

## Linking work experiences to facets of marital functioning

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### Summary

Few studies on the interaction between work experiences and family functioning have focused on specific aspects of work and the family, nor have many studies identified links in the process whereby work affects the family. A four-stage model of how role ambiguity, role conflict, job insecurity and job satisfaction affect three aspects of marital functioning (sexual satisfaction, psychological aggression and general marital satisfaction) was tested. The two mediator variables linking work experiences and marital functioning were concentration difficulties and depression. In a sample of 190 employed married people the model fit the data. The three work stressors (ambiguity, conflict and job insecurity) affected all three aspects of marital functioning via concentration and depression, and the relationship between job satisfaction and marital functioning was mediated by depression.

### Introduction

It is now clear that work and family experiences influence each other. However, the literature that demonstrates interactions between work and the family is just as clear in finding that the relationship between work and family experiences is modest in size. Two explanations of the modest relationship between work and family experiences are proposed here. First, it is possible that the effect of work on the family, or of family experiences on work, is indirect and mediated by other variables. Second, perhaps we have not been specific enough about the type of work or family experiences that we investigate. The work and family literature has been approached from two perspectives: an organizational behavior perspective which has concentrated on operationalizing and conceptualizing work aspects of the relationship to a greater extent than the family, and a clinical perspective that focuses on the family more precisely than on work. The result is that much of the work/family literature uses either global work variables or global family variables.

The goals of our study are two-fold. First we investigate the effect of four work experiences (job insecurity, role ambiguity, role conflict, and job satisfaction) on three facets of marital functioning (psychological aggression, sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction) in an attempt to be more precise in our investigations of work/family relationships. Second, we test whether mood and attentional difficulties mediate the relationship between the work experiences and marital functioning.

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same mediators (Barling and MacEwen, 1991; MacEwen & Barling, 1991). Specifically, there should be different mediators for work experiences that are affective in nature (e.g. job satisfaction) than for those that tax concentration and energy expenditure (e.g. role conflict, role ambiguity and job insecurity).

Stressors are overarousing, and arousal affects attention and concentration (Barling and MacEwen, 1991; MacEwen and Barling, 1991). Motowidlo, Packard and Manning (1986) argue that stressors create cognitive overload such that there is less energy available when stress is high. We supported this hypothesis in two studies. In one study we found that interrole conflict exerted a negative effect on employed mothers' concentration, which in turn affected their parenting behavior and their children's behavior (MacEwen and Barling, 1991). In a second study using a sample of university secretaries and library staff, we found that the greater interrole conflict, the lower the women's concentration and attention, and the worse their proof reading performance (Barling and MacEwen, 1991). Therefore, we predict that role ambiguity, role conflict and job insecurity will be negatively related to concentration.

Unlike role ambiguity, role conflict and job insecurity, job dissatisfaction is not a stressor and therefore is not predicted to tax concentration. That is, job satisfaction is not an overloading stressor as are role conflict and ambiguity. Rather, job dissatisfaction is an affective variable without the sense of time pressure, overload, unpredictability and uncertainty inherent in role conflict and ambiguity. Two previous studies supported this prediction. Satisfaction with being an employed mother was not related to concentrational difficulties, but interrole conflict was (Barling and MacEwen, 1991; MacEwen and Barling, 1991).

Although we predict that job dissatisfaction will not affect concentration, we propose that because job dissatisfaction is an affective variable it will affect depression. This hypothesis has also been supported: mothers' dissatisfaction with the role of employed mother predicted negative mood, but not concentration (MacEwen and Barling, 1991).

We also propose a causal ordering of our mediator variables, with cognitive difficulties predicting depression. When intrarole stressors such as role conflict, ambiguity or job insecurity are present, the added or unusual cognitive efforts required to cope with them may divert attention away from job requirements, impeding successful job performance and work-related functioning (Barling and MacEwen, 1991). Consistent with the notion that job performance influences self-esteem (Jans, 1982), diminished concentration on the job may result in negative mood and depression if the concentration required by the stressors is perceived to impede effective job performance.

### *Marital functioning*

In addition to assessing global marital satisfaction, we will also measure two specific facets of marital functioning, namely psychological aggression and satisfaction with the sexual relationship.

Although it has been assumed that work involvement negatively affects sexual functioning (Johnson and Masters, 1976), the data support only a moderate direct association between them (e.g. Avery-Clark, 1986; Becker and Byrne, 1984). There are no empirical studies linking psychological aggression (verbal aggression and passive/aggressive acts) to work experiences, but there are studies linking work and general stressors to physical aggression between spouses (Barling and Rosenbaum, 1986; MacEwen and Barling, 1988b). However, as with studies on work stressors and general marital satisfaction, the links are not that strong. Impaired marital functioning may be only a distal outcome of work experiences and stressors, and mediating variables may transmit the effect of work experiences to marital functioning. Specifically, it

the fourth questionnaire package which formed the basis for this study. We used the data from the fourth phase because job insecurity was measured only at the fourth phase. Each couple was paid \$15.00 per phase if both partners returned a questionnaire.

### Subjects

One hundred and ten women and 80 men participated. They were on average 40 years old ( $S.D.$  = 9.5; range = 23 to 67), and their average monthly family income was \$4267.00 ( $SD$  = 2416.00; range = \$600 to \$19000). They had been married for an average of 14 years ( $S.D.$  = 8.9; range = 1 to 46).

### Measures

All questions referred to the past six months (see Table 1 for descriptive data and reliabilities).

Table 1. Descriptive data and intercorrelations ( $N = 190$ )\*

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Years education	13.6	6.1										
2. Job insecurity†	—	—	-.10									
3. Role conflict	30.7	11.2	-.12	-.03	(.86)							
4. Role ambiguity	13.2	6.0	.28‡	.06	.26‡	(.84)						
5. Job satisfaction	77.8	16.6	-.03	.14§	-.14§	-.35‡	(.92)					
6. Cognitive difficulties	22.1	5.5	-.11	.13§	.23‡	.28‡	-.14§	(.81)				
7. Depression	36.7	13.0	-.06	.07	.12§	.21‡	-.22‡	.56‡	(.93)			
8. Marital satisfaction	107.5	28.5	.08	-.05	.08	-.19‡	.09	-.21‡	-.49‡			
9. Sexual satisfaction	21.0	9.1	.05	.08	.09	-.10	-.03	-.11	-.33‡	.42‡	(.74)	
10. Psychological aggression	23.9	9.1	-.12	.02	.06	.13§	-.12§	.33‡	.41‡	-.39‡	-.09	(.89)

\*Reliabilities are in parentheses.

†Means and standard deviations for the job insecurity scale would be uninterpretable as they are based on a multiplicative combination of five separate subscales.

‡ $p < 0.01$ .

§ $p < 0.05$ .

### Work stressors

#### Job insecurity

Job insecurity was measured using Ashford *et al.*'s (1989) scale. Their measure is comprised of five subscales: the importance of various job features (17 items), the likelihood each feature will be continued (17 items), the importance of possible changes in the total job (10 items), and the likelihood of change in the total job (10 items). Last, they included a three-item scale assessing feelings of powerlessness regarding changing aspects of the organization. In their study, the internal consistencies of the five subscales ranged between 0.74 and 0.92. They combined the five subscales using the following formula to form an overall index of job insecurity: [(importance of job features  $\times$  likelihood of features' continuation) + (importance of possible

satisfaction and perception of spouse's satisfaction with the status of sexual relationship, and the individual's typical response to the spouse's sexual advances. The scale was reliable in this study, and has been used successfully in a treatment study for marital therapy (O'Leary and Arias, 1983).

#### Psychological aggression

This was assessed using O'Leary and Curley's (1986) 12-item scale, which assesses negative behaviors initiated by the respondent toward his/her spouse (e.g. 'I often won't do what my spouse asks me to do if he/she asks in a nasty way', 'When my spouse tries to boss me around, I frequently do the opposite of what he/she asks'). The scale is internally consistent (O'Leary and Curley, 1986). Also the measure distinguishes between maritally satisfied, maritally dissatisfied/physically nonaggressive and maritally dissatisfied/physically aggressive couples (O'Leary and Curley, 1986).

## Results

We used path analysis to test the model outlined in the Introduction. Before conducting the path analysis, several steps were necessary. First, we computed *t*-tests between the men and women for each of the variables in the model. None of the differences were significant. We also calculated Box's *M* to test whether the covariance matrices for the men and women were significantly different. Box's *M* was not significant, indicating that the matrices were not significantly different from each other. We then combined the men's and women's data. Correlations between demographic variables and variables in the model were examined (see Table 1). Only years of education was correlated with any of the variables and so it was controlled statistically in all analyses.

Second, the use of path analysis requires several assumptions. Multicollinearity was not a problem — as indicated in Table 1, none of the correlations between variables in the model were greater than 0.6. None of the relationships within the model deviated from linearity. Path analysis is predicated on the assumption that there is no measurement error. Although none of the variables measured exhibited perfect reliability, all reliabilities > 0.70, which might well reflect the lower level of acceptability (James and James, 1989).

Path coefficients for our model were derived by computing a series of hierarchical regression equations to derive standardized beta weights. In each equation, years of education was entered first followed by all other variables having a direct effect on the outcome variable, with the variable of interest entered last. All path coefficients were significant (see Figure 2).

However, the significance of individual paths does not indicate how well a model as a whole fits the data. Therefore, we computed *Q* (Pedhazur, 1982) which is a ratio of the variance explained by the tested model to the variance explained by a just identified model in which each variable is assumed to be influenced directly by all other variables preceding it in the model. *Q* can range between 0 and 1, with 1 indicating a perfect fit between the just identified model and the model of interest in which certain direct paths are presumed to be 0. *Q* was equal to 0.84, indicating a good fit. To test the significance of *Q*, we computed *W* (Pedhazur, 1982) whose distribution approximates  $\chi^2$  with degrees of freedom equal to the number of paths set to zero in the tested model. *W* was nonsignificant at  $p > 0.05$  ( $W = 28.9$ ;  $df = 19$ ), indicating that the variance explained by the tested model was not significantly less than the variance explained by the just identified model. Our model, then, fits the data.

and Barling, 1991). Focusing on the nature of the work experience thus permits a clearer understanding of the specific paths linking diverse work experiences and marital functioning. The hypothesis that depression would predict all three marital variables was also supported.

Together with previous studies (Barling and MacEwen, 1991; MacEwen and Barling, 1991), these results suggest that stressors that are overarousing and tax cognitive resources affect attention and concentration, and affective stressors that are not overarousing affect mood. These hypotheses have now been supported across different samples, stressors, and dependent variables. Specifically, the hypotheses have been supported in studies assessing how role experiences of employed mothers affect proof reading performance (Barling and MacEwen, 1991) and parenting and children's behavior (MacEwen and Barling, 1991), in a study on the effect of student role overload on marital interactions (MacEwen, Barling and Kelloway, in press), and now in this study of how employed men's and women's work experiences affect marital functioning.

Although the path analysis provided support for the proposed model, other models may be equally valid or even more valid. First, there may be bidirectional effects between variables in the model. For example, there is support in the literature for an effect of marital satisfaction on depression (Schmaling and Jacobson, 1990). Second, the individual paths supported in this study are not the only causal relationships between the variables. For example, depression is most certainly not the only predictor of marital functioning (see Fincham and Bradbury, 1990). The challenge for future research is to identify other variables that are related to both work experiences and marital functioning. Confirmation of the model in the present study by no means precludes support for alternative models.

Other issues remain to be clarified by future research. As noted earlier, there is research addressing the relationship between role stressors, job dissatisfaction and marital functioning. One focus for future investigation is job insecurity. In times of recession, job insecurity is more prevalent. It might be worthwhile for future research to investigate whether the diverse facets of insecurity identified by Ashford *et al.* (1989) exert different effects. Also, our results need to be reconciled with previous findings that job insecurity is significantly correlated with depression (Vance and McNeil, 1990). A plausible explanation for this difference is that Vance and McNeil (1990) only assessed the direct relationship between job insecurity and depression, rather than also assessing potential mediators such as concentration. The moderate size of the zero-order correlation in their study suggests that the relationship between job insecurity and depression may indeed be indirect, just as research is now finding that work and family experiences are indirectly related via mediators.

In further testing any mediational model linking work experiences and family experiences, other significant work experiences should be investigated. One variable of some importance is 'job strain', i.e. low decision latitude and high demands at work (Karasek and Theorell, 1990), because research shows it exerts consistent negative effects on individuals (e.g. depression, physical well-being). Likewise, in focusing on the relationship of work and family functioning, just how mothers' (MacEwen and Barling, 1991) and fathers' (Barling, 1991) work experiences affect their children should be investigated.

In conclusion, the results of this study shed some light on the question of how work experiences influence marital functioning. First, it is clear that any such effects are indirect, and are mediated by personal strain. Second, the nature of a stressor must be considered to understand how it affects marital functioning. This entails assessing specific stressors or work experiences rather than using global measures. This study contributes to a pattern of results emerging across several studies. Specifically, there appears to be considerable utility in considering the nature of a stressor or work experience when attempting to understand its effects on family functioning.

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