



Workload and marital satisfaction over time: Testing lagged spillover and crossover effects during the newlywed years

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ABSTRACT

Although many studies have found that higher workloads covary with lower levels of marital satisfaction, the question of whether workloads may also predict *changes* in marital satisfaction over time has been overlooked. To address this question, we investigated the lagged association between own and partner workload and marital satisfaction using eight waves of data collected every 6 months over the first 4 years of marriage from 172 heterosexual couples. Significant crossover, but not spillover, effects were found, indicating that partners of individuals with higher workloads at one time point experience greater declines in marital satisfaction by the following time point compared to the partners of individuals with lower workloads. These effects were not moderated by gender or parental status. These findings suggest that higher partner workloads can prove deleterious for relationship functioning over time and call for increased attention to the long-term effects of spillover and crossover from work to marital functioning.

Work and family experiences are intertwined and mutually influenced by each other (Allen, Cho, & Meier, 2014). In particular, employees with high workloads – i.e., having too many demands or feeling very busy – experience poorer quality marital and parent-child relationships (e.g., Crouter, Bumpus, Head, & McHale, 2001; Crouter, Bumpus, Maguire, & McHale, 1999; Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, & Sayer, 2007). Daily diary designs capturing day-to-day fluctuation in the relationship between workload and marital and family functioning indicate that this pattern plays out on a within-individual basis as well. For example, individuals interact more negatively with their spouses (e.g., Repetti, 1989; Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Story & Repetti, 2006) and their children (e.g., Repetti & Wood, 1997) on days that they experience higher workloads and more job stress. Other research examining these covarying associations over more extended periods of time has found mixed results: one study indicated that elevations in newlywed couples' workloads across the first 4 years of marriage were associated with higher than average levels of marital satisfaction, particularly for couples who were satisfied with their work (van Steenbergen, Kluwer, & Karney, 2011), whereas other research among couples during the transition to parenthood indicated that role overload was associated with increases in relationship conflict (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, & Sayer, 2007).

Together, these findings generally indicate that higher levels of workload are associated with lower levels of relationship quality (for exception, see van Steenbergen, Kluwer, & Karney, 2011). However, this work has focused solely on covarying associations between these domains, either at a between-person level (e.g., whether marital functioning is worse for individuals for whom workloads are higher; e.g., Crouter, Bumpus, Head, & McHale, 2001) or at a within-person level (e.g., whether marital functioning is better or worse during times when workload is higher than that person's average level; e.g., van Steenbergen et al., 2011). In doing so, this work has overlooked the important question of whether higher levels of workload might also predict *future* relationship satisfaction. That is, these studies – and most research in this area – examine how workload and marital satisfaction are associated at

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a particular point in time, rather than examining lagged effects that test whether workload at one time point predicts changes in marital satisfaction by some later time point. This type of research could provide new evidence for the important role that work experiences play in family life by documenting downstream effects of work stress on family functioning. Although unexplored in the workload literature, more general findings from the stress and relationship literature provide some evidence that external stressors are associated with changes in relationship functioning over time (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009), suggesting that work stress might be associated with poorer relationship functioning later on.

The present study seeks to expand our understanding of the influence of workload on marital functioning by examining lagged effects of workload and marital satisfaction. To do so, we use repeated assessments of workload and marital satisfaction from 172 heterosexual newlywed couples assessed every 6 months over the first 4 years of marriage. These repeated assessments allow us to examine whether higher levels of workload at one wave of assessment predict more negative changes in marital satisfaction from that assessment to the next, and provide a robust estimate of this effect by examining these associations over several assessment periods. Importantly, this is the first study to examine how workload predicts lagged changes in marital satisfaction over time. van Steenbergen et al. (2011) used data from a sample of newlywed couples to examine the covariance between workload and marital satisfaction over the first 4 years of marriage, testing whether marital satisfaction was higher or lower for a given individual at times when workload was higher than their average workload, but that study did not test lagged effects of workload on marital satisfaction. Accordingly, the current study addresses an important gap in the literature. In considering this issue, we examine not only how workload influences a person's own subsequent level of marital satisfaction, but also how one's partner's workload relates to one's own subsequent level of marital satisfaction. A considerable body of research has shown that a variety of psychological stressors and strains experienced by one partner can negatively affect the well-being of the other partner, including distress, burnout, work-family conflict, and job demands (Ferguson, 2012; Hammer, Allen, & Grigsby, 1997; Westman & Etzion, 1995). The inclusion of both partners also allows us to examine possible moderators of these relationships, including gender and parental status (e.g., van Steenbergen et al., 2011).

1. Spillover and crossover

Two different mechanisms that have been identified for how demands or strains are carried over are spillover and crossover (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Westman, 2001). Spillover refers to when strains experienced in one domain (e.g., work) are transmitted to another domain (e.g., family) and negatively affect a person's well-being in the other role. For example, an individual may experience burnout at work, which can negatively influence that person's mood during non-work time. Indeed, many studies have examined and found that job stressors can spill over to the family domain and result in increased strain at home (e.g., Frone, 2003; Ilies et al., 2007). Conversely, stressors in the family have been found to negatively influence a person's well-being at work (Frone, 2003; Westman, Etzion, & Gattenio, 2008).

The second mechanism for the transmission of stressors and strains is crossover. Crossover refers to the inter-individual transmission of stressors from one person to another (Westman, 2001). Thus, one person's work stressors can cross over and lead to stress being experienced by the individual's partner at home; conversely, family stressors can cross over and negatively affect the individual's partner at work. Many studies have found support for this inter-individual crossover of stressors and strains (e.g., Bakker, Westman, & van Emmerik, 2009; Muurlink, Peetz, & Murray, 2014).

2. Spillover and crossover effects of workload on marital satisfaction

Prior studies examining the relationship between workload and marital satisfaction have primarily used cross-sectional designs and daily diary designs. Collectively, these studies indicate that when individuals experience high workloads, this negatively influences their own perceptions of marital satisfaction (i.e., spillover; for exception, see van Steenbergen et al., 2011). One theoretical mechanism explaining these linkages is scarcity theory (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000), which posits that because individuals only have so many resources in terms of time and energy, when these resources are depleted (e.g., through high levels of workload) they have less time and energy to devote to other important life roles (i.e., being a responsive partner). Thus, when individuals experience high workloads, they have fewer resources to devote to maintaining a healthy marriage, and thus experience lower marital satisfaction. Although this process does not specifically address how workload would affect marital satisfaction over time, conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that with enduring stressors, these resource losses can accumulate through a process called *loss spirals*, resulting in more detrimental outcomes as time passes.

Building on these ideas, more general theoretical models of the influence of stress in close relationships argue that external stressors have the potential to undermine marital functioning over time through a range of mechanisms, including decreasing the amount of time that partners spend together, decreasing the quality of couple communication, increasing the risk of psychological or physical problems, and increasing the likelihood that problematic personality traits will be expressed (e.g., Bodenmann, Ledermann, & Bradbury, 2007; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). Thus, external stressors such as workload have the potential to undermine relationship satisfaction over time. Accordingly, individuals experiencing a high level of workload may experience decreases in their marital satisfaction over a period of time compared to individuals experiencing lower levels of workload. Therefore, we predict the following:

Hypothesis 1. Current levels of one's own workload at one assessment will be negatively associated with changes in one's own marital satisfaction from that assessment to the next.

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