

The Effectiveness of an Educational Program Based on the Threats and Opportunities of Remote Work for Dual-Career Couples During the COVID-19 Pandemic on Work-Family Conflict and Its Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of an educational program based on the threats and opportunities of remote work for dual-career couples during the COVID-19 pandemic on work-family conflict and its dimensions.

Method: This was a quantitative, applied research employing a quasi-experimental design, utilizing a pre-test/post-test with a control group. The sample consisted of dual-career couples from Kerman city who sought counseling for various reasons. Collaboration was negotiated with a private counseling center, and agreements were made. Couples scoring above the cutoff on the prepared questionnaires were purposively selected, resulting in 20 couples who were then randomly assigned to either the experimental group (10 couples) or the control group (10 couples). The experimental group underwent the educational program while the control group received no training. The data collection instrument was the work-family conflict questionnaire by Carlson et al. (2000). Data in the quantitative section were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance with the help of SPSS software.

Findings: Given that the computed F-value for the effect of groups on work-family conflict and its dimensions was statistically significant at the 5% level ($p < .05$), it can be concluded that there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups after the intervention, and the intervention significantly impacted work-family conflict and its dimensions. The Benferroni post-hoc test indicated that the effects of the educational program based on opportunities and threats of remote work on work-family conflict and its dimensions showed suitable stability during the follow-up phase.

Conclusion: Therefore, it can be concluded that the educational package derived from the lived experiences of dual-career couples during the quarantine period of the COVID-19 outbreak was effective on the dimensions of work-family conflict among couples, and this effect was also stable in the follow-up phase.

Keywords: Remote work for couples, COVID-19, Work-family conflict, Educational package.

1. Introduction

In December 2019, a new type of coronavirus was identified in the city of Wuhan, China, and quickly spread throughout China, contaminating many regions including Africa, the Americas, the Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, Southeast Asia, and the Western Pacific. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that may cause respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as MERS and SARS (Wu, 2020). On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) described the outbreak of the coronavirus as a pandemic and called on governments worldwide to take this matter seriously and prepare for the first wave of impacts on public health, one of the measures being the widespread lockdown in many countries (World Health Organization, 2020). With the initiation of lockdown and stay-at-home measures, a large part of the workforce was instructed to stay at home and continue their work remotely, if the nature of their job allowed it; organizations that were previously familiar with remote work, as well as those that had not previously experienced remote work, sent their employees home, creating conditions for the most extensive test of remote work in history (Galanti et al., 2021). Additionally, remote work represents a change in the way work is conducted that helps improve working conditions for employees and employers during the outbreak of COVID-19 and quarantine (Thompson-de Benoit & Kramer, 2021; Toscano & Zappalà, 2020); this form of virtual work has been introduced in the electronic age with the goal of achieving more flexible planning and the potential to improve the balance between work and social life in organizations.

Today, in modern societies, for various reasons, the family system has changed along with socio-economic pressures, and the expected role of women has undergone a significant change (Navabinejad et al., 2024; Saadati & Parsakia, 2023), and the number of married working women, or dual-career couples, has increased day by day, becoming a common family pattern (Haddock, 2002). Among the most prominent manifestations of these role changes in the family are families where both the husband and wife work outside the home, and family science specialists use the term dual-career couples to describe the relationship between these types of couples (Petriglieri, 2019). The term Dual Career Couples or DCCS was first used by Rapaport and Rapaport in 1969 and refers to couples where both partners are employed and simultaneously engaged in responsibilities related to both the workplace and the family (Tiwari, 2016).

The collaboration between career and family ideals reflects a challenge for those seeking this duality. The popularity of this lifestyle has increased over time, and with the change in gender roles, this type of couple has become commonplace (Berlato, 2017; Dai, 2016). The dual-career family as a new type of family in society has provided new resources for couples' satisfaction; similarly, it also presents new types of problems that threaten marital satisfaction (Bett, 2017). Some initial studies on dual-career couples have shown that changes in the family structure by employing both members lead to increased conflict and less happiness in life and create ambiguity in gender roles; subsequent studies have not shown much conflict in the lives of dual-career couples (Byadgi, 2013). These studies have shown more happiness, greater marital satisfaction, and more participation and pleasure in dual-career couples. Empirical evidence indicates that social support and the supports an individual receives in the workplace or in the family domain for simultaneously performing job-family roles have positive effects in reducing conflicts and creating a balance between work and life (Jeffrey H. Greenhaus, 1985; Lambert, 2006; Özbağ, 2014). Therefore, conflicts arising from the imbalance between professional life and family life create psychological stress. Research has shown that the quality of couples' communications plays an important role in the psychological health of couples (Maurya et al., 2021) and thus conflicts and marital dissatisfaction lead to the creation of unsuitable psychological conditions in couples (Galinsky, 2014). The imbalance between family and work and employment has caused many problems and negative consequences for both spouses (such as depression, anxiety, aggression, etc.) for their interpersonal relationships (such as increased conflict and divorce) (Hajikaram, 2016). Also, Tezner and Sharoni (2014), and Chin and colleagues (2015) have also shown in a study the relationship between dual-career couples and conflicts between family and mental health and marital satisfaction (Chin, 2015; Tziner, 2014). In addition, among inter-organizational stress factors, the conflict between work and family is effective in increasing job stress (Jansen & Kristensen, 2003) and recently, with the widespread outbreak of the coronavirus and the creation of quarantine and remote work, it has led to a widespread outbreak among employees and managers. Work and family are two important areas in everyone's life (Babaecian, 2013). As many people encounter numerous conflicts and problems when simultaneously fulfilling work and family roles, and this conflict has many negative effects on individuals (Özbağ, 2014); therefore, research on this topic is very

important and vital. The persistent conflict between the two areas of work and family is related to issues such as increased job burnout, family and job stress, physical illness symptoms, depression, inappropriate child-parent relationships, negative child behaviors, marital conflicts, dissatisfaction with married life, decreased job satisfaction, and increased job leaving and absenteeism (Lambert, 2006). The conflict between work and family is recognized as an important issue that affects employees and employers and even their families (Sheykhshabani, 2012). This conflict occurs when the demands or expectations related to one area are incompatible with the demands or expectations related to other areas (Pourmeidani, 2017; Shabani, 2019). In studies conducted, two dimensions of work-family conflict have been differentiated. One dimension is when work-related activities interfere with family responsibilities, and in another dimension, family-related activities interfere with work responsibilities (Gutek, 1991). Researchers have described different types of conflicts according to behavior, time, and the amount of stress created (Carlson, 1999). Time-based conflict is related to the duration of time an individual must devote to his job-related duties (for example, working late on holidays to complete a project that may conflict with the time the person can spend with the family). Stress-based conflict occurs when the psychological pressure of performing one role interferes with the individual's ability to effectively perform duties related to another role (for example, when an employee cannot focus on his work because he is worried about his sick child or thinking about marital disputes) and behavior-based conflict refers to the behavioral requirements of each role that are considered incompatible for the other role (for example, a high-level executive is expected to be tough and rough at work but kind and considerate with his spouse) (Bijani, 2021; Pourmeidani, 2017).

Given the issues raised and the importance of the conditions of the coronavirus quarantine and the necessity of developing and having special educational programs especially for couples, the purpose of the present research was the effectiveness of an educational program based on the threats and opportunities of remote work for dual-career couples in the conditions of the coronavirus on work-family conflict and its dimensions.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study was a quantitative, applied research that employed a quasi-experimental design with a pre-test/post-test control group format. The semi-experimental sample consisted of dual-career couples from Kerman city who had sought counseling for various reasons. Negotiations were held with a private counseling center for collaboration in the research, and an agreement was reached. Using purposively prepared questionnaires, couples who scored above the cutoff were selected, totaling 20 couples. These were then matched and randomly assigned to either the experimental group (10 couples) or the control group (10 couples). It is important to note that the training was conducted by the researcher themselves. Entry criteria for the semi-experimental investigation of dual-career couples included a minimum education level of diploma, willingness to participate in the study, and the presence of both spouses in the educational interventions. Exit criteria from the study included absence from more than two sessions during the educational program, having psychological disorders or severe marital conflicts, addiction, and use of medical or psychiatric drugs.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Work-Family Conflict

This questionnaire was designed by Carlson et al. (2000) and comprises 18 items measuring three dimensions of conflict: time-based, stress-based, and behavior-based conflict. Each dimension is measured by three items for work-family conflict and three items for family-work conflict. The questionnaire is based on a 5-point Likert scale (5 = very much, 4 = a lot, 3 = moderate, 2 = little, 1 = very little), making the minimum and maximum possible scores for work-family and family-work conflict 9 and 45, respectively. In the research by Malekiha and colleagues, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the first and second parts were 0.91 and 0.88, respectively. The validity of this questionnaire was examined through correlation with life satisfaction scales, job satisfaction, role conflict, and role ambiguity, revealing a negative relationship with job satisfaction and life satisfaction and a positive relationship with role conflict and role ambiguity. In the research by Hashemi and colleagues (2010), the reliability coefficients using Cronbach's alpha and split-half method for the three dimensions of work-family conflict ranged from 0.70 to

0.89, and for validity assessment, the correlation coefficient of this scale was 0.74 ($p < .001$) (Sheykhshabani, 2012).

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Educational Program Based on the Threats and Opportunities of Remote Work for Dual-Career Couples

This educational program, derived from the doctoral dissertation of the researcher, was conducted over 8 sessions of 90 minutes each in a group setting for the experimental group.

Session 1: Introduction and Overview

The first session serves as an introduction where participants and the group leader meet and establish a connection with each other. This session focuses on introducing the members to the general rules of the sessions, basic concepts of the educational meetings, overall goals, number of sessions, and the format of the sessions. A pre-test is administered to establish a baseline for measuring the impact of the intervention.

Session 2: Opportunities and Threats of Remote Work

The second session starts with feedback and a review of the assignments from the previous session. The focus then shifts to presenting and discussing the opportunities and threats associated with remote work for dual-career couples. Participants engage in group discussions to explore how these opportunities and threats manifest in their personal lives, fostering a deeper understanding of the impacts of remote working conditions.

Session 3: Identifying Threats

In this session, participants present feedback and assignments from the previous meeting. The discussion revolves around the threats and negative impacts of remote work. Each member examines these threats and the potential negative effects they could have, with the aim of identifying preventive measures to mitigate these risks in their professional and personal lives.

Session 4: Identifying Opportunities

Following the feedback and assignments from the prior session, this session focuses on the opportunities that remote work presents. The positive impacts of these opportunities are discussed, with each member evaluating how these can

be leveraged to benefit their work and family life. The session aims to identify potential positive outcomes and how to harness them effectively.

Session 5: Comparing Opportunities and Threats, Initiating Change

After reviewing the previous session's feedback and assignments, this session involves a comparison of the discussed opportunities and threats for each member. A general strategy for change and improvement is presented, helping participants to start considering how they can actively make changes in their lives based on the identified opportunities and threats.

Session 6: Implementation of Change

Continuing from the previous session, this meeting again centers on the agency of opportunities and threats. The session delves into utilizing the potential of opportunities to eliminate or reduce threats with weaker agency, followed by strategies to weaken those threats with stronger agency through the effective use of identified opportunities.

Session 7: Sustaining Change

Similar to session six, this session reviews feedback and assignments and continues the discussion on the agency of opportunities and threats. The focus remains on employing opportunities to eliminate or mitigate threats. Strategies discussed in this session aim to solidify and sustain the changes initiated in earlier sessions, ensuring long-term improvement and adaptation to remote work dynamics within the family structure.

2.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis in the quantitative section was carried out in two stages: descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (repeated measures analysis of variance). Calculations were performed using SPSS software, version 22.

3. Findings and Results

Table 1 presents data related to the mean and standard deviation of participant scores in work-family conflict and its dimensions for the research sample in both the experimental and control groups.

Table 1

Descriptive Analysis of Variables

Variables	Stage	Group	Mean	SD
Work-Family Conflict	Pre-test	Experimental	25.05	3.12
		Control	25.29	3.18
	Post-test	Experimental	19.94	3.15
		Control	25.81	3.30
	One-month Follow-up	Experimental	19.80	3.25
		Control	25.72	3.25
Time-Based Conflict	Pre-test	Experimental	11.12	1.01
		Control	11.02	1.12
	Post-test	Experimental	8.88	0.93
		Control	10.92	0.99
	One-month Follow-up	Experimental	8.85	0.97
		Control	11.16	1.03
Exhaustion-Based Conflict	Pre-test	Experimental	12.15	1.25
		Control	12.11	1.19
	Post-test	Experimental	10.39	1.20
		Control	12.16	1.20
	One-month Follow-up	Experimental	10.30	1.29
		Control	12.22	1.23

As can be observed, participants in the study had high scores in work-family conflict and its dimensions on the pre-test before the implementation of the educational program. According to Table 1, the mean scores for work-family

conflict have decreased. This finding implies that the implementation of the planned educational sessions intuitively caused changes in the scores of the dependent variables of the study.

Table 2

Summary of Repeated Measures ANOVA for the Effect of the Educational Program on Work-Family Conflict and Its Dimensions

Variable	Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Eta Squared
Work-Family Conflict	Constant	33450.668	1	33450.668	3916.176	0.000	0.992
	Group	432.833	1	354.089	16.891	0.007	0.644
	Error	239.168	39	46.858			
Time-Based Conflict	Constant	31392.668	1	31392.668	3652.817	0.000	0.994
	Group	438.083	1	21.594	21.590	0.002	0.698
	Error	188.918	39	6.848			
Exhaustion-Based Conflict	Constant	43818.860	1	43818.860	8648.643	0.000	0.997
	Group	288.448	1	92.816	39.501	0.000	0.809
	Error	65.892	39	2.350			
Behavior-Based Conflict	Constant	24448.168	1	2448.168	8222.807	0.000	0.996
	Group	188.250	1	62.418	20.990	0.004	0.692
	Error	83.250	39	2.983			

Given that the calculated F-values for the effect of groups on work-family conflict and its dimensions are significant at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$), it can be stated that there is a significant difference between the experimental and control groups after the intervention, and the intervention significantly affected work-family conflict and its dimensions.

In this study, prior to conducting the main analyses, we ensured that all necessary assumptions for the repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) were satisfactorily

met. The assumption of sphericity was tested using Mauchly's test of sphericity, which was not significant ($p = 0.263$), indicating that the assumption was met and no corrections were required for our F tests. Additionally, the assumption of normality was verified through Shapiro-Wilk tests on the residuals, which confirmed normal distribution ($p > 0.05$) for all dependent variables at each level of measurement—pre-test, post-test, and follow-up. Homogeneity of variances was assessed using Levene's Test, which was non-significant across the groups ($p = 0.198$),

suggesting homogenous variances among the experimental and control groups at each stage of the study. Lastly, no outliers were identified in the dataset, as assessed by inspection of standardized residuals, with all values lying

within the acceptable range of ± 3 standard deviations. These preliminary checks ensured the robustness and validity of the subsequent statistical analyses conducted within the study.

Table 3

Results of the Bonferroni Post-hoc Test at Three Stages by Group

Variables	Comparison	Mean Difference	Significance
Work-Family Conflict	Post-test - Follow-up	0.14	0.89
	Pre-test - Follow-up	5.25	0.00
	Pre-test - Post-test	5.11	0.00
Time-Based Conflict	Post-test - Follow-up	0.03	1.00
	Pre-test - Follow-up	2.27	0.00
	Pre-test - Post-test	2.24	0.00
Exhaustion-Based Conflict	Post-test - Follow-up	0.09	0.96
	Pre-test - Follow-up	1.85	0.00
	Pre-test - Post-test	1.76	0.00
Behavior-Based Conflict	Post-test - Follow-up	0.03	1.00
	Pre-test - Follow-up	2.44	0.00
	Pre-test - Post-test	2.41	0.00

The data in Table 3 indicate that, according to the Bonferroni post-hoc test, the effects of the educational program based on the opportunities and threats of remote work on work-family conflict and its dimensions show appropriate stability in the follow-up stage.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of the statistical analysis of the data collected through the Work-Family Conflict questionnaire and the appropriate statistical tests following the pre-test, post-test, and follow-up stages showed that the educational package derived from the lived experiences of dual-career couples during the quarantine period of the COVID-19 outbreak was effective on the dimensions of work-family conflict among couples, and this effect was also stable in the follow-up stage.

Regarding the effectiveness of the educational package derived from the lived experiences of dual-career couples during the quarantine period of the COVID-19 outbreak on the dimensions of work-family conflict, it can be pointed out that one of the factors that cause conflict between work and family is long working hours (Adekoya et al., 2022; Asanov et al., 2021; Rachman et al., 2022; Toscano & Zappalà, 2020). Not using annual leave and being present at the workplace during weekends and public holidays are among other factors that cause work-family conflict. A high volume of work and job responsibilities, unbalanced and disproportionate work distribution, lack of support for

employees, job insecurity, threats to employees, and mistreatment, setting deadlines, and constant pressure to finish tasks, job and environmental changes, long travel for work, family problems, lack of division of household duties between men and women, and lack of participation in household matters are other factors recognized as stressors and conflict creators between work and family (Luna et al., 2014). It can be said that when an individual feels a mismatch between the demands of their work role and the demands of their family role, this, in turn, leads to the experience of psychological stress and can result in significant individual and organizational decline (Asanov et al., 2021; Biron et al., 2021). If a person's work responsibilities interfere with fulfilling family commitments, and vice versa, unfulfilled family commitments might reciprocally affect their daily work performance. Likewise, unmet work commitments may interfere with their daily family performance. If either spouse experiences conflict between their work and family roles, the division of household chores and the perception of fairness can affect the quality of marital life and predict the stability of marital life, highlighting the importance of work-family conflict (Bijani, 2021).

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Every research has limitations, and the present study is no exception. Among these limitations, it can be noted that the follow-up stage in this research was conducted only once

and with a relatively short interval. Therefore, further follow-ups with more extended intervals are needed to ascertain the long-term stability of the training effects, and caution must be exercised in generalizing the findings related to the follow-up. The participants' attitudes towards the tests used, their cooperation with the researcher, and their honesty and interest in adhering to and fully implementing the educational program are factors that are almost beyond the researcher's control and can influence the results of the research. Due to the importance of the research topic, it is recommended that similar research be conducted for other communities with different variables and by adding more independent and dependent variables, especially mediating and moderating variables, and that the results be compared with the present research. Given the importance of counseling in this period and the existing crisis conditions, it is suggested that research be conducted to implement the components of this study in other approaches to develop protocols for different statistical populations with diverse demographic characteristics. Additionally, counseling and psychotherapy centers, as well as crisis prevention centers, can use the educational program developed in this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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