

# The Pathology of Family Roles of Couples in case of Male Employment in the Offshore Oil Industry (Qualitative Study)

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Men employment in the offshore oil industry is coupled with their intermittent absence from the family, a deficiency which has made it difficult for couples to fulfill their family duties. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to identify the pathologies of couples' family duties when the men need to work offshore. **Methodology:** The present study was conducted through a qualitative content analysis approach; it included 28 subjects who were selected purposefully. The participants included 18 employees, 5 experts, 3 wives and 2 managers, with at least 5 years of experience in the field. Required data collected through interview and observation; it was written word for word, and analyzed using qualitative content analysis method. The sampling ended when data and categories saturation was realized. **Findings:** Data analysis led to the emergence of three main abstract categories, including "work-family conflict", "female's roles overload" and "disorder in the parenting role of the father"; each of these categories included three subcategories, providing a total number of 9 subcategories. **Conclusion:** Offshore employment for men in the oil industry has caused an imbalance in the allocation of, and response to, family roles among couples, resulting in duty conflict. Therefore, the empowerment of couples and implementation of educational programs are essential in order to optimize the responsiveness of couples to family roles.

**Key Words:** Family Role, Offshore Job, Oil Industry

## Introduction

Family and work are considered as the main dimensions of each individual's life; therefore, discussing and studying these two issues, and creating balance between them, is of paramount importance in human life (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006) Since offshore work Schedule in the oil industry is based on 14 days on (12 hours a day) and 14 days off, this situation has created a kind of family interaction involving continuous periodic two-week absence of the husband from home that affects the status of the family and spouse. This pattern of work imposes significant necessities, certain psychological and social adaptation, and specific barriers and complications both for the individual and their families (Clark and et al, 1985; Lewis, Porter & Shrimpton, 1988).

Katz and Kahn (1978) believe that roles determine the types of nature of behaviors expected from each individual. When expectations between roles are incompatible, work or family problems are possible occur (Amazue, 2008; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Interference of work and family results in additional role demands for both women and men (Greenhaus and et al, 2001). The role theory explicitly explains how different areas of social life, such as work and family, make certain role demands from each individual, causing ultimately conflict in human life (Michel and et al, 20097).

Role conflict is one of the most recognized problems in a successful combination of occupational and family roles. This conflict, which

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is a special type of conflict between roles, is relevant to different time demands and incompatibilities which involve an individual with simultaneous dual responsibilities at work and family (Paden, 1995). Such a conflict can lead to family and occupational distress at the individual level, and depression, reduced job and family life satisfaction, reduced life happiness, increased risk for couples' health, poor performance of parental and spousal duties, distemper, poorer mental health and eventually weakening of marital compatibility on a larger scale (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991). According to the role theory, people who struggle with interference of family and professional roles have to do a great effort in order to meet the simultaneous opposite demands of the two areas of the family and work, in which case emotional exhaustion will be inevitable. According to the theory of identity, humans have multiple and important identity roles on which they spend considerable amount of capital and energy. Thus, the conflict between family and work, as an obstacle, causes the unfulfillment, or improper fulfillment, family and work identity roles; this identity failure, in turn, creates an undesirable emotional and excite mental situation, the ultimate result of which is emotional exhaustion (Yavas and et al, 2008).

Duxbury and Higgins (1991) identify increased family or work expectations as role time pressure as one of the active mechanisms, the reason being that role expectations in the area of work or family leads to role overloading; this overabundance of expectations pushes the pressures dominating the individual's time into another role and interferes with the expectations related to performing another role. The positive relationship between the feeling about the hardships of family role and family conflict with work is based on the argument that the amount of time required for a role (work or family) creates a time limit for playing another role. As a result, with a large time committed to a role, time devoted to another role will, inevitable, be lost (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991). Therefore, work-family conflict emerges when people are entangled in a situation where they must fulfill separate roles that require time, energy, and commitment, roles which interfere with one another (Jones and et al, 2007).

The research and background literature on the issue of the family of offshore employees has repeatedly emphasized the concepts of change, transfer, adjustment and adaptation. While all families face situational and developmental changes that require a way to regulate their functioning and the way they communicate, it is necessary to pay more attention to the performance conditions of offshore workers' families. Change is stressful for the family of offshore employees; thus, a way must be discovered, and implemented, to respond to such change and maintain the living condition. The nature of offshore work involves frequent family constraints and transfers which create a different situation in comparison to non-offshore work. There is a general public perception of offshore work according to which this kind of work will put pressure on the status of marriage and families and could lead to the failure of the marriage of the individuals with such working conditions (Taylor & Simmonds, 2009).

The exploration and production of oil and gas in the offshore and other remote areas from home is regarded as a job which separates individuals physically and culturally from home and family. Although the perspective of the work is suitable for production, the social and economic significance of work emphasizes the observation of the nature of relationship between male employees active in the industry with their wives, friends and family (Lewis, Porter & Shrimpton, 1988). While the management of family affairs and participatory decision-makings are dependent on continuous access and parental communication, offshore workers are usually away from home for family ceremonies and important life events (Parkes and et al, 2005; Reynolds, 2004). Offshore workers often, due to several hours of travel, arrive home exhausted. Separation and rejoining are generally recognized as the most difficult emotional moments for couples and families (Gallegos, 2005). Offshore employees' family way of living may cause pressure and, then, change in the roles, and this could be in conflict with the expectations of family roles. When offshore employees are away from home, the wife assumes more responsibility for managing home and children, maintaining relationships with the relatives and friends and making independent decisions. In addition, family responsibilities are more demanding for those wives who work outside. According to reports, independence for most of the wives has had negative outcomes, such as conflict of authority or distrust (Taylor & Simmonds, 2009).

The researcher's study to discover the research background indicates that most of the research carried out abroad in the field of rotational work are related to safety, health and physical and psychological stresses (Parkes, 2012; Bjerkan, 2010; Gardner, 2003; Haward and et al, 2009; Niven & McLeod, 2009), as well as the role of management methods and organizational behaviors in safety and health of marine oil facilities (Hystad and et al, 2014; Dov, 2008); however, there has been no in-depth scientific research regarding the status of family roles in case of men's frequent absence from home, by considering the cultural and social structure of Iran. Therefore, due to the subjective nature of the subject, little knowledge and the need to look deeply into the subject, employing the qualitative research method, with the pattern of naturalism, seems to be necessary; consequently, the present study aims to explain the role of the family in terms of men employment in the offshore oil industry.

## **Methodology**

The current study was part of a qualitative research the findings of which are the results of content analysis and continuous comparison of data. In order to achieve the determined objective of the study, participating subjects were selected through purposive sampling and this process continued until data saturation was achieved. The present study was conducted on a total number of 28 subjects, all of whom were offshore employees in the oil and gas production areas of Assaluyeh, Khark, Siri and Lavan and a number of wives, managers and

experienced social and psychology experts in the field of offshore work. Having at least 5 years of work experience for the employees and experts at offshore and a minimum managerial experience of 4 years for the managers were the main inclusion criteria. Additionally, type of employment, place of work and residence, age, number of children, age of children, and wife's employment were, also, considered in order to observe the maximum variation of participants in selecting the employees. Required data was collected through open semi-structured interview. The research environment used for interviewing the employees and some experts from oil companies operating areas included company headquarters and counseling centers, in contract with oil companies that families had visited. The implementation of the study covered the period between October 2016 to August 2017. Each interview took 34 to 92 minutes, based on the willingness of the participants, recorded on a digital device. Personal and general questions, as well as open questions along with the purpose of the research, were used to collect required data from the interviews. Questions such as 'Express your family life experience in terms of offshore employment', and 'How does offshore work affect your family roles?' were asked to expand the interview process and clarify the subject, topic, and objectives gradually; follow-up and exploratory questions were presented based on the data provided by the participants.

The audio file was carefully transcribed and the text was reviewed several times after each interview in order to analyze the data. Meaning units were specified and condensed with a close-to-text description. Then, a list of codes was prepared, revised and reviewed based on meaning, similarities and differences were determined in meaning, and similar codes were replaced by reduction and induction method in a more abstract level; subcategories and acceptable categories were obtained through continuous comparison. MAXQDA software version 10 was used to facilitate the process of coding, listing, categorizing, repeated comparing of different data and retrieving quotes in the data analysis process.

Credibility, dependability, transferability and conformability methods were used to ensure trustworthiness of collected data. Attempts were made to spend sufficient time collecting and reviewing data, using variety in sampling (selecting participants with different demographic characteristics), giving interview feedbacks to participants, and confirming the categories obtained from the interview texts to ensure the credibility of the data. In order to achieve stability, dependability method of the findings was used, so that the handwritten interviews were presented to the faculty members familiar with qualitative research for analysis and revision in order to ensure the dependability of the content and the results; the research findings were presented to people in similar situations for comment to determine transferability. In addition to obtaining necessary permissions, sufficient explanation of the importance and objectives of the investigation, the confidentiality of specifications and information, permission of the use of voice recordings, the absence of any compulsion or threat to participate and the power of withdrawal at any stages of the investigation were given to each qualified participant in order to observe ethical considerations.

## Findings

The data of the present study was the result of analyzing the content of the interviews performed with 28 participants, including 18 offshore employees, 3 wives, 5 social workers and psychologists and 2 managers; all participants were married. Three main categories, entitled "work-family conflict", "female's roles overload" and "Disorder in the fathers' parenting role" were extracted from the analysis of the collected data; each heading had three sub-categories, yielding a total number of 9 sub-categories (Table 1).

Table 1- Pathology of playing family roles

Main Categories	Sub-Categories
work-family conflict	Time-based conflict
	Pressure-based conflict
	Continuous mental engagement
female's roles overload	Double responsibility of women
	Hardships of child caring
	Women asking assistance from relatives
Disorder in the fathers' parenting role	The father's feeling absence in child's upbringing
	Deficiency in child's Patterning from father
	Reducing the role of paternal control over children

### *Work-family conflict*

This phenomenon is a kind of intra-role conflict in which a person feels inconsistencies between demands of his job role and that of his family. Therefore, the conflict between work and family occurs when employees realize that their roles in the workplace and in the family interfere with each other. The nature of offshore work creates barriers to the division and allocation of time between work and family in doing house affairs, caring and upbringing children, and the optimal use of leisure time, the final result of which is the

incidence of conflicts between work and family. This category consists of three sub-categories of time-based conflict, pressure-based conflict, and continuous mental engagement.

Regarding the conflict between work and family, an employee stated:

*“There is a contradiction in this work, because we cannot meet the family’s needs and fulfill our occupational obligations at the same time.” (Employee 3)*

In this regard, an expert stated that:

*“We have the role of a spouse somewhere in our lives and somewhere else we take the role of a child for our parents or the role of an employee. The more the roles increase in number, the greater their pressure grows, and the more their orientation or direction varies, the more conflicting and contradictory they appear to be.” (Expert 4)*

A worker, concerning his problem regarding pursuing his father’s medical treatment, which is an example of time-based conflict, said:

*“My father is 72 years old and his blood pressure is too high, I have to take care of him, provide his medicines, take him to the clinic when required and consider his health condition, all of which will be disrupted by the rotational job conditions and being away from the family.” (Employee 18)*

Another employee, regarding time-based conflict, stated:

*“When I am away from home, some of my works are not done and my programs, which are quite necessary to be followed and brought to conclusion, turn out to be a mess. Sometimes, when it is time for visiting relatives or inviting guests, as in the New Year’s days or other ceremonies, we may not be at home and, consequently, miss these opportunities.” (Employee 14)*

Another rotational employee said:

*“They (the family members) have emotional needs, and the roles a husband needs to have at home, the roles a father should have for his child are all unfulfilled when one is away and he cannot manage family responsibilities.” (Employee 2)*

A manager, regarding pressure-based conflict, said:

*“When we go home, the exhaustion due to long-term working may cause boredom in doing many of the housework, and this is not appropriate for the family. The employee may need to rest for a while, whereas his family may have some other expectations.” (Manager 1)*

Concerning the cause of the emergence of pressure-based conflict, an expert said that:

*“It can be said that fatigue is the main source of conflict and compatibility problems for men. After two weeks of heavy work in a non-social environment at the sea and in remote places, a man suffers from exhaustion. He desires rest and peace when he gets home; while, his wife and children need more attention, the man’s affection, as well as recreation, hobbies and social participation along with their father.” (Expert 5)*

An employee, about her mental engagement in the workplace, said:

*“On the one hand, my mind is always busy with home, thinking what to do in the time of a problem while being away. Such thoughts have influenced me and have made my mind distracted and disturbed.” (Employee 12)*

Another rotational employee expressed his worries and mental engagements about the probable accidents at home during his absence:

*“My mind is engaged with my family; they might get sick or a problem might occur and they cannot overcome it, I would die of guilt.” (Employee 13)*

#### *Female’s roles overload*

Since men have to be away from the family in offshore work situations, women are forced to do men’s duties as well, aside from spending a considerable amount of their time on fulfilling their own roles. Dealing with home affairs and responding to the demands of children alone make women feel the hardships of their roles and creates conflicts and psychological discomfort for them. This category includes three sub-categories of double-responsibility for women, hardships of caring for children, and women’s demand for help from relatives in family affairs.

An employee said:

*“My wife cannot do the chores by herself anymore. She always misses me and feels bored. My wife cannot cope with family affairs.” (Employee 10)*

One of the employee’s wives, regarding her double responsibility with the absence of the man from home, stated:

*“Bringing up the boys was demanding in the absence of their father and it was very difficult for me to control them especially since two of the boys were twins, which caused me a lot of pressure. The responsibility of rotational wives is very heavy, since, by the husband being away, they have to do all the work at home, especially caring for children, on their own.” (Wife)*

In regard with the increasing pressure on his wife due to excessive responsibilities, an employee said:

*“Although my wife is healthy and has no physical and mental problems, it’s still difficult for her to live in such a condition; she says she cannot deal with the house affairs. She says when I am not at home, it gets very difficult for her to take care of our child and she really gets into trouble.” (Employee 13)*

Another employee said:

*“My wife cannot take care of our child well because of depression; she says, “I cannot deal with house chores.” When I am not home, it gets very difficult for my wife to take care of our child and we really get into trouble.” (Employee 8)*

One of the employees, concerning his wife asking assistance from her parental family at the time of his absence from home, expressed:

*“Family members (my wife’s parents) have to do a lot of things for us. Well, this will make them come up with a lot of expectations and interferences in our life. On the other hand, my wife cannot cope with the house chores or cannot even stay home alone. These are all due to my absence from home.” (Employee 7)*

A manager, concerning the hardships of caring for children for wives whose husbands are employed offshore, stated:

*“When the baby is born, he/she needs to have a good care and parents should both help to raise the child. Our absence from home for half of a month puts all the child caring responsibilities on our wives’ shoulders and this causes problems. (Manager 2)*

#### *Disorder in the Parenting Role of the Father*

According to the participants’ statements in the research on men working at offshore, parenting roles of the father are disturbed due to the instability of the his presence in the family. This concept consists of three subcategories: the father’s absence in child’s upbringing, deficiency in child modeling after the father, and the decrease of the father’s control over the child.

An employee expressed his feelings regarding the impact of his absence on his child’s upbringing:

*“For a child, both mother and father are necessary. Each one of them has his/her own place and none could take place of the other. Most of the time when I am not home, I feel I have no part in upbringing my child since I am not there for him and I don’t know how he is growing up.” (Employee 1)*

Another employee mentioned:

*“My daughter is growing up and needs her father to be with her all the time. she is away from her father 14 days per month. My absence affects the way she is being raised.” (Employee 2)*

One of the rotational wives, regarding her children feeling unfamiliar with their father and having problems in communicating with him, stated:

*“Both in the time of my children going to school or the time of their growing up, his being away was difficult for me. My children felt unfamiliar with their father and couldn’t communicate with him properly.” (Employee 2)*

An expert, on decreasing the father’s controlling role in upbringing his children, expressed:

*“The controlling role of the father loses its central role at home, and it is really difficult for the mother to control children by her own especially at the time of their adolescence. The presence of the father as another controlling factor supervising the condition facilitates caring for the children; for example, checking educational status of the children can be an instance of how the presence of the father regulates the normal cycle of the family.” (Expert 3)*

Relating the deficiency of children modeling their father in such a situation, a manager with more than 20 years of work experience at offshore stated:

*“Children get more dependent on their mother and this causes problems in father-child relationships. Mother becomes whatever there is for them, and father modeling is weakened in their sons’ lives. They don’t learn proper etiquettes and good manners from their father and this causes imbalance in their upbringing.” (Manager 1)*

## Discussion

Based on the results of the present study, which was conducted with the purpose of the pathology of playing family roles by couples in case of the employment of men at the offshore oilfields, 3 main categories, including “work-family conflict ,female’s roles overload, and disorder in the parenting role of the father”, were conceptualized and abstracted. (Table 1)

According to the participants’ statements concerning time conflict of work with family, men miss the opportunity of sharing equal responsibilities in family roles and activities as a result of their job responsibilities because of the amount of time they allocate to working offshore, which mostly interferes with their family life. One example of these activities is pursuing family members’ medical treatment by the employees, which is disrupted due to the special time schedule of working at offshore. The conflict of the roles is due to the pressure on the side of one of the roles which makes it difficult to follow demands of the other role. Regarding pressure-based conflict, some of the participants stated that as a result of work pressures during the fortnight and tolerating various stresses, exhaustion and boredom overwhelm their efficient participation in activities and family responsibilities at the time of coming back home, in a way that they tend to rest more and have peace. Furthermore, according to the data collected from the interviews, the majority of offshore are mentally occupied with their family affairs due to being away from home employees at the work place. Loneliness of the wife and children at home, probable accidents at home, illness of family members, being worried about the safety and peace of the wife and children could be mentioned among the factors causing mental engagement. One of the consequences of the continuous mental engagement is considerable disruption of employees’ concentration in fulfilling their job duties and roles. Therefore, the findings of the current study are consistent with various study results of other researchers, such as Amazue (2008), Yildirim (2008), Jones (2007), Aycan (2005), Kossek and Lambert (2005), Paden (1995). According to Amazue (2008), when expectation between roles are incompatible, family or work problems may arise; Yildirim (2008) highlighted high labor pressures and irregular work schedules as one of the most important predictive factors of work-family conflict (Yildirim & Aycan, 2008). According to Aycan’s findings (2005), demands and occupational Issues cause family problems in the work-family conflict (Aycan & Eskin, 2005). Kossek and Lambert (2005), also, stated that conflict between work and family is one of the most common sorts of conflicts between individuals. In other words, working boundaries confuse family boundaries and the family gets more adaptable with work (Aycan & Eskin, 2005).

The female’s roles overload in offshore work condition is due to the frequent absence of men from home, as an inevitable result of which many of the responsibilities of life affairs are transferred to the wives, many of which may not be compatible with women’s spirits and, in some cases, cause the women to be bothered in responding to the roles. Caring for children and considering their demands, as well as pursuing their medical treatment in the time of illness, and their educational status are among the issues that wives must often fulfill on their own, which increases the suffering and endurance of various roles for women. According to the statements of a number of contributors to this study, in some circumstances women cannot meet house affairs by their own. In this situation, they ask help from their parental family members or their close relatives, a fact with which they are not usually pleased, and they feel embarrassed with others spending time on their personal affairs. These findings were in accordance with the results of the studies by Taylor and Simmonds (2009), Reynolds (2004), Greenhouse et al. (2001), Duxbury and Higgins (1991). Taylor and Simmonds (2009) point to the increasing responsibility of wives in family management and child care and in maintaining relationships with the outside world at the time of the men’s absence from home (Taylor & Simmonds, 2009). According to the results of Reynolds study (2004), the disagreement between couples about the division of housework and the responsibility of child care in men’s offshore work conditions is a source of conflict (Reynolds, 2004). Greenhouse et al. (2001) argue that occupational and familial role interference for both men and women will be followed by double role demands (Greenhaus and et al, 2001). Additionally, according to Duxbury and Higgins (1991), one of the mechanisms of occurring pressure, as a result of increased work or family expectations, is time pressure of roles, as role expectations in the field of work or family ends in role overloading (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991).

With men employed in the offshore, there occurs disruption in their child-caring roles. Father’s departure from the family decreases the father’s emotional support for the child. Gradually, this gap in the presence of father has negative effects in the relationship between the parent and child, so that in some cases, due to the permanent absence of father from home, decrease in feeling of safety, anxiety and sleep disturbance develop in children. According to some of the participants, children of rotational employees are disturbed in modeling paternal manners due to the father being away from the family; on the other hand, father’s supervision on children’s behaviors decreases, so that in many cases wives cannot control their sons on their own and boys feel more liberty in the absence of their father and, sometimes, show inappropriate behaviors. The results of ZarghamBoroujeni et al.(2013), HeydarzadehBenam (2012) and Gholizadeh and Moradianzadeh (2005) are consistent with the findings of the present research. As Zargham Boroujeni et al. (2013) in a study entitled “Comparing the anxiety outbreak in the children of rotational employees of the National Iranian Drilling Company with other children in Ahvaz”, discovered that children of the rotational employees were more exposed to anxiety than the other children, and the father’s rotational occupation had an effect on the child anxiety (Zargham-Boroujeni and et al, 2015). Findings of HaydrzadehBenam study (2012), entitled “The study of the social and cultural consequences of remote workplace from home on the individual and the family of seamen of Bandar Abbas”, indicate the negative effects of this type of employment on the upbringing process of children, in such a way that the father’s continuous absence causes tendency toward being more disorderly and rebellious (Heydarzadeh Benam, 2012). The

results of Gholizadeh and Moradianzadeh research (2005) demonstrated that offshore work is significantly associated with disorder in children's upbringing and family management (Gholizadeh & Moradianzadeh, 2004).

## Conclusion

The families of the offshore employees are affected, on both individual and social scales, due to the occasional absence of men. Confusion occurs in employees in fulfilling work and family roles, because the nature of offshore work creates barriers to the appropriate allocation of time between work and family in order to do house affairs, care for and bring children up, and specify the optimal use of leisure time which results in conflict between work and family. In general, imbalance in the allocation of and response to family roles between couples causes role conflict in them. Therefore, it is recommended to design and implement training and empowerment programs for couples in order to optimize their response to the roles.

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