

Work-family interaction strain: coping strategies used by successful women in the public, corporate and self-employed sectors of the economy

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The main objective of this study was to identify the coping strategies used by successful South African women of all races in dealing with work-family interaction strain. Using a transactional approach, the study also investigated cognitive appraisal as a key antecedent of coping with work-family interaction strain. A survey was conducted with a sample comprising 110 women in the public, corporate and self-employed sectors of the economy. All the participants were married with at least one child of pre school or school going age. The women worked in positions from middle management and higher in corporate or public sector organisations or were business owners with at least four employees. Quantitative and qualitative data were obtained by means of a self-report questionnaire. The main finding of the study showed that the participants used both emotional and problem-focused coping strategies to deal with the hypothetical work-family interaction strain situation. These strategies were positive reappraisal, planful problem solving, self-controlling and seeking social support. Not one of these coping strategies was significantly favoured above the others. The study did not find evidence of a relationship between the participants' cognitive appraisal of the hypothetical situation and their choice of coping strategy, except with regard to cognitive appraisal, control and the coping strategy, escape avoidance; the higher the participant scored on cognitive appraisal, control, the less likely they were to choose escape-avoidance as a coping strategy in dealing with the situation. The article discusses these findings in relation to past studies in other countries and suggestions for further research are presented.

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One of the most significant trends of our time is the continuous rise in the number of married women entering the labour market. This trend is evident world wide as well as in South Africa. In the United States of America, in 84% of married couples both the husband and wife worked in 1997 (Morris, 1997). In South Africa, the percentage of married women participating in the paid labour market increased from 19,7% in 1944 to 61,04 % in 1991 (Smit, 1995). This increasing participation in the labour market has not, however, liberated women from family responsibilities. When married women with children have to manage both work and family, questions regarding personal well being and coping arise. This study investigated the question of how women cope with these dual demands.

The literature on the conflict between work and family roles was reviewed by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), who suggested that work-family conflict exists when *time* devoted to the requirements of one role, *strain* from participation in one role, and *specific behaviours* required by one role make it difficult to fulfil the requirements of another role. Work schedules, work orientation, marriage, children, and spouse employment patterns may all create pressures for increasing participation in the work role or the family role. When these time pressures are incompatible with the role domain, conflict is experienced. Work-family interaction strain was described by Parry and Warr (1980) as the strain experienced by employed women in coping with both domestic and paid work.

However, it is not only the challenge of daily logistics that creates work-family interaction strain. Social expectations regarding women's role behaviour may also create strain. When faced with competing demands at work and at home, less commitment to the job is expected by employers for women than for men (Rosen & Jerdee, in Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Non-compliance with the expectation that women are less committed to their jobs, may cause sanctions from others, as well as sanction from the woman herself, manifesting as guilt. The effects of gender-role socialisation may inhibit or circumscribe women's achievement behaviour in their work roles. In 1987 Gilbert and Rachlin stated that a widely held view at the time was that a career and a family is a 'given' for a man, but that a woman 'is trying to have it all'.

Yet, despite the strain imposed by societal expectations and the challenge of juggling daily logistics, an increasing number of women are choosing to combine work and family. A review of the literature reveals a need for further research on the coping strategies women use in dealing with work-family interaction strain. Many studies of stress and coping have failed to include women as participants. According to Fitzgerald and Betz (in Fassinger & Richie, 1994) and Greenglass (1995) there is a need for investigating adult women who are established in the work setting, as very little is known about the vocational process of most of the population, except if they are white, upper or middle class, college students, and North American.

Working from within a transactional approach, Folkman and Lazarus developed the *cognitive appraisal model*, which postulates that coping responses are constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person. Their approach focuses on the process of what the person actually thinks and does in a specific stressful encounter, and how this changes as the encounter unfolds. They suggest that coping has two major functions: the regulation of distressing emotions (emotion-focused coping) and doing something to positively change the problem causing the distress (problem-focused coping). The model stresses the contextual nature of coping and sees it as influenced by the person's appraisal of the actual demands in the encounter and resources for managing the demands (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Folkman and Lazarus (1988) found that people used significantly less planful problem-solving and distancing in encounters that involved concern for a loved one's well-being and that more planful problem-solving and self-control were used in encounters that involved a goal at work.

The main objective of the study was to identify the coping strategies used by successful women in the public, corporate and self-employed sectors of the economy in dealing with work-family interaction strain. The women were regarded as successful if they worked in positions from middle management and higher in corporate and public sector organisations or were business owners with at least four employees. According to Neft and Levine (1997) one of the fastest-growing areas for working

women is self-employment. Of the 40,000 South African entrepreneurs who have received loans from the Small Business Development Corporation since its founding in 1981, about 25% have been women (Neft & Levine, 1997). The October 1995 household survey found that of the overall number of managers in South Africa, 22% were women. In comparison the percentage of managers who were women were estimated at 40% in the United States of America and between 20% and 30% in Europe (Guyon, 1998).

Past studies suggest that successful women use coping styles that involve the active and direct use of one's self in dealing with events over which one clearly feels some sense of control (Long, 1990; McDonald & Korabick, 1991). Therefore, a more specific question examined whether the women in the sample preferred confrontive coping, accepting responsibility, self-controlling, and planful-problem solving as coping styles. A further question investigated the relationship between work-family interaction strain and coping strategies and explored whether women who experienced less interaction strain, used similar coping strategies.

Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis and Gruen (1986) found that variability in coping is at least partially a function of people's judgements about what is at stake (primary appraisal) in specific stressful encounters and what they view as the options for coping (secondary appraisal). The study therefore investigated the extent to which the cognitive appraisal of the situation influenced the interaction strain experienced by the women in the sample and their choice of coping strategy.

The study also examined race as a variable by investigating whether the coping strategies used by black women made use of social support and positive reappraisal as coping styles to a higher degree than white women. In the US Richie (1992) found that blacks (relative to their white counterparts) use more diverse and flexible coping responses in stressful situations. These coping responses included greater use of informal social support networks and more frequent appraisal of stressful events as discriminatory.

Finally, as success in the public sector possibly depends on creating ties with others and entails seeking social support, it was thought that it would be of interest to explore whether women in the public sector used coping strategies in the domains of seeking social support to a greater degree than women in the corporate and self-employed sectors of the economy.

Method

Participants

The participants were married women living with their husbands and having at least one child of pre school or school going age. In corporations, the women were employed on a full-time basis in positions of middle management and higher. Middle management was defined as Peromnes jobgrade eight or the equivalent thereof, depending on the job grading system used by the organisation. Business owners were regarded as successful if they employed at least four people.

This study attempted to reach a large number of women from a variety of organisations, distributed throughout all the major regions of South Africa, investigating their coping responses to a prescribed hypothetical work-family interaction strain situation. From a total of 230 questionnaires distributed, one hundred and ten questionnaires were returned from women who complied with the selection criteria. Eighty one (73.6 %) from women who identified themselves as european, white, or white african; six (5.5 %) from women who identified themselves as

coloured or asian; and 19 (17.3 %) from women who identified themselves as black, black african or african. Four (3.6 %) women did not give their racial identification. The majority of the women who participated, (72.7 %, $n = 80$), were between the ages of 30 and 45. Of the total number of participants, 65.5 % ($n = 72$) earned more than R 10, 000.00 per month. When the total income of both the participants and their husbands were combined, 80 % ($n = 88$) indicated that they earned more than R 14, 000.00 per month. Two (1.8 %) of the returned questionnaires could not be used as the women did not comply with the sampling criteria. One (0.4 %) questionnaire was returned as undeliverable. Based on 230 questionnaires, the return rate was 47.8 %.

Measures

The questionnaire contained measures for the variables work-family interaction strain, cognitive appraisal, and coping.

Interaction strain

Interaction strain was measured using the Home and Employment Role scale (HER scales, Parry & Warr, 1980). This scale was devised by Parry and Warr as part of the HER scales in order to provide an index of the strain experienced by an employed mother in coping with both domestic and paid work. This interaction strain scale consists of 12 items. The response alternatives are Yes, true; No, untrue; and Don't know. Responses are scored 3, 1 and 2 respectively. Items 2; 3; 8; 9 and 10 are reversed scored. According to Parry and Warr, a high score is indicative of high interaction strain. Internal reliability of the instrument is demonstrated by coefficient alpha 0.75. However, using a covariance matrix for the analysis, the present study computed the internal reliability of the interaction strain scale from the data of this South African sample and found Cronbach's coefficient alpha to be 0.68. The possible scores range from 12 to 36, with a mid-point of 24.

The general assessment of work-family interaction strain was followed by a *description of a hypothetical work-family interaction strain situation*. In this hypothetical situation, a work demand and a family demand come into conflict. The situation read as follows:

You have a very important and urgent assignment at work, which has to be finished within a couple of days. You know that the successful completion of this assignment will have a positive impact on your career. However, one of your children has suddenly taken seriously ill. There is no one emotionally close to the child to take care of the child. Although you can pay someone to take care of the child, you are not sure if this will be the right thing to do.

The participants were asked how often they had to deal with a situation such as the one described, on a Likert-type scale ranging from never (1) to very often (5). They were then asked to rate the extent to which they experienced the situation as stressful on a scale ranging from not at all stressful (1) to extremely stressful (5).

Cognitive appraisal

Cognitive appraisal was assessed by asking the participant to estimate the degree of threat and controllability provoked by the description of a hypothetical work-family conflict situation. The items used to measure cognitive appraisal were those devised by Folkman and her co-workers (Folkman et al., 1986) in a study to examine the functional relations among cognitive appraisal and coping processes, and their short term outcomes within stressful encounters. As the aim of the present study was to investigate the cognitive appraisal of the participants and their choice of

coping strategies in terms of a hypothetical situation, these measures were considered to be appropriate. The degree of perceived threat was examined by 13 items measuring primary appraisal of the situation as used by Folkman et al. (1986). The fourteenth item was an open question, which allowed the respondent to add any threat, which they thought might apply to the hypothetical situation. The respondents rated the degree to which each statement applied to the hypothetical situation with five response options: from 1 (does not apply) to 5 (applies a great deal). These measures were aggregated and were treated as an index of the degree of perceived threat. The possible scores for the primary appraisal of threat, ranged from 13 to 65, with a mid-point of 39. The degree of perceived control was measured by two items: "To what extent is the situation described above one: (a) that you can change or do something about; (b) that you have to accept" (Folkman, et al., 1986). The respondents rated the degree, to which these two statements applied to the hypothetical situation by choosing from five response options, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). These measures were aggregated and were treated as an index of the degree of perceived control. The possible scores for the secondary appraisal of control, ranged from 2 to 10, with a mid-point of 6. The possible scores for cognitive appraisal total ranged from 21 to 68, with a mid-point of 44.5. Using a covariance matrix for the analysis, the present study computed the internal reliability of the cognitive appraisal measure from the data of this South African sample and found coefficient alpha to be 0.91.

Coping

Coping was measured by using the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ; Folkman & Lazarus, 1988), which was developed in order to measure coping in terms of the person-environment relationship. Participants in the present study related the coping questions to the hypothetical work-family conflict situation described previously. The WCQ contains eight 4- to 8- item coping scales, which are scored individually and describe various ways in which people cope with stressful events. The eight coping scales as described in the Ways of Coping Manual (1988) are presented in Table 1.

The WCQ has 66 items. Sixteen of the items are not scored (Ways of Coping Manual, 1988). The respondents responded on a Likert-type scale for each item, ranging from 'does not apply and/or was not used' (0), to 'used a great deal' (3). A mean score, which could range from 0 to 3, described how often a subject used each of the eight types of coping. Higher scores indicated greater use of a given style (Ways of Coping Manual,

1988).

Folkman and Lazarus (Ways of Coping Manual, 1988) reported on the scale's internal consistency, with alpha coefficients ranging from .61 to .79. They asserted that the WCQ has construct validity as was demonstrated by the convergence between the theoretical predictions of their model and the results of their empirical studies. According to the manual, because the Ways of Coping Questionnaire measures coping processes, which by definition are variable, traditional test-retest estimates of reliability are inappropriate. The manual suggests that reliability could, however, be evaluated by examining the internal consistency of the coping measure, estimated with Cronbach's coefficient alpha. Using a covariance matrix for the analysis, the present study computed the internal reliability of each of the coping scales from the data of this South African sample and found Cronbach's coefficient alpha to range from 0.44 (self-controlling) to 0.78 (seeking social support).

Demographic information

Demographic information items covered age, social support, domestic and childcare contribution by husband, physical health, relaxation and exercise habits, job level and income: individual and per family.

In order to give the participants the opportunity to speak beyond the limitations of closed questions, the questionnaire concluded with an open-ended section. In this open-ended section the respondents described, in their own words, the experience of having work and family responsibilities. This section also included a sub-section in which the respondents were given the opportunity to write down any further comment they wished to add.

Procedure

A purposive sampling procedure was used to select the participants. Therefore, only those women who were judged to best meet the purposes of the study were approached to participate. In the Corporate and Public Sector a wide variety of organisations were approached and the selection criteria were explained to a contact person at the organisation. The contact person then selected prospective participants from the organisation's database. The researcher then approached the prospective participants telephonically and invited them to participate in the project. Where organisations were unwilling to divulge information about their employees, the contact persons then distributed a number of questionnaires to women

Table 1. The eight coping scales as described in the *Ways of Coping Manual (1988)*

Confrontive Coping	describes aggressive efforts to alter the situation and suggests some degree of hostility and risk-taking.
Distancing	describes cognitive efforts to detach oneself and to minimize the significance of the situation.
Self-controlling	describes efforts to regulate one's feelings and actions.
Seeking Social Support	describes efforts to seek informational support, tangible support, and emotional support.
Accepting Responsibility	acknowledges one's own role in the problem with a concomitant theme of trying to put things right.
Escape-Avoidance	describes wishful thinking and behavioural efforts to escape or avoid the problem. Items on this scale contrast with those in the Distancing scale, which suggest detachment.
Planful Problem Solving	describes deliberate problem-focused efforts to alter the situation, coupled with an analytical approach to solving the problem.
Positive Reappraisal	describes efforts to create positive meaning by focusing on personal growth. It also has a religious dimension.

Table 2. Mean Scores for Coping Strategies for Self-employed, Corporate, and Public Sector Women

Coping Strategy	Employment Sector	N	M	SD	SE
Confrontive coping	self-employed	15	10.93	1.43	.37
	corporate sector	57	11.66	2.72	.36
	public sector	38	11.92	2.76	.44
	Total	110	11.65	2.60	.24
Distancing	self-employed	15	10.00	2.17	.56
	corporate sector	57	10.40	2.80	.37
	public sector	37	10.54	2.60	.42
	Total	109	10.39	2.64	.25
Self-controlling	self-employed	15	15.20	2.9	.76
	corporate sector	57	16.49	2.71	.35
	public sector	37	17.18	3.33	.54
	Total	109	16.55	3.00	.28
Seeking social support	self-employed	15	15.53	3.24	.83
	corporate sector	57	15.15	3.78	.50
	public sector	38	15.50	4.30	.69
	Total	110	15.32	3.87	.36
Accepting responsibility	self-employed	15	8.20	2.88	.74
	corporate sector	57	7.50	2.36	.31
	public sector	38	8.23	3.00	.48
	Total	110	7.85	2.67	.25
Escape-avoidance	self-employed	15	11.73	3.82	.98
	corporate sector	57	12.49	3.41	.45
	public sector	38	11.68	3.79	.61
	Total	110	12.10	3.59	.34
Planful problem solving	self-employed	15	17.40	3.13	.80
	corporate sector	57	16.89	3.24	.42
	public sector	38	17.26	3.93	.63
	Total	110	17.09	3.46	.32
Positive reappraisal	self-employed	15	17.60	3.86	.99
	corporate sector	57	17.43	4.17	.55
	public sector	37	18.27	3.96	.65
	Total	109	17.74	4.04	.38

they either selected from the database or were known to them to fit the sample criteria. By using a snowballing technique, each prospective participant approached by the researcher was asked to supply the contact details of other women who complied with the sample criteria. A leaflet stipulating the criteria for selection and a request that the participant forward the contact details of other prospective participants known to her, was included with the questionnaire. These referrals were then followed up telephonically.

Business owners who complied with the selection criteria were selected from the membership of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), and women who complied with the sample criteria were asked to make contact with the researcher. A variation of the leaflet included with the questionnaires was distributed with the association's quarterly newsletter, inviting the women, who complied with the sample criteria, to contact the researcher.

Prospective participants were also selected from the membership of The Executive Women's Club of South Africa. The Women's Directory, which lists leading women in a variety of fields in South Africa, supplied a number of prospective participants. To a lesser extent women were identified through their prominence in the media; through a magazine aimed at working women and other business organisations. The women who were approached were geographically distributed throughout all the major regions of South Africa. The employment sectors sampled included banking and financial services, mining, telecommunications, print media, retail, production, transport, parastatals, local and national government departments, members of parliament, as well as business owners. As the respondents were not required to identify themselves or the organisations for which they worked, it was not possible to establish to what extent the returned questionnaires were representative of the respective employment sectors.

The questionnaires were mailed, or delivered by hand, to the prospective participants in an envelope; which also contained a brief covering letter, outlining the background to the research, details for the return of the questionnaire and the contact details of the researcher; as well as a pre-paid return addressed envelope. Prospective participants were followed-up either telephonically or via e-mail about three to four weeks after the questionnaires had been sent to them.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative techniques of data analysis were used. For the quantitative analysis the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows Version 8.0 was used. For all statistical procedures the significance level was set at 0.05. The data from the open-ended section was analysed according to the guidelines provided by Dey (1993). The data was first organised by identifying broad themes. From these themes, various categories were identified.

A one-way analysis of variance was computed to establish whether the participants chose any of the coping strategies significantly more than others. The data was organised to determine whether the preferred strategies were emotion-focussed or problem-focussed. To investigate whether participants who experienced less interaction strain used similar coping strategies, the sample was divided into two subgroups consisting of those participants who measured lower on interaction strain (one standard deviation below the mean) and those who measured higher on interaction strain (one standard deviation above the mean). A Pearson correlation was executed between interaction strain and each coping scale.

A multiple linear regression analysis using a stepwise technique was conducted to determine if there was a relationship between the cognitive appraisal of the situation and interaction strain. Simple linear regression analyses were computed to determine if

Table 3. Analysis of Variance for Choice of Coping Strategies

		df	F	Sig.
Confrontive Coping	Between Groups	2	.772	.465
	Within Groups	107		
	Total	109		
Distancing	Between Groups	2	.220	.803
	Within Groups	106		
	Total	108		
Self-Controlling	Between Groups	2	2.149	.094
	Within Groups	106		
	Total	108		
Seeking Social Support	Between Groups	2	.111	.895
	Within Groups	107		
	Total	109		
Accepting Responsibility	Between Groups	2	.992	.374
	Within Groups	107		
	Total	109		
Escape Avoidance	Between Groups	2	.665	.516
	Within Groups	107		
	Total	109		
Planful Problem Solving	Between Groups	2	.196	.823
	Within Groups	107		
	Total	109		
Positive Reappraisal	Between Groups	2	.481	.619
	Within Groups	106		
	Total	108		

there was a relationship between the cognitive appraisal and choice of coping strategy.

To explore whether black women used the coping strategies of social support and positive reappraisal to a higher degree, a t-test was used comparing the coping strategies of the black women versus the rest of the sample. A one-way analysis of variance was done to examine whether those working in the public sector used coping strategies to a greater extent in the domains of seeking social support.

After conducting both the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the final step was to integrate the findings.

Results

The mean scores for coping strategies for self-employed, corporate and public sector women are reported in Table 2. The analysis of variance for choice of coping strategies is shown in Table 3.

The main finding of this study showed that the participants preferred using both emotional and problem-focused coping strategies in an integrated manner in dealing with a work-family interaction strain situation. These strategies were positive reappraisal, planful problem solving, self-controlling, and seeking social support. Not one of these coping strategies was chosen significantly more often than any of the other, which implied that the participants incorporated all the different coping strategies to a greater or lesser extent in attempting to deal with the hypothetical situation. The participants, regardless of employment sector, chose similar coping strategies in their

attempt to deal with the hypothetical work-family interaction strain situation. Regarding race, black african women in the sample chose self-controlling significantly more often than the rest of the participants ($t(103) = 2,429$, $p < 0.05$). It, therefore, seems as if this sample of black african managers were able to control their emotions and actions to a greater degree than the rest of the participants when dealing with this hypothetical work family interaction-strain situation.

From the possible score range of 12 to 36, with a mid-point of 24, the respondents had a mean score of 21.6 ($n = 97$, $SD = 5.02$) on the general measure of interaction strain. The participants, in response to the open question on what it was like to have work and family responsibilities, described the strain and frustrations involved in attempting to cope with both these roles. However, it was clear that on this general measurement of work-family interaction strain, they did not score high on interaction strain. Apparently, the women were able to prevent work-family concerns from causing excessive strain, knowing that in fact their children were well cared for in their absence. The study also found that women who scored high on work-family interaction strain, more often chose accepting responsibility as a coping option for dealing with the hypothetical situation, than women who scored low on work-family interaction strain ($r(97) = 0.244$, $p < 0.05$). Normally choosing accepting responsibility as a coping strategy in a situation describing a work problem would be a wise and problem-focused way of coping. Given the specific context of the hypothetical situation, to choose accepting responsibility in this context may imply that the participant either felt responsible for the child becoming ill or more likely, for working and

therefore putting her and her family in this predicament. No evidence was found that women, who experienced less work-family interaction strain, used similar coping strategies.

As suggested by the literature, the study confirmed that women who scored high on cognitive appraisal, control in dealing with the hypothetical situation, also had lower work-family interaction strain scores ($r(73) = -0.297, p < 0.05$). There was no evidence of a relationship between the participants' cognitive appraisal of the hypothetical situation and their choice of coping strategy in dealing with this situation, except regarding cognitive appraisal, control and the coping strategy, escape-avoidance. The higher the participants scored on cognitive appraisal, control, the less they would choose escape-avoidance as a coping strategy in dealing with this situation ($r(82) = -0.319, p < 0.01$). Hence, the results of this study do not give unequivocal confirmation for the association between situational appraisals of control and active problem-solving coping strategies.

Of interest is that although 17 (15.5 %) women specifically mentioned the support they received from their husbands, the results indicated that the reality for the majority of the participants looked quite different. Figure 1 shows the average hours per day that the women and their husbands spent on childcare and domestic duties from Monday to Friday, as well as the average hours per day they spent on childcare and domestic duties from Saturday to Sunday. It is important to note that the hours per day spent on these duties were recorded as *perceived* by the women and that this might not be a true reflection of the actual time spent on these duties.

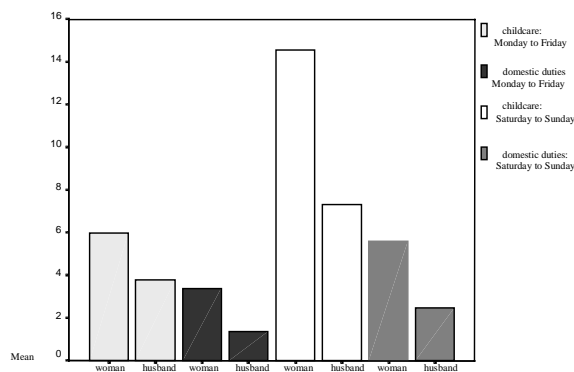


Figure 1. Childcare and domestic duties of the women and their husbands

Regarding childcare duties from Monday to Friday, the women on average spent 6.28 (SD = 6.99) hours per day on childcare; and from Saturday to Sunday, they spent an average of 14.53 (SD = 10.80) hours per day on childcare. In comparison their husbands spent an average of 3.84 (SD = 5.32) hours per day on childcare from Monday to Friday and an average of 7.26 (SD = 8.67) hours per day on childcare from Saturday to Sunday. On *domestic chores* the women spent an average of 3.83 (SD = 5.55) hours per day from Monday to Friday. From Saturday to Sunday, they spent an average of 5.55 (SD = 4.61) hours per day on domestic chores. Their husbands, however, spent an average of 1.34 (SD = 1.87) hours per day on domestic chores from Monday to Friday; and an average of 2.44 (SD = 3.04) hours per day on domestic chores from Saturday to Sunday.

On a day to day basis the women coped with work and family in various ways. During the week many reported that they relied on

paid domestic and childcare help. Over weekends they seemingly made up for this by dramatically increasing the time they spent with their children, far more than their husbands did. Although both husband and wife spent more time on domestic duties over the weekend than during the week, husbands still reportedly contributed far less than the participants did. The respondents emphasised the importance of compromise between work and home demands and of being well organised. One of the participants suggested the re-scheduling of that which could not be handled and warned against trying to be a superwoman. Religion was used on a daily basis to guide a number of the participants in coping with work and family responsibilities. "Pray" was how several women described how they coped. Other psychological attributes, which the participants regarded as important, were positive attitude, having strength of personality and a good self-image.

The self-employed women who took part in the study reported that they had greater flexibility in time. Working from home, although taken up as an option by a large section of the business owners in the study, was not without its complications as it was noted that always being available to the family may potentially increase the strain. Although 23.6 % ($n = 26$) of the participants had the option to work from home, only 10.9 % ($n = 12$) did. Therefore, although a notable number of women, especially business owners, are taking advantage of the increasing acceptability of working from home, this sample preferred working outside the home.

Discussion

The overall low work-family interaction strain score of the sample in this study seemed to indicate that the women as a group had work-family interaction strain under control. The participants judged by their job level, age and the ages of their children could be regarded as being fairly established in both their work and family roles and might therefore already have adjusted themselves in the work-family lifestyle. This finding seemingly supports Gilbert and Rachlin's (1987) view that as couples progress into the later stages of their marriages, the demands of establishing two careers, parenting young children, and developing strategies for dealing with work and family obligations are largely alleviated.

It has been reported that for working married women husband support can buffer the relationship between parental demands and work-family conflict (Holahan & Moos, 1986; Greenglass, 1995; Matsui, Ohsawa, & Onglatco, 1995). Indeed, in this study the majority of respondents indicated that their husbands supported the 'idea' of their working and that they participated in domestic and childcare duties. Therefore, this may be regarded as an important buffer against work-family interaction strain. However, as is clear from the above discussion of the findings, husband support did not necessarily translate into an equal sharing of domestic and childcare chores.

The possibility that the women's choice of coping strategies were limited by the realities of the context at work and at home was hinted at by a number of the respondents. The results implied that generally the women had accepted that they are primarily responsible for organising their lives in ways that enable them to combine work and family responsibilities. The danger of this acceptance of prime responsibility for coping with work and family is that it reduces the need for husbands, business, government and society-at-large to claim their share of this responsibility. Coping with the work-family lifestyle needs to be seen not as a women-only problem, but as one of the realities of modern parenthood.

According to Long (1990) women may not perceive active problem solving coping as appropriate in certain circumstances.

The absence of the more problem-focused coping strategies, confrontive coping and accepting responsibility, from the listing of coping strategies more often chosen in this sample, seemed to imply that the participants did not regard these two strategies as appropriate forms of coping within the work-family context described in the hypothetical situation.

The participants' cognitive appraisal of the hypothetical work-family interaction strain situation suggested controlling that which they regarded as changeable in the situation and accepting those aspects of the situation which they felt were not controllable. In this way, managing a compromise to maximise the security of both their jobs and the ill child in the situation. This finding supports the suggestion by Banyard and Graham-Bermann (1993) that coping should not only be seen as actions taken by and for the self, but that coping includes those actions used to maximise the survival of others (such as children, family and friends). Furthermore, it has been suggested that coping also has to do with evaluating how the stressor and strategies used to deal with it would impact on the welfare of others (Fine, in Banyard & Graham-Bermann, 1993).

Regarding secondary appraisal: control, the participants, given the particular nature of the hypothetical situation, apparently felt that there were aspects of the situation which were controllable, but that certain aspects, were equally uncontrollable and were best accepted. The results of the present study confirm the importance of secondary appraisal: control, in relation to stress, as those participants who appraised the hypothetical situation as highly controllable also had low work-family interaction strain scores.

The decision to work and have a family in itself plays an important role in the participants' motivation to cope with both their work and family responsibilities. Economic realities were often cited by the participants as having influenced their decision to continue living the work-family lifestyle. The women were financially well compensated and many explained that their salaries enabled them to buy superior childcare, education, or luxuries for their children. A number of responses also hinted at an excitement about having financial power.

The women participants in this study described how much they loved their jobs, and in order to continue working they were willing to cope with the work-family lifestyle. It is, however, clear that we still have a long way to go toward a seamless compatibility of work and family. This was notable in the open-ended responses which contained comments such as "I love my family and I love my work and keep finding myself having to decide what is more important too often".

Conclusion

This study has provided data on the coping strategies used by successful women in the public, corporate and self-employed sectors of South African society. Further research is needed to examine work-family interaction in other sectors. In focusing only on successful women, this study was clearly biased in favour of those who cope. It is likely that women with high work-family interaction strain leave the workforce early in their careers or do not reach the higher job levels covered within the scope of this study. Moreover, as participation in this study was voluntary, it might have been that case that only those women with low work-family interaction strain who are coping rather well may have had the time and inclination to participate in this study. The overall sample size is another limitation. Clearly, future studies should attempt to overcome these limitations. It would also be useful for future research to examine work-family interaction from the point of view of married men. Such

research would produce a fuller picture of work-family interaction that may useful inform policies on issues such as childcare and work hours.

Notes

As a result of non-responses, the total number of participants may vary on some measures.

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