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Strategies for work–family balance in a South African context

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ABSTRACT

Finding and maintaining work–family balance has become an increasingly difficult challenge for South African families due to various factors, including economic, political, social and cultural changes that can impact negatively on family well-being. While pathways and strategies for work–family balance have been identified in other contexts, there is little available research on the topic in a South African context. Considering the knowledge that South African social workers have in this regard as a result of their training, qualifications and role in the South African context, South African social workers were selected as participants. The aim of this study was therefore to explore and describe, from the perspective of a group of South African social workers, strategies for work–family balance that can potentially contribute to family well-being in a South African context. A narrative inquiry research design was implemented. Thirteen female social workers between the ages of 23 and 46 who work in different social work contexts across South Africa were recruited by means of purposive and snowball/network sampling. Data were collected by means of written narratives and analysed by thematic analysis. The findings identify the following strategies: Setting clear boundaries, open communication in work and family domains, strengthening personal and professional support systems, planning, time management and prioritising, self-care, reasonable work environment and continuous personal and family assessment. While the findings share similarities with work–family balance strategies identified in other contexts, this study's significance lies in the fact that it identifies strategies specifically for the South African context and that it does so from the perspective of South African social workers.

RÉSUMÉ

Atteindre et maintenir un équilibre travail-famille s'avère de plus en plus difficile pour les familles sud-africaines, et ce, en raison de facteurs variés comme les changements économiques, politiques, sociaux et culturels qui peuvent affecter négativement le bien-être familial. Bien que des voies et stratégies d'équilibre travail-famille soient identifiées dans d'autres contextes, les recherches disponibles à ce sujet dans un cadre sud-africain sont rares. Au regard des connaissances qu'ils possèdent par leur formation,

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leurs qualifications et leur rôle dans le contexte sud-africain, les travailleurs sociaux sud-africains ont été choisis à titre de participants. Le but de cette étude était ainsi d'étudier et de décrire, du point de vue d'un groupe de travailleurs sociaux sud-africains, les stratégies d'équilibre travail-famille qui pourraient potentiellement contribuer au bien-être familial dans le contexte sud-africain. Une méthodologie de recherche de type 'enquête narrative' a été adoptée. Treize assistantes sociales de 23 à 46 ans, employées dans différents contextes sociaux en Afrique du Sud, ont été recrutées par échantillonnage dirigé et « boule de neige »/ par réseau. Les données ont été rassemblées au moyen de descriptions écrites, puis étudiées par analyse thématique. Les conclusions identifient les stratégies suivantes : l'établissement de limites claires, une communication ouverte dans les domaines du travail et de la famille, le renforcement des structures de soutien personnel et professionnel, la planification, la gestion du temps et la définition de priorités, prendre soin de soi, un environnement de travail raisonnable et l'évaluation continue de soi et de la famille. Si certaines conclusions sont semblables aux stratégies d'équilibre travail-famille identifiées dans d'autres contextes, la portée de cette étude réside dans le fait qu'elle identifie des stratégies spécifiques au contexte sud-africain, et plus particulièrement, du point de vue des travailleurs sociaux sud-africains.

Introduction and problem statement

Family well-being is defined as a multi-dimensional construct that consists of positive and uplifting environmental conditions, health, a healthy economic state, safety, spirituality or religion and a well-functioning family structure as a whole. (Newland, 2015; Noor, Gandhi, Ishak, & Wok, 2012). Family well-being is not simply based on individual family members' well-being and is collectively and subjectively defined by family members based on how individual members' needs and the family's needs interact (Newland, 2015). Factors such as physical and mental health of family members, family self-sufficiency, family cohesion, family conflict and harmony, expression of emotions and resilience are aspects that can impact on the experience of family well-being (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2005; Chien & Mistry, 2013; Newland, 2015).

Various theoretical models have been developed to understand and measure family well-being. The ecological system theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Wollny, Apps, & Henricson, 2010) argues that family well-being is influenced by environmental factors such as the dynamics of family relationships (Schimmack & Lucas, 2007), time spent at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2012), and a country's social and economic state (Md-Sidin, Sambasivan, & Ismail, 2008). The resource theory (Wollny et al., 2010) conceptualises the 'interpersonal resource exchange' to promote well-being within the family. The exchange of resources, including time, money, information, possessions and love are necessary to ensure that the needs of individuals are met and their life satisfaction improved (Wollny et al., 2010). The family system-based theory (Wollny et al., 2010) explains the importance of interpersonal relationships and interactions within the family context. In this theory, family functioning refers to a multi-dimensional construct that reflects the effectiveness that activities and internal factors, such as communication styles, conflict resolving

styles and psychosocial support within the family, contribute to family well-being (Walsh, 2003; Wollny et al., 2010).

Walsh (2012) points out that it is essential to gain insight into the factors and processes that can contribute to family well-being as well as the challenges that families face. Some time ago, researchers such as Coontz (1997) and Walsh (1996), pointed out that the family institution is in increasing danger and risks demise due to, amongst other factors, the dramatic change that families have undergone and the changing landscape of family life. In more recent work Walsh (2012) explains that families have changed a great deal over past decades. Among the factors that are contributing to this change are trends such as varied family forms, varied gender roles and relationships, growing cultural diversity and multicultural society and an increase in socio-economic disparity (Walsh, 2012). While these factors point specifically to USA families, families in other parts of the world and in South Africa also face similar and various other challenges (Dodman & Miltin, 2011; Noor et al., 2012; Pitt, Sherman, & Macdonald, 2015; Roman et al., 2016; Theron & Theron, 2010).

During South Africa's Apartheid regime racial segregation and White supremacy were central aspects of South African policy, which was designed to mostly accommodate and enhance the socio-economic privileges and rights of the White population (Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation, 2015; Triegaardt, 2006). During this regime, the White population enjoyed access to proper service delivery, including education, health and social services, experienced a low unemployment rate and had little exposure in terms of vulnerability and risk (Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation, 2015; Triegaardt, 2006). This regime excluded Africans from White-funded amenities in White areas to which Africans did not contribute taxes. The majority African population did not have the privilege of equal access to education, healthcare and social services, did not have equal rights and were limited to promotion or becoming business owners of well-established companies (Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation, 2015; Marais, 2013; Triegaardt, 2006). Furthermore, Africans in both rural and urban areas were restricted in terms of basic service delivery, including clean water and sanitation, electricity and safe public transport (Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation, 2015; Lombard, 2007).

Mainly as a result of Apartheid policies, the democratic South Africa inherited a divided nation with many social, political and economic inequalities (Department of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation, 2015). While South Africa's democratic government has made noteworthy progress in the fight against poverty, inequality and improvements in basic service delivery (Govender, 2016), the unfortunate reality is that inequality has increased since the end of Apartheid more than two decades ago. This has raised questions regarding social justice, social welfare, economic stability and service delivery to all South African citizens (Govender, 2016; Lombard, 2007). The increasing inequality, socio-economic injustice and failure of government departments to deliver sustainable social services in South Africa have a snowball effect on the emotional and behavioural reactions of the people of the country, leading to violent protests as seen in different South African communities (Aboobaker & Matlala, 2013; Bond, 2014; Brunlöf, 2017; Lombard, 2007; Marais, 2013; Poplak, 2014).

Modern day South African families therefore continue to face various social, political and economic challenges and changes, which threaten their familial well-being

(Sekwena, Mostert, & Wentzel, 2007). These challenges can also lead to more challenging and stressful work and social environments (Amoateng & Richter, 2007; Bond, 2014). Families in South Africa are also affected by and face challenges such as poverty and unemployment (with Statistics South Africa (2017) reporting a national poverty rate of 56.8% and a national unemployment rate of 27.7%), social injustice, escalating divorce rates, single-parent households, failing education systems, natural disaster, increasing crime rates, a lack of security and a number of health issues such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Koen, Van Eeden, & Rothmann, 2012; Lombard, 2007; Roman et al., 2016; Sekwena et al., 2007; Theron & Theron, 2010). South Africa's credit rating has recently been downgraded to junk status, which is predicted to have a negative impact on South African's day-to-day standard of living (Fisher-French, 2017).

In a study conducted in the USA, Halpern (2005) found that the pursuit and maintenance of work–family balance is another challenge recently faced by families. Due to socio-economic challenges, both men and women are increasingly faced with greater responsibilities and various roles to be fulfilled at work and at home (Clark, 2000; Ferguson, Carlson, Kacmar, & Halbesleben, 2015; Fraenkel & Capstick, 2012). Specific to South Africa, the South African Board for People Practices Women's Report for 2011 (SABPP, 2011), reports that more women in South Africa are entering the workforce in order to aid, amongst others, gender transformation and empowerment of women. This supports the view that work and family life cannot be separated, and that there is a need to find a balance between these two life domains (Clark, 2000).

Work–family balance is defined as the degree to which a person perceives an experience of positive relationships in both work and family roles. Work–family balance is further defined as a state where family members' relationships are in balance or compatible with each other (Michigan State University, 2015). Greenhaus, Collins, and Shaw (2003) recommend a balanced approach and equal commitment with regard to people's roles in the work and family domain. The pursuit of meaning and pleasant experiences in both work and family life is a starting point when motivated to balance various roles and responsibilities within these life domains. A positively balanced involvement in work and family role responsibilities may reduce negative experiences in the work and family domains and therefore enhance overall well-being (Greenhaus et al., 2003).

Five main models are used to explain the relationship between work and family life (Guest, 2002; Naithani, 2010; O'Driscoll, 1996): the segmentation-, spillover-, compensation-, instrumental- and conflict model. The segmentation model views work and life (non-work) as two separate and distinct life domains that do not influence each other (Blunsdon, Blyton, Reed, & Dastmalchian, 2006). The spillover model perceives the two domains as having the ability to influence each other in a positive or negative manner (Naithani, 2010). The compensation model hypothesises that a lack of demand and/or satisfaction in one domain can be compensated for in the other domain (Staines, 1980). According to the instrumental model, the activities in one domain are seen to facilitate success in the other domain (O'Driscoll, 1996). Lastly, the conflict model theorises that as a result of high levels of demand in all spheres of life, conflicts may arise, which can significantly challenge a person (Guest, 2002). These theories highlight the fact that work and family life are interrelated and highlight the need for a balanced life. Clark's (2000) work–family border theory focuses on such a balance.

According to the work–family border theory (Clark, 2000), people are constantly negotiating their work and family domains and the borders between these domains in order to achieve balance. This theory views work and family as two separate domains that influence each other and also notes differences in work and family/home in terms of purpose and culture. Individuals therefore have to transition between these two domains. Though work and family life may differ from one individual to another, work and family life may, to some degree, be modified to border and create a desired balance (Clark, 2000).

As a result of the tough economic times, dual-earning families, where both parents and/or both men and women work, are on the increase in modern society in order to meet their families' financial needs (Fraenkel & Capstick, 2012). There is evidence that this is also the case for some South Africans (Smit, 2001). According to Nappo-Dattoma (2015), Purcell and Raine (2014) and Sullivan (2015), the on-going development of technology has contributed to longer working hours since people are able to take work home on their electronic devices as well as correspond with work colleagues regarding work via internet, electronic mail and mobile phones from home. Considering the limited availability of work opportunities, people increasingly have to travel long distances to work, and as a result, spend less time at home. This can lead to neglect of family relationships and responsibilities (Sekwena et al., 2007). As a result, an imbalance between work and family life may occur and the boundaries between work and family life can become unclear. Balancing work and family life is therefore becoming a constant challenge for many people in different sectors (Lenaghan, Buda, & Eisner, 2007). Work–family balance is said to play an important role in improving individual and family well-being (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007) and is required in order to minimise the potential conflict that can arise from inter-role conflict caused by work and family life (Ferguson et al., 2015).

Authors such as Greenhaus and Powell (2006) and Halpern and Tan (2009) report that dual-earning families can cope well and also thrive. In light of this, Fraenkel and Capstick (2012) point to the importance of exploring and identifying the variables that enable families and couples to successfully blend and balance the domains of work and family in order to promote family well-being. USA studies that have focused on successful coping strategies in dual-earning families and the ability to achieve a successful balance between the domains of work and family in diverse samples (e.g. racially diverse and gay and lesbian couples) (Bergman, Rubio, Green, & Padrón, 2010; Gerson, 2010; Zimmerman, Haddock, Current, & Ziemba, 2003) have identified a number of similar successful strategies in this regard.

According to Fraenkel and Capstick (2012), these strategies include the prioritisation of family time and well-being; a focus on equality and partnership (for example, making decisions together, having equal control regarding finances and an equal responsibility with regard to housework); partners should value each other's goals in work and life domains; shared responsibility for taking care of children as well as emotional aspects in family life; making as much time as possible for fun and play at home; focusing on one's work when at work; being proud of the family's willingness and ability to balance various roles and recognising how the family profits from a dual-earning family; simplifying living (for example, spending less time on activities that limit the involvement of family); having high, but also sensible and reasonable expectations regarding the running of the household; proactive involvement in making

decisions; and being consciously aware of the value of time. It should be noted that these strategies were mainly identified by dual-earning couples or families in an affluent context.

The available literature, as discussed above, therefore highlights the need for similar studies within a South African context and is also indicative of the need to do so from the perspective of professionals such as social workers. In light of this, the aim of this study was to explore and describe strategies for work–family balance that can potentially contribute to family well-being in a South African context. This was done specifically from the perspective of South African social workers because of their training, qualifications and role in the South African context as discussed below.

Social workers are trained to assist in promoting social change, to assist with problem-solving in human relationships and to promote the empowerment and liberation of people in order to enhance well-being (White Paper for Social Welfare, 1997). Social workers are trained to work directly with individuals, families and communities in order to advocate social change, by keeping clients' (individuals', families' and communities') best interests at heart; caring for and assisting them in a professional manner and promoting their well-being (Lombard, 2007; Rogowski, 2011). Social workers are also equipped to address multiple and complex relations between individuals and their environments to promote well-being as well as identify and develop potential strengths (South African Council for Social Service Professions, 2015). It should be noted that the above may be a reflection of ideals rather than much of the reality of social work in South Africa. The argument can be made, however, that social workers are capable of promoting families' work–family balance and family well-being. Social workers' perceptions regarding strategies for work–family balance that can potentially contribute to family well-being (based on their work as social workers and from a professional point of view) are therefore explored for the purpose of this study.

In light of the above, the following research question was identified: What strategies do South African social workers perceive as effective to introduce to work–family balance in a South African context?

Aim

In order to answer the research question, the aim of this study was to explore and describe, from the perspective of a group of South African social workers, strategies for work–family balance that can potentially contribute to family well-being in a South African context.

Method

The research method was qualitative in nature. A discussion of the research design, sampling and participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness and ethical considerations follows.

Research design

A qualitative research approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) was implemented in this study. Qualitative research is based on the assumption that reality is co-constructed by people

(Creswell, 2014). This research study specifically draws on knowledgeable people's constructions of reality. The study subscribed to the ontological assumption that there are many truths and realities with regard to how society is constructed (Nieuwenhuis, 2007), which informed the epistemological assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and that the participants are the experts on their perceptions of strategies for work–family balance. The study applied a narrative inquiry research design (Botma, Greeff, Mulaudzi, & Wright, 2010). Narrative inquiry describes the purposeful and systematic collection of data in order to analyse and present a person's perspective as told by them, which challenges traditional views of the reality and knowledge of personhood (Etherington, 2007). This research design was fitting for the purpose of the study as the objects of inquiry include stories, perceptions and opinions in order to explore how people make sense of society and the world around them (Botma et al., 2010).

Sampling and participants

Participants were recruited by means of purposive sampling from a population of social workers who met the inclusion criteria (Botma et al., 2010). Participants had to be: registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) as practising social workers; literate in English; and willing to participate. Initially social media (Facebook) was used as a platform to recruit participants. An advertisement was placed on various South African Facebook pages (for example, 'Facing Social Work', 'SA Social Work Practice', 'SACSSP Council'). In this manner, six participants were sampled purposively. Thereafter participants were sampled by snowball/network sampling. This was done to prevent selection bias and to give individuals who were not on Facebook an opportunity to participate (Botma et al., 2010). Participants who were purposively sampled and recruited via social media were asked to locate individuals or colleagues who met the inclusion criteria and who were willing to participate in the study. The snowball/network sampling continued (based on participant referrals) to the point of data saturation (the point at which no new data or information could be obtained) (Botma et al., 2010). Seven participants were recruited through snowball/network sampling. The total sample consisted of 13 female social workers between the ages of 23 and 46 who work in different social work contexts in South Africa. Table 1 provides the demographic profile of the participants. While the authors attempted to recruit and sample across South Africa, it should be noted that the sample is not representative of the majority groupings of the country, which is reflected in the demographic profile of the participants.

Data collection

Atkinson (1998) states that narratives are an excellent and purposeful manner of gaining an understanding of people's perceptions and/or experiences, lives and interactions. Botma et al. (2010) state that the unique nature of narratives can reveal rich data. The use of written narratives was appropriate for this study as it provided insight and understanding into the participants' perceptions. This technique was also chosen purposefully as the authors' intention was to collect data from South African social workers who work in different social work contexts in South Africa and, considering available resources, the technique was appropriate for this purpose. Specific guidelines that were given to the

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants ($n = 13$).

Item	Category	Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	0.0
	Female	100.0
Home language	Afrikaans	46.2
	English	30.8
	Setswana	23.1
Age	20–29	69.2
	30–39W	23.1
	40–49	7.7
Number of years in practice	<1 year	23.1
	1–4 years	38.5
	5–9 years	15.4
	>10 years	23.1
Type of practice	NGOs	46.2
	Government departments	23.1
	Private practice	7.7
	School/University setting	23.1

participants for narratives were as follows: Please write a short narrative and address the following aspect therein: What strategies (with examples) you (as a social worker) regard as effective to introduce work–family balance that could potentially contribute to family well-being in a South African context. You have the option to either write the narrative by hand and scan it onto a computer and then send it via electronic mail to the researcher or post it to the researcher, or to type the narrative and send it via electronic mail to the researcher. The researcher’s (first author) contact details were made available to the participants for this purpose. Instructions to the participants were minimally structured in order to give them sufficient information to share purposeful data without leading them in what to write in their narratives.

Data analysis

The analysis was done concurrently with the data collection to determine the point at which data saturation was reached. Thematic analysis was used to manually analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Riessman (2008) explains that narratives can be analysed in different ways and one of these analyses methods includes thematic analyses. The six steps suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed to analyse the collected data. The steps included: (1) Familiarisation with the data: The first author and co-coder (independently) began the process of analysis by repeatedly reading all of the participants’ narratives to become familiar with the breadth and depth of the content and also actively searching for meanings and patterns in the data; (2) coding: The first author and co-coder generated initial codes by organising the data in the narratives into meaningful groups; (3) searching for themes: Next, the first author and co-coder sorted the codes into potential themes by looking at how different codes could possibly be combined into overarching themes; (4) reviewing themes: The first author and co-coder then refined the themes by, for example, making sure that there were enough data to support the themes and that the themes were distinct; (5) defining and naming the themes: During this step of analysis, the essence of the themes were identified and (6) writing up the data: The analysis was concluded by writing up the themes and telling the story of the data.

The first author and an experienced co-coder manually and independently analysed the data. The co-coder was provided with a work protocol for data analysis by the first author. After the first author and co-coder independently analysed the data, a discussion took place to determine consensus with regard to themes and to add to trustworthiness with regard to the data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Table 2 provides an overview of the measures that were implemented in the study in order to ensure trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations

The study carries institutional ethical approval (NWU-00076-13-A1). Recruitment and sampling were done in a manner that is fair in that specific inclusion criteria had to be met and participants were not exploited or discriminated against based on their race, gender, religion, class or sexual orientation (Botma et al., 2010). Participation was voluntary and participants had to give written informed consent. Potential participants were given at least a week to study the informed consent form before deciding on their participation. Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage of the study without negative consequences. Participant information is confidential and measures were put in place to protect participants' identities.

The study was considered a low-risk study and no emotional discomfort, psychological discomfort or dignity harm was reported by the participants (Botma et al., 2010). However, the contact information of a helping and qualified professional would have been provided to participants who experienced any mental discomfort or distress during or as a result of their direct participation in the study. Participants might benefit indirectly from the study by gaining an understanding of their perceptions of work–family balance and family well-being. Participants may also come to understand and identify ways that can improve or contribute to work–family balance and/or family well-being.

Table 2. Measures to ensure trustworthiness.

Criteria	Measure
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflexivity: The first author took field notes pertaining to the data collection and continually reflected on the entire process to ensure that the study remained truthful and honest by accurately reporting on the study and not fabricating or distorting information. • Peer review: The research was shared with peers for evaluation and critical input. • Structural coherence: A literature integration/control was executed in order to account for similar or contradictory findings and research, also linking it to other research findings.
Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dense and detailed description of the study, including the participants, method, data collection, and data analysis, is provided. • The study made use of a code-recoder procedure whereby an experienced, independent co-coder co-coded the data with the use of a work protocol (also see section on data analyses) to ensure trustworthiness regarding data analysis. • An audit trail was established by keeping field notes and other documentation providing evidence of the sequence of the research method and is stored securely for referral.
Confirmability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A thorough audit trail was established (see section on dependability). • Reflexivity was applied (see section on credibility).
Transferability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dense and detailed description is provided so that the study can be transferred to other contexts or settings (also see section on dependability).

Findings

The themes that emerged from the data analysis of the collected data from narratives are illustrated in [Table 3](#) and discussed in more detail below.

Theme 1: set clear boundaries

Participants highlighted the importance of setting and keeping clear boundaries by distinguishing between roles and responsibilities within work and family life: 'Make your own rules/boundaries and stick to them so you make time for everything;' (P3) 'act professionally in the workplace, but remember your individual roles at home ...;' (P1) 'leave your work at work;' (P1, P6, P7 and P11) '... you need to understand the responsibilities of work and at home ...' (P10) '... distinguish between your roles ... this includes not taking work home ...;' (P4) '... if you are thinking of work at home you cannot focus completely on the expectations of the family' (P5). These inputs are reflective of the importance of not only establishing rules and boundaries in terms of one's work and family roles, but also adhering to these rules and boundaries.

Theme 2: open communication in work and family domains

Participants pointed to the importance of effective and open communication in both domains. Participants suggested family meetings and keeping each other informed: '... if there's communication then others will understand your situation better ...;' (P3) '... have family meetings ...' (P2) and '... discuss what everyone is doing during the week, how they are doing, do they need to know anything, etc.' (P11). Apart from communicating with your family regarding your work, it may also be necessary to communicate openly about your family in your work context: '... open communication is important so that both areas of your life know what is going on in the other area;' (P6) '... effective communication between all parties involved, especially when there is a stressful time at work or at home ...;' (P9). Participants also mentioned there should be open communication in the workplace between the employer and employees: 'Talk to other staff/supervisors so that you don't have to carry all the burdens ...;' (P1). These contributions stress the need for open and effective communication in both domains.

Theme 3: strengthen personal and professional support system

Participants identified maintaining and strengthening personal and professional relationships and support systems as a possible strategy: '... maintain your relationships ...;' (P 5)

Table 3. Themes: Strategies for work–family balance.

Themes/Strategies	Set clear boundaries
	Open communication in work and family domains
	Strengthening personal and professional support systems
	Planning, time management and prioritising
	Self-care
	Reasonable work environment
	Continuous personal and family assessment

'... support at work and home is extremely important ... if you are supported at work, there is an openness to discuss possible issues ... it makes it easier to focus on work when you receive support from colleagues ...' (P6) and '... a professional support network should only exclusively be used for professional issues ...;' (P3) '... personal support network is not there for you to moan, but rather to strengthen and positively influence the family ...;' (P3) '... taking time out to spend one on one time with children ...' (P8). Other quotes, namely '... enjoy time with people that you love and who love you back ... this works as a debriefing aspect ...;' '... sound board ...;' (P3) '... debriefing sessions ...' (P13) indicate that enjoying time with your loved ones can help you to debrief and act as a soundboard.

Theme 4: planning, time management and prioritising

Participants highlighted the importance of developing and improving the ability of 'effective time management, to plan and prioritise' (P10). One participant wrote: 'Prioritising ... is a deliberate thought process to determine what is important and what is not. Certain tasks might need to wait or be delegated so that priorities can be accomplished' (P6). One participant indicated the necessity of thorough planning and mentioned that responsibilities would then not be left until the last minute, thereby resulting in the experience of less stress and pressure (P3). Some of the other participants stated: '... review of one priorities can also assist an individual to prioritise their institutions and dedicate the necessary time to the different institutions ...;' (P7) '... determine how much time you want to dedicate to your job and to your family;' (P9) '... time management ... identify time wasters;' (P4) and 'prioritise – do not do unnecessary things that would not constructively contribute to your work ...' (P4), pointing to the necessity of effective planning, time management and prioritisation.

Theme 5: self-care

Some of the participations suggested that self-care is necessary to promote work–family balance. One participant stated that if you don't care for yourself, you won't be able to achieve balance: 'Self-care is extremely important in my view to work-family balance as, without first recognising that you are the tool to achieving both of these, it can't be done' (P8). Participants also stated that it is sometimes necessary to ask for help and to focus on yourself: '... self-care also involves asking for help;' (P8) '... it's not your responsibility to find solutions for everyone else ...;' (P10). Participants pinpointed specific approaches or activities to apply regarding self-care: '... pray, breathe and re-think ...;' (P1) '... listen to a particular song or podcast everyday ...;' (P8) 'dedicate ... some alone time for yourself;' '... take the afternoon off ...;' (P12) '... take time to read and do the garden ...;' (P12) 'This can be done by reviewing happy periods, previous strategies for managing stress, hobbies that were enjoyable, etc.;' (P3) 'The crux ... for all these activities is the concept of mindfulness which encourages being present at each moment and actively engaging in it ...' (P8). These contributions therefore point to the importance of self-care as well as identifying ways in which to implement self-care.

Theme 6: reasonable work environment

Participants stated that a reasonable work environment can help improve a good work–family balance. One of the participants mentioned that employers have a noteworthy influence on their personnel’s way of work and that employers should assist staff members in finding effective work–family balance (P3). Participants suggested that employers should not hand out work at the last minute at the end of the work day, should be considerate towards employees when it comes to family crises, and should assist employees in handling work demands effectively. Participants shared the following: ‘For people that do not know the benefits of work-family balance, (the employer should encourage) a seminar ... to just educate them to understand why it is important ... ’ (P9) and ‘... having a manager who is understanding and allows flexible working environment helps’ (P12). The statement, ‘... the work environment should employ wellness programmes in order to educate and invest in happier and healthy workers and address stressors in the family connection that ... impacts service delivery’ (P11), was shared by another participant.

Theme 7: continuous personal and family assessment

Participants mentioned that on-going personal and professional assessment is needed to ensure a healthy work–family balance. One participant said that you need to make sure of the profession you want to be in, as some professions can be very draining. And to that you need to give attention to what others say about you, for example: ‘... you are too busy ... ’ or ‘... you have changed ... as they pick up early signs of unbalance/burnout before you do ... ’ (P1). Another participant said ‘... to distinguish and assess responsibilities in both the work and family environment in order to flourish in both environments ... ’ (P5). One other participant said: ‘... it is a trial and error process ... ’ (P6). These inputs reflect the importance of listening to others’ assessments of you as well as making your own assessments.

Discussion

Based on the findings, it is apparent that the strategies proposed in this article share similarities with the strategies regarding work–family balance and successful coping in dual-earning families as identified by Fraenkel and Capstick (2012). Included in these is the strategy of setting clear boundaries, which accords with the strategy of focusing on work when at work (Fraenkel & Capstick, 2012). This strategy also corresponds with the segmentation model, which views work and life as two separate domains (Blunsdon et al., 2006) while not making the argument that the domains do not influence each other. Other researchers also argue that keeping work and family roles separate, allows individuals to be fully devoted to and to develop the role and responsibilities of one life domain at a time (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). The ability to differentiate between roles further allows individuals to successfully cope with demands and responsibilities, within the work and family domain, which also helps to protect individuals from being exposed to high levels of stress and emotional strains (Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005).

The strategy of planning, time management and prioritising, also shares similarities with Fraenkel and Capstick’s (2012) strategies pertaining to prioritisation of family time and well-being, being consciously aware of the value of time, reasonable expectations

regarding one's household, shared responsibilities and proactive involvement in decision-making.

While communication is not specifically referred to by Fraenkel and Capstick (2012), the strategy of open and effective communication can be linked to the strategies of proactive involvement in decision-making, equality and partnership, shared responsibility regarding children and emotional aspects and expectations regarding one's household. Regular communication between individuals has the potential to create a better understanding of each other and each other's current circumstances; it creates an opportunity to respect each other, to have empathy and fosters being supportive towards others (Roman et al., 2016; Theunissen, Van Vuuren, & Visser, 2003). Regular, purposeful communication gives individuals the opportunity to make decisions and solve problems, eliminate future misunderstandings and conflict (Roman et al., 2016). Meaningful communication is also said to promote social competence and assist in building and maintaining support networks that promote work–family balance and family well-being (Koen et al., 2012; Roman et al., 2016; Theunissen et al., 2003).

The strengthening of personal and professional support systems shares similarity with the strategies of having a focus on equality and partnership, valuing each other's goals in work and life and shared responsibility in terms of children and emotional aspects (Ferguson et al., 2015; Fraenkel & Capstick, 2012). It should be noted however that the strategies identified by Fraenkel and Capstick (2012) focus more strongly on personal support systems. Such a support system can positively influence the work domain, assisting in the relief of work-related challenges such as exhaustion and burnout, resulting in increased satisfaction in the workplace (Ferguson et al., 2015). A professional support system, including co-workers and supervisors, can also be seen as a resource to help improve work satisfaction and well-being and can assist in identifying and relieving stress and depression (Wayne, Grzywacz, Carlson, & Kacmar, 2007). Effective support systems, which also involve meaningful communication, create opportunities for individuals to achieve work–family balance and well-being despite the various social challenges in South Africa (Koen et al., 2012; Roman et al., 2016; Theunissen et al., 2003). This strategy is supported by the instrumental model, which holds forth that activities in the personal and professional life spheres (in this instance support systems) have the ability to positively influence and facilitate success in each other (O'Driscoll, 1996).

The strategy of performing continuous family and personal assessment can be linked to the strategy identified by Fraenkel and Capstick (2012) pertaining to simplifying one's living by spending less time on activities and responsibilities that limit spending quality time with one's family.

While self-care activities sometimes take time and commitment, the prioritisation and implementation thereof can foster a healthier and more balanced lifestyle (Nappo-Dattoma, 2015; Radley & Figley, 2007). This strategy relates to the compensational model, which argues that individuals make compensational efforts when experiencing a lack of, for example, satisfaction in a certain life domain (Staines, 1980). Instead of compensating, however, individuals should identify and implement strategies to attain satisfaction in both work and family life. The strategy of self-care can also be linked to strategies regarding making time for fun and play at home, exercise, cherishing hobbies and simplifying living (Fraenkel & Capstick, 2012).

Other authors indicate that organisations should strive towards creating a positive and supportive working environment. This ensures fully engaged employees who can develop professionally and function optimally in order to achieve work–family balance (Fiksenbaum, 2014; Wayne et al., 2007).

Based on the discussion above it becomes apparent that the findings of this study share similarities with strategies for work–family balance identified in other contexts. However, the significance of this study is that it has explored and described strategies for work–family balance specifically within a South African context and further identifies professional South African social workers' perceptions, where the professional aspect (of people familiar with the South African context) plays a valuable role and can contribute to a more objective approach to the strategies as the strategies are proposed from a professional perspective.

Conclusion

The findings point to the importance of work–family balance for family well-being as well as the importance and need for a balance between the work- and family domains. The findings are also indicative of the important role of every member of the family, especially partners/couples/breadwinners, as well as the shared roles and responsibilities of a family unit to implement the identified strategies as appropriate for their family.

As the literature integration above indicates, the strategies are strongly supported by available literature on the topic. The fact that the participants were qualified health care professionals, might, to an extent, explain why the findings are so strongly supported by existing literature as families and well-being is their career focus.

Also evident is that the strategies are relevant on three levels, namely: the individual-, family- and professional level. This is indicative of the interrelated nature of the individual, family and work context, the impact that one can have on the other, and further highlights the need for a balance in this regard. This finding also shares similarity with the ecological system theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979). In this case, the interaction between the strategies on the family level (setting clear boundaries, planning, time management and prioritising, open communication, family assessment and personal support system) and professional level (reasonable work environment, open communication and professional support system) come into play in the mesosystem. Lastly, the South Africa context coincides with the macrosystem or outermost level of the ecological systems theory. The socio-economic status, resources, cultures and so forth specific to the South African context, but that may also vary for different South African families, can impact the appropriateness of the strategies for different families on the individual -, family - and professional level or influence families' ability to apply these strategies. The following figure (Figure 1) gives a graphic representation of the strategies on these three levels.

It should be noted that the qualitative nature of the study means that the study is contextual in nature and that the study and its findings apply to the specific context that was indicated. The findings can therefore not be generalised to a larger population and may not be appropriate for all contexts (including South African contexts), but the detailed description of the process that is provided in this article, will however make the study transferable and make it possible for other researchers to duplicate the study in other contexts if they wish to do so.

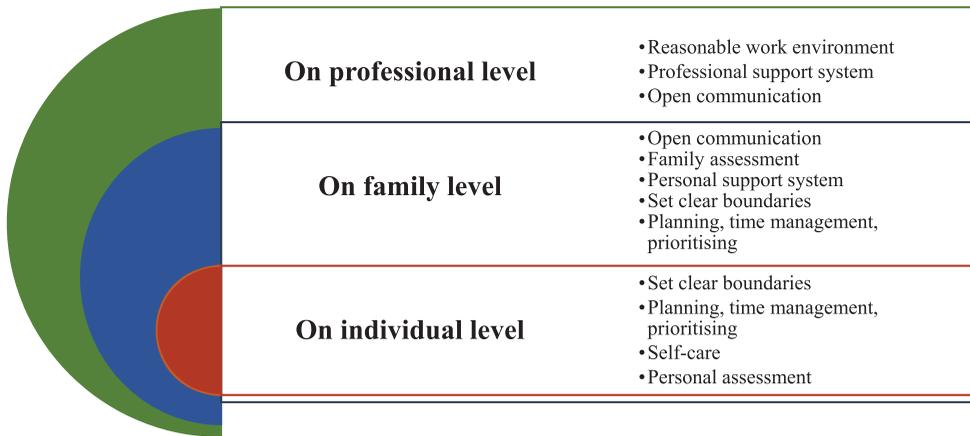


Figure 1. Strategies on individual-, family- and professional level.

As all of the participants are females, the study is gender biased. It should be noted, however, that females make up the largest percentage of South African social workers, making up 86.7% to 89.3% of South African social workers (Department of Labour, 2008) which could have had an impact. Furthermore, time restrictions could also have played a role in the diversity of recruited participants. In spite of this, the participants' input as trained and qualified health care professionals in this study is unique and valuable as both families and well-being receive a great deal of attention in their career. The possibility of social desirability bias should also be considered as participants' responses may have been formulated to present them in a positive light (Botma et al., 2010). Also interesting to note is that the participants' narratives are indicative that they apply their knowledge with regard to work–family balance in their own lives as well. This may be regarded as evidence for the likelihood of social desirability bias towards wanting to impress that they do what they say. On the other hand, this could also be viewed as a positive finding as it suggests that they are meeting their responsibilities toward their own families as well as their profession.

With regard to the method, narratives as data collection technique proved useful as it provided rich and insightful data, however, the use of more and/or different qualitative data collection techniques can be useful for the purpose of triangulation and to provide different perspectives. In certain instances, participants did not, as requested, write their narrative from a general, professional capacity, but rather answered the posed question from a personal point of view. One could speculate that social work practice in South Africa and the resulting job environment is exceptionally challenging – a statement supported by literature (Alpaslan & Schenck, 2012; Schenck, 2004) and that work–family balance is therefore a daily reality that South African social workers are personally faced with. Quantitative research that investigates and measures work–family balance in various South African contexts and the relationship thereof to family well-being is also recommended. Further research on all aspects of work–family balance in South Africa and different South African contexts is called for and longitudinal studies would also be useful for this purpose.

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