Work-Family Conflict and Mental Distress of Black Women in Employment in South Africa: A Template Analysis

Peter Thomas Sandy [1,2,*], Tebogo K. Molotsi [3] and Margaret Rioga [4]

1   College of Nursing, Midwifery & Healthcare, University of West London, London TW8 9GA, UK
2   Development Studies, University of South Africa, Preller Street, Pretoria 0003, South Africa
3   Human Resource Department, University of South Africa, Pretoria 0003, South Africa
4   School of Nursing and Allied Health, Buckinghamshire New University, London UB8 1NA, UK
*   Correspondence: peter.sandy@uwl.ac.uk

Abstract: Work–family conflict causes stress, and exposure to it may lead to mental distress. Yet little is known about work–family conflict and mental distress in Africa. This study reports on the perceptions of black South African women in employment on work–family conflict and the mental distress women may experience when exposed to this conflict. The study utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis as a research design. Data were collected with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule. A total of 20 individual interviews and four focus group interviews comprising five participants each were conducted. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the data obtained were transcribed verbatim and analysed using template analysis. Two level-one theme codes emerged from the data analysis: antecedents of work–family conflict and work–family conflict manifestations. The findings of the study point to the need for managers to work in partnership with employees using family-friendly initiatives such as family supportive supervision for promoting mental well-being.

1. Introduction

The last few decades witnessed a significant global increase in women participating in the labour market (Yadav 2015). Taking Europe as an example, the proportion of women in employment rose from 44% in 1960 to 79% in 2003 (McLnnes 2006). A similar proportion since the 1960s is noted in most developing countries like South Africa (World Bank Group 2015). This is probably a function of increases in the financial needs of most households in the developing and developed worlds (World Bank Group 2015).

Women who participate in the labour workforce have work-related responsibilities and home-related responsibilities (Poms et al. 2016). The nature of work-related responsibilities, like requirements to meet deadlines and the advances in technology, can decrease employees' ability to balance their work and family life. Technological advances, for example, in areas such as the Internet, increase employees' accessibility and hours worked per day (Davis et al. 2017). Hence, the time employees spend at work encroaches on the time they have for their families. Thus, the participation of women in the workforce limits their availability for domestic work and warm relationships with families (Neto et al. 2018). Put simply, combining family and work responsibilities can be difficult for women. This indicates that the demands of work and family on women are incompatible, a view that is consistent with that of the role conflict theory, posited by Kahn et al. (1964). It states that role conflicts occur when pressures in one role are incompatible with those of another.

Two types of role conflicts are reported in the work–family literature: work–family conflict and family–work conflict (Selvarajan et al. 2018). Work–family conflict relates to a conflict that arises when responsibilities in the work domain interfere with those in the family domain (Yadav 2015). Family–work conflict, on the other hand, arises when

family responsibilities hinder those at the workplace (Yadav 2015). Despite the distinct difference, there is a bidirectional association between these conflicts, which Amstad et al. (2011) explain. They note that an increase in conflict in one domain (e.g., home) may lead to an increase in the other (e.g., work). Work–family conflict is more prevalent than family–work conflict among women in employment (Amstad et al. 2011), and thus, this paper focuses on the former. The relatively high prevalence of work–family conflict in this population is attributable to women being more likely to make adjustments in their families to accommodate work demands (Jaga and Bagraim 2017). The adoption of such a stance, Obrenovic et al. (2020) claim, may lead to experiences of stress.

Work–family conflicts are major sources of stress, and thus exposure to the same, particularly over prolonged periods, may result in negative outcomes (Magwaza 2003; Davis et al. 2017). Women may develop anxiety (Karim 2009) and depression (Koekemoer and Mostert 2006) when exposed to work–family conflict. Reduced marital and job satisfaction, and feelings of guilt, are not uncommon among women with experiences of work–family conflict (Oshio et al. 2017). Considering these negative outcomes, developing insight into the interaction between work and family domains is critical for ensuring the well-being of women in employment and enriching the work–family literature. This subject has been extensively researched, but the great majority of prior studies are quantitatively oriented, thereby failing to explore in detail the subjective experiences of women (Ahyoung and Jang 2017). The literature is also biased toward physical health, with mental distress being much neglected (Selvarajan et al. 2018). This study is therefore qualitatively orientated and focuses on mental distress given its detrimental effects on women, their families, and employers (Neto et al. 2018). The term "mental distress" is used in this paper to refer to psychological problems women in employment experience (Sandy and Rioga 2013).

2. Background

The incidence of work–family conflict is on the increase among parents, with women experiencing it more than men (Borelli et al. 2016). This pattern of experiences of work–family conflict is attributable to women assuming dual responsibilities of work and family (Symoens and Bracke 2015). Drawing on a premise from the traditional role theory, people have specific roles they highly value and on which they prefer to spend most of their energy and time (Reitzes and Mutran 1994). The preferences in responsibilities are influenced by people's gender. Men consider the work domain very important and therefore tend to expend more time on work-related responsibilities (Courtenay 2000). By contrast, women value the family and thus the performance of responsibilities for ensuring well-functioning households is considered salient (Jaga and Bagraim 2017).

In patriarchal societies, like Africa, women are expected to assume several roles, like those of wife, mother, hostess to guests and extended family members, sister-in-law, and daughter-in-law (Bayazit and Bayazit 2019). Although fulfilling these roles may elicit acceptance and praise, not fulfilling them, by contract, may elicit a wave of condemnation from families and communities (Chang et al. 2017). It is probably for this reason that women in patriarchal societies are sometimes discouraged from gaining paid employment (Symoens and Bracke 2015).

The engagement in employment may deter women from adequately fulfilling their family roles, and thus, lead to experiences of work–family conflict (Obrenovic et al. 2020). Acknowledging this, work–family conflict is a manifestation of the stress women are exposed to in managing multiple roles in the work and family domains. It is therefore safe to note that any attempt made to perform tasks, for instance, in the work domain, may hinder the woman's ability to perform tasks in the other domain (family). Given that women value the family domain more than the work domain, not effectively carrying out their roles (e.g., childcare) in the former because of work demands may generate stress and subsequently lead to mental distress like increased levels of anger and anxiety (Obrenovic et al. 2020). In other words, the mental well-being of women is at risk when work responsibilities hinder their ability to maintain well-functioning households (Symoens

and Bracke 2015). Thus, dealing with the demands of the work and family domains may make women prone to mental distress, for example, self-harm and suicide (Sandy 2013). Considering this, work–family is a significant predictor of women's mental well-being, a view consistent with the outcome of Panatik et al.'s (2011) study on the determinants of mental distress of teachers. Yet no study known to the authors has examined the work–family conflict and mental distress of black South African women.

3. Theoretical Framework

The conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll 2001) serves as the theoretical foundation of this study. It states, "individuals are always motivated to obtain, retain, protect, and nurture things that they value or serve as a means of obtaining things they value, named resources" (Hobfoll 2001, p. 341). This theory proposes four categories of resources: objects (e.g., food), personal characteristics (e.g., job satisfaction), conditions (e.g., appreciation of others), and energy (e.g., time). It suggests that these resources are finite and valued by individuals, though not always compatible (Turner et al. 2014). Hence, it envisages that psychological stress occurs when resources are threatened, lost, or when individuals invest resources and fail to obtain additional resources in return (Hobfoll 2001). This potential of actual or real loss of resources may result in stress and conflict in the work–family interface, and subsequent mental distress (Brouer et al. 2016).

The conservation of resources theory claims that resources are lost as individuals try to carry out responsibilities in the work and family domains (Hobfoll 2001). It adds that loss of resources is more important than resource gain, and when individuals lose resources, they become more vulnerable to further losses (Hobfoll 2001). The theory, therefore, advocates for individuals to invest resources to build on their resource pool and decrease the risk of future resource depletion (Brouer et al. 2016). For example, an individual may acquire skills at work and invest the acquired skills, for instance, in job performance to acquire additional resources like enhanced self-esteem and promotion. The pool of resources people accumulate varies from person to person (Fatima et al. 2018), and it is these variations that determine how different people cope with responsibilities in the work and family domains.

4. Methodology

4.1. Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is twofold. First, it aims to gain insight into the perceptions of black South African women employed in selected government organisations on the antecedents of work–family conflict and the mental distress women may experience when exposed to this conflict.

4.2. Study Design

This study utilised interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a research design for several reasons (Smith et al. 2009). This strand of phenomenology requires researchers to use their pre-understanding of phenomena studied during data analysis and interpretation. It urges the researchers to go beyond the description of phenomena and report on what participants say about their experiences, and offer expert interpretations of those experiences. However, accurate interpretations of participants' experiences are made possible if researchers adopt a hermeneutics-of-questioning approach and an "insider" stance. The hermeneutics-of-questioning approach requires researchers to stand alongside participants and ask critical questions about things they say. The insider stance compels researchers to understand participants' personal experiences of phenomena and the meaning they attribute to them (Langdridge 2007).

4.3. Study Settings and Recruitment

The study was conducted in two government departments in Johannesburg, a city in South Africa. The departments were chosen because they employed men and women from

a range of ethnic backgrounds. Black South African women constituted the majority of the employees. Eligibility for recruitment of participants was based on the following criterion:

- Black South African women aged 50 years or over with a minimum of five years of work experience in employment in the selected government departments in Johannesburg, South Africa.

A systematic approach to recruitment was adopted. The first author met with potential participants in their respective departments following receipt of ethical clearance and managerial permission to conduct the study. This was to explain the study, give each potential participant an information leaflet, and answer any queries they might have had. The information leaflet contained the researchers' contact details and a request for potential participants to contact the researchers if they were willing to participate in the study. Ninety potential participants contacted the researchers (some via telephone and some via email), indicating their willingness to participate, and hence formed the sample pool from which the study sample was purposively selected. Twenty potential participants, with a mean age of 56 years, met the inclusion criterion and were included in the study.

4.4. Data Collection

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for data collection in line with IPA guidelines (Smith et al. 2009), using extant literature and opinions of two experts in role conflict. The interview scheduled was piloted on a sample of women in employment (n = 3) with similar characteristics to the study sample. The outcome of the pilot resulted in the revision of some of the questions on the interview schedule. Probes and prompts were added to encourage elaboration and gain deeper levels of information.

Data collection, held between May and September 2020, was conducted using individual and focus group interviews with the help of the interview schedule. The first author conducted a total of 20 individual interviews (n = 20) and four focus group interviews, comprising five participants each (n = 4 × 5). This is because he is experienced in these modes of data collection and had established a professional relationship with the participants during the recruitment process. Individual interviews formed the first wave of data collection and were followed by focus group interviews to clarify issues that were not fully addressed in the former set of interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and were held in meeting rooms at the participants' work environments at the request of the participants. The duration of the interviews ranged from 55 to 65 min.

4.5. Data Analysis

The audio-recorded data of the individual and focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using template analysis. This is a form of thematic analysis that emphasises the use of hierarchical coding for analysing textual data (Brooks et al. 2015). It was used here for several reasons. It offers a systematic yet flexible approach to data analysis. Added to this, it does not require researchers to determine in advance a fixed sequence of hierarchical coding levels like other thematic analytical methods (e.g., content analysis). Rather, it encourages researchers to be open-minded and develop as many themes as possible during the analysis of textual data (Brooks et al. 2015).

Central to template analysis is the development of an initial coding template, often from a sub-set of data that is then applied to further data, and subsequently refined to represent themes in the textual data. The initial coding template of this study was developed from a priori themes gleaned from the study's theoretical framework and extant literature on role conflict. The initial coding template was applied to the data sets of the individual and focus group interviews, initially with the former and followed with the latter. Two of the researchers independently coded the transcripts in sets of four at a time, and then jointly reviewed the coding results through a peer validation process. Differences in the codes were identified and discussed until a consensus was reached. The revised coded transcripts were then examined in relation to the coding template for the development and refinement of the same. The refinements of the template included inserting, deleting, and re-wording

themes. The reiterative process of coding sets of four transcripts at a time and mapping them against the coding template occurred eight times before the researchers' consensus was reached on the template. The template developed at this point was considered final (see Box 1) not only because it was an outcome of coding of the full data sets and peer validation, but also because its data sections were relevant to the aims and objectives of the study.

Box 1. The final coding template.

5.1. Antecedents of Work-Family Conflict
5.1.1. Work demands

> Training
> Management
> Operationalisation of policies

5.1.2. Home demands

> Care provision
> Household chores

5.2. Work-Family Conflict Manifestations
5.2.1. Mental distress

> Cognitive manifestations
> Affective manifestations
> Behavioural manifestations

The data analysis revealed several highest-order and lower-order theme codes, which were ordered hierarchically (see Box 1). To ensure clarity, this paper refers to the hierarchical coding levels numerically, with the highest codes being "level one" and the lowest "level four." Two level-one theme codes emerged from the data analysis: antecedents of work–family conflict and work–family conflict manifestations. These theme codes comprise several level-two and level-three theme codes. The level-one, level-two and level-three theme codes are described here, but the level-four theme codes are illustrated with a series of excerpts from the interview data to aid understanding of specific points of the phenomenon studied. The initials "IN" and "FG," which stand for "individual interviews" and "focus groups," respectively, are used at the end of each excerpt to identify their source.

5. Results

5.1. Antecedents of Work-Family Conflict

This level-one theme code concerns factors that may precede and trigger conflict in the work–family interface. It consists of two level-two theme codes: work and home demands.

5.1.1. Work Demands

This level-two theme code relates to factors in work environments that may lead women to experience work–family conflict. It comprises three level-three theme codes: training, management, and operationalisation of policies.

Training

Participants frequently reported that attending work-related training often had negative effects on their family responsibilities. Some claimed that participation in training prevented them from carrying out daily household routines like cooking. They attributed this to the long periods of training activities, and the mental and physical exhaustion that often ensued from participation.

> Participating in training to improve one's skills and knowledge for enhancing performance at work is a good act. But the training is often held for long hours in the afternoons on certain days of the week. They suck up the energies for home responsibilities (IN).

Most of the training was held on Thursdays and Fridays, and you are required to attend. For example, the Excel training was on Fridays, and it is mandatory to attend this training. Failure to do so often results in some form of repercussion like not being promoted (FG).

Many participants repeatedly reported that they were compelled to attend specific training sessions. According to participants, employers claimed that specific training like computing taught them fundamental skills required for improving work performance, though attending may have caused strain.

One of the primary aims of employers is to ensure quality service delivery, which can be achieved if employees are equipped with job-related skills and knowledge (FG).

We are aware that training has a role in improving our performances and the quality of the services we provide. But forcing us to attend a training that we are familiar with causes frustration and anger, which may negatively impact the quality of services (FG).

Most participants talked about how training has developed their skills and knowledge of work-related responsibilities. However, they repeatedly reported that arriving home late after long hours of training interfered with their family responsibilities.

Certainly, the training we were offered developed our skills and knowledge of tasks at work. But arriving home late is not good for our families (FG).

Arriving at home late in the evening makes to feel controlled, powerless, and physically and mentally tired (IN).

Management

Participants expressed concerns about the long hours they spent at work, which were often beyond the seven hours required per day. They noted that the long hours women spend at work had negative implications on their family responsibilities.

I spend lots of my time at work, as it is the place I earn the financial resource I need to support my family. But I frequently take work home. This often prevents me from doing my household tasks (IN).

Apart from taking work home, residing far away from my workplace makes me to always feel stressed because of the long hours I spend travelling to and from work (FG).

Some participants reported that they resided far away from their workplaces, and often felt tired following long hours at work. According to them, the tiredness they experienced was compounded by the long travel times to their homes.

By the time we get home after a day's work and after travelling long distances, we are too tired to attend to our day-to-day routines at home (IN).

I do miss my home activities due to the amount of time I spend on work activities and travelling. The thought of being exposed to violence stresses me (IN).

Travelling in the evening, participants highlighted, is not advisable in South Africa given the high prevalence of crimes (such as rape and violence) against women. Participants reported that even though these crimes are prevalent among women, they are coerced to work long hours.

Working long hours and going home late are the norms in our department. For some of us, we are the breadwinners, and we have to work to feed our families (FG).

Even though our safety is very important, our children need food and the bills have to be paid. So, we have to work; our employers are not flexible (FG).

Operationalisation of Policies

Participants were unanimous in their views about the inflexibility of work schedules. They reported inconsistencies between work schedules and family-friendly policies that advocate for employees not to be overburdened by work responsibilities. They added that women worked long hours and they could only go home when they completed their tasks.

> I often work long hours to complete my tasks. My manager is not flexible, and she does not follow the policy that encourages us to negotiate how and how long to work (IN).

> I am constantly under strain as my manager is not flexible. This sometimes affects my concentration when doing my work and home duties (IN).

A few participants associated the lack of flexibility women experienced at work with role strain. In their view, the role strain experienced was a function of long hours spent at work because of rigid work schedules.

> The employers are rigid. You are only allowed to go home after completing your tasks. This means spending more time at work (FG).

> There is always something to do at work. One would never complete all the duties at work. This is particularly true in my case as a manager (IN).

Attempts were made by participants to offer reasons for role conflict in the work and family interface. They claimed that any failure to complete duties within one domain could result in some duties spilling over to the other domain.

> We always try to do work duties at work at home. The best approach to avoid work-family conflict is not to take work duties to the family space (FG).

5.1.2. Home Demands

This level-two theme code relates to the role that family responsibilities can play in triggering work–family conflict. It consists of two level-three theme codes: "care provision" and "household chores," which are specific responsibilities women can assume in their households.

Care Provision

There was a shared opinion among participants that women bear the burden of caring for children and elderly relatives in their homes. They talked about how the work responsibilities of women could interfere with their caring roles.

> I frequently take work home and this prevents me, most of the time, to attend to the needs of my grandchildren, like taking them to school and attending hospital appointments. Technology is the problem; it makes us take work home (IN).

> Advances in technology particularly in the area of web-based technology such as MS Teams, Blackboard, and email have contributed a lot to work-family conflict. With these advances, work never ends; we are always working (FG).

Apart from these caring activities, participants talked about a specific role they considered important in a woman's life: caring for a spouse.

> We all have to look after our husbands, spending quality time with them. But the work I bring home sometimes prevents this (FG).

> We have many deadlines to complete work tasks. The deadlines are also frequent. It is therefore difficult to sometimes find free time even when at home for my husband; it is all about work (FG).

Even though women preferred to invest their resources of time in their families, some participants articulated reasons why black women would seek and stay in employment. However, being employed leads to experiences of role conflict in the work–family interface.

As a black South African woman, providing for my family forms part of my maternal practice. Work provides me with financial independence and intellectual stimulation (IN).

My family needs food to survive. The money to buy food comes from work. This means that I have to work as my husband does not earn enough though this comes with a price of a role conflict (FG).

Household Chores

All participants referred to household tasks (like cooking and cleaning) as traditional roles of black women. These roles, participants claimed, are consistent with South African black culture, which requires women to ensure well-functioning households.

Black women's main duties involve food preparation and ensuring that the house is clean. But coming home late interferes with these family duties (IN).

Any interference with these traditional roles by work duties, participants stressed, could lead to role conflict and mental distress.

We cook and clean the house. However, we sometimes do not have adequate time to perform these duties because of deadlines to complete work tasks (FG).

5.2. Work–Family Conflict Manifestation

This level-one theme code concerns the negative consequences of work–family conflict, which in this case relates to psychological health problems referred to here as mental distress. Simply, this is a level-one theme code that consists of one level-two theme code: mental distress.

5.2.1. Mental Distress

According to participants, mental distress is manifested in a number of ways, represented here in three level-three theme codes: cognitive manifestations, affective manifestations, and behavioural manifestations.

Cognitive Manifestations

Each participant talked about the work–family conflict in the work–family interface. They described it as a major source of stress, sometimes manifested as obsessive thoughts.

I frequently think of the deadlines for completing the work tasks. As you may imagine, that is very stressful. So, managing the stress involves engaging with the tasks to improve and maintain my performance at work (FG).

If I do not do well at work, I think about it all the time. This keeps the stress alive and makes me think frequently of hurting myself (IN).

Participants stressed that suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are not uncommon among women with family responsibilities in employment, particularly those in managerial positions. They attributed this to the difficulties women experience in balancing the multiple roles in the work and family domains.

Working and caring can be extremely taxing. So, I sometimes feel like hurting myself (IN).

The stress of balancing work and family responsibilities can be extreme. So, the thought about it may make you feel not to be in control of your life and circumstances (FG).

Affective Manifestations

This theme code relates to feelings that participants claimed work–family conflict could evoke in women. They reiterated that women could feel powerless and sometimes

might feel hopeless and helpless because of rigid work schedules and uncompromising behaviours of managers.

> The managers and the inflexible work schedules control all that we do at work. This makes us feel hopeless and helpless (FG).

> I often work long hours to complete my tasks. My manager is not flexible, and she does not follow the policy that encourages us to negotiate how and how long to work (IN).

Participants highlighted that rigid management practices and the operationalisation of inflexible work schedules are prevalent in the workplace. Added to this, they talked about their experiences of feelings of guilt and associated these emotions with the long hours at work.

> As black women, we have to work long hours to earn money. However, we do feel guilty, angry and frustrated when we don't attend to the needs of our families (FG).

> By the time we get home after a day's work and after travelling long distances, we are too tired to attend to our duties at home. As a mother, it makes you feel guilty for not attending to specific needs of the home such as cooking (IN).

According to participants, feelings of anger, frustration and guilt could be perceived as normal reactions to work–family conflict. These feelings, participants reiterated, might be intensified by continual exposure to work–family conflict, and translated to behaviours such as self-harm.

Behavioural Manifestations

This theme code is about behavioural symptoms like suicide attempts women may experience when exposed to conflict in the work–family interface.

> There was a time when I felt very down. So, I drank poison and cut myself with the intention to kill myself. Cutting relaxed and calmed me down (IN).

> We harm or lacerate or cut ourselves when stressed to cope with the stressful situation. We often feel calm following cutting. The feeling of calmness experienced reinforces the cutting behaviour (FG).

Suicide attempts were linked with low self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness, anger, and frustration. Participants claimed that continual exposure to such a cocktail of emotions could lead women to withdraw, isolate themselves, and subsequently engage in suicidal behaviours.

> At home, I sometimes stay in my bedroom, and I think about work. This torments me and sometimes leads me to cut myself (IN).

> Isolating ourselves does not solve the problem of role conflict. It worsens it given that it prevents us from doing our home chores (FG).

Being withdrawn and isolative, participants claimed, could limit women's participation in activities at home and work.

> My husband has not been happy with me for some time because I have not been active at home, for example, not cooking. This stresses me (FG).

> We sometimes take a break at home; stay isolated in the bedroom to relax but occasionally think about work. We work full-time and also have to take care of our household. Our men do not do anything; this is why we are always stressed (FG).

Participants linked women's limited participation in the family domains with sleeping problems.

> The preoccupation with work matters makes me not fall asleep at night. This takes away the energy I have for participating in the home and spiritual life (IN).

> I have to pray five times a day and I also have to sometimes do my work tasks at home. So, going to the mosque five times a day is not always possible; this angers me (IN).

6. Discussion

This study reports on the perception of black South African women in employment on work–family conflict, including its antecedents and effects on mental health. To our knowledge, this is the first study in South Africa that utilises template analysis for exploring work–family conflict. The use of template analysis enabled the researchers to conduct a detailed analysis of the study's data set, reflected in the subdivisions or hierarchical levels of themes on the coding template.

Work–family conflict is reported here and in predecessor studies as a major source of stress for women in employment with leading roles in domestic work (Poms et al. 2016). The stresses associated with this role conflict are in part a function of work demands and gender role expectations of women to assume family responsibilities that often include childcare and domestic work (Symoens and Bracke 2015).

In South Africa, gender role socialisation of black women predominately focuses on traditionally gendered norms, which are, in essence, defined behaviours for males and females in a given culture (Eagly and Wood 2012). Black South African women are required by culture to spend more time with families and ensure well-functioning households (Jaga and Bagraim 2017). Regarding black South African men, work takes precedence over family, and they are not expected to participate in domestic work (Jaga and Bagraim 2017), a view consistent with the outcome of this study. Participants were of the view that black men in South Africa hold strong traditional gendered views. They report that the stresses of work–family conflict, and the mental distress associated with the same, are in part functions of the gendered traditional relationships. Another source of stress relates to the long hours women spend at work in order to complete tasks assigned to them. According to participants, the long hours women spend at work, including the time it takes to travel to their homes, make it difficult for them to engage in home responsibilities and maintain relaxed relationships with family and friends. Work–family conflict arises in such instances when women encounter difficulties in balancing multiple responsibilities in work and family domains (Neto et al. 2018).

Work-family conflict is noted in this study to be associated with rigid work schedules. Participants reported that the long hours women spend at work are functions of inflexible work schedules, which in turn may prevent them from negotiating the times they could work. Spending long hours at work depletes the time and energy women have for family life. Drawing on a key principle of the conservation of resources theory, loss of resources (like time) leads to experiences of stress (Hobfoll 2001). This suggests that loss of resources is more salient than resource gain, as people's vulnerability to further losses and conflict in the work–family interface increases when they lose resources (Hobfoll 2001). According to participants, women value home responsibilities more than work responsibilities and therefore prefer to spend more time on the former than the latter, a view congruent with the traditional role theory (Reitzes and Mutran 1994). As the family is important, any threat, for example, in the form of limited resources to meet demands in this domain, may trigger stress in women (Symoens and Bracke 2015). Simply put, any work–family interference can potentially cause stress, which may subsequently cause mental distress in women.

Previous studies have reported associations with work–family conflict and mental distress like anxiety (Amstad et al. 2011), feelings of hopelessness and helplessness (Neto et al. 2018), obsessive or repetitive thoughts (Davis et al. 2017), expressions of suicidal feelings, and suicide attempts. We grouped similar explanations, noted in the outcomes of this study, into three categories: cognitive, affective, and behavioural manifestations of mental distress. Starting with the cognitive category, participants claimed that obsessive

thoughts, for example, the constant preoccupation with tasks not done well at work, are common responses to stresses of work–family conflict. Obsessive thoughts can heighten arousal because of the inability of individuals to control them (Davis et al. 2017). So, prolonged exposure to obsessive thoughts may result in experiences of more severe forms of mental distress like suicidal ideations and suicidal attempts. According to participants, experiences of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts are not uncommon among women. However, such experiences, they added, are more evident among women in managerial positions in contemporary South Africa. This is not surprising, as women with managerial responsibilities experience high levels of work–family conflict, and report severe effects of stress (Poms et al. 2016).

Participants talked about the affective category of women's manifestations of mental distress. They focused on feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, anger, frustration, and anxiety. Regarding feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, they claimed that these were caused by inflexible work schedules and controlling management practices. The controlling attitudes of managers may result in experiences of a cocktail of emotions, including feelings of hopelessness, anger, and lack of control (Fatima et al. 2018). Repeated experiences of such a cocktail of emotions may lead to heightened psychological tension that requires a medium for safe expression (Sandy 2013). Self-harming behaviours, which are examples of behavioural manifestations of mental distress, are safe media for alleviating these emotions (Sandy 2013), a view echoed in the outcomes of this study. Isolation, withdrawal, and sleep difficulties are other examples of behavioural signs of mental distress reported by participants. According to participants, the manifestation of these behaviours can limit women's participation in the family domain, which in turn can lead to experiences of stress and work–family conflict. From the conservation of resources theory viewpoint, limited participation of women in the family domain is attributable to the depletion of resources of time and energy they have for the same (Brouer et al. 2016). Acknowledging this, there is a need to encourage men to assume some responsibilities in their homes in order to take away the stresses women encounter.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The outcome of this study calls for managers to be aware of work as a necessity for black South African women, given that it serves as a source of income to support families and as a resource for enhancing mental well-being. Critically, the study findings also call for managers to be aware of work–family conflict as a potential cause of mental distress, and poor work and family performance. This is a suggestion for managers to work in partnership with women and promote family-friendly initiatives, which are necessary though not sufficient conditions for promoting mental well-being (Neto et al. 2018). Examples of such initiatives include flexible working arrangements and family supportive supervision.

Family supportive supervision is considered effective for alleviating the negative effects, such as mental distress, of work and family demands on women (Yadav 2015; Selvarajan et al. 2018). Support for women also comes from families and friends and this need to be embraced. In South Africa, black families and their friends mostly live in townships, and are guided by the cultural values of "*Ubuntu*" to share their responsibilities and religious beliefs of demonstrating love and acceptance for one another. Such collectivistic cultures have the potential to buffer the negative effects of work–family conflict and promote the mental well-being of women (Selvarajan et al. 2018).

There are a few limitations to this study. The study was conducted in two government departments in Johannesburg, South Africa. The experiences of women in the study settings in relation to work–family conflict may be different from women in government departments of other cities in South Africa. The study adopted a purposive sampling approach, which might have led to the selection of women with similar experiences of work–family conflict. The study results are based on past narratives of women's experiences of work–family conflict. Even though such narratives may be biased because of the difficulty

people may experience in recalling information, this study still provides valuable insight into the subject of work–family conflict.

References

Ahyoung, Lee, and Yuri Jang. 2017. The impact of work/ family conflict and workplace social support on mental distress in home health workers. *Home, Health Care Management and Practice* 29: 176–82.

Amstad, Fabienne T., Laurenz L. Meier, Ursula Fasel, Achim Elfering, and Norbert K. Semmer. 2011. A meta-analysis of work-family conflict and various outcomes with a special emphasis on cross-domain versus matching-domain relations. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 16: 151–69. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Bayazit, Z. Erden, and Mahmut Bayazit. 2019. How do flexible work arrangements alleviate work-family conflict? The roles of flexibility i-deals and family supportive cultures. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 30: 405–35.

Borelli, Jessica L., Katherine S. Nelson, Laura M. River, Sarah Birken, and Corinne Moss-Racusin. 2016. Gender differences in work-family guilt in parents of young children. *Sex-Roles* 76: 1–10. [CrossRef]

Brooks, Jonna, Serena McCluskey, Emma Turkey, and Nigel King. 2015. The utility of template analysis in qualitative psychology research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 12: 202–22. [CrossRef]

Brouer, Robyn L., Vickie C. Gallagher, and Rebecca L. Badawy. 2016. Ability to manage resources in the impression management process: The mediating effects of resources on job performance. *Journal of Business Psychology* 31: 515–31. [CrossRef]

Chang, Xiaoxi, Yu Zhou, Chenxi Wang, and Heredero P. Carmen. 2017. How do work-family balance practices affect work-family conflict? The differential roles of work stress. *Frontiers of Business Research in China* 11: 3–22. [CrossRef]

Courtenay, Will H. 2000. Constructions of masculinity and their influence on men's well-being: A theory of gender and health. *Social Science and Medicine* 50: 1385–401. [CrossRef]

Davis, Kelly D., Judith Gere, and Martin J. Sliwinski. 2017. Investigating the work-family conflict and health link: Repetitive thought as a mechanism. *Stress Health* 33: 330–38. [CrossRef]

Eagly, Alice H., and Wendy Wood. 2012. Social role theory. In *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*. Edited by Paul A. M. Van Lange, Arie W. Kruglanski and E. Tory Higgins. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 458–76.

Fatima, Tasneem, Mehwish Majeed, and Sayed Z. Shah. 2018. Jeopardies of aversive leadership: A conservation of resource theory approach. *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: 1–12. [CrossRef]

Hobfoll, Stevan E. 2001. The influence of culture, community, and the nested-self in the stress process: Advancing conservation of resources. *Applied Psychology* 50: 337–421. [CrossRef]

Jaga, Ameeta, and Jeffrey Bagraim. 2017. Work-family conflict among Hindu mothers in South Africa. *International Journal of Manpower* 38: 1086–101. [CrossRef]

Kahn, Robert L., Donald M. Wolfe, Robert P. Quinn, Diedrick J. Snoeak, and Robert A. Rosenthal. 1964. *Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity*. Oxford: John Wiley.

Karim, Leila. 2009. Do female and male employees in Iran experience similar work-family interference, job and life satisfaction? *Journal of Family Issues* 30: 124–42. [CrossRef]

Koekemoer, Frieda E., and Karina Mostert. 2006. Job characteristics, burnout and negative work-home interference in a nursing environment. *South African Journal of Industrial Psychology* 32: 87–97.

Langdridge, Darren. 2007. *Phenomenological Psychology: Theory, Research and Method*. London: Pearson.

Magwaza, Thenjiwe. 2003. Perceptions and Experiences of Motherhood: A Study of Black and White Mothers of Durban, South Africa. *Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 4: 1–14.

McLnnes, John. 2006. Work-life balance in Europe: A response to the baby bust or reward for the baby boomers? *European Societies* 8: 223–50.

Neto, Manoel G., Maria J. Chambel, and Vania S. Carvalho. 2018. Work-family life conflict and mental well-being. *Occupational Medicine* 68: 364–69. [CrossRef]

Obrenovic, Bojan, Du Jianguo, Akmal Khudaykulov, and Muhammad Aamir Shafique Khan. 2020. Work-family conflict impact on psychological safety and psychological well-being: A job performance model. *Frontiers in Psychology* 11: 475. [CrossRef]

Oshio, Takashi, Akiomi Inoue, and Akizumi Tsutsumi. 2017. Does work-family conflict really matter for health? Cross-sectional, prospective cohort and fixed effects analysis. *Social Science and Medicine* 175: 36–42. [CrossRef]

Panatik, Siti A., Badri S. Khadijah, Rajab Azizah, Rahman H. Abdul, and Shah I. Mad. 2011. The impact of work-family conflict on psychological wellbeing among school teachers in Malaysia. *Procedia Social Behavioural Science* 29: 1500–507. [CrossRef]

Poms, Laura W., Lilia C. Fleming, and Kathryn H. Jacobsen. 2016. Work-family conflict, stress, and physical and mental health: A model for understanding barriers to and opportunities for women's well-being at home and in the workplace. *World Medical and Health Policy* 8: 444–57. [CrossRef]

Reitzes, Donald C., and Elizabeth J. Mutran. 1994. Multiple roles and identities: Factors Influencing self-esteem among middle-aged working men and women. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57: 313–25. [CrossRef]

Sandy, Peter T. 2013. Motives for Self-harm: Views of Nurses in a Secure Unit. *International Nursing Review* 60: 358–65. [CrossRef] [PubMed]

Sandy, Peter T., and Margaret Rioga. 2013. Caring for the person with mental health needs in the community. In *Community and Public Health Nursing*, 5th ed. Edited by David Sines, Sharon Aldridge-Bent, Agnes Fanning, Penny Farrelly, Kate Potter and Jane Wright. London: Wiley Blackwell, pp. 201–21.

Selvarajan, Rajan T., Barjinder Singh, and Donna Y. Stringer. 2018. Job-spouse demands and work-family conflict: Role of religiosity and spirituality. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 12: 157. [CrossRef]

Smith, Jonathan A., Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin. 2009. *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage.

Symoens, Sara, and Piet Bracke. 2015. Work-family conflict and mental health in newlywed and recently cohabiting couple: A couple's perspective. *Health Sociology Review* 24: 48–63. [CrossRef]

Turner, Nick, Sandy M. Hershcovis, Tara C. Reich, and Peter Totterdell. 2014. Work-family interference, psychological distress, and workplace injuries. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 87: 715–32. [CrossRef]

World Bank Group. 2015. *Labor Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female Population Ages 15+)*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available online: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sl.tlf.cact.fe.zs (accessed on 24 August 2021).

Yadav, Suneeta. 2015. Work-family conflict and mental health of women in banking and teaching profession. *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing* 6: 277–81.