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Sex Differences in Coping with Work-Home Interference

The trend towards longer working hours for much of the labour force in the UK, along with escalating numbers of dual-income families and employed single parents, creates increasing opportunities for multiple roles to clash with one another. Interference between work and home occurs when participation in one role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Research has established the utility of differentiating between work interference with home (WIH), and home interference with work (HIW) (Kelloway, Gottlieb & Barham, 1999). Both directions of interference can produce a number of negative outcomes. Employees experiencing work-home interference have been found to exhibit lower levels of organizational commitment and job performance, and greater anxiety, depression, absenteeism and intention to turnover (see Eby et al., 2005).

Given the costs of work-home interference for both organizations and individuals, the importance of coping strategies is considerable. While there is a growing literature on the impact of organization-implemented practices designed to reduce work-home interference, little attention has been paid to individual coping mechanisms. For employees of organizations that do not offer work-home practices, or who lack access to available practices, individual coping is of paramount significance.

This chapter seeks to extend existing research on work-home coping in several ways. First, it investigates the effects on interference of a wider range of coping strategies than those previously addressed in the work-home literature. Secondly, it takes into account both directions of work-home interference. Finally, this study examines the effect of sex on the effectiveness of coping mechanisms, as dissimilar expectations of men and women in the workplace and at home may influence the ability of certain strategies to reduce work-home interference.

Coping methods

Using Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) cognitive model of general coping, coping in the work-home context can be seen as a response designed to eliminate the threat of work-home interference perceived during primary appraisal of stressors. Despite criticism (see Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003), the most commonly used higher-order categories of coping remain *problem-focused*, aimed at changing the situation causing stress, and *emotion-focused*, aimed at changing the emotional consequences of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). A review of the work-home coping literature identifies two recurring elements of problem-focused coping (role redefinition and instrumental social support), and three key types of emotion-focused coping (emotional social support, behavioural disengagement, and cognitive reappraisal). Aside from social support, investigation of these strategies in the work-home context has been exclusively qualitative in nature.

According to the socialization hypothesis (Ptacek, Smith, & Zanas, 1992), women are socialized to use more "feminine", emotion-focused coping strategies, while men are socialized to use more practical, problem-focused coping techniques. However, a perspective based on the gendered nature of the work-home interface (with men's primary domain traditionally seen as work, and women held primarily responsible for the home) suggests that differences in choice and effectiveness of coping strategies may be attributable to different expectations of men and women. This perspective will be explored in this chapter.

Problem-focused coping

Amatea and Fong-Beyette (1987) described role redefinition as modifying either the demands of a role or the methods for performing the role. According to Elman and Gilbert (1984), structural role redefinition characteristically involves negotiations with others as a means of altering structurally given demands. Two distinct elements of this strategy emerge:

reducing involvement in role activities, and adapting schedules in one domain to accommodate the demands of another.

Limiting work role involvement. Becker and Moen (1999) identified "placing limits on work" as a strategy for dual-earner couples dealing with interrole conflict. Establishing limits on work-related responsibilities taken on, hours spent at work, and work brought home clearly has the potential to reduce the spillover of work demands into the home domain, lessening WIH. Conceding to the demands of home or family in this fashion may, however, increase perceptions of HIW.

Scheduling work to accommodate home. In their interview-based research on the prevalence of restructuring work for family, Karambayya and Reilly (1992) identified behaviours such as making special arrangements at work to attend a child's activity, or restructuring work hours in order to be at home at certain times. These behaviours are likely to reduce the degree of WIH, but the shaping of the work domain to accommodate the needs of the home domain effectively constitute HIW.

Limiting home role involvement. Cutting back on non-essential family or social activities has obvious potential for decreasing interference from home to work, but may increase levels of WIH if perceived as a concession to the demands of the workplace.

Scheduling home to accommodate work. The effect of this strategy is likely to be the opposite of scheduling work to accommodate home. HIW is likely to be diminished, but WIH may increase as a result of work demands taking precedence over family or social activities.

Traditional gender role expectations may render use of these strategies dissimilarly effective for men and women. In contrast to women, men are more often penalized in terms of arrested career development for not complying with work role expectations and for efforts to accommodate family responsibilities (Powell, 1997). Men who curtail their involvement at work, or who structure their job duties to facilitate fulfillment of demands at home, are more

likely to have any consequent decline in WIH cancelled out by reduced opportunities for promotion or pressure from colleagues and superiors to assign greater priority to work, both of which contribute to WIH (Cooke & Rousseau, 1984). Because men are expected to prioritize work over home, making concessions at work for personal responsibilities may result in greater perceptions of HIW for them than for women, who are expected to make home a priority.

Hypothesis 1: Limiting work role involvement and scheduling work to accommodate home will be associated with lower levels of WIH for women than for men, and higher levels of HIW for men than for women.

Women have traditionally experienced stronger social sanctions than men for noncompliance with family demands (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). If women are expected to make home their primary domain, restructuring personal or family activities to accommodate job demands may result in greater perceptions of WIH for them than for men, who are expected to prioritize work over home and are rewarded by their employers for doing so. Women who limit their involvement at home or who schedule family activities to accommodate work demands may also find any reduction of HIW offset by social condemnation of their priorities, whereas men are unlikely to experience comparable penalties.

Hypothesis 2: Limiting home role involvement and scheduling home to accommodate work will be associated with higher levels of WIH for women than for men, and lower levels of HIW for men than for women.

Social support

Instrumental social support refers to practical assistance or information derived from friends, family, or colleagues, while emotional social support consists of understanding or reassurance provided by others. Research indicates that women enjoy larger social support

networks than do men (Lee & Duxbury, 1998), and the general coping literature suggests that women may make greater use of social contacts to help them manage role demands and consequent stress (Porter, Marco, Schwartz, & Neale, 2000). It is therefore likely that these strategies will prove more effective in reducing work-home interference for women than it will for men.

Hypothesis 3: Social support will be associated with lower levels of WIH and HIW for women than for men.

Emotion-focused coping

Behavioural disengagement. This strategy involves reducing efforts to deal with stressors, and is generally regarded as being dysfunctional (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). While the gender role perspective does not suggest any differences between men and women in the effectiveness of this strategy, any individuals who abandon attempts to manage their work-home interference are likely to report higher levels of both WIH and HIW.

Cognitive reappraisal. Individuals employing this strategy make conscious attempts to alter their attitudes about themselves, their behaviours, or their situation, by modifying the cognitive meaning of these events or efforts rather than changing the situation itself (Amatea & Fong-Beyette, 1987). As with behavioural disengagement, there are no immediate implications for sex differences in the effectiveness of this strategy arising from the gender role framework. Reappraising work-home interference in a positive manner may lead to reduced perceptions of both types of interference for both men and women, as favourable elements of the situation are given emphasis and acquire greater salience for respondents.

Hypothesis 4: Behavioural disengagement will be positively related to WIH and HIW for both men and women, while cognitive reappraisal will be negatively related to WIH and HIW for both men and women.

Method

Participants in this study were drawn from two organizations in England: a local authority in the south, and a higher-education institution in the north. Surveys were mailed out to all employees; 226 usable surveys were returned, yielding a response rate of 29%.

The majority of respondents were women (62.3%). Participant ages ranged from 17 to 68, with an average age of just over 41 years. Just under 80% of respondents reported living with a spouse or partner, and of these, 82.8% were members of dual-earner households, where the spouse or partner was also employed. One hundred and forty-one (63.2%) respondents reported having children, with the average age of the youngest child just over 14 years, and 14.8% of respondents reported having caregiving responsibilities for adult dependents (other than children).

Measures

All scales were answered with a seven-point Likert scale ranging from “strongly disagree” = 1 to “strongly agree” = 7 for each item.

Work interference with home was measured using the 6 items from the time- and strain-based work-to-family conflict subscales of Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams’s (2000) multidimensional measure of work-family conflict. The statements were modified in order to be applicable to respondents both with and without family responsibilities. The reliability alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .92$.

Home interference with work was measured using the 6 items from the time- and strain-based family-to-work conflict subscales of Carlson et al.’s (2000) measure of work-family conflict. Again, items were modified in order to be applicable to all respondents. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .84$.

Because the measurement of work-home interference coping strategies is not highly developed, and there is no single preferred instrument (Koeske & Koeske, 1993), new scales

were created to measure individual coping mechanisms. Complete factor loadings for each scale can be found in Table 1.

Limiting work role involvement was measured with four items based on Karambayya and Reilly's (1992) open-ended measure of work restructuring, and on the behavioural correlates of the "placing limits" strategy identified by Becker and Moen (1999). Items assessed the extent to which respondents limited their involvement in non-essential activities at work in an effort to reduce interference between work and home (e.g., "I try not to take on additional responsibilities at work"). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .77$.

Scheduling work to accommodate home was measured with four items based on Karambayya and Reilly's (1992) measure of work restructuring. Items assessed the extent to which respondents scheduled their work activities to accommodate demands from home (e.g., "I try to arrange my work hours to fit around personal activities or my family's schedule"). The reliability alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .86$.

Limiting home role involvement was measured using three items created for this survey, assessing the extent to which respondents limited their involvement in non-essential activities at home or in their personal lives (e.g., "I try to restrict the number of social or leisure activities I participate in"). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .81$.

Scheduling home to accommodate work was measured with three items created for this survey, assessing the extent to which respondents scheduled their activities at home to accommodate demands from work (e.g., "I try to arrange my personal or family activities to fit around my work schedule"). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .91$.

Social support. Instrumental social support was measured with four items adapted from items in the "Seeking social support for instrumental reasons" subscale of Carver et al.'s (1989) COPE inventory. Items assessed the extent to which respondents sought information

or assistance to help them cope with competing demands from work and home (e.g., “I talk to someone to find out more information about what can be done to improve my situation”).

Emotional social support was measured using three items adapted from items in the “Seeking social support for emotional reasons” subscale of Carver et al.’s (1989) COPE inventory. Items assessed the extent to which respondents sought empathy or a listening ear from friends and family as a means of coping with competing demands from work and home (e.g., “I discuss my feelings with someone who provides sympathy and understanding”). Factor analysis revealed that all seven social support items loaded on the same factor. The two subscales were therefore combined to form a composite scale labelled “Social support”. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .89$.

Behavioural disengagement was measured using three items adapted from those in Carver et al.’s (1989) COPE inventory. Items assessed the extent to which respondents had abandoned attempts to achieve work-life balance (e.g., “I give up the attempt to achieve balance between work and my personal life”). The reliability alpha was $\alpha = .81$.

Cognitive reappraisal was measured with three items adapted from those in the “Positive reinterpretation and growth” subscale of Carver et al.’s (1989) COPE inventory. Items assessed the extent to which respondents emphasized the positive aspects of dealing with competing demands from work and home (e.g., “I try to look upon the experience as a learning opportunity”). The reliability alpha for this scale was $\alpha = .83$.

Analysis

T-tests were conducted to explore gender differences in coping strategy use. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was used to test the impact of sex and coping strategies on WIH and HIW.

In each of the regression equations, several background variables were included in the analyses for control purposes. These were hours worked weekly, presence of children aged 16

and under in the respondent's household (absent = 0/present = 1, dummy-coded), and current use of organizational work-home practices (no use = 0, use = 1, dummy-coded). This latter variable was included so that the effects of individual coping beyond those of organizationally-assisted coping could be determined. The local authority offered five flexible work practices, while the higher-education institution provided only limited access to an on-site childcare facility.

Results

The intercorrelations are presented in Table 1, with the means, standard deviations, and t-tests in Table 2. The results of the multiple regression analyses are shown in Table 3, with the significant interactions presented in Figures 1 and 2. Hypothesis 1 was partially supported, with a significant interaction found between sex and limiting work role involvement (β = -.15, p < .05) for WIH. Hypothesis 2 predicted that limiting home role involvement and scheduling home to accommodate work would be associated with higher levels of WIH for women than for men. A significant interaction between sex and scheduling home for work was found, but the relationship was in the opposite direction than that predicted; use of this coping strategy was associated with higher levels of WIH for men (β = -.13, p < .05), rather than women.

No support was found for Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis 4, however, was fully supported. Behavioural disengagement was positively and significantly related to WIH (β = .20, p < .001) and HIW (β = .15, p < .05, and cognitive reappraisal was negatively and significantly related to WIH (β = -.16, p < .05) and HIW (β = -.16, p < .05).

Discussion

This chapter sought to achieve two aims: one, to investigate the effects of a range of coping strategies on work-home interference, and two, to examine the effect of sex on the effectiveness of these strategies. In terms of the general efficacy of coping techniques,

cognitive reappraisal of the situation appeared to be the only successful interference-reduction strategy for all employees. Behavioural disengagement, or “giving up”, emerged as an ineffective coping strategy, being positively associated with both types of work-home interference. Positive thinking can evidently decrease perceptions of demands from one domain spilling over into another, but abandoning all attempts to achieve balance between work and home has uniformly detrimental consequences.

Use of strategies

The most popular coping technique for the respondents in this study was cognitive reappraisal, a strategy in which the responsibility for reducing work-home interference remains with the individual. Strategies that required employing the assistance of others to redefine roles and redistribute demands (limiting role involvement, scheduling one domain to accommodate the other, and enlisting social support) proved less popular.

Similar findings were obtained twenty years ago by Elman and Gilbert (1984), indicating that despite the mounting awareness of “work-life balance” within the past two decades, both men and women remain reluctant to seek structural change in the workplace. The use of non-standard work arrangements, such as flexible hours or working from home, often renders employees less visible at work. Because time spent at work is often used as an indicator of employee commitment and productivity, these arrangements have been associated with career penalties such as lower performance evaluations, smaller wage increases, or fewer promotions (Raabe, 1996). It is therefore unsurprising that the participants in the current study chose to focus on coping strategies with fewer potential negative career repercussions.

A similar reluctance to restructure the home or family role among respondents of this research, the majority of them caregivers to either children or adult dependents, may indicate their desire or sense of obligation to fulfill the demands of this role themselves rather than delegating, sharing, or otherwise reducing their responsibilities. Conversely, the

preponderance of respondents belonging to dual-earner households suggests that resources for restructuring home demands may be limited. Opportunities to devolve responsibilities to others may not present themselves readily, resulting in reliance upon more individual means of coping with competing demands from work and home.

Sex differences in effectiveness of strategies

Limiting work role involvement was associated with lower WIH for women only. Women are still expected to be the primary caretakers of the home, and as such, it may be more socially acceptable for them to limit their involvement or responsibilities at work, their "secondary" domain. Men, in contrast, are still expected to make work a priority (Wiley, 1991). Limiting or reducing involvement at work would be likely to result in organizational penalties for men, which might offset any benefits gained.

While it is evident that altering one's personal life to accommodate work would be associated with the interference of work with home, it is surprising that scheduling home arrangements to accommodate work demands predicted increased levels of WIH for men only. An explanation may be that men have traditionally been expected to prioritize work over home life (Powell, 1997), including making home life flexible enough to accommodate work demands. Now that expectations are changing regarding men's role in the home, and men are increasingly taking responsibility for childcare and becoming more involved generally in family roles (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997), clinging to these old ways of working may provoke more interference.

The results of this study have helped to extend previous work-home coping research in several ways. The quantification of coping techniques such as limiting role involvement that have been identified in interview-based studies (e.g., Becker & Moen, 1999; Karambayya & Reilly, 1992) has permitted the empirical investigation of their effectiveness in alleviating work-home interference. The distinction between WIH and HIW has enabled an examination

of the different effects of various coping strategies upon the two separate directions of interference. However, a number of this study's findings are also consistent with existing research. As with other studies that have found few or no differences in the coping techniques used by men and women, the results reported in this study have provided no support for the socialization hypothesis. Together with the findings of Paden and Buehler (1995), which indicated that different coping strategies buffered the effects of role overload and role conflict on well being for husbands and wives in dual-income couples, the results of this study instead suggest that sex differences lie in the efficacy of coping strategies, rather than the frequency of their use.

Managerial implications

While the results of this study suggest that encouraging employees to 'think positive' may reduce their perceptions of work-home interference, managers need to focus on facilitating coping strategies that involve the participation of the organization (such as rescheduling or limiting work activities), rather than relying on individual employees to assume full responsibility for managing competing demands from work and home. Given current demographic and social trends, which have produced a hitherto unprecedented number of dual earner households, single parent families, and eldercare responsibilities, it is unrealistic to expect employees to abandon all family or community commitments once they enter the office. Organizations that foster a culture of acceptance and support will be more likely to reap the rewards of a satisfied, balanced workforce. Increased flexibility on the part of managers with regard to their employees' work-home issues need not mean reduced productivity for the organization. For instance, devolving scheduling or task assignments to employees may yield synergistic benefits. Employees who need to limit or reschedule work role activities and who are not penalized for discussing these needs openly may find that their colleagues' desires for flexibility may complement their own. That is, synergies may be

achieved when employees can trade time and/or tasks off amongst each other, with the full blessing of management.

The present study's findings also make clear that organizations that continue to frame work-home interference as a 'women's issue' are ignoring the needs of their male employees, an increasing number of whom are finding expectations of them based on traditional gender role stereotypes to be constricting and detrimental to their ability to balance demands from work and from home. Despite the public sector's reputation for being progressive in the area of employee rights and benefits, the organizations participating in the current study have demonstrated the continued need to strive for gender equality with regard to work-home issues. Only when all individuals are acknowledged as warranting equal consideration for their non-work responsibilities will all employees – not only women – experience reduced work interference with home as a result of limiting their work role activities. Only when managers cease to equate committed workers with those who work standard and consistent hours will all employees have the potential to achieve success both at work and at home. Managers who evaluate employees' performance and commitment based on results, not on face time or on evidence of concurrent personal responsibilities, will be more likely to enjoy a loyal, satisfied, and productive workforce, able to effectively balance work and home without fear of negative career repercussions arising as a result.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations to the present study should be noted. Firstly, the cross-sectional design utilised does not allow for firm conclusions regarding causality. Secondly, more total variance was explained for WIH than for HIW, indicating that the coping strategies and control variables investigated are more useful predictors of WIH than HIW. In addition, only for WIH did the additional variance explained by the interactions between sex and coping

reach statistical significance. Sex is evidently an important factor in coping with WIH, but its influence on coping with HIW seems less remarkable.

This study has conceptualized coping as an action that either prevents or reduces work-home interference directly. Another approach would be to conceptualize coping as an action that either attenuates or intensifies the effect of a stressor on work-home interference. Future research on work-home coping might wish to investigate the moderating impact of the strategies explored here on the links between situational stressors, such as caregiving responsibilities or organizational time demands, on work-home interference. Given that men and women are affected differently by certain antecedents to work-home interference (Kirchmeyer, 1995), a better understanding of which strategies are effective in reducing the impact of particular stressors would be useful in seeking to alleviate interference for both sexes.

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Table 1

Intercorrelations among Work-Home Interference and Coping Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Work interference with home	(.92)											
2. Home interference with work	.02	(.84)										
3. Sex	.16	.11	-									
4. Hours worked	.41*	-.26	-.30	-								
5. Presence of children	.23	.10	-.27	.01	-							
6. Limiting work role involvement	.02	.11	-.02	-.05	-.05	(.77)						
7. Scheduling work for home	-.33	.34	.07	-.50**	.04	.14	(.86)					
8. Limiting home role involvement	.19	.18	.02	.28	.05	.11	.20	(.81)				
9. Scheduling home for work	.45**	.23	-.18	.30	-.11	.26	.14	.52**	(.91)			
10. Social support	-.10	.03	.07	.16	.11	-.11	.15	-.09	.04	(.89)		
11. Cognitive reappraisal	-.11	-.04	.00	.06	-.03	-.17	.26	.02	.10	.39*	(.83)	
12. Behavioural disengagement	.05	.13	-.10	.05	.18	-.06	.09	-.01	-.02	-.18	-.22	(.81)

Note. $N = 226$.
Scale reliabilities are in parentheses.
$^{\dagger}p < .10$.
$^{*}p < .05$.
$^{**}p < .01$.
$^{***}p < .001$.

Table 2

Differences in Use of Coping Techniques Between Men and Women

	Men (n=85)		Women (n=141)		
Measure	M	SD	M	SD	t(224)
Work interference with home	4.25	1.58	3.84	1.65	1.85†
Home interference with work	2.22	1.00	2.20	1.00	0.10
Hours worked weekly	41.27	6.46	36.69	10.23	4.10***
Limiting work role involvement	4.30	1.38	4.22	1.21	0.40
Scheduling work for home	4.20	1.41	4.29	1.45	-0.45
Limiting home role involvement	3.40	1.44	3.72	1.39	-1.64
Scheduling home for work	4.06	1.79	4.39	1.46	-1.44
Social support	4.15	1.27	4.52	1.08	-2.21*
Cognitive reappraisal	5.12	1.20	5.24	0.98	-0.81
Behavioural disengagement	3.29	1.46	3.21	1.37	0.41

Note. $N = 226$.
†$p < .10$.
*$p < .05$.
***$p < .001$.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Analyses predicting Work-Home Interference

Independent variable	Work interference with home			Home interference with work		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Hours worked weekly	.44***	.33***	.34***	-.06	-.03	-.04
Presence of young children	.16*	.09	.08	.12†	.05	.05
Current use of work-home options	-.01	.01	.01	.09	.03	.03
Gender	.00	-.05	-.05	-.04	-.04	-.04
Limiting work role involvement		-.03	-.05		.04	.02
Scheduling work for home		-.07	-.06		.27***	.27***
Limiting home role involvement		.18**	.20**		.12	.12
Scheduling home for work		.18**	.15*		.00	.01
Social support		-.04	-.02		.07	.08
Cognitive reappraisal		-.13*	-.16*		-.16*	-.16*
Behavioural disengagement		.21***	.20***		.15*	.15*
Gender x Limiting work role involvement			-.15*			-.05
Gender x Scheduling work for home			.06			-.03
Gender x Limiting home role involvement			.12†			.07
Gender x Scheduling home for work			-.13*			-.01
Gender x Social support			-.06			.02
F	13.83***	12.69***	9.74***	1.72	4.18***	2.93***
△F	13.83***	9.78***	2.33*	1.72	5.45***	0.32
△R^2	.21***	.20***	.03*	.03	.15***	.01
Adjusted R^2	.19***	.37***	.39***	.01	.14***	.12***

Note. $N = 226$.
† $p < .10$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

Figure 1

Sex × Limiting work role involvement predicting Work Interference with Home

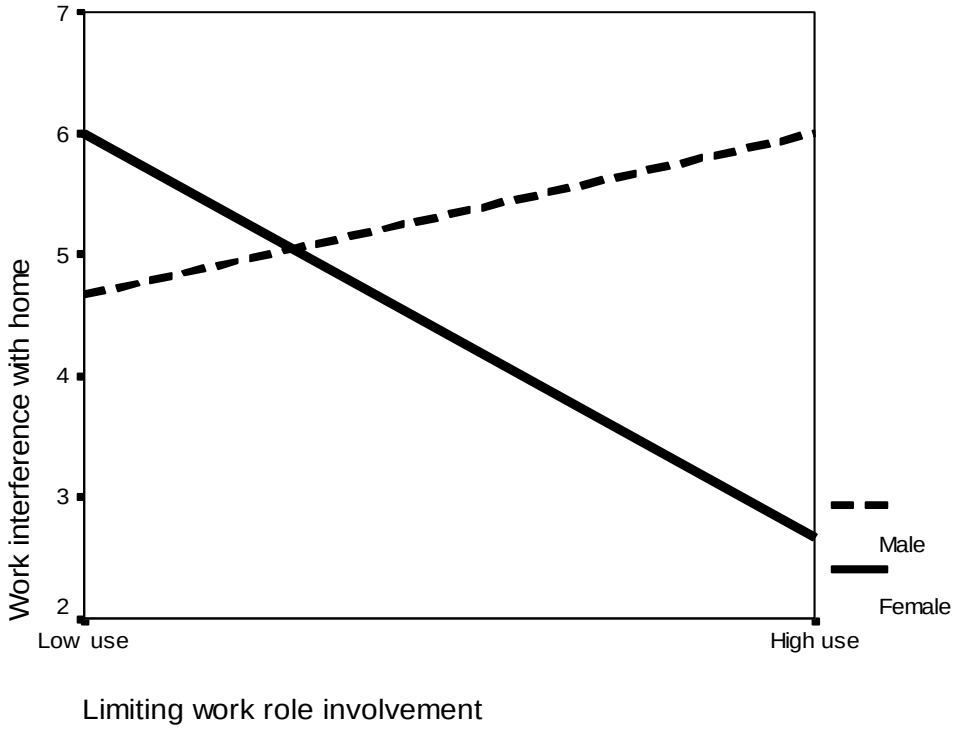

Figure 2

Sex ✕ Limiting work role involvement predicting Work Interference with Home