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A Network Approach to Work–Family Conflict

Abstract

Most human behaviours, including those instrumental for reducing Work–Family Conflict (WFC), take place in the context of social relationships. However, the role of social networks in an individual's WFC goal pursuit process has not received sufficient attention, as most current research is dominated by an agentic perspective that argues that individuals possess the capabilities to change the demands and resources associated with their roles freely. We believe that the reality faced by many workers is more composite, as the various work and family stakeholders present in an individual's network can create significant constraints and opportunities that are capable of inhibiting or enhancing their agency. In this paper, we aim to examine how the ecosystem of network relationships in an individual' social network can influence his or her overall capability to minimize WFC. Building on insights from dynamic network theory, a recently introduced framework in the social network literature, we propose a conceptual model that explains the specific roles that work and family stakeholders (i.e., supporters, preventers, resistors, reactors, negators, interactants, or observers) can assume with respect to goal strivers' attempts to manage WFC. Building on prior work-family and social network research, we illustrate how two characteristics of the network in which an individual is embedded (i.e., centrality and density) can shape the magnitude of social network influence on WFC. Implications for theory and practice are also discussed.

Keywords

work–family conflict, dynamic network theory, network density, centrality, social support, agency.

Introduction

People are working at a faster and more intense pace in recent years; further, following the Covid-19 pandemic, such work is also frequently being carried out from home, all amid work and home boundaries that are now blurred and more permeable than ever (Pradies et al., 2021). Consequently, the tension between work and family roles is also increasing, and the theoretical concept that best captures this tension is Work–Family Conflict (WFC), defined by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) as 'a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect' (p. 77). In the decades of research on this topic, scholars have found that individual (e.g., personality, family characteristics, resources, and personal strategies) and organisational (e.g., organisational stressors, long work hours, supervisors' work-life supportive behaviors, and masculine work culture) factors can increase or reduce individuals' experience of WFC[1] (Kossek, Perrigino, Russo, & Morandin, 2023), with important consequences for other stakeholders in the work and family domains (Pluut, Ilies, Su, Weng, & Liang, 2022). An interesting line of research in this area concerns the specific strategies that individuals can employ to manage their work–family interface (Hirschi, Shockley, & Zacher, 2019; Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011; Thomason, 2022). Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep (2009) found that individuals can minimise WFC by enacting specific tactics aimed at reinforcing the permeability of work and home boundaries. Similarly, Hirschi et al. (2019) theorised that individuals can experience better management of their work–family interface when enacting a series of strategies enabling an increase in resources and reducing in demands associated with their roles. Similarly, Thomason (2022) found that working women

[1] Although WFC might take two *forms*, namely, work-family conflict and family-work conflict, we are interested here in the *global* WFC concept. Participation in one domain is simply made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other domain.

were more likely to manage their work–family interface according to their preferences when interacting and negotiating collaboration and support over their work and family strategies with different role senders. Although this line of research is promising, it is fundamentally built on the assumption that individuals are agentic and have high discretion and confidence in their capabilities to define, plan, and execute the work and family strategies necessary to manage the work–family interface based on their own preferences or those of their meaningful family stakeholders (Kreiner et al., 2009).

However, the reality faced by most employees worldwide is more composite, as individual agencies are often constrained by environmental conditions, especially those that pertain to social relationships with other influential stakeholders (Hobson, 2011; Perlow, 1998; Pluut et al., 2022), defined in the literature with the term 'role senders' (Hall, 1972) or 'border-keepers' (Clark, 2000), as they have a crucial influence in the shaping the transition between work and home domains. To illustrate, consider the case of John, a manager in a dual-career couple, who aims to manage the competing demands between work and family domains to ensure equal career opportunities for self and the partner (Crawford, Thompson, & Ashforth, 2019). Even if John is fully competent to enact the strategies necessary to minimise WFC and enhance the permeability of the home boundaries, attaining such a goal could become problematic if he works with a family unsupportive supervisor who expects him to be available 24/7 and imposes high role demands through meetings, calls, and stringent deadlines (Perlow, 1998). The social ties in one's environment can therefore be a source of constraints – or opportunities in the case of a work-life supportive boss (Kossek et al., 2023) or positive spillover (Ilies, Keeney, & Scott, 2011) – which may shape an individual's capabilities to manage the work–family interface as planned (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, Prouska, & Beauregard, 2017;

Hobson, 2011; Pluut et al., 2022). Accordingly, Crawford et al. (2019) have proposed the adoption of a dynamic approach that considers the respective goals, identities, and expectations of all actors potentially shaping an individual's work–family interface. Meanwhile, other scholars (e.g. Baumann, Kleshinski, Adair, Perrigino, & Wynne, 2017; Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007; Hobson, 2011; Ollier-Malaterre, 2011) have proposed a similar approach for the work–family field through the adoption of a systemic perspective that could help elucidate the ecosystem of role senders and border-keepers who can impact the attainment of work–family goals on individuals and on their 'invisible stakeholders' (Ollier-Malaterre, 2011, p. 418).

Although there are encouraging signs of interest in the relational aspects of the work–family experience, focus on this approach is still marginal, and most of the current research is dominated by an agentic perspective. Significant exceptions are the studies focusing on crossovers (Bernhardt & Bünning, 2022; Grotto & Lyness, 2022; Li, Cropanzano, Butler, Shao, & Westman, 2021), spillovers (Ilies et al., 2011; Pluut et al., 2022; Wayne, Michel, & Matthews, 2022), boundary management (Clark, 2000), women's career and family strategies (Thomason, 2022), and family supportive supervision (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011; Kossek et al., 2023; Yu, Pichler, Russo, & Hammer, 2022). Building on this perspective, we aim to illustrate how the network of social relationships that an individual develops in the work and family domains can shape the personal capabilities needed to manage WFC. More specifically, drawing on dynamic network theory (Westaby, 2012; Westaby & Parr, 2020), we theorise how the social entities in a focal actor's network are connected to the goals of the focal actor (*hereinafter* goal striver), striving to reduce the conflict between work and family roles. Instead of analysing individuals' work–family strategies in isolation, we focus on how the interactions between an individual and other role senders can impact the goal pursuit process (Borgatti &

Halgin, 2011; Thomason, 2022). Adopting dynamic network theory terminology, we describe the different role ties that work and family role senders can develop towards the goal striver and how these ties can shape the goal striver's capability to reduce WFC. Finally, we elaborate on how two network characteristics (i.e., density and centrality) influence the internal dynamic network dynamics. We believe that our paper makes important theoretical and practical contributions to the literature. From a theoretical standpoint, by integrating social network research into the WFC field, we overcome some of the limitations of current research, particularly with respect to the dominant focus on individual agency and marginal interest in the relational dimension of WFC (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). Dynamic network theory helps us realise that an individual's goal to reduce WFC might be shaped by the myriad of relationships, expectations, and, above all, the contingent goals that each actor in an individual's ecosystem is pursuing at any moment (Carmeli & Russo, 2016; Hobson, 2011). Practically, understanding the different roles and reactions that work and family stakeholders can develop towards the goal pursuit process might help individuals better understand which actors they can rely on and whom to avoid due to potential negative reactions towards their attempt to maintain WFC control.

Integrating Dynamic Network Theory into Research on WFC

Dynamic network theory (Westaby, 2012) represents a theoretical advancement in traditional social network research. Social network research relies on three main assumptions: (i) individuals are embedded in a network of relationships; (ii) the relationships and structural characteristics of the network can shape the individuals' goal pursuit process; and (iii) individuals deliberately act to create (vs. dissolve) those social ties that are instrumental (vs. unhelpful) for their goal attainment (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1985; Kilduff & Brass, 2010). Dynamic network theory adds to these assumptions by suggesting that the decisions individuals

undertake to attain a particular goal result in conscious or unconscious reactions from the other social actors in the network (Westaby, 2012; Westaby, Pfaff, & Redding, 2014). The nature of such reactions – positive or negative – depends not only upon the social ties between the different actors involved in the goal pursuit process, but, even more importantly, upon the contingent goal that each social actor seeks to pursue at that specific moment. Moreover, social network research has historically shown that social ties in the network develop because of similarity (Kossinets & Watts, 2009), perceived utility, or cost-benefit analyses, such as in the relationship between an employee and the employer that is regulated by social-exchange mechanisms (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Dynamic network theory enriches this perspective, showing how social ties between different social actors also develop according to the principle of network-goal relevance (Westaby & Parr, 2020). Social actors will assume an active role – either as supporters or resistors of the goal pursuit process – only when directly solicited by the goal striver or when directly or indirectly affected by the behaviours undertaken by the goal striver to attain the target goal. The following example can help elucidate the value of integrating dynamic network theory into the analysis of WFC in comparison with traditional social network research.

> It is Friday morning, and Pat is excited because she has organised a pizza party for her daughter and her classmates for that evening. Unfortunately, at 1 p.m., Pat receives an urgent call from her boss, who requires her to complete a project with a tight deadline. This causes Pat to cancel the party, which will greatly disappoint her daughter. Pat loves her daughter, but her career means a lot to her, and she knows that declining her boss's request would cause resentment and a negative evaluation at the end of the term.

Traditional social network researchers would look at the relationships that Pat could activate within her social network, mainly considering the formal or informal ties Pat has activated over time with the other social actors. Following this logic, we would expect Pat to ask her teammates to join forces to complete the task on time and go home for the party

arrangements. Other actors within Pat's personal network could be critical to reducing WFC, likewise her husband, parents, or close friends who could help with the party organisation. Traditional social network research does not help considering the possible reactions to Pat's request for help. Dynamic network theory theorises that the response of other social actors could depend, in addition to the nature of their relationship with Pat, on the contingent goal that each actor seeks to pursue in that specific moment. This can change the nature of not only the response that Pat receives but also her behaviours, as it is likely that she would seek support only from those social actors from whom she expects to receive a positive answer. For instance, she could seek advice from her mentor, even if working in another team, to carefully ponder how declining her boss' request would impact her career, or she could seek a friend's help rather than her husband's if they often argue on paid and unpaid division of labour in the family. To summarise, the advantage of dynamic network theory is that it integrates the social actors' contingent goals and needs to elucidate the supportive forces that a goal striver could seek to activating in his or her network when attempting to reach an important goal (Westaby, 2012).

Another important advantage of dynamic network theory is the explicit consideration of multiple ties and roles that social actors can assume in the goal pursuit process (Westaby, 2012). This framework introduces seven social roles that individuals could assume in a focal actor's dynamic network system, in addition to the role of the goal striver. These roles are that of a system supporter (an entity that engages in activities that support the goal pursuit), goal preventer (an entity that engages in activities that prevent the pursuit of a goal), supportive resistor (an entity that supports the activities of a goal preventer), system reactor (an entity that negatively reacts to the social actors who work *against* the goal pursuit), system negator (an entity that negatively reacts to the social actors who work *for* the goal pursuit), interactant (an

entity that encounters the other social actors involved in the goal pursuit process), and observer (an entity that observes other actors involved in their goal pursuit efforts). We build on these different roles in the next sections to develop our propositions and conceptual model.

Supporting forces

The first role in dynamic network theory is *goal striving* (G), which corresponds to the role of the focal actor who, directly and independently, strives to pursue a specific goal (i.e., reducing WFC in this manuscript). The goal striver is characterised as possessing a high level of effort, determination, goal commitment, planning capabilities, and implementation intentions (Locke & Latham, 2002). Hirschi et al. (2019) illustrated four different strategies through which goal strivers could seek to attain their multiple work and family goals: allocating resources, changing role resources and demands, sequencing goals to assign different levels of priority, and revising goals when their pursuit is not turning out as expected. Similarly, Thomason (2022) found that women are likely to adopt specific strategies aimed at building idiosyncratic deals with proximal and peripheral role senders who can have a positive impact on their career trajectory. The core assumption of these studies is that individuals are better equipped to attain their multiple work and family goals when negotiating with different role senders on possible resources and strategies that could help them adequately coping with multiple role demands. However, as prior research has demonstrated, while being proactive or having adequate resources is a necessary condition to experience less WFC, it is insufficient as employees could be subjected to conflicting requests from more influential and higher-status stakeholders at work (Perlow, 1998). Prior research has shown that work–family tensions usually increase when the goal striver's behaviors and goal pursuit strategies are at odds with the behaviors, expectations and preferences of significant others in the work or family environment (Kreiner et al., 2009; ten Brummelhuis &

Bakker, 2012). An individual's capacity to reduce WFC is therefore dependent upon the behaviours and goals of other role senders in the network, as the behaviours and decisions that those role senders assume to achieve their own personal goals can create constraints that reduce the goal striver's capabilities and resources (Hobson, 2011).

Regarding the role of different role senders, dynamic network theory suggests that work and family stakeholders can assume either supportive or resisting roles (Westaby, 2012). Supportive roles are enacted by *system supporters* (S), who consciously provide support to the goal striver (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). While the goal striver is directly involved in attaining work and family goals, system supporters play a secondary role that facilitates goal attainment. This role might be enacted by a co-worker who offers to cover for an employee who is away to attend an important family event or by a supervisor who provides instrumental support helping an employee to reconcile work and home commitments, a so-called work-life supportive supervisor (Kossek et al., 2023). In the family domain, an example of a system supporter is a spouse who accepts the work interference on the family coming from the partner's job and handles it in a way that minimises work and family tensions. For example, Perlow (1998) analysed a team of 17 employees and their spouses over nine months. She found that spouses differ in the degree to which they accept the interference caused by the spouse's work in their family domain. Some spouses (mostly females) accommodated the extreme scheduling of their partners, therefore behaving like system supporters (albeit with some frustration and resentment), whereas others reacted to the condition more negatively. The capability framework (Sen, 1992) provides a theoretical justification for the relevance of system supporters. It suggests that the social context in which an individual is embedded can positively or negatively shape one's personal capabilities to pursue the life one desires, enabling or constraining individual agency

(Sen, 1992). Since an enabling social network environment generates positive consequences in the management of the work–life interface (Carmeli & Russo, 2016; Hobson, Fahlén, & Takács, 2011), it is likely that the presence of supportive forces in one's social network creates opportunities (Rowley, 1997) and enhances the individual's capabilities to manage the work and family domains according to personal preferences. Work–family researchers have consistently shown that supportive resources – especially when coming from influential role senders like a boss – are critical for alleviating the experience of WFC (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012; Yu et al., 2022). This is also consistent with the Clark's (2000) work/family border theory, whereby it is suggested that those goal-strivers who are exposed to network members showing high commitment to their well-being – mostly shown in terms of caring and support – will experience a better work-life balance and less WFC.

Proposition 1: The presence of supportive forces in the goal striver's work and home networks reduces WFC.

Network resistance

Network resistance comprises social actors, indicated with the terms *goal preventer* and *supportive resistor*, who work against the goal pursuit (goal preventer) or who provide support to actors working against the goal pursuit (supportive resistor). A goal preventer generates a constraining network environment (Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, & Bui-Wrzosniska, 2010) through a series of decisions and behaviours that can reduce a person's capabilities to attain the preferred goal (Hobson, 2011). A supervisor acts as a goal preventer when judging less-committed those employees who use work–family programmes (Hideg, Krstic, Trau, & Zarina, 2018; Leslie, Park, Mehng, & Manchester, 2012), imposing stringent deadlines (Perlow, 1998),

or creating an extreme work schedule that makes it impossible for employees to actively participate at home (Afota, Ollier-Malaterre, & Vandenberghe, 2019; Hewlett & Luce, 2006).

The supportive resistor role is enacted by individuals who support those actors working against the goal striver. Network theorists suggest that the presence of social entities working against the goal pursuit (i.e., network resistance) diminishes the goal striver's capabilities to achieve the target goal, or at least makes it more difficult (Westaby et al., 2014). This is likely to happen because network resistance actors create a series of constraints and additional role demands that prevent the goal striver from managing the work–family interface as planned (Hobson, 2011). This was the case for resistor spouses in Perlow's (1998) study, who were imposing tight constraints on their partners' overworking and specific rules on the division of paid and unpaid work at home. Other influential stakeholders can assume the role of goal preventers, such as the 'happy workaholic' bosses (Friedman & Lobel, 2003), who enjoy working 10–12 hours per day as the situation fits their preferences and role identity and who expects collaborators to do the same regardless of their own preferences, a condition that likely increases their WFC. Consistently, it is plausible that the presence of network resistance entities in the network will cause individuals to experience greater WFC.

Proposition 2: The presence of network resistance entities in the goal striver's work and home network enhances WFC.

Network reactance

The term *network reactance* describes those social actors who are not directly involved in pursuing, supporting, or preventing goal attainment, but who use their power, status, and influence to influence the opinions and behaviours of the other actors within the network (Westaby, 2012). The first role within this social entity is the *system reactor*, defined as an entity

'who [is] negatively reacting to others working against (or obstructing) the target behaviour or goal pursuit' (Westaby, 2012, p. 47). A system reactor takes no action towards those actors who act as goal preventers but reacts with disapproval, encouraging them to change their behaviours. System reactors can exert a moderating effect by attenuating behaviours that do not facilitate goal attainment. The identity literature provides an exploratory lens for elucidating the moderating effects of system reactors. People rarely form their attitudes or behaviours in isolation; on the contrary, individuals are influenced by the environment in which they are embedded (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Being confronted by an influential actor who disapproves one's behaviour can instil a sense of dissonance between one's behaviours and others' expectations (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). This experienced dissonance can represent a 'turning point' inducing a deep personal reflection and a change in one's course of actions (Obodaru, 2012). Prior research has shown that when social cues are not appreciative of one's behaviour but rather are challenging – the so-called constraining 'jolts' (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005), as in the case of a system reactor's disapproval – people tend to revise their self-concept and assume new patterns of behaviour (Hammond, Palanski, & Clapp-Smith, 2017). An example of this is a partner who disapproves of his or her spouse being always focused on work (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014), or a child asking the parents to stop using the smartphone at home (Russo, Ollier-Malaterre, & Morandin, 2019), both of which can instil a sense of dissonance and induce a behavioural change. To summarise, we expect that the presence of system reactors in the network can reduce network constraints and, therefore, enable the focal actor to experience less WFC.

Proposition 3: The presence of system reactors in the goal striver's work and home network moderates the effects of network resistance entities on the goal striver's capabilities to reduce

WFC; thus, the constraints generated by network resistance entities are buffered in the presence of system reactors.

Network reactance also comprises the role of *system negators*, namely, social entities that act in a diametrically opposite way than system reactors, as they have a negative reaction towards those actors who support or sympathise with the goal striver (Westaby, 2012). Although system negators do not publicly act as blockers or inhibitors of the goal pursuit process, they can utilise their power, status, and influence in the network to create barriers and challenges to a potential goal striver. An example of system negator is a supervisor who decides not to disclose information on the family-friendly policies available in the company or who stigmatises those employees using them (Hideg et al., 2018), thus discouraging other employees from accessing these policies even when available. The activation of system negator roles is more likely in the presence of a goal conflict, that is, when multiple goals from different role senders are introduced into the system (Westaby, 2012). Another example of system negator is a parent with a strong work ethic who exhorts his child to focus exclusively on work, and give up to all nonwork distractions – to achieve rapidly a good social status and give proof to others of his hard-working attitudes and good discipline received by the family. As this example demonstrates, a system negator can be influenced by his or her work ethic values (Bourdeau, Ollier-Malaterre, & Houlfort, 2019). Individuals with a strong work ethic consider work and professional success to be fundamental life values in developing morality and enhancing social status (Williams et al., 2016). Extreme work schedules are considered an important part of one's identity, and they often use these as symbols to prove to self and others their virtuousness and morality (Blair-Loy, 2003). Investing in non-work activities is often considered a waste of time for high-work-ethic people, leading them to react negatively to those who pursue or support such

a goal. Accordingly, we expect that goal strivers will experience greater WFC when they encounter system negators in the network.

Proposition 4: The presence of system negators in the goal striver's work and home network moderates the effects of system supporters on the goal striver's capabilities to reduce WFC; thus, the opportunities generated by system supporters are neutralised or reduced in the presence of system reactors.

Peripheral roles

Dynamic network theory also theorises about the presence of peripheral roles, namely interactants and observers, who are involved in the goal pursuit process in a peripheral way (Westaby, 2012). One difference between interactants and observers is that while interactants enter an individual's ecosystem without being aware of the goal pursuit process, observers are aware of the specific goal but deliberately decide to observe the goal pursuit process from outside (Westaby, 2012). Work–family scholars have also demonstrated that peripheral actors can play an important role in the management of the work–life interface, shaping the contextual conditions that facilitate the transition between work and home domains. For example, community members can be an important source of additional support for goal strivers (Voydanoff, 2004). Similarly, Cohen and Brissette (2005) demonstrated that charity organisations can provide important instrumental resources to employees, reducing their experience of WFC, in partial replacement of more direct support from central actors.

However, social network research suggests that the role of peripheral actors is controversial (Westaby, 2012). On the one hand, peripheral actors can be invisible and unnoticed or marginally noticed only for their support/lack of support (Thomason, 2022). In other cases, they can become more central actors, with whom the goal striver needs to negotiate and develop

joint decisions. Thomason (2022) found that working women rely on social actors occupying a peripheral role, namely parents, in-laws, children, extended family members, and friends, to share some domestic responsibilities and therefore have more time and energy to dedicate to one's career, a strategy called shielding. Other women holding a managerial position, as described in Thomason's study, relied on peripheral roles for important life decisions, likewise divorcing from a gender inegalitarian partner, a strategy termed as moving. Researchers suggest that an individual assuming a peripheral role can become more directly involved in someone's goal pursuit through situational cues, such as through the mere exposure to someone's situation (Aarts, Dijksterhuis, & Dik, 2008). Peripheral roles can also inhibit the goal pursuit process, generating apprehension and distractions that divert important cognitive resources from goal achievement (Westaby, 2012). Thomason (2022) found that, for some women, the presence of conservative parents, with a traditional gender conception of paid and unpaid role involvement, was an obstacle to moving forward in the decision to divorce from their husbands and assume a different role identity. In such cases, the peripheral role senders acted as an additional constraint, limiting women's capability to enact their preferred work-life strategy.

Hence, there is evidently uncertainty about what could lead peripheral role senders to assume a positive or negative role in the dynamic network system. Social network research has shown that structural equivalence between network members promotes similarities in network members' attitudes and behaviours (Burt, 1992). People tend to assume similar attitudes and behaviours to those social actors who hold an equivalent role in the network, such as managers who likely develop more similar attitudes to other managers than to subordinates (Brass, Galaskewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2014). Accordingly, it is possible that social actors occupying

peripheral roles in one's network can become more (or less) empathetic towards the goal striver when holding (not holding) an equivalent role in the network.

Proposition 5: Peripheral actors can become more (less) empathetic towards the goal striver's goal of reducing WFC when they hold (do not hold) an equivalent structural role in the network.

A definition of the eight social roles and their possible influence on the goal striver in the work and family domains is summarised in Table 1, while a representation of the conceptual model is illustrated in Figure 1.

========== Insert Table 1 and Figure 1 about here ==========

Social network characteristics influencing the strength of social constraints

In the previous section, we described the social roles, according to dynamic network theory, work and family role senders can assume, consciously or unconsciously, in a goal striver's attempt to reduce WFC. In this section, we propose, without pretending to be exhaustive, network characteristics that could influence this process, making an individual more exposed to enablers versus constraining network conditions. Drawing on traditional views in social network (e.g., Kilduff & Brass, 2010) and work-family research (Clark, 2000), we focus on the factors that may have a strong impact on individuals' behaviours and work-family decisions, namely, the goal striver's centrality in the network and the density of network relationships.

Centrality

Centrality refers to an individual's position in the network in relation to other social actors (Brass, Butterfield, & Skaggs; 1998; Rowley, 1997). An actor with a highly central position in the network has more influence (Clark, 2000) and rapid access to others through direct or indirect connections (Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). Meanwhile, an actor with a peripheral position

has few connections and is dependent on more central actors to access different regions of the network (Brass, 1984; Brass et al., 1998). Prior research has considered the role of actor centrality in examining different individual, organisational, and societal phenomena, such as unethical behaviours (Brass et al., 1998), the relationship with stakeholders (Rowley, 1997) and the level of political integration (Cohn & Marriott, 1958). These studies confirm that having a central role in the network can provide a focal actor with important advantages (Freeman, 1979), including access to multiple sources of information, contact with influential stakeholders, and resources that can facilitate the goal attainment (Rowley, 1997). For example, Clark (2000) theorized that individuals who are central actors in one domain – due to their easier access to resources, connections, and for their greater level of competence and identification – can experience greater control and autonomy in deciding the level of permeabilities of their boundaries and being more capable of managing the transitions between the work and home domains. However, centrality is also associated with greater social pressure and visibility. Because of their position in the network, central actors are more susceptible to monitoring, control, and surveillance, with potential restrictions on their agency (Brass et al., 1998). Brass and colleagues (1998) argued that central and well-known actors could lose more rapidly their reputation if they violate social norms and expectations. Accordingly, it is possible that the effects of resistance forces on the goal striver's capabilities to manage WFC will be more influential when the goal striver occupies a central position in the network rather than a peripheral one, owing to enhanced social pressure and surveillance. To illustrate, an influential manager in an organisation who has a family impediment preventing him from participating in the annual company retreat will be more subjected to social pressure by the leadership team to

ensure his presence at the retreat to prove the unity of the organisation and commitment of all its members, which will likely increase rather than decrease WFC.

Proposition 6: The effects of network resistance forces on the goal striver's goal of reducing WFC are stronger (weaker) when the goal striver occupies a central (peripheral) position in the network.

Density

Density is a network characteristic that captures the degree of interconnectedness among social actors (Oliver, 1991). In dense networks, social actors share information and interact more often than in loosely dense networks. Such greater interconnection favours the development of stronger ties, but also more frequent reciprocal monitoring and behavioural adjustments (Rowley, 1997). In loosely connected networks, members are isolated, marginalised, or unable to communicate with other regions of the network. This means that, in loosely connected networks, individuals could be less monitored and have greater discretion over their behaviours. Higher density can also increase social consensus (Jones, 1991) and facilitate the diffusion of organisational norms and conformism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). As the network becomes more interconnected, members' behaviours tend to become similar (Rowley, 1997). Based on this reasoning, we expect that focal actors experience more constraints on their capabilities to reduce WFC in highly dense networks rather than in loosely dense networks. Since relations are more interconnected in highly dense networks, it might be very difficult for a goal striver to set impermeable boundaries between work and home to limit work-related calls and messages during non-working hours (Kreiner et al., 2009), as the social norms to conform to such practices are extremely pervasive (Adkins & Premeaux, 2019). The density of the social network can help explain why organisations are often so "remarkably resistant to adaptation to the modern

workforce" (Williams et al., 2016, p. 532) for what concerns their preferences for a more balanced allocation of resources between work and nonwork roles. Decades of research in sociology and management has shown that the dominant masculine and work-centric organisational culture is protected and perpetuated by the same organisational actors who feel trapped in the moral imperative of work devotion, overwork, and success (Lupu & Empson, 2015) and perceive a hypothetical change to these norms as a threat to their self-concept (Benard & Correll, 2010). As in the case of centrality, it is plausible to think that the density of the network will make the constraints generated by network resistance forces more influential on the goal striver's capacity to reduce WFC.

Proposition 7: The effects of network resistance and system negator forces on the goal striver's goal of reducing WFC are stronger (weaker) when the network is highly (poorly) dense.

Discussion

In this manuscript, our goal was to elucidate how various work and family role senders in an individual's network shape the individual's capabilities to minimise the experience of WFC. Drawing on dynamic network theory (Westaby, 2012), we present a conceptual paper that can advance the current research on WFC in three important ways. First, by integrating social network research into the WFC literature, we overcome some limitations of current research, particularly with respect to the dominant focus on individual agency (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). WFC has been traditionally conceptualised as an individual-level construct, mostly depending on individuals' resource allocation, strategies, and work–family decisions (Adkins & Premeaux, 2019; Greenhaus & Powell, 2012; Hirschi et al., 2019). Much of the current work–family research is based on the idea that individuals are agentic and have the freedom – often depending upon the possession of adequate personal and contextual resources (ten Brummelhuis

& Bakker, 2012) – to manage their work–family interface in accordance with their own preferences and/or with those of their most important family stakeholders (Kreiner et al., 2009). Even if this condition is true for many people, especially for those with high status, autonomy, and power, it is not true for all, especially for those workers who have limited discretion over their work schedule and are subject to the influence and decisions of more powerful role senders. Integrating theories and concepts from social network research enable us to understand better how the relationships with other stakeholders can shape an individual's capacity to actually manage the work–family interference as planned (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007; Ollier-Malaterre, 2011; Thomason, 2022).

Dynamic network theory emphasises that the goal pursuit process could be shaped by a myriad of relationships, expectations, and, above all, the contingent goal that each actor in an individual's ecosystem pursues in a specific moment, a condition that can generate what has the potential of becoming an enabling or constraining network environment (Hobson, 2011). The reactions of the various work and family role senders towards an individual's attempt to minimize WFC likely depend on their relationship with the focal actor but also on their own contingent situation (Westaby et al., 2014). Importantly, the integration of dynamic network theory into work–family research can also contribute to advancing this stream of research from a methodological standpoint. Dynamic network theory introduces a methodological instrument called the dynamic network chart (Figure 2), which can favour a visual and immediate understanding of all social actors directly or indirectly involved in the WFC process and in what capacity (Westaby, 2012). This chart can enable individuals to visualise the anticipated relations and types of behaviours (i.e., supportive, resisting, reacting, negators, interacting, or simply

observing) and it can facilitate the recognition of which relationships are more strategic to activate in a precise moment to maximise the expectation of obtaining a positive outcome.

The integration of dynamic network theory into the work–family field can also facilitate a better understanding of the various roles assumed by work and family role senders. To date, prior studies have mostly focused on the resources that stakeholders can provide to the focal actor coping with increasing work and family demands (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Work and family role senders – both proximal and peripheral – have been mostly considered as social support providers (Kossek et al., 2023; Thomason, 2022); facilitators (or negators) of work–family programmes (Leslie et al., 2012); creators of long work hours culture (Afota et al., 2018); and generators of social stressors that cause work to dominate personal life, for example, via mobile devices (Shockley & Allen, 2015). Dynamic network theory enables the consideration of a larger variety of roles that social actors can assume towards an individual struggling to reduce WFC. For example, this framework helps to consider some actors who do not directly intervene to constrain or support the goal of reducing WFC but rather use their power to influence the network's environmental condition (Westaby, 2012). This consideration has important practical implications, as it shows that not all social actors possess the same weight and that the social cues generated by some stakeholders can play a critical role in favouring (or inhibiting) goal attainment (Westaby, 2012).

Third, integrating social network theories in the work–family literature can help researchers consider some contextual factors, such as the centrality of the focal actor's position in the network or the density of the relationships, which can significantly shape the individual's capabilities to manage the work–life interface as planned (Hobson, 2011). The consideration of factors pertaining to one's role in the network can help researchers highlight potential paradoxes

in the main reasoning underlying current studies. For example, most work–family scholars tend to assume that occupying a central position or having a broad network of relationships can help individuals become more resourceful and therefore better equipped to manage their work–family interface (Adkins & Premeaux, 2019; Hirschi et al., 2019). However, occupying a central position in the network or being highly connected to other actors might also increase social control and surveillance (Brass et al., 2004), with a negative impact on individuals' discretion to act as desired.

Adopting a network perspective can therefore enable work-family researchers to develop a finer-grained understanding of the process and role that various work and family role senders can play in the individual's experience of WFC. This is an important aspect to consider, given that due to economic turbulence and uncertainty, many employees are lowering their personal work-family aspirations to align with those of more influential stakeholders at work (Chatrakul Na Ayudhya et al., 2017; Clawson & Gerstel, 2014). For example, an article posted in 2017 on LinkedIn by Katheleen Bellehumeur, a managing director at an investment funds company, argued that spending ordinary daily times with kids, doing homework, or simply playing, was more important than organising wonderful outdoor activities on the weekend (to compensate for the absence during the week). This article was commented on by a sarcastic reader who claimed that while this was right and beautiful, it was a privilege not applicable to most employees worldwide due to limited control over their work schedule.

Future Research

The model we propose can stimulate and guide future work–family research in several respects. Longitudinal research is required to examine when and under what circumstances work and family role senders may vary their response towards a goal striver from positive to negative (or

vice versa). Recent advancements on social network programming, such as Siena (Ripley, Snijders, Boda, Vörös, & Preciado, 2020), could make the analysis of this stream of research much easier than before. Future research is also needed to examine additional factors that can shape the goal striver's capacity to activate supportive or resistive roles in their dynamic network. For example, it would be interesting to examine what happens to an individual's capability to activate supportive forces when changing roles or units in the organisation because of his or her different position in the network. Third, we see opportunities to integrate elements of social network research with gender role theories (Eagly & Karau, 2002) to examine whether social actors are more likely to enact supportive (vs. resistance) forces according to the goal striver's gender, gender congruence between social actors and/or personal gender egalitarian orientation, considering that the goal of being able to reconcile work and family domains is typically viewed as feminine (Mescher, Benschop & Doorewaard, 2010).

Additional research is also needed to determine how different roles coexist. Westaby (2012) argued that supportive and resistor roles can also occur in the same actor, as people enact a series of behaviours that support or inhibit another's goal not only according to their attitudes but also to their contingent situation and needs. For example, it would be interesting to examine the implications for a goal striver to work with a supervisor who is assumed to be a family supportive supervisor but who sends emails to collaborators over the weekend to reach the business goals. Moreover, current research recognises that WFC may take two forms: family interfering with work and vice versa. Building on this insight, future research should investigate how these two forms are affected by specific role senders to provide a fine-grained understanding of the interdependent exchanges between work and non-work roles. This would contribute not only to highlighting the whole dynamics at play, but also to designing company

interventions and policies aimed at shaping more sustainable cultures, by considering the perspectives of different stakeholders. Finally, the present paper was mostly centred on the consideration of the network of working and family relationships. Thus, there are several possible areas of research that future studies could examine, such as the role assumed by other peripheral stakeholders in the work and home domains, as recently demonstrated by Thomason (2022). It would be valuable to examine whether the presence of these peripheral actors may lead employers to develop less support for employees' work–life challenges or instead lead to a revision of internal organisational policies and culture.

Practical Contributions

Examining network relationships intervening in the process of reducing one's WFC has important practical implications. Acknowledging that managing the work–family interface is a complex and interconnected goal affected by both human agency and social relationships with other role senders may lead people to adopt a more holistic perspective and become more respectful of each other's work–family goals and preferences (Knapp, Smith, Kreiner, Sundaramurthy, & Barton, 2013). An enhanced awareness of the mutual influence on people's work and family goals can promote a richer and more informative debate around the topic of career sustainability and the impact of demanding work conditions on invisible stakeholders in the home domain (Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Finally, understanding the role of different social actors through the help of visual aids, such as dynamic network charts (Figure 2), can also help individuals to determine which actors they can rely on in case of need and which to avoid due to potential negative reactions. The visual representation of possible stakeholder reactions – which also depends on the centrality in the network or the density of the relationships – can lead an individual to plan more effectively the strategies to optimise their family and career trajectories.

For example, an individual can decide to decline some visible projects when facing demanding family challenges to have greater discretion and less social pressure on his or her work–family decisions or, on the contrary, can look for novel professional assignments when family conditions can allow them.

Conclusions

As contemporary society is generating greater work and family inequalities and tensions, individuals are encountering greater difficulties in maintaining WFC at a sustainable level. These are materialised within social relations, where multiple expectations and pressures risk paralysing individual agency or produce undesired outcomes (Hobson, 2011). In the present paper, we outline a conceptual model based on dynamic network theory (Westaby, 2012) that enables us to showcase how various work and family roles are interconnected within an individual's network and how these might affect individual goal attainment. We believe that the proposed conceptual model can serve as a spark for impactful future research on how we could evolve as a society to become more conscious of the impact of mutual behaviours on the goal of managing one's own work–family interface as planned – and not as wished or imposed by others.

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Table 1

Description of dynamic network roles and examples of impact on the goal striver's efforts to reduce Work–Family Conflict (WFC)

Role	Description*	Example of the role in the work domain	Example of the role in the family domain
Goal striver (G)	Entity directly and wilfully pursuing the target goal	An employee striving to reduce WFC	
System supporter (S)	Entity supporting others pursuing the target goal	A co-worker offering to cover for an employee who is absent due to a family event	A friend offering to look after children after school if parents return home late
Goal preventer (P)	Entity directly and wilfully preventing the target goal	A supervisor stigmatising those employees who use or request access to family-friendly leaves	A gender inegalitarian employee complaining about the partner being always at work and not sufficiently focused on the family
Supportive resistor (V)	Entity supporting others that are working against (or obstructing) the target goal	A team leader publicly supporting the top management decision to limit the use of flexible work arrangements to exceptional cases	An employee's mother recalling how important it is for the children to have a present partner at home
System reactor (R)	Entity negatively reacting to others working against (or obstructing) the target goal	An HR manager criticizing the behaviour of an unsupportive leader who makes it more difficult for employees to access remote work arrangements	Children recalling to a parent how important the job is for partner, inviting him or her to be more involved in domestic activities to respect their partner's career aspirations.
System negator (N)	Entity negatively reacting to others pursuing (or facilitating) the target goal	A CEO who publicly disapproves the behaviour of a family supportive supervisor, criticizing him or her for being too focused on subordinates' well-being and less focused on organisational goals and priorities	A partner's close friend who highlights, while talking with children, how difficult it could be for kids having a full-time working parent
Interactant (I)	Entity that encounters others in the target goal pursuit context	An individual incidentally interacting with an actor sharing opinions about the benefits of work–family programmes that can induce a personal reflection	A friend supporting a women's decision to divorce from a gender inegalitarian partner

Observer (O)	Entity that is observing (or aware of) people involved in the target goal	A colleague from a different department observing the focal actor's efforts to obtain more flexibility at work	A close friend observing the evolution of internal dynamics within the couple with no intention of intervening

* The following definitions are elaborated upon based in Westaby's Exhibit 1.1, entitled "Social Network Roles and Central Components in Dynamic Network Theory" (2012, p. 5).

Figure 1

Proposed conceptual model

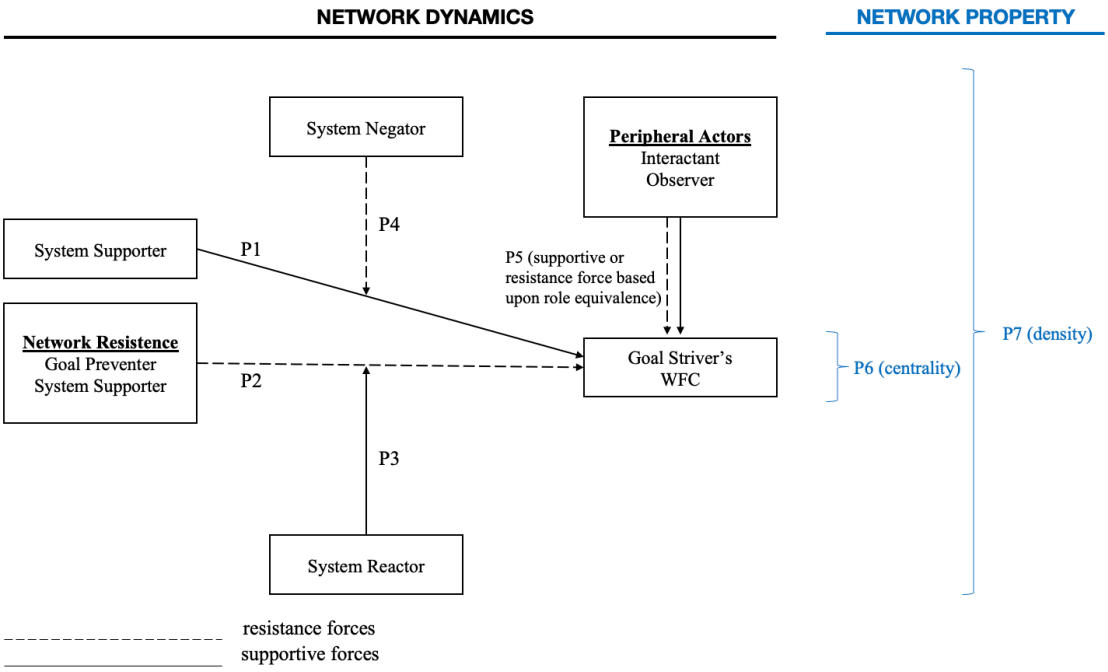
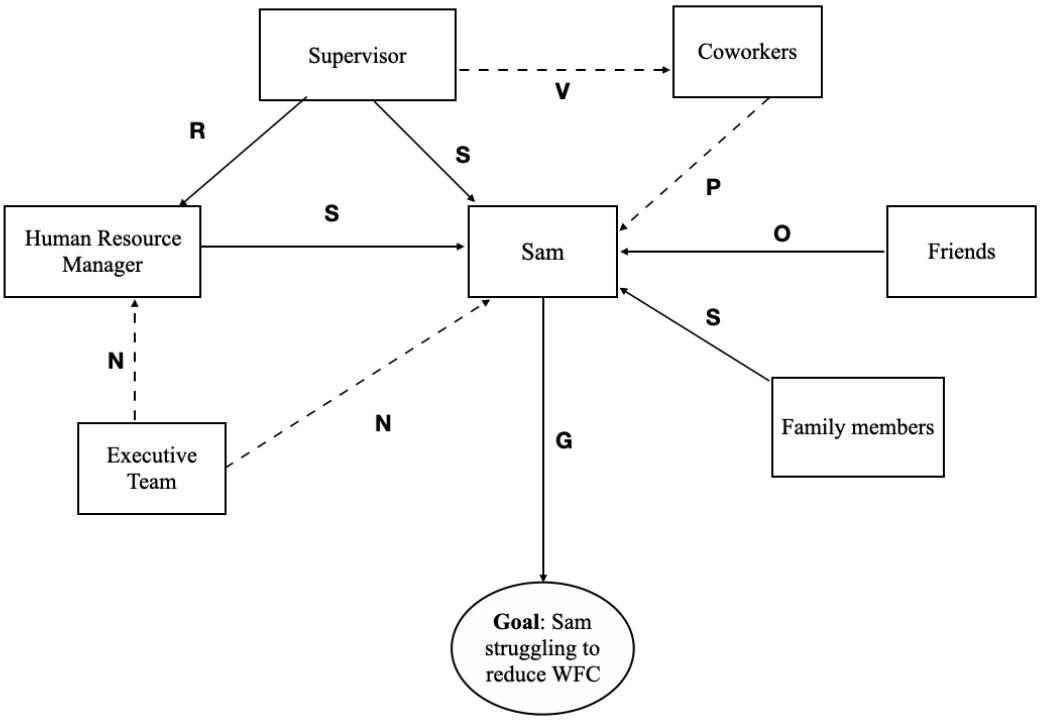


Figure 2

Example of a dynamic network chart illustrating Sam's goal to reduce WFC and possible reactions from different work role senders



Notes:
Solid line = supportive linkages in the network; dashed line = resistance linkages in the network.

G = goal striver; S = system supporter; R = system reactor; V = supportive resistor; P = system preventer; N = system negator; I = interactant; O = observer. Source: Adapted from Westaby (2012).