**Qualitative Diaries: Uncovering the complexities of work-life decision-making**

**Abstract**

Purpose - The purpose of this paper is to describe the benefits of the application of qualitative diary methods in the context of research on the work-family interface.

Design/methodology/approach - The diary method was used, in conjunction with semi-structured interviews, to collect data from 24 dual-earner couples over a one month period.

Findings – The qualitative diary method revealed important new insights into how couples managed their work and family commitments on a daily basis by allowing the researcher access to rich episodic data that would not have been available using more traditional approaches. This is particularly important in the area of work and family given its dynamic nature.

Research limitations/implications – The use of this method is time consuming, requires a great deal of dedication from participants and results in large quantities of complex data for analysis. Despite this the suggestion is that this approach is highly valuable in work-family research providing a more in-depth understanding of how these two domains are negotiated.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the literature on effective qualitative research demonstrating the benefits of employing qualitative diary studies to explore the work-family interface. It is intended to be of use to researchers investigating the area of work and family, as well as to those interested in using qualitative diaries in their research.

**Qualitative Diaries: Uncovering the complexities of work-life decision-making**

**Introduction**

The rapid changes in workforce demographics during the last thirty years make the study of the work-family interface a particularly important area of enquiry and consequently there has been a growing interest in the dynamics of work and family domains (Greenhaus, 2008). With an increasing number of dual-career couples raising a family, and more families having the simultaneous demands of child care and eldercare (Saltzstein et. al, 2001), role pressures are also increasing, with the majority of employees facing conflicts between work demands, personal and family responsibilities on a daily basis, the potential detrimental effects of which have been well documented (e.g. Allen et. al., 2000; van Steenbergen and Ellemers, 2009).

Diaries are increasingly recognized as a valuable method in organizational and management research (van Eerde et al, 2005). They offer the advantage of immediacy (Symon, 2004), enabling recent events to be recalled in sufficient detail to afford new insights into complex phenomena (Poppleton et al, 2008). Diaries have the ability to capture the particulars of experience in a way that is not possible using traditional designs and permit the examination of reported events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context (Reis, 1994), therefore offsetting some of the problems with retrospective accounts (Bower, 1981). Diary studies seem particularly suitable to investigate the work-family interface as both the work and family domains are dynamic, changing daily (Butler et al, 2005, Williams and Alliger, 1994). Therefore a method with the ability to capture this dynamism is important, allowing a picture to be built up of the types of issues that are raised on a daily basis. Despite this, qualitative diaries have rarely been used in work-family research. General discussions of the applications of diary methods have previously been reported (e.g. Bolger et al, 2003) but no previous paper has focused specifically on the benefits of, and methodological issues surrounding, the application of qualitative diaries to exploring the work-family interface.

The aim of this paper is to explore the benefits of, and difficulties with, the use of qualitative diary studies, particularly in relation to the study of work and family. In doing this it will demonstrate how the use of qualitative diary studies can enhance our understanding in this area. It will also describe a study recently undertaken using qualitative diaries in conjunction with interviews exploring how couples make decisions in incidents of work-family conflict; a form of inter-role conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are in some respect incompatible (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). This leads to the discussion of some practical issues when implementing such diary studies in this field.

Firstly, I will address some of the methodological issues in previous work-family research. Secondly, I will discuss the benefits of using qualitative diaries in relation to the aforementioned study investigating work-family decision-making processes. I will then go on to address some possible limitations and considerations before reporting conclusions.

**Methodological Issues in Work-Family Research: The Call for Diary Studies**

Although there has been extensive research exploring the work-family interface, numerous methodological deficiencies within this area have been raised, many of which are concerned with research designs and methods used. These include issues such as the over-reliance on single source self-report survey data, a lack of triangulation (e.g. Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 1999) and overemphasis on the individual level of analysis (e.g. Eby et al, 2005). A review of these issues, and of the methods used to investigate this area, was carried out by Casper and colleagues (Casper et al, 2007). They found that qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were used infrequently and recommended greater use of qualitative methods to improve theory development in this area.

Until recently work-family research has been dominated by a positivistic paradigm, focusing on antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict which are often objective characteristics of the individual, their family or their work (Zedeck, 1992). Focusing on objective characteristics alone cannot fully capture the complexity of work and family roles including how and why these variables impact on the work-family interface. The everyday reality of people trying to manage work and family involves complex processes and dynamics, where reconciling different interpretations of events is a daily occurrence. In response to this, work-family researchers are increasingly engaging in more phenomenological methods to understand the processes underpinning how people manage work and family domains (e.g. Gatrell, 2007; Poppleton et al. 2008)

There has also been a predominant focus on differing levels of work-family conflict in the literature, where individuals’ general levels of conflict are measured at a particular point in time using surveys, rather than research conceptualising and measuring conflict as a specific event or episode (Maertz and Boyar, 2011). Work and family conflict is infrequently explored in relation to actual interaction. Medved (2004) argued that meticulous investigation of everyday actions and interactions is essential because it allows for an examination of the relational work embedded in the routines involved in managing daily work and family responsibilities. Beyond this, findings have emerged that appear to challenge the idea that work-family conflict can be effectively measured using surveys employing likert scales which measure an individual’s work-family conflict level as being high or low. Such measurement assumes that people retain their experiences of work-family conflict in this way, and that it is these conflict levels that are most relevant in assessing the causes and consequences of work-family conflict, rather than placing importance on distinct conflict incidents or events. For example, Butler et al. (2005) focused on daily work-family conflict and work-family facilitation episodes and found that both varied from day to day. Maertz and Boyar (2011, p.74) questioned whether people actually have a theoretical work-family conflict level that “they carry around ready to be reported on surveys” and concluded that “researchers should look to break out of comfortable routines using “levels” scales in between-subjects designs, particularly when the main phenomenon of work-family conflict and its immediate effects occur within subject” (Maertz and Boyar, 2011, p.72). They argue for further examination of how work-family conflict is played out in the micro-practices of daily work and family routines.

Another limitation in the work-family literature is the predominant focus on individuals as the unit of analysis, despite numerous studies calling for dyadic research using couples to investigate the dynamics of work-family conflict (e.g. Eby et al, 2005, Moen and Yu, 2000). Casper and colleagues (2007) conducted a comprehensive review of the content of articles on work-family research in the I/O and OB journals between 1980 and 2003 and concluded that “most studies collected data from one person (76%) with one data collection method (77%) thus little is known about work-family relations at dyadic, group or organizational levels” (Casper et al, 2007: p 37). Research focusing only on the individual overlooks the complexities inherent when men and women attempt to coordinate their work and family commitments with those of their spouses and with the needs of their families (Crouter and Manke, 1997).In reality individuals’ choices are shaped by the people in their lives therefore a realistic view of the individual as part of a system of interconnected individuals is fundamental to understanding how people manage their work and family responsibilities (Moen and Sweet, 2002). Previous research (e.g. Kossek et al, 2001), has demonstrated how relatives can play an important role in managing work and family and there has been some research which has begun to focus on couple’s, rather than individuals’, strategies for managing work and family responsibilities, thereby acknowledging that this is a joint process (E.g. Becker and Moen, 1999, Moen and Yu, 2000). Using qualitative diary studies with both members of a couple enables an in-depth exploration of the work-family interface with the potential to identify how these domains are managed within couples and how their interdependence is manifested.

The diaries that have been used in previous research on work-family conflict (e.g. Williams and Alliger, 1994, Doumas et al, 2003, Butler et al, 2005) tend to be quantitative diaries, which act more like surveys, filled in by participants on a daily basis. Such diary studies provide a useful way of capturing the dynamic nature of work and family roles as participants are required to think about events at the end of each day. They highlight daily changes that have an impact on work-family conflict, which other more retrospective techniques would be unlikely to recognise and are therefore a particularly useful method for investigating this area. However, because these diaries use self-report scales, each consisting of a small number of items, they focus upon certain pre-defined factors and may therefore overlook other factors that might be important when managing work and family, neglecting valuable insights participants may have to offer. Plowman (2010) demonstrated the value of using qualitative diaries in a study where the aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of a “gendered” organisational culture in order to identify what needs to change and why. To achieve this, the staff and managers at the case study company were given diaries in order to record their individual self-reflection about daily events in the workplace. Her findings from this application of the diary method affirmed the value of qualitative diaries for uncovering the internal workings of organisations by revealing what goes on in the unofficial sphere of the organisation, which would normally remain undiscovered. This demonstrates the importance of qualitative diaries in uncovering underlying issues from different perspectives. Poppleton, Briner and Kiefer (2008) provided one of the only studies of work and family using qualitative diaries. They employed these diaries to collect data from participants in two contrasting organizational contexts; a progressive local government organization, which encouraged work–non-work integration, and a traditional manufacturing organization. Their aim was to discover the frequency of work–non-work facilitation, conflict and spillover in the two organisations and how the different organizational contexts shaped these experiences. This methodological approach enabled them to gain valuable insights into how context can shape work–non-work relationships. For instance, high levels of work to non-work facilitation and work to non-work conflict were reported in the flexible organisation whereas high levels of both positive and negative spillover from work to non-work and vice versa were found to be more predominant in the less flexible organisation. Work to non-work conflict was actually lower in the less flexible organisation with the implication that routine and predictability of working patterns may have exerted a protective effect. The importance of context would not have been highlighted using a more traditional methodological approach.

The case study provides another example of the use of qualitative diary studies using a similar episodic approach to exploring work and family. Rather than focusing on the frequency of events my research focuses on work-family conflict episodes with the aim of exploring the details of the resolution process as well as the negotiation involved by using couples as the unit of analysis. In this way I demonstrated how diaries can be used to focus on the interpersonal, rather than simply the intra-psychic process involved in negotiating incidents of work-family conflict.

**Using qualitative diaries to explore work-family conflict: A Case Study**

In order to gain an in-depth insight into the decision-making processes that dual-earner couples engaged in when attempting to resolve daily work-family conflict I employed qualitative diaries. The aim of my research is to gain a detailed understanding of the mechanisms and processes of decision-making in incidents of work-family conflict, as they occur on a daily basis and in their own words. Using qualitative diaries enables the exploration of the meaningfulness of participant’s ordinary lives in everyday situations and aids in understanding events from their perspective by gaining detailed descriptions of their experiences, rather than trying to find explanations. As such my research seeks an ‘insider’s account’ (Poppleton et al, 2008) capturing different levels of meaning that may not be fully explored using quantitative methods, therefore complementing the quantitative studies traditionally done in this field. I argue that the use of such in-depth qualitative analysis enables new and important findings to emerge, including the discovery of new factors affecting daily decision-making. Furthermore, in using both couples and individuals as units of analysis it is possible to identify how this interdependence is manifested whilst also allowing for the discovery of important strategies used by the couples on a daily basis to resolve work-family conflicts.

***Participants***

Selection criteria included couples who (a) have both partners working greater than or equal to 20 hours a week, (b) have child dependants of 17 years or younger, and (c) who share a common residence. They were recruited using self-selection as well as snowball sampling. Given the specific requirements of the desired population this sampling method provided the most effective way of recruiting participants.

This recruitment strategy resulted in twenty-four dual-earner couples (48 participants) from a variety of organizations and occupations in both the public and the private sector ranging from school teachers to small business owners. Many of these participants worked flexibly with only six couples where neither party had job flexibility. Half of the couples consisted of full-time working parents whereas within the remaining twelve couples one partner worked part-time; this was the woman in all but one case.

***Initial Interviews***

In-depth interviews were conducted initially with both members of the couple present, before private diary completion, in order for me to build rapport with the participants, obtain background information, and have the opportunity to explain the task of completing the diaries and the aims of the research in detail. As part of this initial interview I employed the critical incident technique (Chell, 2004) asking interviewees to recall a specific work-family conflict incident which they had experienced recently. I then talked this incident through with the interviewees in order to identify their decision-making process, and any factors which had an impact upon this process, before explaining how this would work in relation to recording such an incident in their diary. This approach enabled participants to understand the type of incidents that should be recorded in their diary, as well as the importance of including adequate detail in terms of their decision-making process and all the factors involved. During these initial interviews participants were also assured of the confidentiality of the information they were divulging, that all names would be changed in the write-up process and that they were free to withdraw at any time.

***Diaries***

Diaries were completed over 28 consecutive days, including weekends, either in hard copy or electronically (via e-mail) according to preference. Participants were asked to report all incidents of work-family conflict experienced over time, as it occurred and in their own words to obtain a sense of how individuals make these decisions, as well as how they are affected by the incidents and the decisions made. In this way the diaries explored factors that are considered when couples make difficult work-family decisions. Each diary page consisted of four open-ended questions based on the aims of the research:

* Please describe any decisions where you made a choice between work and family today
* What did you decide to do?
* How did you arrive at this decision? Please describe in as much detail as you can the decision process that you went through and ALL the factors that had an impact on the decision you made.
* What was the outcome of the decision that you made? Please explain how you felt about the decision and anything that occurred as a result of the decision.

Participants were contacted via telephone and/or e-mail several times during the four week period to provide the opportunity for further questions and to make sure they were happy to continue.

***Follow-up Interviews***

At the end of the diary period, unstructured telephone interviews were conducted with each individual separately, focusing on the content of the diaries, checking understanding, and the participant’s reactions to the experience.

**Data Analysis**

A combination of template analysis and diagrammatical representations were used to analyse the data obtained from the diaries. Template analysis works well in studies examining different perspectives within a specific context (King, 2004); therefore it was deemed useful in this study where multiple perspectives were the focus. These included perspectives of both individuals within the couples, as well as different perspectives across couples and across time. The initial template was developed by examining a sub-set of the transcript data (diaries from one couple), defining codes in light of the research questions regarding experiences of work-family conflict and decision-making. The four main themes in the initial template were taken from the four open-ended questions asked in the diaries listed above as participants’ responses subsequently followed this general pattern. These four headings were: type of conflict, decision made, reason for decision, and outcome of decision. Several themes were listed under each of these headings based on the interviews and diaries of one couple. The full sets of transcripts and diaries were worked through systematically, identifying those sections of text that were relevant to the research questions and marking them with the relevant code from the initial template. When inadequacies in the initial template were revealed, modifications were made developing the final template. Initially many new themes were inserted into the original template including higher and lower order codes. For instance, more specific family-friendly policies were included under the broad theme of the availability of family-friendly policies. The broad theme, ‘unofficial work agreements’ was inserted into the template to capture the support participants reported receiving at work outside of official family-friendly policies. Other themes changed position; for example, the theme of ‘turn-taking’, originally a broad theme, was inserted as a lower order theme under the main theme of support. After all interview transcripts and diaries had undergone an initial analysis, the diaries were worked through again and subsequently further changes were made to the template; this time with several themes being grouped together in a more insightful and informative manner. For instance, ‘the availability of support’, ‘job requirements and expectations’ and ‘financial considerations’ were grouped together as lower order themes under the broad theme of ‘enabling and constraining factors’ as this more effectively described the impact that these factors had on participant’s decision-making. This final template served as the basis for the interpretation of the data. A section of this final template showing the coding of different factors impacting upon daily decision-making is shown in Figure One.

*[Insert Figure One about here]*

Once all data had been coded in this way it was deemed that another way to organise this data was required to enable comparisons of decision-making within and between individuals and couples, and to explore links between different stages in the decision-making process. Subsequently diagrammatical representations were employed to describe each individual conflict made by all participants, including; the type of decision, the decision that was made, the reasons expressed for making this decision, and the subsequent outcomes, displayed in a flow chart diagram. 224 decisions were reported in participant’s diary entries and subsequently analysed in this way. These diagrams retained some of the original context of the data providing a more detailed approximation of participant’s decision-making process and the way this progressed by allowing the important links involved in this process to be preserved, in a way that a list of themes could not. Within each diagram, codes from the final template relating to the specific decision-making factor, or outcome represented in that diagram, were reported making links between the two easily apparent. Such diagrammatical representations enabled the comparison of decision-making within and between individuals and couples, and the exploration of links between different stages in the decision-making process (See Figure 2 for examples). For instance, the decision-making process reported by both partners regarding the same decision could easily be compared side by side; or those outcomes most commonly associated with particular types of decisions or decision-making factors could be more easily explored. In this way, when diagrammatical representations were used in conjunction with template analysis, they aided an effective and detailed analysis of the data regarding how couples made decisions in incidents of work-family conflict.

*[Insert Figure 2 about here]*

In the following sections some of the benefits and difficulties with the qualitative diary method will be discussed, particularly in relation to the use of this method for exploring the work-family interface, by drawing on examples from the case study. Subsequently guidelines for conducting qualitative diaries in this area are suggested.

**Benefits of the diary method: Revealing new insights**

Qualitative diaries allow researchers to explore work-family processes within the context of daily life in a way that is not possible with more traditional methods. The episodic and longitudinal nature of this methodological approach made it possible for some key findings to emerge. Using the diary-interview method and obtaining multiple perspectives was also important. Overall employing a qualitative strategy enhanced all such benefits of the diary method enabling new and important contributions to the existent work-family literature.

*Episodic Approach*

The episodic approach demonstrated that work-family conflicts were not intermittent events but occurred almost daily for the majority of participants. This approach in conjunction with the qualitative nature of the research revealed that all participants had certain pre-arranged strategies in place for dealing with these conflicts. These included reciprocal arrangements and pre-established hierarchies. Reciprocal arrangements involved building, and maintaining, agreements of mutual reciprocation both within couples and externally with other parents. Such prearranged agreements aided timely conflict resolution. Participants also reported having pre-established solution hierarchies in place which they could call upon in daily incidents of work-family conflict. Preferred conflict resolution options were at the top of the hierarchy, progressing down to those options that would only be relied upon as a last resort. Such hierarchies were frequently used by couples when resolving work-family conflicts. A couple’s pre-established hierarchy could provide a general picture of their resolution process as well as how problematic and stress-inducing this process tended to be.

*[Insert Table 1 about here]*

Beyond this, by allowing couples to express their own perception of their experiences of a specific event freely and without restriction, the qualitative diaries uncovered factors considered by participants when making decisions in incidents of work-family conflict which had not previously been discovered (e.g. Powell and Greenhaus, 2006). The lesser time lapse between the event occurrence and recording of the event offered the opportunity for as many decision-making factors as possible to be recalled and reported.

*[Insert Table 2 about here]*

Table 2 shows some of the factors revealed as having an impact on decision-making along with examples from the data. Financial factors were shown to play an important role in daily decision-making despite previous research in the managerial literature rarely considering the financial aspects of how daily work-family conflict is resolved (e.g. Powell and Greenhaus, 2006). Another factor revealed as having a significant impact on daily decision-making was the consideration of fairness and equity. Again such considerations have not previously been addressed in relation to work-family conflict. Previous theory and research has demonstrated that equity theory can provide insights toward understanding close, intimate relationships (e.g. Hatfield et al, 1979, 1985), but this has not been explored in relation to couples making work-family decisions. For instance, when considering whether or not to rely on available support to resolve particular work-family conflict participants frequently considered fairness judgements regarding others affected by the decision outcome as well as the amount of support previously sought from a particular individual. Participants’ decisions were also impacted upon by their relative investment of resources across domains in terms of striving to maintain some kind of balance. The amount of time previously invested in each domain impacted upon their decision-making regarding which domain they subsequently decided to invest their time to resolve work-family conflicts. The impact of past events on subsequent work-family conflicts demonstrated how each conflict cannot be understood out of context.

The use of qualitative diaries therefore enabled the revelation of numerous new factors. This highlights the importance of focusing on specific incidents of work-family conflict as well as the necessity of a longitudinal approach. Taking decisions made in isolation gives an incomplete, and often inaccurate, picture of events.

*Longitudinal Aspect*

In direct relation to this, the importance of capturing the immediate, and not so immediate, outcomes of work-family decision-making by employing the qualitative diary methodology was highlighted in the findings regarding flexible working. Outcomes can be thought of in two senses; the actual behavioural arrangement, or the subjective evaluation of those arrangements (Szinovacz, 1987). An exploration of both the practical and emotional outcomes over time permitted by the diary method led to deeper insights in terms of participant’s emotions regarding practical decisions made, and the impact these had over time. For example, previous literature has been unclear regarding the benefits of flexible working. Some studies have reported that ‘family-friendly’ policies, such as flexible working arrangements, actually demonstrate positive relationships with family to work conflict (Hammer et al, 2005; Lapierre and Allen, 2006). While the possibility of an increase in such conflict incidents for those with flexible working was found in the current research, what previous studies have not shown is the longer-term daily impact on the employees themselves, and subsequently the organisation. The findings demonstrated how, despite some problems with flexible work arrangements, a lack of flexibility can continue to be damaging after the event due to the constraints this puts on daily decision-making. For example, Janet reported experiencing constraints placed upon her decision-making by an unsupportive and inflexible supervisor who refused to allow her to start work at 10am rather than 9am on an occasion where she was required to work away from home. Her concern about this decision continued to have a knock on effect on both her work and personal life over the following days. This can be seen in the examples in Table 3. The longitudinal nature of the research enabled the observation of the impact that imposing such constraints on decision-making can have over time. Although the immediate consequence of the lack of support offered from management meant she invested her resources in the work domain on that occasion there were further consequences involving distractions at work and conflict with her partner, Rick. This demonstrates that the practical solutions decided upon by participants may not necessarily be the end point.

*[Insert Table 3 about here]*

Beyond this the necessity to continuously make decisions under such constraints can lead to individuals leaving their organisation or intending to do so. This was expressed by several participants both in diary entries and in follow-up interviews.

Further exploration of the impact of using various family-friendly policies at work using qualitative diary methods, with a focus on both practical and emotional outcomes, would be beneficial in obtaining a comprehensive picture of how these initiatives actually impact people’s lives. A greater understanding of the actual conflicts experienced by employees on a daily basis is vital in the creation of policies or supportive strategies that will be successful.

*Capturing Multiple Perspectives in Qualitative Diaries*

Having both members of each couple complete qualitative diaries led to valuable insights into joint decision-making processes and enabled a more complete understanding of what actually transpired in work-family conflict events by having two descriptions of the same event. This approach highlighted the complex interrelated nature of the decision-making process within a couple. Couple’s lives and their decision-making were inextricably linked and both were subsequently impacted, practically and emotionally, by the decisions made. For instance, congruence in beliefs, values and preferences were important in conflict resolution. An example of the impact of congruent beliefs on decision-making is provided by partners Dave and Emily. The conflict regarding whether or not Dave would work on his day off was easily resolved without expression of negative outcomes by either party as both Dave and Emily agreed upon the importance of finances (see Table 4). Incongruence in beliefs, and related negative consequences, were highlighted by the differing perspectives of the same dilemmas highlighted in couple’s descriptions of conflict resolution. For example, Adam reported fairly few work-family conflicts throughout his diary and with regards to those he did discuss he often stated that such conflicts were easily resolved by his partner Sarah. Conversely she reported a great deal of difficult work-family conflicts and related negative emotions. It was apparent from their diary entries that her beliefs regarding how work-family conflicts should be resolved, and the roles that each of them should play, were not necessarily congruent with her partner’s.

*[Insert Table 4 about here]*

This methodological approach enabled more subtle, genderdifferences in the experiences of work-family conflict to be uncovered by the analysis and comparison of daily diary entries of each individual within a couple. Men and women were found to differ with regards to the extent to which they were involved in reaching a resolution to daily conflicts and hence, whether or not they actually experienced the event as a conflict.There were very few conflict events reported by men that were not also discussed in their partner’s diaries; however there were numerous conflicts reported by women that received no mention in their partner’s diaries. These insights would not have been raised without the use of qualitative diaries with both members of a couple. They point to the critical nature of partner perceptions in understanding an individual’s work-family conflict. A realistic view of individuals as part of a family unit is fundamental to understanding how people develop and implement their plans for managing their daily work and family responsibilities. It is important that research looks beyond the individual to the impact of others in both the family and work domains on work-family conflict resolution. While gaining perspectives of influential others in the work domain was out of the scope of the current research this is also an important area for future research to explore.

**Methodological Challenges**

A number of different challenges were experienced with regards to the use of qualitative diaries. I address some of the challenges in this section before providing some guidelines with regards to dealing with these challenges when employing this methodology in conducting research into work and family interactions.

*Effective recording*

A potential challenge when using qualitative diaries is ensuring that sufficient and significant details are recorded. Unlike other qualitative methods, such as interviews, the researcher is not present to prompt participants or to request a more detailed response which can lead to loss of important information.

*Participant commitment*

A separate but related issue is level of participant commitment and dedication required in diary studies which is rarely required in other types of research (Bolger et al, 2003) and the burden that repeated responses places on participants. This is likely to be intensified when using qualitative diaries investigating work-family conflict. It is difficult to maintain this level of commitment to the research over time, without the presence of the researcher and especially when participants are, by the very nature of the research topic, people with little spare time. As a means of addressing this problem it is especially important to maintain contact with participants throughout.

*Accuracy*

Another challenge involves the accuracy of the data reported in the diaries. It can sometimes be difficult to contact participants and diaries are not always completed on time which not only slows down data collection and analysis but also causes concern about the accuracy of the information provided. Busy participants may resort to completing diaries in retrospect.

*Ethical issues*

In relation to using the diary method with couples, the personal disclosure of both members of a couple in separate and private diaries raised numerous ethical issues. After diary completion, an important part of the research was the follow-up interview which provided the opportunity to clarify, and discuss in more detail, issues raised in the diaries in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the decision process. However, when diaries have been completed by both members of a couple, and particularly qualitative diaries investigating such personal issues as those addressed when considering work-family conflict, some difficult issues arose. Going back to interview participants after reading their personal disclosures in a private diary raises numerous ethical issues. In many cases where sensitive issues and conflicts arise, it is simply not feasible to discuss the topic in the interview, not only because of the sensitive nature of the topic, but also because it may have been a private issue for the individual. Other authors have chosen not to conduct follow-up interviews because of such difficulties, and have instead chosen only to undertake single interviews (Gatrell, 2009).

**Design considerations for the use of diary research in the study of work and family**

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the benefits of using this methodological approach to explore the topic of work and family rather than to provide an exhaustive guide on how to conduct qualitative diaries (see Symon, 2004, for a general guide on using this methodological approach in organisational research). However, based on the research discussed and the particular issues addressed above it leads naturally to the inclusion of suggestions for researchers using this approach regarding some important design issues to consider, particularly in relation to exploring the work-family interface. These are presented in order of the various stages of the research process.

*Research Preparation: Diary design*

There are three general categories of diary methods in the literature (Eckenrode and Bolger, 1995). These are; interval-contingent, where experiences are recorded at regular, predetermined intervals of time; signal-contingent, where participants report experiences whenever they are contacted by the researcher; and event-contingent, where participants report every time a pre-established event takes place. An event-contingent schedule is often required when diaries are employed with the purpose of exploring work-family incidents as providing reports at fixed times each day would not ensure that a work-family incident had occurred and could be reported. This design requires a clear definition of the triggering event because any ambiguities as to which events fall within that definition may cause participants to omit relevant events and a decrease in the number of events reported. For example, in the current study the importance of recording minor, routine work-family conflicts was emphasised in the initial interviews, including discussion of specific examples.

When considering the use of qualitative diaries one of the challenges is to focus the research, drawing a line around what can be investigated in a particular study and what is out of the scope of that research, while also avoiding imposing a structure onto participants which is not their own. An important issue specifically when designing qualitative diaries is how much structure, if any, to incorporate in the diary. There are clear benefits of keeping diaries as unstructured as possible; namely to prevent participant’s description of work-family incidents being confined in anyway by the researcher’s preconceived ideas. However, a blank page might be daunting for some participants, particularly those who may not have written for a significant period of time. It is also important that the diary is designed in a way that encourages the reporting of as much relevant information as possible. In order to make an informed decision regarding structure pilot studies can prove highly useful in trialling different layouts.

In the current study, having trialled various diary structures, semi-structured diaries, consisting of four open-ended questions for each day, were decided upon. During the pilot studies unstructured diaries consisting of a blank page for each day led to daily reports that were not entirely relevant and lacking sufficient detail with regards to the decision-making processes involved in conflict resolution. Participants explained that without the prompts of the semi-structured diary, they “would just have written what happened and not any feelings or why” and that they “did think about it more” when completing the semi-structured diary. Overall the semi-structured diaries tended to produce more detail regarding the decision-making process. However, there was still concern regarding restriction of participant expression resulting in information loss since the aim of this study was to capture participants’ experiences from their point of view therefore a compromise was reached by including an extra space for further comments each day.

*The pre-diary interview:*

*Explaining what is involved* – It is important to explain exactly what is involved in taking part from the outset, including the demands that will be placed on participants, so they know what to expect (Symon, 2004). When conducting research into work-family issues it is vital to be aware that participants may be required to draw upon experiences in which they have deep emotions invested (Gatrell, 2009). Downplaying the commitments required might be tempting when trying to recruit participants as this can be a challenge when conducting qualitative diary research into work-family issues. However, it is important to be transparent from the beginning, not only ethically, but also in order to decrease the likelihood of participants dropping out of the research further down the line.

*Ensure understanding regarding diary reporting* – It is also important to ensure that clear instructions regarding exactly what participants are being asked to record in the diaries are provided in the initial interview, including the amount of detail required, and that these are fully understood by participants. For example, the use of the critical incident technique in the initial interview enabled me to talk participants through a work-family conflict incident, asking follow-up questions, to demonstrate the amount of detail required when reporting such incidents in the diaries.

*Agree exactly when diaries entries should be made* - Although, modern diaries using signalling devices such as pagers are now available, these have limited utility for event-based research. If participants are being asked to report events as they occur, decide whether or not it is reasonable to ask participants to report an incident in their diaries immediately after the event. This can often be unrealistic with regards to reporting work-family events therefore a more realistic approach might be to allow participants to postpone responding at inopportune moments. A discussion regarding when participants would complete their diaries during the initial interview along with encouragement to report events as soon as possible can help to reduce fabrication due to highly retrospective accounts. For instance, Symon (2004) suggested that a participant completing their diary on the train on the way home from work found this helpful in that it was free from distractions and rarely varied therefore producing diary entries that were consistently recorded at the same time each day. It could also be useful to ask participants to record exactly when they completed their diary entry, or more specifically to note how much time has passed between the event and the recording. This not only gives researchers a clearer picture of the accuracy of the account, but may also encourage participants to make greater efforts to record their experiences as close to the event as possible.

*During diary completion*

*Maintain contact with participants*– “Personal contact retains participants more so than monetary incentives or dependence upon goodwill towards science” (Bolger et al, 2003, p.595). It is important to contact the couples at least once a week during diary completion to ensure any concerns are raised by providing further opportunity to ask questions. This helps to ensure that any issues are dealt with as they occur and to prevent loss of data due to misunderstandings or disillusionment with the study.

*The post-diary interview*

*Conduct private interviews* – Despite the ethical issues with follow-up interviews they provide an important opportunity to question the meaning and significance of events to the participant with the potential of producing valuable depth of information (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). However bringing up personal issues in a joint follow-up interview would show no regard for the individual’s privacy. Qualitative researchers have a responsibility to prioritise the interests of participants above the desire to collect data and achieve publications (e.g. Gatrell, 2009) and ethical guidelines iterate the need for researchers to protect participants from potentially harmful effects of qualitative research interviews (e.g. British Psychological Association, 2010). Subsequently any follow-up interviews should be conducted individually and in private with careful consideration of whether it is appropriate to raise any issues that could cause harm to participants.

*Discuss impact* - These interviews also provide an opportunity to discuss what impact, if any, keeping the diaries had on participants. Diaries can be used not only as a research tool but also as an intervention having the capacity to enable reflection and raise consciousness about the reported topic, allowing for a deeper understanding and space for thinking and acting on change (Alford et al, 2005; Plowman, 2010). It is useful, interesting and good practice to ascertain how taking part in the research affected participants. For instance, in the current research participants expressed how this process “made me think more about what I actually do” with some suggesting that it led to greater self-awareness such as enabling them to “analyze my motives and realize that they are usually family orientated” and others expressing greater awareness of their partner’s roles and responsibilities, “realising more what the demands are on each other.” For some participants this led to decisions to change behaviour such as Paul, who worked from home, realising that much of his stress emanated from trying to engage in work and home roles simultaneously: “It causes stress doing something and then going back and checking my emails and then doing something so I’m not doing it anymore.”

**Conclusion**

This paper demonstrates the numerous benefits of using qualitative diaries in work-family research as well as addressing some of the challenges of employing diaries in this area and subsequently providing some important considerations. Although the use of the qualitative diary method can entail numerous challenges in exploring the work and family interface, overall the benefits outweigh the problems.

Dual-earner couples frequently engage in difficult decisions regarding how to manage their daily work and family responsibilities. The case study presented here revealed important new insights into this process of daily work-family conflict resolution such as the discovery of new factors shown to have an impact on how decisions are made and work-family conflicts subsequently resolved. Such findings have not previously been unveiled using more conventional techniques and provide a significant step in our understanding of how work-family conflicts unfold permitting further research into the impact of various factors and processes. These findings were enabled by the substantial amount of detail attained using a non-retrospective, episodic and longitudinal approach which also allows participants free expression to report their own perception of experiences.

Beyond this the use of qualitative diaries enabled emotional experiences to be captured at the time of event occurrence which can be lost or diluted using retrospective techniques (Symon, 2004). There was a focus on both practical and emotional outcomes providing greater insight into the actual daily experiences of participants as well as the impact that such emotional outcomes had on subsequent work-family scenarios. Such findings throw new light on important issues such as the real impact that organisational policies have on the day-to-day lives of working parents. The inter-related nature of the decision-making process within a couple was also highlighted by the use of episodic data produced in the diaries demonstrating how decisions were not made by individuals in isolation, but as part of a dyadic unit. Finally, a deeper insight into current, more subtle, gender differences in experiences of work-family conflict were also revealed by the comparison of daily accounts.

Researchers exploring work and family can use qualitative diaries to address both new questions and to revisit old questions. By using a new approach that has the ability to look at work-family issues in a new light, important new issues have the opportunity to be uncovered, and the daily dynamics of the complex relationships involved in managing work and family can begin to be understood. In this way, qualitative diaries are extremely useful tools which should be considered by researchers looking to add new and valuable contributions to the existing management literature on work and family.

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**Tables and Figures**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Pre-arranged Strategies | Example |
| Reciprocal arrangements within couples | Lucy: “Paul had taken him [their son] to the initial hospital appointment so I wanted to take him this time, and this allowed Paul to get a full day’s work in!” |
| Reciprocal arrangements with others | Linda: “We have often looked after their [neighbours] children and we have an “arrangement” whereby we reciprocate with childcare. In July we had their children for a whole day so we did not feel awkward asking them to help out.” |
| Pre-established hierarchies | Marissa: “You have this process where you think I can’t go, right Nick can’t go, mum can’t go, who can go? Then you go through the guilt and then I end up somehow trying to get the time off.” |

**Table 1. Examples of pre-arranged conflict resolution strategies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Factor | Example |
| Financial | Christina: “We need the extra money now that Christmas is fast approaching” |
| Impact on others | Paul: “Lucy’s [his partner’s] dad seems happy with the responsibility. We check with him on a weekly basis and would change our routine if it was too much for him.” |
| Amount of previous support | Amy: “We ask for my mum’s help enough so I didn’t want to ask even more of her when there were other options. She is already looking after Logan overnight once this week” |
| Maintaining balance across domains | Kyle: “I’ve had a slow start to the week it is essential that I have a couple of solid days....its fine as had some good family time at the beginning of the week.” |

**Table 2. New factors revealed as impacting daily decision-making including examples.**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Outcomes of Constrained Decision-Making | |
| Distractions at work | Janet: “Still worrying about this decision....felt distracted, stressed and a bit guilty” |
| Conflict at home | Rick: “Got a ticking off from Janet about not organising the school run for when she is away” |
| Intention to leave organisation | Lucy: My job could be a lot more flexible and I’ll probably be looking around for another one really because it’s getting quite bad |

**Table 3. Highlights the longitudinal impact of constrained decision-making revealed by the diary method**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Inter-Related Decision-Making | |
| Congruent beliefs | Dave: “....as a result of working I will be able to treat them all [his family] when I get paid”  Emily: “We need the extra money now that Christmas is fast approaching....[this decision] didn’t upset me in any way at all as I understand the need to earn extra money” |
| Incongruent beliefs | Adam: “Sarah does most of it with the kids”  “No problem as it’s usually Sarah who stays at home.”  Sarah: “I can get time off work to look after them, if he doesn’t go to work he doesn’t get paid so that’s the reason in his mind but it stresses me to take time off sometimes because I’ve got work to do too” |

**Table 4. Examples demonstrating inter-related decision-making**

* + 1. At home

1. Enabling and Constraining Factors **DF1**
   1. Availability of Support
      1. At home
      2. At work
   2. Job Requirements and Expectations
   3. Financial Constraints
2. Fairness and Equity **DF2**
   1. Support Seeking
      1. Impact on Supporter
      2. Impact on Children
      3. Previous Support
      4. Impact on Participant
   2. Time Investment
      1. Task Time
      2. Task Frequency
      3. Time Previously Invested
      4. Future Expectancy
3. Preferences **DF3**
   * 1. At work
   1. Job Requirements and Expectations
   2. Financial Constraints
4. Fairness and Equity
   1. Support Seeking
      1. Impact on Supporter
      2. Impact on Children
      3. Previous Support
      4. Impact on Participant
   2. Time Investment
      1. Task Time
      2. Task Frequency
      3. Time Previously Invested
      4. Future Expectancy
5. Preferences

# ure One – Section of the final template showing factors impacting upon daily decision-making

# Figure One – Section of the final template showing factors impacting upon daily decision-making

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Comparison within couples**  **Couple 1 – Lucy: Couple 1 – Paul:** | **Comparison across time**  **Sylvia - Day2: Sylvia – Day4:** |

# Figure Two – Diagrammatical Representations of Decision-Making Scenarios – Examples (N.B. The codes in the following diagrams acted as a means of linking back to their position in the template)