



# You are a helpful co-worker, but do you support your spouse? A resource-based work-family model of helping and support provision



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## ABSTRACT

Drawing from the literature on behavioral spillover effects, the work-home resources model and research on helping at work, we investigate how help provision at work spills over to influence the provision of spousal support at home by examining a resource generation mechanism and a resource depletion mechanism. Across two experience-sampling studies, we collected data from employees and their spouses multiple times per day in different domains for ten workdays. Results from our two-study examination supported both the resource generation mechanism and the resource depletion mechanism. On days when employees helped colleagues more, they reported higher positive affect, which led to higher support provision to their spouses; meanwhile, higher levels of helping translated in less time for the family, which led to lower support provided to spouses. In Study 2, we tested and found that prosocial motivation enhanced the resource-generating effect of help provision. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The past three decades have witnessed a surge of research on helping behaviors in the workplace, including but not limited to, altruistic behaviors (Organ, 1988), organizational citizenship behaviors toward individuals (OCB-I, L. J. Williams & Anderson, 1991), and prosocial organizational behaviors (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Helping other people at work enhances both individual and organizational performance (N. P. Podsakoff, Whiting, Podsakoff, & Blume, 2009; Spitzmuller, Van Dyne, & Ilies, 2008). Research has also documented the benefits of helping behaviors in the workplace for helpers themselves (Grant & Sonnentag, 2010; Sonnentag & Grant, 2012). Nevertheless, despite the prevailing belief in the “bright side” of helping others at work, helping behaviors may very well be a double-edged sword. Some recent studies pointed to the potential negative consequences of providing help for those who do so, such as higher fatigue, lower work progress, and lower career advancement (Bergeron, Shipp, Rosen, & Furst, 2013; Bolino, Hsiung, Harvey, & LePine, 2015; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016). Thus, a more balanced and comprehensive

understanding of the consequences of helping others at work is needed. Herein, we take such a balanced perspective by examining both positive and negative consequences of helping at work for the help providers and their spouses.

To date, research on the consequences of helping colleagues at work has largely focused on work-related outcomes (see N. P. Podsakoff et al., 2009, for a review). With some notable exceptions (see Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009, for an exception), research on how helping behaviors at work influence individuals' family lives is relatively scarce, which is surprising because the work-family literature has extensively discussed spillover processes between the work and family domains. This stream of research suggests that work experiences or the effects of work events on employees' feelings or attitudes or behaviors spill over to influence the family domain, creating similar outcomes in both domains (e.g., D. S. Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006; Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Hanson, Hammer, & Colton, 2006; Lambert, 1990). Building on the spillover perspective in the work-family research field, we examine whether helping behaviors at work influence employees' behaviors at home, with a special emphasis on employees' provision of social support to their spouses. This study thus goes beyond a focus on work-related consequences of helping behaviors by examining their implications for fulfilling the family role.

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We believe support provision to one's spouse is a highly relevant outcome in this context, as social support is critical to the functioning of marital relationships (Cutrona, 1996) and reduces spouses' family-to-work conflict (Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler, & Cullen, 2010). In this study, we focus on employees' social support provision to their spouses with a particular emphasis on emotional support (e.g., showing care and concern) because such support was found to be the strongest predictor of spouses' perception of being supported (Cutrona, 1996) and receiving emotional support from family members makes a unique contribution to one's well-being beyond the effect of instrumental support (i.e., assisting with child care and other family responsibilities) (Erickson, 1993; Lapierre & Allen, 2006). In addition, a meta-analysis showed that emotional support received from spouses is beneficial for one's work life (Wayne, Randel, & Stevens, 2006). Thus, the present study focuses on emotional support provision as a behavioral outcome in the family domain.

As mentioned, work-to-family spillover can involve feelings, attitudes or behaviors from work that spill over across the work-family boundary and thus influence employees' family lives (e.g., Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Lambert, 1990). Previous work-family research mostly focused on affective and attitudinal spillover (e.g., Ilies, Wilson, & Wagner, 2009; Judge & Ilies, 2004; Williams & Alliger, 1994); as a consequence, the behavioral spillover effect and the psychological mechanisms by which it is realized remain largely unexplored. Our aim in this paper is to bridge this research gap and extend theory and research on work-family spillover by investigating whether and how a specific work behavior – help provision – spills over to the family domain and influences a similar behavioral construct, the provision of support to one's spouse. Our conceptual argument starts from the notion that helping behaviors have the potential to impact employees and their family lives both negatively and positively. Accordingly, we propose and test two mechanisms (i.e., resource depletion and resource generation) that explain how helping behaviors at work spill over to the family domain and influence spousal support provision at home.

The work-home resources model (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) offers an integrative framework for examining the depleting and enriching processes underlying work-family spillover simultaneously. Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker depicted the work-family dynamic as comprised of processes whereby demands and resources in the work domain influence individuals' behaviors in the family domain, due to resource depletion and resource generation, respectively. Consistent with their resource perspective, and based on research on the consequences of helping behaviors at work, we identify two helping-related personal resources (i.e., positive affect and time) that explain how helping behaviors at work influence support provision at home, both positively and negatively. The resource generation mechanism comprises a process by which individuals develop positive affect (a resource) through helping co-workers at work, leading to an increase of supportive behaviors toward spouses at home. In contrast, the resource depletion mechanism emphasizes that helping colleagues at work consumes individuals' time, an important resource in balancing work and family, leaving them less time to spend at home and thus decreasing the extent to which they engage in supportive behaviors toward spouses. To examine these two resource-related mechanisms, we emphasized the within-individual processes because positive affect and time are volatile resources which are fleeting in nature and thus are best captured using an experience-sampling design (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012).

Understanding that enacting helping behaviors at work can be both resource-generating and resource-depleting begs the important question of who is more likely to harvest the resources that

may result from helping colleagues. Bolino, Harvey, and Bachrach (2012) suggested in their theoretical work that OCB is more rewarding when it is consistent with employees' chronic self-concept orientation. Specifically, helping colleagues at work, a type of OCB, should benefit the helpers more if the helpers have higher other-orientation (Grant, Parker, & Collins, 2009). In this study, we focus on an individual characteristic that reflects individuals' other-orientation – prosocial motivation, which describes individuals' desire to benefit others (Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Rioux & Penner, 2001). We intend to provide empirical evidence for the proposition in Bolino and colleagues' (2012) work by testing the cross-level moderating effect of prosocial motivation on the resource-generating effect of helping colleagues, that is, whether the within-individual relationship between helping and positive affect is conditional on individuals' level of prosocial motivation. Fig. 1 shows our conceptual model in full.

We test our model in two studies using experience-sampling methodology with data collected from multiple sources (i.e., focal employees and their spouses) at different time points (i.e., multiple surveys at work and at home everyday) in different countries (i.e., the United States and China). Our two-study examination aims to contribute to the literature from four main perspectives. First, integrating the helping literature and the work-family literature, our studies answer the call for research on whether helping behavior at work “has downstream effects on behaviors at home (such as helping the spouse or children)” (Koopman et al., 2016, p. 35) and further contribute to research on the consequences of helping by investigating its positive and negative effects on employees' family lives. Second, our research serves as an empirical test of the notion that helping is more rewarding for more prosocial individuals (Bolino et al., 2012) and explores the boundary condition of the “doing good-feeling good” effect. Third, building on the work-home resources model (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) and integrating the conflict and enrichment perspectives in the work-family literature (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), this article contributes to research on the work-family behavioral spillover effect, by uncovering a work-to-family enriching path and a work-to-family depleting path, linking behaviors in the work domain to behaviors in the family domain. Fourth, this paper also extends the work-home resources model (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) by suggesting a novel way to examine work-family phenomena by considering that the same work experience can simultaneously be resource generating and resource depleting, affecting the family domain differently.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses

Work-family scholars have long asserted behaviors in one domain may spillover to influence the other domain, with individuals enacting similar behaviors in both domains. This process is called the behavioral spillover effect. Edwards and Rothbard (2000) proposed two pathways to explain the behavioral spillover effect. An indirect pathway suggests that behaviors may “become ingrained as habits or scripts that influence behaviors across domains” (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000, p. 187). That is, individuals' behavioral tendencies might be changed because of work behaviors and these changes affect how they interact with their family members. Such processes establish in a longer term as they are explained through structural resources (e.g., interpersonal skills) that take substantial amounts of time to develop (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). To capture such long-term processes, most research to date has studied work-family behavioral spillover based on between-individual differences. For example, parents who are teachers or nurses are more likely to pick up

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