It’s not too often that we get to see research that combines Wall Street and Sesame Street, changing diapers with changing project deadlines, or power lunches with romantic candlelight dinners. But two articles in a recent issue of *Journal of Applied Psychology* do that—in a way. The pair of articles examines the interrelations between family and work roles, and the degree to which stressors, enhancers, and other factors in each realm affect important variables in the other. It’s not an entirely new area of research by any means, but my eye was caught by the way the authors in the two pieces use theory-driven research and meta-analysis techniques to examine what is a popular topic among practitioners: work–family balance. Given that this is a topic that most of today’s managers are aware of, if not concerned about, it’s easy to see how these articles fit into the purview of this column.

In “Commitment to Family Roles: Effects on Managers’ Attitudes and Performance,” Laura Graves, Patricia Phlott, and Marian Ruderman (2007) took an admittedly narrow sample of top-level managers and gathered information about how their commitments to family roles, parental roles, and marital roles affected their satisfaction with their life, their careers, and their work. They also examined how commitment to family acted both as a boon and bane for these outcomes through the mediating effects of psychological strain. In other words, do these commitments act to both raise and lower psychological stress? And what effect does that have on more distant outcomes like life satisfaction, career satisfaction, and work performance? It’s easy to imagine how commitments to raise children, spend time with a husband, or attend family events can impede one’s ability to get ahead (or even just keep up) at work by putting in extra hours at the office, but the authors also point out that commitment to family can also reduce strain. One may gain new skills for coping with stress or other challenges at home that transfer to the workplace, or one’s general happiness with a good family life may seep into one’s attitudes towards other areas of life, like work.

And indeed, the results of the research confirmed many of these hypotheses. Although they did not find that marital or parental role commitment increased interrole conflict between work and family, the researchers found that these commitments did enhance one’s ability to juggle those same roles and did
reduce the resulting psychological stress. In general, they found that commit-
ment to family and marriage had more benefits than costs. This research has
some severe limitations in that it only examined high-level managers who
could probably mitigate the effects of role conflict by, for example, hiring care-
givers, house cleaners, tutors, and so forth. The results may be different if future
researchers examine other workers who have more difficulty making ends meet
or dealing with special needs. Still, the present research has value even if it only
examines the specific population of middle- to high-level managers.

Ford, Heinen, and Langkamer (2007), on the other hand, took a much
broader approach when they conducted a meta-analysis on work–family sat-
satisfaction and conflict. The authors note that despite the relative maturity of
the topic, there is little research that reviews the relationships “between
sources of stress and support in the work domain and the satisfaction people
have with their family–nonwork life.”

What interested us about this research was that the authors set out to look
at the two-way streets that exist between work satisfaction and satisfaction
with other areas of life, such as family. You can read the article for all the
technical details, but among the end results is the finding that a fair amount
of variance in one was explained by variance in the other. In particular, stress
in one domain affects stress in another. Interestingly, though, there seems to
be an asymmetry in place such that the spillover from work into family is
greater than the other way around. So an unreasonable project deadline at
work may make it harder to deal with a toddler’s temper tantrums, but being
surprised by flowers and a night out with your spouse may have a smaller
effect on your ability to put up with that really annoying guy in the cubicle
next to you at the office. Alas.

We find both of these articles (as well as a methods review by Casper, Lil-
lian, Bordeaux, Lockwood, & Lambert, 2007, in the same issue) to be useful
signposts at the intersection of science and practice because they examine—
with scientific rigor—issues that are on the minds of many practitioners. Fur-
thermore, these issues are sometimes flung around by managers and leader-
ship gurus with the same zeal as many fads that have come in and out of style
over the years. It’s not unusual to look at recruitment literature and see claims
of a work–family balance and specific benefits that target this balance like
flextime, telecommuting, floating holidays, vacation time, work-sponsored
social events, or promises of a reasonable work week. And although that all
sounds good and none of us is likely to turn down at least the option to exer-
cise these benefits, the more cynical (or scientific) of us may have wondered
“so what?” Does it really matter in terms of making the organization health-
lier or more effective? Research endeavors like the ones described here are
pointing at the answers.

As with the issues related to recruitment and flexible scheduling, we
know that trying to convince organizations to invest in “soft” interventions—
interventions for which there is no directly assessable bottom-line impact—is always a challenge. When organizations do make such an investment, they want to know that they are getting the maximum bang for the buck. That’s why the article “Maximizing Returns on Mentoring: Factors Affecting Subsequent Protégé Performance” by Scott Tonidandel and his colleagues Derek Avery and McKensy Phillips (2007) caught our eye. Mentoring programs are popular, but are also often largely ineffective. Tonidandel and colleagues looked into this issue using a sample of NCAA basketball coaches, for whom the success of both the mentor and the protégé are objectively measurable. Specifically, they looked at the interactions that occurred when current head coaches had served as assistant coaches (protégés) under other more senior head coaches (the mentors), with a focus on the style and type of mentoring provided (psychosocial and/or career development), as well as on the success of the mentor. They then tried to determine whether these factors affected the ultimate success of the protégé when he/she became a head coach.

Interestingly, they did not find that the amount of time spent working under a mentor was predictive of future success. They did find, however, that the more successful the mentor, the more successful the protégé when he/she became a head coach and further that the effects of both psychosocial and career-development mentoring were moderated by the success of the mentor—the more successful the mentor, the stronger the effect of mentoring. Finally, the length of the mentoring relationship did matter, it just depended on the success of the mentor. As Tonidandel and colleagues explain, “Long-term relationship with a successful mentor had a positive impact on protégé success. In contrast, a long-term relationship with a mentor who tended to be less successful was associated with lower performance by the protégé” (p. 98).

The study highlights that mentoring matters and further that the mentor matters. In our experience, we’ve often seen less successful people assigned as mentors because they were seen as having the time to do the task or because it was seen as a chance for the underperforming employee to provide some benefit to the organization. We’ve also seen mentoring programs that were short-term—a few months when an employee is new to the organization. However, these results suggest that these may not be the best strategies. Mentoring works best when it is long-term, provided by those who are themselves successful. Of course, what exactly mentoring includes remains elusive. In the current study, serving as an assistant coach was taken to mean that one was a mentor’s protégé, but this is not necessarily the case. The senior person may not take an active interest in any of his or her assistants’ development or may favor some over others. Nonetheless, Tonidandel and colleagues provide us with some real food for thought about mentoring and mentorship programs.

We’ll wrap things up this time by talking about “war stories” and how they can be used. Training programs are often criticized for not having enough “real-world” connection, so stories and anecdotes of actual situations
are sometimes incorporated into the training. But how should this be done? Should trainees learn about others’ successes, or their failures? Wendy Joung, Beryl Hesketh, and Andrew Neal (2006) addressed this issue in their recent *Applied Psychology: An International Review* article, entitled “Using ‘War Stories’ to Train for Adaptive Performance: Is it Better to Learn from Error or Success?” To make a long (but very interesting) story short, the answer seems to be that trainees learn better from learning about prior failure and poor decisions than they do from prior successes or good decisions. Joung et al. used a sample of experienced fire fighters going through incident command training, and presented one group with failure-oriented stories as part of the training, while the other group received training that included stories about the same incidents, reworked to reflect good decisions and success. Though the results were not unequivocal, the results (measured in several different ways) suggest that the error-oriented training led to better training outcomes than did the “best-case” training. The authors also note anecdotally that in the error training group, the discussions after each case study were much more animated, with participants eager to find better ways to have resolved a problem and avoided mistakes, while the best-case groups were more subdued in their conversations and otherwise indicated that they were less engaged overall. Transfer of training is always a concern, but when the training is for high-impact tasks like fireground management, one has to suspect that engaged trainees are going to learn more and retain more than their less-engaged colleagues.

As always, we’re looking for your suggestions for articles to highlight here—articles that advance theory or conceptual understanding, while at the same time providing clear, practical, and useful information for practitioners. Feel free to e-mail us at marcus.dickson@wayne.edu, or HMadigan@ameren.com. We’ll be keeping our eyes open for articles, as well.

**References**


