Possible Antecedents of Correctional Staff Work on Family Conflict

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As the empirical literature on correctional staff behaviors and attitudes expands, many salient relationships have been identified between the correctional work environment and different aspects of job satisfaction. One area just beginning to be explored is how the work environment affects family life. In the literature, this is referred to as Work on Family Conflict. The following study examines the impact of several work environment antecedents. Using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, perceived job dangerousness, role strain, instrumental communication, integration, input into decision-making, supervisor support, job variety, and organizational fairness were tested determine their influence on the dependent variable of Work on Family Conflict. The results indicate that worker position, supervisory status, perceived dangerousness of the job, organizational fairness, and role ambiguity were linked to Work on Family Conflict.

The past several decades have seen an explosion of research on the attitudes and behaviors of correctional staff. A significant proportion of this research has explored how the work environment impacts correctional staff, identifying many salient relationships between the correctional work environment and the job stress, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment of employees. This research has been instrumental in better understanding the world of corrections. Work-family conflict has recently received greater attention in correctional literature. Work life and family life are inseparable for many individuals and often spill over and impact one another (Williams & Alliger, 1994; Zedeck, 1992). This is referred to as work-family conflict. Work-family conflict is a very real problem in the field of corrections. Correctional work is demanding and often involves long stretches of uneventful, routine activities, punctuated by brief periods of crisis. Violence is a constant possibility. Staff are sometimes unexpectedly required to stay for mandatory overtime shifts. Correctional facilities must be staffed year round and around the clock. In sum, there is a chance that correctional workers will experience work-family conflict.

The small but growing body of correctional literature on work-family conflict has mainly focused on the consequences of work-family conflict. There has been little, if any,

empirical research on how work environment factors impact work-family conflict among correctional staff. Therefore, this study was undertaken to examine the impact that perceived dangerousness of the job, role ambiguity, role conflict, instrumental communication, integration, input into decision-making, supportive supervision, job variety, and organizational fairness have on work-family conflict, while controlling for the effects of the personal characteristics of gender, age, position, tenure, education, race, and supervisory status.

Brief Literature Review

Work and home are the two primary life domains for most adults (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992), including those who work in the field of corrections. When work and home spill over into one another, conflict can arise. This is known as work-family conflict (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Work-family conflict is a bidirectional concept (Netermeyer, Boles, & McMurrian, 1996). Family matters may arise which impact the person at work. This form of work-family conflict is known as family on work conflict. Likewise, issues and problems at work may spill over to home, causing conflict. This form of work-family conflict is Work on Family Conflict. The focus of this study is Work on Family Conflict because, intuitively, work environment factors are more likely to be related to Work on Family Conflict than family on work conflict and are also more controllable by administrators.

There have only been a handful of correctional articles which have studied work-family conflict. These studies indicated that Work on Family Conflict was an issue for correctional employees and the levels of conflict varied by personal characteristics (i.e., age, tenure, position, and education level) (Lambert, 2001; Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2004). Work on Family Conflict also has been found to be negatively associated with correctional staff job satisfaction and positively related with job stress (Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2003; Triplett, Mullings, & Scarborough, 1999). While these are all important studies and findings, there is much more research needed on work-family conflict among correctional staff. One area yet to be researched is if and how the work environment is related to Work on Family Conflict. This study examines the following variables to ascertain their influence on Work on Family Conflict.

Perceived dangerousness of the job is a potential antecedent of Work on Family Conflict. Corrections is often viewed as a dangerous job because of threats by inmates and actual inmate violence. Empirical research has found that perceived dangerousness of the job is associated with lower job satisfaction and increased job stress for many correctional staff (Cullen, Link, Wolfe, & Frank, 1985; Moon & Maxwell, 2004). Intuitively,

it makes sense that a person who feels that his/her job is dangerousness is going to be more stressed and dissatisfied, which may impact home life.

Role strain is a potential antecedent of Work on Family Conflict. Role strain arises when a worker's responsibilities and duties are vague, ill-defined, and ambiguous, and/or when directives are inconsistent or contradictory (Hepburn & Knepper, 1993). Role ambiguity and role conflict are the two major forms of role strain. Role ambiguity is defined as uncertainty or a lack of information in carrying out the duties and responsibilities of a given position or job (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role conflict is defined as occurring when behaviors for a given job or position are inconsistent with one another (Rizzo et al., 1970). Both role ambiguity and conflict have been negatively linked with correctional staff job stress and job satisfaction (Hepburn & Albonetti, 1980; Hepburn & Knepper, 1993; Triplett et al., 1996; Van Voorhis, Cullen, Link, & Wolfe, 1991). Both role ambiguity and conflict could lead a correctional worker to experience Work on Family Conflict. Workers who suffer from role ambiguity and/or conflict will probably be stressed, and this stress is likely to spillover and cause problems at home.

Correctional staff need clear communication to accomplish their jobs. *Instrumental communication* is the "degree to which information about the job is formally transmitted by an organization to its members" (Agho, Mueller, & Price, 1993, p. 1009). Instrumental communication has been positively linked with organizational commitment of correctional staff (Lambert, Barton, Hogan, & Clarke, 2002). It is expected to have an inverse relationship on Work on Family Conflict. Instrumental communication should help employees do their jobs and be effective organizational members, leading to less conflict for them.

When work groups in the same organization are pitted against one another, unintended negative outcomes may result. Creating group cohesion among employees, work groups, departments, and/or divisions within an organization is *integration* (Lincoln & Kalleberg, 1990; Mueller, Boyer, Price, & Iverson, 1994). Integration has been found to have a positive impact on both correctional staff job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Lambert et al., 2002). Lower organizational integration allows different groups of employees to compete against one another, which can lead to an ʌUs vs. Them@ type of working environment, which ultimately can lead to problems for correctional employees (Lambert et al., 2002). Therefore, it is possible that integration is an antecedent of Work on Family Conflict among correctional employees.

Employees want a say in their jobs and organizations. In other words, they want *input into decision-making*. Lack of decision-making has been found to be positively associated with job stress and negatively related with job satisfaction and organizational commitment among correctional workers (Hepburn, 1987; Stohr, Lovrich, & Wilson, 1994;

Wright, Saylor, Gilman & Camp, 1997). It is postulated that input into decision-making should have an inverse association with Work on Family Conflict. Little control over one's job can lead to internal conflict for a person, and this can ultimately cause the person to experience Work on Family Conflict.

Research by Cherniss (1980) illustrated the importance that *supervision* has in the development of positive attitudes among employees in social service organizations. Supervisors need to be approachable, fair, considerate, give direction, and provide feedback (Bruce & Blackburn, 1992). If employees feel that supervisors fail in these aspects, particularly in terms of support and consideration for workers, they are less likely to be satisfied with their job and less committed to the organization. Quality, open, and supportive supervision has been associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment among staff across a wide range of correctional settings (Cullen et al., 1985; Grossi, Keil, & Vito, 1996; Jurik & Winn, 1987; Lambert, 2004; Van Voorhis et al., 1991). Therefore, supervision is predicted to have a negative effect on Work on Family Conflict among correctional employees.

Job variety is simply the degree of variation in the job (Price & Mueller, 1986). Some jobs require role performance that is highly repetitive, while other jobs have significant degree of variety in the required tasks and how they are performed (Mueller et al., 1994). A positive association has been found between job variety and correctional job satisfaction (Jurik & Winn, 1987; Lambert, 2004). Job variety should make work more pleasant so as to lead to lower Work on Family Conflict for correctional workers.

To be successful, organizations need to be perceived as being just and fair by their employees (Greenberg, 1990). This is often referred to in the literature as *organizational justice*. Distributive and procedural justice are the two major dimensions of organizational justice. Distributive justice is the perception of fairness in distribution and allocation of outcomes within an organization based upon inputs by an employee (Greenberg, 1987). Procedural justice is the perception of fairness of the processes and procedures used to arrive at organizational outcomes (Greenberg, 1986). Correctional workers want to be treated fairly and justly at work. Both forms of organizational justice have been found to have positive impacts on correctional staff job satisfaction and organizational justice (Lambert, 2003; Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2002). Perceptions of unfair outcomes and/or procedures can lead to resentment, which in turn can increase the amount of Work on Family Conflict experienced by correctional employees.

Methods

Respondents

In the fall of 2000, a sixteen page survey, which was pre-tested on correctional staff at another facility, was administered to the staff at a Midwestern state maximum correctional institution.[1] The institution had been in operation for several decades and, at the time of the survey, housed more than 1000 medium and high security adult male inmates. Due to sick leave, temporary reassignment, annual vacation leave, etc., it was estimated that only approximately 400 of the 450 employees were available at the time of the survey. A cash raffle, with several cash awards ranging from $50 to $100, was used to increase participation, and one follow-up survey was done. A total of 272 useable surveys were returned, representing a response rate of 68%. Overall, the respondents appeared to be representative of the staff at the prison. Of the total prison staff, about 77% were male, 86% were white, and 53% were correctional officers. Among the respondents, about 76% were male, 82% were white, and 50% were correctional officers.

Seventy-six percent of the respondents were male. The mean age was 43. Respondents represented all areas of the correctional facility: 50% of respondents worked in custody (i.e., correctional officers), 6% worked in unit management (i.e., counselors, case managers, and unit managers), 3% worked in the correctional-based industry, 4% worked in the education and vocational department, 3% worked in the medical department, 5% worked in the business office, 3% worked in administration, and 26% worked in other areas. The median tenure at the facility was 9 years and ranged from 0 to 26 years. In terms of highest educational level, 9% of the respondents indicated that they had a high school diploma or GED, 50% had some college but no degree, 20% had an associate's degree, 16% had a bachelor's degree, 4% had a master's degree, and 1% had a professional or terminal degree. About 82% of the respondents indicated that they were White, 8% were Black, 2% were Hispanic, 3% were Native American, and 5% were another race.

Measures

Personal Characteristics. Gender, age, position, tenure, education, race, and supervisory status were selected as control variables. For how the variables were measured, see Table 1.

Dangerousness. Perceived dangerousness of the job was measured using four questions (e.g., AI work in a dangerous job,@ and AIn my job, a person stands a good chance of getting hurt.@) adapted from Cullen et al., (1985). All of the indexes were measured using the following response options: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = uncertain, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree, and all of the indexes were summed.

Role Ambiguity. Four items (e.g., AI clearly know what my work responsibilities are @ (reverse coded)) from Rizzo et al., (1970) and Ivancevich and Matteson (1980) were used to measure role ambiguity.

Role Conflict. Role conflict was measured using four items (e.g., AI regularly receive conflicting requests at work from two or more people.@) from Triplett, Mullings, and Scarbough (1996), Ivancevich and Matteson (1980), and Cullen et al. (1985).

Instrumental Communication. Instrumental communication was measured by five items from Curry, Wakefield, Price, and Mueller (1986), some of which were reworded to reflect a correctional setting. Respondents were asked how well they were informed about tasks to be done, what was important about their job, how equipment was to be used, and rules and regulations.

Integration. Integration was measured by five items (e.g., AAt this prison, there is a great deal of departmental interaction on most decisions,@ and AThere is bickering between the various departments@ (reverse coded for the index)) adapted from Miller and Droge (1986), some of which were reworded to reflect a correctional setting.

Input into Decision-Making. Seven items (e.g., AWhen decisions are made at this prison, persons affected are asked their ideas,@ and AI have input into matters that effect me at my job.@) adapted from Curry et al. (1986) were used to measure perceptions on input into decision-making.

Supervision. Three items (e.g., AMy supervisor encourages me in doing my job.@) were used to measure a person's perception of accessibility, fairness, and candidness of the relationship with his/her supervisor(s), and the items were based upon supervision questions from the Prison Social Climate Survey (Camp, 1994; Wright & Saylor, 1992).

Job Variety. Five items (e.g., AMy job requires that I be very creative,@ and AI rarely get to do different things on my job@ (reverse coded)), adapted from other studies (Curry et al., 1986; Mueller et al., 1994), were used to measure job variety.

Organizational Fairness. Perceptions of organizational justice were measured using five items (e.g., AMy last annual performance rating presented a fair and accurate picture of my actual job performance, @ and APromotions are more related to whom you know rather than the quality of work@ (reverse coded). Both distributive and procedural justice were measured.

Work on Family Conflict. Work on Family Conflict was the dependent variable in this study. It was measured using a nine item index. The items were adapted (and reworded for a correctional setting) from studies of work-family conflict outside the field of corrections (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991; Bohen & Viveros-Long, 1981; Higgins & Duxbury, 1992). The nine survey items utilized for this measure reflect the time

conflict, strain, and harm to family and home life, which sometimes results from working at a correctional facility. Examples are, ΑWork makes me too tired or irritable to fully enjoy my family and/or social life, @ ΑMy time off from work does not really match other family members schedules and/or my social needs,@ and ΑI frequently argue with my spouse/family members about my job.@

Results

Descriptive statistics for the measures used in this study are presented in Table 1. There appears to be significant variation in the measures. The median and mean were similar to one another for each variable, which indicates that the variables were normally distributed. For the index measures, Cronbach's alpha, a measure of internal reliability, is also reported. In addition, all the indexes have a Cronbach's alpha value above .60 (see Table 1), which is the generally accepted cut-off point of an acceptable level of internal consistency (Gronlund, 1981).

Table 1

Descriptive Information of Variables

Index Name	Description	Mean	Sdev.	Med.	Min.	Max.
Gender	0 = Female, 1 = Male	0.76	0.43	1	0	1
Age	Continuous years	42.55	8.32	44	20	61
Position	0 = Not a correctional officer, 1 = Correctional officer	0.50	0.50	0.50	0	1
Tenure	Years at the prison	9.63	6.81	9.00	0	26
Education	0 = No College degree, 1 = College degree	0.41	0.49	0.00	0	1
Race	0 = Nonwhite, 1 = White	0.81	0.39	1.00	0	1
Supervisory Status	0 = Not a supervisor, 1 = Supervisor of other staff	0.24	0.42	0.00	0	1
Dangerousness	4-item index measuring perceived dangerousness at work, α = .82	13.58	3.54	14	4	20
Role Ambiguity	4-item index measuring degree of perceived clarity of expectations, α = .62	8.67	2.41	8	4	18
Role Conflict	4-item index measuring perceptions of confusing and conflicting tasks/roles at work, α = .70	10.76	2.76	10	4	19
Instrumental	5-item index measuring timely and useful communication and information for the	17.65	3.69	18	5	25

Communication	job, α = .85					
Integration	5-item index measuring perceived cooperation/joint efforts between different work groups, α = .73	13.44	3.04	14	5	22
Input into Decision-Making	7-item index measuring level of input allowed in decision-making, α = .84	14.08	4.12	14	5	25
Supervision	3-item index measuring perception of supportive, quality supervision, α = .77	9.51	2.79	10	3	15
Job Variety	5-item index measuring the variety of job tasks, α = .76	15.74	3.91	16	5	24
Organizational Fairness	5-item index measuring perceived fairness of distributive and procedural justice, α = .79	15.10	3.89	15.00	5	25
Work on Family Conflict	9-item index measuring the degree that work problems cause conflicts at home, α = .79	21.74	5.41	21	10	37

Note. Sdev. stands for standard deviation. Med. stands for median. Min. and Max. stand for minimum value and maximum value, respectively. α r

Table 2
OLS Regression Results

Variable	B	β	t-value
Gender	-0.23	-0.02	-0.33
Age	-0.04	-0.06	-1.04
Position	2.09	0.20	2.92**
Tenure	-0.09	-0.12	-1.76
Education	-0.50	-0.05	-0.81
Race	-0.09	-0.01	-0.12
Supervisory Status	1.73	0.14	2.32*
Dangerousness	0.22	0.15	2.36*
Role Ambiguity	0.54	0.25	3.61**
Role Conflict	-0.06	-0.03	-0.41
Instrumental Communication	0.08	0.05	0.87
Integration	-0.12	-0.07	-1.03
Input Into Decision-Making	3.41	0.04	0.32
Supervision	-0.26	-0.14	-1.57
Job Variety	-0.02	-0.01	-0.21
Organizational Fairness	-0.27	-0.20	-2.41*
R-Squared		.34**	

Note. See Table 1 for how the variables were measured. B represents the unstandardized regression coefficients. β represents the standardized regression coefficients.

 * $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was computed with the Work on Family Conflict as the dependent variable. The seven personal characteristics and the nine work environment indexes were entered as independent variables. The results are reported in Table 2. Based upon the R-Squared statistics, about 34% of the variance observed in the Work on Family Conflict index was explained by the independent variables. Among the seven personal characteristics, only position and supervisory status had a statistically significant relationship with Work on Family Conflict. Correctional officers and supervisors reported higher levels of conflict than did non-custody and non-supervisory employees respectively. Dangerousness and role ambiguity had positive relationships with Work on Family Conflict. Organizational fairness had an inverse relationship. Role conflict, instrumental communication, integration, input into decision-making, supervision, and job variety all had non-significant effects. Based upon the standardized regression coefficients, role ambiguity had the greatest impact, followed closely by organizational fairness and position. Supervisory status had the least impact.

Discussion and Conclusion

Of the sixteen independent variables used in the multi-variate analysis, only five had a statistically significant relationship with Work on Family Conflict. Correctional officers on average reported higher levels of this form of conflict than did non-custody staff. The nature of correctional officers' work likely causes higher levels of Work on Family Conflict. Custodial work requires around the clock shifts and dealing with inmates, a group who are not willing clients. Correctional officers bear the brunt of the mistreatment, both at the hands of the inmates and, occasionally, the administration. They are also more likely to witness violence. All of these factors may lead to greater conflict for this group of correctional employees.

Likewise, supervisory staff reported greater levels of Work on Family Conflict. Again, it is probably the nature of the position that causes the conflict. Supervisors direct, guide, and control other workers. Not every employee is a model worker. Some cause headaches and problems for supervisors. In addition, supervisors may be pressured to solve difficult problems. Further, supervisors may be expected to stay after their shift to complete work, usually with no additional pay. Supervisors have also been found to have greater commitment to the organization (Lambert, 2004). It could be that this higher level of organizational commitment causes supervisors greater stress when they see things going wrong within the correctional facility, particularly if they are held responsible for the situation. Finally, gender and age had no significant association, nor did tenure, race, or educational status.

Among the nine work environment measures, only dangerousness, organizational fairness, and role ambiguity had significant effects. Working in corrections is often perceived by society as a dangerous job. Dangerous jobs often lead to people being on a heightened level of alert, which may not only result in biological changes (i.e. adrenalin), but a higher level of anxiety. It is difficult to turn off this heightened state when the shift is over, and thus, carries over into the family environment where such behavior is inappropriate.

Organizational fairness was negatively related to Work on Family Conflict. We live in a society that stresses that people should be treated fairly and justly. If they are not, frustration and even anger can result. It seems if correctional staff feel that they have been treated unfairly at work, it spills over to their home life.

It is hard to shut off anger when one leaves the front door of work. Again the frustration and unhappiness from the work setting may carry over into behaviors at home.

Finally, role ambiguity had the greatest level of impact on Work on Family Conflict. It appears that role ambiguity not only affects the job satisfaction of correctional staff but may also cause them to experience greater levels of Work on Family Conflict. A lack of clarity at work leads to frustration at work as tasks may be missed or not done correctly. These errors may be pointed out by supervisors, either informally or through formal channels of discipline. The result may leave employees feeling upset at the end of their shift and those emotions are taken home where anger and frustration are vented on family members. Role ambiguity may also affect officer safety. Since violence is a constant possibility, workers who are unsure of their specific tasks, may exhibit higher levels of anxiety and fear. Again, it is hard to turn off these emotions at the end of the shift.

Interestingly role conflict, instrumental communication, integration, input into decision-making, supervision, or job variety had statistically significant associations with Work on Family Conflict. These findings need to be replicated before it can be concluded that these dimensions of the work environment have no direct impact on Work on Family Conflict for correctional workers. There is a good possibility that many of these variables may indirectly affect Work on Family Conflict. For example, a lack of integration or poor supervision may lead to increased role ambiguity for a person, in turn leading to increased conflict. While not reported, integration and supervision both had significant negative correlations with role ambiguity (R^2 = -.39 and r = -.48, p ≤ .001).

There is a need for future research in this area. This study does have limitations. Only staff at one correctional facility were surveyed. Staff at other institutions need to be studied until the antecedents of Work on Family Conflict among correctional staff are identified and understood. Other work environment measures should be studied to see how they are related to Work on Family Conflict. R-squared was 34%., which means that only a third of the variance in Work on Family Conflict was accounted for by the sixteen independent variables used in this study. Therefore, two-thirds of the variance was the result of other variables. These other variables need to be identified. This is critical information if scholars and administrators are to develop programs to effectively deal with correctional staff work-family conflict.

Knowledge of and ability to understand the antecedents of correctional employee affective states, attitudes, and behaviors is critical for all parties involved, including correctional administrators, correctional employees, inmates, academicians, and society in general. The results of this study support the premise that the job characteristics of job stress, supervision, job variety, and job autonomy are critical aspects of the work environment which impact correctional staff. The effects of job characteristics on correctional staff should not be ignored by future research on correctional staff or by correctional administrators.

In closing, employees are at the heart and soul of any correctional facility. Correctional facilities succeed or fail because of their staff. Working in corrections is abounding with opportunities for work-family conflict, particularly Work on Family Conflict. It is only in the last decade that there has been empirical research on Work on Family Conflict among correctional staff. This small, but growing body of research has mainly examined the consequences of Work on Family Conflict. It has been found that Work on Family Conflict leads to greater job stress, lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment among correctional workers. This is a negative outcome for all involved. A greater concern for quality of life of

correctional employees is required. Not only is there a need for more research on the consequences of work-family conflict, but there is a need to identify potential antecedents. In this study, it was found that position, supervisory status, perceived dangerousness of the job, organizational fairness, and role ambiguity were linked to Work on Family Conflict. It is hoped that there will be greater research on work-family conflict among correctional workers, especially for possible antecedents. It is only then that we will have a better understanding of the nature of correctional work.

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Endnote

1. The data from the 16 page survey with 221 questions has been used in other studies. A full list of these studies is available upon request. Therefore, there may be some familiarity in the in the discussion of the data. Nonetheless, none of the previous studies examined the possible antecedents of Work on Family Conflict among correctional staff.