

Reciprocal influence between professional activity and family life: perceptions of fathers/mothers*

Influência recíproca entre atividade profissional e vida familiar: percepção de pais/mães

Influencia recíproca entre actividad profesional y vida familiar: percepción de padres/madres

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To measure the influence, both of family life upon professional activity and of professional activity upon family life. **Methods:** A quantitative, descriptive, exploratory study, using a questionnaire with two versions - male and female - with a sample of 92 couples with children younger than six years, living in Rio Grande City - RS. **Results:** We found that physical and mental fatigue related to working conditions influenced family chores, causing discouragement and irritability. Men presented major concerns regarding the limited time available to the family due to professional responsibilities. Viewed as very influential for family support, dialogue contributed to the resolution of professional problems and creation of an environment that was conducive to addressing the family challenges impacted by work. The parents felt that family life did not affect career, but reported the influence of thinking about the family at work. **Conclusion:** Few influences were identified that affected the balance between family life and professional activity, which, in general, contradicted other studies in the literature.

Keywords: Family relations; Work; Preschool

RESUMO

Objetivo: Mensurar a influência, tanto da vida familiar na atividade profissional como da atividade profissional na vida familiar. **Métodos:** Estudo exploratório descritivo de abordagem quantitativa, que utilizou um questionário com duas versões – feminina e masculina – aplicado em amostra de 92 casais com filhos de idade até seis anos, residentes na cidade do Rio Grande - RS. **Resultados:** Constatou-se que o cansaço físico e mental relacionado ao trabalho, influenciou nas tarefas familiares, causando desânimo e irritabilidade. Os homens apresentaram maior preocupação com o pouco tempo disponível em família em razão da profissão. Visualizou-se como muito influente o apoio familiar, tornando o diálogo contribuinte na resolução dos problemas profissionais e na criação de um ambiente propício ao enfrentamento dos desafios impostos pelo trabalho. Os pais consideraram que a vida familiar não prejudica sua atividade profissional, mas referiram influência do pensamento familiar no trabalho. **Conclusão:** Poucas influências foram identificadas que prejudicam a conciliação entre vida familiar e atividade profissional, o que, no geral, contrariou demais estudos encontrados na literatura.

Descritores: Relações familiares; Trabalho; Pré-escolar

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Medir la influencia, tanto de la vida familiar en la actividad profesional como de la actividad profesional en la vida familiar. **Métodos:** Estudio exploratorio descriptivo de abordaje cuantitativo, que utilizó un cuestionario con dos versiones – femenina y masculina – aplicado en una muestra de 92 parejas con hijos de edad hasta seis años, residentes en ciudad de Rio Grande - RS. **Resultados:** Se constató que el cansancio físico y mental relacionado al trabajo, influyó en las tareas familiares, causando desánimo e irritabilidad. Los hombres presentaron mayor preocupación con el poco tiempo disponible para la familia en razón de la profesión. El apoyo familiar se visualizó como muy influyente, volviéndose el diálogo como contribuyente en la resolución de los problemas profesionales y en la creación de un ambiente propicio para el enfrentamiento de los desafíos impuestos por el trabajo. Los padres consideraron que la vida familiar no perjudica su actividad profesional, sin embargo refirieron influencia del pensamiento familiar en el trabajo. **Conclusión:** Pocas influencias fueron identificadas como perjudiciales a la conciliación entre vida familiar y actividad profesional, lo que, en general, se opone a estudios encontrados en la literatura.

Descriptores: Relaciones familiares; Trabajo; Preescolar

* Study originated from a broader research project developed by the “Grupo de Estudos e Pesquisa de Família, Enfermagem e Saúde” (Family, Nursing and Health Study and Research Group) of the School of Nursing of the “Universidade Federal do Rio Grande” – FURG – Rio Grande (RS), Brazil.

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INTRODUCTION

Child raising is immersed in the reality in which families live; it is shaped by values and beliefs present in established interpersonal relationships and several family groups, thus causing the experience of raising children to be determined by this context⁽¹⁾. The growth of children who are not of school age yet in particular shows the implementation of actions that support adequate child development. This makes it necessary for parents to be deeply involved in actions aimed at stimulating children, which enable greater integration with the social environment where they are included⁽²⁾.

Parents' professional activities are shown as an aspect associated with child development, due to the influence they have on family relationships. These activities are included in the restructuring of the job market, which confirmed important organizational changes, such as job structuring reorganization, the worsening of work relationships and household income, and the increase in professionals' involvement in work institutions⁽³⁾.

The resulting interferences in the professional and family routine are observed through the ever increasing inclusion of parents in the work context, which tend to involve more responsibilities and competencies, contributing to a better professional performance, while leading to less family interaction concomitantly. Studies show parents' longer length of time in the work environment⁽⁴⁾; their exposure to stressful situations, caused by work conflicts⁽⁵⁾; and the development of certain activities – for example, work shifts⁽⁶⁾ – as practices that reduce time spent with children.

Thus, work conditions imposed on parents interfere with their availability to develop actions that involve adequate child growth and development. Certain studies⁽⁶⁻⁷⁾ show parents' feeling of shame as a result of the unfulfilled desire of personal achievement and failure to fulfill their role in the family life.

Consequently, the different types of family organizations established by the socio-cultural characteristics of certain countries can help to attenuate or intensify interactional relationships. Certain studies⁽⁷⁻⁸⁾ show the existence of more modern family structures, in which parents work for a greater stability of their family and seek to leave their children in childcare institutions or under the care of the extended family (grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins), thus enabling them both to work and to contribute to the household's economic balance and greater harmony and interaction among family members.

In contrast, the study that investigated the harmonization between work and children, in the context of five countries⁽⁸⁾, also identified the characteristics of more traditional families, in which gender relation is

strongly present in societies, delegating family support to the father figure, considered as the “head of the family”, while child care falls on the mother. This is justified by the following factors: the lack of trust in child care institutions; the belief that affective development is negatively influenced by the distance between mothers and children in early childhood; and the influence of maternal responsibility for child care, still present in many families. In this sense, a study⁽⁹⁾ shows that certain child life and health conditions are not associated with socioeconomic factors, but rather with life, food and housing conditions and access to health services, among other aspects, according to the mothers' lifestyle.

In the Brazilian context, a study that investigated children's perception of their mothers, who were working women⁽⁷⁾, was contextualized. This study pointed out that the work situation also requires the extended family to be included in the job market, preventing family support from being a part of child care. The situation reported may lead to a feeling of guilt in parents, as they cannot spend more time with their children.

It should be emphasized that there is a relationship of reciprocity in this context, revealing the fact that certain family aspects interfere with work development, such as the moments when it is necessary for parents not to be involved to resolve family-related needs or the cases involving the health-disease process, equally indicated by the studies performed^(6,10-11). In addition, authors⁽¹²⁾ argue that family relationships enable the construction of the personal and professional identity, through the relation between generations, which include continuing rituals and routines in the family nucleus and provide relevant characteristics to define personal, professional and social behavior. Moreover, it should be emphasized that the stage of life before children are of preschool age is when information is absorbed and put into practice, thus forming their personality. A study shows that Brazilian nursing must view the family as an object of its care and, for this reason, it needs to seek knowledge about the characteristics and conditions in which the family lives to intervene positively⁽¹³⁾.

The present study was motivated by the interest in knowing the influence of reciprocity between professional activity and family life, in the perspective of fathers and mothers with children younger than six years, based on the premise that the age group in question requires family support, at the same time that the family needs financial stability. Thus, the following guiding question was made: How is the influence of reciprocity between professional activity and family life present, in the perspective of fathers and mothers with children aged until six years? To respond this question, the analysis of the level of demand of aspects that influence the

reciprocal relationship between professional activity and family life was set as the goal, based on the following specific objectives: to measure the influence of family life on professional activity and to measure the influence of professional activity on family life.

METHODS

An exploratory and descriptive study with a quantitative approach was conducted, which was part of a broader research project entitled “*Vida Familiar e Profissional – entre as Responsabilidades e as Demandas Enfrentadas pelos Pais na Sociedade Contemporânea*” (Family and Professional Life – between the Responsibilities and Demands Faced by Parents in Modern Society)⁽¹⁴⁾. This project was initiated by a group of researchers from the *Universidade do Porto*, in Portugal, and it has been developed by research groups of other countries, including Brazil. In this country, such development occurred in the city of Rio Grande, situated in the southernmost part of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, and the study sample was comprised of 92 couples, aiming to analyze the harmonization between the family and professional life of couples with children aged until six years.

The following inclusion criteria were used to select individuals: to live in the city where the study was conducted; (both parents) to be included in the job market; to have at least one child aged until six years; and to agree to participate in the study by signing an Informed Consent Form. Data were collected using a questionnaire with two versions, a female and a male one, based on the following topics: profession, task division, family life, harmonization strategies, personal life, shared life and socio-demographic data. In 2006, this questionnaire was adapted to the local reality of the city of Rio Grande, once the original version was developed in another socio-cultural, economic and political context by researchers of the *Universidade do Porto*, in Portugal, in 2003⁽¹⁴⁾.

According to the objectives of this study, seven questions about the Influence of Professional Activity on Family Life and other seven associated with the Influence of Family Life on Professional Activity were approached and responded using the Likert scale. According to this scale, responses follow a ranking which varies from zero (0) to four (4), expressing opinions between two extremes: not demanding or without influence (0) and very demanding or very great influence (4). The remaining scale variations reflect the following levels: almost not demanding or low influence (1), slightly demanding or average influence (2) and somewhat demanding or great influence (3).

Interviews were conducted in the homes of study

participants, through previous booking of a date and time, the majority of which occurred on weekends, in 2008. Prior to data collection, scholarship recipients were trained, aiming to instruct them how to perform the activity. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS), version 16.0, was used for data processing and analysis. According to the recommendations of Resolution 196/96, the main research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the institution involved (Process 23116.003244/2008-16).

RESULTS

The following three steps will be described to show the results of the influence of reciprocity between professional activity and family life: characterization of individuals, influence of professional activity on family life and influence of family life on professional activity.

Characterization of individuals

A total of 92 couples with children aged until six years participated in the present study. With regard to age group, 45.7% of mothers were aged between 20 and 29 years and 42% of fathers were aged between 30 and 39 years.

In terms of professional activity, 13.2% of mothers were teachers in primary education, secondary education, special education and independent disciplines, such as mathematics, for example. In addition, 13.2% performed general service jobs, such as those in home and hospital hygiene sectors; 8.8% of mothers worked in the area of nursing, such as nurses or nursing technicians; 5.5% were cleaning women and 7.7% worked in business sectors.

With regard to the reality of fathers in this study, they performed the following professional activities, in order of frequency: 7.6% were in the business sector, as salesmen, clerks and traders; 6.5% were drivers; 5.4% worked in residential security as security guards and doormen, and 5.4% performed activities that could be considered “manual”, such as bricklayers, loggers and painters.

Influence of professional activity on family life

The results obtained associated the statements about the influence of professional activity on family life and enabled greater evidence of physical and mental tiredness related to work to be observed. This is because, in both statements, fathers and mothers responded according to the presence of such factors as causes of listlessness and irritability in family activities. The corresponding results can be observed in Figures 1 and 2, illustrating the frequency of response:

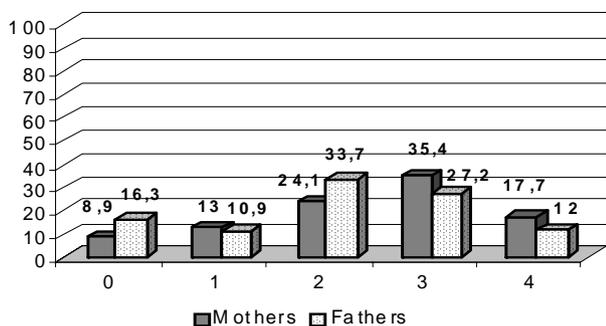


Figure 1 - Distribution of frequencies of response to the alternative: Due to my professional activity, I feel very tired to do the things I have to do at home. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2008.

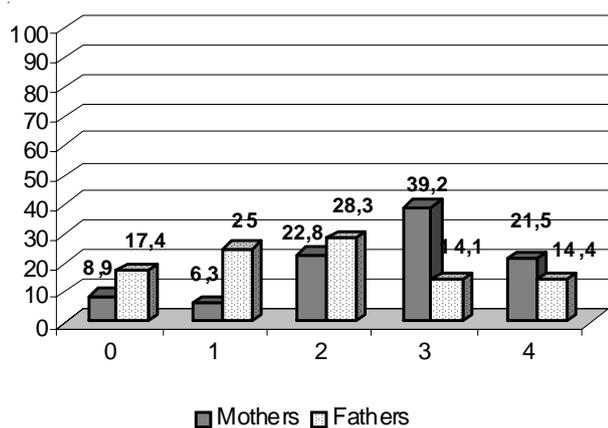


Figure 2 - Distribution of frequencies of response to the alternative: After a stressful day of work, I feel easily irritable. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2008.

In this sense, it should be emphasized that the majority of mothers interviewed (35.4%) reported a great influence (3) of tiredness on the performance of home tasks, while 33.7% of fathers mentioned an average influence (2) for the same item. With regard to stress, 39.2% of mothers attributed a great influence (3) and 28.3% of fathers, an average influence (2), stating that a stressful day of work contributes to their irritability.

When the decrease in the time available for family activities due to professional activities was considered, 30.4% of mothers attributed an average influence to this and 28.3% of fathers, a great influence. According to the perspective of activities performed at work causing conversations in the family nucleus to be more interesting, 30.4% of mothers and 27.2% of fathers attributed an average influence to this theme, respectively.

Nonetheless, the performance of work tasks as a way to help to better deal with home problems was pointed out as having an average influence by 34.2% of mothers, whereas 27.2% of fathers considered it to have no influence, and other 27.2%, a low influence. In addition, the use of professional abilities was also observed in home activities, without influence,

corresponding to 26.6% of mothers and 29.3% of fathers, confirming a slight variation between the opinions of fathers and mothers interviewed.

Concluding this category, the “parents not separating professionals concerns from their time in the home” aspect was asked, to which 29.1% of mothers attributed low influence, while 23.9% of fathers considered it to have no influence and other 23.9%, low influence.

Influence of family life on the professional activity

In this category, it was possible to observe the influence of family life on professional activity. The existence of affection and consideration in family relationships, which enable individuals to be more self-confident to develop their professional activity, and the denial of the fact that the fulfillment of family responsibilities reduces one’s dedication to professional activity were emphasized as the most relevant factors. The factors mentioned are distinct situations, although present in the family environment, one representing the family’s sentimental contribution and the other, the performance of care activities, in the sense of the commitment to family and home. The frequency of relative responses to these conditions is shown in Figures 3 and 4:

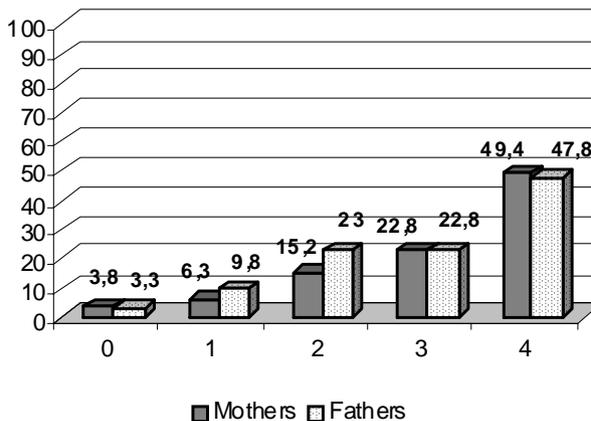


Figure 3 - Distribution of frequencies of response to the alternative: Affection and consideration received at home give me more self-confidence in my professional activity. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2008.

According to the data shown in the figures, the highest frequency refers to both sexes, once 47.8% of fathers and 49.4% of mothers attributed a very great influence (4) to the first factor, while 50% of fathers and 36.74% of mothers attributed no influence (0) to the content of the second factor, regarding the decrease in professional dedication due to family responsibilities.

In addition, family conversation should be emphasized, especially when it refers to the couple’s

dialogue. It was observed that 45.6% of mothers reported that conversations with their partner had a very great influence on the resolution of professional problems, whereas 41.3% of fathers attributed the same level of influence to this question.

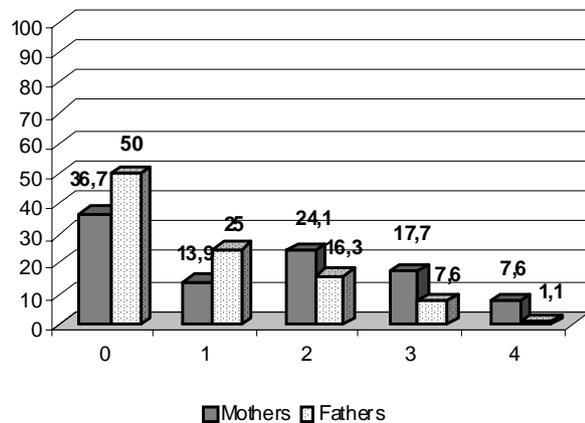


Figure 4 - Distribution of frequencies of response to the alternative: My family responsibilities reduce the level of dedication I could have with my professional activity. Rio Grande, RS, Brazil, 2008.

As a result, the majority of fathers and mothers perceived that stressful situations at home did not have professional consequences, once 43.5% of fathers and 41.8% of mothers reported no influence of family stress on irritation at work. On the contrary, families can provide an environment of rest and support for one to face professional challenges. In this sense, fathers (41.3%) and mothers (32.9%) considered this factor to have a very great influence.

With regard to family connection to work performance, what stood out was the fact that fathers and mothers were able to separate one from the other more appropriately, because 34.2% and 30.4% considered such situation to have an average influence, respectively.

Finally, there is the sleep-wake cycle interference in the interaction with family members. Concomitantly, there is the question of home activities that may interfere with the couple's sleep. When asked about this, 35.9% of fathers attributed no influence to this factor, while 29.1% of mothers considered it to have a great influence.

DISCUSSION

The reciprocal relationship between professional activity and family life, as reported by the parents interviewed, showed the presence of physical and mental tiredness as an influence of professional activity on family life, on an intermediate level of demand; and family affection as a source of support, when it comes to the influence of family life on professional activity, due to

the higher frequency of reports stating the maximum level of demand. In this way, it should be emphasized that caring for small children involves interferences from both the parents' physical/physiological aspects and psychosocial aspects.

Thus, considering the results that show the influence of work on the individuals' physical and mental tiredness, women had a higher frequency of this aspect, in terms of the presence of irritability and listlessness in the family environment. This can also be observed in a study conducted with health professionals, in which these factors were associated with working hours and interpersonal relationships in the family environment, which cause workers to feel anguished, misunderstood and tired, making them more irritable⁽¹⁵⁾.

In the reciprocal relationship, parents pointed out that family adversities do not cause stress in the development of work, a finding that goes against what was observed in the present study⁽¹⁰⁾, which indicated the change of plans inherent in professional activities, early departure from the work environment and constant family thoughts in the work environment as bad mood- and stress-producing factors in the workplace.

With regard to the lower time available with the family due to obligations and working hours, parents' concern about the decrease in their involvement with family activities was observed. From this perspective, parents could be assessing the quality of their paternal role, under the conditions imposed by their work, according to what was observed in this study⁽⁶⁾. In contrast, another study⁽¹⁶⁾ supports the reduction in time spent with the family in the mothers' reality, due to work overload. In this sense, working mothers were more concerned about the short time they had to dedicate themselves to their children and spouse.

In the reciprocal relationship, there is a denial of the influence of home responsibilities on one's professional dedication, through the lack of influence attributed by the majority of individuals interviewed, especially men. A study that analyzed nursing workers⁽¹¹⁾ corroborated this finding and described the reduction in work performance only caused by work absences resulting from their children's illnesses. In spite of this, these workers reported feeling proud of their constant presence in the work environment, thus meeting their professional responsibilities. This situation can reflect the need for female self-affirmation or even show women's multi-functional ability in the job market.

Considering the data obtained from work activities as aspects that influence family conversations, making them more interesting, it is relevant to show that, in addition to the family's dialogical interaction being comprised of the family nucleus' own routines, as found in a study⁽¹²⁾, it is possible to observe the professional

influence on this interaction. Thus, it is plausible to show that the influence analyzed is also caused by family dialogical interaction activities.

In reciprocity, family interaction contributes to the formation of the individual's professional behavior, as family characteristics build a structure both in personal and professional performance⁽¹²⁾. When improving one's professional sense, the findings of the present study reported the importance of family relationships, because mothers more frequently recognize the importance of a conjugal relationship based on dialogue between the couple. Parents, in their turn, more frequently recognize family relationships as a whole to create a comfortable environment that promotes rest, aiming to help the family nucleus' well-being, so as to contribute to good professional performance. According to what has been stated, it is strongly believed that good family relationships represent a support for personal and professional performance.

In addition, it was reported that parents rely on family support, expressed in terms of affectivity and consideration and originated from their conjugal relationship and interaction with their children, as a requirement for good professional performance. In this sense, a study emphasizes⁽¹⁰⁾ that, when added to the home sphere's positive influence, both the professional sphere itself and the community in which the family is included represent sources of support that influence an individual's professional performance⁽¹⁰⁾.

The present study also enabled researchers to observe that work can influence both problem resolution at home and the improvement of professional competencies in home routines. Thus, the study reveals that women more strongly expressed the influence of work in the resolution of family problems, which was also observed in an investigation conducted with nursing professionals⁽¹⁷⁾, where authors concluded that certain activities and obligations inherent in work directly affect time spent with family, causing professionals to be further apart from their spouse and children. As a result of this separation, problem resolution at home could be harmed, a fact that tends to make the professional-spouse-mother feel frustrated, as their direct participation in the family environment is considered insufficient⁽¹⁸⁾. Similarly, studies point to reciprocity through the negative influence of family responsibilities in the workplace^(10,16), especially with regard to the reduction in time availability to perform professional activities at home, and through changes in work plans, resulting from family situations. Consequently, authors⁽¹⁷⁾ who investigated the perception of teachers with newborn babies, after they return to work, observed that family interference in an individual's professional activity causes them to give up the development of extra activities in their work routine.

The target study emphasizes these results, once mothers had a lower frequency, although a lack of influence was reported.

In terms of the use of professional competencies in the home routine, the slight level reported by fathers and mothers is an indication of the low recognition of professional activity interference in family life. However, it is acceptable to believe that professional duties interfere with family life in a way that is proportional to the conditions and types of work performed by them. This is confirmed by a study with nursing professionals, in which the profession was more valued, as greater safety resulting from work activities has a repercussion for home tasks, in the family relationships and child care during early childhood⁽¹⁷⁾.

With regard to the results indicating the existence of a certain level of disregard for professional concerns when in the family environment, it is possible to affirm that, according to the study results, work-related problems do not negatively interfere with family life. In contrast to such finding, authors⁽¹⁸⁾ showed that teachers-mothers cannot separate work from family life when they are home, due to their professional responsibilities extending beyond their working hours. Their professional concerns interfere with routine activities and family relationships. Thus, these concerns occur at different levels in the family environment, which can be justified by the type of work performed by the father or mother.

Concomitantly with this idea, there are family concerns during the development of professional activities, more frequently reported by mothers, although considered to have a low influence. Once again, the conditions shown demonstrate that mothers have a greater perception of family influence during professional development.

A study⁽¹⁸⁾ confirms this finding by revealing the mothers' anxiety, who need to leave their children in child care institutions while they work. As the extended family is not always available, because they are usually in the job market as well, parents use day care centers with the purpose of preserving child care during their absence. However, parents remain connected to their children, due to their concern with all the care provided by these institutions, arousing feelings that can hinder professional development.

With regard to the family activity's interference in the couple's sleep-wake cycle, it should be emphasized that having children of school age can represent difficulties in the harmonization between rest and the times when they are home, especially in the parents' work shifts⁽⁶⁾. The data shown contradict the results obtained by the previously mentioned study, in which parents do not identify family life as something that interferes with the rest needed for good professional performance. This can be justified as a result of their working hours,

emphasizing certain activities such as painting, civil construction and business activities, which do not usually involve night-time activities that may change parents' sleep cycle and rest. In contrast, in the mothers' reality, who indicated such influence more frequently, the majority of them can be considered as teachers or professionals working in nursing or hygiene services, which often include different work shifts and professional activities being performed at home. Concomitantly, there appears again the trend towards transferring child care to mothers, especially when it comes to children younger than one year, as a result of breastfeeding and remaining activities inherent in this age group.

In this context, the study's quantitative nature enabled the identification of factors that influence the relationship existing between work and family, which is associated with the possibility of developing qualitative studies, aiming to delve into specific questions about the family's micro-space.

CONCLUSION

With regard to the "Influence of professional activity on family life" category, fathers and mothers in this study reported that the influence of physical and mental tiredness associated with work causes listlessness and irritability in family tasks. In addition, fathers were more concerned about the reduction in time spent with the family, when compared to mothers, as a result of the fulfillment of professional activities, which can be related to the profile of such activities. An average level of work influence on family conversations was observed, the

same level attributed by mothers, through the recognition that work helps to resolve family problems. The result obtained was corroborated by couples, in terms of the use of professional abilities in family life, and this can be an indication of lack of recognition of such influence. To conclude this study's target category, the question of lack of separation between professional concerns and the family environment was observed and the reason for this may be the lack of interference of work-related problems in the family life of these parents.

On the other hand, the "Influence of family life on professional activity" category shows that parents rely on family support, capable of creating self-confidence through family dialogue that helps to resolve professional problems and to create a peaceful and strengthening environment for individuals to face the challenges imposed by work in their routine.

In addition, participants consider family life not to be harmful to professional activity, not even in the case of the occurrence of family stressors, while mentioning that family thinking is somewhat demanding for professional development. There was a greater variation in the level of demand of the sleep-wake cycle, where mothers perceived greater family interference in home rest, which is needed for good work performance.

In this way, there is a reciprocal influence between family life and professional activity. In addition, it should be emphasized that, although individuals are parents with small children, it was possible to identify few influences that harm the harmonization between these two dimensions, thus greatly diverging from studies found in the literature in general.

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