



Neuroticism and well-being among employed new parents: The role of the work-family conflict

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ABSTRACT

In this longitudinal study, the authors tested a single-mediator model in which neuroticism forms a risk factor predisposing individuals to experience work-family conflict, which, in turn, was hypothesized as influencing their levels of parental, marital and personal well-being. The authors focused on men and women at a particular phase in the life cycle: employed, married (or cohabiting), and undergoing the transition to parenthood. Data were collected during the third trimester of pregnancy and at 9 months postpartum. The participants for this longitudinal study were part of an initial sample of 185 Canadian couples expecting their first child. Of this number, 172 men and 50 women were working at 9 months postpartum and were included in the current study. As predicted, for men, after controlling for demographic variables, the mediated effects were significant for the residualized change scores of union quality and of psychological distress. The link between neuroticism and parenting satisfaction was also mediated by work-family conflict for men. For women, no mediated effects were significant.

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1. Introduction

In today's society, individuals are trying to "do it all": that is, find well-being through a combination of roles (worker, spouse, parent). Although employment, marriage, and parenting are important psychologically (Noor, 2004), the roles they confer tend to overlap and people's experiences in one affect their behavior and satisfaction in others.

Little research has examined the long-term impact of dispositional variables on the incidence of conflict between these multiple roles (Michel & Clark, 2009; Rantanen, Pulkkinen, & Kinnunen, 2005). The present study aimed to illuminate this insufficiently considered issue. More precisely, the literature led us to investigate a single-mediator model in which the personality trait of neuroticism forms a risk factor predisposing individuals to experience conflict between multiple roles, which in turn, should influence their levels of well-being (see Boyar & Mosley (2007) for a similar hypothesis). This study follows Lahey (2009) latest recommendation suggesting that achieving a full understanding of the mechanisms through which neuroticism is linked to well-being should be a top priority.

In the current study, we focused on men and women at a particular phase in the life cycle: employed, married (or cohabiting), and experiencing the arrival of their first child. Although an extensive

literature exists on the transition to parenthood, few researchers have studied new parents' return to paid employment early in the baby's first year of life (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, & Sayer, 2007). This is a demanding time in adults' lives that requires articulating multiple roles (Costigan, Cox, & Cauce, 2003) and leads to conflicts between work and family life (Rantanen et al., 2005). The choice of this specific population is in accordance with a recent comment by Ellenbogen, Ostiguy, and Hodgins (2010), who emphasized that, from a public-health standpoint, researchers should be particularly concerned with high neuroticism in parents because of the evidences showing its negative effect on following generations. The same reasoning also applies to low levels of well-being among parents (Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992).

The personality trait of neuroticism refers to a relatively stable tendency to respond with negative emotions to threat, frustration, or loss (Lahey, 2009). Its relationship with individuals' subjective well-being is largely recognized (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2008). In effect, recent studies showed that neuroticism is one of the personality traits the most strongly associated with individuals' well-being (Romero, Villar, Luengo, & Gómez-Fraguela, 2009). Neuroticism is also supposed to have a negative impact on well-being within the couple and the family (Schneewind & Kupsch, 2007).

In the current study, neuroticism was hypothesized to form a risk factor in the experience of work-family conflict because of the tendency of people high in neuroticism to experience negative affects in response to challenges and to view themselves and the surrounding world negatively (see Bruck & Allen (2003) and Rantanen et al. (2005), for a similar hypothesis). Defined as the

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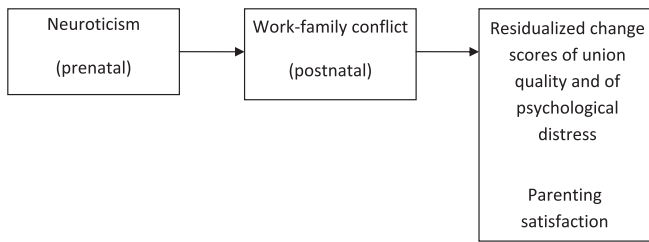


Fig. 1. The proposed mediated model.

extent to which a person is overwhelmed by his or her responsibilities and feels that the pressures from work and family are mutually incompatible (Blanch & Aluja, 2009; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007), the work-family conflict (or the similar concept of role overload) is currently the most popular lens through which the experience of multiple roles is being examined (Glynn, Maclean, Forte, & Cohen, 2009). Another popular approach focuses on positive aspects of multiple roles (see, for instance, Andreassi & Thompson (2007), for their work on “positive spillover”). Recent work by Michel and Clark (2009), based on a sample of 187 employees, revealed that dispositional negative affect, a concept that is usually associated with neuroticism, is an important predictor of work-family conflict (see also Blanch & Aluja (2009), for similar results).

A significant number of parents experience conflict between their work and family roles, which in turn influences their overall level of well-being (Kinnunen, Feldt, Geurts, & Pulkkinen, 2006; Pearson, 2008). Stress arising from opposing demands of work and family have been associated with more specific measures of adjustment, such as family dissatisfaction (Boyar & Mosley, 2007; Michel & Clark, 2009), symptoms of psychological distress (Noor, 2002), or poorer mental health (Glynn et al., 2009; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007).

To the best of our knowledge, very few studies, with the exception of those by Rantanen et al. (2005) and Perry-Jenkins et al. (2007), have used a longitudinal design to examine associations between personality traits, the work-family conflict, and well-being. Longitudinal studies allow for the prediction of changes in the well-being of individuals dealing with multiple roles. In the context of the transition to parenthood, this prediction is of paramount importance in light of previous studies showing, for instance, that a decrease in new parents’ union quality following childbirth is associated with a higher likelihood of divorce (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, Saisto, Halmesmaki, & Nurmi, 2006). In addition, the transition to parenthood offers a unique opportunity to study the causal link between personality traits and work-family conflict because personality traits can be assessed before the onset of work-family conflict.

The aim of the current study was to investigate a single-mediator model in which the relationship between neuroticism and well-being of employed new parents is explained by their level of work-family conflict (see Fig. 1). The current study was as much about predicting parents’ level of adjustment to their new role as mother or father as it was about predicting changes in their level of adjustment to their marital role following the arrival of their first child. Finally, the current mediated model was aimed at predicting changes in adults’ psychological distress between the prenatal and the postpartum periods.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants for this longitudinal study were part of an initial sample of 185 Canadian couples expecting their first child. Of

this number, 172 men and 50 women were at work at 9 months postpartum and were included in the current study. At Time 2, participating men were working an average of 43 h per week ($SD = 8.74$), whereas participating women were working an average of 35 h per week ($SD = 10.91$). Their occupational status at Time 2 was as follows: blue collar (31% for men, 16% for women), lower white collar (24% for men, 18% for women), and upper white collar (45% for men, 66% for women) workers. The majority of men (68%) and women (60%) were married. The other participants were cohabiting with their partner without being legally married. Men’s age ranged from 20 to 44 years ($M = 30$, $SD = 3.87$), and women’s from 21 to 39 ($M = 28$, $SD = 3.69$). Men had been living with their partners an average of 5 years ($SD = 2.67$), whereas the average union length for women was 4.5 years ($SD = 2.95$).

2.2. Procedure

Most couples were recruited in prenatal classes offered by regional hospitals. Prenatal classes are very common in Canada and almost all couples expecting their first child attend these classes. In keeping with previous investigations dealing with the transition to parenthood (Costigan et al., 2003), the first evaluation was conducted during the third trimester of the first pregnancy ($M = 32$ weeks of gestation, $SDs = 3.36$ for men and 3.77 for women) and the second was conducted at 9 months postpartum ($SDs = 1.07$ for men and 1.28 for women).

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Demographics

A demographic questionnaire asked participants to report, for instance, the number of hours they work per week, their main occupation, their marital status (married vs. cohabiting), their age, and the length of union with their current partner at both assessment points.

2.3.2. Neuroticism

The 12-item neuroticism subscale of the NEO Five-Factor Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 1992), which measures negative affectivity, was completed during pregnancy. Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point Likert-type scale (0 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*) the extent to which each statement (e.g., “Too often, when things go wrong, I get discouraged and feel like giving up”) corresponds to their perception of themselves. A high score denoted a high level of neuroticism. Alphas for this subscale were respectively .79 for men and .84 for women.

2.3.3. Work-family conflict

Participants completed a 5-item postnatal measure of work-family conflict (Costigan et al., 2003), which assessed conflict between the roles of worker, spouse, and parent. Each item (e.g., “How much do your job and family responsibilities conflict with each other?”) was scored on a scale ranging from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). Greater scores indicated greater work-family conflict. The instrument showed adequate reliability in the current sample (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .74$ for men and .72 for women).

2.3.4. Well-being

Participants also completed three measures of well-being. The 32-item Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) assessed union quality. The 29-item Psychiatric Symptom Index (Ilfeld, 1976) measured psychological distress. Of the questionnaire’s 29 items, only 24 were used at both evaluations for women in order to eliminate symptoms of psychological distress that can be attributed to pregnancy (e.g., “During the past seven days, how often did you have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep?”). The 45-item

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