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# Spillover and crossover of exhaustion and life satisfaction among dual-earner parents

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## Abstract

This study integrates spillover research of stress transferring from work to home and crossover research of strains transferring from one spouse to another. A spillover and crossover model was tested among 191 (couples of) dual-earner parents. For both males and females, it was hypothesized that (self-reported and partners' rating of) work-to-family interference (WFI) partially mediates the job demands–job exhaustion relationship, and fully mediates the job demands–life satisfaction relationship. Further, we hypothesized reciprocal crossover effects between both partners' job exhaustion and life satisfaction. The results of structural equation modeling analyses offered support for the mediating role of WFI although there were genders differences. In addition, we found a crossover path from females' exhaustion to males' exhaustion and from males' life satisfaction to their partners' life satisfaction. This implies that not only job-related strain, but also positive, context-free well-being may crossover among partners.

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*Keywords:* Crossover; Exhaustion; Life satisfaction; Spillover

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## 1. Introduction

Many studies in the domain of Occupational Health Psychology have shown that unfavorable working conditions negatively influence employees' mental and physical health and well-being (e.g., Quick & Tetrick, 2003; Schabracq, Winnubst, & Cooper, 2003). However, less attention has been paid to possible consequences of (impaired) employee well-being for their spouses (Westman, 2001). Such a process may be particularly relevant to couples in which both members are employed and maintain a family that includes children (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1971).

In the current study, we examine among dual-earner parents two possible ways in which job demands and strain may carry over from the work domain to the home domain: spillover and crossover. In *spillover*, reactions experienced in the work domain are transferred to and interfere with the non-work domain (e.g., Lambert, 1990; Leiter & Durup, 1996). Although work may influence family life in both positive and negative ways (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000), we will exclusively concentrate on how the work of employees negatively influences their personal functioning at home. This phenomenon is also known as work-to-family interference (WFI). *Crossover* denotes the process in which stress and strain experienced by employees leads to stress and strain experienced by their spouses at home (Westman, 2001). Thus, spillover concerns an *intra*-individual transmission of stress or strain from one domain to another domain, while crossover refers to a dyadic, *inter*-individual transmission within the same domain.

Our objectives were threefold. First, we examined whether WFI plays a mediational role between job demands and well-being. Although evidence for this mediation process has been reported in previous studies (e.g., Demerouti, Bakker, & Bulters, 2004; Geurts, Rutte, & Peeters, 1999; Montgomery, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Den Ouden, 2003), the present study uses a different research strategy. Instead of utilizing only self-reports of WFI, as is done in most studies, we also use peer-ratings of spouses to evaluate work-to-family interference as perceived by their partners. This strategy may circumvent problems with common method variance in previous spillover research. Second, we investigated whether context-specific (work-related) feelings of exhaustion crossover to the partner. Again, this has been studied in the past (e.g., Westman & Etzion, 1999), but only a limited number of studies controlled for the job demands of each of the partners (see Westman, 2001; for a review). Finally, we examined the crossover of context-free (general) life satisfaction between partners, a phenomenon that has not been investigated. Therefore, our knowledge on whether—or to what extent—positive experiences may be transferred is insufficient (Westman, 2001).

Fig. 1 illustrates the proposed spillover and crossover model of dual-earner parents. The model contains within-domain relationships (marked 'w,' i.e., the relationship between job demands and exhaustion for both partners), and between-domain relationships (marked 'b,' i.e., the relationship between job demands and WFI, and the relationships between WFI on the one hand, and job exhaustion and general life satisfaction on the other hand). Finally, the model includes two crossover relationships, marked 'c,' i.e., between the exhaustion of both partners and between

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