



A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF
WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT IN
MANAGERIAL COUPLES

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Are we overlooking some fundamental questions?

Abstract

In this study I explore the phenomenon of work-family conflict in an “unconventional” way. Most studies on work-family conflict are quantitative studies of individuals, based on Anglo-Saxon samples. The contribution of this study is to use a different method (i.e. in-depth interviews) to focus on a different unit of analysis (i.e. managerial couples) in a different context (i.e. Spain). The study suggests that the field may be overlooking some fundamental variables. Content analysis of the interview transcripts reveals the crucial importance of implicit values and beliefs, immanent or tacit actions such as decision-making and learning, and communication and mutual understanding within the couple. The study contributes to the field by suggesting a different theoretical approach to work-family conflict as a decision-making problem. I propose using social exchange theory to explain work-family conflict as a complex evaluation of the costs and benefits of exchanges between multiple actors on the basis of personal values and beliefs. I invite scholars to develop theory along these lines or suggest alternative theory that incorporates these neglected variables, and call for more qualitative and comparative studies to understand the experience of work-family conflict in different collectives. Future research should test whether decision making is central for the understanding of work-family conflict only in managers or in other collectives as well. I recommend the couple as the best unit of analysis to address issues such as accommodation within couples and complex decision-making in both individuals and couples.

Keywords: work-family conflict, managerial couples, decision-making.

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Introduction

The last few decades scholars studying work-family conflict have accumulated ample evidence that work-family conflict is an important and pervasive phenomenon, with unfavorable consequences, such as stress (Allen et al., 2000), job dissatisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998), lowered performance and commitment, and turnover (Kossek & Ozeki, 1999). As a consequence, prevention of work-family conflict is becoming an increasingly pressing problem for companies. In an era of fierce competition for scarce resources in the labor market, companies are increasingly adopting family-supportive programs (Goodstein, 1994; Ingram & Simons, 1995). According to Osterman (1995), organizations adopt these programs in an effort to build a committed workforce – an effort that will undoubtedly facilitate the retention of valuable professionals and managers.

Although scholars started to study work-family conflict about 25 years ago, there are some striking gaps in the literature. Research has been centered around a few recurring variables such as work and family involvement, work and family stress, job and life satisfaction, social support, and turnover. The purpose of this study is to fill some of the gaps that characterize the literature on work-family conflict and get a broader overview of relevant variables related with work-family conflict. The conventional studies in the field are quantitative, based on American or Canadian samples, and focus basically on individual experience. Only a small number of studies have addressed work-family conflict in couples outside the U.S. or Canada using qualitative methods. With the exception of the work of Jones and Fletcher (1993; 1996), qualitative studies of work-family conflict experienced by couples outside the U.S. or Canada are very rare. In this sense this study is unconventional, because its aim is to explore work-family conflict in a different unit of analysis, in a different setting, and with a different method than most studies in the field.

In this study I will focus on managers because I expect that they are a group that, because of the nature of their work, experience high levels of work-family conflict. More specifically, I will study managerial couples, i.e. couples of which one or both members have managerial responsibilities. Managers may be expected to experience more time-based work-family conflict because they have to devote more time to work and show a high degree of availability and flexibility in their job. They can also be expected to experience more strain-based work-family conflict because of their responsibility for resources and people. Managerial work is said to be inherently more stressful than other types of work because of the high levels of role overload, role conflict and role ambiguity (French & Caplan, 1972; Caplan, Cobb, French, Van Harrison, & Pinneau, 1980). According to spillover theory, work

stress can be expected to spill over into family and personal life, resulting in work-family conflict (Evans & Bartolomé, 1980). Indeed, Judge, Boudreau & Bretz (1994) found that the executives in their sample reported substantially higher levels of work-family conflict than a heterogeneous cross-section of employees studied by Frone et al. (1992). Female managers in particular may be expected to experience a high level of stress and work-family conflict since they have to combine both work and family responsibilities, which puts them at a perceived or real disadvantage compared with male managers. There is some evidence that female managers, in order to be successful, need to make sacrifices in their private and family life. Authors have reported lower rates of marriage and parenthood (Gilson & Kane, 1987; Hardesty & Jacobs, 1986), more divorces (Carter & Glick, 1970), and failure or dissatisfaction in private life (Etzion, 1987).

However, the idea that managers can be expected to experience higher levels of work-family conflict may be challenged from a different theoretical viewpoint. According to the demand-control-support model (Karasek, 1985; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Johnson & Hall, 1988), employees with greater autonomy and control in their work role can be expected to experience less stress. This explains their finding that blue-collar workers generally report higher levels of stress than managers do. Managers also may be expected to have more discretion to meet conflicting work and family demands. This should mean that managers will experience less stress and work-family conflict. And Beatty (1996) did indeed find that female managers experience no more mental health problems and have no more problems with divorces or rates of marriage than average employees. So the evidence is not conclusive. Despite the questions that remain concerning managerial stress and work-family conflict, attempts to study work-family conflict in this particular group are relatively scarce (Judge, Boudreau & Bretz, 1994; Lyness & Thompson, 1997).

Only a minority of authors studying work-family conflict has considered studying couples instead of individuals. That is surprising if we consider that balancing work and family is clearly not an individual affair; rather, it is a continuous process of accommodation of the workloads of both partners. There is the early work of Handy (1978) and Bartolomé & Evans (1980), who pointed out different types of work-family accommodation in individuals and couples and problems associated with these accommodation styles. More recently, Hammer, Allen & Grigsby (1997) found important crossover effects of work-family conflict between couples. They concluded their study by suggesting that future research on work-family conflict should use the couple as the unit of analysis. They belong to a group of scholars in the work-family domain studying crossover effects (Greenhaus et al., 1989; Gupta & Jenkins, 1985; Jones & Fletcher, 1993; Parasuraman et al., 1992; Westman & Etzion, 1995). There are a number of interactions in couples that can moderate or reinforce work-family conflicts, like for instance mutual understanding, intellectual and professional equivalence, mutual support, emotional dependence of one partner, or rivalry. Interesting in this regard are the studies by Buunk & Peeters (1994) and Repetti (1989), which point to the interplay between stress at work and social support on a daily basis.

There is a great need for empirical research that can serve as a basis for complementing or correcting theory on work-family conflict that is largely based on Anglo-Saxon data. Most studies I have found have been developed in Anglo-Saxon countries (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada) that have relatively comparable populations. Hence, it should not surprise us that the resulting models show signs of generalizability. Yet attempts to look at work-family conflict in other cultures are scarce. Examples include China (Yang, Chen, Choi & Zou, 2000), Japan (Matsui, Ohsawa & Onglatco, 1995), Finland (Kinnunen & Mauno, 1998), Hong Kong (Ayree, Luk, Leung & Lo, 1998, 1999), and Malaysia (Ahmad, 1996). Only a few studies explicitly compare two different cultures (Ayree, Fields & Luk, 1999; Yang, Chen, Choi & Zou, 2000).

There are also certain societal characteristics that can be expected to exacerbate work-family conflict. First, the importance or centrality of the family as an institution, as is the case in, for instance, Eastern or Latin countries. Second, a recent increase in female labor participation, where we see a rapid transition from traditional single- to dual-earner families. In these countries or cultures we see two simultaneous, opposite types of social pressure that must create a dilemma for women in particular: a pressure to work and a pressure to take care of one's family.

One such country is Spain. Although there are several reasons why we can expect work-family conflict to be an increasingly pressing problem in Spain, Spanish research in this area is completely lacking. Research on this topic is especially relevant in Spain because there are several circumstances that, when combined, intensify work-family conflict. First, Spain has one of the highest growth rates of female labor force participation in Europe (28.92% between 1983 and 1993). This trend started quite recently –in the late seventies after the Franco era– which means that the transition from traditional to dual-earner families has been quite radical in Spain. Second, working hours are typically from “nine till eight”, with a long lunch break between two and four. These atypical working hours translate into long working hours. In a recent study involving more than 20 countries around the world (Collaborative International Study on Managerial Stress, CISMS), we found that Spanish managers work an average of 52 hours a week, more than any other nation in the sample (Spector et al., in press). This means that combining work and family is especially difficult for Spanish families. Third, the family continues to be an important institution in Spanish society, as in most Latin and South European countries, which generates a particular pressure to create and look after a family. Fourth, companies in Spain have only recently started to adopt family-friendly policies. Those that have are mostly Spanish subsidiaries of American multinationals, such as Procter & Gamble, IBM or Hewlett Packard, that have implemented global human resource policies in Europe. All these elements combined create a very different context than the ones that are taken as “given” in most studies on work-family conflict reported in American academic journals.

Another striking feature of research in the field of work-family conflict is that most studies are quantitative, cross-sectional studies using surveys. In a recent review paper, Casper and Eby (2000) concluded that 85% of the studies reported in leading journals are cross-sectional, and 94% are based on survey data. This can be contrasted with the fact that this type of studies is associated with methodological problems and, more importantly, with a lack of insight into complex interactions and temporal, causal paths between variables. Only a limited number of studies have taken a microscopic and/or longitudinal look at how work-family conflict originates in the described antecedents, how it develops, and how it results in the reported consequences (Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1997; Jones & Fletcher, 1996; Williams & Alliger, 1994). The advantage of qualitative studies is that they can provide rich data to illustrate the causal linkages and complex interdependencies between variables. With a few exceptions, however (e.g. Cooke & Rousseau, 1984; Frone, Russell & Cooper, 1992; Karambaya & Reilly, 1992; Loscocco, 1997; Mollica & Wayne, 2000; Westman & Etzion, 1990), there has been very little research on work-family conflict using qualitative methods.

To conclude, this study aims to fill some of the gaps that characterize the literature on work-family conflict. It looks at a neglected unit of analysis –managerial couples– using a neglected method –a qualitative study– in a neglected cultural setting –a non-Anglo-Saxon country, one, furthermore, that can be expected to evoke higher levels of work-family conflict, namely Spain. Since the study moves in several new directions at once, I have preferred to be cautious and have opted for an exploratory study. My aim is to chart the experience of work-family conflict in managerial couples in Spain, to generate variables and

relationships that may have been overlooked in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon literature, and provide a first basis for theory development and future research.

Method

Sample

The target group of the study were managerial couples, i.e. couples of which at least one member has a managerial responsibility. I used criterion-based, semi-random sampling. The criteria were chosen to have a heterogeneous, balanced group of respondents. I tried to have both male and female managers, and managers at different levels working in different organizational settings.

The sampling was semi-random because I chose respondents randomly from a predetermined list. First, I drew up a list of companies that were described in the Anglo-Saxon popular business press as having family-supportive policies. I wanted to control for this characteristic because I expected that employees working in a family-friendly environment would report different experiences. The reader will notice that in the results section I do not refer to the distinction between respondents working for family-friendly or non-family-friendly companies. First, because in the respondents' experience this distinction did not seem to make a big difference. Probably this is related to a second possible explanation, namely that in Spain the implementation of this type of policies has only recently started. It may be too early for respondents to evaluate and appreciate these policies.

Second, I used a list of 1999 alumni who attended an MBA or an executive program at IESE. Probably these managers are not representative of the population of Spanish managers, since they received additional executive education. But as Miles & Huberman pointed out, the most useful generalizations from qualitative studies are analytic and not sample-to-population (1994, p. 28). I then systematically checked the function titles of the alumni working for these companies. I contacted the first person on the list holding a management function. As I managed to recruit respondents working for family-friendly companies, I tried to find matching companies (same size, same sector) to have counterbalancing views.

Respondents were contacted by telephone at their work and asked for their own and their spouse's collaboration, explicitly assuring discretion. Mostly, they were contacted several times until an appointment was made. The response rate was very high; only four respondents refused an interview, one man after discussing it with his wife, one man because of a pregnancy about to be due, one woman because of a very young baby, and a last woman without giving any specific reason. Attentive readers will note that, ironically, the motives for refusing an interview have to do with work-family issues. The resulting sample consists of 14 respondents, 6 couples and 2 members of couples, 2 directors, 9 middle managers and 3 non-managers (always spouses of a manager), 8 women and 6 men, and 5 representatives of family-supportive companies. Table 1 presents each respondent's initials, demographic data, and company, indicating whether or not the respondent worked for a "family-friendly company".

Table 1. Description of the respondents: initials, gender, job level, alumnus/non-alumnus, company initials and company classification as family-friendly or not

Initials	Initials spouse	Gender	Job	Alumnus	Company	Family-friendly?
IDR	ED	Male	Manager	No	H	Yes
ND	VP	Female	Manager	Yes	I	Yes
TR	CA	Female	Manager	Yes	AA	Yes
AH		Female	Manager	No	H	Yes
NM		Female	Manager	No	N	Yes
IB	AG	Male	Director	Yes	S	No
JMT	EF	Male	Director	Yes	D	No
CA	TR	Male	Manager	No	T	No
VP	ND	Male	Manager	No	R	No
EG	CI	Female	Manager	Yes	AC	No
AG	IB	Female	Lawyer	No	M	No
EF	JMT	Female	Student	No	/	No
CI	EG	Male	Manager	No	AC	No
ED	IDR	Female	None	No	/	No

Interviews

Of all qualitative methods available, I chose the interview to allow a more in-depth analysis of the respondents' background and experiences. The interview was semi-structured. It was structured in the sense that the interviewer followed a sequence of pre-scripted questions in a predetermined order (Gatewood & Field, 1994). It was semi-structured because the interviewer tried to follow the pace and flow of ideas of the respondent, while trying to bring up (not forcing) the topics in the topic list. For instance, if the respondent brought up a specific case of work-family conflict to illustrate a certain point, she was not prevented from doing so. Respondents were interviewed at home or at work, for one and a half to two hours, generally together with their partner. The topics generally addressed were:

- Description of the family
- Description of the job
- Career track
- Work attitudes
- Chronological description of a typical day
- Conflicts between work and family
- How the respondent copes with these conflicts
- Company policies concerning the family
- Suggestions/advice for other couples

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980; Weber, 1990). In a first phase the interviews were transcribed into a written format. The transcripts –based on tape recordings– are what Miles & Huberman (1994) call “thick”. I did not attempt to make a

literal transcript of every word said in the interview, but I did strive to not lose any information. In a second phase different raters read the materials independently to construct a multi-layered taxonomy with mutually exclusive categories and subcategories. Before starting the coding, the different raters agreed on the content and the hierarchical ordering of categories and subcategories to have one, common taxonomy. In a third phase the transcripts were coded – using descriptive coding, classifying elements into the appropriate, lowest level category. Codes were not assigned to paragraphs, but to phrases, parts of phrases or even words, to assure detailed coding. In a fourth phase I did a simple frequency count of how often a particular theme emerged in the data. Typically, in qualitative research different raters code the materials independently so inter-rater reliability can be calculated. The problem with this procedure is that there is no consensus on the elements that were coded differently, which implies an important loss of information. Therefore, in this study two raters coded the materials independently, and then reviewed the material together to strive for consensus on all codes – a time-consuming process that allows the full use of the data. The coincidence between the initial and agreed upon coding was high: $r = 0.96$ at category level and $r = 0.79$ at subcategory level.

Table 1 shows the different main categories and subcategories, following the logical order of categories as the researchers used them to score the interview transcripts. There are eleven broad categories:

A. Socio-demographic information

This category contains respondent information, such as age, sex, marital status, professional experience, position in the company, description of the family, and location where they live and work.

B. Macro context

In this category I classified all information about the social, cultural, and legal context that seemed to be relevant to the respondent, such as the labor market, socio-cultural characteristics of the country and the legal system.

C. Organizational Context

This category had the most subcategories, each with its own second level of subcategories. For this reason the subcategories in this category will be treated as main categories. Subcategories were: company characteristics (e.g. proportion of female workers, organizational structure), organizational events (e.g. start-up or merger), human resource policies (e.g. wage policy, retention policy), career-related issues, job characteristics (e.g. managerial responsibilities, travel), and company culture (e.g. managerial attitudes, long working hours).

D. Family-friendly policies and practices

Although these policies in principle belong to the company's human resource policies (category C), they were coded separately because of their special relevance in this study. Examples are: flexibility, childcare, absence of autonomy, and virtual office arrangements.

E. Actions at work

Here I describe specific individual work-related actions of the respondent, such as entering or leaving a job, searching for a job, or travelling.

F. Life events

This category contains major life events, such as birth, marriage and divorce.

G. Non-work context and support

This category contains a list of people that may provide domestic support such as cleaning the house or taking care of children.

H. Work-family interface

Obviously I have a category describing the work-family interface, the central theme of the study. Some of the elements that are listed in this category are: work-to-family and family-to-work spillover, the impact that one partner's career choices may have on the other partner or the whole family, and some family-related actions such as spending time with children.

I. Couple information

This category contains information on all types of interaction between couples such as communication, mutual understanding, interdependence, satisfaction with the relationship, and love.

J. Individual information

Here I categorized a quite heterogeneous list of elements that refer to individual characteristics (such as values, beliefs and personality), experiences of the respondents (such as stress or loneliness), and immanent actions (e.g. decision making or learning).

K. Money-related issues

A category I did not foresee initially and decided to add is a category that sums up money-related issues, such as whether the couple can or cannot afford a nanny.

Table 2. Main categories and subcategories, following the logical order of categories as the researchers used them to score the interview transcripts

A. SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC FACTS / INFO

1. Personal: name/sex/age/...
2. Civil: married/single/divorced/...
3. Background: qualifications/experience/...
4. Position company: level/seniority/responsability
5. Family: number/age of children/parents/other family
6. Location: country and city where they live

B. MACRO CONTEXT

1. Market
 - a. Sector
 - b. Labor market
2. Country / city culture or environment
3. Gender issues / new role of women
4. Country Law

C. ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

1. Company characteristics
 - a. Prestige / status / reputation of the company
 - b. % Women
 - c. % Production workers
 - d. Seasonal fluctuations in work
 - e. Absenteeism / turnover
 - f. Organizational structure
 - g. Organizational capital (financial / human / products)
2. Organizational events
 - a. Start-up
 - b. Strong growth
 - c. Restructuring
 - d. Merger / acquisition
 - e. Cultural change / shock
 - f. Bankruptcy / termination
3. HR policies
 - a. Wage / salary policy
 - b. Other monetary policies (bonuses, stock options, ...)
 - c. Recruitment policy
 - d. Retention policy
 - e. Sport / leisure facilities at work
 - f. Medical service at work
4. Career-related issues
 - a. Structural / formal career path
 - b. Informal / implicit "career rules"
 - c. Adaptability of career path to accommodate private preferences
5. Job
 - a. Job characteristics
 - b. Managerial responsibilities
 - c. Travelling
 - d. Transfer / delocation / expatriation
6. Company cultural elements
 - a. Managerial attitudes, relationships
 - b. Peer / colleague attitudes, relationships
 - c. Sex related attitudes / discrimination
 - d. Long working hours
 - e. Time management problems
 - f. Internal competition
 - g. Valuation of commitment
 - h. Respect for private life
 - i. Autonomy at work

Table 2 (continued)

D. FAMILY RESPONSIBLE POLICY & PRACTICE

1. Formal work-family policy
2. Flexibility (part-time, compressed, ...)
3. Leave arrangements
4. Kindergarten
5. Virtual office
6. Assessment/coaching/medical/psychological
7. Education/training
8. Extralegal support
9. Expatriate counselling
10. Absence autonomy / liberty
11. Adaptation of job content to accommodate private preferences
12. Miscellaneous services at work (cafeteria, laundry, ...)

E. ACTIONS AT WORK

1. Incorporation / recruitment
2. Promotion / transfer
3. Travelling
4. Moving to / living in another country for work
5. Invest in company
6. Resign / refuse promotion / job offer
7. Search for job
8. Leave company (because of FR issue) / change job
9. Resume work
10. Start working morning / stop working evening
11. Work part-time
12. Work for temporary contract
13. Start up a company

F. LIFE EVENTS

1. Graduation / study
2. Military service
3. Marriage
4. Pregnancy
5. Birth
6. Aging
7. Divorce

G. NON-WORK CONTEXT / EXTERNAL SUPPORT

1. Family
 - a. Spouse
 - b. Parents
 - c. Children
 - d. Other
2. Babysitters (sporadic)
3. Nannies (full-time or part-time)
4. Cleaning lady
5. Kindergarten
6. School
7. Clubs
8. Inter-family support

Table 2 (continued)

H. WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE

1. Work-to-family conflict
 - a. Time-based spillover / availability
 - b. Strain-based spillover
2. Domestic tasks
 - a. House
 - b. Children
3. Time for / Bringing up of children
4. Time with partner
5. Impact career one partner ‡ other partner (interind)
6. Impact job choices / changes ‡ family (ind – fam)
7. Sacrifice one partner for other
8. Family-to-work spillover

I. COUPLE

1. Communication / negotiation / consultation
2. Mutual understanding / sharing / complementarity / support
3. Contracts / agreements / exchanges
4. Common / comparable / same level jobs
5. Common hobbies
6. Emotional autonomy vs. dependency
7. (Dis)satisfaction with relationship / love
8. Intention to break up the relationship
9. Separation / divorce

J. INDIVIDUAL

1. Values / priorities / principles / interests
2. Beliefs / perceptions / expectations
3. Character / personality / maturity / intelligence
4. Ambition / aspiration
5. Reactive vs proactive planning
 - a. Family
 - b. Work
6. Learning / changing values & priorities
7. Decision making / risk taking / choices
8. Organization / time management skills or problems
9. Stress / suffering / burnout / depression / pressure
10. Feelings of guilt / obligation, conscience
11. Loneliness
12. Coping behavior
13. (Job) satisfaction
14. Intention to leave
15. Commitment / involvement / OCB
16. Hobbies

K. MONEY-RELATED ISSUES

1. Cost nanny / babysitter
2. Cost house
3. Cost school
4. Wage inequity between partners
5. Dependency on wage of partner
6. To aspire to a certain financial level
7. Have the money to afford ...
8. Dependency on company wage

An implicit but important assumption behind the use of content analysis is that the frequency with which elements are cited reflects their importance. This assumption can be questioned. Frequency is a quantitative measure and not a qualitative one. To address this issue I went into more detail and studied which elements were linked with outcomes that can be considered as more qualitative indicators of impact, i.e. elements that reflect the wellbeing of a respondent or a couple. I identified which elements were mentioned in association with –i.e. in the same sentence or paragraph as– stress, job satisfaction, satisfaction with the relationship or intention to leave the organization. This time I did not count frequencies but interpreted the material to make sure I made the right causal links.

Results

Content analysis

Table 2 shows a ranking of the main categories according to total absolute frequency (first column). To take into account the fact that the number of subcategories may influence these frequencies, I also calculated the total frequency divided by the number of subcategories (second column). This table gives an indication of the relative importance of the different categories for the respondents. The experience of work-family conflict seems to be mainly an individual experience, although the organizational context and the socio-demographic characteristics have an important weight as well. It should not be surprising that work-family conflict scores high, as it is the central variable in the study. If we take into account the number of subcategories, we see that job characteristics stand out among the most frequently cited categories in the study. Actions at work and couple interactions are less frequently mentioned, but still important in the experience of the respondents. Organizational culture is more frequently cited than family-responsive policies and practices, and these latter more frequently than human resource policies in general.

Table 3. Ranking of main categories according to absolute frequency (first column) and absolute frequency divided by number of subcategories (second column)

CATEGORY	FR	AV.FR
J. Individual	432	27
C. Organizational context	359	10
H. Work-family interface	185	23
A. Socio-demographic facts / info	163	27
E. Actions at work	155	12
I. Couple	128	14
C5. Job	104	26
C6. Company cultural elements	92	10
D. Family responsible policies & practices	70	6
F. Life events	65	9
C1. Company characteristics	53	8
C4. Career-related issues	51	17
B. Macro context	45	11
C3. HR policies	38	6
G. Non-work context / external support	32	4
K. Money-related issues	22	3
C2. Organizational events	21	4

Coincidence (inter-rater reliability): 0.96 at category level

Coincidence (inter-rater reliability): 0.79 at subcategory level

Table 3 gives more detail as it ranks the subcategories according to total absolute frequency. This table gives some insight into why the aforementioned main categories are cited more or less frequently. Let us first focus on the most frequently cited elements (i.e. elements mentioned in positions 1 to 20). Work-family conflict is mainly an individual experience because it is a question of personal values, beliefs, decision-making, learning, personality, and character. It is associated with an individual experience of stress. Individual socio-demographic factors weigh heavily, mainly because respondents frequently mention their experience, responsibility and position in the company. Here we clearly see that we are dealing with managers. The fact that job characteristics and managerial responsibilities score high in this ranking confirms this idea. Although in the ranking of the main categories couple interaction is less frequently mentioned, we see that communication, sharing, and mutual understanding between partners is among the most frequently cited subcategories. Of the subcategories mentioned in the work/family interface category, time-based spillover and time for the children are the most cited. Organizational characteristics that score high in the ranking are the formal career path and the number of working hours. Relevant actions in the organization are promotion and refusing a promotion. These latter elements are again associated with being a manager.

On a second level we see that other socio-demographic elements play a role in the experience of work-family conflict: number of children, sex, age, and where the respondents live. Strain-based work-family conflict is also situated on this second level of frequency. On an individual level the proactive planning of a family and job satisfaction come into the picture. Organizational and job characteristics that are cited here are sex-related attitudes in the company and whether or not the job involves travelling. The most cited family-friendly policy in this study, and the only one among the top elements in the ranking is flexibility. Closely related to this policy is the action of starting to work in the morning and stopping at night. Another cited organizational action is quitting a job or company.

Causal links with wellbeing

The analysis of the paragraphs and phrases that were coded as indicators of wellbeing, such as stress, satisfaction with the job and the relationship, and turnover intention, revealed several interesting causal relationships.

A. Stress

Let us first look at stressors as causes of work-family conflict. A first type of stress arises during important *career transitions* when respondents reportedly had to accept or endure a decision, forced upon them by the organization, supervisor, or partner. This results in a perceived lack of control. Examples are being forced to promote (promotion stress), being obliged to continue working in difficult circumstances to guarantee financial stability in the family, or being confronted with a partner who is being expatriated.

Table 4. Ranking of subcategories according to absolute frequency

	SUBCATEGORIES	FR
1	J1. Values / priorities / principles / interests	64
2	J2. Beliefs / perceptions / expectations	56
3	J9. Stress / suffering / burnout / depression / pressure	55
4	A3. Background: qualifications/experience/...	50
5	J7. Decision-making / risk taking / choices	47
6	C5A. Job characteristics	44
7	I1. Communication / negotiation / consultation	42
8	A4. Position company: level/seniority/responsibility	38
9	H1A. Time-based spillover / availability	37
10	I2. Mutual understanding / sharing / complementarity / support	36
11	J6. Learning / changing values & priorities	31
12	C5B. Managerial responsibilities	29
13	J3. Character / personality / maturity / intelligence	29
14	H3. Time for / Bringing up of children	27
15	A5. Family: number/age of children/parents/other family	25
16	C4A. Structural / formal career path	25
17	C6D. Long working hours	25
18	E6. Resign / refuse promotion / job offer	25
19	A1. Personal: name/sex/age/...	23
20	E2. Promotion / transfer	23
21	<i>H1B. Strain-based spillover</i>	23
22	<i>C6C. Sex related attitudes / discrimination</i>	22
23	<i>J5A. Family</i>	22
24	<i>J13. (Job) satisfaction</i>	22
25	<i>C5C. Travelling</i>	21
26	<i>D2. Flexibility (part-time, compressed, ...)</i>	21
27	<i>A6. Location: country and city where they live.</i>	20
28	<i>E10. Start working morning / stop working evening</i>	20
29	<i>E8. Leave company (because of FR issue) / change job</i>	18
30	<i>F1. Graduation / study</i>	18
31	<i>H4. Time with partner</i>	18
32	<i>J8. Organization / time management skills or problems</i>	18
33	<i>B3. Gender issues / new role of women</i>	17
34	<i>C1G. Organizational capital (financial / human / products)</i>	17
35	<i>I7. Dissatisfaction / satisfaction with relationship / love</i>	17
36	<i>E9. Resume work</i>	16
37	<i>F5. Birth</i>	16
38	<i>H2A. House</i>	16
39	<i>J4. Ambition / aspiration</i>	16
40	<i>B2. Country / city culture or environment</i>	15
41	<i>E4. Moving to / living in another country for work</i>	15
42	<i>H6. Impact job choices / changes on family (individual on family)</i>	15
43	<i>J10. Feelings of guilt / obligation, conscience</i>	15
44	<i>J16. Hobbies</i>	15
45	<i>C3B. Other monetary policies (bonuses, stock options, ...)</i>	14
46	<i>C4C. Adaptation of career path to accommodate private preferences</i>	14
47	<i>G1B. Parents</i>	14
48	<i>H5. Impact career one partner on other partner (inter-individual)</i>	14
49	<i>C6A. Managerial attitudes, relationships</i>	13
50	<i>H2B. Children</i>	13
51	<i>J5B. Work</i>	13
52	<i>C1F. Organizational structure</i>	12
53	<i>C4B. Informal / implicit "career rules"</i>	12
54	<i>C6B. Peer / colleague attitudes, relationships</i>	12
55	<i>E3. Travelling</i>	12
56	<i>F4. Pregnancy</i>	12
57	<i>G3. Nannies (full-time or part-time)</i>	12
58	<i>C3A. Wage / salary policy</i>	11
59	<i>D1. Formal work-family policy</i>	11
60	<i>F3. Marriage</i>	11
61	<i>I3. Contracts / agreements / exchanges</i>	11
62	<i>J15. Commitment / involvement / OCB</i>	11
63	<i>C5D. Transfer / delocation / expatriation</i>	10
64	<i>C6E. Time management problems</i>	10
65	<i>E1. Incorporation / recruitment</i>	10

EXCERPT 1

See Exhibit 1.

Other respondents mention certain job characteristics as causes of stress that also indicate (a lack of) control over the environment: difficult and demanding clients, demanding targets, speed, complicated internal procedures, continuous fights with administration, losing or having to fire people, and working long hours, nights and weekends.

EXCERPT 2

In that job I was very busy. I was working long hours, including nights and weekends. That was my third job. And I had a lot of stress because my job consisted of testing or improving products on the spot in the actual factory. I often had to work under pressure of time because to do my job the production process had to be stopped. There was this constant pressure of possible failure. And the longer the production equipment needed to be put on hold, the more it cost. In the meantime people were waiting and watching. They depended on my quick problem-solving.

On the other hand, certain jobs help to avoid stress. One respondent told us that she accepted a promotion during her pregnancy because she knew that although the job entailed management responsibility, it did not have the pressure of having a time schedule that was incompatible with having a family. Some respondents –mostly women– reported having refused jobs or being afraid to accept jobs because they meant a significant extra workload or required frequent business trips.

Some respondents referred to stress as a consequence of an unfavorable (from a work-life balance point of view) organizational culture or unwritten rules that existed in certain sectors or organizations. Examples include “workaholic cultures” where employees are forced to compete with colleagues on the basis of working hours, which are used as a signal for promotion. Another respondent spoke of “male cultures” in which meetings were planned in the late afternoon, without considering that this can cause problems for employees who have to pick up their children from school.

EXCERPT 3

In my opinion, work-family policies confirm that women need to have a different role in the family than men. If men had the same commitment to the family, the problem of “male” working hours would be resolved automatically. For example, it’s difficult to imagine that a man who had that commitment would schedule a meeting for 7 p.m., even if he had a management position. The two things go together: a change in men’s attitude towards the family and a more “female” organization of time in organizations. For instance, my husband would have no objection to scheduling a meeting late in the afternoon unless he made it a principle to be home at 7 p.m.

EXCERPT 4

First, firms play with the promotion factor, which generates comparisons and competition between colleagues. That's where I see the biggest conflict between work and family. Because of the competition consultants are in a permanent state of professional anxiety. However hard you work it's never enough, you're always comparing, and you always think your own work is more important than your wife's. If a consultant has an assignment in Madrid, the whole family has to move to Madrid. A consultant never considers changing jobs. Some firms even play on their employees' financial dependence. You find employees competing to see who buys the most expensive furniture or car. That means they have to ask for loans and so become "hooked" to the company. And they can't just say, "Tomorrow I'll do something different".

A fourth source of stress has to do with expectations and interactions within couples. These expectations create an extra source of pressure to be dealt with, and when the expectations are high they can be stressful. An example is one respondent (a manager) who reported experiencing stress because his wife was sometimes not home yet when he came home. Other examples are the person who got angry when her husband was away from home for a long time, or a manager who initially refused a job offer that involved a lot of travelling because he knew that his wife could not cope with being alone – until his partner reacted to his decision in an unexpected way by suddenly insisting that he accept the job. In this case the uncontrollable factor is the partner.

Several respondents –again only women– reported that the source of their stress was internal. The pressure of one's own consciousness can create feelings of guilt that can be emotionally demanding.

EXCERPT 5

If I can go home at 6.30 or 7 p.m., even though I have things to do, even non-work related things, I would feel guilty if I didn't go home. Not being at home, not picking up my children after school, or not doing what some mothers do, creates a feeling of guilt. And so I try to leave at 7 or 7.30 p.m.

Among the consequences of stress respondents reported physical exhaustion and being less patient with other people. Several respondent-couples reported having at some stage had problems with having children because of stressful situations such as expatriation or a stressful job.

EXCERPT 6

She: When we were in Germany we wanted another child. Especially my husband, because he is an only child. We wanted to have two children.

He: We were trying to have another baby. But in 1993-1994 I had a serious problem in the company – a major restructuring. My department –the International Product Management department – became obsolete. I was offered a job in research in the US. For six months I worked in research, based in Germany, but planning to move to

New York; we got as far as looking for a house. The problem was that the structure of the company was not definitive yet. This situation generated a lot of stress – for all my colleagues and for myself.

She: As a result of this we had a problem with having a baby. When the situation improved, we finally had the baby.

B. Job satisfaction

Factors that were mentioned as creating job satisfaction were: a pleasant working environment and good relationships with colleagues.

EXCERPT 7

She: I'm very satisfied in my job. It requires a lot of precision, but it is quite easy-going. There's no competition, it's a stand-alone department. Quite a contrast with previous jobs. I feel quite privileged in my job, because although I have managerial responsibility, I have a quiet job.

Interviewer: How do you see the future?

She: Within 2 to 3 years I'd like to be in a job at the same level, but working with more highly qualified people. Now, I hold back from demanding too much from my subordinates because they are on a lower level and have stricter work schedules.

A factor that can create dissatisfaction because it leads to an imbalance between work and family is time-based spillover. One couple reported they would not like or approve of prolonged periods of work or travel. Another couple reported spending little time with their children because of long working hours, and indicated their dissatisfaction with the situation.

EXCERPT 8

She: The nanny picks the children up from home, gives them a bath, prepares dinner, and feeds them; I usually join them at the end of their dinner – just before they go to bed.

He: I join them –sometimes– in time to put the children to bed and tell them a bedtime story.

She: We're not satisfied with this situation.

He: I hope that my work situation – you see, I work in a young, fast-growing company with a lot of young executives. They all work long hours. I hope that my work will change so that I can spend more time with my family.

One manager-respondent reported his dissatisfaction with the fact that his wife sometimes came home later than he did. But he also admitted that, on the other hand, he was delighted that she was happy at work, and he even suggested expanding the office. He added that he would not like to have a “stupid” wife (tontita) with whom he could not discuss things.

EXCERPT 9

He: It stresses me that she (his wife) –working as the head of her own law office– maybe does not dedicate as much time to her child or family as most other women do in Spain. I am aware that this maybe is a “male chauvinist” stance. But, for instance, I dislike, but respect, the fact that sometimes she’s not home yet when I get home. When this happens often, I get angry. I know I should learn to deal with it, because we both have a good income, so it’s not because I earn more than she does, that she should take care of the children.

An important insight is that when people evaluate their job satisfaction they do not only refer to strictly work-related factors, but to both work and non-work factors. A good example is a respondent who told us she was very satisfied because the quality of her life had greatly improved when she had accepted her current job in Barcelona.

EXCERPT 10

Before, I worked in Madrid. I left home on Monday morning and got back on Friday night. Now, my quality of life has improved enormously. Although I work long hours and weekends, the fact that I see him (husband) every day is great. Living separated doesn’t make sense to me.

C. Satisfaction with the relationship

It is interesting to note that respondents never referred to dissatisfaction with their relationship as a consequence of work-family problems. Maybe that is because one interview is too short to be able to build a relationship with the interviewer that would make it possible to talk about marital problems. Another explanation is a sampling effect –couples with relationship problems may have refused to take part in the study in the first place.

The respondents that explicitly mentioned the quality of their relationship referred to it as a necessary condition, a starting point to confront work-family problems. One couple testified that flexibility and mutual understanding on both sides helped a lot to confront conflicts between work and non-work:

EXCERPT 11

Communication and love is essential in this respect. It’s difficult to separate work and family. That’s why it’s so important that the family experiences a little bit (...), that they can see the company, understand your situation better. That they can see that you’re worried, or that you’re happy because of things happening at work. Communication is fundamental. In all directions. That’s [the reason] why [we have] the conversation we have during dinner.

D. Turnover intention

Among the reasons for quitting a job there is obviously the wish to *improve oneself* financially, but only one manager mentioned this. Another pointed out that his salary was an important decision criterion in deciding to join the company he was currently working for,

but certainly not the most important one. He loved his new job, his intrinsic motivation was very important. But he especially liked having the opportunity to help to develop people.

A second reason for changing jobs is *organizational pressure to promote and accept higher workloads and responsibility*. One respondent referred to the “up-or-out” culture in her firm which meant that very few employees were allowed a career plateau. Most people were invited or encouraged to leave the firm if they could not promote. Several respondents indicated their satisfaction at having left their job to improve the balance between work and family. One female manager confided to us that since she had changed to her current, quieter job (her fifth), she had had two children. Before that, she and her husband had had difficulty having children.

EXCERPT 12

My husband and I wanted to have a baby before, but we weren't able to. According to the doctors, it was because of my nervousness and stress at work. That was my third job. Since I changed to a quieter job –the one I'm in now, my fifth job– we've had two children without any problems.

One manager also reported being forced to quit his job because of company-wide reorganization and described the stress of the uncertainty while waiting, searching for and evaluating alternative job offers. An interesting case is that of one respondent who said he was forced to invest in company-specific skills, which, together with family-friendly policies, “*hooked*” him to his company. His explanation was that it would be difficult to change jobs without losing all the advantages the firm offered. This employee testified to staying with the company despite unfavorable working conditions (being paid less than the industry average, lack of managerial career track), because of the family-friendly arrangements he enjoyed. This case illustrates how companies may use family-friendly policies as substitutes for, rather than as complements to, existing incentive systems, as has been suggested by Osterman (1995).

In Exhibit 1 the reader will find an extract from the transcript of an interview in which a couple describe a critical case of work-family conflict in their relationship. It is a good illustration of many of the points made above.

Discussion

The field of work-family conflict is dominated by quantitative research. The credibility –and the chances of publication– of research in organizational behavior and management is associated with the use of sophisticated quantitative methods. This study uses a different method –interviews and content analysis– and a different unit of analysis –managerial couples– than most studies in the field in the interests of a more in-depth insight into the phenomenon. The results suggest that scholars studying work/family conflict have been overlooking some crucial variables that play an important role in the experience of work-family conflict.

On the one hand, the results justify some of the well-established research variables in work-family conflict research: work stress, job satisfaction, time-based and strain-based work-family conflict, and socio-demographic variables (Allen et al., 2000; Ernst & Ozeki, 1998; 1999). An element that is well studied by scholars looking at family-friendly policies is

flexibility (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright & Neuman, 1999). On the other hand, the respondents frequently referred to certain themes that have scarcely been addressed in the literature: personal values and priorities, decision making and choices in situations of work-family conflict, the quality of the relationship of the couple, the time people actually spend with their children, job characteristics, and learning. The fact that our study reveals these variables should not surprise us, as some are processes that are hard to capture with quantitative studies of individuals, which is the method that has been dominating the field. They are immanent, tacit phenomena, phenomena that change over time, and phenomena that reflect the interaction between the two partners in a couple. These results suggest that instead of conceptualizing work-family conflict as an inter-role conflict –the dominating underlying theoretical stream in the field– one could frame it as an individual decision-making problem that is based on personality, values and situational factors. Work-family conflict can also be approached as a problem of accommodation and negotiation between two members of a couple. Or combining the two, a decision-making problem in which the central problem solver has to take into account the decision making of several dependent actors (e.g. spouse, supervisor), taking initiatives and decisions in a process of continuous interaction.

Causal analysis of variables associated with outcomes like stress, dissatisfaction with the job or the relationship, and turnover revealed that, in managers' experience, being in control, being able to influence, or being able to create or maintain an equilibrium between work and family is essential. As soon as respondents reported being forced to accept extra, unwanted workloads, business trips, promotions or expatriations, for whatever reason, they reported stress, dissatisfaction or an intention to quit the job. This pressure may be intended by the firm, as is the case in companies that deliberately encourage competition and comparison, or in companies with up-or-out cultures. Sometimes employees accept them in order to bridge a difficult or crucial period in their own or their partner's professional or personal career. Often the factor one cannot control is precisely the partner. These insights are in line with the demand-control-support model (Karasek, 1985; Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Johnson & Hall, 1987), which predicts high levels of stress when a person is confronted with a lack of control or decision latitude, high workloads and a lack of support. The insight also casts an interesting light on the fact that decision making seems to be so important in managers' experience of work-family conflict. First, managers are habituated and trained in making decisions. But since they also have to take into account the decisions and intentions of their partner, who may be a manager as well, both the number of decision criteria and the uncertainty of inputs and outcomes increases. Not to mention the emotional interdependency of the two partners, which will undoubtedly complicate decision making.

To conceptualize work-family conflict as a decision-making problem while taking into account exchanges and interactions between multiple actors (husband-wife, employer-employee, supervisor-employee), as is the case in work-family dilemmas, we can draw on equity theory (Adams, 1965; Greenberg, 1987; 1990) or social exchange theory (Homans, 1958, 1974; Blau 1964; Coleman, 1972; Emerson, 1976; Gouldner, 1960). Equity theory claims that people compare the ratios of their own perceived work outcomes (i.e. rewards) to their own perceived work inputs (i.e. contributions) to the corresponding ratios of a comparison other (e.g. a co-worker). If the ratios are unequal, the party whose ratio is higher is theorized to be inequitably overpaid (and to feel guilty), whereas the party whose ratio is lower is theorized to be inequitably underpaid (and to feel angry). Equal ratios are postulated to yield equitable states and associated feelings of satisfaction. Individuals are theorized to adjust their own or the comparison other's actual or perceived inputs or outcomes in order to change unpleasant inequitable states to more pleasant equitable ones. These reactions may be classified as being either behavioral (e.g. altering job performance) or psychological (e.g. altering perceptions of work outcomes) (Greenberg, 1990, p. 400). If expanded towards the

family domain, equity theory can offer a framework to understand why individuals decide to give priority to work or family depending on rewards and contributions, in both the work and the family context. It offers a rationale for the decision to accept or refuse a promotion depending on work and family demands, quit a job or marriage, or stay and experience dissatisfaction or stress because of an imbalance between work and family rewards and contributions. Within this framework work-family policies can be conceptualized as an extra reward to compensate employee contributions. Social exchange theory may offer a more complete theory because it goes beyond the economic exchanges that equity theory stresses. It also takes into account social exchanges that are more difficult to quantify but may be essential for work-family conflict –an essentially social phenomenon. A promising study using social exchange theory is Lambert (2000), which links work-life benefits and organizational citizenship behavior. Yet even social exchange theory may not reach far enough, because it does not address altruistic behavior. I found repeated indications that the sacrifices spouses make can only be understood as purely altruistic behavior. This altruistic behavior, in turn, is often inspired by certain underlying values and beliefs of individuals, the number one theme of our study. Our study suggests that scholars in the work-family domain can no longer ignore individual values and beliefs.

A recent study by Greenhaus & Powell (2000) offers a promising methodological approach to address work-family conflict as a decision-making problem. They asked part-time MBA students to make decisions to participate in either a work activity or a family activity, experimentally manipulating external pressures and support for participation in the other role. They found that the relative strength of pressures from role senders in the work and family domains and the relative salience of work and family roles affect the decision. In addition, these authors found that individuals who decide to participate in the work activity experience more conflict than those who decide to participate in the family activity. This study may inspire future research to approach work-family conflict as a decision-making problem while taking into account multiple external pressures (work and spouse) and sources of support. However, future research should also take into account relevant values and beliefs about the relative importance of work and family. Greenhaus & Powell have shown that social identity theory (Burke, 1991; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1995; Thoits, 1991) offers a theoretical framework to approach values as central or salient social identities.

Our results suggest that in order to understand work-family conflict in managers and managerial couples, scholars need to address the experience and position of these managers and certain managerial job characteristics and actions such as travelling, promotion and refusing promotion. Because of their responsibilities at work, managers work longer hours and experience more time-based and strain-based work-family conflict than other sectors of the workforce. Our study did not resolve contradictions in the literature regarding the higher or lower stress levels associated with higher demands and higher time discretion. It does, however, confirm that stress is an important issue for managers and, partly because they have more discretion over their time, managers are more frequently confronted with choices between work and family. With each promotion, managers face increases in responsibility and expectations in terms of the amount of time and energy devoted to work. As a consequence, managers are repeatedly forced to make choices between their professional and personal careers. This may also explain why decision making is so central a part of managers' experience. I call for more, especially qualitative, studies focusing on managers to create a better understanding of the work-family conflict experienced by this group.

A limitation of the study is that the results are based on a very specific sample, which may color the results. By using a semi-random sampling technique and taking into account some potentially important control variables, I have made an effort to obtain a

balanced, unbiased group. However, the fact that most respondents were recruited from the alumni-directory of one specific business school in Spain may influence the results. The fact that most of them are MBAs signals their ambition and achievement orientation, which may influence the relative priority they give to work and family. Moreover, they obtained their MBA from an international business school reckoned among the top in Spain and Europe. This strengthens the achievement orientation signal and increases the likelihood of international careers. Third, given their cultural inheritance, the experience of Spanish managers may not be generalizable to other cultures. Fourth, by interviewing existing couples, and not separated couples, I may be under- or overestimating, or even missing important variables.

The respondents hardly mention elements in their particular cultural and legal macro-context that may influence their experience of work-family conflict. An exception is the idea of a gender/class culture in Spain creating an implicit but strong social pressure on young women to work and have a career. Several women in the sample testified that working at home and staying home to raise children is generally associated with a low social status and the stigma of being a “maruja”, the Spanish word for housewife, but with clear negative connotations. The fact that relatively few macro-factors were mentioned may be because it is simply irrelevant to most respondents, and from this we may conclude that we should not overestimate cultural differences. Another explanation is that respondents are not conscious of cultural factors because, like the air we breathe, a cultural context is omnipresent and evident. In this case we should be very cautious not to underestimate their influence. At this stage we should beware of drawing any conclusions. Future research should explicitly address cultural issues and compare couples in different contexts. Another suggestion is to study couples that have lived in different contexts.

To conclude, the innovative approach of this paper has revealed some promising new lines of inquiry for the field of work-family conflict. Future research should draw on broader and different samples to replicate our study and check the generalizability of its findings –because if it can be generalized it may have a strong implication for theoretical development. It suggests that by over-emphasizing quantitative research scholars in the field are overlooking some fundamental phenomena, especially tacit, time-related, intra-personal and inter-personal processes. It calls for more qualitative research and a shift in focus from the consequences of work-family conflict to the actual decision making preceding and creating conflict situations.

Exhibit 1

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT IN MANAGERIAL COUPLES

**A critical case of work-family conflict. Expatriation to Mexico
(fragment of transcript of interview)**

(For your information: she works as owner / manager of a small lawyer's office, a subsidiary of a bigger office owned by her father in another town).

- He: I got a proposal to go to Mexico to start up a company. At that time, I was assistant commercial director at the company. I went there for one month to get things started. When I came back I got the proposal to actually go and become general director of the company in Mexico. It was a very attractive offer, which represented a serious step in my professional career.
- She: This was a completely unexpected offer. My first reaction was negative.
- He: I told her, think about it (on Friday) because Tuesday I have to give an answer.
- She: I passed the weekend crying a lot, experiencing an enormous pressure.
- He: The truth was that company did not want an answer that quickly. It was me who was impatient and anxious to take a decision. I was impressed by her reaction. I was aware that she had to give up a job in which at that moment she was earning a lot more than me. They were going to pay me very well in Mexico, and although I was very excited about the offer, I tried to take into account her point of view as well. So I tried to convince her. My arguments were: it is an excellent opportunity, it would be only for 2-3 years, she could take up her old job again with her father, etc...
- She: I asked my father about this possibility, but my parents were very upset about the whole situation. My father reacted very strongly to the idea that I would leave / close the Barcelona office as an important part of the company. He made it very clear that if I would do that, I wouldn't have to count on him anymore. He told me that I would not be able to enter the law firm again, I would lose all my clients and to him it would be like losing a child. This put even more pressure on me, which was a horrible experience.
- He: My parents were positive about the idea, but they were not aware what this would mean for her. Especially my mother, who never worked. They only thought about the idea that their son would be general director of a firm at his 30 years, with a big job and a big income.
- She: Despite the heavy pressure of my father, I finally decided that my husband was more important than my father was. My core argument was my husband. I was prepared to sacrifice myself for the excellent opportunity for my husband.
- He: It was clear – although we went through difficult times – that I would never leave her.
- She: I experienced this as a moral pressure. If I would refuse to go, he would not have any choice. He would lose the chance of his lifetime, he would reproach me.
- He: I was aware that it would mean a huge sacrifice for her, because one night we were dining with couples who went to Mexico. They told me that she could work as a secretary. This made me imagine the situation the other way around – that she would get a big offer to start up a law firm in Holland, and I had to work as carpenter. I never even considered separating from my wife.
- She: I knew that it would be a sacrifice, but it was also an act of rebellion against my father, who reacted so strongly.
- He: I also knew that for her it would be a sacrifice. We realised, whatever decision we would take, it would jeopardise one person's future. It was a real dilemma.
- She: The company also played an important role. He sort of planned to have his "lifetime career" there. Refusing the offer, I was afraid that he would reproach me the rest of his life.
- He: We finally took the decision to go to Mexico. Fortunately, because of unforeseen macro-economic circumstances – the election of a new President and the brutal devaluation of the Mexican peso - the project was called off. Moreover, my supervisor - a comprehensive and good person - realised that taking into account my family situation he could not ask me to go to Mexico, in this crisis period. Thus they proposed me to go to Mexico frequently to build up the company in different stages. In this year, I was one month in Mexico, one month in Spain.
- She: This still was a sacrifice to me, because I was alone, but relative to the previous situation, better.
- He: Retrospectively, I realise that it would have been a serious mistake to go, because she would never have adapted to the situation. She would have suffered, because Mexicans are very "machista"; she would not have been able to do the kind of work she likes and that would have been terrible. She would have led the life of a housewife, and this would [have] depress[ed] her.
- She: I also realise that we did not judge the risk that was involved in the decision.
- He: Mexico City is a very aggressive city; I know different couples who separated after going there.
- She: To me, this was certainly the most difficult period in my life. One also learns to put things into perspective – it would not have jeopardised his career not to go to Mexico.
- He: We were less mature in that period.
- She: The influence of this story on our later relationship is that it has enforced our relationship, and that I am less worried when he has to travel abroad. Recently, he got an attractive proposal to go and direct a bigger company in Seville. He considered the proposal. My reaction was the same as in the Mexico case, maybe even more extreme: forget it.
- He: Now, I would think it over more, certainly with the baby.

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