

Bringing It All Back Home

How Outside Stressors Shape Families' Everyday Lives

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ABSTRACT—*Families are dynamic systems that are permeable to influences from the outside world, such as daily stressors at work and at school. Our research uses naturalistic methods to investigate how family interactions change in response to such experiences and how other family members contribute to that process. We argue that the short-term effects of daily stressors on family dynamics can have cumulative, long-term implications for family health and functioning. Naturalistic studies that incorporate daily diary, observational, and physiological measures can offer new insights into families' everyday stress responding and coping processes.*

KEYWORDS—*work-family; stress and coping; family processes; naturalistic methods; school stressors*

The family is popularly imagined as a stable haven, a place where individuals come together to recuperate from the ups and downs of the outside world. But the family has ups and downs of its own; it is a dynamic system, not impermeable to outside influences but porous and continually in flux (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). For example, parents' job schedules and children's homework shape family time, activities, and routines. Other effects of work and school on the family are less overt. The research described here asks how daily stressors at work and at school penetrate family boundaries, by examining the small adjustments that family members make in response to outside stressors over brief time spans. This line of work contributes new approaches to two areas of research in psychology; it incorporates stressors and day-to-day variability into the study of family life, and it adds an interpersonal perspective to the study of stress and coping by situating family members center stage in the stress-response process.

Because reactions to a stressor can persist after an event has occurred, individuals may carry the residue of stressful experiences at work and at school into the home at the end of the day,

where it can shape the rhythms of family life. One way to study that phenomenon is to focus on reactions at home to events at work and at school, using naturalistic methods that capitalize on day-to-day variability in individual behavior and family life. We now know that it is possible to reliably observe family interactions changing in response to stressors experienced earlier in the day. This research opens a window onto the processes by which stressors may gradually come to permeate and change a family.

We have found that, following more stressful days at work, spouses and parents adjust their social behavior at home in two ways (see Table 1). One common pattern is an overall reduction in social engagement and expression of emotion. For example, air traffic controllers were more emotionally and socially withdrawn from their wives and children after busier and more demanding days at the airport (work shifts marked by lower visibility and more air traffic volume; Repetti, 1989, 1994). Social withdrawal is also observed in response to social stressors at work. For instance, employed mothers whose preschool children were enrolled in a work-site daycare center were studied on 5 consecutive weekday afternoons. After describing their day at work, the mothers were reunited with their children. Analyses of the videotaped reunions showed that, if they had reported a more demanding workload or more negative interactions with coworkers and supervisors, the mothers spoke less and were less emotionally engaged (fewer observations of caring and loving/warm behavior) with their preschoolers, compared to their behavior on less stressful days (Repetti & Wood, 1997a). In another study, members of dual-earner couples described job stressors each day at work and their marital interactions each evening at home for a week. When they returned home from more socially stressful or more demanding days at work, both husbands and wives were more distracted and less responsive toward their spouses than they were after less stressful workdays (Story & Repetti, 2006).

A second short-term response to job stress resembles the stereotypic image of an agitated employee kicking his dog after an argument with his boss: an increase in irritability and displays of anger with both spouse and children (Repetti, 1994; Story & Repetti, 2006). That pattern is sometimes only observed for a subset of people, such as those who are more prone to

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TABLE 1
Studies Examining Change in Family Behavior as a Function of Conditions at Work Earlier That Day

Study	Sample and duration of observations	Daily assessment of experiences at work	Daily assessment of after-work behavior	Experiences at work predicting day-to-day changes in behavior
Air Traffic Controller (ATC) study ^a	33 male ATCs and their wives 3 consecutive days	Objective measures of workload: FAA records of air traffic volume National Weather Service records of visibility during the ATC's shift at work ATCs' ratings completed at the end of the day ^d	ATCs and their wives' end-of-day descriptions of their own and their spouses' marital behavior A subsample of the ATCs' ratings of interactions with their school-aged children at the end of each day	Higher levels of workload linked with increases in marital and parental withdrawal More social stressors associated with parental withdrawal and more anger and use of discipline with child Wives' supportive behavior facilitated ATCs' marital withdrawal on high-workload days
Daycare Reunion Study ^b	30 low-income and middle-class mother-preschooler dyads (50% African American and Latina) 5 consecutive days	Mothers' ratings completed before leaving work to pick up child at the worksite daycare setting each day ^d	Videotapes of a subsample of the dyads' reunions after work at the daycare center Mothers' end-of-day descriptions of interactions with preschoolers that followed the reunion	Both job stressors linked with increases in emotional and behavioral withdrawal from child Mothers with generally higher levels of emotional distress and Type A behavior were more vulnerable to the short-term effects of increased job stressors In response to maternal withdrawal, preschoolers decreased their aversive behavior and increased their attempts to engage their mothers in a positive way
UCLA Family Development Study ^c	43 middle-class dual-earner couples (87% Caucasian) 5 consecutive days	Husbands' and wives' ratings completed before leaving work each day ^d	Husbands' and wives' end-of-day descriptions of their own and their spouses' marital behavior	Job stressors linked with increases in marital anger and withdrawal Negative mood mediated the association between job stressors and marital behavior High-conflict families were more vulnerable to the daily effects of job stress than were low-conflict families

Notes.

^aRepetti (1989; 1994)

^bRepetti & Wood (1997a, 1997b)

^cStory & Repetti (2006)

^dParticipants' ratings of workload and social interaction with coworkers and supervisors that day at work.

experience psychological distress (Repetti & Wood, 1997a). Both types of response to job stressors have been replicated in other labs (e.g., Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004), and both have been confirmed using spouses' daily descriptions of the employed person's behavior. For example, when men reported a busier-than-usual day at work, hours later their wives described them as angrier and more socially withdrawn than usual (Story & Repetti, 2006).

A related line of research suggests that minor daily stressors at school are associated with similar changes in children's social interactions at home. Two studies from our group found that elementary-school-age children described more aversive interactions with their parents on days when they experienced more problems with peers or more academic problems at school

(Lehman & Repetti, 2007; Repetti, 1996). When teens in another study reported more academic problems at school, they described more conflict with family members the next day and even the day after that (Flook & Fuligni, 2008). In summary, the research described here indicates that the emotional and social behavior of both parents and children change, at least in the short term, in response to stressors that are experienced outside of the home. Those daily patterns have been corroborated with independent observations and spouse reports of behavior.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Traditionally, psychological research on families uses one of two methodologies: experimental or intervention designs, typically

staged in the laboratory and focused on short-term processes, and multivariate descriptive or correlational research, typically focused on longer-term processes. However, because laboratory-based research does not capture family interactions in context, it may not accurately reflect how family members behave when surrounded by the distractions, obligations, and routines of the home. Descriptive research using larger samples also cannot closely map the daily lives of families.

In order to understand how families cope with outside stressors on an everyday basis, the research described here adopts a third approach, one that focuses on short-term processes as they occur, not in the isolation of a research laboratory, but in the natural habitats of home, work, school, and other community settings. Intensive repeated measures, such as daily diaries, ask participants to self-report—or others to observe—behavior, activities, events, and mood at multiple points throughout the day. With these techniques, researchers examine the within-person trajectory of experiences in everyday life and look repeatedly at reactivity to and recovery from daily events or social interactions (Gable & Reis, 1999). Our group has been among those seeking to also incorporate physiological responses, through biomarkers like cortisol, into these naturalistic research designs. Technologies that facilitate the close observation of families, such as video recording, are allowing researchers to gain a better foothold on families' interactions in their natural settings. These tools allow us to come much closer to the study of family members' real time affect and behavior and, as discussed next, to address questions about *how* stressors manage to influence family life.

MECHANISMS OF SHORT-TERM CHANGE

Individual Spillover and Coping Processes

Stressors experienced outside of the home change family behavior through their impact on a member's emotions, physiology, and cognitions. These mechanisms are depicted in Figure 1. First, there is evidence for a straightforward carryover of physiology and mood from one context to the next. The term "spillover" is often used to describe findings whereby states such as negative mood or physiological arousal are experienced and expressed in the family, even though the original precipitating conditions occurred outside of the family. For example, we found that husbands had elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol at home (8:00 p.m.) after socially stressful days at work (Saxbe, Repetti, & Nishina, 2008), consistent with a physiological spillover effect.

Whereas the study of physiological spillover processes is just beginning, support has accumulated for a mood spillover model. There is evidence that negative mood mediates associations between job stressors and marital behavior (Story & Repetti, 2006) and that end-of-workday negative mood predicts day-to-day changes in angry marital behavior in husbands and wives (Schulz et al., 2004). Negative mood generated outside of the

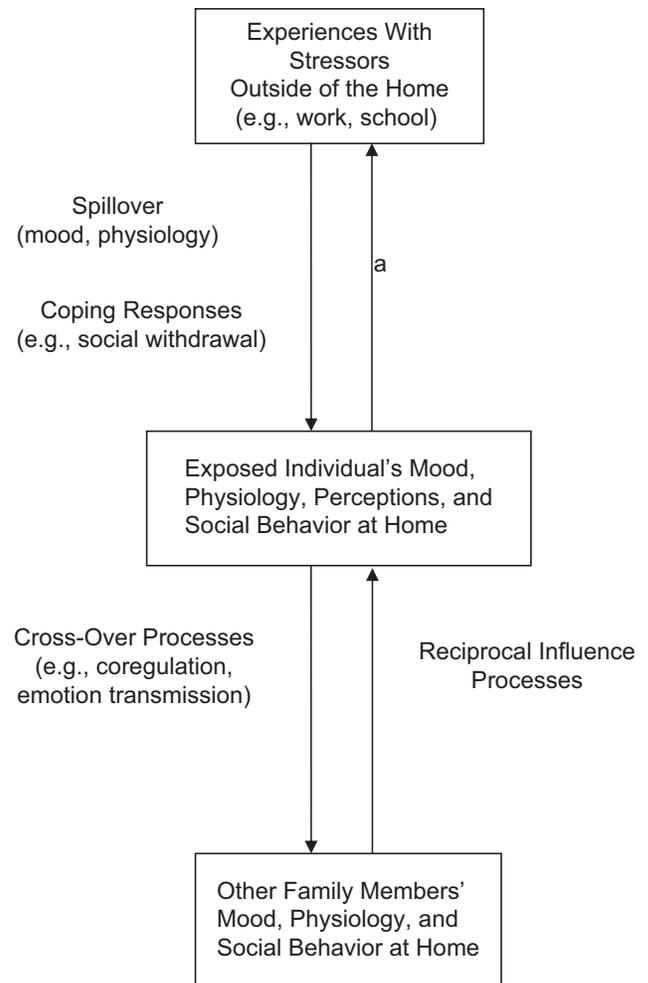


Fig. 1. Mechanisms of short-term change in the family caused by outside stressors. Stressors outside of the home lead to short-term changes in the family, first through spillover and coping responses that influence an individual's mood, physiology, perceptions, and social behavior at home. Then, because of cross-over processes like coregulation, the psychological and physiological impacts of outside stressors can extend to other family members. Finally, through reciprocal influence processes, all members help to shape how stressors affect family dynamics. Note: "This direction of effect has received much less attention in the research literature; given this article's focus on dynamics within the family, it is not discussed here."

home may not only influence subsequent social behavior but may also color social perception within the family. A study of fifth graders found that anxious mood mediated links from social and academic difficulties at school to the children's descriptions of more aversive interactions with parents later at home (Lehman & Repetti, 2007). Perhaps the short-term increases in anxiety that children experienced because of a stressful day biased their perceptions of their parents' behavior.

Another way that stressful events can shape family life is through the coping responses that family members use at home to manage the emotional and physiological residue of experiences that occurred outside. We believe that social withdrawal may be one such short-term coping response. Social withdrawal can involve nothing more than watching television or reading the

newspaper rather than engaging in conversation or helping with homework. In a naturalistic study of a “week in the life” of dual-earner families, our research group at the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families (CELf) recorded family members’ locations at home every 10 minutes. In the evenings after work, the most commonly observed space configuration for fathers was being alone in a room (39% of the observations; Campos, Graesch, Repetti, Ochs, & Bradbury, in press). Perhaps one of the ways that fathers withdraw after work is by physically positioning themselves away from other family members. Social withdrawal may go unrecognized as a coping strategy by the person using it and, therefore, may not be captured by retrospective self-report methods. However, whether or not it is intended as a coping response, avoidance of social exchanges may provide a period of isolated relaxation that shields the individual from stimulating social interactions and promotes recovery from elevated levels of arousal and negative mood back to baseline levels (Repetti, 1992).

The Involvement of Other Family Members

Whether through direct spillover processes or coping responses, stressors do change what happens at home and there may also be repercussions for the psychology, biology, and behavior of other family members. The term “crossover” is sometimes used when stressors experienced by one family member affect another person, such as a spouse or child. Crossover may occur through emotion-transmission processes, short-term links between one family member’s momentary mood and another member’s concurrent or subsequent emotional experience (Larson & Almeida, 1999). For instance, a study of couples’ moods across 7 days found that one spouse’s anger and sadness was associated with changes in the other partner’s mood when the couple reunited after being apart (Schoebi, 2008). In addition to the transmission of momentary mood or affect, family members may show synchrony, or “coregulation,” of physiological states. In a recent study of couples over 3 days, we found that husbands’ and wives’ fluctuations in cortisol appeared to be linked, as did their fluctuations in negative mood (Saxbe & Repetti, in press).

These studies indicate that, like a row of falling dominos, the mood and physiology of one family member may be affected by the experiences of another family member hours earlier in a different setting. Of course, spouses and children are not passive participants in emotion transmission and coregulation processes; we have found evidence for reciprocal influence processes whereby family members help to shape one another’s unfolding responses to stressful days. For instance, in the air-traffic-controller study, wives’ supportive behavior appeared to facilitate a social-withdrawal response (Repetti, 1989). Observations of parent–child reunions after work suggest that children may also influence how a parent responds to a stressful day. Video data from the CELf study showed that, upon their return home from work, fathers were often ignored or were greeted in

a distracted manner by their children (Campos et al., in press). Recall that, subsequent to their arrival home, the fathers were often observed alone in the home. Their children’s unavailability or distracted greeting may represent another way that a family member can encourage a social-withdrawal response. Alternatively, children may behave in ways that interfere with a parent’s attempts at social avoidance. In another study involving videotaped after-work reunions, preschoolers increased their attempts to engage their mothers in interaction (by demonstrating more interest and involvement in the activity) when the parent showed signs of withdrawing (Repetti & Wood, 1997b). These findings all point to the role that family members can play in shaping reactions—in particular, social-withdrawal responses—to stressors experienced outside of the home.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILIES AND RESEARCHERS

If the short-term effects of daily stressors on the well-being and behavior of all family members accumulate over time, they may have a long-term impact on families. For example, air traffic controllers assigned to less friendly and supportive work teams described the emotional tone of their interactions with their school-aged children as more negative and less positive, when averaged over several days, than did the men who worked on teams that were more congenial (Repetti, 1994). Did chronic exposure to a stressful social climate at work and the daily echo of those effects at home erode the overall quality of those father–child relationships? It seems reasonable to expect that, in the face of chronically high levels of job stressors, there would be a gradual drift in the baseline or typical patterns of social interaction in the family. Research suggests that, ultimately, both parents’ relationships with their children are influenced by one spouse’s employment experiences (Bumpus, Crouter, & McHale, 1999).

Investigations of long-term consequences are an important direction for future research. To the extent that chronic daily stressors have a cumulative effect on the family, they can also influence the emotional, social, and biological development of offspring. Allostatic load—the idea that chronic stress causes wear and tear on regulatory systems—has been used to tie the repeated activation of stress-response systems in the family to long-term health outcomes (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Critical detail will be added to the emerging picture of stress and coping processes in daily life as researchers observe physiological stress responding in natural settings—such as unwinding and recovery at home after a stressful day—and the responses of all family members to events and interactions as they occur. Building on that foundation will help us understand how chronic stress eventually contributes to health. One of the most pressing needs is for naturalistic studies of children’s immediate physiological reactions, as well as their emotional, cognitive, and social responses, to experiences both outside and inside the home.

Variability in how individuals and families respond to daily stressors will be an important part of the picture. The available evidence suggests that the short-term effects described here are moderated by stable differences in psychological well-being and the quality of family relationships (Repetti & Saxbe, 2009). For example, the immediate impact of job stressors on after-work behavior is strengthened among parents who report symptoms of depression and anxiety (Repetti & Wood, 1997a) and in families with high levels of conflict (Story & Repetti, 2006).

Psychologists are zooming in on the day-to-day experiences of individuals and families through naturalistic research designs that incorporate methods such as intensive repeated measures, direct observation, and physiological assessment. As we look closer, we gain new insights into basic questions: How long do the biological, emotional, and behavioral effects of a stressor persist; how are emotions passed from one person to another; and how do individuals cope with everyday emotional experiences? Our findings point to the critical role played by others in coping responses and highlight certain understudied coping strategies. The implications are exciting, not only for understanding stress and coping within families, but also for understanding how we are shaped over time by our everyday experiences and by the interpersonal-relationship contexts within which we all exist.

Recommended Reading

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- Larson, R., & Almeida, D. (1999). (See References). As the lead paper in a special edition of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, this integrative review details a new paradigm for mapping paths of emotional transmission in families and includes statistical models for evaluating daily emotion transmission.
- Lehman, B.J., & Repetti, R.L. (2007). (See References). The first study of school spillover effects that included daily diary reports from both children and parents.
- Saxbe, D.E., Repetti, R.L., & Nishina, A. (2008). (See References). A naturalistic study that uses cortisol as a physiological measure of stress to investigate couples' recovery from daily work stress in the home.
- Story, L.B., & Repetti, R.L. (2006). (See References). A daily diary study of work stress and marital behaviors that provides evidence for the mediating role of negative mood in work–family spillover.
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