

Daily work-related affect spilling over to the family domain and crossing over between partners via affect at home and psychological detachment.

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Abstract

With the increased labor market participation of women—and therewith the increase in dual-earner couples—more and more individuals have to combine work and family roles. We examined how work-related experiences spill over to the family domain and cross over between partners, in that way affecting both partners' work-family role combination. Work experiences can be positive (e.g., experiencing supervisor support) as well as negative (e.g., interaction with a rude client) and elicit congruent emotional reactions (e.g., affect; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996; Zohar, Tzischinski, & Epstein, 2003). Until now, research mainly focused on constructs related to affect (e.g., job satisfaction), stable, general or context-free measures of affect (e.g., negative affectivity; Balducci, Schaufeli & Fraccaroli, 2011). To that end, we will focus on fluctuating positive and negative affect experienced in the work context as potential antecedents of the work-family role combination. State positive affect at work refers to an individual's resourceful dynamic tendency to feel joyful/alert/enthusiastic and experience a pleasant engagement with the work environment, whereas state negative affect at work refers to an individual's unresourceful state to feeling afraid/nervous/distressed and experience an unpleasant engagement with the work environment (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). In other words, individuals can gain resources in the work domain, which can be subsequently invested in the family domain thereby improving the quality of the family life (i.e., work-family enrichment; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). Conversely, individuals can also invest valuable resources in the work domain, which will no longer be available in the family domain thereby hampering the fulfillment of family demands (i.e., work-family conflict; Greenhaus & Beutell 1985).

We examined two potential pathways through which positive and negative affect at work might influence work-family enrichment and conflict: (1) an affective pathway via positive and negative affect at home and (2) a cognitive/behavioral pathway via psychological detachment—that is, mentally and physically leaving one's work behind after working hours (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, 2015).

In addition, individuals manage their own resources reservoir, but their partner can also be a source of resource gains or losses impacting the individual's resources reservoir (Hobfoll, 2001). To that end, we examined whether partners within a dual-earner couple alter each other's spillover from work to home, by influencing the mediating mechanisms (i.e., positive and negative affect at home and psychological detachment).

To that end, we surveyed 57 dual-earner couples twice a day over a period of one workweek. We assessed work-related positive and negative affect at the end of the workday and family-related positive and negative affect, psychological detachment, work-family enrichment and conflict right before bedtime via online surveys. We analyzed our data using a three-level path analysis. We applied the actor-partner interdependence model to simultaneously examine intra-individual actor and reciprocal inter-individual partner effects.

We found support for the affective spillover pathways. Specifically, positive affect at home mediated the relation between positive affect at work and work-family enrichment, whereas negative affect at home mediated the relation between negative affect at work and work-family conflict. These findings suggest that daily affect experienced at work might endure and enter the family domain. In addition, affect might color one's perception, alter one's behavior and resources reservoir (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) with positive affect at home promoting and negative affect at home impairing the family domain.

In addition, we only found partial support for the psychological detachment pathway to explain spillover processes (i.e., only for the negative spillover). Possibly, the cardiovascular activation following positive affect experienced at work is shorter in duration compared to negative affect (Brosschot & Tayer, 2003), thereby not impairing psychological detachment at home. Another possible explanation is that psychological detachment is only hindered by negative activation (deCroon, Sluiter, Blonk, Broersen, & Frings-Dresen, 2004) and unrelated to positive activation. The indirect effect of negative affect at work to work-family conflict via lowered psychological detachment, confirms the stressor-detachment model (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, 2015). This model states that job stressors—and the associated negative activation—impair psychological detachment, which in turn impair well-being. Specifically, negative affect experienced at work might elicit negative activation (Anderson & Levy, 2009), thereby impairing the individual to psychologically detach. Not being able to distract work-related thoughts and discontinue work-related activities at home seem to deplete resources and as such impair well-being in the form of lower work-family enrichment (Siu et al., 2010) and higher work-family conflict (Crawford et al., 2016).

We did not find support for a crossover effect of positive affect at home within dual-earner couples, whereas we did find support for the crossover of negative affect at home between partners. This finding could be interpreted in the light of research that found that negative events (and associated affect) impacted interpersonal relations stronger compared to positive events (and associated affect; Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). Moreover, psychological detachment did not crossover between partners, but individuals who psychologically detach positively influence their partner's positive affect at home. An individual who psychologically detaches from work, can devote all his/her mental capacity to the family domain (i.e., listen attentively to one's partner) and will engage in non-work related matters (e.g., taking care of the children). These acts might increase positive affect of the partner at home, whereas it might not preclude the partner to think or do work-related activities (i.e., psychologically detach). Lastly, positive as well as negative affect experienced by an individual at home, respectively, facilitated and impeded psychological detachment of the individual's partner. This could be explained by prior research that found that an individual who experiences positive affect at home is more likely to engage in positive interactions with his/her partner, which could increase the partner's likelihood to be distracted from work-related thoughts and actions. Conversely, experiencing negative affect at home might lower the likelihood that one will engage in positive interactions with his/her partner, which could increase the partner's likelihood to be more prone to work-related thoughts and actions (Danner-Vlaardingbroek et al., 2013).