 years), n = 6,441</th>
<th>Youngest child teenager (13-17 years old), n = 7,062</th>
<th>Empty-nester (age &gt; 50 years), n = 2,610</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Effect size</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Effect size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job responsibility</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job hours</td>
<td>50.04</td>
<td>49.08</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>50.30</td>
<td>46.10</td>
<td>0.43a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W-F conflict</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>0.42a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job flexibility</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>3.13</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program access/use</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>-0.29a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-W fit</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family characteristics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in household chores</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>-0.20a</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>-0.47a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (%Yes)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0.23a</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W-F fit</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>2.58</td>
<td>0.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work success</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life success</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>5.26</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital success</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>5.52</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting success</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F-W = family–work; W-F = work–family.

a. Indicates a statistically significant difference (effect size > .20) between men and women in the family life stage.
youngest child in elementary school. In all other life stages, men had greater, but not significantly greater, job responsibility. Gender comparisons of job hours found that men worked significantly more hours in almost every life stage, with women showing greater fluctuation in work hours across the life stages. The greatest gender difference in job hours was between men and women with a youngest child in elementary school. Gender comparisons of job flexibility indicated no significant gender differences across family life stages. Men had higher mean levels in all stages except in the stages with a youngest child in elementary school, or a youngest child who was a teenager. Gender differences in access to and use of work–family programs indicated significantly higher levels for women across all family life stages except the first parenthood stage. The greatest gender differences were between men and women with a youngest child in elementary school, or a youngest child who was a teenager.

Gender comparisons of work–family conflict indicated that men had significantly greater work–family conflict in almost every life stage, with the greatest gender differences between men and women with a youngest child in elementary school. There were no significant gender differences for men and women in the first parenthood stage, or those who were empty-nesters. In contrast, women reported significantly greater family–work conflict in the life stages of being younger than age 35 years with no children, having a youngest child in elementary school, or having a youngest child who was a teenager.

**Family characteristics.** Gender comparisons for time in household chores showed the greatest effect size differences, with significantly higher levels for women across all family life stages. The greatest gender differences were between men and women with a youngest child in elementary school, a youngest child who was a teenager, or men and women who were empty-nesters. Gender comparisons of marital status indicated that men were significantly more likely to be married across all family life stages.

**Outcomes.** There were no mean differences with effect sizes greater than .20 for the outcome variables of work, life, marital, and parenting success or job satisfaction. Gender comparisons for work–family fit identified one significant difference. Women with a youngest child who was a teenager had significantly greater fit than men in that life stage.

**Hypothesis 2**

The proposed work–family interface model fit the global data (see Figure 1). The $\chi^2$ was significant ($\chi^2 = 13,312$, $df = 149$, $p < .000$), and the CFI, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), and RMSEA were within acceptable ranges (CFI = .942,
TLI = .910, RMSEA = .0460; Kline, 1998). All 18 paths were significant in the predicted direction. The same work–family interface model also fit 6 two-group models based on gender and family life stage. Table 2 presents the structural equation modeling standardized parameter estimates for the six life stage groups. Model comparisons treating the six groups together identified significant gender differences in all of the paths except work–family programs to work–family conflict, work–family programs to family–work conflict, time in household chores to family–work conflict, and work–family fit to job satisfaction, work, life, marital, and family success.

**Work characteristic paths.** The strength of the relationship between job responsibility and increased work–family conflict was greatest for women in the first parenthood stage, and women who had a youngest child in elementary school. Significant gender differences were identified between men and women in the first parenthood stage, and those who were empty-nesters. The strength of the relationship between job hours and work–family conflict was greatest for women with a youngest child in elementary school, a youngest child who was a teenager, and those who were empty-nesters. Significant

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**Figure 1.** Structural equation modeling standardized parameter estimates for the model of the work–family interface (global sample)
Table 2. Structural Equation Standardized Parameter Estimates for Gender and Life Stage Models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>No children (age &lt; 35), n = 9,949</th>
<th>First parenthood (child ≤ 1), n = 1,009</th>
<th>Youngest child preschool aged (2-5 years), n = 6,827</th>
<th>Youngest child elementary school aged (6-12 years), n = 6,441</th>
<th>Youngest child teenager (13-17 years old), n = 7,062</th>
<th>Empty-nester (age &gt; 50 years), n = 2,610</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) Job responsibility → W-F conflict</td>
<td>0.041 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.066</td>
<td>0.056 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.148 (^{b})</td>
<td>0.086</td>
<td>0.109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Job hours → W-F conflict</td>
<td>0.540</td>
<td>0.536</td>
<td>0.536</td>
<td>0.560</td>
<td>0.526</td>
<td>0.562 (^{b})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Job flexibility → W-F conflict</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>0.116</td>
<td>0.149 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>0.105</td>
<td>0.099</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(d) W-F programs → W-F conflict</td>
<td>0.035 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.015 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.110 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.118 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.046 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.013 (^{a})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(e) Job flexibility → F-W conflict</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.056 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.031 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(f) W-F programs → F-W conflict</td>
<td>0.034 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.003 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.043 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.051 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.015 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.038 (^{a})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(g) Time in HH chores → F-W conflict</td>
<td>0.028 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.030 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.061 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.100 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.052</td>
<td>0.052 (^{a})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(h) Married → F-W conflict</td>
<td>0.044 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.032 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.010 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.090 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.018</td>
<td>0.021 (^{a})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i) W-F conflict → F-W conflict</td>
<td>0.194</td>
<td>0.085 (^{b})</td>
<td>0.231 (^{a})</td>
<td>0.102 (^{a}) (^{b})</td>
<td>0.148</td>
<td>0.040 (^{a}) (^{b})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
Table 2. (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(j) F-W conflict → W-F conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-.024</td>
<td>-.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(k) Job flexibility → W-F fit</td>
<td>.218</td>
<td>.200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(l) W-F conflict → W-F fit</td>
<td>-.503</td>
<td>-.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(m) F-W conflict → W-F fit</td>
<td>-.122</td>
<td>-.150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n) W-F fit → job satisfaction</td>
<td>.353</td>
<td>.368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(o) W-F fit → work success</td>
<td>.391</td>
<td>.392</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(p) W-F fit → life success</td>
<td>.551</td>
<td>.545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(q) W-F fit → marital success</td>
<td>.414</td>
<td>.396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(r) W-F fit → parenting success</td>
<td>.542</td>
<td>.554</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: F-W = family–work; W-F = work–family.
a. Indicates that the path was not statistically significant.
b. Indicates statistically significant difference between men and women in the family life stage.
gender differences were identified between men and women with a youngest child who was in preschool, or those with a youngest child who was in elementary school.

The strength of the relationship between job flexibility and reduced work–family conflict was greater for men across all of the family life stages except for men under age 35 years with no children. The greatest gender differences were between men and women with a youngest child in elementary school, a youngest child who was a teenager, and those who were empty-nesters. Similarly, the strength of the relationship between job flexibility and reduced family–work conflict was greater for men, with the most pronounced gender differences between men and women with a youngest child who was a teenager.

Family characteristic paths. The relationship between time in household chores and family–work conflict was not significant for men or women in any family life stage. Marriage significantly predicted reduced family–work conflict only for men who were empty-nesters.

Work–family interface outcomes. The strength of the relationship between job flexibility and increased work–family fit was significant for men and women in every life stage, but stronger for men. Significant gender differences were identified between men and women younger than age 35 years with no children, and those with a youngest child in preschool. The strength of the relationship between work–family conflict and reduced work–family fit was significant for men and women in every family life stage. Similarly, the strength of the relationship between family–work spillover and reduced work–family fit was significant for men and women in every family life stage. Significant gender differences, with a more strongly negative relationship for women, were identified for those with a youngest child in preschool, a youngest child in elementary school, or a youngest child who was a teenager.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to empirically evaluate the influence of family life stage on gender differences in the experience of work and family life across six family life stages. As hypothesized, the model fit the data at a global level. It also fit the data by gender, across life stages, and across life stages by gender. However, significant differences in the means of the model variables and in the size and direction of the relationships among the variables revealed important differences by gender and family life stage. Findings confirmed the usefulness of a life course perspective in exploring gender differences in the work–family interface (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Within-gender
differences were as important as between-gender differences in understanding men’s and women’s experiences of the work–family interface.

**Gender Differences in the Work–Family Interface**

Several important gender differences emerged, irrespective of family life stage. Men on average worked more hours than women, were less aware of and used fewer family programs, spent less time in household labor, and experienced more work–family conflict including missing family obligations and dinners and reporting interruptions at home because of work. Women, in contrast, reported greater family–work spillover, particularly when they had a youngest child who was in elementary school or was a teenager. In spite of these differences, men and women reported similar levels of work, life, and family success with differing levels of work–family and family–work spillover.

**Gender Differences by Family Life Stage in the Work–Family Interface**

The inclusion of life stage in the analysis provided a more informative and detailed picture of these gender differences. Some gender differences were temporary, limited to one or few life stages. Parenthood presented the strongest gender differences. Parents of young children seemed to organize the division of labor inside and outside the home to respond to the new demands of children. In gendered ways, women continued to have primary responsibility for their homes and child care, whereas both men and women focused on work and earning an income.

With job hours, men consistently worked more hours, but the greatest gender difference was for men and women with young children or teenagers. The gender gap in job hours augmented to almost 3 times the gender difference in the overall sample for men and women with children under age 12 years, whereas there were almost no gender differences for men and women in the first stage (no children and age 35 or less) or in the last stage (empty nest stage). Similarly, men as a group reported more work–family conflict than women but the greatest differences were for men and women with young children at home. For those with a youngest child in preschool, the gender difference was nearly 2 times the gender difference for the entire sample. All of these gender differences reflected a curvilinear relationship. The greatest differences emerged during the intensive child-rearing years, whereas the earlier and later family life stages showed smaller or no gender differences.
With family–work conflict, the lack of gender differences found when comparing men and women without regard to life stage was misleading. Although there were no significant gender differences in the first life stage (no children), women with preschool and elementary school–age children reported significantly higher levels of family–work conflict than men. The gender difference in time spent in household chores was also significantly greater during these life stages. The gender gap in household chores, with women spending greater time, was 4 times larger for those with children under age 12 years at home than the average difference. Women seemed to increase their concern and commitment toward family responsibilities particularly when children were young, whereas men increased their commitment toward paid work.

The gender differences in work–family conflict and family–work spill-over are consistent with Mennino and Brayfield’s (2002) conclusion that men in male-dominated occupations are more likely to make trade-offs in which work is allowed to interfere with family plans or time. These findings suggest a privileging of employment responsibilities over family responsibilities (Mennino et al., 2005). Women, on the other hand, are more likely to experience spillover in which task, time, and emotional reactions in the home spill over into the work sphere, especially when they have young children (Roehling et al., 2003).

This suggests parallel curvilinear relationships of work–family conflict and family–work spillover for men and women. Men increase in work–family conflict across the early parenting life stages and decrease as children grow and leave the home, whereas women follow a similar pattern, but with family–work spillover. The relationship between family–work spillover and decreased work–family fit is also curvilinear for women. Feelings of spillover from family to work are more strongly related to perceptions of successful management of work and family relationships across the intensive parenting years. In contrast, work–family conflict does not differ in its relationship with work–family fit for men across family life stages. These findings confirm previous conclusions that women’s experience of work and family life is more strongly related to children’s ages and needs than men’s (Higgins et al., 1994).

Job hours were consistently a strong predictor of women’s experience of work–family conflict, especially women with a youngest child in elementary school, a youngest child who was a teenager, and those who were empty-nesters. But the flexibility that would presumably reduce the experience of time-based conflicts between work and family life was more effective for men across all family life stages, including the intensive parenting and empty nest stages. Mennino et al. (2005) found that a family-friendly workplace culture was more effective in reducing negative spillover than formal
company policies. Women may be particularly likely to benefit from a culture of flexibility in addition to formal flexibility policies. Previous studies also suggested that reduced work hours may be most effective in reducing work–family conflict for women. This may be particularly true for women who are mature workers. Studies of mature workers indicated that mature women preferred working fewer hours and found job responsibilities more emotionally draining than mature men (Pitt-Catsouphes & Smyer, 2005).

**Implications**

Having young children at home emerged as the critical catalyst for gender differences in the work–family interface in this analysis. Greater gender differences were found in the central stages of life when children require a great deal of temporal and economic resources from their parents. When life stage was not considered, the first and last stages seemed to offset each other, concealing major gender differences in the central stages of family life. Thus, although there has been an increase in cultural emphasis on gender equality in the work and family realms, the findings indicated that gender differences persist. This does not mean that the current generation is not more egalitarian, but suggests that becoming a parent has more influence than other cultural norms. Men and women seemed to focus on their work and roles somewhat differently, particularly during the central stages of family life. Sanchez and Thompson (1997) emphasized that mothers continue to be primarily responsible for the household and that “contemporary fatherhood” has not altered this pattern in spite of change in other social relations.

Findings from this study suggest that these persistent differences may be working for men and women, at least in their perceptions of personal and family success. But in interpreting these findings, it is important to recognize that the sample reflects upper-middle-class men and women. Thus, the fact that persistent differences seem to be working for upper-middle-class men and women from IBM does not suggest similar results for women in more oppressed or economically difficult circumstances. Furthermore, the small number of success perception measures and common method variance suggest that strong conclusions cannot be drawn about men’s and women’s well-being from these measures.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to consider in interpreting these results. Because of the use of cross-sectional data, differences may be conflated with cohort
effects. Longitudinal data is necessary to evaluate how work–family linkages shift over the life course. The study presents an essential first step toward understanding differences in the experience of the work–family interface for workers at various family life stages. Future longitudinal research will be able to build on this foundation to further isolate life stage effects from potential cohort effects.

It is also crucial to acknowledge that the data came from only one corporation, and IBM employees tend to be more highly educated, have higher salaries, and have more experience with computer technology than the general population (Hill et al., 2004). These features may limit generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the corporate sponsor required that the study contain a limited number of questions, which prevented using established work–family scales for all the variables in the analysis. It is unlikely that single items were as reliable in capturing the complexity of these constructs. This trade-off was necessary to gain access to broad corporate data, which allowed group comparisons on a range of factors that would have been impossible with a more common data set (Hill et al., 2004). The corporate nature of the data also limited the availability of couple data, which is essential to explorations of how women’s choices and work and family realities are influenced by their husband’s circumstances and vice versa. Fuller exploration of the “linked lives” contribution of the life course perspective is limited.

Finally, in interpreting these relationships, it is important to recognize that national differences are masked by the group analysis of the data. But it is very likely that national context influences the means of these work–family variables and their relationships across the family life course. Based on work by Aryee et al. (1999), nations may be categorized based on their collectivist/familistic or individualistic cultures. Collectivistic/familistic cultures are those in which the tendency is to place family interests above those of the individual. This is in contrast to individualistic cultures in which “self-development and family development are posed as counter to the demands of work” (Aryee et al., 1999, p. 494). This cultural difference in orientation is likely to influence interpretations of work–family conflict and family–work spillover. Furthermore, societal norms around maternal employment and the public work–family policies that reflect those norms are likely to influence gender differences in the experience of work–family conflict across the life course, as well as access to flexibility and work–family programs. The current analysis provides empirical evidence for how men and women differ on the same measures of the work–family experience across the life course. These findings serve as a baseline for future explorations of the influence of national context on gender differences across the family life course.
Conclusion

This analysis provided an important first step toward a better understanding of similarities and differences between male and female workers across the life course. The findings indicate that children strongly influence the work and family lives of men and women and that parenthood creates or maintains a more gendered work and family life. This lends empirical support to the assertion that work–family linkages are deeply embedded within life course location and temporal and social structural contexts (Grzywacz et al., 2002; Moen & Sweet, 2004). It is imperative that life stage be included in work and family analyses to better understand the shifts in effect sizes and directions of effect across gender.

The findings also suggest that men and women may need different work and family options even when they are in the same family life stage. For example, when children are young, men may benefit from more job flexibility in when and where they work, whereas women may need more reduced hour or part-time options. Unfortunately, there may be limits to the real possibilities offered to workers, because their work-life strategies are constrained by structural options. In organizations that are committed to work–family programs, greater awareness of the differences in the needs of men and women at different life stages could improve work–family fit and work, family, or life success for a variety of employees.

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