

Being there for co-workers and family: How balancing work and family roles affects collegiality at work

Lieke ten Brummelhuis

Sociology/ICS graduate school, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

Email: l.tenbrummelhuis@uu.nl

Jarrold M. Haar

Waikato Management School, University of Waikato, Hamilton, NZ

Email: haar@waikato.ac.nz

Tanja van der Lippe

Sociology/ICS, Utrecht University, The Netherlands

There is a consensus that employees face increased demands from both the work and the family domains. Family demands have increased due to the more evenly shared family tasks between men and women, whereas employees are expected to invest more in social relations at work since teamwork has become a common work design. This study sought to explain collegiality or informal co-worker relations, by including the impact of family demands and family-work balance strategies over and above work factors of the employee. Moreover, characteristics of co-workers were also taken into account as predictors. Data were taken from a Dutch survey of 1114 employees. The results showed that family-work balance strategies, used by the employee and co-workers, decreased collegiality, whereas from the family demands, only the presence of young children was negatively related to collegiality. A supportive work environment and a task dependent work design contributed to collegial behaviour. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: *collegiality, co-worker relations, teamwork, family-work balance, family-friendly arrangements*

Relations between team members have become increasingly important since organisations design their work process more and more in cooperative forms (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Hodson, 1997). A team-based work design is seen as the crucial ingredient of post-bureaucratic organisations, and the key to efficiency and competitiveness in the global economy (Barker, 1993; Hodson, 1997; Tausky & Chelte, 1991). For a team to function properly, organizations need employees who are real ‘team players’. The recruitment prerequisites for those team embedded positions thus not only entail adequate job skills, knowledge and experience, but also excellent social, communicative and cooperative skills. Paradoxically, whereas employees are expected to invest more in the work domain, developments beyond the organizational domain hinder employees to meet higher social participation at work, since employees are confronted with increased demands from the family domain as well (Flap

& Völker, 2004; Sanders, Van Emmerik & Raub, 2002). In the last decades, the growing number of women who participate in paid work, the rise in single parent families and the grown number of dual earner families have increased the likelihood that employees occupy a family and a work role (Allen, Herst, Burck & Sutton, 2000; Cinamon & Rich, 2002). The combination of work and family roles often leads to conflict, time pressure and stress (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). While work-family research has pointed out the mutual influence of the family and the work domain (see Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux & Brinley, 2005 for a review), no former research has studied the effects of family demands on informal relations at work in detail. Can employees meet the social requirements of modern jobs while at the same time facing increased demands from the family domain? The present study will address this issue and will contribute to former work-family studies, network studies and organisational behaviour studies in four ways.

The few studies investigating antecedents of informal relations at work beyond the workplace showed mixed results. Flap and Völker (2001) for example, found that employees with a partner and children were less involved in social activities at work, whereas other studies found that having children was positively related to informal, altruistic relations at work (Flap & Völker, 2004; Sanders & Van Emmerik, 2004). The present study will elaborate on these studies by using more detailed measures of the family while investigating the effects of family on co-worker relations.

In answer to the conflicting demands from family and work, employees and organisations have come up with different strategies to successfully combine these dual roles, like outsourcing of family tasks and flexible work times. Several studies have addressed the beneficial effects of these strategies for employee well-being and work-family conflict (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright & Neuman, 1999; Hill, 1996; Tausig & Fenwick, 2003), as well as work outcomes such as organizational commitment (Flynn, 1995; Kossek & Ozeki, 1999; Ng, 2006; Haar & Spell, 2004), absenteeism (Galinsky & Stein, 1990) and organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine & Bachrach, 2000). Elaborating on these studies, we will evaluate the effects of family work balance strategies on co-worker relations.

The third contribution of this study is to focus on a clearly marked dimension of the rather broadly used concept 'co-worker relations'. Co-worker relations have been studied under several

different designations, such as co-worker solidarity (Hodson, 1997, 2001), informal relations at work (Morrison, 2004; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995), pro-social behaviour (Brief & Mitowidlo, 1986) and several dimensions of OCB (Podsakoff, et al., 2000). Since, the use of different concepts of co-worker relations allow for a broad array of interpretations (Brief & Mitowidlo, 1986; Podsakoff et al.; 2000), Podsakoff et al. (2000) called for studies to take into account a more careful and adequate use of the different dimensions of work relations. In answer to this call, the present study focuses on a specific dimension of work relations: the collegiality of employees at work. Collegiality refers to social and communicative behaviour of employees, directed towards co-workers, with the intention to contribute positively to the cooperation in the team and the work atmosphere.

Finally, previous studies thus far have not included co-worker characteristics in studying relations between employees. Since two persons are required to build a relationship, the characteristics of the interaction partner will affect the relation as well (Flap & Völker, 2001, 2004; Sanders & Van Emmerik, 2004). Therefore, the present study will include characteristics of co-workers while investigating collegiality at work. In summary, the present study will investigate the effects of 1) family demands, 2) work-family balance strategies, and 3) co-worker work characteristics on collegiality of employees, over and above work characteristics of employees.

Theoretical framework

Previous studies explaining why people start and invest in informal relations used both psychological and sociological insights. The *psychological perspective* on the development of relations is represented by the *theory of similarity*, which predicts that persons who have several characteristics in common, such as gender and age, are more likely to start relationships (Homans, 1950). Under the *sociological perspective*, relationships are seen as the result of intentional action. People invest in relationships if they estimate the long-term rewards of the relationship to outweigh possible costs, given several restrictions (Flap & Völker, 2001). These two theoretical approaches however, do not contradict each other and can instead be integrated, since more similarities between people may increase the chance that the relationship is fulfilling and rewarding (Flap, 2001).

Similarity between persons can thus be seen as another restriction that the person takes into account while considering their investment in a relationship. In this paper, we adopt the central assumption that collegial behaviour of employees is a result of a rational consideration, given certain conditions. In the following sections, we discuss conditions for building informal relations that are most support by empirical evidence (Flap & Völker, 2004).

As mentioned above, previous studies have shown that employees, who are similar on primary characteristics such as gender and age, but also education, will be more likely to form a stronger informal relationship (Flap & Völker, 2001). We therefore expect that similarity in demographic characteristics (gender, age and education) of the employee and co-workers will be positively linked with collegiality of the employee (*Hypothesis 1*). Secondly, co-worker relations will be more likely if employees need each other's help, advice or input to perform their tasks (Flap & Völker, 2004). In line with this we expect collegiality to be positively linked with task dependency between co-workers (*Hypothesis 2*). The time embeddedness of employees forms the third restriction regarding the formation of stronger informal relationships (Raub & Weesie, 2000). If employees know that they will interact with each other in the future, they are less likely to show opportunistic non-cooperative behaviour that may be beneficial in short time, but is likely to imply long term disadvantages due to hostile behaviour of the alter. Instead, employees who have long-term relationships to co-workers will be more likely to act cooperatively and build a mutual benefiting exchange relationship. Consequently, we expect an employee with a permanent work contract to be more collegial than employees with a temporal contract (*Hypothesis 3*).

Fourth, the community in which employees are embedded can also act as a condition for strengthening informal relationships. In cohesive communities the social control among co-workers is higher, which prevents opportunistic behaviour of employees and stimulates investment in social relations. In addition, cohesive work environments facilitate reciprocal relations in which employees are more co-operative and more socially involved as a return for the support they received from the supervisor or co-workers (Lambooi, 2005) Therefore, we expect employees who work in a more cohesive environment (high co-worker and supervisor support) to show higher collegiality (*Hypothesis 4*).

The fifth condition under which formation of informal relations is more likely to occur is the opportunity to meet co-workers. It is simply impossible to invest in relations if there is no opportunity to meet others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). The time in which employees can interact at work is at first determined by the formally arranged hours that employees are at work and, since for interaction at least two persons are needed, the hours that co-workers work. In addition, flexibility in work arrangements to allow for balancing work and family roles may also affect the time that employees are present at work, and thereby the opportunities for social investments. Therefore, we expect the work hours of the employee and co-workers to be positively linked with collegiality (*Hypothesis 5a*), whereas the use of telework and flexible work schedules will be negatively linked with collegiality (*Hypothesis 5b*).

Sixth, collegial behaviour of employees will be less likely to the extent that employees have other relationship options outside the organization. Two types of alternatives can be distinguished: work alternatives and relational alternatives. Work alternatives refer to other job options that employees have. If employees can easily find a comparable job in another team or organisation their urge to invest in co-workers relations is lower (Flap & Völker, 2004). In a similar vein, we expect job alternatives of the employee to be negatively linked with collegiality (*Hypothesis 6a*). Relational alternatives refer to significant relationships that employees have outside the organisation, such as relationships with a partner and children. The need for informal relations at work is likely to be lower among employees who already have fulfilling relationships at home (Flap & Völker, 2004). Moreover, relations outside the organisation can conflict with relations at work since both types of relations require the employee's time and energy (Sanders & Van Emmerik, 2004). In line with this argument, we suggest that help in family tasks will save employees' time and energy, which they in turn can invest in social relations at work. Therefore, we expect employees who have more family relations (partner and children) and higher family demands (young children and more family tasks) to express less collegial behaviour at work (*Hypothesis 6b*), whereas help in family tasks will be linked with higher collegiality (*Hypothesis 6c*).

Methods

Data and procedure

Data were collected using a multi-stage sample of employees from 30 Dutch firms. This survey was designed to study the causes of and solutions to work-home interference (Van der Lippe & Glebbeek, 2004). Within the 30 organizations, the number of industries was representative for the Netherlands, although the percentage of those in the service sector was slightly higher and agriculture was slightly lower than in the Dutch economy. We had information about the function group of each employee, enabling us to link co-workers of a work group.

Employees were interviewed in oral and written form at home. In addition, they filled in a *time diary* during one week assigning how many hours they spent on tasks e.g. cooking, cleaning, providing care and working. Of the respondents who lived with a partner the partner was also interviewed with an oral and written questionnaire, and filled in a time diary as well. Respondents ranged in age from 17-62 (average 40 years), with 75% having a partner, with number of children ranging from zero to six, with an average family size of one child. We only included respondents who worked over 12 hours per week and filled in at least 75% of the questionnaire. This yielded a total sample of 1017 employees, for a response rate of 26%, which corresponds well with similar Dutch national probability samples (Kalmijn, Bernasco & Weesie, 1999).

Measures

Collegiality We operationalized collegiality as the social and communicative behaviour of employees towards co-workers, and their effort to contribute to the social atmosphere in the work group. The 6-item scale was designed for the Time Competition Study (Van der Lippe & Glebbeek, 2004) to measure the social contacts of co-workers and their cooperative attitude in their work group. A principal component analyses extracted a single component with a total Eigenvalue of 2.484. The reliability of the scale was adequate with a Cronbach's alpha of .75.

Controls Background characteristics gender, age and education of the employee were included. *Gender* was measured by a dummy variable, labeled as 0 (*man*) and 1 (*woman*). *Age* was measured as

a continuous variable in years and *education* was measured on a 12-point scale ranging from 0 (*not finished school or lower education*) to 11 (*higher, scientific education*).

Similarity of co-workers In order to measure how similar the employee was to co-workers in terms of the personal characteristics gender, education and age, we used two different measures for each characteristic. First, we measured the differences between the employee score on e.g. education and the mean education score of the other work group members. This individual difference towards the co-worker mean was calculated for the variables gender, education and age. In addition, we took into account the variance of these personal variables within the work group by taking the standard deviation of the gender, education and age of all participating co-workers of a work group.

Dependency The 4-item Likert scale of *task dependency* was designed for the Time Competition Study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.60$) and measured the extent to which colleagues needed each other's knowledge, as well as the extent to which employees were responsible for a common output. We also used *job autonomy* as a measure of dependency between co-workers, assuming that employees with more autonomy are less dependent on other co-workers. Autonomy was measured on a 3-item Likert scale by Van Veldhoven and Meijman (1994).

Time embeddedness The time embeddedness of employees in the organisation was measured by a single item on the type of the employee's *contract*. We measured time embeddedness with a dummy variable 0 (*temporal contract*) and 1 (*long-term contract*).

Community Two measures were used for work community. *Support by the supervisor* was measured with a 5-item scale by Van Veldhoven and Meijman (1994). The respondents had to react on several statements about the sympathy, interest, attention and appreciation of their supervisor (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). For *co-worker support* we used three items designed by De Vries (1997), also with 5 answer categories, measuring the extent to which employees could count on help from

colleagues (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.80$). To gain a more reliable measure of supportiveness of co-workers, we calculated the mean on the co-worker support scale reported by the co-workers of each employee.

Opportunity to meet The opportunity to meet co-workers was operationalized as the time that employees were present at their work location. We measured this first as the employee's absolute number of work hours per week. Furthermore, the number of work hours of co-workers was taken into account by measuring the mean number of work hours of the other co-workers of an employee's work group. Third, respondents were asked how often they used *flexible work schedules*. We also calculated the mean use of flexible work schedules by the co-workers of each employee. Finally as a measure for opportunity to meet co-workers we took into account whether the employee used *telework*, resulting in a dummy variables, 0 (no) 1 (yes) and whether a lot of co-workers used telework, by including the *percentage of teleworkers in the work group*.

Alternatives Two types of alternative relations were taken into account. First, we measured whether the employee had easily access to another job. The 4-item job alternative scale (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81$) included items such as 'If you lose your job can you easily find a comparable job'. Second, alternative relations beyond the organisation were measured by the presence of a partner and children. A dummy was used for presence of the *partner* with 0 (*no partner*) and 1 (*partner*). The *number of children* was a continuous variable and varied in this sample from 0 to 6 children. The *age of child(ren)* was measured by a dummy for the presence of young children in the household (0 to 6 years old). The amount of *family tasks* was measured as the total time in hours per week spent on household and childcare tasks. *Help in family tasks* was measured as a dummy whether employees received help in doing household tasks, with the answer categories 0 (*no*) and 1 (*yes*).

Data analyses

To examine the direct effect on collegiality of similarity between co-workers (Hypothesis 1), co-workers dependency (Hypotheses 2), employee's time embeddedness (Hypothesis 3), work community (Hypotheses 4), opportunity to meet co-workers (Hypotheses 5a and 5b) and alternatives

(Hypotheses 6a, 6b and 6c) regression analyses were estimated with collegiality as the dependent variable. Since we had no expectations beforehand which of the predictors would have the greatest impact on collegiality we used the stepwise method for the regression analysis instead of a hierarchical regression analysis. In the stepwise method, variables are entered in the model one by one, whereby predictors with the highest correlation enter first, followed by the weaker predictors. In each round, the significance of all the predictors is recalculated, which results in a model with only significant predictors. Following the stepwise regression method we thus estimated a best-fit model with only the most important predictors for collegiality, while the non-significant predictors are left out. Another approach could have been to test each hypothesis separately, by estimating six models, each including only predictors belonging to a single hypothesis. We chose not to estimate separate models, but instead to combine all predictors in one model, to ensure that the combined effects of the predictors were tested.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of the stepwise regression analysis on collegiality. None of the similarity variables had a significant effect on collegiality of employees. We thus did not find support for Hypothesis 1 that employees, who are more similar in gender, education and age, to their co-workers, are more collegial to co-workers. Task dependency was a strong predictor of collegial behavior, being positively related to collegiality. In contrast to what we expected, job autonomy was also positively related to collegiality, meaning that employees with more leeway at work are more collegial towards co-workers. We thus found only partly support for Hypothesis 2, that tasks dependency between co-workers increases collegiality. The results confirmed our expectation that long-term relations increase collegiality (Hypothesis 3), given the significant relation between long-term contract and collegiality.

Hypothesis 4, that collegiality is higher in cohesive work environments, was firmly supported by our results. Supervisor support was the most important predictor of collegiality, and also support of co-workers was positively related to collegial behavior. We found no support for Hypothesis 5a since

the number of work hours of both the employee and co-workers had no significant effect on collegial behavior. However, Hypothesis 5b was supported since employees who used flexible work schedules themselves, and who had co-workers who used flexible work schedules were less collegial at work. In addition, co-worker's use of telework was negatively related to collegiality.

We found support for Hypothesis 6a that good job alternatives reduce collegiality at the current professional position, since employees who reported to have less difficulties in finding a comparable other job, were less collegial at work. Hypothesis 6b was only partially supported, as the presence of young children was an important predictor of reduced collegiality. However, the other measures of family demands, having a partner, the presence of children and the number of family tasks, had no effect on collegiality of the employee. Finally, Hypothesis 6c was not supported, since help in household tasks was not significantly related to collegiality of employees.

< TABLE 1 >

Discussion

The aims of this study were threefold. First, we sought to expand our understanding of informal relations at work by including family factors in addition to typical work factors. We could however not prove a difference in collegial behaviour between employees with and without a partner and/or children. A more detailed view on family life though, revealed an effect of young children on collegiality. Since employees with young children were less collegial, we suggest that care for young children costs a lot of time and energy that prevents employees from being optimally involved in social relations at work.

Our second aim was to evaluate the effects of family-work balance strategies on collegial behaviour at work. Help in household task did not have the beneficial effect on co-workers relation we expected, while the use of flexible work schedules was rather detrimental for co-worker relations. The negative effect of flexible work arrangement was also present if co-workers used these arrangements, which brings us to the third aim of this study: studying the effects of co-worker factors on collegial behaviour. Co-worker characteristics were highly important concerning the use of work-family

balance strategies. If employee's had co-workers who worked at home and used flexible work times regularly, they were less collegial towards co-workers. Since the co-worker characteristics (gender, age and education) did not have an effect on collegiality of the employee, we could not confirm the *similarity theory* that co-workers who are more alike in personal characteristics have more and stronger social ties.

In addition, our study of collegiality between co-workers revealed three striking results. First, in accordance to previous studies (Ng et al., 2006) we found no difference in collegial behaviour between employees working longer and shorter workweeks, which we expected since employees that make longer work weeks have more opportunity to meet. Others have suggested that nowadays mainly women occupy a part time job, with the social ties at work being the main reason to get involved in paid work (Flap & Völker, 2004). Therefore, the pro-social attitude of part timers towards co-workers would compensate for less interaction time with co-workers due to their shorter workweek (Flap & Völker, 2004).

Another interesting finding was the importance of the work community for collegiality, since both supervisor support and co-workers support were related to increased collegial behaviour. We suggest a number of possible mechanisms to be at work here. The positive effect of support may be part of a social exchange mechanism (Blau, 1964) in which the employee pays back in a similar currency as the supervisor and co-workers. The finding also supports the idea that more cohesive environments enable higher social control in which collegial behaviour is enforced. Finally, the supportive environment may reflect a supportive work culture in which all supervisors and co-workers share reciprocal norms, resulting in highly collegial behaviour among all.

The last salient finding concerns the contradictory effects of dependency, operationalised as task dependency and job autonomy, on collegial behaviour. Whereas tasks dependency indeed increased collegiality as expected, so did job autonomy, against our expectation. Apparently we wrongly assumed that autonomy goes hand in hand with less dependency between co-workers. Instead, job autonomy may represent a work asset. In line with our reasoning that a supportive work environment pays back in more collegial behaviour of employees, we suggest that the employee is

grateful for the trustful gesture of the employer by giving more autonomy and therefore is more willing and able to invest in social relations at work.

Limitations

The study results must be viewed in the light of some limitations. First, the study was cross-sectional, meaning that no firm conclusions regarding causal relations can be made. A longitudinal study may reduce these limitations, although this method involves other methodological pitfalls and difficulties and is not able to prove causation conclusively in itself (Zapf, Dormann & Frese, 1996). Improvements could be made upon the measure of tasks dependence, since the reliability of our scale was not optimal. Furthermore, future research could apply a more elaborate operationalization of time embeddedness. Our sample restricted us to use only one measure, being the temporal versus permanent contract. Despite these limitations, strong aspects of our study include the relatively large number of respondents (>1000) and the use of time diaries to measure the time spent by employees on family tasks and other activities. Moreover, the unique study design enabled us to match employees who worked together, whereby we could study the effects of co-worker characteristics on collegiality of the employee.

Conclusion

Overall, our more detailed look on the relation between family demands and collegiality at work revealed that the presence of young children lowered collegiality at work. Furthermore the importance of work-family balance strategies and co-worker characteristics was stressed, since the use of flexible work arrangements of both the employee and the co-workers lowered collegial behaviour. Overall, our results lead to the conclusion that collegiality is most likely to occur in a work environment that provides physical and emotional bindings towards the organization. More supportive work environments, including supervisor and co-worker support, as well as a work design in which co-workers are dependent on each other to perform their tasks, may help to bind employees emotionally to the organization, benefiting collegial behaviour. Physical binding can be achieved by offering employees permanent contracts and restricting the use of telework and flexible work

schedules, for example by setting down common office hours among a team. Our finding that flexible work arrangements lower collegiality should however not lead to the abandon of family-friendly policies, since others have shown the beneficial effects of these policies for family and work outcomes, as well as lower work-family conflict (Baltes et al., 1999). Our results though, highlight the downside of these policies. Whereas family-friendly policies might enable employees to combine family tasks and in-role work outcomes, they seem not to cover for ex-role performances like collegiality towards co-workers.

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Appendix

Table 1. Explorative regression analysis of work and family factors on collegiality

Predictors	COLLEGIALITY (n = 1017)
Supervisor support	.308***
Task dependency	.245***
Co-worker flexible schedule	-.078*
Co-worker support	.083**
Job autonomy	.087**
Presence children < 6 years	-.095***
Job alternatives	-.079**
Long term contract	.060*
Flexible work schedule	-.072*
Co-worker telework	-.056*
Total R ²	.241
Total Adjusted R ²	.234
Total F statistic	35.262***

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001.

Standardized regression coefficients.