Workaholism and well-being among Japanese dual-earner couples: A spillover-crossover perspective

Akihito Shimazu [a,*], Evangelia Demerouti [b], Arnold B. Bakker [c], Kyoko Shimada [a], Norito Kawakami [a]

[a] Department of Mental Health, The University of Tokyo, Graduate School of Medicine, 7-3-1 Hongo, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113 0033, Japan
[b] Eindhoven University of Technology, Department of Human Performance Management, The Netherlands
[c] Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

This study among Japanese dual-earner couples examined the impact of workaholism on employees' and their partners' work-family conflicts and psychological distress. The matched responses of 994 couples were analyzed with logistic regression analyses. Results showed that workaholics (i.e., employees scoring high on both working excessively and working compulsively) were more likely to experience work-to-family conflict and psychological distress compared to relaxed workers (i.e., low on both working excessively and working compulsively) for both genders. Results also showed that husbands of workaholic women were more likely to experience family-to-work conflict, whereas wives of workaholic men were not. These findings integrate and expand previous findings on workaholism and the recently formulated spillover-crossover model.

Introduction

With changes in family structures and the increasing participation of women in the workforce (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2010; Peeters, Montgomery, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005), employees are having to work additional hours beyond their traditional work schedule more often in order to fulfill the demands of the roles as a spouse, parent or caregiver. In addition, advances in communication technology in recent years have made it possible for work to be performed almost anywhere and anytime: at home or on holiday (Jones, Burke, & Westman, 2006; Kinnunen, Geurts, & Mauno, 2004; Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2007). Excessive work has become a common phenomenon in many cultures and is actually applauded by societies rather than recognized as an addiction-like behavior with negative consequences (Porter, 1996). These changes have created the potential for interference or conflict to occur between employees' work and personal lives (Bakker, Demerouti, & Dollard, 2008), and they call for a better understanding of how an employee's work may impact their well-being, specifically psychological health and family functioning.

This study focuses on the impacts of workaholism on well-being among Japanese dual-earner couples by using a large community sample. Specifically, we examine whether a spouse's workaholism has an impact on his or her own psychological health and family functioning or on those of his or her partner. To answer the questions, we will use the recently formulated spillover-crossover model (Bakker, Demerouti, & Burke, 2009, 2008; Shimazu, Bakker, & Demerouti, 2009), which proposes an *intra-individual* transmission of stress or strain from work to home and vice versa, and a dyadic, *inter-individual* transmission of stress or strain from husbands to wives and vice versa.

Workaholism

For the general public, workaholism is synonymous with working long hours. However, conceiving workaholism exclusively in terms of the number of working hours is misleading because it neglects its addictive nature. A typical work addict is motivated by a strong internal drive that cannot be resisted, rather than by external or contextual factors, such as financial problems, a poor marriage, organizational culture, supervisory pressure, or a strong

* Corresponding author. Tel./fax: +81 3 5841 3612.
  E-mail address: ashimazu@m.u-tokyo.ac.jp (A. Shimazu).

desire for career advancement. This follows from the overview of earlier theory and research presented by Scott and colleagues (Scott, Moore, & Miceli, 1997), who found the common characteristics of workaholism featured in its various definitions.

First, workaholic people spend a great deal of time on work activities when given the discretion to do so—they work excessively hard. Second, they are reluctant to disengage from work and they persistently and frequently think about work when they are not working. This suggests that they are obsessed with their work—they are compulsive workers. Therefore, based on a conceptual analysis, Schaufeli and his colleagues (Schaufeli, Bakker, Van der Heijden, & Prins, 2009; Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008) defined workaholism as the tendency to work excessively hard (the behavioral dimension) and to be obsessed with work (the cognitive dimension), which manifests itself in working compulsively. This definition agrees with the most recent analysis of scholarly definitions that concludes that working hard at the expense of other important life roles and a strong internal drive to work are two key aspects of workaholism (Ng et al., 2007).

Three theoretical perspectives on addiction, i.e., individual dispositions, socio-cultural experiences, and behavioral reinforcements in the environment, can help shed light on the causes of workaholism (Ng et al., 2007). These perspectives suggest that people become workaholics because 1) they possess certain personality traits (Scott et al., 1997), 2) their social or cultural experiences facilitate workaholism (Oates, 1971; Robinson & Post, 1995; Schaufeli, Bakker et al., 2009), and/or 3) their workaholic behaviors are reinforced repeatedly (Ng et al., 2007). In terms of personality traits, people scoring high on Type A personality, extraversion, and neuroticism as well as need for achievement are considered vulnerable to becoming addicted to their work (Burke, Matthiesen, & Pallesen, 2006; Ng et al., 2007). In terms of socio-cultural experiences, stressful or dysfunctional childhood/family experiences, competitive work environments, and role modeling are supposed to trigger workaholism. Moreover, work environments that reward excessive work, place emphasis on work input rather than work output and sustain a "winner-takes-all" culture are thought to stimulate workaholism (Ng et al., 2007).

Since workaholism is conceptualized as a syndrome implying that the simultaneous experience of a set of key components is considered to characterize the workaholic (Aziz & Zickar, 2006), we distinguish between four different combinations of both workaholism dimensions (Schaufeli, Bakker et al., 2009; Schaufeli, Shimazu, & Taris, 2009): relaxed workers (who score low on both working excessively and working compulsively), hard workers (who score high only on working excessively), compulsive workers (who score high only on working compulsively), and workaholics (who score high on both workaholism scales).

Workaholism and well-being

Previous studies revealed that workaholism is associated with poor health. By definition, workaholic people spend an excessive amount of time on their work. This suggests that they have insufficient opportunity to recover from their excessive efforts (Schaufeli, Shimazu et al., 2009), leaving them emotionally or cognitively exhausted over time (Taris, Schaufeli, & Verhoeven, 2005). In addition, they persistently and frequently think about work when they are not at work (Taris et al., 2005), which may result in sympathetic arousal and emotional distress. Consequently, workaholism is associated with poor physical health (e.g., Burke, 2000; Kanai, Wakabayashi, & Fling, 1996; Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009), diminished sleep quality (Kubota et al., 2010), and impaired psychological health (e.g., Burke, 2000; Schaufeli et al., 2008; Shimazu & Schaufeli, 2009).

Previous research also found that workaholism is associated with poor family functioning, for example, increased marital problems (Robinson, Flowers, & Caroll, 2001), lower family satisfaction (Burke, 1999a), lower relationship satisfaction (Bakker et al., 2009), and greater work-family conflict (Bakker et al., 2009; Bonebright, Clay, & Ankenmann, 2000; Taris et al., 2005). The present study focuses on work-family conflict or spillover, which is defined as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p.77). This definition of work-family conflict implies a bidirectional relationship between work and family life in such a way that work can interfere with family life (i.e., work-to family conflict: WFC) and family life can interfere with work (i.e., family-to work conflict: FWC) (Frone, 2000).

The scarcity hypothesis (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) can provide an explanation regarding why workaholism should be related to WFC. Accordingly, people possess limited and fixed amounts of resources (e.g., time and energy). Managing multiple roles, such as employee and spouse, is problematic as it draws on the same scarce resources. Because workaholic people tend to invest more resources in their work at the cost of non-work activities (Ng et al., 2007), they are likely to experience interference from their work with their family lives (i.e., WFC) due to fewer resources left to devote to their family.

Workaholism and a partner's well-being

The scarcity hypothesis would also propose that workaholism is associated with one's partner's well-being. Because workaholic people have fewer resources left to devote to their family, their partners are likely to experience higher home demands and poor relationship quality, which may result in greater FWC for their partner. For instance, Bakker et al. (2008), in a sample of 168 dual-earner couples, showed that one's WFC led to increased social undermining and higher home demands for the partner, which resulted in greater FWC for the partner. This result suggests that workaholism would be associated with one's partner's FWC or, more generally, to that partner's psychological health, probably through one's WFC and relationship quality. However, there have been few empirical studies that directly examine the relationship between one's workaholism and their partner's FWC.

One exception is the study of Robinson, Carroll, and Flowers (2001), which revealed that wives of workaholic husbands reported less positive affect toward their husbands than wives of non-workaholic husbands. However, Robinson et al.'s design did not allow a test of bidirectional effects (i.e., from husbands to wives and from wives to husbands) because they did not collect data from husbands regarding their positive affect toward their wives. This means that the effects of a workaholic wife on her husband's psychological health are unknown. Given that research has confirmed a positive relationship between the individual's workaholism and his or her own WFC (e.g., Bakker et al., 2009; Bonebright et al., 2000; Taris et al., 2005) and between the individual's WFC and his or her partner's psychological distress (Bakker et al., 2008; Shimazu et al., 2009) among both genders, we can assume a positive relationship between the individual's workaholism and his or her partner's psychological distress among both genders, i.e., from men's workaholism to women's psychological distress and from women's workaholism to men's psychological distress.

A spillover-crossover perspective

The present study among Japanese dual-earner couples examines the impacts of workaholism on employees' and their partners'