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Kyle Gerjerts
University of Northern Iowa

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Coping with Work-School Conflict through Social Support

**Kyle Gerjerts
Dr. Adam Butler**

**University of Northern Iowa
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Coping with Work-School Conflict through Social Support

Costs of attending college have soared in recent years, with both public (7%) and private (5.3%) schools experiencing large increases in average tuition, room, and board last year alone (Neusner, 2002). With the high costs of secondary education and also the importance of work experience in today's job market, it is now the norm for college students to hold part time jobs while attending classes. Today there are nearly six million working students in the United States (Lakew & Mutari, 2003). In 2000, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey reported that three-fourths of all full-time college students in the U.S. were employed. This is about four percentage points higher than the same survey given in 1996 (Lakew & Mutari, 2003). The commitment necessary to meet the demands of both school and work suggests that college students may experience conflicting demands between the two roles. Work-school conflict is defined as the extent to which work interferes with a student's ability to meet school related demands and responsibilities (Markel & Frone, 1998). Unlike work-family conflict, a similar inter-role conflict construct, work-school conflict is generally studied as a unidirectional phenomenon (i.e., work to school conflict) because the work role is secondary in importance to the school role for most students.

A general model of work-school conflict suggests that it is a mediating link between certain job characteristics and school outcomes (e.g., Markel & Frone, 1998). Numerous outcomes have been studied and linked to work-school conflict. Markel and Frone (1998) found that increasing levels of work-school conflict were directly related to decreases in school readiness and indirectly related to decreasing school performance and school satisfaction. Conflict has also been tied to a number of outcomes from realms such as employment and mental health, suggesting its disruptiveness in many facets of life. For example, researchers examining

work attitudes found that work-school conflict was positively related to work-related cynicism (Stern, Stone, Hopkins, and McMillion, 1990). Furthermore, Shanahan, Finch, Mortimer, and Ryu (1991) reported that work-school conflict was positively related to depression among boys.

The numerous negative outcomes associated with work-school conflict suggest a need to understand factors that might decrease it or moderate its effect. Rather than modifying job characteristics associated with work-school conflict (cf., Markel & Frone, 1998), a process that may not be practically or economically feasible, it may be more tenable to employ coping mechanisms to reduce the experience and negative effects of work-school conflict. Coping, though it can take a number of different forms, is frequently defined as acts that control aversive environmental conditions, thus lowering psychological and physiological disturbances (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). One coping mechanism that may be especially relevant to college students, many of whom are living away from family for the first time, is social support.

Social support can be defined as “the availability of helping relationships and the quality of those relationships” (Leavy, 1983) and consists of frequent contacts and strong, positive feelings (Elloy & Mackie, 2002). Support may play a role at two different places in a general stress model. First, support may play a role in primary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), preventing an event from being appraised as stressful to begin with. For example, Allen (2001) reported a negative correlation between supervisor support and work-family conflict. Second, support may play a buffering role, modifying the effect of the experience of stress on pathological outcomes. For example, several studies showed that spousal support moderated the effect of family demands on work-family conflict (Aryee, Luk, Leung, & Lo, 1999; Matsui, Ohsaa, & Onglatco, 1995). In a meta-analysis Viswesvaran, Sanchez, and Fisher (1999) found that social support played a role in both primary appraisal and moderation of the stressor-strain

relationship. Specifically, they found that support alleviated perceived occupational stressors such as role conflict, role ambiguity, and work overload. Furthermore, they reported that social support moderated the relationship such that the occupational stressors were not as strongly related to examples of strain (job dissatisfaction, withdrawal intentions, neuroticism, and burnout) when higher levels of support were present.

These studies have all addressed individual-level social support. Perceived organizational-level support, on the other hand, has been linked with increased organizational commitment (Scandura & Lankau, 1993) and reduced absenteeism (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986). There is some empirical support for the beneficial effects of social support in the context of work-school conflict. Hammer, Grigsby, and Wood (1998) found that students who perceived a university as providing effective support services reported lower levels of work-school conflict than students who perceived less university support. Thus, their results suggested that organizational-level support might play a role in primary appraisal, leading working students to be less likely to perceive work-school conflict. Hammer et al. did not test for a buffering or moderating effect of social support.

In the present study, we extended previous research by examining both the primary appraisal and buffering functions of social support on work-school conflict. Moreover, we looked at social support from both supervisors and coworkers. We also advanced the literature by examining two previously unexamined consequences of work-school conflict. We measured job satisfaction as a psychological indicator of strain and somatic complaints as a physical indicator of strain. We viewed work-school conflict as a stressor and predicted that higher levels of it would be related to lower job satisfaction and more somatic complaints. Based on the primary appraisal function of social support, we predicted that both supervisor and coworker

support would be related to lower work-school conflict. Finally, based on the buffering function of social support, we predicted that support would moderate the relationship between work-school conflict and strain such that the relationship would be weaker under higher levels of support.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants in this study were 148 undergraduate students at a state university in the midwest. All of the subjects were employed either full-time or part-time when the research was completed. On average, the respondents were 19.93 ($SD = 1.77$) years of age and spent 12.86 ($SD = 11.57$) and 4.43 ($SD = 6.84$) hours working off and on campus, respectively. Seventy percent of the participants were female.

Measures

The items comprising all scales are presented in the Appendix.

Control variables. We measured several demographic and structural variables that served as controls in our regression analyses. These were age, sex, class, hours worked per week on campus, and hours worked per week off campus

Somatic complaints. Participants indicated how often they experienced 18 physical symptoms of strain in the past year on a response scale from never/very rarely (1) to very often (5). Items came from a scale developed by Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, and Pinneau (1980), with additional items selected from a scale by Thomas and Ganster (1995).

Job satisfaction. Job satisfaction was measured with five items from the Job in General Scale (Ironson, Smith, Brannick, Gibson, & Paul, 1989). The response scale and scoring were the

same as that used with the Job Descriptive Index (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969). Yes responses were scored as 3, uncertain responses were scored as 1, and no responses were scored as 0.

Work-school conflict. Five items (Markel & Frone, 1997) measured the extent to which students' work responsibilities conflicted with their abilities to perform in school. Participants were asked to rate the frequency of such conflict by responding to statements using a 5-point scale ranging from very rarely (1) to very often (5).

Supervisor and co-worker support. Two, four item scales measured the extent to which students perceived receiving support from individual supervisors and co-workers. Participants were asked to rate the frequency of the support by responding to statements using a 5-point scale ranging from very rarely (1) to very often (5).

Results

Our hypotheses predicting relationships between support and work-school conflict were tested with zero-order correlations. The correlation matrix, along with descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients, is presented in Table 1. All other hypotheses were tested using hierarchical moderated regression. Job satisfaction and somatic complaints were each regressed on two separate predictor sets. At step 1, we entered age, sex, class, hours worked on campus, and hours worked off campus to control for those variables. At step 2, we entered work-school conflict and either supervisor support or coworker support. At step 3, the cross-product of work-school conflict and supervisor or coworker support was entered. All continuously measured predictors were centered prior to running the analyses (Aiken & West, 1991), and significant interactions were explored using procedures described by Cohen and Cohen (1983). Results from the regression analyses are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Our hypothesis that work-school conflict would be associated with psychological and physical strain was fully supported. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, higher levels of work-school conflict were associated with lower job satisfaction and more somatic complaints. Our prediction that supervisor and coworker support would be related to less work-school conflict was not supported, although both relationships were marginally significant. As shown in Table 1, higher levels of both supervisor support ($p = .06$) and coworker support ($p = .07$) were related to lower levels of work-school conflict.

Our hypothesis that social support would moderate the relationship between work-school conflict and job satisfaction was partially supported. As shown in Table 2, only the relationship between work-school conflict and job satisfaction was moderated by coworker support. Consistent with our prediction, analyses of simple slopes showed that more work-school conflict was associated with less job satisfaction ($\beta = -.41, p < .001$) when coworker support was low. However, when coworker support was high, work-school conflict did not affect job satisfaction ($\beta = -.01, p = .94$).

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to understand the role of social support in preventing work-school conflict and moderating its negative effects. Prior research found that work-school conflict was related to reduced school readiness and depression (Markel & Frone, 1998; Shanahan et al., 1991). Our study extended past research by showing that work-school conflict was also related to reduced job satisfaction and more somatic complaints. Although prior research examined the role of institutional support in reducing work-school conflict (Hammer et al., 1998), we extended this research by examining support from both co-workers and supervisors. We found that co-worker and supervisor support only marginally reduced work-

school conflict. However, we did find that co-worker support, but not supervisor support, moderated the relationship between conflict and job satisfaction. When coworker support was low, there was a strong, negative relationship between conflict and job satisfaction. In contrast, when co-worker support was high, there was no relationship between conflict and job satisfaction. The relationship between conflict and somatic complaints was not moderated by either co-worker or supervisor support.

One of the ways in which social support influences the stress response is by affecting the primary appraisal of an event as a threat. In the present study, we found that both co-worker and supervisor support played a marginal role in primary appraisal. One factor in this weak primary appraisal relationship may be the limited amount of tangible support that can be supplied for the school role. Although emotional support can be provided for both the work and school role, tangible support is more easily supplied in the work role. The low skilled nature of most student employment makes it possible for others to easily assist or complete work tasks, but only the student can take exams and write term papers. The other way in which social support influences the stress response is by buffering the individual from the negative effects of stress. We found this buffering relationship only on a psychological indicator of strain, job satisfaction, and only when the support came from co-workers. This finding is interesting because it suggests that college students may prefer social support from people who are of equal work status to them and who are their peers. Although we are not aware of other research on this issue, this result makes sense from a developmental perspective as college students are becoming more independent from caregivers, and supervisors at work may be more closely associated with a parental role.

This study has several important implications for theory development and future research. First, our results suggest that the perception of some stressors may be more amenable to

influence by social support than others. In particular, social support may be more effective when both emotional and tangible support can be supplied. Future research should use measures of social support that disentangle the type of support supplied, as well as identify contexts that allow for certain types of support but not others. Second, our results suggest that not all sources of social support are equally beneficial to everyone. We found that co-workers were a better source of support than supervisors for college students. This suggests that support may be particularly effective if the source of support “fits” the needs or values of the worker. Finally, our results indicate that the influence of work-school conflict extends to important work outcomes, as well as physical health. Future research might extend further our knowledge of other outcomes associated with work-school conflict, such as turnover intentions and job performance.

This study also has important implications for practice in organizations. Employers and supervisors need to recognize that college students are likely to experience conflict between their work and school roles at some time. Our results suggest that employers could minimize this conflict and its negative effects by encouraging coworkers to support one another. Employers might put in place policies and procedures that make it easy for students to substitute work tasks or schedules. It might also be beneficial for student employees to be placed in positions in which they can more readily interact with each other. Potentially, this could sustain levels of job satisfaction through situations of work-school conflict, thus creating a more positive work environment. College students could also ease the stress of combining work and school by surrounding themselves with people who regularly give them support.

There are several limitations to the present study that temper our conclusions. Our sample was limited to students at one state university in the U.S., and our findings may, therefore, not generalize well to private or foreign colleges. It may be worthwhile for future studies to include

students from multiple colleges in their sample. Our study also relied exclusively on self-report data, and it is possible that certain traits affected both responses to our predictors and criteria, creating spurious or inflated relationships. Controlling for personality traits or collecting data about an individual's work-school conflict from other sources, such as classmates or co-workers, would help alleviate this problem. Despite these limitations, our results shed more light on the problem of work-school conflict and suggest that social support provides a practical means of coping with that problem.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations for Measured Variables.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Age	19.93	1.77					
2. Hrs On	4.43	6.84	-.04				
3. Hrs Off	12.86	11.57	.32**	-.54**			
4. Sex	--	--	-.01	-.10	.02		
5. Class	1.11	1.20	.81**	.06	.31**	-.10	
6. W-S Con	2.66	.91	.13	-.09	.37**	-.05	.16*
7. Sup Support	3.40	.84	.07	.16	-.17*	.14	.03
8. Cwk Support	3.87	.68	.06	.07	-.03	-.10	.12
9. Job Sat.	2.36	.83	.01	.09	-.03	-.13	.06
10. Complaints	2.09	.51	-.15	.00	-.11	-.22**	-.20*

Table 1 (continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Descriptive Statistics, Reliabilities, and Correlations for Measured Variables.

	6	7	8	9	10
6.W-S Conflict	.84				
7. Sup. Support	-.16	.83			
8. Cwk. Support	-.15	.47**	.84		
9. Job Satisfaction	-.21**	.32**	.37**	.84	
10. Complaints	.15	-.08	.02	.00	.86

Note. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients are presented on the diagonal for measures 6-10.

W-S = work-school; Sup = supervisor; Cwk = co-worker. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. Women were coded as 0 and men as 1.

Table 2

Standardized Regression Coefficients with Co-worker Support as Moderator

	Job Satisfaction			Somatic Complaints		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	-.18	-.15	-.09	.06	.11	.09
Hrs On	.07	.11	.16	-.03	-.09	-.10
Hrs Off	.03	.16	.14	-.04	-.18	-.18
Sex	-.14	-.12	-.16*	-.24**	-.22**	-.21*
Class	.23	.17	.09	-.26	-.32*	-.30*
W-S Conflict (W)		-.22*	-.21*		.29**	.29**
Cwrk. Support (C)		.28**	.29**		.06	.06
W x C			.22*			-.06
R ²	.05	.14**	.18**	.10*	.16**	.17**
ΔR^2		.13**	.04**		.07**	.00

Note. W-S = work-school; Sup. = supervisor; Cwk. = co-worker. $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Standardized Regression Coefficients with Supervisor Support as Moderator

	Job Satisfaction			Somatic Complaints		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	-.18	-.20	-.16	.06	.09	.10
Hrs On	.07	.09	.10	-.03	-.08	-.08
Hrs Off	.03	.18	.17	-.04	-.18	-.18
Sex	-.14	-.19*	-.20*	-.24**	-.22**	-.22*
Class	.23	.23	.18	-.26	-.29*	-.30*
W-S Conflict (W)		-.24**	-.23*		.27**	.27**
Sup. Support (S)		.26**	.24		-.04	-.04
W x S			.11			.01
R ²	.05	.18**	.19**	.10*	.16**	.16**
ΔR^2		.12**	.01		.06*	.00

Note. W-S = work-school; Sup. = supervisor; Cwk. = co-worker. $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Appendix

Job Satisfaction

Pleasant

Bad (r)

Enjoyable

Undesirable (r)

Acceptable

Somatic Complaints

Your face became hot when you were not in a hot room or exercising.

You perspired excessively when you were not in a hot room or exercising.

Your mouth became dry.

Your muscles felt tight and tense.

You were bothered by a headache.

You felt as if the blood was rushing to your head.

You felt a lump in your throat or a choked-up feeling.

Your hands trembled enough to bother you.

You were bothered by shortness of breath when you were not working hard or exercising.

You were bothered by your heart beating hard.

Your hands sweated so that you felt damp and clammy.

You had spells of dizziness.

You were bothered by an upset stomach or stomach ache.

You were bothered by your heart beating faster than usual.

You were in ill health, which affected your work.

You had a loss of appetite.

You had trouble sleeping at night.

Your work made you feel mentally exhausted.

Supervisor Support

Your supervisor shows concern.

Your supervisor pays attention to the work you are doing.

Your supervisor is helpful in getting work done.

Your supervisor creates good teamwork within your work group.

Coworker Support

Your co-workers are friendly.

Your co-workers are helpful.

Your co-workers are personally interested.

Your co-workers are competent in their jobs.

Work-School Conflict

Because of my job, I go to school tired.

My job demands and responsibilities interfere with my schoolwork.

I spend less time studying and doing homework because of my job.

My job takes up time that I'd rather spend at school or on schoolwork.

When I am at school, I spend a lot of time thinking about my job