



# Relationship between similarity in work-family centrality and marital satisfaction among dual-earner couples



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 18 December 2016

Received in revised form 9 March 2017

Accepted 10 March 2017

Available online 15 March 2017

### Keywords:

Complementarity

Marital satisfaction

Polynomial regression analysis

Response surface analysis

Similarity

Work-family centrality

## ABSTRACT

This study employed a dyadic approach to test two opposing hypotheses about the joint effect of two partners' work-family centrality on their marital satisfaction. The similarity hypothesis predicts that similarity in work-family centrality would be positively related to marital satisfaction; in contrast, the complementarity hypothesis suggests that similarity in work-family centrality would be negatively related to marital satisfaction. Data were collected from 533 Chinese dual-earner couples. Results of polynomial regression and response surface analysis provided support for the complementarity hypothesis rather than the similarity hypothesis. Additionally, marital satisfaction was higher when there was low-low (vs. high-high) couple congruence in work-family centrality. This study extends research on work-family centrality and provides a new perspective on understanding dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

Work and family are two important domains in adults' lives, and each has its unique function (Grzywacz, 2016). Work-family centrality refers to a value judgment about the relative importance of the work role versus family role (Carr, Boyar, & Gregory, 2008). People with high work-family centrality believe that work is a central activity in their lives, and thus they tend to allocate more time and energy to the work domain than the family domain. By comparison, people with low work-family centrality believe that the family role is more significant in their lives, and thus they tend to prioritize family tasks. Previous studies have documented that work-family centrality has significant implications for individuals' work-related outcomes such as psychological detachment, work engagement, job satisfaction and retention (Carr et al., 2008; Wang, Luo, Zhang, & Wu, 2016; Zhang, Ma, Xie, Tang, & Zhou, 2013). However, we know little about the potential influence of work-family centrality on people's family life. Devoting time and energy to work/family necessarily depletes the time and energy available to devote to family/work, considering that time and energy are limited resources (Goode, 1960). Consistent with this argument, work-family

centrality might influence not only work-related outcomes but also family life.

Hence, the primary goal of the current study was to examine the relationship between work-family centrality and marital satisfaction. More specifically, considering that previous research suggested that the combination of two partners' characteristics could lead to different marriage relationship outcomes (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), the present study used a dyadic approach to test the association between similarity in work-family centrality and marital satisfaction among dual-earner couples. Similarity in work-family centrality refers to the degree to which the two members of a couple have the same assessments of the relative importance of work versus family roles. Higher/lower similarity in work-family centrality indicates that the absolute difference between two partners' scores on work-family centrality is smaller/bigger. Results from this study have the potential to make several contributions. First, with a dyadic approach, this study helps to deepen our understanding of the influence of work-family centrality at the couple level and then expands the research on work-family centrality. Second, by testing two competitive hypotheses about the effect of similarity, this study contributes valuable information related to mate selection. Finally, by examining the effects of different similarity patterns, this study helps to facilitate theory development in research on couple similarity.

Couple similarity is an important topic in the study of marital satisfaction. Some researchers believe that similarity is the "glue" of marriage (Scanzoni & Scanzoni, 1976). The similarity hypothesis indicates that couple similarity might positively predict couple relationship satisfaction and this hypothesis has been confirmed by numerous studies

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(Chi, Epstein, Fang, Lam, & Li, 2013; Gaunt, 2006; Wilson & Cousins, 2003). There are four aspects of the explanation for the similarity hypothesis. First, similar couples will feel comfortable interacting with their spouses because they can maintain their own preferred style of behavior. Second, they are more likely to validate each other's world view and have more common topics to talk about than dissimilar couples. Third, they might develop a more effective communication pattern than dissimilar couples (Chi et al., 2013). Lastly, similar couples might understand each other better (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001) and provide more effective support for each other. In line with the similarity hypothesis, similarity in work-family centrality might also be positively related to dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

However, as an alternative to the similarity hypothesis, the complementarity hypothesis tells a different story when it comes to the relationship between couple similarity and marital satisfaction. According to the complementarity hypothesis, couple diversification can positively predict marital satisfaction, whereas couple similarity might be harmful to marital quality (Winch, Ktsanes, & Ktsanes, 1954). This hypothesis also has been supported by empirical studies (Badr, 2004; Keizer & Komter, 2015; Shiota & Levenson, 2007). Researchers argue that enacting similar roles might at times make for a great deal of conflict (Murstein, 1971). For instance, if both partners are highly motivated to handle the family money, the result may be collision rather than satisfaction. Conversely, couples with more dissimilarity might have diversified skills to fulfill tasks and pursue goals in marital life with less attendant conflict (Shiota & Levenson, 2007). For example, tasks might be completed better when one partner is concerned with the entirety, and the other is concerned with the details. It has been found that complementarity in needs is positively related to the progress toward a permanent union for long-term couples (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962).

As mentioned earlier, working people may experience competition between work and family owing to the limited amount of time and energy. Individuals with high work-family centrality need their spouses to spend more time and energy to maintain family functions. By comparison, individuals with low work-family centrality might need their spouses to gain more resources such as income for their family. In line with the complementarity hypothesis, when one partner is work focused and producing high income (i.e., high work-family centrality) and the other partner takes primary responsibility for raising the family (i.e., low work-family centrality), a dual-earner couple may experience more synergy between work and family, and thus higher marital satisfaction, than a dual-earner couple in which both partners are family caretakers or both are primarily devoted to work.

Taken together, these results suggest that similarity in work-family centrality might be a double-edged sword in a dual-earner couple's marriage. In addition, owing to the lack of research on the association between work-family centrality and marital satisfaction, we cannot predict the total influence of similarity in work-family centrality on dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction. Thus, we tested two opposing hypotheses respectively based on the similarity hypothesis (Gaunt, 2006; Wilson & Cousins, 2003) and the complementarity hypothesis (Winch et al., 1954).

**Hypothesis 1a.** Similarity in work-family centrality will positively predict dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

**Hypothesis 1b.** Similarity in work-family centrality will negatively predict dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

Further, it is important to differentiate two scenarios of high similarity in work-family centrality: when husbands and wives are congruent at high levels of work-family centrality and when they are congruent at low levels of work-family centrality. A previous study showed that people tend to invest more time and energy into roles that are high on centrality, because these roles have significant implications for their well-being and self-esteem (Simon, 1992). Moreover, success in these roles seems to be more psychologically rewarding than success in less

central roles (Burke & Stets, 2014). It has been found that high work-family centrality positively predicts work-to-family conflict (Carr et al., 2008; Zhang, Li, Wei, & Yang, 2011), which is a significant risk factor for low marital satisfaction (Carroll, Hill, Yorgason, Larson, & Sandberg, 2013).

It is reasonable to deduce that work-family centrality might be negatively associated with marital satisfaction at the individual level. In addition, numerous studies have confirmed the reciprocal relationship between two partners' marital satisfaction (i.e. Bakker, Demerouti, & Burke, 2009; van Steenbergen, Kluwer, & Karney, 2014). Thus, when husbands' and wives' work-family centrality are both high, they may experience lower marital satisfaction because in this situation, the division of household labor might induce conflict and dissatisfaction. In contrast, when husbands' and wives' work-family centrality are both low, although they may achieve less success in the work domain, they have a common goal of raising a family. They may both invest a lot of time and energy in the family domain, resulting in high marital satisfaction.

**Hypothesis 2.** Marital satisfaction will be lower for couples who are congruent at higher levels of work-family centrality.

It is also important to differentiate two types of non-congruence in work-family centrality: when the husband's work-family centrality is higher than the wife's, and vice versa. Due to the traditional gendered division of labor, men are expected to be more agential and successful in the role of breadwinner (work role), whereas women are expected to be more communal and successful in the role of caregiver (family role) (Eagly, 1987). Until a few decades ago, the labor division pattern in China was still characterized by the Chinese saying, "the man goes out to work, while the woman looks after the house." Hence, these gender role expectations might remain dominant in today's Chinese society. When a husband's work-family centrality is higher than the wife's, their work-family time investments will be more consistent with gender role expectations. By comparison, when a wife's work-family centrality is higher than her husband's, their work-family intersection might be inconsistent with gender role expectations. According to social role theory, work-family value (i.e., work-family centrality) is more likely to produce positive outcomes if consistent with gender role expectations than if inconsistent with gender role expectations (Leslie, Manchester, & Kim, 2016).

**Hypothesis 3.** Marital satisfaction will be higher when a husband's work-family centrality is higher than his wife's rather than when a wife's work-family centrality is higher than her husband's.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 533 full-time dual-earner couples from Central and East China. These couples volunteered to independently fill out two identical anonymous questionnaires in their home. They were recruited by 34 psychology undergraduates of a Chinese university. Each student was asked to approach 20 dual-earner couples among their family members or friends. The questionnaires were in Mandarin and had code numbers to identify male and female completers. Of the 680 packages with questionnaires distributed, 533 were returned completed, resulting in a response rate of 78%.

About 80% of the couples were married for more than 3 years, 14% were married from 1 to 3 years, and 6% were married within one year. Three hundred and fifty-four couples had at least one child under the age of 18, and the other couples had no children under the age of 18. Three hundred and twenty-seven couples had elderly domestic helpers, and the other couples had no elderly domestic helpers. About 90% of the couples had no paid domestic helpers, and the other couples had paid domestic help. The mean age of the men was 37.38 years ( $SD = 7.32$ )

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