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Religious coping and maternal work-conflict: uncovering the pathways to well-being

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ABSTRACT

Most studies examining work-family conflict have utilized quantitative methodologies, which do not provide sufficient narrative information about participants' experiences. This qualitative descriptive study describes both the religious and non-religious coping strategies employed by Twelve ($N = 12$) Conservative Protestant Working Mothers with school-aged children to manage work-family conflict. The CPWM shared their experiences of how they found balance and well-being. Two research questions guided this study: How do Conservative Protestant Working Mothers with school-aged children describe their experiences of work-family conflict when transitioning between the work and home environments? How do Conservative Protestant Working Mothers with school-aged children describe the coping strategies they use to reduce or resolve work-family conflict? Prayer was found to be a coping strategy used by all of the mothers in this study, it helped to reduce their stress levels and enhance their emotional well-being.

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Introduction

As more women with children enter the workforce, it is crucial for social workers to understand the intersectionality of spirituality and religion among working mothers. A national study by the Selzler et al. (2020) found that 86% of U.S. adults considered themselves spiritual, while Kim et al. (2022) reported that 63% identified with a religious affiliation. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2018, two-thirds of employed women were working mothers, and approximately 23.5 million had children under the age of 18 (Christnacht & Sullivan, 2020). Working mothers experience additional stressors as they navigate the boundaries between work and home environments. There remains a need to explore effective strategies for managing work-family conflict to reduce emotional and psychological distress, as well as to better understand their lived experiences through qualitative research methods. While previous studies have

examined work-family conflict among Protestant mothers, these studies predominantly used quantitative methods, limiting the ability to capture the specific coping strategies participants employed to address their stressors.

Research on work-family issues and religion remains limited (May & Reynolds, 2018). Studies that have examined work-family conflict and religion have predominantly employed quantitative methodologies. Religion has been found to serve as an effective coping strategy in managing difficult situations (Gallagher et al., 2013). Much of the research on the potential benefits of religion has focused on conservative Protestants (Civettini & Glass, 2008; Glass & Levchak, 2014; Greeley & Hout, 2006). This study builds on the work of May and Reynolds (2018) by offering a qualitative narrative that explores the experiences of Protestant working mothers and the coping strategies they use to manage work-family conflict.

Reason studying conservative Protestant mothers

According to the most recent Religious Landscape Study, Conservative Protestants represent the largest percentage (25.4%) of Christians in the United States, with 20.8% of the population identifying as Catholic, and 14.7% identifying as Mainline Protestants (2015). May and Reynolds (2018) conducted a quantitative study examining work-family conflict among women from three religious groups (Conservative Protestant, Catholic/Orthodox, Mainline Protestant) and those with no religious affiliation. Their findings indicated that Conservative Protestant participants reported less work-family conflict compared to women from other religious groups and those without a religious affiliation. However, due to the quantitative nature of their methodology, May and Reynolds (2018) were unable to provide contextual data explaining why Conservative Protestant women experienced less work-family conflict. This study expands on their research by offering a descriptive narrative of Conservative Protestant women and the coping strategies they use to address work-family conflict.

Working mothers and coping strategies

Some working mothers have successfully managed work-life balance without experiencing increased psychological or emotional distress by using positive coping strategies. However, previous research has primarily employed quantitative approaches, which have not provided detailed descriptions of the specific coping strategies these mothers used to effectively manage work-family conflict. Van Tongeren et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study that found positive religious coping strategies were associated with a sense of

purpose and significance, with aspects of religion and spirituality being used to cope with the challenges of work-family conflict.

Liang et al. (2016) found that employees with high levels of spirituality coped better when experiencing psychological breaches at work. Similarly, Tejada (2015) reported that in harmful work cultures, an individual's spiritual well-being acted as a protective factor and an effective coping strategy. However, these studies did not offer a qualitative narrative from women, which could have provided insights into why the coping strategies were effective.

There remained a need to better understand the specific coping strategies employed by working mothers to reduce psychological and emotional distress and how they achieved work-life balance. This study explored the lived experiences of 12 Conservative Protestant Working Mothers (CPWM) and examined both religious and non-religious coping strategies used to address work-family conflict. Additionally, it presents the narratives of these CPWMs, offering unique insights into the specific methods they employed to manage work-family conflict.

Explore importance of problem & study

It was not known how Conservative Protestant Working Mothers (CPWM) with school-aged children described their experiences of using religious coping strategies when transitioning between the work and home environments to reduce or resolve work-family conflict. The lack of adequate coping strategies during the transition between home and work environments causes significant stress for many working mothers, negatively affecting their health, relationships, and careers. This study described the religious and non-religious coping strategies used by CPWM with school-aged children and provides more insight on the resiliency skills they utilized.

Research is beginning to provide more insights on the strategies and resources working mothers use to combat work-family conflict. However, relatively little contextual data is available to explain why Conservative Protestant women exhibit better coping mechanisms when facing work-family conflict (May & Reynolds, 2018). The results of this qualitative phenomenological study are important as they help fill a gap in the current literature. Most existing studies on work-family conflict and balance have relied on quantitative methodologies.

Theoretical framework & research questions

This study explored the different coping strategies used by CPWM who experienced work-family conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) explained that work-family conflict exists when simultaneous and conflicting demands

are made from both the home and work domains. The strength of the borders separating and protecting the home and work domains determines how much effort and strength is needed to transition between the home and work environments. According to Clark (2000), psychological borders are the rules individuals establish that shape their patterns of thinking and behavior, determining when certain emotions are appropriate in one domain but not the other. Physical borders, such as walls, delineate spaces where work can be done with minimal interference from family, and vice versa. Temporal borders define how time is allocated between work and family responsibilities (Clark, 2000).

The Work-Family Border Theory was used as the theoretical foundation for this study. According to the theory, individuals are daily border crossers between the domains of their family and work (Clark, 2000). The strength of the physical, temporal, and psychological borders determines whether a work-family conflict episode will occur (Clark, 2000). When the cultures of the work and home environments are similar, the borders separating these domains tend to be weak, resulting in fewer episodes of work-family conflict. However, when there are significant cultural differences between the work and home domains, stronger borders are necessary to reduce conflict (Clark, 2000). The strength of these borders also influences the quantity and quality of communication shared between the home and work environments.

Literature review

A comprehensive review of the literature indicated that women continued to experience stressors related to episodes of work-family conflict (Berger, 2018). May and Reynolds (2018) found that Conservative Protestant women reported less work-family conflict compared to women in other religious groups and non-religious women. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) were among the first to conceptualize and develop a theoretical framework to explain work-family conflict. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) employed quantitative methodology to examine work-family balance and to identify how and why individuals experience conflict when managing roles and responsibilities in both the work and family domains.

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), found that individuals experienced work-family conflict when strain spilled from one domain into the other, and when behaviors in one domain were incompatible within the other, or due to time constraints. They identified several causes for this phenomenon, including the rise of dual-earning couples and quality of life concerns raised by employers (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This historical perspective on work-family conflict provided a foundation for examining the issue. Clark (2000) argued that although the work and home environments differ, they are not disconnected.

Daily episodes of work-family conflict are documented in previous literature, yet few studies provided qualitative contextual data of how religious coping strategies reduced or resolved work-family conflict episodes and experiences of role overload. For example, Hunter et al.'s (2019) study evaluated the number of boundary violations experienced by working women and found that both exhibited positive and negative reactions when transitioning between work and home. However, the study did not explore how positive coping strategies might reduce or resolve work-family conflict. Additionally, Duxbury et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study and found that family-role overload and total-role overload were significantly higher for women than for men. The women in their study also perceived greater stress from these roles compared to their male counterparts (Duxbury et al., 2018). The authors suggested that qualitative research was needed to better understand the impact of gender on these perceived stress and role-overload (Duxbury et al., 2018).

The need to understand types of coping strategies employed

Conservative Protestant women represent the largest group within the Protestant denomination (2015); however, relatively little is known about the coping strategies they use when transitioning between the work and home environments to reduce or resolve work-family conflict. May and Reynolds (2018) study identified that much can be learned from a qualitative analysis of data gathered from Conservative Protestant women who report low levels of work-family conflict. The intersection of work-family conflict, motherhood ideology, and religious coping remains an understudied phenomenon, despite evidence that women with families continue to report greater levels of stress than their husbands when working outside of the home (Duxbury et al., 2018).

Though there are increasing numbers of studies on religious coping and life stressors (Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013), very little contextual data are available on how women use their religious identity as a strategy to cope when transitioning between the home and work environments to reduce or resolve work-family conflict (May & Reynolds, 2018). One study conducted by Lee et al. (2017) conducted a study of 454 working mothers where they examined how the participants divided their time between work and home. The researchers found that mothers who spent more time at work experienced the highest levels of work-family conflict (Lee et al., 2017). However, the specific types of coping strategies used by the mothers were not explored in Lee et al.'s (2017) study, indicating a need for qualitative data on their experiences with work-family.

Additional studies support that working mothers have effectively used their personal and professional resources to reduce the negative consequences of work and family imbalances (French et al., 2018; Young & Schieman, 2018). However, how employees cope with work-family conflict and role overload

remains relatively unexamined in the literature (Kalliath & Kalliath, 2014). Though studies confirm that work-family conflict in both directions is higher for women than men when they choose to pursue a career and raise a family (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014; Shockley & Allen, 2015), very little is known about what working mothers do to reduce their stress levels (Duxbury et al., 2018) and increase their self-care practices (Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2018).

Religion as a coping strategy

For many women, religion serves as a way to cope with the demands and pressures of life. May and Reynolds (2018) compared perceptions of work-family conflict among Conservative Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic and Non-Religious women, finding that Conservative Protestant women reported the lowest levels of work-family conflict. According to May and Reynolds (2018) “more research will be needed to better understand the mechanisms behind the relationship between religious affiliation and work-family conflict” (p. 1818). Research conducted by Dugan and Barnes-Farrell (2018) identified a gap in the literature regarding the need to understand the role self-care has for women experiencing work-family conflict.

Several studies have used religious coping strategies to analyze or describe how individuals cope with life stressors (Dolcos et al., 2021; Krause & Pargament, 2018; Rainville, 2018). Krause and Pargament (2018) found that individuals who read the Bible to cope with stressful life events were more likely to rely on benevolent religious coping strategies. Moreover, those who rely on benevolent religious appraisals tend to be more hopeful about the future. Similarly, Rainville (2018) found religious service attendance served as a coping resource for individuals by providing a sense of continuity during negative life events, such as unemployment or the end of relationships. Dolcos et al. (2021) conducted a study with 203 participants using questionnaires and self-reported measures. They found that participants who used religious coping strategies were protected against the harmful effects of emotional distress and were able to maintain their emotional well-being.

Methodology

Research methodology design

A qualitative descriptive design was selected to address the problem statement and the research questions. This methodological approach describes the religious coping strategies used by CPWM when transitioning between the work and home environments to reduce and or resolve work-family conflict. Descriptive research according to (Nassaji, 2015; Nicoleau et al., 2016) is used to describe a phenomenon and

focuses on the “what rather than how or why something has happened” (p. 130). Similarly, Sandelowski (2000) asserts that the description in qualitative studies entails the “presentation of the facts in everyday language, offers a comprehensive summary of an event in everyday terms and uses language as a vehicle of communication (rather than an interpretive structure that must be read)” (p. 335).

A qualitative descriptive design was selected from among several possible qualitative methods. This design was chosen because the research inquiry aimed to describe the religious coping strategies employed by CPWM with responsibilities in both home and work environments. The study did not focus on a phenomenon in a single setting or consider a bounded entity, both of which are essential components of a case study design (Yin, 2014). One strength of a simple qualitative descriptive design is that “language is a vehicle of communication, not itself an interpretive structure that must be read” (Sandelowski, 2000, p.36). The data provided through semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to share their specific coping strategies used to combat work-family conflict. This research design was chosen to explore the different strategies used by CPWM and provide insight into this phenomenon while addressing a need in the existing literature.

Interview instrument

The principal researcher, a working mother, collaborated with subject matter experts to ensure the quality and appropriateness of the interview questions and to reduce possible biases. The interview questions were co-constructed with an expert panel that included individuals with terminal doctoral degrees in Marriage and Family Therapy, Psychology and Religious Studies. The interview instrument consisted of numerous questions that uncovered how participants described the different types of borders that separated their home life from their work life. For example, to gain an understanding of how they described physical borders, participants were asked “How often do you bring tasks from work home with you to complete (making work-related phone calls, checking e-mails, completing documentation, writing reports)?”

Another question the researcher asked participants was to describe their temporal borders “In what way does your work hours contribute to any situations with work – family conflict? (i.e. the time your kids have to be at school vs. the time you have to be at work).” Additional questions were constructed for participants to describe their psychological borders, such as: “what happens when you interact with your spouse or children in the same manner that you interact with your co-workers?”

Participants and sample selection

This study includes interview data from 12 Conservative Protestant Working Mothers living in Southwest Florida. The researcher employed a purposive sampling strategy by seeking referrals from organizational leaders and managers for individuals who met the study's criteria. According to Elo et al. (2014) purposive sampling is suitable when the researcher is interested in participants who have the best knowledge on the phenomenon. The snowball sampling strategy was considered after participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Snowball sampling involves asking participants for recommendations and is particularly useful when the researcher knows where the target population can be recruited due to their high visibility but may encounter difficulty accessing them (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The participants were interviewed either via video-conferencing technology or in private areas at their workplace.

According to Magilvy & Thomas (2009) the sample for a qualitative descriptive study is often smaller than in other qualitative designs and is conveniently and purposefully selected. The sample size can be as few as three to five people and as many as twenty. Participants in a qualitative study must have experienced the phenomenon, must be able to communicate with the researcher and be willing to tell their story. Furthermore, when the aim of the study is narrow, is supported by established theory with strong dialogue and is highly specific, the study will need the least number of participants (Malterud et al., 2016).

The principal researcher targeted recruitment of women who worked at social service agencies and met the following criteria: worked 32–40 hours, identified as a Conservative Protestant, resided in Southwest Florida, and had parental responsibility for at least 1 school-aged child. The researcher actively recruited 20 participants for the sample to account for attrition. This study gathered data from semi-structured interviews with 12 individuals and two focus groups, consisting of three and four participants respectively, to address the two research questions and confirm the initial themes developed from the interview data.

Recruitment and data collection

The principal researcher started data collection procedures after approval had been granted by the Grand Canyon University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher conducted an internet search of social service agencies in Hillsborough County, FL using the search terms “social service agencies Hillsborough County FL.” An e-mail describing the study and requesting site permission was sent to a point of contact on the company's website. The researcher contacted leaders via e-mail at varied social service agencies to request site authorization. The request included the purpose of the study, the

criteria necessary for participation, and a disclaimer of the anonymity of their workplace in both presentations and published documents.

Additionally, the researcher informed the leaders that data would not be collected during working hours or on site unless permission was granted. Leaders were also made aware that no recruitment of participants could occur until the researcher received approval from the University's IRB. Finally, the researcher informed the leaders of the organization that the outcome of the study would be shared with them and would be available to discuss strategies that might be helpful based on the data analysis.

The participants were recruited from two organizations in Southwest Florida. The principal researcher collaborated with the Human Resources Department designee on identifying the most efficient strategies to recruit, which included direct referrals to supervisors, list of e-mail addresses and/or contact information for women working in the organization, recommendations based on personal knowledge of employees, use of newsletters and/or e-blast.

Participants who were identified by their leaders of meeting inclusion criteria were emailed a recruitment letter requesting their permission to participate. The researcher reached out by telephone to those who responded to the e-mail and conducted a telephone screening. All participants signed an informed consent form. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews. Allowing the interviewees to describe the conflict they experienced when transitioning between the work and home environments.

The two focus groups were used to confirm and provide clarity on the candidate themes from the individual semi-structured interviews. Those who participated in interviews were asked to participate at a later date in a focus group. One focus group consisted of four participants while the other had three participants. Parker and Tritter (2006) stated that focus group discussions can uncover common issues all participants share regarding a specific topic. Unlike individual interviews, data from focus groups emphasize the interactions within the group, thus expanding the data to how a group collectively makes sense of the phenomenon (Redmond & Curtis, 2009). Researchers collecting data from focus groups can also observe how participants construct, express, defend and often make sense of the phenomenon being studied (Wilkinson, 1998).

Data analysis procedure

The interviews conducted by Zoom© were recorded. The face-to-face semi structured interviews were recorded using the Echo Smart Pen© and the Jitmo© recording device. The focus groups were recorded only with Zoom©.

The average length of the semi-structured interview was 1:03. This time included discussion time of the informed consent.

The researcher hand transcribed all semi-structured interviews. Completed transcriptions were emailed to the participants for review of accuracy and to confirm their statements. The approved interview transcripts were a total of 123 pages, single spaced in Times New Roman font size 12.

Coding the data and testing the reliability of codes

The researcher used a combination of manual and electronic coding to develop the code book through an open coding process. In phase one of the thematic analysis, the initial codes were developed employing meaningful text from participant responses on a spreadsheet designed by the researcher. Examples of meaningful text were specific strategies the participants used to cope with conflict, responses with religious significance, words that conveyed emotional experiences, responses based on the shared experiences of the participants and justifications for behaviors. The researcher typed the codes on a Microsoft Word© document.

Spreadsheets including the code, and the text associated in the code were used to test the reliability of the codes. The reliability of the codes were tested by reviewing the text associated with the codes in light of the theoretical framework, the definition of the religious and non-religious coping strategies and by comparing the narratives of the participants. Columns were added to the spreadsheet so the researcher could write or type the justification for the code being used. The notes compiled from testing the reliability of the codes were summarized and used to begin searching for the themes. The spreadsheet used to summarize the data was organized into broad categories that described coping strategies, how and why conflict occurred and consequences of transitioning between the home and work environments. These categories were the foundation for the initial themes. The researcher began thematic analysis by manually transcribing the individual interviews after they were uploaded from the recording devices onto the researcher's laptop.

The two research questions guiding this qualitative phenomenological study were:

RQ1: How do Conservative Protestant Working Mothers with school-aged children describe their experiences of work-family conflict when transitioning between the work and home environments?

RQ2: How do Conservative Protestant Working MothersCPWM with school-aged children describe the coping strategies they use to reduce or resolve work-family conflict?

The researcher used Braun and Clarke (2012) 6-phase thematic analysis as a guide to analyze the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis is “essentially a method for identifying and analyzing patterns in qualitative data” (p. 120). This researcher used a hybrid analysis approach for the focus groups to clarify, extend, or challenge the participants’ themes. The hybrid data analysis for the focus group included thematic analysis and constant-comparison analysis.

The researcher used the six stages of open coding to guide the coding process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The initial codes were developed manually from data extracted from interviews that were constructed using Excel Spreadsheet and visualizing data using poster boards prior to importing transcribed documents into the MAXQDA© software. The second step included checking the reliability of the codes. This was accomplished by testing the codes over time. Different methods were used over a 2–3-week period, to test and revise codes, which included revising codes using both manual and electronic coding methods and strategies through MAXQDA©.

The final step of thematic analysis was writing up the report. The researcher was confident that the themes represented the story the participants told about their experiences of managing work-family conflict while transitioning between the work and home environments while at the same time providing data to answer the research questions. The results of the thematic analysis combined with a constant comparison analysis of the focus group along with the analysis of the individual interviews provided a rich and thick description as well as a persuasive story about the data. The themes created as a result of the analysis of the data sets provided answers to the research questions while simultaneously providing a genuine representation of how the participants managed work-family conflict issues.

Lastly, the steps of the data analysis did not initially include using a constant comparison analysis. As the researcher engaged in the process of the analysis, the advantages of constantly comparing the data across all datasets became clear. The researcher garnered a deeper understanding of the stories being told by the participants and created a code book that reflected their experiences with managing work-family conflict.

Results

Descriptive findings

The mothers who participated in this study all worked full-time ($N = 12$), 32–40 hrs per week. Of the participants, 42% of them ($n = 5$) had one child, 33% ($n = 4$) had two children, 16% ($n = 2$) had four children, 4.5% ($n = 1$) had 3 children, and 4.5% ($n = 1$) had one child. Eighty-three percent of the mothers ($n = 10$) were married, while 17% ($n = 2$) were not married. Fifty percent of the

Table 1. Demographics of CPWM.

Factor	Percentage %
<i>Demographics</i>	
Denomination	
% Non-denominational	50
% Baptist	42
% Assemblies of God	>1
% Pentecostal	>1
Marital Status	
% Married	17
% Unmarried	83
Number of Children	
% 1 child	42
% 2 children	33
% 3 children	>1
% 4 children	17

mothers ($n = 6$) identified as non-denominational, 33% ($n = 4$) identified as Baptist, 8.5% ($n = 1$) identified as Pentecostal, and 8.5% ($n = 1$) identified as Assemblies of God. (see Table 1) provides a description of the participants.

Twelve participants completed individual semi-structured interviews, and seven of these twelve later participated in the two focus groups. Of the twelve semi-structured interviews, eight of them were conducted using Zoom® while the remaining four were conducted in a private office within the organization where they were employed. The first focus group consisted of four mothers and the second focus group consisted of three mothers. The goal of the original design for the focus group was for 3–5 participants. Therefore, the minimal participation requirement for the focus groups was met, despite the absence of two individuals who initially consented to participate in the focus groups.

Data collected from the two different focus groups that consisted of the Conservative Protestant Working Mothers (CPWM) from the individual semi-structured interviews was designed to explore how the phenomenon was experienced within a social context. The two focus groups were conducted virtually utilizing the zoom platform. Focus Group 1 consisted of 4 participants that lasted for one hour and forty-eight minutes and Focus Group 2 consisted of seven participants that lasted one hour and twenty-five minutes (see Table 2). Additionally, data collected from the focus group discussions allowed the researcher to observe how the CPWM constructed, expressed, defended, and often made sense of the phenomenon being studied (Wilkinson, 1998). Finally, data from focus group designs confirmed and provided clarity on the candidate themes from the individual semi structured interviews.

Table 2. Focus group data and transcription length.

Focus Group	Number of Participants	Interview Duration	Transcript Volume
1	4	1 hr 48 min	25
2	3	1 hr 25 min	20
Total	7	3 hr 13 min	45

Due to the two focus groups being conducted for the same study and being used to clarify, extend and/or challenge the candidate themes, the researcher used a hybrid analysis approach. The hybrid data analysis for the focus groups included thematic analysis and constant comparison analysis. According to Doody et. al (2013) “as focus group data are analyzed one focus group at a time, the researchers can use the multiple groups to assess whether the themes that emerge from one group also emerge from other groups” (p. 266).

Prior to starting the focus group interviews, the researcher discussed expectations, ground rules, and offered gratitude for their continued participation in the study. The researcher then re-reviewed the consent forms and reiterated issues of confidentiality. The CPWM were reminded of the purpose of the study and the procedure that would be followed. The researcher asked the participants to introduce themselves. The researcher followed the introduction with an introduction of the first candidate theme that was developed from the analysis of the individual semi-structured interviews. The participants shared their experiences regarding the theme and how the themes matched or did not match their personal experiences. The CPWM were asked for suggestions on changing the wording of each candidate theme. This process was repeated with each theme identified from the analysis of the individual interviews.

Identified themes

Three main themes emerged from the participant interviews that provide a better understanding and description of work-family conflict of CPWM and the coping strategies they employed. The three themes identified are: 1. Internal conflict within working moms between intensive motherhood ideology and ideal worker norms, 2. Religious and non-religious coping strategies provide relief from anxiety, and 3. They remained hopeful during times of chaos and confusion because of their use of religious and non-religious coping strategies. These themes provide a better understanding of how the CPWM explained work-family conflict and navigating between the two environments.

Theme 1 finding

The findings from this theme address research question 1. There is an internal conflict within working moms between intensive motherhood ideology and ideal worker norms. The participants provided numerous examples of how their attempts to adhere to the traditional notion of intensive motherhood ideology and ideal worker norms created situations where they made sacrifices and experienced consequences in both the home and work environments. Role identification in both the home and work environments were important to the mothers in this study. However, fulfilling their responsibilities as a mother was always their priority. They prioritized family over work. “My family is always

Table 3. Frequency table of theme 1 with direct quotes.

Code	# of Code Occurrences	# of documents	Exemplary Quotes
Consequences	46	11	So his cry for help or attention like our relationship just tarnished, we couldn't, look just alike, couldn't stand each other, so it really took a toll on my household and I had to step away because at the same time the demand was extremely high, you want me keep up with these kids, I don't mind, I love advocating for the children, but when I realize and took a step back and reflected, I had to really, I chose my family.
Work domain identification	29	12	Cause I've always worked with young women and that's always my passion, still gonna do that at some form or fashion, some kind of way, but always to help and make things better so moving over into quality improvement that was always my goal, come to learn and improve the programs we have here and see how I can help them grow and make them better.
Time-based conflict	20	10	And you might not be able to get it done uhm and you're exhausted. You try to get your brain not to work as much as you can, have some down time for some things do have to carry over into the work environment.
Sacrifices	13	7	So I guess the compromise was that they would let me leave and let me get my kids situated but the unfortunate part was I had to go back and somebody else was feeding my children dinner, giving them baths and doing the nightly routines I missed out on which is why I had to switch jobs and take a pay cut, so.

first and foremost. I always see it that I can't replace my family, but I can replace a job" was a statement from one of the CPWM. [Table 3](#) provides direct exemplary quotes from the CPWM that support Theme 1.

The CPWM in this study shared very few examples of being engaged in activities that were not related to work or their children. This thematic finding is significant because when mothers have available time and energy resources, they engage in self-care activities which decreases their stress (Dugan & Barnes-Farrell, 2018). However, the mothers in this study did not report spending time engaged in self-care activities. In those rare instances when the participants did engage in an activity that was unrelated to work or family, it was done inconsistently.

CPWM reported having no surplus of time on a weekday. One participant stated: "You might not be able to get it done uhm and you're exhausted. You try to get your brain not to work as much as you can, have some down time for some things you have to carry over into the work environment." Another CPWM stated "so I guess the compromise was that they would let me leave and let me get my kids situated but the unfortunate part was I had to go back and somebody else was feeding my children dinner, giving them baths and doing the nightly routines I missed out on which is why I had to switch jobs and take a pay cut, so."

The CPWM had a difficult time and was conflicted with trying to meet the demands of being a mother and a worker. One participant stated that she was unprepared for managing work-family conflict "that's definitely something I wasn't prepared for. Even though I knew I wanted to go back to work, I didn't realize one, how hard it would be to leave my baby and go back to work."

Eighty-three percent ($n = 10$) of the CPWM reported *Time-Based Conflicts*, where the most challenging conflicts to resolve. The CPWM felt they did not have enough time to fully meet the demands of both family and work environments. Their desire to reap the rewards of having a career and being a mother created an internal conflict for them. Conforming to the ideals of intensive motherhood and those of an ideal worker created stressful situations for them. All of the CPWM ($N = 12$) reported their career was important to their identity. During the focus group one CPWM shared that she coped with the multiple demands because she “believed women were created by God to be able to do all these things.” She also shared that the time-based conflicts were temporary because children grow up. The participants created many labels for this theme during the focus group.

The CPWM identified that time-based conflicts were significantly reduced due to workplace flexibility, being able to have technology at home to complete work tasks while away from the office or outside normal business hours. This type of work flexibility often allowed them to compensate for time with their family when work demands exceeded their normal expectations. Several of the participants expressed gratitude that they were able to complete work assignments and other work obligations outside of normal business hours or while at home without being penalized. One mother reported having a strong work border “I have a talk with my kids. Like Hey, I gotta get this done, I know you’re not feeling good, let me give you some medicine, I’ll make you some soup . . . you know I try to make them as comfortable as I can while still working.”

Additionally, all ($N = 12$) CPWM reported positive experiences, even referring to their jobs as “their calling” and they found meaning for their stressors and conflicts through their religious coping strategies. Their lives were indeed enriched because they divided their time between the work and home environments. These experiences of enrichment, according to the analysis of data, are due in part to the flexibility they have in doing work tasks at home if they choose to. Being able to take work home and complete tasks in their home environments decreased the stress levels of CPWM.

Theme 2 finding

The findings from theme 2 address the second research question. Religious and non-religious coping strategies provided relief from anxiety, when CPWM felt they could no longer influence the outcome, they gave their unresolved conflict to God. Five of the twelve (42%) CPWM reported they experienced *relief through divine conversations with God*, four (33%) stated they abdicated to God, gave their worries and cares to him. The majority ($n = 11$) of the CPWM reported that *prayer* helped them cope with the stress of managing the demands from their multiple roles and found it to be a positive coping strategy. Forty-two percent ($n = 5$) experienced God to be an *elixir for anxiety*, they found relief by turning their problems over to God, believing that he

would take care of them. *Active Coping* was used by one hundred percent ($N = 12$) of the CPWM. The CPWM reported responding to stress by using both religious and non-religious coping strategies. One CPWM stated “I can’t. you know what, It’ll work out, It’ll work out, so I was just trying to leave that worry I had going on and I was like, took a second, pray to myself, like Lord I know you are gonna fix this situation.” Another CPWM stated that “praying, trusting God, knowing that he is in control that he is going to guide me and he’s going to work it out for me in a way that I can’t foresee but it’s going to be ok.” Table 4 provides direct exemplary quotes from the CPWM that support Theme 2.

Theme 3 finding

The findings from this theme address the second research question. CPWM remained hopeful during times of chaos and confusion because of their use of religious and non-religious coping strategies. The CPWM in this study decreased the number of work-family conflict experiences using coping strategies that reduced their levels of stress. The use of religious coping strategies provided them with hope that their current reality was temporary. *Hope* was expressed when they shared the reassurance and comfort they derived from their relationship with God. One CPWM stated that she would “pray about it. I just try to let it go and let God. I know that there is no point in stressing or worrying about things I can’t change, that I don’t have any control over.” Hope was also expressed when they reflected on the gratitude, they had for the blessings they received while being in past seasons of chaos and confusion.

Planning was an additional coping strategy used by all ($N = 12$) CPWM to help them minimize the amount of chaos and confusion they experienced. Planning as a strategy was often used while being mindful of how God could influence a situation. This finding is significant because the coping strategies that were most used by the participants in this study to convey hopefulness was not solely related to their religious identity. Working mothers, regardless of their religious identification can experience the benefits of using positive

Table 4. Frequency table of theme 2 with direct quotes.

Code	# of Code Occurrences	# of documents	Exemplary Quotes
Relinquish Control	7	4	Pray about it. I just try to let go and let God. I know that there is no point in stressing or worrying about things I can’t change, that I don’t have any control over.
Relief Through Divine Conversations	6	5	Praying, praying trusting God, knowing that he is in control that he is going to guide me and he’s going to work it out for me in a way that I can’t foresee but it’s going to be ok.
Abdicate to God	3	3	Yes, it’s kinda one of those Jesus take the wheel situations
Elixir for Anxiety	6	5	I can’t. you know what, It’ll work out, It’ll work out, so I was just trying to leave that worry I had going on and I was like, took a second, pray to myself, like Lord I know you are gonna fix this situation

Table 5. Frequency table of theme 3 with direct quotes.

Code	# of Code Occurrences	# of documents	Exemplary Quotes
Provides Meaning	12	7	in Ecclesiastes it says that life has cycles. And one thing I realize is that there will come a cycle in my life that is going to be very bad, it hasn't come yet. But when it comes, I want to be prepared.
Provides Direction	14	8	So I'm at this place in my life for now, I don't believe everything anybody tells me anymore, I read (the bible) for myself I find out for myself.
Roadmap for Living	12	9	I really felt is that we are on a path and I don't know if that's in her but like kinda following and trusting God's path for us and I don't where that's if that's a thing in here or not.
Maintain Positive Outlook	8	7	So, just living in that and just growing in that and moving forward and just staying positive as possible is what you try to do.

reinterpretation and growth as demonstrated by this study. Reframing a challenging and difficult situation was found to be a helpful strategy in coping with work-family conflict.

One CPWM stated that “in Ecclesiastes it says that life has cycles. And one thing I realize is that there will come a cycle in my life that is going to be very bad, it hasn't come yet. But when it comes, I want to be prepared.” Another stated “I really felt is that we are on a path and I don't know if that's in her but like kinda following and trusting God's path for us and I don't where that's if that's a thing in here or not.”

Without sufficient and adequate coping skills, the manifestation of stressors from the demands from the home and work environments during a workday can contribute to a sense of hopelessness. The CPWM in this study created multiple personal labels for this theme based on the different coping strategies. “*Comfort*” and “*reassurance*” was used when seeking guidance and confirmation from God before making decisions related to their careers and families. Numerous examples were provided of how their conversations with God provided them with hope. Reminiscing on past blessings and believing they would continue to be blessed helped CPWM cope during times of chaos and confusion. The reinterpretation of a stressor was also noted as they discussed the challenges they encountered when trying to ensure they were physically and emotionally available for the children. During the focus group, the personal label related to this theme was “*growing pains*.” Table 5 provides direct exemplary quotes from the CPWM that support Theme 3.

Discussion, limitations, and recommendations

Discussion

There were various strengths the CPWM of this study demonstrated that assisted them in having positive work-life integration. Understanding how working mothers used both religious and non-

religious coping strategies of planning, praying, positive reinterpretations, and growth (reframing) and being hopeful during their stressful situations will assist social workers in their interactions with clients. The working mothers in this study consistently experienced simultaneous demands from the work and home environments while managing multiple demands yet were able to find solace and peace between the two.

Additionally, these mothers continued to be responsible for ensuring that their home environment was a place that their children could thrive and feel emotionally safe by habitually making their family a priority over their career. “My child comes before anything. You know, if I need to go to see the teacher, that’s what I’m going to do. I don’t care about y’all job” was what one participant stated about her children being her main priority. Although many organizations have created policies that support work flexibility, it is pivotal to change and redefine the narrative of the “ideal worker norms” to reduce the internal conflict experienced by working mothers.

The CPWM in this study rarely allowed their work duties to interfere with them, providing care and being emotionally available for their families. The use of non-religious coping strategies provided the participants with a sense of hope. Positive reinterpretation and growth were not defined as religious coping strategies, however there were numerous examples of how the participants redefined and reframed stressors as opportunities. Consistent with the non-religious coping strategy pattern, the participants expressed far more utilization of positive religious coping strategies than negative coping strategies. The application of useful and adaptive coping strategies is critical to the health and well-being of working mothers.

The experiences of role overload continued to prevail and plague many of the working mothers with school-aged children. These experiences included time pressures, volume of demands, multiple demands occurring in a short period of time, demands outside of their existing workload, familiar situations, and unexpected role overload that was unplanned. The data provided by the participants overwhelmingly suggested that the coping strategy of praying was helpful in reducing their stress levels. Participants reported that having conversations with God provided comfort, reassurance, and hope.

Consequently, it would be unreasonable to expect that all work-family conflict experiences would be resolved for working mothers. Although the participants in this study demonstrated that they were able to cope with many different stressors, there were experiences of unresolved conflict which caused frustrations, worries, and anxieties. Their use of religious and non-religious coping strategies provided them with the ability to stay focused, prevented them from acting impulsively, and from succumbing to unhealthy and unproductive ways to cope. Their personal label for this theme was “*being proactive.*”

Limitations

The following limitations/delimitations were present in this study: The data collected for the study was based on self-reports provided by the participants, leading to the possibility of bias and social desirability; causing the participants to answer the questions in a manner they felt would be viewed more favorable by the researcher. An additional limitation was the population sample, which was from Conservative Protestant women from non-denominational churches, Baptist churches, and Pentecostal churches in a Southern state of the United States. The results were not generalizable to other churches; however, they would extend the theoretical level (Yin, 2014).

To address the limitation of having only one coder and to reduce researcher bias, the researcher documented thoughts and feelings in a personal reflection journal during and after data collection. According to Morrow (2005), keeping a record of one's life experiences, reactions, and emerging awareness allows the researcher to examine and minimize how their understanding of the phenomenon is being incorporated into the analysis. Furthermore, collecting data from semi-structured interviews and focus groups emphasized the participants' words. The use of the participants' words allowed for a straight description of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants which according to Sandelowski (2000) was the intent of a qualitative study. The limitations identified were unavoidable due to the requirements of the target participants and did not have a negative impact on the outcome of the study.

Future practical implications

The future implications of this study suggest that without effectively applying useful and adaptive coping strategies, many working mothers will continue to experience the negative consequences of unresolved work-family conflict. The findings of this study are significant to advancing scientific knowledge on work-life balance because knowing and applying useful and adaptive ways to cope with stress from work-family conflict continues to elude many working mothers. The coping strategies found and discussed in this study will aid social workers in their conversations with working mothers. It will assist them in providing psychoeducation to their clients who may be experiencing challenges in navigating work-life-integration on the use of active coping strategies found in this study (i.e., praying, reframing, being proactive, planning, etc.) to be helpful. Additionally, the results from this study will enhance social workers' knowledge of how to effectively cope with work-family conflict stressors and having work-life balance, which is critical to the physical, mental health, and spiritual needs of working mothers.

In the field of social work understanding how spirituality impacts clients is essential. The practical implication of this study supports social workers

incorporating spirituality in their conversations with their clients and how it can assist them in meeting their goals. The findings in this study support social workers being able to incorporate the whole person approach when working with clients, addressing the spiritual, mental, and physical aspects of their lives.

This study suggests that applying useful and adaptive religious and non-religious coping strategies helped the working mothers in this study manage the demands of multiple roles when having a career while at the same time actively parenting school-aged children. These coping strategies can be the catalyst needed to develop relationships in the home and work environments that can create greater work-life balance. There is an opportunity for working mothers, regardless of their religious affiliation to adapt and adopt the coping strategies described in this study to preserve their health, their relationships, and their careers. Throughout the study, the participants described the various ways they managed the stressors experienced when the expectation is to perform well in two environments that were significantly important to them.

The coping strategies, both religious and non-religious can be adapted by working mothers experiencing work-family conflict to help them reduce work-family conflict. The relief from anxiety that the participants in this study shared when describing their coping strategies will help working mothers see their stressful situations as temporary. The results from this study can further assist social workers in providing examples of different strategies they can suggest to their clients who are working mothers struggling with work-family conflict. By exploring with their clients and reframing views of the “ideal worker norm” social workers will be able to empower them toward positive change, thus decreasing their emotional stressors.

Recommendations

This study was designed to add to the body of knowledge in the current literature on work-life balance. Being that stress is inevitable when managing multiple roles and demands, it is imperative that research address the coping strategies individuals use when they have limited time and energy resources. It is recommended that a quantitative method using a causal-comparative design is used to determine whether there is any statistical difference in how women from different religious groups use coping strategies. Comparing the coping strategies from women who identify from religious groups, including but not limited to Buddhism, Muslim or Jehovah Witness could provide additional evidence of whether there is something unique about coping with life stressors as a believer in Jesus Christ and other Christian principles.

The use of a longitudinal study design is recommended. The qualitative descriptive design utilized in this study prevented the researcher from exploring how the use of coping strategies changed as the women progressed through different life stages. A longitudinal study design would detect how the use of

coping strategies changes or evolves as stressors in women's life increase or decrease over time. Capturing this data would allow practitioners to create interventions and solutions to help women as they encounter different stressors based on their ages and stages in life.

It is recommended that the field of social work integrates spirituality into the training and teaching of social workers about the importance of exploring and incorporating spirituality into client conversations and engagement. To educate social workers about the effectiveness of interacting with their clients through a whole person's lens would enhance the workers' comfort levels of incorporating spirituality into their treatment goals.

Lastly, it is recommended that in the field of social work, employers, organizations, and companies, would benefit greatly, by allowing working mothers to integrate useful and adaptive religious coping strategies during their workday. Learning ways to cope with stressful work relationships and situations in the workplace has the potential to decrease the incidences of harassment and absenteeism while at the same time improving work productivity and employee morale. The working mothers in this study consistently demonstrated how their use of adaptive coping strategies helped them resolve issues with their supervisors and peers. It would be useful for employers to create professional development courses on coping strategies. Incorporating discussions about spirituality as coping strategies into mentoring programs with intentional conversations of work cultures within the workplace and environments would assist in less negative work experiences.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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