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# Attitudes Towards Managing the Work-Family Interface: The Role of Gender and Social Background

Melrona Kirrane

*Dublin City University*, melrona.kirrane@dcu.ie

Kathy Monks

*Dublin City University*, kathy.monks@dit.ie

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# Attitudes towards managing the work-family interface: The role of gender and social background

Melrona Kirrane & Kathy Monks  
Dublin City University  
melrona.kirrane@dcu.ie

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## Abstract

The effective management of the work-life interface is an issue increasingly recognised as of strategic importance to organisations and of significance to employees (Forsyth & Polzer-Dedruyne, 2007; Nord et al., 2002; Russell & Bowman, 2000). A pan-European investigation (Brannen et al., 2002) concluded that young Irish people characterize the two domains of work and family as operating in conflict with each other. Given the high rate of workforce participation in the Irish labour market, and the corporate imperative of effective retention strategies (Messersmith, 2007; Cappelli, 2000), understanding how this perspective may influence behavioural intentions with respect to managing the work-family interface will be a valuable insight for organizations. Although gender and social background have long been identified as having a significant impact on the development of a number of work-related attitudes (Barling & Kelloway, 1999), neither dimension has been investigated with respect to their impact on attitudes towards managing the work-family interface. This study aims to establish the relationship between a number of demographic factors and such attitudes. Identifying behavioural intentions among students now ready to enter the labour market, will facilitate the development of more appropriate and robust organizational policies and procedures in relation to managing the work-family interface. Attitudes towards managing the work-family interface were measured using the Career Family Attitudes Measure (Sanders et al., 1998). The results of this study confirm that gender continues to have a strong role in the development of attitudes towards managing the work-family interface. The results also suggest that a number of social background factors, in particular school experience, parental education and parental occupation are strong factors in the development of these attitudes.

Keywords: Gender; work-family balance, young workers, stereotypes

## Introduction

Work-life balance, from an employee perspective is “the maintenance of a balance between responsibilities at work and at home” (De Cieri et al., 2005: 90). In the light of increasing numbers of dual career couples in the workplace, managing the work-family interface

continues to be topic of significant interest to researchers, government, management and employees (Cooper, 2007; Jones, Burke & Westman, 2006; Pocock et al., 2001). Although young people enter employment with well-developed attitudes, beliefs and values in relation to a number of work-related areas (Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Smola & Sutton, 2002), there is little empirical evidence as to the attitudes of young people towards the management of the work and family domains. Given the well-documented prevalence of work-family conflict (Lyonette, Crompton & Wall, 2007; Siegel, Post, Brockner, Fishman & Garden, 2005; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 2002), and the corporate imperative of attracting, motivating and retaining high calibre employees (Carsten, 2006; Peterson, 2005; Batt & Valcour, 2003; De Cieri, Holmes, Abbott & Pettit, 2005), it would be valuable for employers to have some insight into the attitudes of new recruits towards the management of the central life domains of work and family. Such insight could be used to inform appropriate organizational policies and procedures in this regard.

This study takes its starting point from the qualitative investigation of the attitudes and orientations of young Europeans towards their future work and family lives (Brannen et al., 2002). The Brannen et al. study conducted a number of focus group investigations over a period of five years from 1996 among 372 respondents aged between 17 and 30 years. With specific reference to the Irish sample (17 focus groups with 2-5 members per group), one of the conclusions reached was that young Irish people view career and family lives as two worlds in conflict with each other, often due to the patterns of working and family lives the respondents had personally witnessed and experienced. A second conclusion that emerged from analyzing Irish responses was the widespread perception and experience of gender inequality across a number of domains including access to promotion, the division of household labour and gender-role prescriptions regarding how the lives of males and females should proceed. How such views and experiences influence behavioural intentions is the focus of this study.

Although gender differences in a large number of work-related attitudes are well-documented (Charles, 2007; Giles & Rea, 1999; Kulik, 2002), we only have little evidence of its impact on attitudes towards managing the work-family interface among young people (c.f. Sanders et al., 2000). In a similar vein, although there is some evidence that both paternal and maternal educational and professional backgrounds influence the development of many attitudes amongst children (Ex & Janssens, 1998), there is a dearth of evidence as to the role parents play in attitudes specifically related to managing the work-family interface. Another strong feature of the literature concerning the development of work-related attitudes is the role of school environment (Hannan et al., 1996; Lynch, 1999). Yet, whether or not school environment plays a significant role in the development of attitudes towards managing the work-family interface has still to be established. Also common in the prevailing literature is the extent to which an urban or rural upbringing influences the development of social attitudes (Glendinning et al., 2003). While the two environments have been found to

influence the development of a number of social and work-related attitudes, it remains to be seen whether or not there is an according impact on attitudes towards managing the work-family interface. This article begins by considering the prevailing literature surrounding these broad themes. It considers the nature of the work-family interface and the general area of work-related attitudes among young people. The paper then explores the influence of gender, parental characteristics, educational experience and social background on work-related attitudes, with specific attention to attitudes towards managing the work-family interface. Many studies examining attitudes, aspirations and orientations of young people tend to investigate high-school students. This study will confine its sample to final year university students, many of whom are just about to enter their first period of full-time employment. At this stage in their careers they may be closer to the reality of issues facing dual career workers than second level students, whether or not they choose to engage with them.

### **The Work-family Interface**

The balancing of personal and work lives has always been an issue for society and social scientists, but the rapid and dramatic changes in the extent to which men and women engage in caring within families and participate in paid employment renders the reconciliation of family and working life one of the most pressing policy and political issues facing all European societies (Steil, 2007; Houston, 2005; Drew, Emerek & Mahon, 1998). Historically, and this was particularly the case in Ireland, women placed more centrality on the roles of motherhood and marriage, while men have emphasized the provider role (Feree, 1990; Bielby & Bielby, 1989; Wiley, 1991; Drew, Emerek & Mahon, 1998). However, the increased participation of women in the workforce (Buckley, Cowan, McCarthy & O'Sullivan, 2005, EIRO, 2002a; Heraty & Morley, 2000), has changed men's traditional responsibility of primary breadwinner within the two-parent family and has led to the phenomenon of the dual-career couple. A dual career couple is one where the couple shares a lifestyle that includes an ongoing love relationship, cohabitation, and a work role for each partner (Steil, 2007). While being part of such a unit and context can confer advantages (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003), it is well-documented that many dual career couples experience difficulties in striking a balance between their life roles (Grawitch, Trares & Kohler, 2007; Quick, Henley & Quick, 2004; Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 2002). The work-life conflict that may ensue emerges due to a lack of fit between employees and their life responsibilities and the goals of the organization (Lyonette et al., 2007, Lingard et al., 2007; Reynolds 2005).

Many claims regarding work-related attitudes of young people have emerged from research that has concentrated on male and female school-leavers or high-school students (Watson, Quatman & Edler, 2002; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). Yet in such populations, many of the individuals involved may not necessarily pursue the professional careers that are generally attributed to dual career couples. Most studies that investigate work-related attitudes among university students are now nearly twenty years old (Fiorentine, 1988; Veroff, 1984; Machung, 1989). How those now ready to take their first steps into full-time employment intend to manage these competing domains remains largely a matter of conjecture.

## **Gender and Attitudes toward Managing the Work-life Interface**

Social scientists have long been fascinated by work-related attitudes and beliefs (Barber & Axinn, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 2001). Such attitudes continue to be of interest due to the major familial, social, organizational and political changes of the second half of the 20th century (Brannen et al., 2002; (Cowan & Hoffman, 2007; Steil, 2007; Klammer & Letablier, 2007).

According to Gender Schema theory (Bem, 1981) and Social Role theory (Eagly, 1987), male and female children are influenced from a very early age by cultural prescriptions about the traits and behaviours that are appropriate for them. Within the context of learning their distinctive social roles (Parson & Bales, 1955), it is suggested that boys generally acquire such instrumental traits as ambition, aggressiveness, power orientation, independence and self-reliance. Girls, on the other hand, learn expressive traits such as warmth, deference to others and social concern. As a result, girls and boys may experience quite different messages regarding careers and how they are best managed (McMahon & Patton, 1997).

A large body of evidence suggests significant gender differences in a number of work-related values and attitudes, such as job satisfaction, pay and rewards, and career aspirations (Dravigne, et al., 2008; Noblet et al., 2008; Platsidou & Agaliotis, 2008). While international research has revealed less stereotypical perspectives on occupational roles for males and females (Ryckman & Houston, 2003; Sanders, Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, & Steele-Clap, 1998; Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2001; Loughlin & Barling, 2001; Heckhausen & Tomasik, 2002; Kuol, 2002), in the Irish context, some research suggests that the role of breadwinner continues to be important to males' sense of identity (Giles & Rea, 1999; Brannen et al., 2002). Whether gender operates a significant impact on attitudes concerning the management of the two domains of work and family life has yet to be examined. To this end, the following hypothesis is explored:

Hypothesis 1: Gender will differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

## **Social Background and Attitudes toward Managing the Work-family Interface**

Intergenerational transmission of values and attitudes from older to younger generations is a basic tenet of socialization theory (Super, 1957). The family serves as a socialization agent that transmits values, ideologies and norms from one generation to the next. Attitudes towards work form as the younger generation is exposed to the economic behaviour, experience and values of their families and significant others (Oesterle, Johnson & Mortimer, 2004). Indeed it is suggested that background factors such as parental education background and child-rearing values that are linked to parental occupations, lead the younger generation to emphasise certain attitudes, values and motivational sets (McKie & Cunningham-Hurley, 2005; Mortimer & Finch, 1996).

It is well-documented that parental employment experiences significantly impact work-related attitudes of children (Dryler, 1998; Helwig, 1998; Loughlin & Barling, 1998; Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997; Schoon & Parsons, 2002). Indeed some research suggests that maternal employment in particular may have differential effects on male and female children (Blau, 1998, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan & Aber, 1997, Lefebvre & Merrigan, 1999, Ram, Abada & Hou, 2004). Findings such as these have contributed to a lively field of research with solid conclusions yet to be drawn with respect to causality (Togeby, 1995; Kulik, 2002). The impact of such parental characteristics on attitudes towards managing the work-family interface remains unexplored and although it could be assumed that parental characteristics will influence such attitudes, this gap underpins the second hypotheses of this investigation.

Hypothesis 2a: Parental education will differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

Hypothesis 2b: Parental employment will differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

### **School Experience and Attitudes toward Managing the Work-family Interface**

School organization and processes have an impact on pupil achievement and development which is independent of between-school differences in pupil intake (Brutsaert & Van Houtte, 2004; Kniveton, 2006; Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995; Hannan, Smyth et al., 1996). Indeed, school experience has been cited as strongly influencing work-related attitudes and expectations, as well as the acquisition of norms in general (Ballen & Moles, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Ketsetzis, Ryan & Adams, 1998; Pierce, Alfonso & Garrison, 1998).

One dominant theme in this research is the influence of single-sex and mixed-sex (co-educational community/comprehensive) schools on pupil development and achievement. It was first suggested by Dale (1969, 1971, 1974) in his 26-year long study of grammar schools in England that coeducational learning environments are happier, friendlier, more pleasant and gregarious than single sex schools, however this conclusion remains hotly debated within the empirical literature (Breen, 1995; Young & Fisher, 1996; Beaton et al., 1996; Hannan, 1996; Rennie & Parker, 1998; Marsh & Rowe, 1996; Lynch, 1999; Trickett & Birman, 2005; Jackson, 2002).

Single and mixed sex school environments have been found to have different effects on male and female pupils (Logan, 2007; Kenway & Gough, 1998; Drudy & Lynch, 1993). For example, it has been found that girls are uncomfortable when they perceive their teachers to be giving more attention to boys during mathematics lessons in mixed sex classrooms (Steinbeck & Gwizdala, 1995). Further, girls in mixed-sex schools were less likely to report teacher encouragement for post-secondary studies than were their counterparts in single-sex schools (Smyth & Hannan, 2002; Lynch, 1999). However evidence as to the enhanced impact of single or mixed sex schools is not conclusive (Francis et al., 2003; Mael, 1998; Woodward, Fergusson & Horwood, 2000; American Association of University Women, 1998).

Mixed-sex schooling has been identified as having some effect on gender role expectations. Boys in their final year of second level education were identified as having less traditional views of work and family roles than their counterparts in single-sex schools (Hannan et al., 1996, Lynch, 1999). On the other hand, girls may experience some conflict in mixed-sex environments due to the more ambiguous and variable priorities which often characterise it. For instance, high achieving girls may be expected to be both “masculine” in their independence, autonomy and work dedication, and at the same time be “feminine” in their interaction with others, with the emphasis on gentleness, social emotional supportiveness and lower assertiveness (Hodson & Sullivan, 1990).

Taken together, these findings highlight the role of context in the development of girls and boys over the years of their second-level education. These contexts in turn are seen to influence their attitudinal development and academic achievement. Whether these differential experiences continue to impact their attitudes to managing the work-family interface has yet to be established. Thus the following hypothesis is examined:

Hypothesis 3: School environment (single-sex or mixed-sex) will serve to differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

### **Rural/Urban Upbringing and Attitudes toward Managing the Work-family Interface**

Whether or not a rural setting is a good place in which to grow up and live remains a matter of some debate in the literature (Parman, 1990; Ni Laoire, 2001, 2002, 2004; Jamieson, 2000; Glendinning et al., 2003; Coldwell, 2004). Common issues that concern rural youth include transport, access to services, community life and emotional well-being. There are also issues concerning the lack of youth employment opportunities and a consequent sense of disengagement from their local social structures (Shucksmith, 2000). Moving away is seen as providing a means of enhancing the range of opportunities available to young people and increasing their level of independence (Walberg & Greenberg, 1996).

Gender is well-documented as a factor that influences feelings in relation to rural and urban living (Istemic, 2007; Glendinning et al., 2003; Ni Laoire, 2004). Young rural women can now pursue paths in life that were not available to their mothers or grandmothers and, although they may leave their locality, returning at a later point in life is now an option. Indeed, striving for such independence has been identified in the attitudes of young rural women, with higher occupational aspirations being identified among them than urban youth, either male or female (Ek. et al., 2008; Dahlstrom, 1996). One explanation for this may be the sense among females that they have to leave, given the dominance of rural communities by males (Yuping, Kao & Hannum, 2007; Dahlstrom, 1996), or the limited work opportunities that currently exist for women as cottage industries become modernized and technology-driven (Peterson & Mathieson, 2000). It should be noted that rural living is not easy for males either with some research suggesting a rural context may have a role to play in rising rates of male suicide (Ni Laoire, 2001). It remains to be

examined whether or not such different backgrounds influence the development of work-related attitudes, particularly with respect to managing the work-family interface. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 4: Rural and urban contexts will serve to differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

### **Summary**

This study focuses on personal and social background factors as possible channels through which the young person's attitudes towards managing the work family interface are shaped. The study examines the extent to which gender, parental background, the nature of the school experience and urban/rural upbringing influence the development of attitudes towards managing the work family interface. This article addresses these issues among 413 final year undergraduate students studying in Ireland.

### **Method**

Four hundred and thirty five final year degree students from 5 third level institutions all around Ireland completed a paper-and-pen questionnaire which was administered during class time and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was administered in each institution separately, and completed questionnaires were sent back to the primary source for analysis. Four hundred and thirteen usable responses were returned (95%).

### **Measures**

The Career Family Attitude Measure (Sanders, Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, & Steele-Clapp, 1998) comprised half the questionnaire. This 56-item measure incorporates six scales addressing various domains within the work-family interface. They include Family Focus, Balance, Career Focus, Dominance, Spousal Support, and Independence (See Table 1 for alpha ratings). Respondents completed a Likert-type scale, with scores on each scale ranging from 1 – 5. Low scores indicated strong to moderate disagreement with the item and high scores indicated moderate to strong agreement with the item.

1. The Family Focus scale is made up of two different sub-scales. The first sub-scale (I Defer) involves 10 items, one reverse score. It measures the extent to which respondents are willing to defer their own career to facilitate family life. It includes such items as 'I will be mostly responsible for raising our children, regardless of whether or not I work outside the home'. The second sub-scale of the Family Focus measure (Someone defers) is a 7-item scale with one reverse score. It measures the extent to which respondents feel someone else should defer their career for the sake of family life. For example 'If I get an excellent job offer somewhere, I will expect my spouse to move to the new place'.



2. The Balance scale includes 10 items (one reverse score) and refers to the concept of equality in general, with specific reference to division of labour in the home, participation in decision-making, and careers and education of both partners. It includes such items as 'I expect my spouse and I to share responsibility for raising our children.'
3. The Career Focus scale is a 6-item scale (two reverse scores) which pertains to paying more attention, on occasion, to one's work than to one's marital relationship or children. Items includes 'Sometimes I will have to pay more attention to my job than to my family.'
4. The Dominance scale (9 items, two reverse scores) pertains to having a career and decision power within the home while one's spouse defers her or his career in order to raise children. The scale includes such items as 'I do not expect my spouse to have a career.'
5. The Spousal Support scale (8 items) pertains to the intention that one's spouse will be supportive by giving in during disagreements, moving if the respondent receives a good job offer elsewhere, doing housework if not employed, and keeping weekend distractions to a minimum. The scale includes such items as 'If my spouse is not employed, he/she should do all the housework.'
6. Finally, the Independence scale concerns socializing and vacationing independent of one's spouse. There are six items which include 'I expect my spouse to take some vacations alone.'

Students also completed a demographic section which incorporated gender, age, educational background, and parental information related to education and occupation.

## Sample

The sample was broken down quite equally in relation to gender with males making up 46% of the sample and females constituting the remaining 54%. The mean age was 20 years.

Eighty per cent of respondents were University students with the remaining attending Institutes of Technology. These are third level institutions within Ireland that concentrate on applied and vocational programmes. The majority of respondents were studying Business Studies (75%), such as Bachelor of Commerce/Business Studies, Bachelor of International Business, or Bachelor of Business and Marketing. The rest of the sample was equally divided between students taking degrees in Computing and Social Studies.

Eighteen per cent of the sample came from families of one or two children and in general family size was three or more children. The parents of most of the sample were married (86%) with the remainder spread between the categories of divorced/separated/widowed/never married. Nearly one third of the sample had attended co-educational schools, and respondents were split quite equally in relation to whether their upbringing was urban or rural.

In relation to parental employment, the fathers of over 75% of the sample were in full-time employment. The fathers of 19% of the sample had a primary degree while the figure was just 6% in relation to postgraduate qualifications. The fathers of 47% of the sample were in professional job categories (for example, accountants, company directors, lecturers, journalists).

The mothers of 53% of the sample now work outside the home, and half of them do so on a full-time basis. In relation to maternal education, the mothers of 12% of the sample had a primary degree with this figure falling to 6% in relation to postgraduate qualifications. The majority (71%) of employed mothers worked in administrative positions with 25% holding professional positions.

## **Results**

Pearson correlations, t-tests, Kruskal-Wallis, Mann-Whitney, and analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted on the data. Alpha ratings were also derived for the Career Family Attitude Measure (see Table 1).

### **Career Family Attitude Measure (CFAM)**

Most respondents rated Balance as the most important issue in managing the work-life interface, followed by Career Focus and Independence (see Table 1). Family Focus was rated least important by respondents as an issue in managing the work-life interface.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics**

Domain	Mean	Standard Deviation	Alpha
Balance	4.42	0.57	0.74
Career Focus	3.63	0.83	0.74
Independence	3.53	0.68	0.78
Dominance	2.66	0.60	0.69
Spousal Support	2.56	0.98	0.69
Family focus: I Defer	2.17	0.46	0.71
Family focus: Someone defers $\beta$	2.9	0.78	0.35

**N = 413**

$\beta$ : Results associated with this sub-scale are not examined further given its poor alpha rating

### Hypotheses testing

Hypothesis 1: Gender will differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

Gender emerged as the strongest independent variable. Lending some support to Hypothesis 1, males scored significantly higher on Career Focus ( $p < .005$ ), Dominance ( $p < .0001$ ) and Spousal Support ( $p < .0001$ ). Females scored significantly higher on Balance ( $p < .0001$ ). However, there was no gender difference in relation to attitudes towards Independence or Family Focus: I Defer (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Descriptive statistics of scale scores by gender**

	Male Mean	Male Standard Deviation	Female Mean	Female Standard Deviation
Balance	4.14	0.57	4.65**	0.46
Career Focus	3.72**	0.78	3.48	0.84
Independence	3.48	0.68	3.56	0.66
Dominance	3.01**	0.58	2.40	0.45
Spousal Support	2.70**	0.68	2.42	0.61
Family Focus: I Defer	2.31	0.46	2.04	0.43

\* Kruskal-Wallis test significant at .05 level. \*\* Kruskal-Wallis test significant at .01 level.

The results of both males and females revealed some interesting relationships. Among males, the strongest relationship emerged between Dominance and Spousal Support ( $r = 0.48^{**}$  - See Table 3a). This suggests male respondents felt these two dimensions were positively related to each other, in that Dominance was achieved via spousal support for such a position. This point will be revisited in the discussion.

Male respondents also felt there were strong negative relationships between Balance and both Dominance and Spousal Support ( $r = -0.47^{**}$  and  $r = -0.42^{**}$  respectively). This suggests that males believed that Balance, or equality in decision-making, was not best achieved if one spouse played a particularly dominant or supportive role in the relationship.

**Table 3a: Scale intercorrelations by gender (male) N = 188**

	1. Family focus: I defer	2. Balance	3. Career focus	4. Dominance	5. Spousal support.	6. Independence
1. Family focus: I defer	1					
2. Balance	-0.19**	1				
3. Career focus	0.01	0.05	1			
4. Dominance	0.18*	-0.47**	-0.01	1		
5. Spousal Support	0.17*	-0.42**	0.004	0.48**	1	
6. Independence	-0.10	0.09	0.19**	0.05	-0.05	1

\* Kendall's tau\_b correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Kendall's tau\_b correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Among females, the strong positive correlations were identified between Spousal Support and both dimensions of Family Focus: I Defer ( $r = 0.30^{**}$ ) and Dominance ( $r = 0.28^{**}$  - see Table 3b). This would suggest that female respondents felt that a supportive role was best provided to their spouse by either deferring their own career or allowing one partner in the relationship to be dominant.

The strongest negative correlation was found between Dominance and Balance ( $r = -0.30^{**}$ ), which suggests that females did not feel that equality in decision-making was best achieved if one spouse had more decision power than the other.

**Table 3b: Scale intercorrelations by gender (female) N = 225**

	1. Family focus: I defer	2. Balance focus	3. Career	4. Dominance support.	5. Spousal	6. Independence
1. Family focus: I defer	1					
2. Balance	-0.25**	1				
3. Career focus	0.12	-0.03**	1			
4. Dominance	0.29*	-0.30**	0.14**	1		
5. Spousal Support	0.30*	0.20	0.08	0.28 **	1	
6. Independence	-0.06	0.14**	0.13**	-0.02	-0.09	1

\* Kendall's tau\_b correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* Kendall's tau\_b correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Many significant relationships between the subscales were the same for both males and females. For example, males and females alike positively correlated Spousal Support with both Dominance and Family focus: I Defer, Dominance with Family Focus, and Independence with Career Focus.

That said, males rated the positive relationship between Spousal Support with Dominance far more strongly than females. Females, on the other hand, rated the positive relationships between Family Focus and both Spousal Support and Dominance much more strongly than males.

All the significant negative relationships identified between the subscales were the same for males and females, in that they agreed negative relationships exist between Balance and the three subscales of Spousal Support, Family Focus and Dominance.

However, the negative perception of the relationship between Spousal Support and both Balance and Dominance was far stronger among males than among female respondents.

Lending some more direct support to hypothesis 1 is the result that only female respondents reported a significant positive correlation between Career Focus and Dominance as well as between Independence and Balance. These results depict a sample of eager females, keen on taking the lead and performing well in their careers. The results may also suggest some conflict between co-operation and self-gratification, or even what could be interpreted as some over-compensation in the pursuit of equality.

## **Parental Occupation**

Hypothesis 2a: Parental education will differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

Hypothesis 2b: Parental employment will differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

Parental education had no impact on the results and so hypothesis 2a is rejected.

The results indicated that those whose fathers were employed scored significantly higher on Career Focus ( $p < .05$ ) and Dominance ( $p < .01$ ). No gender difference was detected. Those whose mothers were employed scored significantly higher on Balance ( $p < .05$ ), but gender had no impact on these results either. Males whose mothers were not employed scored significantly higher on Family Focus (I Defer) than females whose mothers were not employed ( $p < .05$ ). Thus hypothesis 2b is supported.

## **School Experience**

Hypothesis 3: School environment (single-sex or mixed-sex) will serve to differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

Respondents who attended a single-sex school rated the desire for Independence significantly higher than those who attended a mixed-sex school ( $p < .05$ ). Further analysis indicated that while females who attended a single-sex school rated Independence highest, both males and females who attended single-sex schools rated Independence higher than respondents who attended mixed-sex schools ( $p < .01$ ). The lowest rating for Independence was found among boys who attended a mixed-sex school. Thus hypothesis 3 is supported.

## **Urban Versus Rural**

Hypothesis 4: Rural and urban contexts will serve to differentiate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface.

Fifty per cent of the sample was brought up in an urban setting with the remainder being brought up in a rural environment. This urban/rural divide had no impact on the results. Thus hypothesis four is not supported by the study.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this investigation was to investigate attitudes towards managing the work-family interface among university students now ready to enter full-time employment. A sample of 413 students responded to the 56-item CFAM (Sanders et al., 1998) and completed a demographic questionnaire pertaining to personal and social background. Specifically, the demographic questionnaire examined respondents' social background with respect to school experience,

parental occupation and parental education. In relation to attitudes towards managing the career-family interface, in line with research by Sturges & Guest (2004), Lewis, (2002), and Smola & Sutton (2002), the sample attributed overwhelming importance to equality in practices and processes that relate to both career and personal lives, in other words, balance between their work and family lives. Although the female respondents emphasized this significantly more than males, the importance given to the Balance dimension across the survey suggests that this new cohort of workers reflect the Generation X culture of working to live rather than living to work (Mayer, 2007; Iadova, 2007; Quinn et al., 2007). Such a narrowing of the gender value gap has also been well-documented within the literature (Mooney, Fan, Finley & Beutel, 1996; Kuol, 2002; Kerpelman & Schvaneveldt, 1999; Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2001).

Examining the findings in detail suggests some support is evident for Connell's (1999) and Sandelands' (2002) conclusions that gender is a fundamental organising principle of human life. Although priority was given to career-related matters over family-related activities by both males and females, males emphasized this to a far greater extent than females and were also far more likely to suggest dominance as a means of managing the work-life interface. This is in line with previous Irish research (Giles & Rea, 1999; Brannen et al., 2002), and with Powell, Butterfield & Parent's 2002 replication of an earlier study (Powell & Butterfield, 1979) which concludes that males are still more career oriented than women in aspiring to top management positions.

At the same time, a certain reversal of stereotypes could also be detected in the findings. Only females reported strong relationships between Career Focus and Dominance, and between Independence and Balance. These purposeful attitudes are certainly in line with the stronger academic achievements of girls over boys as witnessed in yearly examination result profiles in Ireland.

It needs to be recognised, however, that all males and all females were not of the same mind. While a preference for dominance accompanied by spousal support was clearly identified in the pattern of results for both males and females (albeit more so among males), it was interesting to note that males and females alike also saw a negative relationship between the quest for equality and balance in their lives and a situation where one partner had a domineering role in the partnership.

These seemingly contradictory findings may reflect the conflict and tension surrounding gender role attitudes and choices that is typical of early adulthood (Barber & Axinn, 1998; Brannen et al., 2002). They may also reflect a poor awareness of the complex interdependence of work and family roles and of the realities involved in co-ordinating the activities demanded by both (Clark, 2000, 2002).

Unlike Kulik (2002), this study found no impact of parental education on the views of their children with respect to managing the work-family interface. In relation to the role of parental occupation, a higher proportion of those whose fathers were employed emphasised the importance of their career, and this is in line with much previous research concerning the influential power of the family on career related aspirations among children (Hodson & Sullivan, 1990; Dryler, 1998; Clark, 2000, 2002). Interestingly, a higher proportion of those whose mothers were employed emphasised the importance of egalitarianism between the sexes, a preference possibly born out of growing up with a greater awareness of the concept of working wives and mothers and the transmission of less traditional attitudes towards gender roles commonly identified among employed mothers (Hoff-Ginsberg & Tardiff, 1995; Moore, 1995; Ex & Janssens, 1998). Interestingly, maternal non-employment appeared to have a greater effect on males than females by raising the importance males attribute to family-related activities. This is in contrast with the conclusion of Affleck, Morgan & Hayes, (1989) who found that having an employed mother made females more sensitive to the need for task sharing. This differential effect of maternal employment on males and females is well-documented (Mortimer et al., 2008; Ram, Abada & Hou, 2004; Moen, Erickson & Dempster-McClair, 1997).

In line with the (controversial) general conclusion that single-sex schools result in higher academic achievement (Trice, Naudu, Lowe & Jaffee, 1996; Haag, 2000), those who attended a single-sex school placed a significantly higher emphasis on the importance of Independence than those who attended a coeducational school. This was the case for both males and females but the difference was greatest among females. This finding may have some importance for the on-going debate surrounding the efficacy of coeducation and single-sex schools (American Association of University Women, (AAUW), 1998). As Watson, Quatman & Edler (2002) found that girls at single-sex schools had higher career aspirations than both girls and boys at coeducational schools, this pursuit of Independence by females may facilitate the achievement of such ambition and overcome the shortfall between aspiration and achievement identified by Rindfuss, Cooksey & Sutterlin (1999).

## **Conclusion**

Given the increasing recognition of the difficulties of separating work and non-work responsibilities and commitments, managing the work-life interface will continue to require attention in organisational policies and procedures (Messersmith, 2007; Schneider & Waite, 2005; Grawitch, Trares & Kohler, 2007; McCarthy, Grady, Darcy & Kirrane, forthcoming). As employees increasingly expect employers to be responsive to their needs (Kossek & Lambert, 2005), the findings of this study suggest some difficulties for organisations that fail to incorporate some degree of flexibility into their work-life balance policies and procedures. Bearing in mind the additional boosts to creativity and commitment that may accrue to organisations when employees' needs are met (Doherty & Tyson, 2000; Dowling & Fisher, 1997; Nord et al., 2002), recognising the diversity of values amongst this new cohort of would-be employees and adopting employee strategies that allow differing preferences to be met may continue to be a worthwhile path for organisations.



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