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Effects of job stress on family relationships

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In the short-term, daily job stressors influence family interactions through their impact on the employed person's mood, thoughts, and coping behaviors. In the long-term, family relationships can be shaped by those experiences in both positive and negative ways. Some spouse 'cross-over' effects appear to represent accommodations of the employed partner under stress — for instance, a spouse's increased provision of social support and involvement with children — and are evidence of dynamics that go beyond a simple and direct transfer of stress from work to home.

Addresses

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An interest in how experiences at work shape family life is part of a larger perspective acknowledging that families are not cloistered from the outside world and are best understood within their broader social ecologies. Of course there are many ways that jobs can influence families; one is through the impact that occupational stressors have on family relationships. We know that the effects of a stressful experience on cognition, emotion, and physiology do not necessarily evaporate when there is a switch to a new social context; the residue on the body and the mind can continue to have consequences in the next situation. The term *spillover* is sometimes used to refer to that process of carry-over of internal states from one setting to another.

As depicted in [Figure 1](#), there are both direct and indirect effects of the stressful experiences at work on family interactions. The term *negative mood spillover* refers to expressions of impatience, frustration and irritability at home that result directly from negative mood originally generated earlier at work. The connection is indirect inasmuch as behavior at home represents attempts to

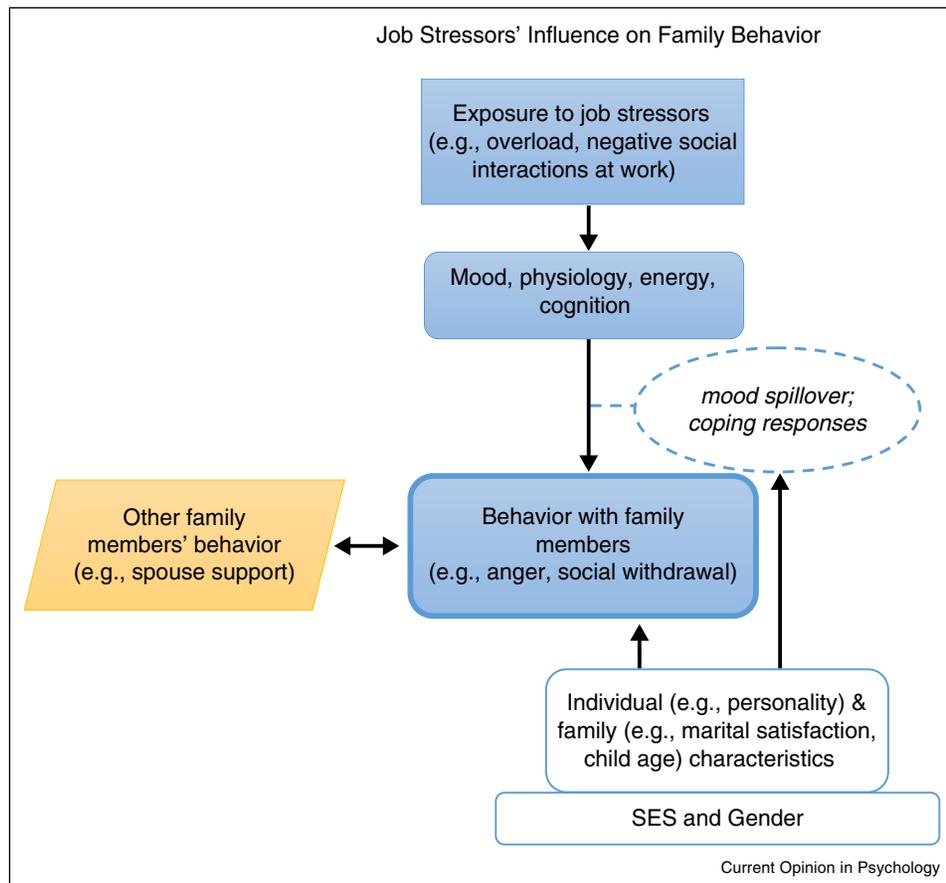
cope with, and recover from, the lingering effects of stress exposures earlier at work. An example is social withdrawal from family members in an effort to avoid tense interactions and to return to baseline levels of emotion and energy. In addition, the repercussions of job stressors are sometimes observed in a spouse's behavior, another type of indirect outcome, often referred to as a cross-over effect. Studies of spillover and cross-over uncover gender differences, as well as individual and family differences, in these work-family processes.

Spillover as a short-term process

The use of intensive repeated measures (IRM) to observe 'spillover' processes as they unfold dates back over 25 years [1,2]. These studies capitalize on day-to-day variability in experiences at work and behavior at home to test short-term, within-subjects associations between a job variable and a family outcome. In order to appropriately test the temporal sequencing of work and family variables presumed in a spillover model, the optimal research designs separate — in time and space — the assessment of work and family variables: job experiences are described at work and descriptions of after-work family behavior are provided later in the day at home. IRM studies with these design features have incorporated objective measures of job stressors [2], and employed individuals' daily behavior has been assessed by spouse reports [3,4] and by video recordings [5].

Two common patterns of short-term responses to daily job stressors are social withdrawal and increases in irritability and displays of anger. Studies that assess different types of job stressors have suggested that days with a high number and pace of job demands and those characterized by distressing social interactions at work may differentially elicit these two behavioral reactions [2,4,5]. Rather than focus specifically on behavior, some studies test short-term effects of spillover on patterns of family interaction. For example, on days with more supervisor criticism mothers describe more harsh and more withdrawn interactions with their preschool-aged children [6]. That study also tested next-day effects and found that supervisor criticisms were followed by declines in warm mother-child interactions on the following day (after adjusting for the following day's supervisor interactions). Evidence suggests that short-term spillover effects vary depending on individual and family characteristics, such as levels of conflict and marital satisfaction [3,4]. Spouses in high-conflict families [4] and those who report more symptoms of depression [5] may be especially vulnerable to the short-term effects of job stressors on behavior with family members.

Figure 1



Job stressors' influence on family behavior.

Daily stressors that are only partially connected to experiences at work, such as the total hours spent working each day (both paid and unpaid) [7] and daily perceptions of overload from both work and non-work tasks and responsibilities [8^{*}], have also been linked with changes in daily patterns of family interaction. Both types of studies have shown that negative mood as well as other cognitive and emotional experiences, such as the desire to avoid social interaction, help to mediate spillover effects [4,8^{*},9].

Stable patterns of spillover

Just as erratic trickles from everyday rainfall may carve deeper and deeper ruts into soil that overtime become entrenched, short-term spillover processes may accumulate and establish more stable patterns of work and family dynamics. For instance, patterns of short-term spillover responses in IRM studies were used to create individual-difference variables that reflect a tendency to react to a stressful day in a particular way (e.g., with anger, or disregard, or distancing), and those spillover patterns were correlated with both the individual's and the spouse's marital dissatisfaction [8^{*}].

Two recent studies testing stable associations between perceptions of job stress and family behavior capitalized on an ethnographic video archive of the daily routines and social interactions of dual-earner families. One found that the wives' self-reported job stress predicted naturalistic observations of their own and their husbands' support behavior. Wives who reported more job stress were observed receiving *more* support from their husbands, both because they solicited more and because their husbands offered more support. There was no link between husbands' job stress and couple support behavior [10^{**}]. A separate analysis of the recordings revealed individual differences in spillover: high-neuroticism husbands who reported high levels of job stress displayed more negative and engaged social behavior, whereas low-neuroticism husbands with high job stress showed social withdrawal behaviors, operationalized as a decrease in emotion display and involvement with family members [11].

Given that some of the roots of work-family research lie in the maternal employment literature of the 1970s, it is not surprising that there has been much interest in the effects

that job stressors may have on the parent-child relationship [12*]. In one study that used direct observational methods, mothers' ratings of a more negative interpersonal atmosphere at work predicted less positive (e.g., less sensitive and stimulating) mother-infant and father-infant interactions 3 months later, as well as more negative (i.e., more intrusive) father-infant interactions [13]. Although the fathers' workplace atmosphere did not predict the quality of parenting behavior in that sample, a cross-sectional study also employing direct observation found that fathers working in less supportive work environments were less engaged and less sensitive with their infants [14]. Work schedules have also been examined as potential stressors. For instance, low-income mothers of preschoolers who worked nonstandard schedules reported higher levels of parenting stress [15]. However, a non-standard work schedule can also have positive effects on family life. Husbands of nurses working an evening shift (compared to those on day shifts) spent more time with their school-aged children and knew more about their activities; the children also gave their fathers' parenting skills higher ratings [16].

Though not specifically focused on job stress, a longitudinal study that tracked job satisfaction and marital quality over 12 years found that declines in job satisfaction contributed to increases in marital dissatisfaction and discord over the next 3 years (but not later on) [17]. The reverse relationship — marital quality predicting job satisfaction — was even stronger, which is consistent with a bidirectional work-family spillover process.

Perceived spillover

Rather than test the association between a work and family variable, some investigators assess family members' spillover perceptions and attributions. One IRM study using this approach found that more time spent at work predicted reports of more work-family conflict that day; and perceptions of work-family conflict, in turn, predicted fewer social activities with the family [18]. At the between-subjects level, the perception of work-family conflict has been connected with family outcomes, such as less marital satisfaction [19] and fathers knowing less about their adolescents' daily activities, a finding partially explained by less paternal acceptance of, and engagement in joint activities with, their children [20].

Conclusions

Research on how work stressors affect family relationships paints a nuanced picture that may include coping processes and positive outcomes for families. Although we do see echoes of job-related negative mood finding direct expression at home, we also observe other behaviors, like social withdrawal, that may serve to protect the family from the direct display of stress. That explains why, in addition to negative mood, the mediators of spillover include cognitive variables, like a desire to avoid social interaction. Spouses'

accommodations of the employed partner under stress — for instance, by providing more social support and increasing their involvement with children — are also evidence of family dynamics that go beyond a simple carry-over of stress. These spouse responses may reflect family resilience under stress, while other 'cross-over' effects may result from emotion contagion.

The term 'spillover' is used to refer to many different phenomena in psychology. For work-family researchers, 'spillover' encompasses not only the effects of stress on the family, but also the consequences of positive occupational experiences, such as a supervisor's recognition for good work predicting warmer mother-child interactions that day [6*]. This approach reminds us that work is not always stressful; in addition to financial rewards, jobs provide many psychological benefits for individuals and families [12*]. There is also a limited body of spillover research that addresses the reverse causal direction: family life influencing experiences at work. In other research areas, the term spillover is more likely to be constrained to mean a transfer of stress or negative affect with a family behavior or interaction variable as the outcome. For example, recognizing that there are other contexts in which stress arises, some have studied the effects of daily problems at school on a child's behavior at home [21], and 'within-family spillover' describes how distressing interactions with one family member influence subsequent behavior with a different family member [22]. The term 'stress spillover' has also been used in a broad fashion to refer to the impact that the daily sum of stressful events across many different domains of life has on family interactions [23].

Although there is no need to prioritize 'work' as the progenitor of all stress in families, jobs and families do provide a convenient way to study how internal states are carried from one situation to another because IRM designs can capitalize on the separation of those settings in both time and space. When, instead, participants are asked to rate stressful experiences and family outcomes at the same time, typically at the end of each day, the rater's momentary mood may color perceptions of variables on both sides of the spillover equation. On the other hand, because single daily assessments are less demanding on participants, these IRM studies can cover many more days of data collection and therefore have more within-subjects variance to exploit in the analysis. For instance, an individual's spillover pattern score, computed from reports of stress and family behavior collected over many days, can be utilized in other cross-sectional or longitudinal analyses [8*].

The research discussed here highlights how relationships are not insular, but permeable, changing, and resilient. Stressors originating in one situation can influence emotion, cognition and behavior in subsequent situations.

When the stressors are chronic, there can be long-term consequences for relationships, at least in part because of the adjustments and adaptations that partners sometimes make.

Conflict of interest

Nothing declared.

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