Mothers' Return-to-Work Reasons and Work–Family Conflict: Does a Partner Involved in Childcare Make a Difference?

Sanna Moilanen, Eija Räikkönen and Maarit Alasuutari

Abstract

Facilitating mothers' work–family reconciliation upon their return to work can be considered a viable means of enhancing women's overall employment participation. This study examined return-to-work reasons among mothers with a one-year-old child, how these reasons are related to mothers' background characteristics, work-to-family conflict (WFC) and family-to-work conflict (FWC) and whether having a partner home caring for the child protects against such conflicts. Results based on survey data collected from Finnish working mothers (N = 573) in 2016 showed four dimensions of return-to-work reasons: personal importance of work, work- and career-related worries, dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering and convenient work/childcare conditions. Higher personal importance of work was associated with lower levels of WFC and FWC, whereas higher work- and career-related worries were related to higher WFC and FWC. Higher dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering was associated with higher WFC and higher convenient work/childcare conditions with lower WFC. Having a partner on care-related leave did not protect against the conflict.

Keywords: employed mothers, family and work, Finland, return to work, work-life balance

Introduction

Facilitating mothers' return to work after parental leave is part of the European Union's employment strategy, which is set to improve employment participation rates among women. Long absence from the labour market after having a child can have negative consequences on mothers' employability (Misra et al., 2011); hamper their opportunities regarding career development, wages and pensions (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011); and contribute to gender

inequality, both in the labour market and in families. A significant reason for mothers opting out of the labour market or delaying their return after having a child is the perceived difficulty of reconciling paid work and childcare (e.g. Hietamäki et al., 2018; Luotonen, 2013). Mothers tend to be primarily responsible for housework and childcare (e.g. Edlund and Öun, 2016; Sihto, 2015), which makes them particularly vulnerable to work–family conflict (Notten et al., 2017; Ruppanner, 2013). Considering that reconciling work and family responsibilities touches the everyday lives of mothers in modern welfare states globally (e.g. Ruppanner, 2013), and given the negative consequences of work–family conflict on overall family wellbeing (Allen et al., 2000), it is important to find ways in which policies can ease the reconciliation of work and family demands during mothers' transition to the labour market after parental leave to encourage their earlier return to work.

Previous studies (e.g. Baxter, 2008; Leach et al., 2006; Luotonen, 2013), which have mainly used qualitative methods, have reported a variety of return-to-work reasons among mothers with young children. These studies have also described how mothers have considered some return-to-work reasons (e.g. enjoyment of work) to facilitate their overall work–family reconciliation whereas other reasons for the return (e.g. worrying about one's career) have been seen to challenge the reconciliation, especially if the return has been considered as premature (e.g. Baxter, 2008). Yet, no previous study has performed statistical analysis on whether and how diverse reasons relate to mothers' experiences of reconciling work and family responsibilities. Thereby, with a comprehensive sample and aims to add on the existing knowledge as well as enhance the generalization of the findings we investigate the return-to-work reasons among Finnish mothers with a one-year-old child and how these reasons are associated with work–family conflict.

One important policy goal for facilitating mothers' return to work is encouraging fathers to share childcare responsibilities. Finland is part of the Nordic countries where work–

family policies have traditionally been characterised as promoting gender equality through the provision of equal opportunities for both mothers and fathers to participate in paid work and childcare (Nordenmark, 2015). The Nordic countries can, indeed, be considered as forerunners in facilitating maternal work through their comprehensive *work-facilitating policies*, such as early childhood education and care (ECEC) services (Misra et al., 2011). Finland, however, stands out from the other Nordic countries with the unique characteristic of its family policy, which grants parents a chance to take paid care-related leave until the child turns three years old (Repo, 2010). Such *work-reducing policies* can delay the entry into employment among mothers with young children (Misra et al., 2011). Indeed, in Finland, the possibility for a long care-related leave has underlined child home care provided by the mother and thereby, 'cemented the gender division of care' (Repo, 2010: 45). However, given the ongoing policy aimed at encouraging fathers' caregiving role in Finland (Lammi-Taskula, 2017) and across Europe (Nordenmark, 2015), we also explore whether having a partner home caring for a child protects against the work–family conflict, a matter that research has paid little attention to.

Specifically, this article addresses the following research questions: (1) *Which dimensions can be identified in terms of the reasons that mothers of one-year-old children have for returning to work?* (2) *How are the mothers' background characteristics associated with the return-to-work reasons?* (3) *How are the dimensions of return-to-work reasons related to work–family conflict?* (4) *Does having a partner on care-related leave buffer the experience of conflict?* We use the demands-and-resources approach (Voydanoff, 2005) as a theoretical framework for understanding the links between mothers' return-to-work reasons, partner's involvement in childcare and work–family conflict. Our study contributes to work–family research by providing new knowledge on how the reasons for returning to work among mothers with young child(ren) are related to their experiences of work–family

conflict. The study further sheds light on the ways by which work–family policies could be framed so as to encourage mothers' earlier return to work and thereby benefitting family's economic situation, mothers' career progression and family wellbeing by means of relieving the experience of work–family conflict during mothers' transition to work after parental leave.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

Mothers' reasons for returning to work

Due to the competing obligations that women face between work and family responsibilities, the financial explanation and prioritising the needs of the family conceal the more complicated picture behind mothers' work decisions (Damaske, 2011). In addition to financial reasons, concerns about maintaining skills, qualifications or promotions and fears for job security; the needs of the business or employer or feeling pressured have been found to shape mothers' return-to-work decisions (Baxter, 2008; Leach et al., 2006; Luotonen, 2013). Other return-to-work reasons among mothers with young children include the mother's preference for working, enjoyment of working and a sense of purpose along with a need for a break from the home and childcare (e.g. Baxter, 2008; Leach et al., 2006; Sihto, 2015). Also, finding suitable care arrangements and having flexible working hours have been reported as return-to-work reasons (Sihto, 2015). Based on this previous research, we expect *to find at least four dimensions of return-to-work reasons relating to (1) the preference for working, (2) suitable childcare and working times, (3) the financial situation and (4) other work-related concerns* (Hypothesis 1).

According to two previous studies that have examined the relationship between mothers' background characteristics and return-to-work reasons, mothers' lower educational background has been associated with returning to work because of the family's financial

situation, whereas reasons that relate to higher educational background include the emphasis on the content of work (Sihto, 2015), the need to maintain skills and qualifications and returning to work because longer break would harm the career (Baxter, 2008). Mothers in the higher-status managerial and professional jobs, for example, are particularly likely to return to work because a longer break would harm their career; longer working hours, again, are associated with greater likelihood of returning to work because of financial situation and because of preference for working (Baxter, 2008). Regarding the dimensions of return-to-work reasons we expect to find (see H1) and based on previous findings, we propose that *mothers with lower educational background and full-time working hours, compared to part-time hours, emphasise more the financial situation of the family as a reason for returning to work, because longer working hours correspond to greater financial remuneration*. *In addition, mothers with higher educational level and full-time working hours, compared to part-time hours, are expected to emphasise more the preference for working and work-related concerns as important return-to-work reasons* (Hypothesis 2).

Demands-and-resources approach and work–family conflict

According to the demands-and-resources approach (Voydanoff, 2005), work–family conflict denotes the extent to which the demands and resources associated with work and family roles conflict with each other. Demands reflect 'structural or psychological claims associated with role requirements, expectations, and norms to which individuals must respond or adapt by exerting physical or mental effort' (Voydanoff, 2005: 708). After returning to paid work, mothers engage in the roles of mother and worker, which are associated with role-specific demands that can be mutually incompatible and thus lead to inter-role conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Blair-Joy (2003) argues that such incompatibility results from competing cultural understandings of the family and work

devotions; the family devotion schema emphasizes family and home as the primary responsibility for women, whereas the work devotion schema denotes women's strong commitment to work. A work–family conflict is then created by a clash between simultaneous and competing (moral) commitments towards family and work (Blair-Loy, 2003). However, conflict can be lessened by resources, namely, 'structural or psychological assets that may be used to facilitate performance, reduce demands, or generate additional resources' (Voydanoff, 2005: 708).

Work–family conflict is bi-directional in that work demands can interfere with family (i.e. work-to-family conflict, WFC) and family demands with work (family-to-work conflict, FWC; see Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005 for a review). In our study, WFC is observed when the mother perceives that the time and energy resources invested in the work role make it difficult to fulfil the family-role demands, including childcare and housework. FWC appears when the resources a mother allocates to her family role hamper the fulfilment of her work-role demands. Consequently, time pressures and strains associated with one role are seen to make fulfilling the requirements and expectations of the other role more difficult (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Although a person can simultaneously experience both WFC and FWC, the meta-analytical examination by Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran (2005) showed they are distinct forms of work–family conflict. Thereby, in the present study, the two constructs are examined separately to offer increased information about the bi-directional nature of work–family conflict (Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran, 2005).

Drawing on the demands-and-resources approach (Voydanoff, 2005), we propose some return-to-work reasons can be perceived as *demands* and others as *resources*, which we expect are associated differently with mothers' experiences of WFC and FWC. Specifically, when a mother highlights having returned to work because she sees work as enjoyable and purposeful, the return can be considered as a work-related resource. Thus, work can be seen

as a psychological asset that facilitates performance in both roles or generates additional psychological resources (Voydanoff, 2005), which are associated with low work–family conflict. Furthermore, mothers highlighting suitable working hours (work-related resource) or childcare arrangements (family-related resource) as their return-to-work reasons may find reconciling work and family responsibilities less demanding and thus experience low work–family conflict (Baxter, 2008). We therefore expect that *when the return-to-work reason is considered either a psychological (e.g. self-fulfilment) or structural (e.g. suitable working hours) resource, it is associated with low work–family conflict* (Hypothesis 3a).

On the contrary, when the return is motivated by a certain kind of requirement (e.g. financial necessity, fear for job security), the return can be considered a demand, which the mother has to exert physical or mental effort to respond or adapt to (Voydanoff, 2005), and this can lead to high work–family conflict. For a family-devoted mother (Blair-Loy, 2003), returning to work due to necessity may mean that the return takes place sooner than preferred (e.g. Baxter, 2008; Sihto, 2015), but also a work-devoted mother may worry for spending too little time with her young child(ren) (Blair-Loy, 2003) despite the possible enjoyment of work. Because there is a strong cultural pressure for mothers of young children to participate in childcare (Hays, 1996), these mothers may be more inclined to feel that their work-related demands interfere with their participation in childcare, and vice versa, which can cause high levels of work–family conflict (Steiner et al., 2019). Thereby, we hypothesise that *when the return-to-work reason is considered a demand, it is associated with high work–family conflict* (Hypothesis 3b).

Although work-related demands have been generally associated with WFC and family demands with FWC, work and family demands serve as antecedents to both WFC and FWC (Michel et al., 2011). Thereby, both work- and family-related resources and demands can be considered as antecedents to both forms of work–family conflict. Previous studies (Moilanen

et al., 2019; Notten et al., 2017) also indicate that mothers who work long hours or non-standard hours (e.g. evenings, nights, weekends), have higher educational level, poorer financial situation, and more children experience high levels of work–family conflict.

Mothers' return to work in the Finnish context

Broad historical, social and cultural forces shape the options mothers have to balance work and family (Blair-Loy, 2003). Mothers' decisions about work and care are influenced by general attitudes towards mothers' paid employment and gender roles (Edlund and Öun, 2016) and perceptions of what constitutes acceptable childcare (Ellingsæter and Gulbransen, 2007). These cultural beliefs also intertwine with work–family policies that have a key role in assisting parents to develop strategies to ease the tensions associated with work and family demands (Misra et al., 2011; Ruppanner, 2013).

In Finland, women's engagement in the labour market is a norm and widely accepted. The overall employment rate of women is close to that of men, and the great majority work full-time (OECD, 2019). Parents' participation in work is supported by the provision of tax-based ECEC services, which are universal in that every child is entitled to these services. For low-income families the services are free, and the highest possible fee per child is about one-sixth of the average monthly income. Despite the comprehensive and affordable provision of ECEC services, only 33.5% of one-year-old children attend them in Finland (Säkkinen and Kuoppala, 2018), which is less than in other Nordic countries (OECD, 2018) that share rather similar ECEC provisions with Finland.

The low participation rates among Finnish one-year-old children in ECEC can be explained by the child homecare allowance, which the Social Insurance Institution pays to parents of children aged under three who do not attend ECEC (Repo, 2010). The entitlement to the allowance starts after the parental leave, when the child is about 9 months old (see

Appendix 1). About half of one-year-old children are cared for at home by the allowance (Kela, 2017), predominantly by their mothers (Närvi, 2018). In Finland, maternal homecare reflects the culturally shared ideas about what is good for the child (Ellingsæter and Gulbransen, 2007; Hays, 1996), which tends to support traditional gender-role attitudes in that mothers are seen as the ones who should use most of the parental leave and provide homecare, while fathers are the primary breadwinners (Edlund and Öun, 2016; Hietamäki et al., 2018). Although stay-at-home mothering is often a temporary solution to alleviate the tensions around work and childcare (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016c), the homecare allowance encourages mothers to take a relatively long absence from the labour market. Upon mothers' return to work, the Finnish population sees that the most agreeable alternative to reconcile work and family is through the mother taking main responsibility for the family by working part time (Edlund and Öun, 2016). Despite the introduction of the flexible care allowance in 2014, which encourages parental part-time work (Appendix 1), such working is not as prevalent among Finnish mothers as in the other Nordic countries (Salin et al., 2018).

Finnish policies have aimed to increase the share of fathers' involvement in the care of children through the use of care-related leave, which has been associated with mothers' earlier return to work (Salmi and Närvi, 2017) and with lower levels of work–family conflict for mothers (Ruppanner, 2013). During the child's first year, parents can decide which of them provides full-time homecare for the child and uses the parental allowance (Appendix 1). Fathers' share of the parental allowance, however, is under 10% (Närvi, 2018). Since 2013, fathers have also been entitled to a maximum of nine weeks of paid paternity leave. The three-week entitlement (which can be used simultaneously with the mother) is generally used by fathers, and the proportion of men using the additional six-week leave entitlement has increased over the past decade, reaching about 50% recently (Närvi, 2018).

We consider partners' involvement in childcare as a family-related resource, and as a buffer against mothers' experiences of work–family conflict. Research indicates that spousal support is associated with lower WFC and FWC (Michel et al., 2011). Longer periods of care-related leave enable the partner to provide routine care and take full responsibility for childcare and housework (Lammi-Taskula, 2017). Thereby, having a partner involved in childcare while the mother works, provides the mother with much needed support in reconciling work and family demands. We thus hypothesise that *having a partner on care-related leave buffers the mother's experience of work–family conflict* (Hypothesis 4).

Methods

Data and participants

The data originate from a larger survey targeted at parents of one-year-old children born between 1 October 2014 and 30 September 2015 (henceforth, the target children) in Finland. Voluntary participants, whose contact information was received from the Population Register Centre, were recruited from 10 municipalities in 2016. The municipalities were located in different parts of the country, and in the classification of Statistics Finland, two of them were categorised as rural municipalities, two as semi-urban and six as urban municipalities (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016b). In the six smaller municipalities, the survey request was sent to all parents of target children, whereas in the four larger municipalities, the request was sent to parents living in postal code areas chosen discretionarily by considering, for example, the general educational and employment levels of the population in that area and the accessibility of ECEC services. The study participation invitation was sent to 14,612 parents, of which 2,696 (18.5%) completed the survey.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample of the present study. The participants comprised partnered mothers (i.e. mothers with a residential partner) who had

returned to work at the time of the survey (N = 573; 21.3% of the initial sample). Thereby, fathers, lone mothers, full-time students and unemployed mothers or mothers who had been laid off were excluded from the final sample. The mean age of the mothers in this study was 33.4 years (SD = 4.4), which is fairly comparable to the national average age of mothers of one-year-old children as in 2016, on average, women gave birth at the age of 30.8 years (Official Statistics of Finland, 2016a), and the age of their target children averaged 15.2 months (SD = 3.2, range = 8.4–20.5 months). The vast majority of the mothers had attained tertiary education (ISCED, 2012), which is higher compared to Finnish women (48.4%), overall (Official Statistics of Finland, 2019). On average, the participating mothers had either 1 or 2 children, which corresponds well to the national average number of children in families with underage children (Official Statistics of Finland, 2020). All mothers in this study had been on maternity and parental leave after having their target children, and 17.6% had returned to work soon after taking these leaves, when the children were about 10 months old (M = 9.7, SD = 1.8). After parental leave, the majority (66.3%) had taken care leave (M = 3.9 months, SD = 3.5) before returning to work. The target child was, on average, about one year and two months old when the mother returned to work.

Measures and variables

Return-to-work reasons were measured with 21 items (adapted from Salmi and Närvi, 2017; Appendix 2). The respondents were asked, 'Did the following factors influence your decision of when to go back to work', which they evaluated on a scale of 1 (*very little or not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

Work-to-family conflict (WFC) was measured with four items (Carlson et al., 2000), two of which measured time-based WFC (e.g. 'My work keeps me from my family more than I would like') and the other two, strain-based WFC (e.g. 'When I get home from work I am

often too frazzled to participate in family activities/responsibilities'). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Using these four items, a latent variable denoting WFC was created for the analysis (see section Data analysis).

Family-to-work conflict (FWC) was measured with four items (Carlson et al., 2000). The first two items measured time-based FWC (e.g. 'The time I spend on family responsibilities often interferes with my work responsibilities'), and the remaining two items measured strain-based FWC (e.g. 'Because I am often stressed from family responsibilities, I have a hard time concentrating on my work'). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Using these four items, a latent variable denoting FWC was created for the analysis (see section Data analysis).

A partner on care-related leave. Whether the partner was on care-related leave at the time of the survey was measured by asking the mothers, 'What is your partner's current activity?' Participants were allowed to select all relevant options out of 12 (e.g. '*full-time stay-at-home parent*,' '*part-time stay-at-home parent*'). A dummy variable was coded: 0 = mother without a partner on care-related leave and 1 = mother with a partner on (part-time or full-time) care-related leave.

Background characteristics. Based on the findings of previous studies (Moilanen et al., 2019; Notten et al., 2017), the following characteristics were focused on: the *number of children* living in the household, the mother's *educational level* (0 = non-tertiary, 1 = tertiary), the *monthly net income* of the family (1 = less than €500; 2 = €500–1,000; 3 = €1,001–2,000; 4 = €2,001–3,000; 5 = €3,001–4,000; 6 = €4,001–5,000; 7 = €5,001–6,000; 8 = €6,001–7,000; 9 = €7,001–8,000; 10 = more than €8,000), the mother's *working hours* (0 = part-time, 1 = full-time) and the mother's *working time pattern* (0 = daytime working hours, 1 = non-standard working hours). Descriptive statistics for work-to-family conflict, family-to-work conflict and background characteristics of the mothers are shown in Table 1.

‘Table 1 here’

Data analysis

As the first research question, dimensions of mothers’ return-to-work reasons were examined on the basis of 21 items (see items and their correlations in Appendix 2) via exploratory factor analysis (EFA; Fabrigar and Wegener, 2011; Tabachnik and Fidell, 2013). As we aimed to explore whether this large set of variables could be more parsimoniously represented with fewer meaningful dimensions of return-to-work reasons and we had no firm hypotheses either about the number of the dimensions of the return-to-work reasons or how the items would reflect the potential dimensions, we chose EFA as the method of data analysis. Geomin was used as the rotation method as it allowed the dimensions to be correlated. To identify the optimal factor structure, we relied on several criteria, as no statistical criteria have been found to be correct in all situations (Fabrigar et al., 1999): eigenvalues-greater-than-one rule of thumb (Kaiser, 1960), the interpretability of the solutions and consistency with theoretical predictions (Gorsuch, 1983). Furthermore, items that cross-loaded (i.e. loadings of 0.32 or higher; Tabachnik and Fidell, 2013) on two or more factors were excluded from the final solution.

Initial EFA results showed that items 1 (‘the finance of the family was tight’), 6 (‘I got new job’), 9 (‘my job pays well’), 12 (‘my partner stayed looking after our child’) and 17 (‘my return made financial sense’) had low communalities (< .20), indicating that they did not measure the factor structure well. These items included all those related to the finances of the mother or the family (items 1, 9 and 17). All five items were removed and a re-estimation of the EFA was performed with the remaining 16 items. Now, the eigenvalues-greater-than-one rule indicated that a 4-factor solution would best approximate the data. Closer inspection

of the factor loadings revealed that item 15 (‘maintaining of the professional skills’) cross-loaded on factors 3 and 4, which resulted in the exclusion of this item from the final analysis. Thereby, the final EFA was conducted with the remaining 15 items. The second research question, namely the associations between mothers’ background characteristics and the dimensions of return-to-work reasons were explored via Spearman correlations because some of the variables were dichotomous and the continuous variables were nonnormally distributed.

The third and fourth research question, that is, associations of the dimensions of return-to-work reasons with WFC and FWC and the buffering effect of the presence of a partner on care-related leave on these associations were investigated via exploratory structural equation modelling (ESEM; Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009). We used ESEM as it can integrate an EFA measurement model (here, the dimensions of return-to-work reasons) within traditional confirmatory factor analysis (CFA)/structural equation modelling framework. This increases the validity of our results as the measurement-error-corrected latent variables of the return-to-work reasons and work-family conflict could be estimated simultaneously.

Prior to the ESEM examinations, a CFA measurement model of work–family conflict was formed, in which the latent WFC and FWC constructs were set to correlate with each other (see Appendix 3). These factors served as dependent variables in our ESEM model. The independent variables were the correlating latent dimensions of return-to-work reasons. In addition, the number of children, educational level, income, working hours and working time pattern were controlled for in the analyses.

As in previous ESEM studies (e.g. Arens and Morin, 2016), the assessment of fit of the ESEM models was based on the following indicators: the χ^2 test, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), the comparative fit index (CFI) and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). An acceptable fit with the data

is indicated by a non-significant *p*-value for the χ^2 test, CFI and TLI values of above .90, an RMSEA value of below .06 and an SRMR value of below .08 (Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2018). However, research regarding the adequacy of these criteria for ESEM is still lacking (Arens and Morin, 2016). Hence, as suggested (e.g. Arens and Morin, 2016), we used these criteria only as rough guidelines for facilitating model evaluation and simultaneously considered the theoretical adequacy of our ESEM models.

The buffering effect of the presence of a partner on care-related leave on the associations of the dimensions of return-to-work reasons with work–family conflict (research question 4) was investigated by comparing the fit of the freely estimated model (i.e. associations of the dimensions of return-to-work reasons and control variables with work–family conflict being freely estimated across the two groups of mothers) to that of the constrained model (i.e. the aforementioned associations constrained to being equal across the groups), using the χ^2 difference test (Satorra and Bentler, 2001). A statistically significant χ^2 difference test denotes that the free model fits the data better than the constrained model. However, the χ^2 test is sensitive to a large sample size ($N = 573$ in the present study) and non-normality of the data. Furthermore, it does not accommodate the effects of model complexity; hence, the freely estimated models always fit better than more constrained models. This issue is particularly relevant in our study because competing ESEM models differ greatly in degrees of freedom. Relying on indices that do not adjust for model complexity may amplify the risk of capitalising on chance.

Therefore, we inspected changes (Δ) in fit indices more closely. A ΔCFI and ΔTLI ≤ .01 and a ΔRMSEA ≤ .015 between a more restricted model and the reference model would indicate reasonable support for the more constrained model (Chen, 2007; Cheung and Rensvold, 2002; Marsh et al., 2005). Prior to this examination, the measurement invariance of

the return-to-work dimensions and work–family conflict were examined by following similar steps to the examination of the moderating effect (Appendix 5).

The analyses were performed using the Mplus statistical package (version 8.2; Muthén and Muthén, 1998–2018). Missing values (range 0%–17.3%) were assumed to be missing at random, and, since the variables were somewhat skewed, the robust maximum likelihood estimator was used. The full-information maximum likelihood procedure was used to account for the missing data.

Results

The dimensions of the return-to-work reasons

Our first research aim was to identify dimensions of return-to-work reasons among mothers of one-year-old children. Based on 15 items, four factors that were readily interpretable and thus showed a theoretical utility, could be identified [$\chi^2(51) = 200.26$, $p <$ .001, CFI = 0.94, TLI = 0.87, RMSEA = 0.07 (90% CI: 0.06; 0.08), SRMR = 0.03]. Also, the model comparison of 3 and 4 factors favoured the 4-factor solution ($\chi^2(12) = 137.82$, $p <$ 0.001). Table 2 presents these four factors (i.e. dimensions) and their correlations. The factors accounted for 24%–86% of the variance among the items.

‘Table 2 here’

We named the first factor *personal importance of work* (including items 2, 7, 8 and 16, Table 2). Mothers reported having returned to work because they liked their jobs and considered jobs important to them. The mothers also perceived that their workplaces had good atmospheres, and work was seen as beneficial for their self-fulfilment.

We labelled the second factor *work- and career-related worries,* and it included items 3, 4, 13, 14 and 18 (Table 2). The mothers had returned to work because they were worried about the possibility of losing their jobs or saw it necessary to return because of their work situation. They were also concerned that a long absence from work would compromise their opportunities for career progression. Moreover, upcoming changes in the workplace required the mothers to return to work, or it was a request originating from their line managers.

We named the third factor *dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering,* and it included items 5, 11 and 20 (Table 2). Mothers justified their return to work with the feeling of wanting a change and having missed the company of other adults during the family leave period. They also thought that full-time childcare was not for them.

The fourth factor we labelled *convenient work/childcare conditions*, and it included items 10, 19 and 21 (Table 2). Mothers considered their working hours as being convenient and their jobs, overall, as being suitably light. They also recognised that their children had been given suitable childcare placements.

Return-to-work reasons and mothers' background characteristics

The second research aim was to examine the associations between the mothers' background characteristics and the four dimensions of return-to-work reasons. The significant correlations, presented in Table 3, indicated that the more children the mothers had, the more they highlighted having returned to work because of *personal enjoyment of work*. Furthermore, mothers with tertiary education, compared to those with non-tertiary education, emphasised more that they had returned to work because of *personal importance of work* and *work- and career-related worries*. Also, the higher monthly income the mothers had, the more they highlighted having returned to work because of all four reasons. Mothers who worked daytime hours, compared to those working non-standard hours, emphasised more

having returned to work because *personal importance of work*, *work- and career-related worries* and *convenient work/childcare conditions*. Finally, mothers with full-time working hours highlighted more having returned to work because of *personal enjoyment of work* compared to those with part-time working hours.

'Table 3 here'

Return-to-work reasons, work–family conflict and the buffering effect of having a partner on care-related leave

Our third and fourth research aims were to investigate how the mothers' return-to-work dimensions are related to work–family conflict and whether having a partner on care-related leave buffer the experience of conflict. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the variables for mothers with and without a partner on care-related leave are presented in Table 1 and Appendix 7, respectively. As can be seen from Table 1, on average, the mothers in both groups reported moderate levels of WFC and low levels of FWC.

Figure 1 presents the final ESEM model including the statistically significant associations of the dimensions of the return-to-work reasons with work–family conflict for mothers with and without a partner on care-related leave, separately.[1] The model fit the data adequately: $\chi^2(632) = 1073.78$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.05 [90% CI: 0.04; 0.05], SRMR = 0.06. High *personal importance of work* was associated with low WFC and FWC. The more the mothers highlighted that they had returned to work due to considering their work as personally important, the less they reported work–family conflict, overall.

'FIGURE 1 here'

High *work- and career-related worries* were associated with high WFC and FWC. The more the mothers reported that they had returned to work because of work- and career-related worries and requirements, the more they reported overall work–family conflict.

Dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering had a positive association with WFC. This indicates that the more the mothers emphasised having returned to work because of this reason, the more they perceived that their work roles were in conflict with their family roles.

Convenient work/childcare conditions had a negative association with WFC. The more the mothers perceived that convenient work and childcare conditions had motivated their return to work, the less they perceived that work demands were in conflict with family responsibilities.

Overall, the effect sizes (β) of the associations of return-to-work reasons with WFC and FWC ranged from −.15 to −.39, that is from small to medium (Cohen, 1988). Regarding the magnitude of the statistically significant associations between the return-to-work reasons and work–family conflict, the negative association between *convenient work/childcare conditions* and WFC was the strongest (Figure 1). This indicates that suitable work and childcare conditions are meaningful reasons for returning to work for mothers of young children in terms of facilitating the combination of work duties with family responsibilities. Moreover, for mothers with a partner on care-related leave, the positive association of *work- and career-related worries* with FWC was nearly as strong as the one mentioned above. Thereby, these mothers felt particularly strong about family-related responsibilities hampering their work-related duties when they had returned to work because of having worries related to work and career. The weakest association for mothers without a partner on care-related leave was the negative association between *personal importance of work* and FWC, whereas for mothers with a partner on care-related leave, the weakest association was found between

dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering and WFC. The return-to-work reasons, together with the control variables, explained greater proportion of the variance for WFC than for FWC in both groups of mothers.

Our model did not display a statistically significant moderation effect between the dimensions of reasons for returning to work and having a partner on care-related leave in relation to WFC or FWC [$\chi^2(17) = 17.73$, $p = .406$, ΔCFI = .00, ΔTLI = .00, ΔRMSEA = −0.001]. This indicates that having a partner on care-related leave did not buffer the conflict. To demonstrate that the result was not dependent on the measure used as the moderating variable, the same analyses were performed with different continuous moderators (e.g. partner's care-related leave measured in weeks) and categorical moderators. The results, however, were unchanged.

Discussion

This study examined the return-to-work reasons among Finnish mothers with a one-year-old child, how these reasons are related to the mothers' background characteristics and work–family conflict and whether having a partner on care-related leave protects against the conflict. Our analyses revealed four dimensions of return-to-work reasons: personal importance of work, work- and career-related worries, dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering and convenient work/childcare conditions. These return-to-work reasons were in line with those found in previous studies (e.g. Baxter, 2008; Sihto, 2015) although, in contrast to previous findings (e.g. Luotonen, 2013) and our expectation (H1), we did not discover a dimension denoting a return to work due to financial reasons. Perhaps, the mothers in our study did not need to emphasise the financial situation as a reason for their return due to the generosity of the compensation levels relating to care-related leaves in Finland. Another possible explanation is the high educational background of the participating mothers, for

whom the financial aspect of work may not have been a central reason for returning to work (see Sihto, 2015).

Drawing on the demands-and-resources approach (Voydanoff, 2005) we expected that the return-to-work reasons would be differently associated with WFC and FWC, according to whether the reasons were a resource or a demand by nature. According to our findings, *personal importance of work* as a return-to-work reason was associated with low WFC and FWC. This indicates that when the mothers highlighted having returned to work because work is important or beneficial for their self-fulfilment, they did not perceive that the time and energy resources invested in their work and family roles would hamper the fulfilment of the demands associated with the other role. These findings agree with our hypothesis (H3a); the personal importance of work can, perhaps, be considered as a psychological asset that has the potential to facilitate the combination of work- and family-related demands (Voydanoff, 2005) and thus reduce overall work–family conflict. Our results, partly in accordance with the original hypothesis (H2), further suggested that mothers who consider the personal importance of work as a key reason for returning to work are more likely to be privileged in terms of education, income and work during daytime and full-time hours. Thereby, these mothers may have more rewarding jobs for career progression and more interesting employment opportunities than mothers with lower educational and income levels (see Damaske, 2011; Sihto, 2015), and thus returning to work that the mother enjoys offers these mothers a work-related resource to cope with simultaneous work and family responsibilities.

Another finding that coheres with our hypothesis (H3a) is the association of high *convenient work/childcare conditions* with low WFC. The finding suggests that the more the mothers emphasised suitable working hours and childcare placement as the reasons for returning to work, the less they perceived that the resources allocated for their work roles would complicate fulfilling their family roles. This result resonates with previous findings,

according to which work autonomy, flexible work schedules or opportunities to work fewer hours, for example, facilitate mothers' early return to work (e.g. Luotonen, 2013; Sihto, 2015) and, along with finding suitable childcare arrangements, may ease the reconciliation of work and family (Baxter, 2008). Work schedules that give mothers a chance to work and to provide care can be considered as a structural asset to help the mother reconcile work demands and those relating to the care of the child (Voydanoff, 2005). Indeed, our results indicated that convenient work/childcare conditions as a return-to-work reason was emphasised particularly by mothers with daytime working hours, which have been found to facilitate the combination work and childcare more compared to non-standard working hours (Moilanen et al., 2016), and by mothers with higher income that can provide more opportunities for also purchasing childcare and thereby relieving the simultaneous demands associated with work and childcare. It is also possible that these mothers express strong family devotion (Blair-Loy, 2003) and thus lower their work commitments and make temporary sacrifices in terms of the content of their work to adjust to the challenges of combining work and caring for a young child (see Luotonen, 2013; Sihto, 2015).

It is rather unexpected that returning to work because of *convenient work/childcare conditions* was not associated with FWC (H3a). Perhaps suitable work hours and convenient childcare arrangements, when the mother is at work, helps to reduce particularly the experience of work-related stress, which can facilitate the reconciliation of work demands with family responsibilities, hence the significant association only with WFC. Another possible explanation is methodological; namely, of the three items measuring *convenient work/childcare conditions* as a return-to-work reason, two items were related to work conditions and both reflected this dimension of return-to-work reasons more strongly than the one relating to childcare placement. Because work-related antecedents are shown to have stronger associations with WFC than FWC (e.g. Michel et al., 2011), this could help in

explaining the non-significant association between *convenient work/childcare conditions* and FWC. However, more research is needed to further examine these associations.

Work- and career-related worries as reasons for returning to work were associated with high WFC and FWC. These reasons were considered to be demanding by nature, including worry over losing one's job or fear of a long absence compromising one's career. As the mothers must adapt to the requirement of returning to work, they need to exert physical or mental effort, which possibly leads to high work–family conflict (Voydanoff, 2005). The finding thus supports our hypothesis (H3b) and indicates that the more the mothers emphasised their return comprised work- and career-related worries, the more they perceived that the allocation of resources for work-related demands made fulfilling their family-related responsibilities difficult, and vice versa. High levels of both types of work–family conflict may be an indication of both family- and work-devoted mothers adhering to traditional gender-role attitudes (Steiner et al., 2019), which supports the culturally held view of maternal care as the best form of care for a young child (e.g. Hays, 1996), and thus perceiving that the return was either premature (family-devoted mothers) or that there is too little time to spend with the children due to work demands (work-devoted mothers) (Blair-Loy, 2003). Returning to work may therefore contradict the mothers' views of what they and society consider as the *proper* thing to do as mothers (Blair-Loy, 2003; Sihto, 2015).

According to our findings, mothers with higher educational level, higher income and daytime working hours emphasised that they had returned to work because of work- and career-related worries, which partly supports our hypothesis (H2). These mothers may thus represent women in precarious employment situations, possibly occupying higher-status managerial and professional jobs, who have returned to work earlier than preferred because of fear over their jobs and career progression and diminishing skills (see Baxter, 2008; Sihto, 2015), which is likely to lead to high work–family conflict. Another explanation relates to the

high degree of responsibilities associated with managerial and professional jobs, which may be time consuming and thus clash with the mother's perception of working conditions that would best facilitate her work–family reconciliation (see Luotonen, 2013). Such incompatibility together with having had to return to work because of the worries about one's career may cause these mothers to experience high WFC. Also, in pursuit of advancing one's career, a mother of a young child may experience high FWC when trying to combine the family-related responsibilities with a job that involves a lot of time-consuming duties and the expectation of working overtime hours during one's free time (Damaske, 2011; Sihto, 2015).

Unexpectedly, we also discovered that *dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering* was related to high WFC: the more the mothers highlighted that the return was motivated by having missed the company of adults and by perceiving that full-time childcare was not for them, the more they expressed that work demands hampered the fulfilment of their family responsibilities. Although these reasons indicate that work is something that mothers like to do and that offers them a break from childcare, which could mean that it is perceived as a psychological resource that contributes to low levels of work–family conflict (Voydanoff, 2005), our finding counteracted this presumption. Again, a possible explanation for the finding relates to culturally shared moral commitments for mothers (Blair-Loy, 2003) and assumptions concerning gender roles in Finland. Explicitly, it is conceivable that due to the social pressure for mothers to care for their young children (e.g. Hays, 1996; Hietamäki et al., 2018), rationalising the return to work in a way that does not support such a view may arouse feelings of guilt, which can strengthen the impact of role pressures and lead to more conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Indeed, this return-to-work reason was emphasized by mothers with higher income, so, as described above, these mothers may find it difficult to combine their heavy work-related demands related to higher-status jobs with their family responsibilities. Guilt can also be triggered by contradictory demands on mothers (Blair-Loy,

2003; Perälä-Littunen, 2018), substantiated by the ambivalence of the Finnish work–family policy in supporting *both* full-time maternal work through comprehensive ECEC services *and* full-time mothering through child home care allowance (Repo, 2010). Moreover, both mothers and fathers may continue to consider the mother as the primary parent and caregiver even after her return to work (Perälä-Littunen, 2018). As a result, mothers may shoulder most of the childcare work, which, together with time and energy consuming work demands, can lead to high WFC.

Based on previous research (see Michel et al., 2011) we expected (H4) that the partner's involvement in the provision of a routine and solo care for the child would facilitate the demands associated with work and family demands and, thus, buffer mothers' experience of work–family conflict. Our results, however, did not provide support for this expectation. It could be that due to the gendered nature of work and family roles, mothers may take on a larger part of the reconciliation work despite sharing the childcare responsibility with the partner, especially right after returning to work (e.g. Lammi-Taskula, 2017), which may result in them experiencing conflict. Moreover, even if the father stays at home, he may still support the belief of the mother being the primary parent and caregiver, which may not facilitate her family demands to the extent that the experience of conflict is relieved (Perälä-Littunen, 2018). Leach et al. (2006: 495) further note that 'feelings of regret, anxiety or guilt may be common to all new mothers, whatever their employment or child care status.' Thereby, returning to work after care-related leave can be an overwhelming time with competing demands and thus lead to high levels of conflict despite the partner's involvement in childcare. However, more studies are needed to probe into the impact of fathers' take-up of care-related leave on mothers' work–family conflict.

Limitations

Regarding the generalisability of the results, the key limitation of the present study is the over-representativeness of mothers with high educational backgrounds. Although highly educated mothers tend to return to work earlier than mothers with lower educational backgrounds (Hietamäki et al., 2018), the results may be generalisable only to mothers with tertiary education. However, in terms of the age of the mother and the number of children, the participants of the present study correspond to the population of Finnish mothers in general. Second, the cross-sectional data does not provide insights concerning the causal relationship of the studied associations, and thereby, reverse causality is possible. Finally, the effect sizes (β) in the ESEM analyses ranged from small to medium (Cohen, 1988). Thereby, it would be ideal if future research could study other possible aspects (e.g. gender role ideals, the partner's work characteristics) that may influence mothers' experiences of work–family conflict upon their return to work.

Policy implications

Overall, our results revealed that mothers with similar background characteristics return to work for multiple reasons. Accordingly, our findings suggested that mothers with higher income and daytime working hours, for instance, may be privileged in terms of emphasising their return to work because of personal importance of work as well as convenient work and childcare conditions, both of which can facilitate the overall work–family reconciliation. At the same time, however, the same mothers emphasised such return-to-work reasons that associated with high conflict between work and family roles. Our findings, thus, reveal the complex nature of the combination of work and family responsibilities of mothers with young children in a way that there are simultaneous demands and resources in relation to both work and family spheres. Hence, by investing in the resources and acknowledging the demands

attached to different return-to-work reasons, policies on national and workplace levels can facilitate mothers' experiences of work–family reconciliation.

Our results indicated that suitable working and childcare conditions that enable the successful combination of working with caring for a young child are particularly important in relieving the tensions between returning to work and family responsibilities. Thereby, in terms of working conditions, policymakers should perhaps invest more effort in supporting the opportunity to work part-time among those parents of young children who wish to do so. The general view in Finland supports maternal part-time work as the best way to reconcile work and care for young children (Edlund and Öun, 2016); yet, part-time work is not prevalent in Finland (Salin et al., 2018). The danger in encouraging only women to work part-time, however, lies in the possibility of reducing women's focus on career advancement and of increasing job or occupational sex segregation and a larger gender earning gap (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011). Moreover, because convenient work and childcare conditions as a reason for returning to work was emphasised particularly by mothers with higher income and daytime working hours, policy interventions should seek mothers with lower income and non-standard working hours. To make part-time work a viable option for parents, therefore, requires making it more readily available also to parents who work during non-standard hours and ensuring that it provides adequate wages and pensions. In addition, considering the previous findings that have emphasised the challenges that mothers who work during non-standard hours encounter with regard to childcare arrangements (Moilanen et al., 2016) and work–family conflict (Moilanen et al., 2019), policy makers should pay special attention to mothers of young children working outside daytime hours when seeking solutions to the issues attached to work–family reconciliation. All in all, convenient childcare conditions continue to be at the centre of policy attention also in the future because the

childcare provision needs to be adjusted to the changes in the working conditions, for example, the increase in remote work, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although our results did not provide support for the expectation that partners' take-up of care-related leave protects against the conflict experienced by mothers, we do not wish to imply that policies should not continue to encourage fathers' share of these leaves. Instead, family policy in Finland should, perhaps, be more explicit in allocating a larger share of family leave *solely* to fathers. Currently, only nine weeks of paternity leave are ring-fenced for fathers, which may encourage the gendered use of care-related leave (Närvi, 2018). That said, a new family leave model in Finland, which aims to facilitate gender equality both in families and working life by providing an opportunity for parents in two-parent families to divide family leave equally between parents is planned to enter into force in 2022. Although the new model sends an important cultural message with an aim to balance the connection between maternal responsibility and the division of household labour and childcare between the parents, the cultural perception of mothers as primary caregivers remains strong, which may challenge the reform of family policy in extending leave rights for men. In order to encourage fathers' larger share of care-related leave, general assumptions concerning the gendered division of labour should change towards a more gender-equal approach.

Even if policies do not necessarily have the power to change social attitudes and behaviours with regard to the gendered assumptions around work and family, national-level policies can encourage workplaces to invest in 'family-friendly' policies (Abendroth and Den Dulk, 2011). Managers, for example, can offer mothers work arrangements that can facilitate work and family demands. In particular, workplace policies that aim at increasing the quality or frequency of flexible work arrangements are found to ease work and family demands (Hegewisch and Gornick, 2011; Luotonen, 2013) and encourage mothers' earlier return to work. Finally, given the association between personal enjoyment of work as a return-to-work

reason and low work–family conflict, in an attempt to facilitate mothers' work–family reconciliation upon their return to work, it would be important to find ways to support the work enjoyment of employees at the organisational level across different professions.

Conclusions

The present study has contributed to the field of work–family research by providing new knowledge on the associations between the reasons that mothers of young children have for returning to work and work–family conflict. The study has also provided potential means to facilitate mothers' experiences of work–family conflict during their transition back to the labour market, which can be used to encourage mothers' earlier return to work after parental leave. Policies have a key role in alleviating mothers' work–family conflict by, for example, supporting working times and childcare possibilities that cohere with the general as well as parents' own views of how to best reconcile work and family. Such policies have the potential to promote gender equality in the labour market in addition to benefitting the economic situation of the families, mothers' career progression and the wellbeing of family members.

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Note

1. Although a moderating effect of partners on care-related leave was not found, the results are presented separately for the two groups as partial strict invariance was found for the measurement model of work–family conflict.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for background characteristics, work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts.

Variables		Mothers without a partner on care-related leave (n = 404)			Mothers with a partner on care-related leave (n = 168)		
	Range	*M*/%	*SD*	α	*M*/%	*SD*	α
Background characteristics							
Number of children	1–8	1.71	0.98		1.57	0.91	
Educational level[a]	0–1	84.4			88.7		
Net monthly income	1–10	6.01	1.73		5.10	1.17	
Working time pattern[b]	0–1	23.0			13.1		
Working hours[c]	0–1	68.3			73.8		
Work–family conflict							
Work-to-family conflict	1–7	3.25	1.27	.77	3.69	1.23	.76
Family-to-work conflict	1–7	2.51	1.09	.75	2.55	0.98	.70

Notes: [a]0 = non-tertiary, 1 = tertiary; [b]0 = daytime working hours, 1 = non-standard working hours; [c]0 = part-time, 1 = full-time.

Table 2. The dimensions of mothers' return-to-work reasons, correlations between the dimensions and reliability coefficients for the dimensions (N = 573).

Items		Loadings			
		F1	F2	F3	F4
		Personal importance of work	*Work- and career-related worries*	*Dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering*	*Convenient work/ childcare conditions*
2.	I am able to realise my potential at work	**0.651**	0.065	0.262	−0.051
3.	I was worried I would lose my job	−0.037	**0.756**	0.012	−0.038
4.	The changes at workplace were coming	−0.018	**0.651**	0.035	−0.001
5.	I missed the company of other adults	0.195	−0.016	**0.657**	0.010
7.	I like my job	**0.928**	−0.061	−0.025	0.045
8.	The atmosphere at my place of work is good	**0.592**	−0.061	−0.036	0.259
10.	My job is suitably light	0.001	0.030	−0.019	**0.587**
11.	Full-time childcare is not for me	0.085	−0.014	**0.546**	0.058
13.	My line manager asked me to go back to work	−0.059	**0.489**	−0.056	0.155
14.	I had to go back because of the situation of work	0.067	**0.622**	−0.152	0.145
16.	My job is important to me	**0.683**	0.089	0.267	0.001
18.	I was worried a long absence would compromise my opportunities for career progression	0.049	**0.504**	0.246	−0.051
19.	My child was given the suitable child care placement	−0.002	0.125	0.192	**0.374**
20.	I wanted a change	−0.051	−0.045	**0.695**	0.286
21.	The working hours are convenient	0.109	0.016	0.124	**0.652**
Correlations between the dimensions					
	F1	—			
	F2	.21*	—		
	F3	.31*	−.02	—	
	F4	.36*	.13	.24*	—
Cronbach's alphas					
	Mothers without a stay-at-home partner	.87	.73	.74	.58
	Mothers with a stay-at-home partner	.84	.67	.73	.62

Notes: *$p < .05$

Table 3. Associations between mothers' background characteristics and the dimensions denoting the return-to-work reasons (Spearman correlations)

	Return-to-work reasons			
	F1	F2	F3	F4
	Personal importance of work	*Work- and career-related worries*	*Dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering*	*Convenient work/childcare conditions*
Number of children	.09*	−.06	.01	.03
Educational level[a]	.13**	.18***	.08	.08
Net monthly income	.19***	.14**	.22***	.10*
Working time pattern[b]	−.14**	−.21***	−.08	−.18***
Working hours[c]	.09*	.08	.04	−.06

Notes: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; [a]0 = non-tertiary, 1 = tertiary; [b]0 = daytime working hours, 1 = non-standard working hours; [c]0 = part-time, 1 = full-time.

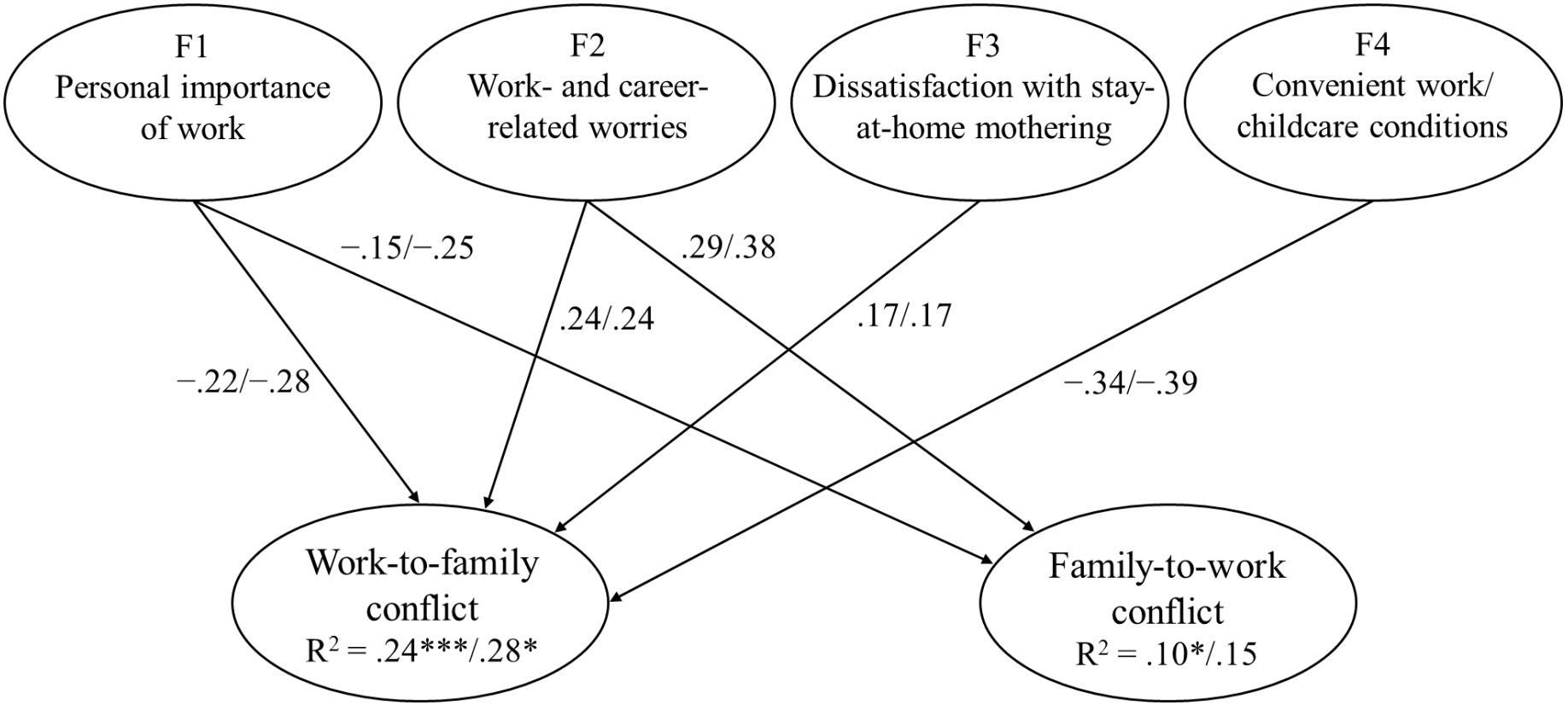


FIGURE 1. The final ESEM model. Mothers without a partner on care-related leave/Mothers with a partner on care-related leave. Only statistically significant standardized estimates ($p < .05$) are presented. For the sake of clarity, correlations between dimensions of return-to-work reasons and factor loadings are omitted.
Notes: *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$

Appendix 1. Family leave scheme in Finland in 2020

Family Leave Scheme	Length and Timing	Entitlement	Compensation
Maternity leave	Paid for 105 days, starting earliest 50 days and latest 30 days before the due date. The mother can decide about the exact time when to start the leave.	Mother	Income-based, in the beginning of the leave approximately 90% and after 56 days approximately 70% of the monthly income. Minimum compensation was about €700 per month in 2020.
Paternity leave	Paid for 54 days of which 1–18 days can overlap maternity leave. The father can take the rest of the days after the parental leave, but before the child turns two years.	Father	Approximately 70% of the monthly income. Minimum compensation as above.
Parental leave	Starts after the maternity leave and lasts for 158 days (until the child is about 9 months old).	Both of the parents, but not at the same time	Approximately 70% of the monthly income. Minimum compensation as above.
Care leave and home care allowance	The home care allowance can be paid after the parental leave, but not during the paternity leave, until the child turns three years. The allowance is not paid for a child who attends public/publicly supported early childhood education and care.	Both of the parents; can also be paid to a caretaker outside the family.	The home care allowance consists of a care allowance and a care supplement. The care allowance is not affected by the family's income. In 2020, the care allowance amounted to €341.69 per month for one child under 3 years of age. Care allowance increases if there are other under school-aged children in the family who do not attend early childhood education and care. Care supplement is income-based. In 2020, the maximum amount of the supplement was €182.86 per month.
Flexible care allowance	Can be paid until the child reaches the age of three years, if the parent works no more than 30 hours per week on average or no more than 80% of the normal full-time hours.	Both of the parents, also at the same time	The amount of the compensation depends on the number of working hours per week/working time.

Sources: Kela (2019), also Eerola et al. (2019)

Appendix 2. Pearson's correlations of the 21 items of return-to-work reasons ($N = 573$).

Items		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	The finance of the family was tight.	–	-.20*	.25**	.16	-.09	.04	-.12	.09	.06
2	I am able to realise my potential at work.	-.25***	–	.13	.15	.36***	.18*	.63***	.31***	.29***
3	I was worried I would lose my job.	-.01	.07	–	.52***	-.07	.08	.09	.03	-.08
4	The changes at workplace were coming.	-.14*	.08	.54***	–	.07	.12	.09	.07	.09
5	I missed the company of other adults.	-.12*	.46***	.02	.06	–	.24**	.45***	.30***	.24**
6	I got new job.	.00	.15**	.09	.12*	.06	–	.11	.09	.04
7	I like my job.	-.20***	.68***	.06	.08	.33***	.15**	–	.59***	.33***
8	The atmosphere at my place of work is good.	-.05	.48***	.05	.09	.32***	.07	.66***	–	.37***
9	My job pays well.	-.13**	.27***	.11*	.14**	.16**	.09	.30***	.26***	–
10	My job is suitably light.	-.04	.15**	.06	.07	.10	.02	.19***	.25***	.24***
11	Full-time childcare is not for me.	-.15**	.33***	-.01	-.03	.46***	-.08	.25***	.19***	.20***
12	My partner stayed looking after our child.	-.17**	.10*	-.01	.02	.09	.00	.07	.07	.12*
13	My line manager asked me to go back to work.	-.05	.05	.26***	.34***	.03	.06	.01	.05	.16**
14	I had to go back because of the situation of work.	-.16**	.14**	.43***	.39***	-.05	.23***	.16**	.14**	.09
15	Maintaining of the professional skills.	-.26***	.48***	.20***	.17**	.35***	.17**	.42***	.33***	.27***
16	My job is important to me.	-.24***	.67***	.14**	.12*	.46***	.09	.71***	.51***	.33***
17	My return made financial sense.	.06	.00	.07	.15**	-.04	.07	.04	.03	.09
18	I was worried a long absence would compromise my opportunities for career progression.	-.15**	.29***	.45***	.31***	.16**	.15**	.17**	.13*	.20***
19	My child was given the suitable childcare placement.	-.06	.24***	.09	.15**	.23***	.15**	.22***	.27***	.21***
20	I wanted a change.	-.18**	.37***	-.02	.01	.56***	.07	.24***	.28***	.10
21	The working hours are convenient.	-.13*	.40***	.01	.03	.29***	.09	.41***	.41***	.21***

Notes: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; correlations for mothers with a partner on care-related leave above the diagonal and mothers without a partner on care-related leave below the diagonal; a 5-point response scale: 1 = very little or not at all–5 = very much.

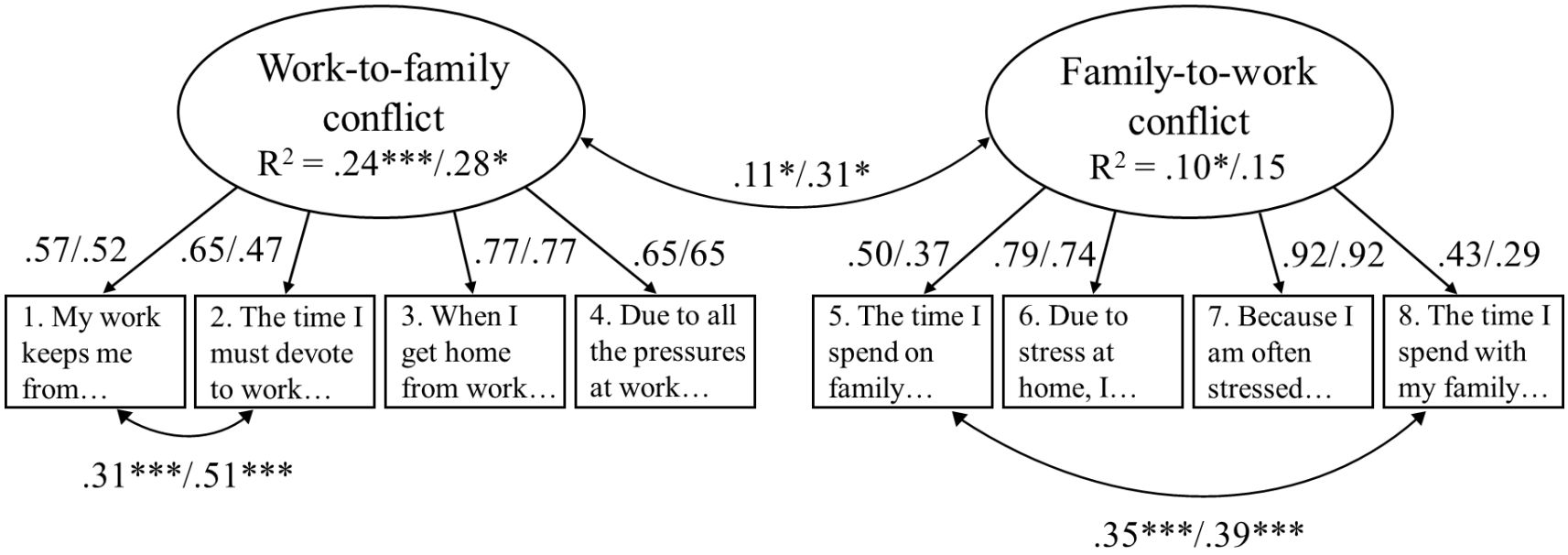
Appendix 2. (Continued)

Items	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
1	.06	.05	-.21*	.10	.05	-.08	-.12	.36***	-.04	-.07	-.14	-.03
2	.10	.18*	.07	.10	.19*	.52***	.66***	.03	.27**	.06	.24**	.19*
3	.06	-.03	-.07	.31***	.47***	.20*	.10	.10	.35***	-.04	-.13	.03
4	.20*	.08	.12	.10	.29***	.18*	.09	.04	.26**	-.03	-.00	.15
5	.19*	.45***	.15	.04	-.10	.26**	.41***	.08	.09	.05	.56***	.25**
6	.05	.06	.02	.05	.17*	.22**	.09	-.03	.12	.00	.21*	.13
7	.25**	.28**	.07	.16*	.20*	.36***	.70***	.09	.15	.13	.25**	.28**
8	.41***	.12	.06	.10	.13	.22**	.46***	.24**	.02	.15	.22**	.28**
9	.34***	.23**	.17*	.18*	.17*	.33***	.36***	.44***	.13	.19*	.23**	.19*
10	–	.30***	.01	.17*	.17*	.08	.19*	.21*	-.00	.26**	.28**	.53***
11	.12*	–	-.04	.09	.03	.14	.31***	.17*	.13	.26**	.43***	.27**
12	.05	.10	–	-.05	-.09	-.03	.16	.02	-.08	-.11	.07	.00
13	.09	-.06	.04	–	.51***	.24**	.22**	.26**	.12	.09	-.03	.03
14	.07	-.05	.03	.54***	–	.26**	.23**	.13	.29***	.10	-.09	.01
15	.10	.19***	.05	.19***	.27***	–	.54***	.24**	.50***	.22**	.22**	.17*
16	.19***	.37***	.11*	.05	.15**	.55***	–	.24**	.34***	.07	.34***	.22**
17	.07	.08	.03	.07	.06	.13*	.08	–	.19*	.11	.11	.13
18	.12*	.17**	.13*	.16**	.26***	.48***	.31***	.24***	–	.14	.13	.04
19	.11*	.14*	-.08	.19***	.18**	.29***	.29***	.08	.20***	–	.29**	.32***
20	.19***	.46***	.07	.02	.01	.31***	.36***	-.01	.18***	.32***	–	.38***
21	.44***	.21***	.04	.09	.20***	.35***	.44***	.00	.18***	.41***	.41***	–

Notes: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; correlations for mothers with a partner on care-related leave above the diagonal and mothers without a partner on care-related leave below the diagonal; a 5-point response scale: 1 = very little or not at all – 5 = very much.

Appendix 3.

The two-dimensional measurement model for work–family conflict was examined via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The CFA was chosen as the method of data analysis as our aim was to test whether the established two-dimensional structure (Carlson et al., 2000) was supported also by our data. The initial CFA measurement model of work–family conflict did not fit the data: $\chi^2(19) = 168.49$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = 0.12 [90% CI = 0.10; 0.13], CFI = 0.87, TLI = 0.81, SRMR = .06. The modification indices (MI) suggested that model fit could be improved by estimating the residual covariance between items 1 and 2 ('My work keeps me from my family more than I would like', 'The time I must devote to my work keeps me from participating equally in household responsibilities and activities', respectively) measuring time-based WFC (MI = 62.53) and items 6 and 8 ('Due to stress at home, I'm often preoccupied with family matters at work', 'The time I spend with my family often causes me not to spend time on activities at work that could be helpful to my career', respectively) measuring FWC (MI = 69.91). After adding these, the model showed good fit with the whole data: $\chi^2(17) = 41.32$, $p < .001$; RMSEA = 0.05 [90% CI = 0.03; 0.07], CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.96, SRMR = .03. The factor loadings were reasonably high, and the residual variances of the observed variables were positive and statistically significant (Appendix 4).



Appendix 4. The measurement model of work–family conflict. Standardized regression coefficients are presented for mothers without a partner on care-related leave/mothers with a partner on care-related leave.
Notes: *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$

Appendix 5.

Prior to the invariance comparisons of the dimensions of return-to-work reasons across mothers with and mothers without a stay-at-home partner, we first estimated the four-factor EFA solution of the return-to-work reasons using ESEM. Although the fit of the model was relatively good [$\chi^2(51) = 195.15$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.89, RMSEA = 0.07 (90% CI: 0.06; 0.08)], inspection of the MIs suggested that the model fit could be improved by estimating the residual covariance between items 13 'My line manager asked me to go back to work' and 14 'I had to go back because of the situation of work' (MI = 81.85). After this theoretically meaningful modification, the model fitted the data well: $\chi^2(50) = 113.49$, $p < .001$, CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.05 [90% CI: 0.04; 0.06].

Measurement invariance comparisons across the two groups of mothers for the four-factor structure of the return-to-work reasons provided support for strict invariance (i.e. Model 3ain Table A.6.; Putnick & Bornstein, 2016). This indicates that mothers in the two groups exhibited the same meaning attribution regarding the dimensions, their response style to the items was similar and the measurement error of the items was of a similar magnitude for both groups.

Measurement invariance comparisons of the structure of work–family conflict across the mothers with and mothers without a stay-at-home partner showed partial strict invariance (Model 3bp in Appendix 6): the intercept and residual variance of item 2 'The time I must devote to my work keeps me from participating equally in household responsibilities and activities' was not equal across the groups, suggesting that although mothers from the two groups exhibited the same meaning attribution regarding WFC (i.e. loadings were equal across the groups), the response style and measurement error between the groups was different (Marsh et al., 2005) with

regard to item 2. Regarding the rest of the WFC items and all the FWC items, complete strict invariance was obtained.

Appendix 6. Measurement invariance comparisons of return-to-work reasons (model a) and work–family conflict (model b) for the presence of a partner on care-related leave.

Invariance models for return-to-work reasons		χ^2 value	*df*	Scaling correction	χ^2 difference test $\chi^2(df)$[a]	CFI	ΔCFI	TLI	ΔTLI	RMSEA (90% CI)	ΔRMSEA	SRMR
1a	Equal loadings	996.95	578	1.01	—	0.90		0.87		0.05 (0.05; 0.06)		
2a	Equal loadings and intercepts	1082.59	601	1.01	model 2a vs. 1a 88.06(23)***	0.89	−.01	0.86	−.01	0.05 (0.05; 0.06)	.00	
3a	Equal loadings, intercepts and residuals	1097.32	619	1.01	model 3a vs. 2a 15.78(18)	0.89	−.00	0.87	.00	0.05 (0.05; 0.06)	.00	
Invariance models for work-family conflict		χ^2 value	*df*	Scaling correction	χ^2 difference test $\chi^2(df)$[a]	CFI	ΔCFI	TLI	ΔTLI	RMSEA (90% CI)	ΔRMSEA	SRMR
1b	Equal loadings	64.34	40	1.07	—	0.98		0.97		0.05 (0.02; 0.07)		0.04
2b	Equal loadings and intercepts	90.97	46	1.06	model 2b vs. 1b 27.77(6)***	0.96	−.02	0.95	−.02	0.06 (0.04; 0.08)	+.01	0.06
2bp.	Equal loadings and partial intercepts	81.22	45	1.06	model 2bp. vs. 1b 17.60(5)***	0.97	−.01	0.96	−.01	0.05 (0.03; 0.07)	.00	0.05
3bp.	Equal loadings, partial intercepts and residuals	89.98	52	1.08	model 3bp. vs 2bp. 9.17(7)	0.97	.00	0.96	.00	0.05 (0.03; 0.07)	.00	0.06

Notes: [a]A reference model fits the data better if $p < .05$; p. = partial invariance; Δ = change. ***$p < .001$.

Appendix 7. Spearman's correlations of the study variables for mothers with and without a partner on care-related leave ($N = 573$).

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	Number of children	-	-.15	.05	.13	-.14	.14	-.01	-.06	-.02	.02	.06
2	Educational level[a]	.03	-	.37***	-.57***	.43***	.19*	.16*	-.01	.04	.04	.02
3	Net monthly income	.15**	.32***	-	-.19*	.12	.11	.10	.15	.13	-.02	.00
4	Working time pattern[b]	.01	-.32***	-.23***	-	-.42***	-.21*	-.07	-.11	-.09	.01	.07
5	Working hours[c]	-.05	.06	.18***	-.27***	-	.16*	.02	.05	-.12	.12	-.12
6	F1 Personal importance of work	.06	.11*	.20***	-.14**	.08	-	.30***	.38***	.28***	-.16*	.00
7	F2 Work- and career-related worries	-.07	.18***	.15**	-.26***	.11*	.27***	-	.05	.16*	.16*	.23**
8	F3 Dissatisfaction with stay-at-home mothering	-.00	.11*	.21***	-.08	.04	.45***	.12*	-	.41***	-.19*	.02
9	F4 Convenient work/childcare conditions	.05	.10*	.05	-.22***	-.02	.43***	.28***	.35***	-	-.24**	.02
10	Work-to-family conflict	-.02	-.06	-.08	.13*	.09	-.24***	.04	-.08	-.25***	-	.23**
11	Family-to-work conflict	.06	.19***	.14**	-.23***	.07	.01	.24***	.05	.05	.29***	-

Notes: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$; [a]0 = non-tertiary, 1 = tertiary; [b]0 = daytime working hours, 1 = non-standard working hours; [c]0 = part time, 1 = full time; correlations for mothers with a partner on care-related leave above the diagonal and mothers without a partner on care-related leave below the diagonal.