Work-family Balance Themes in Recent Feature-Length Films

Pauline Burton
Honours Student, 2007
School of Management, Faculty of Business
Queensland University of Technology

Supervisor
Dr Paula McDonald

Associate Supervisor
Dr Keith Townsend

Paper presented at
The University of New South Wales 2007 National Honours Colloquium

Abstract
The level of work-family balance achieved by individuals has wide reaching physical and psychological impacts on well-being. The objective of the study is to investigate and describe the way in which work-family balance themes are portrayed in recent feature-length films. The study will be primarily grounded in the work-family balance literature, but will incorporate aspects of popular culture (film) and media influence. Facets of work-family balance explored include gendered roles, occupations, work-family conflict, work-family enrichment, workplace structures and relationships, and technology. The sample comprises 40 top-grossing films and DVDs released in Australia between 2000 and 2005, with the data analysis taking a qualitative approach, utilising variations of content analysis. The findings have implications for normative notions of work-family balance in the community and youth’s expectations of occupations and the conditions associated with them.
Introduction

“Whoever tells the story defines the culture”
David Walsh, Ph.D., Founder, National Institute on Media and the Family

The way in which individuals balance their work and family lives is an area of academic enquiry that has received an increasing level of scrutiny over the past two decades. Theoretical orientations have developed in response to, or at least in parallel with, the progressively higher profile of work-family balance issues in the media and in scholarly literature (AFC, 2007), yet little is known about how work-family balance is portrayed in various media forms. Consumption of media is greater than ever before and its influence is well established in relation to some messages, including violence and gender. This study will focus on feature-length films, which are important components of media more broadly and an influential source of entertainment for adults and children alike. This study aims to extend extent research by investigating not only gender and occupations as done in previous studies, but by incorporating other salient aspects of work-family balance such work-family conflict and enrichment, workplace structures and relationships, and technology. Furthermore, the study will explore all relevant top-grossing films and DVDs in a six year time period – a more comprehensive approach than much previous work which has limited samples to Disney animated films or G-rated films. Content analysis will be utilised to analyse the film content, with the coding framework developed from the work-family balance literature. The importance of this research centres on the way it will facilitate understanding of how work-family balance is portrayed, via films, to audiences. The way in which normative notions of work-family balance are portrayed in recent films form an ideal or socially desirable way of life and define the very nature of the culture in which society operates. Thus, this study poses the question of whether these work-family ideals are the ones to which we aspire to for humanity.

Literature Review

What is Popular Culture?
Popular culture is suggested by Browne (2006:15) to be “all those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist” and takes many forms, including television, books and films. Artefacts of popular culture such as films do not form part of the genre of popular culture as a result of their standard of excellence but because of their success as measured by the people (Harmon, 2006). Further, Harmon (2006) suggests that the many artefacts of popular culture which are reflecting the attitudes of society, will tend to reinforce the present cultural attitudes and values. Popular culture research methodology is still considered to be in its development phase as it requires the combination of many different academic disciplines. It is however this multi-disciplined approach, that can be considered strength, with researchers drawing on methodologies that best suit their needs.
The Pervasiveness of Film

Feature-length films are described by Quinn (2001) as being reasonably high-budget, theatrically released, and over ninety minutes in length, while the Australian Film Commission suggest feature-length films are those over 60 minutes in length (AFC, 2007). The latter definition will be adopted for this study. Charles (2005) purports that movie theatres have taken over from myths and story telling as the means by which the history, stories and beliefs of our society are communicated, suggesting that films are a key socialisation method in today’s society. A Canadian study by Nye (2006) suggests that the average 18 year old has seen over 500 films, a statistic which demonstrates the large captive audience of filmmakers.

Over one hundred thousand fiction films have been made (Seger, 1996). Australia has a substantial medium for consumption of many of these films, with almost 2000 cinemas across the country and over 99 percent of households containing at least one television (AFC, 2007). Cinema attendance in Australia has remained relatively stable over recent years, with current average attendance at 7.5 times per year. The rapid uptake of DVDs as a film viewing medium saw over 26 million DVDs sold in 2003 (AFC, 2007) and provided the audience with an alternative to cinema attendance. The cost of DVD players and the hire price of DVDs have decreased since their inception, promoting a boom in the market (AFC, 2007) and thus an expanding audience.

Media Influence

Research has revealed that media has the ability to influence people’s development, perceptions and behaviour (Lloyd, 2002). The influential capabilities of media have been established in causal studies such as in the areas of violence (see Anderson et al., 2003 for a comprehensive review). There is also correlational evidence to suggest media influences other social phenomena including gender roles (Charles, 2005) which is pertinent to this study. Both positive and negative influence can be exerted on people (Charles, 2005) and it is this influence that is under the control of film-makers.

The influence of films has been explored since the early twentieth century and social workers are suggested to have been the first professionals to conduct empirical research in the area, with the aim of improving the society in which they lived (Jowett, Jarvie, & Fuller, 1996). A comprehensive investigation by the Payne Fund Studies in 1933 explored the influence of films on American youth and provided insight into the effect that films have on behaviour (Jowett et al., 1996). Consistent causal findings have been established in the area of media influence and violence. This research has been extensive, using diverse methodology, samples, media genres (Anderson et al., 2003). Exposure to violence in the media shows effects in the short and long-term, including outcomes such as aggressive behaviour (physical and verbal), thoughts and emotions.

An important theory that explains media influence on audiences is the Horizon of Expectation theory proposed by Jauss (1982). Jauss suggests that texts are not released in an informational vacuum and that when we experience a new text, it arouses the expectations we have from exposure to previous texts. This new text may then appease or challenge our expectations in relation to the topic and a person may choose to replace,
correct or alter their horizons of expectations accordingly. The extent to which an audience feels comfortable having these expectations challenged will determine the type of media or films they choose to engage in. Further, filmmakers and scriptwriters are subject to the same informational messages as viewers in their formation of horizons of expectations which influences their level of acceptable challenge.

With media influence having the ability to shape our perceptions of the world, and encourage us to act in certain ways, it is rational to assume that the way in which audiences perceive work-family balance, will shape the way they act in relation to it. That is, consistently portrayed messages in the media may influence normative notions or expectations of what can be expected in balancing paid work and family responsibilities and how it could or should be achieved. These perceptions may be crucial to well-being as a substantial number of studies have shown that a perceived lack of work-family is associated with both psychological and physical health issues (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992b; Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006). Key aspects of work-family balance that have been investigated in previous research are detailed in the following section.

**Work-Family Balance**

Work-family balance refers to the creation of some degree of an effective and acceptable combination of the two domains, work and family (Thorntwhaite, 2004). Work-family balance has been a commonly used term, however recent research has seen a shift to recognise family as only one aspect of a worker’s non-work life (Warren, 2004). Whereas work-family balance encompasses work and home, particularly dependent children (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005), work-life balance tends to be broader in scope, encompassing numerous domains (Warren, 2004). Cummins (1996) identified over 150 different life domains including financial, leisure and security etc, however, the central tenet of this research project will be on work family issues.

Failure to balance work and family has been shown to have negative physical and psychological effects on both men and women (Vaananan, Kevin, Ala-Mursula, & Pentti, 2004). Studies have shown that employees who experience conflict between work and family domains have higher rates of sickness and absenteeism, higher instance of fatigue and sleep complaints, higher levels of stress and life dissatisfaction, and heavy alcohol use (Frone, Russel, & Cooper, 1997; Vaananen et al., 2004; van Hooff, Geurts, Kompier, & Taris, 2006). Thus, achieving harmony between paid work and non-work activities and responsibilities is critical to employee well-being.

Work-family balance has been described in the literature as having both positive and negative elements (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). The negative view, or absence of work-family balance, is often referred to as work-family conflict, spillover or interference (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). Conflict between work and family has been represented in the literature as a two-way phenomenon whereby work interferes with family (WIF) and family interferes with work (FIW) (Gutek et al., 1991). Family to work interference occurs when family related responsibilities hinder work performance, for example a sick child may prevent a parent from attending work. Work to family interference occurs when work responsibilities hinder duties within the family.
unit, such as when a parent is required to do overtime, preventing them from carrying out family related duties. In contrast to conflict, the positive side of the work-family balance equation is referred to in recent research as work-family enrichment and is explicated by Greenhaus and Powell (2006, p. 73) as being where “experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role”, with the two roles being work and family. Work-family enrichment, although referred to using other terms in earlier research (e.g., positive spillover, enhancement, facilitation) (Hanson, Hammer, & Colton, 2006; Hill, 2005; Wadsworth, 2003), is a relatively recent theoretical concept. A seminal paper by Greenhaus and Powell (2006) draws on role accumulation theories (Voydanoff, 2001) to suggest that employees who participate in both work and family roles can experience greater well-being than if they only participate in one of those roles. They go further to suggest that positive experiences in one role can buffer employees from negative experiences and enhance experience in their other role.

Salient themes in the work-family balance literature that purport to influence the integration of paid work and non-work responsibilities include gender roles, occupational category and status, workplace structures and relationships, and technology. These work-family aspects may be associated with either work-family conflict or work-family enrichment or both. The abovementioned themes are summarised below.

**Occupational Roles/Status and Work-family Balance**

Men and women have historically engaged in different roles in the home and in paid work. Traditionally women have tended to the household duties, whilst the men engage in paid work (Lingard & Francis, 2005). There has been increased participation of women (particularly mothers) in the paid labour force in recent years, with over 55 per cent of women now in paid work, however many of these women are in part-time or casual work and still do a majority of the domestic work regardless of work status (Whittock, 2002: ABS, 2006). In 2003, fathers were more likely to be employed than mothers (91 per cent and 61 per cent respectively), and employed full-time than mothers (84 per cent and 25 per cent respectively) (ABS, 2006).

Workers in manual occupations, casual/part-time work or lower skilled jobs, struggle more than other occupational groups to balance work and family, often because they have less control over the location and timing of their work (Hill, Martinson, Ferris, & Baker, 2004; Warren, 2004). Much of the work-family balance research over the past 20 years has focused on high-skilled managerial and professional occupations (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Frone & Rice, 1987; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003; Lyness & Kropf, 2005; Saltzstein, Ting, & Saltzstein, 2001), with very little attention given to lower-skilled or manual workers. Manual occupations, such as craftsmen, operatives and labourers (Weaver, 1975), often have a rigid work schedules and/or are shift-workers. Lambert (1990) proposes that having the autonomy to choose work hours makes it easier to meet family responsibilities and can lead to a greater level of enjoyment in family life. Work-family balance is also seen as more difficult to achieve for working class families as they may not have the income to afford goods or services that can aid in achieving this balance, for example external childcare (Barnett, Del Campo, Del Campo, & Steiner, 2003).
Workplace Structures and Relationships

In response to increasing rhetoric about work-family balance and changing workforce participation trends, many organisations have developed and implemented both formal and informal policies and procedures. The range of policies available and the degree to which they are utilised by employees, varies considerably across organisations (Bardoel, Tharenou, & Moss, 1998; Bond, 2004; Hyman & Summers, 2004). Factors that have been found to affect the development, implementation and use of work-family balance policies include; gender composition of the workforce, parental versus non-parental status of employees, the extent of unionisation in the workforce, and occupation category (Bardoel & Moss, 1999). With the influx of women into the paid workforce and because they continue to do the majority of the household duties and childcare, is it mainly women who take up family friendly policies within their workplace (Whittock, Edwards, McLaren, & Robinson, 2002). In general, the work-family balance literature suggests that positive workplace structures and policies decrease work-family conflict and lead to improved psychological outcomes (Brough, O'Driscoll, & Kalliath, 2005; Saltzstein et al., 2001).

The nature of workplace relationships has also been found to affect an employee’s level of work-family balance. Research suggests that family-friendly policies must be offered in conjunction with supervisor support and encouragement from top management to be effective (Glass & Estes, 1997; Raabe & Jessner, 1988). Employees are often not willing to utilise the family-friendly policies and practices of their workplace if they feel it will jeopardise their chance of promotion, their work assignments, or their job security (Glass & Estes, 1997). Additionally, coworker support and support by supervisees have also been found to affect the level of work-family balance achieved by employees (Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziema, & Lyness, 2006).

A meta-analysis by Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaren (2006) of 38 work-family studies in the area of family-friendly work environments and work-family conflict, found that a family-friendly work culture (defined as a perception by employees that their organisation supports work-life integration) was most likely to reduce work-family conflict. The meta-analysis also found weak negative correlations between supervisor support and work-family conflict and also between coworker support and work-family conflict. Finally, findings from this study suggest that individual family-friendly policies tend to be more effective in reducing work-family conflict when they are not used in isolation, but are combined with other family-friendly measures. Thus, when attempting to facilitate work-family balance for employees, organisations should not take a narrow, tunnel-vision approach, but offer a wide range of alternatives that can be combined in various ways to cater to individual’s needs (Mesmer-Magnus & Viswesvaran, 2006).

Role of Technology

The role of technology in contributing to the work-family interface has been debated in the literature with some studies suggesting that the use of information and communication technology benefits flexible work scheduling, particularly for the purpose of raising children. Other researchers suggest that it is this same technology that blurs the lines between work and home, making employees contactable and able to work 24/7,
often leading to work overload (Golden, Veiga, & Simsek, 2006; O'Connor, 2005). Types of technology being utilised by employees in an attempt to balance work and family include personal computers, laptops, mobile phones, instant messaging, email, voicemail, personal digital assistants and pagers (Gurvis & Patterson, 2005). These discussions of technology as a ‘double-edged sword’ in efforts to achieve work-family balance are consistent with the dialogical theories of work-family conflict and work-family enrichment. That is, technology is recognised, across the literature to have the potential to contribute to conflict as well as to enrich the integration of paid work and other life domains.

Work-family balance and the media: What is the evidence so far?

To date, empirical investigations into how work-family balance themes are communicated to audiences via the mass media are very scarce indeed. Yet the influence of such themes, as demonstrated above, are likely to be significant and pervasive. Research investigating work-family balance themes using the media of film are limited to an investigation of gender roles, family or couple depiction and relationships, the elderly, and occupations. Furthermore, they are often limited in scope to Disney animated films or G-rated films as the premise for their sample. Although Disney films and G-rated films feature prominently in top grossing film lists, they are by no means the only ones to be viewed by large audiences. The following section identifies films studies previously undertaken in the area.

An investigation of gendered themes has been a consistent focus of investigation in many previous studies. A general consensus across these studies is that the number of men outweighs the number of women depicted in films. Hoerrner (1996), Hannon (1997) and Roberson et al. (2007), whose samples all consisted of Disney animated films, suggest that this domination of male characters in films is at a ratio of two to one or higher. Tanner et al. (2003) explored further areas of gender in Disney films and revealed that in 58.3 percent of films, the mother was portrayed as the primary caregiver. In this study, fathers were depicted as controlling and aggressive in over half of the films.

Relationships was a central tenet of a study by Tanner et al. (2003) who explored the depiction of couples and families in 26 animated Disney Films. Findings indicate fathers maintained an elevated status, while mothers tended to be marginalised and that relationships between couples often contained gender-based power discrepancies. Traditional family structures were found in almost one third of the films (30.8 percent) examined in Tanner et al.’s study, with alternative family structures being found in 61.5 percent of films. Films depicting single parent families made up 38.5 percent of the sample. Wynns and Rosenfeld (2003), also using Disney films, examined the nature of father-daughter relationships and found that in each film, the father was portrayed as inept.

A program undertaking current research on gendered roles in the media is See Jane ("See Jane," 2006), whose primary focus is on children aged 11 years and under. The program claims to have undertaken “the most in-depth content analysis of popular G-rated movies ever conducted”, with a sample size of 101 top-grossing films. Findings from one report
(Kelly & Smith, 2006c) suggest 93.1 percent of the films were gender imbalanced, with 75% of characters being male. Another important finding was the minimal change in percentage of male domination in films over time. Further, male characters were depicted as predominantly white, more physically aggressive than female characters, and infrequently shown as part of a marriage or committed relationship (Kelly & Smith, 2006b). Analysis of occupations revealed that both male and female characters engaged in gender stereotypical occupations. Women are shown mostly in clerical or secretarial jobs, whilst men are reported mostly in white collar occupations, however the report does not indicate the level of the white-collar job. Males were more likely to be seen engaging in paid work than females (55.2 and 48.2 percent respectively), however far fewer women were actually depicted as employed due to the male domination of the films (Kelly & Smith, 2006a). Whilst the research is recent and delves into various work-family aspects, the G-rated film sample is a limitation of research from the “See Jane” program.

O’Brien (2002) investigated the way in which Walt Disney has changed the storyline of four Disney movies over time. The findings of this study provide an effective way to summarise previous research. O’Brien (2002) suggests that although changes have been made to the films to make them more appealing to today’s society, they are still lagging behind in areas such as women’s roles. The films are criticised for their conservatism and female oppression, continuing to portray women in traditional roles and being set in a patriarchal society. In summary, film studies to date which have examined work-family themes have generally been restricted to gender, occupations and relationships. This study will extend research in this field to include a range of additional work-family themes.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

The work-family balance literature suggests two relevant theoretical frameworks to explore the visual texts used for this study. The first is the two-way work-family conflict framework which comprises work interference with family (WIF) and family interference with work (FIW) (Gutek et al., 1991). The second is a work-family enrichment framework which suggests “experiences in one role improve the quality of life in the other role” (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Utilising both frameworks permits exploration of both the negative (conflict) and positive (enrichment) work-family balance themes. Further, Jauss’ (1982) theory of the Horizons of Expectations will be used to inform filmmakers of the extent to which work-family themes portrayed in movies are stereotypical and to inform audiences in the way they approach films (e.g., with a healthy scepticism). Although Jauss’ theory was developed in relation to literary texts, this study will allow for some reflection on the utility of this theory in relation to visual texts.

**Research Questions**

No known study to date has attempted to conduct a large scale analysis of how a wide variety of work-family balance issues are portrayed to audiences in recent feature-length films. Thus, the overarching research question formulated from the literature gap is:

How are work-family balance themes portrayed in recent feature-length films?

Pauline Burton Queensland University of Technology 8
More specific questions have been formulated utilising the ubiquitous issues arising in work-family balance literature.

1. Do workers in manual occupations, lower skilled jobs, or casual / precarious work, struggle more than other occupations in balancing paid work and unpaid family commitments?
2. To what extent are paid and unpaid roles gendered?
3. When and how does work to family, and family to work conflict or enrichment occur?
4. How do workplace structures (e.g. pay, organisational policies) and workplace relationships (e.g. managerial support) impact on the nexus between work and family?
5. How does technology (e.g. computers and mobile phones) impact on work-family balance?

Research Significance
The proposed research is innovative and important for a number of reasons. Firstly the research will make a substantial contribution to the understanding of how work-family balance is portrayed, via films, to audiences. For example, the findings will contribute to:

1. Notions about the nature of work and family life in terms of what is normative and socially acceptable / desirable
2. Appropriate gender roles in relation to work and home
3. Understanding of how younger audiences learn about different occupations and the conditions associated with them
4. The structures (pay, work hours) and relationships (negotiation, friendships) associated with paid work
5. The role technology plays in the ability to balance work and family responsibilities

Methods
The research questions were explored via qualitative methodology which is appropriate when a better understanding of human/social activities is needed (Collis & Hussey, 2003) as is the case for this study. A primarily deductive approach was taken to answer the research questions whereby the research starts with a theory, which is then tested or measured with data that is collected (Mason, 2002).

Sample
The study used a population sample obtained from The Australian Film Commission, a Commonwealth Government sponsored body responsible for reporting on film and DVD statistics. Collis and Hussey (2003) suggest a population sample is appropriate when the population is not too large, which is applicable for this study. The population is 40 films from the highest grossing movies and DVD rentals between 2000 and 2005 (AFC, 2007). The time-frame was considered sufficient to provide more than just a brief snapshot of
themes, while ensuring the sample would be in easily accessible DVD format. The population was further narrowed by reading each movie synopsis and limiting the sample to synopses describing at least one parent and one dependent child as central to the storyline.

Table 1 - List of Movies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Release date of movie</th>
<th>Movie</th>
<th>Release date of movie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Beauty</td>
<td>26/1/2000</td>
<td>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</td>
<td>24/10/2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheaper by the Dozen</td>
<td>8/1/2004</td>
<td>Signs</td>
<td>15/8/2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daddy Day Care</td>
<td>26/6/2003</td>
<td>Spanglish</td>
<td>17/2/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr Dolittle 2</td>
<td>5/7/2001</td>
<td>The Day After Tomorrow</td>
<td>27/5/2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lantana</td>
<td>4/10/2001</td>
<td>The Pacifier</td>
<td>24/3/2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for Alibrandi</td>
<td>4/5/2000</td>
<td>The Sixth Sense</td>
<td>7/10/1999*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me, Myself and Irene</td>
<td>22/6/2000</td>
<td>Whale Rider</td>
<td>8/5/2003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* DVD release date in 2000

Data Collection and Analysis
Films record passing events and can be used as permanent resources (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Accessing films is an efficient means of data collection as films are available to the general public through the many video retail outlets around the country. Secondary data collection is often less expensive than primary data collection and can usually be obtained faster (Fay, 1997).

Data analysis was undertaken qualitatively, utilising variations of content analysis (Rose, 2001). Coding was completed in Excel with the coding framework developed from the work-family literature and theoretical frameworks, though emergent themes were also found. Specific a-priori codes were gender, occupation, division of paid and unpaid work, work to family and family to work conflict and interference, workplace structures and relationship, and technology.
Due to the potential subjectivity of coding, two raters were used to code the films. Interrater reliability is a crucial element to this study as reliable data is found to exist when multiple raters agree on its meaning (Hair, Babin, Money, & Samouel, 2003). More than one third of the films were watched by both raters. Raters met on a regular basis until agreement was reached on what themes were considered relevant to coding and the actual coding of the films in relation to both the a priori codes and emergent themes.

Limitations
The study is limited to work-family balance and does not take into consideration other relevant work-life balance issues (see broader literature). It was decided to concentrate on work-family issues for this study as the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) suggests that over 71% of households are family households.

The sample did not include less mainstream films (“alternative”), which may be less conservative in their depiction of work-family balance themes. English language films only were chosen due to time and budgetary restraints. In regards to generalisability, the study only included films that were highly grossing in Australia and therefore results could not be generalised to other countries. Similar government supplied lists of top grossing films in other countries will be obtained and cross-checked for similarities to hopefully allow generalisation to countries found to watch the same films.

Findings

Gendered Roles
In 45 percent of the films, the family central to the storyline was portrayed as being a single parent family for all or part of the film. In 95 percent of films where a mother was present in the family, there was explicit or implicit information that the mother carried out unpaid work (e.g. domestic duties or childcare). However in films when fathers were present, the extent to which they were depicted carrying out unpaid work was substantially less at 43 percent. There were even derogatory comments when men were seen to be carrying out domestic unpaid work. For example, in Cheaper By the Dozen when Tom’s friend Shake called him a “Pansy house husband” and in Daddy Day Care when asked by Peggy if he thought men could do everything women can do, the man that inspecting the day care for his child replies “No…its unnatural, a little bit icky”.

In films where the family central to the storyline had a father, that father was seen to engage in paid work in all but one of the films (Signs). This is not the case with mothers, whereby only two thirds of mothers were depicted as engaging in paid work in films where there was enough information to make this determination. Mothers were regularly seen carrying out unpaid domestic chores. For example, the films Bend it Like Beckham, Charlie and Chocolate Factory, Stuart Little 1 and 2, The Stepford Wives, My Big Fat Greek Wedding and Mean Girls, depicted the mothers doing the cooking for the family or cleaning up after a meal. In Charlie and Chocolate Factory, the mother was observed mopping the floor and Ladder 49 depicted the mother doing the dishes. Washing the

1 Please note, at time of writing, analysis is ongoing and the results presented are preliminary only.
clothes was done by the mother in *Stuart Little 1*, and *Elf* and *Ladder 49*, portrayed the mothers doing or unpacking the groceries. Far fewer instances of men carrying out unpaid domestic chores were apparent. When single father families were the family central to the storyline, the father was depicted carrying out chores. For example, in *Billy Elliot* and *Save the Last Dance*, the fathers were depicted doing or having done grocery shopping. *Daddy Day Care* and *Cheaper by the Dozen* were the exceptions to the gendered stereotypical depiction of domestic duties and showed the fathers of two-parent families doing numerous household chores, for example cooking and cleaning.

*Occupations*

Males were most commonly depicted in high skilled professional or executive jobs (44 percent of the time) and even though women were seen in these types of jobs 59% of the time, the quantity of women in these jobs was less than men as the number of women for which an occupation was not able to be identified was greater. No women were identified as being manual workers, tradesmen or emergency services workers, whereas men were depicted as manual or trade workers in 17 percent of films and as emergency services workers in 7.5 percent of films. The only clear portrayal of a non-stereotypical gender role was in the film *Daddy Day Care*, when Charlie starts his own day care facility.

*Work-family conflict*

Work-family conflict was a theme commonly depicted across the majority of films. Instances of work interfering with family were more prevalent in the films than family interfering with work (92.5 and 55 percent of films respectively). Many instances of one parent, usually the father, working long hours and cutting into family time were evident in the films. *Cheaper by the Dozen* depicts Tom being 45 minutes late to pick his children up from school due to work commitments. Tom works such long hours that one of his children says “at least we get to see you on TV”. Work is also depicted as interfering with home in a financial manner such as in *Double Jeopardy*. Nick faked his own death and had his wife sent to prison to avoid law suits by investors that would send the family broke. Serious consequences were evident in some films when work spilled over into family life. For example, the previous example in *Double Jeopardy* and also in *Ladder 49* when Jack dies at work, leaving behind a wife and two young children.

*Work-family enrichment*

Fewer definitive instances of work family enrichment were evident in the films than those depicted work-family conflict. Further, where themes showing work-family conflict were very obvious in the dramatisation, situations where work-family enrichment occurred were more subtle. An example of work-family enrichment whereby positive experiences in the work domain enhance the family domain was portrayed in *Cheaper by the Dozen*. When the parents in this movie, Tom and Kate, return to their previous satisfying jobs, the children, who had been in turmoil, calmed down and were happy. Family to work enrichment, whereby positive experiences in the family domain buffer the person or family from negative aspects of the work domain, were seen in *Billy Elliot*. When Billy was accepted into ballet school (a positive experience in the family domain), much of the stress and tension associated with his father and brother being out of work related to a mining strike, was dissolved.
Technology

The impact of technology of work-family balance was portrayed in some circumstances as positive, particularly in aiding flexibility in the timing and location of work, and in other circumstances as negative, especially lengthening the hours of work. However, analysis so far suggests that the role of technology, as portrayed in the films, was more negative (24/7 contact) than positive (flexibility). Examples of films where technology was depicted as facilitating work-life balance was *The Incredibles*, where Bob regularly shuts himself away in his office to work on his computer while the everyday chaos of family goes on in the rest of the house, and in *Santa Clause 2*, where Scott is cloned by a science fictional machine so that he can simultaneously be at home engaged with his family as well as at work. On the other hand, technology upsetting the balance between work and home was much more prevalent and included central characters receiving work calls whilst at home (*Cheaper by the Dozen, Daddy Day Care*, and *Freaky Friday*) and working very long hours on a computer at home, before or after a full day at work (*Daddy Day Care, Elf*). Finally, although not identified in the literature, technology was also found, in some films to contribute to employees losing their jobs. For example in *Maid in Manhattan*, Marissa was dismissed when a surveillance camera filmed her trying on hotel guest’s clothing. In *Charlie and Chocolate Factory*, a retrospective narrative describes a situation where Charlie’s father lost his job at a toothpaste factory when machines were brought in to replace the workers. However, later in the movie, the complex relationship between technology and unemployment became apparent when Charlie’s father was reinstated at the factory as a technician to repair the machine that had previously taken his job.

Discussion

Findings from this study suggest that the majority of recent-release films are reinforcing the traditional work-family stereotypes. Fathers are invariably depicted as engaging in full-time paid work, whereas mothers are often shown in part-time jobs which they ‘fit’ around household duties and childcare. Numerous films portrayed mothers without any paid working role, but as full-time, stay-at-home parents executing domestic duties. These findings in relation to the domestic division of labour are consistent with the ‘reality’ of the work-family literature which indicates that mothers frequently engage in part-time or casual work to help balance work and family, and that when they do engage in full-time paid work, the majority of unpaid domestic duties are also performed by the mother.

The portrayal of the family unit in the study films seems to have moved beyond the traditional stereotype. In 45 percent of the films, the family central to the storyline is portrayed as being a single parent family for all or part of the film. This figure is more than double the actual single parent families in Australia (ABS, 2006b). The depiction of single parent families, with all their trial and hardships, almost as often as nuclear families (mother, father and progeny), may be related to the greater potential for dramatisation in these family types. The extent to which films depict single parent versus nuclear families achieving work-family balance, is currently being explored.
Occupational analysis also revealed some findings consistent with the literature. Only male film characters were depicted in stereotypically male-dominated occupations, for example in fire-fighting or mining occupations. In contrast, only female characters were depicted in roles seen as traditional for women, such as hotel maid. This characterisation reinforces the notion to audiences that even if you choose to engage in an occupation that is traditionally dominated by the other gender, you may not perform it satisfactorily. If audiences perceive they may fail if choosing a stereotypically gendered occupation, it may prevent them from doing so.

Applying Jauss’ Horizon of Expectation theory to gendered roles and occupations in the study films reveals that filmmakers are not altering their normative notions of work-family balance. Generally, filmmakers are not increasing their level of acceptable challenge in relation to work-family expectations and therefore depiction of work-family themes in films remains status quo. By making parents aware of the characterisation of gender and occupations in films, it will encourage them to approach films with a healthy skepticism. In particular, parents may like to watch films with their children and discuss gendered themes. Parents would then be proactive in ensuring today’s children are challenging their Horizon of Expectations, contributing to a dismantling of stereotypes.

The prevalence of work-family conflict across films suggests that experiencing conflict between work and family is a normative and/or acceptable situation for families. Significantly higher instances of work interfering with family than family interfering with work implies that work is the domain that takes priority, often at the expense of family commitments. Many instances of parents missing, or being late for family commitments such as school plays, school interviews, or picking up children from school, are evident in the films. Intentional or not, this may send messages to children that they are not as important or valued as much as paid work. These negative messages can change the perception and behaviour of children as in the media influence/violence literature.

Work family enrichment, although often subtly depicted, was present in several films. Work-family enrichment is a relatively new area of academic enquiry in the work-family literature and development of the associated theoretical framework seems set to continue. The example of work-family enrichment in Cheaper by the Dozen, explained above, indicates that enrichment not only occurs for the person concerned, but can have a flow-on effect to other members of the family. Tom and Kate not only enriched their own lives, but also that of their children. Being aware of the positive impacts that work-family enrichment can have on all members of the family may influence parents to make more informed work-family choices. Parents can do this by considering whether the choice they make, will also benefit or enhance the other domains of their life.

The paradoxical effects of technology on the work-family interface were consistent with the literature. Technology was depicted in the films as affecting work-family balance in both a positive and negative way, with negative outcomes being more prevalent. Mobile phones were the most common form of technology and were consistently seen facilitating the interruption of family activities. These dramatisations, therefore inform employers that it is considered normative to be contacting employers when they are not in
attendance at the workplace. By making employees aware of how technology is being portrayed to employers via the films, the employees can make educated decisions on the use of technology. For example, an employee might choose to let their mobile phone go to voice mail after work hours or they might divert all calls to the person who is on-call.

In conclusion, Work-life balance has the potential to affect many facets of psychological and physical well-being. Therefore, it is important to understand the factors affecting the degree of work-life balance achieved. The wide reaching impact of media influence is an important contextual factor in understanding society’s perceptions in relation to normative work-life balance. This study has extended current research on the depiction of work-family balance themes in recent-feature length films, by incorporating a range of additional themes and utilising a top-grossing film sample. Findings from this study can be used to inform filmmakers as to the extent of stereotypical themes that are being included in films. This may encourage them to challenge their Horizon of Expectation and move beyond what is traditional. Findings can also be used to inform parents as to what messages are being given to children. Parents can then take it upon themselves to approach films with a healthy scepticism and discuss work-family themes from the films with their children. The application of Jauss’s (1982) theory of the Horizons of Expectations, although developed in relation to literary texts, seems to also apply to visual media. By challenging this horizon, parents and filmmakers alike can work towards breaking down the stereotypical portrayal of the work-family themes in films.
References


Wadsworth, L. L. (2003). The application of role-identity salience to the study of social support and work-family interaction. ProQuest Information & Learning, US.