

Entry for Encyclopedia of Human Relationships

Work-Family Spillover

The term work-family spillover is often used in a general way to refer to the effects that paid employment has on family relationships. Initial research focused on maternal employment, based on the idea that a mother's work outside of the home might adversely affect her children and family. We now know that this assumption was incorrect and painted a far too simplistic picture of work and family life; rather, the specific characteristics and experiences of jobs – not merely employment itself – have both positive and negative consequences for the family.

Effects of Job Characteristics and Work-Related Experiences on Family Relationships

Studies of job conditions and job characteristics now commonly include subjective appraisals of work and longitudinal research designs, in which participants are followed over time, to understand how individuals' experiences or views of their jobs might bring about changes in family dynamics. Job satisfaction is one of the chief features of work life that is studied. In general, parents who are more satisfied with their careers show greater warmth and responsiveness to their children, and also report greater marital satisfaction. Workers who experience more autonomy and complexity on the job also display more positive parenting and less harsh and restrictive parenting. Thus, jobs can serve as an arena outside the household where workers may experience achievement and fulfillment that can carry over into the family with positive implications for those relationships.

On the flip side of job satisfaction is job stress. Research consistently indicates that chronic job stress affects family relationships through an impact on individual well-being. For example, the subjective experience of job stress has been associated with self-reports of distress, such as depression, that have then been linked to poorer marital and parent-child relations. In the absence of individual distress as an intervening link, however, there is no connection between chronic job stressors and family outcomes.

One facet of job stress is the social climate or the quality of social relationships at work. Parents who experience a non-cohesive or conflictive work atmosphere seem to have more negative interactions with their children (e.g., they are less affectionate, more angry), with longitudinal studies suggesting that these effects can hold up over the course of months. Similarly, couples who report negative and unsupportive relationships at work also experience more marital tension and arguments. While investigators have tended to focus on the impact of a negative work atmosphere, social support in the workplace has been linked with greater individual health and well-being; these links are thought to have positive implications for family life.

Another aspect of job stress is time pressure and work overload which can lead to parents feeling overwhelmed by and conflicted about their work and family roles. Similar to the association between the social atmosphere at work and family relations, studies reliably show that overloaded parents have poorer relations with their children (e.g., more conflict, less acceptance). In addition, more time pressure at work has been connected to reduced parental monitoring, meaning less knowledge about children's activities and whereabouts, and less allocation of time to parenting. For couples, time pressure and work overload are associated with greater marital tension and poorer marital

adjustment. The subjective appraisal of job demands as being stressful or overwhelming seems to have a greater influence on family interactions and relationships than the objective job conditions.

One such objective measure of job conditions is the length of the workday, or the number of hours spent on the job. Initially, it was assumed that long hours at work would be associated with poorer family outcomes. However, research indicates that long work hours are not a predictor of individual or family functioning, with the majority of studies reporting no reliable linkages between time on the job and lower marital quality or poorer home environments for children. This is probably because of the host of benefits (income, access to health care, social support) that typically increase with more hours of employment. However, the distribution of parents' work hours over the day (e.g., amount of overlap with spouse's work schedule and child's school day) and the subjective appraisal of those work hours (e.g., do work hours fit one's needs) do influence family relationships. In particular, among two-parent families in which one parent works a non-standard shift (e.g., at night), there is often a disruption of family routines and increased rates of marital dissatisfaction have also been observed. In single-parent households, shift work can place an extreme burden on the family.

Researchers have also turned their attention to experiences that occur *in transit* between work and home. Although commuter stress is associated with negative individual health outcomes, such as high blood pressure, there does not appear to be a substantive link between commuting and family relations and functioning. Studies have implicated the length, unpredictability, and uncontrollability of commuting as characteristics that help explain commuter stress via their associations with worker's

greater negative mood, and decreased frustration tolerance and task motivation.

However, there is no conclusive evidence that these effects contribute to increased tension in the home.

Short-Term Processes

Because chronic job stressors can affect family relationships, researchers have been interested in understanding just *how* experiences at work come to have an impact at home. One approach to answering this question puts families under the microscope, focusing on a short period of time (days or weeks), to see if day-to-day fluctuations in stressors at work correlate with day-to-day changes in family behavior. This strategy differs from approaches that consider the effects of stable job characteristics or conditions. Now, instead of comparing an ER trauma nurse (who perceives a high level of stress at work) to a florist (who generally perceives little job stress), the researcher is comparing the same person, say the florist, to him- or herself on different days with different levels of job stress (Valentine's Day versus the day after). When this is done, work-to-family effects are often observed and they seem to fall into two categories - social withdrawal and increases in anger and conflict. Interestingly, these short-term consequences of job stress are observed both in marital and in parent-child interactions and they are found in studies that use objective measures of daily job stressors.

The social withdrawal response to job stress consists of short-term decreases in the employed individual's usual level of social engagement at home. Coming home after a stressful day at work, he or she might speak less, express less positive and less negative emotion, and be less interested and less involved in social interaction. For instance, a parent may be less likely to help with homework or to discipline a child. The second type

of response is quite different. After more difficult or stressful days, the employed family member may express more anger and be more critical than usual. For example, researchers have found that a one-day increase in stress at work is associated with increases in marital arguments and use of disciplinary tactics with children later that day.

How is it that a high stress day at work comes to affect behavior in the family? Psychologists believe that job stressors leave a cognitive, affective, and physiological residue, such that the employee's thoughts, feelings, and biology are changed, at least in the short-term, by his/her experiences at work. Those repercussions can be felt in the home. This is the more technical and narrow meaning of the term "spillover": the experience of negative mood or physiological arousal in one setting that was generated in a different setting. Negative mood and physiological arousal due to stressors experienced at work sometimes do persist when the employed person returns home and evidence suggests that those spillover effects account for some of the increase in anger and conflict that were described above.

There is, of course, an alternative to simply experiencing and directly expressing the residue of job stress at home; employees can attempt to change their physical and psychological state, perhaps by relaxing, or distracting themselves from thoughts about a difficult day, or engaging in any one of a number of coping tactics. The social withdrawal response to job stress may be one such coping strategy. In other words, rather than discuss job-related worries or problems at home, the employee may avoid social interaction, perhaps to reduce the chances that negative mood or irritability will lead to arguments and to facilitate a process of relaxation and unwinding.

Whether the residue of stress at work directly affects the employed family member's social behavior through spillover processes or indirectly affects his or her behavior through a coping response, the impact is felt by the partner in the social interaction. Researchers are beginning to investigate processes of emotion transmission, whereby emotions are transferred from one member of a dyad to another through their social interactions. Likewise, there is some evidence that stress hormone levels in couples are linked when couples are at home together. We are thus beginning to see how stress at work can ultimately affect the psychological and biological functioning of other family members. However, it should be remembered that spouses and children are active participants in the daily social life of families. They also contribute to the dynamics of the employed family member's reactions at home to stress at work. For example, studies have uncovered different ways that other family members can either encourage or disrupt an employee's attempts at social withdrawal.

Individual and Family Differences

While the research summarized here indicates that jobs do influence family relationships, both in the short-term and in the long-run, not every family is affected in the same way or to the same degree. For example, some individuals and families do not show any impact of job stressors on home life. A variety of individual and family characteristics – such as the socioeconomic status and life stage of the family; the gender, personality, and psychological well being of the employee; existing patterns of conflict, parenting styles, and division of labor in the home – all help to shape work-family dynamics. For example, parents who are psychologically distressed seem to be more vulnerable to the effects of job stress on interactions with their children, and family

relationships that are generally satisfying and harmonious seem to protect families from the short-term repercussions of job stress.

Family-to-Work Spillover Effects

Although most work-family investigations focus on work-to-family effects, there is also interest in bidirectional models. Studies have found evidence for both a negative (e.g., stress contagion) and a positive (e.g., useful skills and attitudes) impact of home life on work life. Of note, recent longitudinal research has suggested that marital quality has more influence on job satisfaction than vice versa, such that increases in marital satisfaction contributed to increases in job satisfaction over time, and increases in marital discord predicted declines in job satisfaction over time. Thus, there is evidence to suggest that reciprocal effects between work and family simultaneously occur, and that these bidirectional pathways warrant further study.

In conclusion, while many employed adults say they worry that time spent at work may harm their families, on the whole, employment benefits the family environment. Jobs typically bring income, health care, social support, and a sense of accomplishment that contribute to the well-being of workers and their families. It is only under certain circumstances (e.g., high job stress, mismatch of work shift with family schedule) that employment can also bring negative consequences for the family.

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See also

Emotional Contagion, Employment Effects on Relationships, Job Stress Relationship Effects, Work-Family Conflict, Workplace Relationships

Further Reading

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