

2019

Communicating about being parents in the workplace

Ruqayah Almuzayn
University of Northern Iowa

Copyright ©2019 Ruqayah Almuzayn

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Recommended Citation

Almuzayn, Ruqayah, "Communicating about being parents in the workplace" (2019). *Graduate Research Papers*. 868.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/grp/868>

This Open Access Graduate Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Research Papers by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

Communicating about being parents in the workplace

Abstract

The primary purpose of this research project is to shed light on ways employed parents communicate about parenting in the workplace. This study explores how and with whom employed parents talk about their families in the workplace and how this talk is perceived. Qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews, with ten parents were conducted. The interviews revealed several functions of parent talk, the contexts in which talk about parenting occurs, the conditions in which parent talk is perceived positively, and how parent talk influences people's relationships with colleagues.

This Paper

Communicating about Being Parents in the Workplace

by

Ruqayah Almuzayn

is submitted in fulfillment of the Research Paper requirement of
the Department of Communication Studies
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, Iowa

May 8, 2019

Dr. Danielle Dick McGeough, Paper Advisor

Dr. Melissa Dobosh, Second Reader

Dr. Tom Hall, Director of Graduate Studies

Communicating about Being Parents in the Workplace

Ruqayah Almuzayn

University of Northern Iowa

Acknowledgement

I will be forever grateful for several exceptional individuals who have provided me with support towards the completion of my Master's degree.

Thank you to my parents, Abdul Alkarim and Zahra, and my seven siblings, for teaching me the value of family and education and for believing in me through the most stressful time.

I am thankful for a supportive husband, Ali Alrubh, who has offered me tremendous financial and emotional support to go through the challenging, yet rewarding journey of Graduate school. Thank you for all the nights when you made dinner, for all the rides to the library, and for your patience when I had many stressful days with a lot of anxiety.

For my sunshine, my kids, Baraah and Mohammed, your smiles and hugs gave me hope and reminded me of my purpose. Thank you for your nice notes when I stayed long days and nights at the library without giving you much attention.

Dr. McGeough, I am thankful for your guidance and flexibility to complete this project from choosing the topic until the end. You kindly provided me reassurance that I can do it and reminded me that process matters as much as the results.

Dr. Dobosh, thank you for your attention to details and teaching me to be a clear and concise writer. Your passion for research and group communication studies is contagious. I will always remember that research is fun.

Finally, this project would not have been completed without my participants. Thank you for their time and contribution.

Abstract

The primary purpose of this research project is to shed light on ways employed parents communicate about parenting in the workplace. This study explores how and with whom employed parents talk about their families in the workplace and how this talk is perceived. Qualitative methods, semi-structured interviews, with ten parents were conducted. The interviews revealed several functions of parent talk, the contexts in which talk about parenting occurs, the conditions in which parent talk is perceived positively, and how parent talk influences people's relationships with colleagues.

Key words: employed/working parents, small talk, communication in organizations

Communicating about Being Parents in the Workplace

Social talk is an essential part of the workplace; it helps to create a friendly working environment and eases communication about work issues. Social talk is impacted by changing demographics (e.g. more dual-income families where more females are working). When females employees are also moms, they consider motherhood to be a priority in their lives, so it is likely family talk will become part of social talk at work. Hence, family talk is a common type of social and small talk at work (Tannen, 1994). This study allows working parents, male and female, to reflect on and better understand how their paternal status is communicated through telling stories about their families in the workplace. This study will help organizations understand the functions of small talk in the workplace for parents.

Previous research has addressed the challenges of being a working parent and the struggles parents face at work. However, there may be some work-related advantages to being a parent. One such advantage is the opportunity it provides for social talk in the workplace. This study explores how people talk about their families in the workplace, what kinds of family talk and stories emerge, and how participants feel family talk in the workplace influences their relationship with coworkers. This paper will review the literature on workplace relationships, small talk in the workplace, propose a research question, and discuss the method, analysis and limitations of this study.

Literature Review

Workplace Relationships

Workplace relationships are interpersonal relationships with the ability to offer personal and professional growth. Workplace relationships may fulfill different individual needs at different career stages. There are three types of peer relationships: information peer, collegial peer, and special peer (Figure 1), all of which fall on a continuum differentiated by their communication characteristics (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

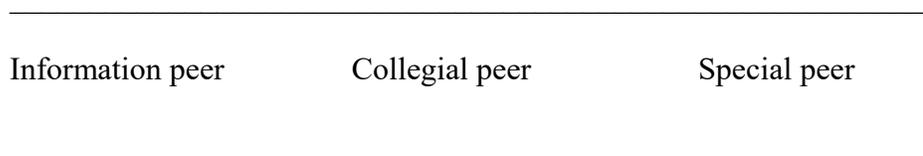


Figure 1. A continuum of peer relationships (Kram & Isabella, 1985, p.119).

An *information peer* refers to communication regarding the exchange of information related to tasks specifically or the organization generally and involves a low level of trust and self-disclosure. A *collegial peer* is characterized by communication regarding work issues and personal issues; they offer emotional support and feedback to each other. This type of peer relationship involves a moderate level of trust and self-disclosure. A *special peer* relationship is characterized by communication regarding work and personal issues and is more like friendship. In these relationships, there is more intimate bonding and high levels of vulnerability. Special peer relationships involve high levels of trust and self-disclosure (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Odden & Sias, 1997). Each type of relationship offers different opportunities for growth and some level of trust and self-disclosure. Each type of peer relationship, as well as the combination of various functions and types of relationships, provide employees some means of growth.

Workplace relationships (e.g. information sharing, job related feedback, network, friendship, and informational, instrumental and emotional support, role perception, turnover, job performance) can function positively or negatively (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). High quality coworker relationships serve as work-related support as well as emotional support, and have a significant effect on outcomes, such as increasing job satisfaction and performance, and employee's well-being (Cahill & Sias, 1997). The quality of peer relationships are beneficial not only for the individuals but also for the organization (Odden & Sias, 1997; Brunetto et al., 2013).

Gender plays an important role in forming relationships in the workplace. Men and women differ in regards to the types of relationships they form with their peers. Men tend to form more informative peer relationships while women tend to form collegial peer relationships. Interestingly, men and women did not differ in their tendency to form special peer relationships (Odden & Sias, 1997).

In addition to the importance of coworkers' relationships, supervisors may influence the work environment. A supervisors' role is significant because supervisors assign tasks, give feedback and guidance which consequently impacts employee success and job satisfaction (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Due to the importance of a supervisors' role, their effective communication and relationships with their subordinates leads to employee engagement and job satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2003; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000; Mikkelsen, Hesse & Sloan, 2017).

To conclude, high quality coworker relationships can provide work-related and emotional support, and have an impact on job satisfaction and performance. Supervisor/subordinate relationships also have a substantial impact on employee's work experience and job satisfaction.

Gender is a salient factor in forming such relationships at the workplace. It is essential to emphasize that these relationships in the workplace matter and one way to build, develop and, maintain such relationships is through small talk.

Small Talk in the Workplace

Interactional talk is a general term for the aspect of communication that focuses on interpersonal relationships for the purpose of social interaction. (G. Brown & Yule, 1983). For example, both small talk and social talk are parts of interactional talk. Holmes (2000, p.38) positioned interactional talk on a continuum:

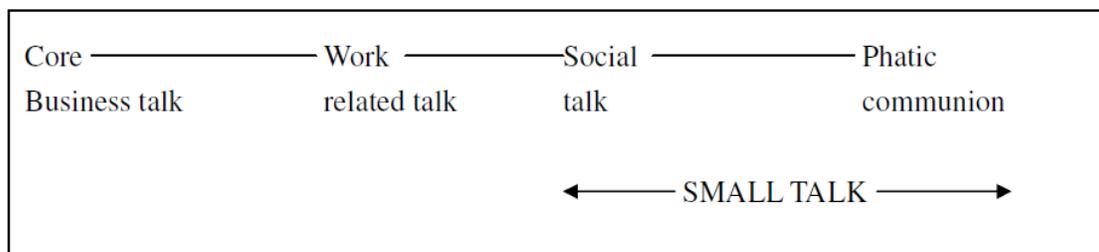


Figure 2. Locating small talk on the continuum (Holmes, 2000, p.38)

Core business talk is focused on a task, which contains a great deal of information. Work-related talk is generally related to work but not to a specific work issue. Social talk serves as a means to express and maintain interpersonal relationships. Phatic communication refers to talk with less information and more utterance (e.g. greeting). Therefore, small talk is a part of social talk, yet it is dynamic and flexible, so it shifts through the continuum.

Small talk in the workplace can extend from business talk, and also it can serve to function as a springboard for business talk. Small talk is also context based; the amount and forms of small talk differ from one context (e.g. group or organization) to another (Holmes 2000; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Mak & Chui, 2013). This paper adopts Holmes's (2000) definition of

small talk term as non-work related talk because this model shows the dynamic nature of workplace interactions. The boundaries between different kinds of talks (Figure 2) are not rigid, and some types of workplace talk do not fit exactly into a specific kind of talk.

Small talk was not always considered as important talk in the workplace. There was a tendency to focus on work related communication rather than interpersonal communication (G. Brown & Yule, 1983). Small talk has also been considered as a distraction in the workplace and as “women’s work” and “not real work” (Fletcher, 1999; Holmes & Marra, 2004). It is also regarded as a phatic talk implying that is useless, because it is lacking information (Holmes & Marra, 2004). Thus, small talk was defined in regards to the necessity for achieving task requirements and viewed as unessential.

However, it is likely shortsighted to discount small talk in relation to task accomplishment. For example, whether employees are conscious of it or not, small talk can actually be helpful in achieving organizational goals (McCarthy, 2000). For example, a short conversation between coworkers could help them solve work problems, exchange ideas for new projects, and heighten their interest to collaborate and work in teams.

While formal communication has gotten attention in the workplace due to its importance, informal communication is used more often and it is as important as formal communication in terms of teamwork and building relationships (Crossling & Ward, 2002; Guirdham, 1999; Zorn & Violanti, 1996). Small talk as informal communication (i.e. friendly comment about appearance or asking about a sick family member) can imply that coworkers care about each other and are willing to interact more which might lead to more collaboration on tasks and creation of positive connections with others.

There are not set times for small talk during the workday, but there are situations where it is more common. Small talk occurs when two or more coworkers arrive at work, meet for the first time in the working day or during lunch or coffee breaks. The first encounter of the day between coworkers is mandatory time for small talk, because it maintains the interpersonal relationships and helps start the work day positively (Holmes & Fillary, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2004). Coworkers could have small talk at various times through the workday; beginning, during the lunch or at the end of the workday.

Small talk functions in reinforcing rapport, solidarity and mitigates power. When taking turns in small talk between a supervisor or a manager and an employee, the manager mitigates their power, which helps foster solidarity, and thus reinforces positive and strong relationships in workplace “rapport” (Pullin, 2010). Small talk can also serve as an opening or closing to a meeting by filling an awkward silence (Mak & Chui, 2013). To conclude, there is a value of social talk in building relations and therefore achieving the organization’s goals. (Holmes & Marra, 2004; Campbell et al., 2003; Fletcher, 1999; Holmes 2000; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003).

The primary function of small talk is to “oil the social wheels” (Holmes & Fillary, 2000, p. 5); it helps to create a friendly environment and unity between coworkers (Holmes & Fillary, 2000; Holmes & Stubbe, 2003; Holmes & Marra, 2004). Common small talk topics are weather (e.g., it is a nice day), sport (e.g., great game on Saturday), family (e.g., how are the kids doing at school?), health (e.g., how are you?), out of work activities (e.g., did you go to the festival?) work (e.g., how is the project going?), and positive comments about appearance (e.g., awesome outfit) (Holmes & Fillary, 2000). Food is another ideal and safe topic for small talk (Pullin, 2010). Small talk is essential to building positive relationships in the workplace, and one type of small talk is parent talk.

Parent Talk

Although the aim from this section was to present studies on parent talk in the workplace, no helpful studies were found. There is a lack in the literature on how parents talk about parenting in the workplace. Therefore, some relevant literature is found that focuses on how social networks influence the transition for couples to becoming parents.

The transition from being a couple to parents involves various changes that could be stressful. Parenthood involves challenges for the couples as they learn to cope with various personal, familial, social, and professional changes. These changes could be in values and attitudes about parenting, household responsibilities, daily routines, work schedules, interpersonal relationships and the couple's relationship (Cowan et al., 1991; Belsky, Spanier & Rovine, 1983; Levy-Shiff, 1994; Miller & Sollie, 1980; Wainwright, 1966). Social networks help to mitigate the changes that are involved with the transition of parenthood.

Social networks refer to a chain of immediate connections for an individual such as nuclear and extended family members, friends, coworkers, people who share the same interests (i.e. attend same church) (Levy-Shiff, 1994). Social networks could influence parenting through providing help to parents in the form of social support. Social support for parents could be emotional (i.e. verbal encouragement that they are capable of overcoming parenting challenges), instrumental (i.e. help with child care), or informational (i.e. advice about child rearing) (Cochran & Walker, 1993).

As couples move through the transition to parenthood, their social network becomes unstable. There is a dynamic change in the mothers' and fathers' social network (i.e. family and friends) during the transition to parenthood as a way for parental adjustment. An example of social network change for couples after the birth of their child indicated decrease in the size of

family network and increase in the frequency of contact with relatives as well as an increase in the contact with non-relatives who are parents of young children. Parents preferred keen and close family relationships with frequent contact rather than wide and loose relationships as the responsibilities change with children in the household. Parents tend to seek friendships with other parents after their child's birth because it is easier to relate to the same experience. New mothers' friend networks did not change in size or frequency over the first two years after their birth because females value their friendship connections during stressful time (Adams, 1964; Bost, Cox, Burchinal & Payne, 2002; Belsky & Rovine, 1984; Cochran & Walker, 1993; Terry, 1991, Toombs et al., 2018). Social network has a positive impact on the well-being of parents during times of stress and challenges (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Levitt, Weber & Clark, 1986; Levy-Shiff, 1994). During the transition to parenting, new mothers and fathers seek their social network to adjust to the challenges that comes with parenting.

Colleagues relationships and social talk matter in the workplace. Social talk is affected by demographic change in the workforce; with more dual-income families, personal and professional issues blend and one such types of small talk is parent talk. Therefore, parent talk becomes more prevalent, yet understudied. Thus, the research question is proposed:

How do parents communicate about parenting in the workplace?

Method

Participants

This study included ten participants: six moms and four dads. Participants had one to four children ranging from 6 months to 16 years-old. Eight of the participants were from the United States, with two participants from India and the Czech Republic. The participants were

predominately White (8), with one African American participant and one Asian participant. Seven of the ten participants' ages ranged from 30 to 40 years-old. The remaining three participants were over 40 years old. All of the participants are employed full-time as faculty or staff at a public university in the Midwest in the United States. The average of length of employment for the participants at their current job is eight years.

I recruited participants using network and snowball sampling through word-of-mouth and emails to my social and professional network. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus. I designed semi-structured, open ended interview questions to discuss with the participants their experiences about talking with parenting in their workplace and how others perceive it. The interviews were audio recorded.

Procedures

I started the interviews with thanking the participants for their time, some small talk, and answering any questions they had about the researcher or the study. Then, I asked the participants to choose their pseudonyms, sign the consent form, and fill out a short demographic information sheet. Then I began the question and answer portion of the interview. Eight questions included how often do they talk about their families at the workplace, with who, and why. How do they think others perceive the parent talk and what does the parent talk do for them and their colleagues?

During the interviews, the researcher related to some parenting experiences and stories told by the participants and addressed the fact that she was a parent. The average interview lasted 45 minutes, and the interviews combined totaled seven and a half hours of audio data and 54 pages of transcriptions in a single spaced document.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to code the data through several steps. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher read the transcripts and listened to the interviews repeatedly. Then the researcher generated initial codes, followed by a search for themes and then determined theme names and their contribution to answering the research question (Manning & Kunkel, 2013). The first three interviews were coded, and after collecting more data, the same themes were emerged, so the rest of interviews were coded using the same themes found in the first three interviews.

Findings

The research question in this study asks: How do parents communicate about parenting in the workplace? The question encompasses how, why and with whom do people talk about their families in the workplace? How do working parents think others perceive parent talk? And, how do they perceive what this type of talk does for them and their colleagues?

From the ten interviews, I generated four major themes and six subthemes. The interviews uncovered various functions of parent talk, the contexts in which talk about parenting occurs, the conditions in which parent talk is perceived positively, and how parent talk influences people's relationships with colleagues. Briefly, employee parents talk about parenting while at work because being a parent is a significant part of their identities. The amount, length, and depth of the parent talk depends on how close they are with their coworkers, as well as, their goals and needs from such talk. If others can relate and if the parent talk does not interfere with the completion of the employee parents' work, talk about parenting in the workplace is perceived positively. Lastly, parent talk improves employee parents' relationships with their coworkers and positively affects their ability to work collaboratively.

When I asked participants about when they talk about their families, they acknowledged various times such as before meetings, during lunch, and as an off-hand comment. Parent talk also comes at other times. For example, Jenny, who is a staff member and a mom of two kids, said that there is weekly specific time to share stories about kids. Jenny stated, “We have weekly snack time with faculty where the rule was to not talk about work at all, so we really got to know each other and if there is something going on in their lives, they can share if they would like.”

Participants claimed that they tend to talk about their families with other colleagues’ parents. Participants explained that they talk about parenting with other colleagues who were parents, because they can relate to the parenting experience or with colleagues who are not parents but willing to listen to them talking about their kids. For faculty participants, in addition to have parent talk with their parent colleagues, faculty use stories about their kids in their classes to teach some concepts that are relevant to course materials. Regardless of when the parent talk happens, the participants confirmed it is quick and not a full conversation. Daisy, a faculty member and a mother of one girl, said, “You will not spend an hour of your work day talking about your family, but it just comes up.”

Functions of Parent Talk

Employee parents indicated the main reason for talking about parenting in the workplace was, that as a parent, it is an important part of their identities. Another salient reason was that family issues affect work and vice versa. In other words, parent talk functions to express one’s identity at work as well as explaining needs that affect work.

Intersection and interdependence between work life and personal life.

Participants asserted that parents' employees have to deal with some kids issues, while they are at work (i.e. take a call from the kids' school). Another participant added that it is not only necessary to deal with kids' issues at work for the benefit of the kids, but also for work benefits. This was best captured by Jenny's comment: "It is by necessity, information planning and logistics." For example, to plan working on projects with colleagues when the parent has to leave for a hospital appointment for the kids or to find a lactation space at work or planning for maternity leave. One's role as a parent influences their role as an employee and talk about parenting helps them to better plan for work.

The tension of different identities.

Participants addressed that employees spend long time at work, so it is strange to completely separate personal life and work by not talking about their families. They considered being a spouse and a parent an important part of their identities. Participants expressed that being a parent is part of their identities and said, "I am one person" and "being a dad is part of who I am." Another stated, "It is second nature to talk about kids" and "It is the second piece of my life."

"It is short sighted to assume that we are talking only about work at work," Jenny explained. Employees are whole individuals with many identities, and it is superficial to work with others considering only their work employee identity. Talking about being parents is a reminder that employees have other identities beyond that of professionals. Cody, who is a faculty member and a father of two kids, indicated, "What happens at home affects work. Parenting could be stressful sometimes, so if you have someone to talk with about parenting, who thinks of you as a human and not a working machine, it helps you feel better."

Stacy, who is a staff, a teacher, and a mom of two, said she intentionally uses stories about her kids while teaching to remind the students that she is not only a teacher but also a parent and to open the door to student parents. Adam, a faculty member and a father of four kids, reported that talking about his kids to explain concepts to the students is helpful. He added, "It is not only about our classes and our research, it is about us as fully human beings, not just working day robots." "Because I am a parent and a spouse, I feel that is more important than the job I do. I want to be able to share that part with my coworkers," Zoey said, a staff member and a mother of one boy. Students might forget that their professors have a life outside the classroom. If the professor brings their kids into the conversation, it serves as a reminder that there is much more than only teaching in the professor's life.

Context Matters

Factors that affect how much and with whom employee parents talk about their kids include the level of closeness for the employee parents' relationships with their coworkers, supervisor-subordinate relationships and what employee parents seek from such talk. From the participants responses, I concluded that when they talk about their kids, what they need from their peers is not the same as what they need from their supervisors.

Seeking emotional support from peers

When employee parents talk about their families, the type of relationships with peers matter. It depends on how close the relationships are and the level of trust, and whether their colleagues are only coworkers or also friends. Employee parents indicated that they tell different stories for different people. The stories are mix of things: daily issues, funny stories, struggles, and the education of the kids.

Sarah, a manager and a mother of four boys, the oldest being 9 years old and the youngest 18 months old, showed her coworkers a video of her kids. She stated that her youngest is obsessed with “the baby shark” song on YouTube. He thinks it is the funniest thing ever, so all the boys were dancing and singing to that song. It was funny to watch their dance moves. Sarah added that she will not show the video of her kids dancing to her supervisor, but she feels comfortable showing it to her coworkers or employees who she supervises.

Participants mentioned a variety of reasons to talk about their families such as venting, asking for advice, emotional support, and sharing the “parents’ guilt”. One participant said she needs to share the “parents’ guilt” with her coworkers. For example, when the kid is sick and the parent has to be at work, it is relieving to talk about it with colleagues to vent and relate to others who identify with the same experience.

Employee parents discussed the need of support from their peers. Jenny stated, “Mostly, I share the struggles because some of my colleagues are also friends, so I need their support.” The participants stated that they need to vent and share struggles with colleagues who they are especially close with if they are parents, so they understand parents’ struggles. They seek empathy, advice, and emotional support from close colleagues.

Stacy explained that she uses the same story but she filters it depending on who she is talking with. She explained, “I shape the same story depending on my audience, the more vulnerable I feel, the less people I share it with.” Stacy said with most coworkers, she shares broad experiences; everybody can relate to them, but with coworkers who are friends, she discloses more knowing that she will not be judged as a mom.

Work related issues with supervisors.

The participants asserted that whether they talk about their children with supervisors depends on whether their relationship with their supervisor is formal or informal. If it is formal, they do not share stories about their kids with supervisors unless the supervisor initiates the conversation about milestones, health conditions or ask about kids generally. The only reason employees talk about their kids with supervisor formally if it is work related. “I do not need sympathy or emotional support from my supervisor but practical things,” Jenny stated. Some of these things could be if the employee parents need coverage for their shift, have to leave work early, or need approval to work from home. If the relationship between subordinates and supervisor is informal, they talk about their families and relate to the parent talk as parents. Adam said, “My interaction with my supervisor is not structured by the power dynamics, we are part of the same community because ‘it takes a village’ to raise a child.” Another participant, Daisy reported, “My supervisor is very friendly and family oriented, so it is easy to talk with her about my family.”

Parent Talk is Perceived Positively if ...

The participants indicated that the perception of parent talk is determined upon two conditions: if the talk is relatable and if the parent talk does not interfere with productivity.

Parent talk to other parents.

The participants explained that other parent employees tended to understand what they were going through. Employee parents provide support, advice, and confirmation to other each other, and, as such, are perceived positively. The participants also indicated that moms are more inclined to talk about their kids than the dads because moms are often the primary caretaker of the kids. Scott, who is a staff member and a father of one boy, said, “I like to talk to moms

because they know what is going on with the kids, especially the developmental stages, while dads may not notice it if they are not that involved.” Adam mentioned, “In our American culture, women just tend to be talking more about kids because it is their primary role. They are expected to take care of the kids and carry a lot of the burden of parenting.” Zoey concurred and explained that moms are more interested and understanding in regards to parent talk because they are the main caregivers if they follow the traditional parenting role; the mom does most of the work for the kids. Hence, it is not surprising that moms talk more about their kids because they are more involved with their kids, so they have more stories to tell, situations to vent about, or need support than dads.

“People without kids do not understand the need for flexibility for parents,” Zoey said. Participants echoed that some colleagues who are not parents do not identify with employee parents’ situation when things come up with kids and that results in not getting some work done. Zoey, explained, “Peers perceive talking about being a parent positively if they have kids or can relate; do not have kids but love kids. If they do not have or love kids, you get the impression, it is not perceived positively.” Colleagues would perceive parent talk as a waste of their time if it is not an interest for them and they cannot relate. However, if supervisors start the conversation, colleagues without kids might not perceive it negatively because of the supervisor authority over the subordinates. Also, if colleagues or supervisor initiate the conversation about kids, that means they perceive the parent talk positively. Jenny explained “I think it is positive, if my colleagues are initiating the conversation.”

If employee parents are getting their work done.

“I am responsible at work, get my project done, they can count on me. I volunteer, too. I do not want to give any excuses. I am productive and get good feedback,” Jenny said. Employee

parent talk is perceived positively if it does not interfere with employee parents' productivity.

Scott explained that if the employees are getting their work done, quick conversations about their families will not be perceived negatively. He added, "There is a time and a place to talk about your kids and a five minute conversation at work is not unprofessional."

Employee Parent Talk Improves our Work with Colleagues

The participants pointed out that parent talk improves their relationships with their coworkers and consequently improves their work. Participants indicated knowing about the personal lives of their coworkers eased working with them because they become more understanding when issues come up. If coworkers know about others' personal lives, it helps to figure out how to interact with them. "Talking about my family makes my relationships closer with my coworkers because it make us more human and relatable," Zoey said. "Because it gives a person, a little more depth as human beings. We all have common things as human beings and as parents," Joe, a manager and a father of one boy, commented. Stacy iterated, "When talking about our families, we are little warriors underneath all of us. It enhances our work because I can relate when they are open to hear about it. It makes our work better." Adam concurred, "It is kind of a bonding experience for parents to talk about their kids while they are at work. It reveals to each other what kind of person I am, because this is my context, so that allows us to have better insight and we can then work more effectively." When employee parents share their struggles and successes with other colleagues, the employee parent talk serves as a bond. The coworkers must know what parents are going through, especially when things are not going well, "They must know what is happening with my family. I am seeking understanding that I am stressed out from a problem at home," Stacy said.

Discussion

This study explored how, why, and with whom people talk about their families in the workplace. It also explored how employee parents think parent talk is perceived by others and how it influences their relationship with their coworkers. The four themes that emerged complement prior research (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Odden & Sias, 1997; Cahill & Sias, 1997; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000; McCarthy, 2000; Crossling & Ward, 2002; Guirdham, 1999; Zorn & Violanti, 1996).

Participants' insights into the intersection and interdependence between work and life is consistent with extant research that suggests that small talk is important to achieve organizational goals (McCarthy, 2000). Participants indicated that work affected family and vice versa, so it is expected that they would talk about personal life at work. Parent talk as part of small talk comes up sometimes to coordinate work issues and other times to vent about a family problem and then focus at work.

Participants also describe seeking emotional support from colleagues. This, too, confirms previous scholars claims that there are three types of workplace relationships: information peer, collegial peer, and special peer. Each type of relationship offers different opportunities for growth and some level of trust and self-disclosure (Odden & Sias, 1997; Kram & Isabella, 1985). The participants indicated that the closer the relationships they have with their colleagues, the more they trust them, and, in turn, they share more about their kids. Depending on the type of workplace relationships, employee parents choose what kind of stories they tell about their kids and how many details they disclose.

A focus on emotional support confirms previous scholars claims that higher quality coworker relationships function as emotional support whether it is work related or personal life

related (Cahill & Sias, 1997; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). The participants acknowledged that their colleagues offer informational, instrumental, and emotional support when employee parents talk about their kids and when they need advice, resources, or verbal affirmation.

Under the second theme, employee parents reported talk about work related issues with supervisors which confirms previous scholars claims about the importance of supervisor's role and its impact on the work environment (Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). The participants mentioned that the main reason for parent talk with their supervisor is work accommodation (i.e. approval to leave work early or work from home). Most participants referred to their relationship with their supervisor as formal because the supervisor provided feedback and evaluated their work, which limited their small talk to work issues.

The fourth theme which focuses on how employee parent talk improved the employees' work is consistent with extant research that claims higher quality of coworker relationships has a significant effect on increasing job satisfaction and performance, and employee's well-being (Cahill & Sias, 1997; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Participants indicated that parent talk is a way to build relationships with their colleagues, which has a positive impact on their job satisfaction and work effectiveness.

The fourth theme is also consistent with extant research that suggests informal communication in the workplace (i.e. small talk) is significant to work productivity in a teamwork settings and build relationships between colleagues (Crossling & Ward, 2002; Guirdham, 1999; Zorn & Violanti, 1996). Participants mentioned that parent talk helps them to understand their coworkers on a personal level which makes it easier to collaborate and work with them when problems came up.

This study and the results yielded from it can be beneficial to organizations to help them understand what functions, reasons, and effect talking about being parents has on the coworkers. The results of this study could be presented to organizations to highlight the importance of peer relationships and subordinate- supervisor relationships through small talk and facilitate further discussions about the positive outcomes from informal communication. It is also helpful for employee parents to realize just when talking about parenting is beneficial; parent talk can help to build relationships, create a positive environment and thus make work more effective but if parent talk is detrimental; it can be a distraction from doing the tasks.

The concept of work/life balance came up repeatedly during the interviews. The participants indicated that it is a personal choice to merge the line between professional and personal life and talk about personal life at work. Libby, a faculty member and a mom of one girl, said, "It is like we want to be respected for being professionals here at work, so we kind of hide that part of ourselves that is maternal." On the other hand, some working parents encourage the conversation about their personal life at work. "I have established that a big part of my identity is being a mom, so the first thing my colleagues ask me about is my kids," Sarah said.

This study's small pool of participants is a shortcoming. A larger sample pool would provide more in-depth data and better highlight many topics related to parent talk. Future research could expand our understanding by considering gender similarities and differences that may influence parent talk and how it is perceived. In this study, there was not large enough participants pool to make claims about differing experiences based on gender, yet gender roles of parenting that is relevant to parent talk were brought up in the interviews in some ways. For example, Adam who is a faculty and a dad for four kids stated that male employee parents often use their privileges as dads without being judged (i.e. leaving a few minutes early to pick up the

kids from school). On the other hand, moms are either expected to be the “super women” and balance it all or choose between work and family. For future research, it is important to consider the type of organization and the nature of the work for employees, because it may affect how much parent talk the employees could have with their colleagues. For example, the academic setting is different than other industry specific organizations, where faculty and staff do their tasks individually, employees in other organizations work more collectively and in teams than faculty and staff.

Conclusion

Small talk serves as a means to achieve transactional and relational goals in the workplace. This study aimed to discuss how and with whom employee parents talk about their families in the workplace and how this talk is perceived by themselves and by others. Qualitative methods provided rich description and deep understanding of the communicative aspects about parenting in organizations. The findings indicate that coworkers talk about their families in the workplace because of the intersection and interdependence between work and personal life and because of the tension between identities. When talking about their families, employee parents seek emotional support from their peers while they seek work related approval from their supervisors. Overall, employee parent talk is perceived positively by others if colleagues initiate the conversation, if the colleagues are parents themselves, so they identify with the situation, or if employee parents’ work is getting done on time, so talking about families is not an excuse to not do their work. Furthermore, including personal lives in the workplace conversations helps to get the coworkers to build relationships and work effectively.

Here is some advice the participants and the researcher are suggesting to make more space for working parent. Creating family friendly events for the employees to feel that the

organization cares about their personal lives. Supervisors could set a tone for how much small talk is allowed during the work day, so small talk would not interfere with work productivity. Providing a counselor or a life coach for employees may help them solve their problems and understand themselves more which then could spill over into their work and prepare them to manage complex issues and make better decisions.

References

- Adams, B. N. (1964). Structural factors affecting parental aid to married children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 327-331.
- Belsky, J., & Rovine, M. (1984). Social-network contact, family support, and the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 455-462.
- Belsky, J., Spanier, G. B., & Rovine, M. (1983). Stability and change in marriage across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 567-577.
- Bost, K. K., Cox, M. J., Burchinal, M. R., & Payne, C. (2002). Structural and supportive changes in couples' family and friendship networks across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64(2), 517-531.
- Brunetto, Y., Xerri, M., Shriberg, A., Farr-Wharton, R., Shacklock, K., Newman, S., & Dienger, J. (2013). The impact of workplace relationships on engagement, well-being, commitment and turnover for nurses in Australia and the USA. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 69(12), 2786-2799.
- Brown, G., Gillian, B., & Yule, G. (1983). *Discourse analysis*. Cambridge university press.
- Campbell, K. S., White, C. D., & Johnson, D. E. (2003). Leader-member relations as a function of rapport management. *The Journal of Business Communication* (1973), 40(3), 170-194.
- Cahill, Daniel J., and Patricia M. Sias. The perceived social costs and importance of seeking emotional support in the workplace: Gender differences and similarities. *Communication Research Reports* 14, no. 2 (1997): 231-240.
- Chiaburu, D. S., & Harrison, D. A. (2008). Do coworkers make the place? Conceptual synthesis and meta-analysis of lateral social influences in organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(5), 1082-1103.

- Cochran, M., & Walker, S. K. (1993). Parenting and personal social networks. *Parenting: An Ecological Perspective*, 149-178.
- Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological bulletin*, 98(2), 310.
- Cowan, C. P., Cowan, P. A., Heming, G., & Miller, N. B. (1991). Becoming a family: Marriage, parenting, and child development. *Family Transitions*, 79-109.
- Crosling, G., & Ward, I. (2002). Oral communication: The workplace needs and uses of business graduate employees. *English for Specific Purposes*, 21(1), 41-57.
- Fletcher, J., & EBSCOhost eBook Collection. (1999). *Disappearing acts gender, power and relational practice at work*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Guirdham, M. (2011). *Communicating across cultures at work*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
- Holmes, J. (2000). Doing collegiality and keeping control at work: Small talk in government departments. In J. Coupland (Ed.), *Small talk* (pp. 32-61). Harlow, England: Pearson Education
- Holmes, J., & Fillary, R. (2000). Handling small talk at work: Challenges for workers with intellectual disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 47(3), 273-291.
- Holmes, J., & Stubbe, M. (2003). *Power and politeness in the workplace*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Pearson Education
- Holmes, J., & Marra, M. (2004). Relational practice in the workplace: Women's talk or gendered discourse? *Language in Society*, 33(3), 377.

- Kram, K. E., & Isabella, L. A. (1985). Mentoring alternatives: The role of peer relationships in career development. *Academy of Management Journal*, 28, 110–132.
- Levy-Shiff, R. (1994). Individual and contextual correlates of marital change across the transition to parenthood. *Developmental Psychology*, 30(4), 591.
- Levitt, M. J., Weber, R. A., & Clark, M. C. (1986). Social network relationships as sources of maternal support and well-being. *Developmental Psychology*, 22(3), 310.
- Manning, J., & Kunkel, A. (2013). *Researching interpersonal relationships: Qualitative methods, studies, and analysis*. Sage Publications.
- Mak, B. C. N., & Chui, H. L. (2013). A cultural approach to small talk: A double-edged sword of sociocultural reality during socialization into the workplace. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 8(2), 118-133.
- McCarthy, M. (2000). Mutually captive audiences: Small talk and the genre of close contact service encounters. In J. Coupland (Ed.), *Small talk* (pp. 84-109). Harlow, England: Pearson Education
- Mikkelsen, A. C., Hesse, C., & Sloan, D. (2017). Relational Communication Messages and Employee Outcomes in Supervisor/Employee Relationships. *Communication Reports*, 30(3), 142–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08934215.2017.1300677>
- Miller, B. C., & Sollie, D. L. (1980). Normal stresses during the transition to parenthood. In *Coping with life crises* (pp. 129-138). Springer, Boston, MA.
- Odden, C. M., & Sias, P. M. (1997). Peer communication relationships, psychological climate, and gender. *Communication Quarterly*, 45, 153–166

- Pullin, P. (2010). Small talk, rapport, and international communicative competence. *The Journal of Business Communication*, 47(4), 455. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/756820945?accountid=14691>
- Richmond, Virginia P., & McCroskey, James C. (2000). The impact of supervisor and subordinate immediacy on relational and organizational outcomes. *Communication Monographs*, 67(1), 85-95.
- Tannen, D. (1994). *Talking from 9 to 5: How women's and men's conversational styles affect who gets heard, who gets credit, and what gets done at work*. William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10019
- Terry, D. J. (1991). Stress, coping and adaptation to new parenthood. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 8(4), 527-547.
- Toombs, A. L., Morrissey, K., Simpson, E., Gray, C. M., Vines, J., & Balaam, M. (2018, April). Supporting the complex social lives of new parents. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (p. 420). ACM.
- Wainwright, W. H. (1966). Fatherhood as a precipitant of mental illness. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 123(1), 40-44.