**Overview**

The theoretical model of work–family conflict in sport is a multi-level approach to understanding the antecedents and outcomes of work–family interactions in a sport context. The theory essentially poses that individual lives and work–life choices are shaped and constrained by the organisational and socio-cultural structures and norms surrounding them. It asserts that by examining individuals within the contexts in which they live and work, we can understand and manage work–life conflict and work–life balance pursuant to better individual, organisational and socio-cultural outcomes. This chapter provides a look at this theory – its constructs, major propositions and how it was developed. We then examine what we and others have learned in our investigations of work–life conflict among coaches, as well as ways that we can extend the theory in the future.

**Specific constructs**

There are a number of constructs utilised to build the model, which we list below with their basic definitions:

- **Work.** Understanding that there are multiple forms and structures of work, within the work–family literature work is typically defined as paid employment.
- **Family.** Again, this is a broad concept, but a working definition is offered by Eby *et al.* (2005) as ‘two or more individuals occupying interdependent roles with the purpose of accomplishing shared goals’ (p. 126).
- **Work–family conflict.** Work–family conflict is defined as a type of inter-role conflict wherein at least some work and family responsibilities are not compatible and have resultant effects within each domain (Boles, Howard and Donofrio, 2001; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). It has become largely accepted that work and family interact, and that this interaction is bi-directional. Work can affect family, and family can affect work (Boles *et al.*, 2001; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus *et al.*, 1997; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1996).
- **Work–family balance.** Although our original theoretical framework in 2005 examined only work–family conflict, the work–family literature (in general and our own) has expanded
to a greater understanding that the work–family interface can have both negative (conflict) and positive (balance, enrichment) outcomes (see Schenewark and Dixon, 2012). In addition, it is understood that conflict and balance may not necessarily be the opposite ends of the same continuum, but each has distinct antecedents and consequences (Eby et al., 2005).

- **Work–life.** Much like the constructs of conflict and balance, the construct of work–family has expanded to understand that even those without a ‘family’ will still experience conflict and enrichment from work and non-work domains. For example, Mazerolle and Goodman (2013) have explored the ways that organisations can support athletic trainers who have life pursuits including hobbies, exercise and personal athletic pursuits.

- **Role theory.** This is the basic set of theories undergirding work–life research. These theories purport that individuals hold multiple life roles and that these roles interface with each other. Some approaches operate out of a scarcity assumption (e.g., Greenhaus and Powell, 2003), which assumes that individuals hold finite resources such as time, energy and money, and that choices in one role come at a cost to another. Other role theories, such as those from Grzywacz and Marks (2000), Greenhaus and Powell (2003) and Greenhaus and Brummelhuis (2013), suggest that work and family can actually have an enriching effect, whereby resources in one role enhance those within the other role. Our collective work supports both approaches.

- **Multi-level.** One major tenet that is often not central in work–family conflict theory is that it is multi-level. This means that it allows for simultaneous examination and analysis of individual and organisational behaviours (e.g., Kozlowski and Klein, 2000). It allows the researcher to address the complexity of relationships among variables and within changing contexts and to specify relationships between constructs and behaviours at various levels.

- **Top-down.** A top-down perspective suggests that higher levels (e.g., organisations, cultural assumptions) shape and constrain lower levels. To paraphrase Kanter (1977), the workplace shapes the worker.

- **Bottom-up.** A bottom-up perspective suggests that individual behaviours can collectively influence higher levels. For example, worker demand for work–life balance policies can alter those policies at the organisational level.

**Major propositions**

We put forth four major propositions. These are described below:

1. Work and family interact for those working in a sport context, and those interactions are somewhat distinct to that context due to the organisational and social structures and cultural assumptions within sport;
2. Individual behaviours are shaped and constrained by both organisational and socio-cultural properties;
3. Organisational behaviours are shaped by individual attitudes and behaviours regarding work–family; and
4. Work–life issues impact both men and women, although the antecedents, experiences and outcomes may look different. Boundary conditions regarding gender, while acknowledged, were not specified in the original theoretical model.
How has it been tested?

The model has been applied and tested somewhat broadly in the sport management literature in particular. We completed the initial testing of the model (Bruening and Dixon, 2007; Bruening and Dixon, 2008; Dixon and Bruening, 2007), setting out to examine both the top-down and bottom-up processes and relationships within the model. To that end, we conducted online focus groups with forty-one women (nine focus groups with four to five members each). Then, we conducted additional individual interviews with seventeen of those women who coached at the NCAA Division I level and also were mothers. We asked them about their experiences with work and family, how organisations helped and hindered their work–family conflict, and how they were coping and seeking change through their experiences.

The data confirmed that top-down and bottom-up processes were at work, and that antecedents and outcomes could be identified at all three levels within the model (individual, structural and socio-cultural). At the individual level, coaching mothers’ drive (many of them self defined as Type A personalities) and values impacted their level of work–family conflict and their abilities and mechanisms for coping with it. Most coaching mothers reported that they valued both their family and their work, which increased work–family conflict, but also increased their resiliency. Organisational practices, such as flexible scheduling and a family-friendly culture, also impacted work–family conflict. Finally, socio-cultural norms, such as expectations that women handle the majority of childrearing duties, strongly impacted coaching mothers’ work–family conflict.

Our two studies confirmed the general viability of the model, which has been extended and applied to other contexts, individuals and research questions in the ten years following publication of the original piece. These extensions and applications will be addressed in a later section.

Process

The development of the theory was a blend of our personal and professional experiences and backgrounds. On a scholarly level, Dixon had a human-resource-management background, so the questions of improving employee satisfaction and performance within an organisational context fit nicely within her overall research framework (see also Dixon, Noe and Pastore, 2004, 2008; Dixon and Warner, 2010). Thus, the model flowed from original questions about the factors impacting coaching satisfaction (Dixon and Warner, 2010), whereby work–life balance emerged as one of the most salient factors impacting the satisfaction of current college coaches.

Bruening had a strong background in qualitative research, sociology and women’s studies. She had written extensively on the experiences of African-American women in sport and on creating inclusive participation and work environments (see Bruening, Borland and Burton, 2008; Bruening, Dover and Clark, 2009). Thus, this area of research flowed naturally from her examinations of barriers to persistence in sport for women.

On a personal level, we had been college coaches, leaving the profession partly due to anticipation of work–family conflict issues. As such, our own backgrounds resonated with the participants in our studies and made powerful connections and motivations for the study of work–life balance in general. At the time of the creation of the model, we both had young children and were experiencing fairly high levels of work–family conflict. This experience motivated us to find new pathways for career and life success for ourselves and others. It also, however, created challenges for remaining objective as scholars, something we constantly had to check within both thinking and writing.
In conducting the interviews, we felt that our own background created an atmosphere of trust with the study participants, such that they were willing to share their struggles and experiences at more than a surface level. As we spoke to them, the mothers brought up many points that were salient to our own lives. For example, they mentioned exhaustion and feelings of guilt, which resonated with us as we travelled (leaving our children at home) to conduct the interviews. As researchers, it was extremely valuable that both of us were in similar life stages. We could discuss the similarities and differences of our lives to the participants, we could support each other in the sometimes arduous research process, and we were able to de-brief often such that we could ensure that we were approaching the participants’ stories and our interpretation of those stories with proper perspective.

The theory was built on previous work on the lives of coaches. This work had either theorized or utilised quantitative methods to demonstrate high levels of work–life conflict in coaches from a variety of contexts. For example, Chalip (1978) examined the experiences of swimming coaches in New Zealand and found that there was tremendous pressure to choose sport over family. Knoppers (1992) found vast differences in the support systems for male and female coaches. For example, most female coaches had to carry their own career and family, while male coaches had spouses who not only took sole responsibility for home care, but also supported the coach’s career through actions such as hosting recruits and donors, and attending team events. Pastore, Inglis and Danylchuk (1996) and Weiss and Stevens (1993) echoed these findings, demonstrating that work–life conflict was a significant source of burnout among female coaches. We sought to add to this literature with in-depth interviews with the coaches, and with a specific focus on work–life conflict, rather than the overall experience or satisfaction of coaches.

The larger body of literature on work–life experiences, and three pieces of work in particular, also informed our efforts. Garey’s (1999) in-depth examination of the lives of nurses was provocative in that she wrote that many women did not see work and life as separate realms, nor did they portion off stages of their own and their children’s lives. Instead they worked to weave a life into what may, at the time, have looked like a jumbled mess. Yet, when they looked back, they could see the beautiful tapestry they had created. Garey’s study led us to question if coaches saw their lives similarly – a woven mess of children, athletes, games, events, years – none of which they were willing to leave. This work provided a focal point on the individual experiences of coaching women.

Rapoport, Fletcher and Pruitt (2002) examined work–life conflict within organisations. Their work was influential in that it demonstrated not only the work–life issues that arise in organisations, but also that something could be done to change organisations when the policies and culture were not working for the employees. This work provided direction towards the organisational factors impacting coaching mothers, and it influenced a focus on bottom-up processes that lead to organisational transformation.

Hewlett and Luce’s (2005) work built a case for the pressures on young mothers to maintain a ridiculous work schedule even in the face of mounting home challenges, or desires to spend more time with their families. This article, both compelling and true to others’ experiences, was influential in informing enquiry in the sport realm. We found that female coaches felt they could not exit the profession or they would never re-enter. Hewlett and Luce highlighted the socio-cultural pressures that influence the work–life experiences of mothers, and aided in us in revealing the hidden assumptions behind working, coaching and motherhood.

Processing Hewlett and Luce’s (2005) findings also represented a culmination of our thinking regarding multi-level theories, as did studying an entire edited text on the topic by Kozlowski and Klein (2000). These authors grappled with the idea that human behaviours take place within
a context – both organisational and social – and that in order to adequately understand and measure human behaviours, scholars need to develop conceptual and measurement models within contexts. They explained that the scholarly community had embraced the idea of top-down processes, but had done little to explain or measure those that emerged from the bottom, or individual level. Thus, work–family conflict theory in sport was somewhat an answer to Kozlowski and Klein’s challenge for more work on emergent or bottom-up processes, particularly within organisations.

Therefore, in developing the theory, we reached into the psychological, sociological, human resource management, family studies and organisational behaviour literatures to uncover the factors that might be related at the various levels as antecedents and outcomes. With attention to theoretical developmental principles outlined by Whetton (1989), we wanted to develop a theory that was comprehensive yet parsimonious, contextually flexible and, most of all, useful for predicting and explaining attitudes, behaviour and relationships within a complex framework.

Individual factors included personality, values, family structure and gender. Organisational factors included job pressure, work hours, work scheduling and organisational culture. Socio-cultural factors included gender ideology and cultural norms and expectations. Subsequent testing of the theory, qualitatively in particular, has demonstrated that these factors all play a part in work–family conflict to varying degrees, with organisational and individual factors being the most salient (see Dixon and Sagas, 2007).

The outcomes examined were drawn largely from the human resource management, organisational behaviour and family studies literature bases. Using the principles of multi-level theory, the outcomes can be experienced at any level, but we wanted to demonstrate that outcomes at lower levels could also influence those at higher levels. For example, if worker satisfaction and performance increased due to work–life balance, then organisations might be prompted to enhance policies and practices that facilitate work–life balance. If more working mothers assert influence in organisations, such that the labour force composition were altered, then cultural norms and gender roles within society could also shift.

**Extensions and applications**

The original framework presented in 2005 has been extended and applied in various contexts and samples. It was first tested empirically with college coaching mothers (Bruening and Dixon, 2007; Dixon and Bruening, 2007) in a two-part study that examined the top-down and bottom-up processes that impacted the experience of work and family for these women. Since then, several scholars have extended and applied the model both directly and tangentially.

One of the extensions of the theory was an examination of the work–life balance of young professional baseball players (Dixon et al., 2006). We demonstrated that it was incredibly taxing on young men to pursue career and family at the same time. In fact, one baseball player described having a ‘Double A’ clause on any serious relationship – that is, he would not enter into one until he had made at least the Double A level in the minor leagues. Results also showed, however, that men who were married and who had a robust support system (spouse, family of origin) were more satisfied with their lives, even in the midst of difficulty. This study, which supported the findings for college coaches, pointed to the importance of a strong support system in navigating work–life conflict.

Another extension was a systematic examination of the work–life balance practices and policies within college athletic departments (Bruening, Dixon, Tiell, Osbourne, Lough and Sweeney, 2008; Tiell et al., 2008). This series of studies demonstrated that while numerous work–life practices and policies are available to coaches, often they are not applicable or otherwise go
unused. For example, universities may offer maternity leave. However, most coaches said they would never take six weeks away from their team, even in the off-season. So, the policy is on the books but does not impact the coaches’ lives. Of equal importance, these studies pointed to the supervisor as the most immediate determinant of the work–life climate with an organisation and the subsequent work–life conflict for college coaches.

Dixon and Sagas (2007) conducted a large-scale quantitative study of both male and female college coaches, examining the role of perceived organisational and supervisor support in the work–life conflict, and work and life satisfaction. They found that work–life conflict was a significant predictor of both work and life satisfaction. High levels of work–life conflict were associated with decreased satisfaction – a relationship mediated by perceived supervisor support. Specifically, increased support helped mitigate the impact that conflict had on satisfaction. Extending the work of Dixon and Sagas (2007), Ryan and Sagas (2011) gathered data from a large number of college coaches and confirmed the role a supervisor can have in facilitating a positive work environment.

Our previous work with coaching mothers, along with work from Garey (1999) and Hewlett and Luce (2005), collectively suggests that work–life challenges might change over a person’s life course. We blended this thinking with Sweet and Moen’s life course theory to examine how this may apply to coaching mothers (Bruening and Dixon, 2008). The participants indicated that career, family and support systems changed over time, and impacted their work–life experiences and the interpretation of those experiences. They suggested that work–life balance did not get easier with time, but it changed and morphed into new challenges and new support needs. The implications were that organisations must be aware that work–life challenges extend beyond childcare for young children into a supportive culture that values people’s entire life course.

The work to date has largely focused on work–life conflict as its central construct. While this construct captured the experiences and frustrations of many of the participants, some suggested that it inherently left one with the feeling that ‘some conflict’ was probably inevitable, and that ‘no conflict’ was the best possible outcome. Given that perspective, it was difficult to see the benefits of adopting dual roles of worker and family member (Ryan and Sagas, 2011). Schenewark and Dixon (2012), therefore, examined the dual concept of work–family conflict and work–family balance among college coaches. Ryan and Sagas revealed that both constructs provided unique explanatory value, and that both should be utilised in future studies to provide more explanatory power.

A number of researchers have also extended the theory beyond college coaches to other contexts. In a series of compelling articles, Leberman and Palmer (Leberman and Palmer, 2008, 2009; Palmer and Leberman, 2009) explored the lives of mothers in New Zealand who are also elite athletes (and sometimes coaches as well). They found that the mothers relish their dual roles, and value participation in multiple roles as making significant contributions to their lives, yet find a constant struggle in balancing the time and the emotional and financial demands of their multiple roles. These authors highlight the gender differences in navigating multiple roles for elite male athletes and female athletes. They recommend, in particular, financial support systems for the elite athletes, such that they do not also have to work full-time while training and tending to their families.

Mazerolle and colleagues have also extended the work–family theory to the context of athletic trainers (e.g., Mazerolle, Bruening and Casa, 2008; Mazerolle, Bruening, Casa and Burton, 2008; Mazerolle, Pitney, Casa and Pagnotta, 2011; Mazerolle and Goodman, 2013). Their work has demonstrated that work–family conflict is also a significant contributor to the satisfaction and retention of athletic trainers. Additionally, Mazerolle and colleagues’ work has revealed that
work–life conflict and balance are significant issues for both men and women, and that both have left the profession as a result. Their work echoes the need for more investigation of the work–life balance of fathers (see also Dixon et al., 2006). Towards that end, Graham and Dixon have developed a research agenda to investigate the work–family experiences of coaching fathers. An initial review article (Graham and Dixon, 2014) examines the tensions of coaching fathers stemming from contrasting perspectives on work and family in larger society versus those in the coaching subculture. These expectations and values create tensions for coaching fathers as they simultaneously seek to be ‘good fathers’ and ‘good coaches’.

**Future directions**

To expand the existing work, theory building in the area of the work–life interface could take a number of different directions. The three most pressing include expanded examination of fathers in sport, life course applications and experimental designs for reducing conflict/increasing balance.

First, there is clearly an emergent trend and a need to examine the work–life experiences of fathers within sport. As Graham and Dixon (2014) indicated, there is a clear tension for men between traditional notions of work and family (e.g., those outlined by Knoppers, 1992) and emergent social expectations of fathers, particularly to be more involved and engaged in their children’s lives. These tensions have implications for individual level stress, coping and career choices, but may also inform work design and organisational culture in sport. Clearly, coaching fathers must be studied and, since a vast majority of management positions in both college and professional sport are also held by men, examinations must extend to those positions as well. As such, the following research questions should be central: (a) what are the work–life experiences of fathers working in the sport industry; and (b) how do gender roles shape those experiences?

Another important direction for the future of this theoretical agenda is the further exploration of the work–life interface over the life course. Clearly both life and career stages need to be part of the equation in an effort to address these questions: (a) how do work–life experiences change over the life-course of employees in the sport industry; (b) how do professional expectations change; and (c) how to familial expectations change?

Finally, while models of work–life conflict and work–life enrichment have been expanded qualitatively (Bruening and Dixon, 2007, 2008; Dixon and Bruening, 2007) and through survey-based research (Kacmar, Crawford, Carlson, Ferguson and Whitten, 2014; Odle-Dusseau, Britt and Greene-Shortridge, 2012), we could not identify any research testing designs to reduce conflict and increase balance, and even enrichment. Scholars could consider the following questions: (a) what conditions optimise the presence of work–family balance and minimise conflict; and (b) how can a supervisor facilitate work–family enrichment in the sport workplace? It might be possible to introduce work–family policy or practice interventions and examine their effects. This could involve more controlled quasi-experimental designs or in-depth case comparisons. The idea is that we have little insight into direct cause-effect relationships of policies and practices. Research designs that would illumine these relationships more strongly would be helpful for creating practical applications.

To date, scholars developing the theoretical model of work–family conflict in sport have focused on a multi-level approach. Work–family interactions of individuals are impacted by the sport organisations in which they work and the socio-cultural context in which they find themselves. Moving forward, scholars need to continue to acknowledge the complex and unique nature of the work–family interface within sport, expanding to include research on fathers,
work–family conflict, balance and enrichment over the life course, and utilising experimental designs to better understand and manage work and life roles. The result can be better individual, organisational and socio-cultural outcomes.

Note

1 This chapter is a reflection on Dixon and Bruening (2005) and the work related to it.

References


Applying work–family conflict theory

Rachel Madsen

I first became aware of Marlene Dixon and Jennifer Bruening’s (2005) research on work–family conflict in 2007 when I was a doctoral student researching the lack of women as collegiate head coaches. I had just completed a twelve-year career as a head collegiate basketball coach where the glaring lack of female head coaches was impossible to ignore, but the reasons for the gender gap were not as obvious. Like many others, I assumed that the problem was simply a factor of time, even though more than forty years had passed since Title IX was introduced. However, the statistics had been telling a very different story over the years as the percentage of women as head collegiate coaches had dropped almost steadily since the 1970s and reached an all-time low in 2006 (Acosta and Carpenter, 2014). It became clear to me that time was not the solution and there were certainly other factors at play preventing women from becoming head coaches.

When digging deeper to explore the problem of so few women in coaching, work–family conflict quickly arises as an explanation because coaching careers require very long, non-traditional hours and a great deal of travel away from home and family. However, work–family conflict had often been presented as a single-level theory and, therefore, did not satisfy me as an explanation. In critiquing such simplistic explanations, Dixon and Bruening explained, ‘While single-level perspectives have some explanatory value, alone they cannot adequately address behavior in organizations and social contexts’ (2005, p. 246). Thus, they expanded work–family conflict into a multi-level theory, which then became very useful in my research on the lack of women in collegiate coaching.

To be specific, when looking at the issue more critically, I began asking why work–family conflict seemed to keep women out of coaching but it did not have the same negative effect on male coaches. Those following a single-level, bottom-up work–family conflict approach would suggest that the women analysed the situation and made rational, individual choices to spend more time with their family. However, as Dixon and Bruening point out, ‘we must be cognizant of the potential constraints – both structural and social – that impact individual choices’ (2005, p. 232). The description of these multi-level constraints was very important to me, and in particular the explanation that work–family conflict acts on women in very complicated and often unconscious ways.

I have applied Dixon and Bruening’s multi-level theory to several projects: my dissertation research exploring why high-level female athletes choose to not pursue coaching careers (Madsen, 2010) and investigating why women are increasingly pursuing careers as assistant coaches, but not head coaches (Madsen, Clark and Burton, 2013). In each project, the participants consistently described multi-level factors (societal, structural and individual) impacting their perception of work–family conflict in coaching careers.

The problem of too few women in coaching is a complicated issue that requires a thorough understanding of the problem. Dixon and Bruening have provided a lens through which to examine the multiple factors acting on women as they navigate athletic careers. Perhaps even more importantly, through discussing a multi-level interactive theory, Dixon and Bruening (2007) also propose that women need not be passive observers of a system that excludes them, but rather they can work from the bottom-up to make college athletics more inclusive. It is this latter point
that I stress to students with my current teaching; they recognise college athletics as a somewhat flawed system, closed off to many. With greater awareness and encouragement they can bring about some long overdue positive change.

Note
1 Rachel Madsen is with the College of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Niagara University.

References