

Gaining insights into the work–family interface in the South Asian context

Research on work and family issues is expanding rapidly on a global basis (Ollier-Malaterre and Foucreault, 2017). The nature of the relationship between work and nonwork life appears to have changed dramatically over the last few decades. Whether these changes represent fundamental shifts in the nature of work, family and life, or more superficial changes, is an empirical question. Work and family lives are now more integrated but, at the same time, more distinctly separated temporally, spatially and psychologically (Conley, 2009; Moen *et al.*, 2013). The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has highlighted the nexus of work–family interaction in a manner that has not existed since the era prior to the Industrial Revolution (e.g. Barnett, 1998). The home is now the hub for nearly all life activities (at least for many people), harking back to preindustrial life dominated by craft and agrarian economic models.

The global interdependence of markets, changing institutional norms, increased performance expectations and demographic shifts in the workforce are intensifying demands on workers (Moen *et al.*, 2013). These higher work demands, coupled with new technological innovations, allow work to penetrate more deeply into nonwork life (Duxbury *et al.*, 2008; Milliken and Dunn-Jensen, 2005; Perlow and Porter, 2009). These trends might suggest heightened levels of work–family conflict (WFC) across cultural and geographical boundaries. Yet many employees are reporting increased conflict and synergy simultaneously resulting from participation in work and family spheres.

For our special issue (SI), the work–family interface is used in a very broad manner; it encompasses all constructs focusing on the relationship between work and nonwork life including but not limited to: WFC, work–life balance, work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict, work–family spillover, work–family enrichment, work–life enrichment, work–life synergy, etc. Almost all of the studies in this SI investigate WFC (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985) and work–family synergy (Beutell and Gopalan, 2019). This highlights that conflict and synergy are not anchors or endpoints on a single continuum, but rather, distinct and weakly related variables with different antecedents and consequences.

Contextualizing work and family interaction in South Asia

Much of what we know about work and family, have emerged from Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic (WEIRD) countries, primarily the United States and Western Europe. However, this is beginning to change as significant research is emerging on work and family interface on data from non-Western contexts, particularly from East Asia (Shockley *et al.*, 2017). More needs to be done to understand how cultural contexts influence work–family theory, realizations and practices, especially in South Asia.

Our main goal for this SI entitled “Gaining Insights into the Work-Family Interface in South Asia” is extending our understanding of how individuals in South Asia deal with two important facets of their lives: work and family. The economic, social, cultural and legal contexts in South Asia provide an important setting for understanding the relationship between work and family lives of working individuals. For example, changing performance expectations in emerging economies, like India, have significant ramifications for how individuals deal with nonwork expectations and responsibilities. The familial/social context in South Asia is different from other Asian countries as multigenerational families are still prevalent (e.g. in-laws live in the same household with their children) in most South Asian



countries. Do these family structures affect the work–family interface positively or negatively?

Further, we need to know how specific cultural orientation in the South Asian context affects the meaning of work, life and interactions between them. How do the cultural values in these countries, such as vertical collectivism (Billing *et al.*, 2014), gender roles (Olló-López and Goñi-Legaz, 2017), gender egalitarianism (Kaufman and Taniguchi, 2019; Rajadhyaksha, 2020) and time orientation (Billing *et al.*, 2009) help us understand work–family interface? These comments and questions hint at the dynamics and underlying complexities. Consider this quote on work–family in India:

Our findings reveal an intriguing combination of high family centrality, traditional gender roles, high work and family demands, with work construed as a means to support family, within a dense web of social support/obligations, and role integration being viewed as natural and organic. This combination resulted, perhaps surprisingly, for the Westerners, in our interviewees feeling “happily exhausted”; that is, despite high role demands, they reported low WFC (because they accepted spillover well) and high work–family enrichment (Raina *et al.*, 2020a, b).

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This is not to argue that family is unimportant in the West, but rather that family centrality in South Asia is notably more pronounced in comparison. We know that family size is decreasing, the age of marriage is increasing, fertility is decreasing (Yeung *et al.*, 2018). These trends point to coming changes in work–family dynamics in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries. The papers from this SI provide important insights into understanding the work–family interface and pave the path for future research in this understudied/underrepresented context in work–family literature.

Response to the call

We issued the Call for Papers in October of 2018 with a submission deadline of March 31, 2019. We also offered a Professional Development Workshop (PDW) on “Contextualizing Work-Family in India” at the Academy of Management (Boston, 2019) cosponsored by the Indian Academy of Management. This session, although specifically focused on India rather than all SAARC countries, provided an opportunity to talk about importance of understanding contextualizing work–family research, network influential work–family researchers from around the world, recruit reviewers for our SI and discuss important contextual issues affecting work–family interaction in India and beyond. This PDW might be related to the preponderance of India-focused papers in our SI.

Submitted articles were assessed initially for fit with the SI. Articles were then blind reviewed by two or more experts in the field. All articles went through a “revise and resubmit” process with several doing so more than once. We greatly appreciate the dedication of the reviewers who contributed greatly to the success of this project. Out of the 22 articles consistent with the SI theme, seven appear in the SI with authors from Bangladesh, India, United Arab Emirates and United States.

Contributions of SI articles

The eclectic mix of articles in the SI enhances our understanding of work–family dynamics in India. Articles by [Varthakar and Aggarwal-Gupta \(2020\)](#), [Gopalan *et al.* \(2020\)](#), [Raina *et al.* \(2020a, b\)](#) examine work–family interface using individual-level antecedents such as role overload, cultural values. [Arefin *et al.* \(2020\)](#) extended beyond individual-specific antecedents. They discussed how negative emotions and thoughts emanating from organizational politics might spill over to the family leading to work interfering with family. [Sampath *et al.* \(2020\)](#) examined dyads of subordinates and supervisors to explore WFC's crossover between a supervisor and his and her subordinates in India's high-power distance culture. The study by [Rajadhyaksha \(2020\)](#) shifts gears from individuals to cities. It provides an interesting analysis of how Ease of Living Index perspective in Indian cities relate to gender and gender egalitarianism and discuss its ramifications for the work–family interface. Finally, [Sehgal *et al.* \(2020\)](#) consider the context of women entrepreneurs (WEs) in India.

Collectively, the manuscripts in the SI do a good job contextualizing work and family, primarily in an Indian context. [Vatharkar and Aggarwal-Gupta \(2020\)](#) note that Indian society interweaves traditional values with modernity in ways that may be difficult for Westerners to comprehend. Family roles are central, as stated previously. [Raina *et al.* \(2020a, b\)](#) reinforce family values and the ethics of duty and sacrifice in the family's service. While such family systems appear to be declining, they argued that familial contracts are being renegotiated rather than disappearing altogether. [Gopalan *et al.* \(2020\)](#) emphasized sensitivity to local sociocultural frameworks are related to regional work–family differences in India. This study also reports that nuclear families are gradually replacing extended families. [Sampath *et al.*'s \(2020\)](#) findings also echo the high emphasis on family and social responsibilities among respondents in India. The equal importance of work and family is noted as a unique challenge among Indian employees. [Sehgal *et al.* \(2020\)](#) reported below-average WFC scores for WEs in India, signaling toward high emotional and social support received from the collectivistic context of Indian culture.

[Gopalan *et al.* \(2020\)](#) explore support in relation to WFC and enrichment among a sample of Indian university faculty members. Several types of support were examined, including supervisor, coworker and family (instrumental and emotional components) support. Interestingly, supervisor and coworker support predicted work–family enrichment but was not related to WFC. Both types of family support were also related to enrichment. The lack of findings for conflict was explained by the flexibility, control and discretion that characterize university faculty members to minimize conflictual situations. Faculty members enjoy a unique employment situation that needs more attention from a work–family perspective.

In a study with the intriguing title “does it matter where you live?”, [Rajadhyaksha \(2020\)](#) investigates city context, gender, gender egalitarianism, and WFC and positive spillover. There were no main effects for gender. The idea that gender needs to be considered in more nuanced, interactive fashion is advanced. It is interesting to note, perhaps counterintuitively, that traditional women report more positive spillover than egalitarian women.

Overall, this study blends urban planning concepts with gender studies as important aspects of the work–family interface.

Offering a comprehensive view of work–family antecedents in India, [Raina *et al.* \(2020a, b\)](#) focus on white-collar employees. One of the more exciting variables here is diffuse orientation, a cultural dimension. Diffuse orientation is the level of particularity or wholeness that a culture uses in defining constructs. For the work–family context, diffuse orientation may create the perception that work, and family overlap rather than being distinct spheres. Interestingly, diffuse orientation was predicted to increase WFC. It did not, but it was associated with higher levels work–family enrichment. Other findings showed that a supportive work–family organizational climate reduced WFC while work centrality

increased enrichment. This study offered a cultural, organizational and individual view of work–family antecedents.

Does role overload affect the work–family interface among Indian bank employees? That is the question addressed by [Vatharkar and Aggarwal-Gupta \(2020\)](#) using a structured questionnaire. The authors review findings on the negative effects of overload on variables such as burnout, anxiety, strain, health consequences, absenteeism, turnover, etc. The beneficial effects of engaging in multiple roles are also noted. Findings revealed that role overload was related to both directions of work interfering with personal life. Gender and children moderated relationships between overload and work interfering with personal life.

The omnipresence of politics in organizations transcends cultural boundaries. [Arefin *et al.* \(2020\)](#) show how the perception of organizational politics (POPS) is related to WFC. This study looked at frontline hotel employees in Bangladesh. Unlike previous studies of POPS, that primarily focused on health outcomes, this study extends previous work by including work-to-family conflict. Findings indicated that work-to-family conflict mediated relationships between POPS and task performance, organizational citizenship behavior and turnover intentions. Other findings suggest that POPS increases WFC and turnover intentions and decreases performance and organizational citizenship behavior.

The studies discussed so far have looked at work–family variables of the individual employee. In a “crossover” study, [Sampath *et al.* \(2020\)](#) tested whether supervisor’s WFC influenced WFC of subordinates. The supervisor’s WFC was expected to crossover to the employees who report to them, that, in turn, would vary as a function of relationship quality or leader–member exchange (LMX). Findings did support the hypothesize crossover effects; supervisory WFC is directly related to subordinate’s WFC. Further, subordinate’s WFC was lowered by higher LMX quality. This study reveals the supervisor’s impact on their subordinates, showing that supportive supervisory behaviors can reduce the WFC of subordinates.

Organizational employment has consequences for employees’ work–family lives as noted in the previous studies (with the exception of [Gopalan *et al.*](#), who studied university faculty members). What about other work arrangements, such as entrepreneurship? [Sehgal \(2020\)](#) takes a look at WEs in India. There is a growing literature on WEs on a global basis ([Lepeley, 2020](#)). This study of 164 WEs, defined as women who have a financial stake in and manage day-to-day operations for a business of any size. Most of the women (86%) had founded or cofounded a new business, with nearly half being sole owners. A noteworthy finding was the relatively low levels of WFC reported by WEs. This has been noted elsewhere in the literature ([Beutell and O’Hare, 2020](#)). It is also worth mentioning that WEs report higher levels of work–family enrichment/synergy than their male counterparts ([Khandelwal and Sehgal, 2018](#)). This study demonstrates that core self-evaluations (CSE) are related to both conflict and enrichment for WEs. CSE also played a mediational role in the relationship between social support and the work–family interface.

The papers presented above offer unique perspectives on work and family interface in South Asian context and from a South Asian perspective. These manuscripts have implications for work–family theory and research from various angles, including individuals, dyads, cultural and city/community levels. In addition, they present implications for individuals, supervisors, entrepreneurs, organizations and urban planning. The findings from the studies presented in this SI provide insights into further developing a contextual understanding of how work and family interact with each other in South Asia. However, we must note that most studies in the SI come from the Indian context; there is no doubt that the SI would have benefited from studies from other South Asian contexts. We hope future studies include data/context from other South Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka to enhance our understanding of work and family dynamics in South Asia.

It is our hope that more research will include contextual variables in work–family research. Few studies have examined the impact of cultural traditions, family values and changing work–family contexts in South Asia. Recently, more attention is being given to these variables. Contextualizing work–family interaction requires an examination of the meanings of “work” and “family” embedded in traditions, philosophies, religions, languages and the fabric of everyday life. The divide between rural and urban life (as cities continue to expand) is a central factor in adherence to traditional expectations, or even more strictly, requirements, versus more flexibility in attitudes and behaviors in an urban setting. South Asia offers a rich context for work–family research. This is critical since South Asia is growing rapidly in economic and political influence, accounting for nearly one-fifth of the global population.

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