

The blame game in work-family conflict

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When the demands of work and family conflict, is the job blamed, is the family role blamed or is blame placed on both? And what are the consequences?

A new study by Elizabeth M. Potoski, Ph.D., assistant professor of [psychology](#) in the School of Science at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, is the first to explore day-to-day experiences in attributing this type of blame. The work examines individual incidents of work-family conflict and tracks how blame for this conflict is attributed.

Only three percent of those surveyed blamed both work and family for conflict between the two. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed blamed work, not family, for conflict. Twenty-two percent blamed only their family role. Five percent blamed external factors other than work or family for the conflict, and only six percent blamed themselves for the conflict. There were no [gender differences](#) in how blame was assigned.

Individuals who attributed conflict to external sources rather than blaming the conflict on themselves were more likely to experience anger and frustration following the conflict. According to Potoski, anger and frustration on the job are related to many negative workplace outcomes such as employee theft. Preventing such emotions may benefit both employees and employers.

"The Blame Game: Exploring the Nature and Correlates of Attributions Following Work-Family Conflict" was published online before print on May 31, 2011 in the peer reviewed journal *Group & Organization Management*.

Focusing on reactions to the work-family conflict, Potoski found that the order in which events were scheduled was an important factor in attributing blame as the second event, whether work or family related, was more likely to be blamed than the first. This type of conflict might be avoided on both the work and home fronts, she says, by scheduling

events in advance. Last-minute office meetings and drop-in visits by relatives were highlighted by those she surveyed as blame targets.

The 269 participants in the study worked an average of 45 hours per week. All held bachelor's degrees and slightly more than half had received graduate degrees. With an average age of 43 years, two-thirds had spouses who worked at least part-time.

"A lot of research on work-life conflict exists, but most provides an overview which averages many [experiences](#) rather than exploring single incidents and reactions to these incidents," said Potoski, who is an industrial-organizational psychologist. "This study is valuable because focusing on details helps us better understand the mechanisms and processes of conflict. This understanding may be important to future studies of the negative [emotional](#) reactions to work-family conflict including [anger](#), [frustration](#), shame and guilt.

Provided by Indiana University

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