



Social support at work and at home: Dual-buffering effects in the work-family conflict process



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ABSTRACT

Using experience-sampling methodology, the present study offers a within-individual test of the buffering model of social support in the daily work-family conflict process. Building on the conceptualization of social support as a volatile resource, we examine how daily fluctuations in social support at work and at home influence the process through which work interferes with family life. A total of 112 employees participated in the study and were asked to respond to daily surveys in the work and home domains. Results showed that social support at work and at home—as volatile resources—buffered the daily work-family conflict process within their respective domains. First, a supportive supervisor mitigated the within-individual effect of workload on emotional exhaustion. Second, a supportive spouse protected the strained employee from the effect of emotional exhaustion on work-family conflict, and spousal support also moderated the indirect effect from workload to work-family conflict through emotional exhaustion. The findings suggest that enacting a dual social support system can effectively reduce the adverse effects of excessive job demands on exhaustion and work-family conflict, but buffering effects are highly dependent on the timely availability of social support.

1. Introduction

A burgeoning body of research conducted over the last few decades has shown that the potential impact of work on employees' everyday lives is expanding. The ever-increasing demands on the job (Kubicek, Paškvan, & Korunka, 2015), the rapid growth of requests for extended work availability (Dettmers, 2017), and the dramatic rise of dual-earner households (Masterson & Hoobler, 2015) are but a few of the developments that have contributed to the prevalence of work-family conflict across the globe (Allen, French, Dumani, & Shockley, 2015). Work-family conflict refers to “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). Struggles in managing both work and family occur almost daily and have consequences for employees and their families. Work-family conflict negatively affects performance and satisfaction in the work domain, diminishes mental and physical health outcomes, leads to parental stress as well as reduced marital and family satisfaction (Peeters, Ten Brummelhuis, & Van Steenbergen, 2013), and impairs social interactions at home, thereby negatively affecting the spouse (Bakker, Demerouti, & Dollard, 2008).

In light of the societal trends noted above, it is not surprising that concerns are being raised about how employees, especially members of dual-earner couples, can navigate their daily lives and balance work and family responsibilities. Accordingly, it is critical to understand the mechanisms through which work interferes with family on a daily basis and find ways to intervene in this work-family process. In their conceptual piece on the work-home resources model, Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012) explicitly discussed the notion that many work-family processes, such as those by which work depletes employees and leaves them with less energy for dealing with family responsibilities, are relatively short-term and occur on a daily basis. These authors recommended that processes linking work and family should be studied at the day-to-day level, which is what we do in the research reported herein. We examine the spillover effect of workload, which is probably the most generic and common demand on the job, across the work-family boundary, as it happens at the daily level.

In relating variations in workload across days to day-to-day changes in work-family conflict, we adopt a twofold focus. First, this paper builds on prior research that has pointed at emotional exhaustion as the key dimension of burnout (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998) and a

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widespread and impactful type of work-related strain (Gaines & Jermier, 1983). Much has been written about job strain and burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993) and how these affect individual employees and their families (Jackson & Maslach, 1982), yet a better understanding of how emotional aspects of work-induced strain can explain the daily occurrence of work-family conflict requires the examination of emotional exhaustion as part of the daily work-family process. In line with the work-home resources model (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), which explicates depleting processes underlying work-family spillover, we aim to uncover the role of depletion of emotional resources in the process by which perceptions of high workload produce work-family conflict. Thus, we propose that emotional exhaustion elucidates (as a mediator) the day-to-day relationship between workload and work-family conflict.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, this paper focuses on what can be done to buffer the effect of workload on emotional exhaustion and also the effects of workload and exhaustion on work-family conflict. Here, we build on the research stream that has focused on how different forms of social support may reduce work-family conflict (e.g., Carlson & Perrewé, 1999; Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011). We contribute to a long-standing debate in the work-family literature about the validity and merit of the buffering model of social support, hereby focusing on the social support an employee perceives to receive daily in both the work and home domains. As alluded to earlier, following Ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012), we conceptualize and study the work-family process as it occurs daily. Capturing the daily work-family process has the potential to more accurately identify when and how different sources of social support buffer the work-family conflict process. We distinguish the resource depletion stage of the process—which happens at work and is reflected in the relationship linking workload to emotional exhaustion—and the spillover stage, which links energy depletion (emotional exhaustion) to work-family conflict experienced at home. Disentangling these two stages allows us to take a dual view of social support, distinguishing between work-based (i.e., coworkers and supervisor) and home-based (i.e., spouse) sources of support. These distinct forms of social support function as buffers for the resource depletion and spillover stages, respectively, and both can be targets of interventions.

In sum, we examine spillover effects of daily variations in workload on work-family conflict as mediated by emotional exhaustion and as moderated by daily levels of social support. Our theoretical approach in this paper integrates the work-home resources model (Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) with the buffering model of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Our study is unique in its focus in that we (a) disentangle stages of the daily work-family conflict process, (b) examine daily fluctuations in social support as a volatile resource, and (c) discern effects with respect to the source of social support. In doing so, we offer a thorough understanding of what brings about and prevents work-family conflict on a daily basis in a sample of dual-earner couples.

2. The role of social support in the work-family conflict process

This study sheds light on an unresolved puzzle in prior research on social support. Considerable debate revolves around the specific role of social support in reducing work-family conflict (Carlson & Perrewé, 1999; Michel, Mitchelson, Pichler, & Cullen, 2010; Seiger & Wiese, 2009; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Consistent with the more basic psychological theory on the role of social support in improving psychological and physiological health (Cohen & Wills, 1985), social support can be considered either a direct antecedent of work-family conflict (the *main-effect* model) or a moderator for the relationship between job demands and work-family conflict (the *buffering* model). And, as Cohen and Wills (1985) noted with respect to the effects on psychological and physical health, “understanding the relative merits of these models has practical as well as theoretical importance because

each has direct implications for the design of interventions” (pp. 310–311). The main-effect model implies that, while certainly beneficial in reducing work-family conflict, social support cannot mitigate the detrimental effects of excessive demands, which are so prevalent in today’s challenging jobs. That is, the main-effect model suggests that increasing social support reduces work-family conflict (or emotional exhaustion) for the average worker or the average day regardless of workload. Whereas this would surely be a beneficial effect, it would not affect the relationship between workload and work-family conflict, and higher workloads would still increase work-family conflict (yet perhaps from a lower baseline than without the main effect of social support). The buffering model, on the other hand, if supported, suggests that workloads can be increased without also increasing work-family conflict (or emotional exhaustion), as long as adequate social support is offered. However, the general pattern of empirical findings favors the main-effect model and has provided relatively weak support for the buffering model of social support in the work-family process (e.g., Carlson & Perrewé, 1999; Luk & Shaffer, 2005; Seiger & Wiese, 2009).

We do not contest the validity of these findings; however, the overreliance on cross-sectional data in work-family research (Lapierre & McMullan, 2016) has prevented research from advancing our understanding of the psychological mechanisms by which social support can reduce work-family conflict beyond the simple main-effect model. The buffering model of social support posits that, for social support to have buffering (as opposed to main) effects, it must be responsive to the coping requirements elicited by a stressor (e.g., workload) or stress experience (e.g., emotional exhaustion) (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Therefore, when testing the buffering hypothesis, it is necessary to take into account several contingencies and examine *who* provides support and *when* (House, 1981; Jacobson, 1986). It has been argued that studies that do not incorporate such refinements in their design would have results biased toward main-effect conclusions (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Hence, it may be promising for this stream of research to put study design and level of analysis issues under close scrutiny, in order to provide a sensitive and adequate test of the buffering hypothesis, because “this test is particularly affected by design weaknesses” (Cohen & Wills, 1985, p. 316).

Cross-sectional data force scholars to focus on differences in social support levels *between* individuals and they subsequently treat social support as a time-invariant construct. Yet more recent findings on day-to-day fluctuations in organizational citizenship and helping behaviors (e.g., Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2015) suggest that social support might not be consistently available to employees. That is, social support can also be understood as a volatile resource (i.e., on some days individuals receive more support than on other days; see Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). If social support is a resource that can be conceptualized both as volatile and stable, it is imperative that scholars pursue investigations that aim to uncover at which level of conceptualization social support works best in buffering stress and reducing work-family conflict (see also Ilies, Aw, & Pluut, 2015).

At a conceptual level, the benefits of social support in reducing the detrimental effects of workload on work-family conflict should be highly dependent on the *timely* availability of social support. Put differently, social support can only buffer the effects of a stressor if it is responsive to the occurrence of that stressor, such as work (over)load, which can be higher on some days than on other days. It is therefore important to address the temporal dimension of the constructs involved. Studying day-to-day fluctuations in work and family experiences, while further taking into account that social support is not received consistently across days, would be an important step forward in testing the buffering model of social support in the work-family conflict process. Hence, we propose an alternative conceptualization of social support and work-family conflict and of the processes by which social support can reduce the occurrence of work-family conflict when workloads are high—a conceptualization that aligns better theoretically

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