

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Is 'me-time' selfish?: Daily vitality crossover in dual-earner couples

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Abstract

This multisource daily diary study examined the recovery outcomes of working mothers' time spent for the self (i.e. me-time) and whether the benefits crossover to their husbands. Drawing on the recovery literature, we hypothesised that working mothers' me-time positively relates to their vitality. In line with the crossover theory, we expected a positive relationship between mothers' and their husbands' vitality, mediated via hostile marital interaction. Because working mothers commonly associate guilt with spending time for themselves, we further examined whether the benefits of me-time are qualified by mothers' guilt-proneness. Data were collected from 79 dyads of heterosexual dual-earner couples with children at bedtime for two work weeks. As expected, working mothers' me-time positively related to their own vitality, controlling for their time spent for others. Moreover, mothers' vitality positively related to their husbands' vitality, which was mediated by mothers' hostile marital interaction reported by husbands. Contrary to our expectation, the well-being benefits of me-time were similar across working mothers regardless of their guilt-proneness. Bridging two streams of research on recovery and crossover, this study represents an important contribution to the literature.

KEYWORDS

crossover, dual-earner couples, me-time, multisource daily diary study, recovery

INTRODUCTION

Evidence suggests that gender difference persists in unpaid time use such that women in dual-earner couples tend to do the lion's share of housework and dependent care (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Sayer, 2016). Employed mothers, relative to employed fathers, report reduced time for sleep, personal care and free-time pursuits to fulfil work demands and family responsibilities (Bianchi et al., 2006), and mothers tend to spend time with children while fathers are more likely to spend time alone during the evenings (Campos et al., 2009). Working mothers' decisions to forgo time for the self, or me-time (i.e. the time individuals voluntarily spend pursuing their own interests and attending to their own needs), have in part been explained by the social norm that women should be the primary caregiver who makes sacrifices to 'be always there for others' at home (e.g. intensive mothering; Hays, 1996; Trussell et al., 2023). In this vein, spending me-time is considered selfish because it serves working mothers' own needs while underprioritising others' needs. Indeed, many working mothers view me-time as selfish and feel guilty about spending time to meet their own needs (e.g. Aarntzen et al., 2019; Guendouzi, 2006; Mullens & Glorieux, 2022).

However, a substantial body of research demonstrates that taking time for voluntary, enjoyable activities is critical for negating stress and generating energy (e.g. De Bloom et al., 2017; Koçak et al., 2023). Notably, energy restoration is an important prerequisite for people to attend to others and build interpersonal relationships (Rawn & Vohs, 2006), thus holding the potential to affect others in their social surroundings. Drawing on crossover theory (Westman, 2001) and the recovery literature (Sonnetag et al., 2022), we address this paradox. Specifically, we theorise that working mothers' time spent for the self provides a boost not only to their own vitality but also to their husbands' vitality, and thus may better be thought of as a win-win than as selfish. *Vitality* is the state of feeling alive, alert and energised (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). As an important resource that enables individuals to better handle various demands, vitality has been examined in previous research as a key well-being indicator that reflects a state of recovery (e.g. Kinnunen et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2021). As guilt is commonly associated with working mothers' me-time, we further investigated whether the benefits of me-time diminish among guilt-prone mothers. To address these research questions, we conducted a multisource daily diary study, collecting data from 79 heterosexual dual-earner couples.

Our study makes several important theoretical contributions. First, we contribute to a more in-depth understanding of me-time, defined as 'the time when you can do what you want to do' (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Despite the widespread idea that spending time for the self is beneficial to one's well-being (e.g. Ali, 2020; Grokker, 2014; Saunders, 2021), our understanding of me-time is limited. Previous research has adopted a qualitative approach (e.g. Lewis, 2022), examined time spent on a priori determined activities (e.g. studies assessing time devoted to self-care or to leisure; Offer, 2016) or has cross-sectionally measured the subjective perception of me-time (e.g. 'I have too little time doing things for myself [e.g. reading, listening to music, internet, ...]'; Grisslich et al., 2012). As such, whether and how daily self-focused time relates to daily well-being remains unclear. In this study, we assessed daily time spent for the self to

capture the essence of me-time. Given that how individuals spend off-job time can vary from day to day and can include a wide array of activities, our research provides clearer insight into the well-being benefits of me-time by capturing its within-person variations. Such a within-person approach helps avoid retrospective bias by capturing time spent closer to when the experiences occur (Butler et al., 2013).

Second, we advance theory by addressing the need to better understand the social context of recovery (Sonnentag et al., 2022). As a key social context in which recovery from work occurs, scholars have called for more research on how family members facilitate or inhibit employee recovery (Sonnentag et al., 2022). Crossover theory posits that individuals' psychological states are transmitted to others in their social systems (Westman, 2001). Considering accumulated evidence of crossover among dual-earner couples (Matei et al., 2021; Steiner & Krings, 2016), it is plausible that working mothers' vitality might crossover to their spouses, thereby enhancing spouse well-being. However, existing studies on recovery in intimate relationships tend to focus on the focal employees' recovery and well-being without considering spouses' outcomes (e.g. Hahn et al., 2012; Wilson et al., 2021) or did not consider the underlying mechanisms via crossover occurs (e.g. Hahn et al., 2014; Hahn & Dormann, 2013; Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2018). By identifying whether and how daily vitality crosses over among dual-earner couples, we make an important theoretical contribution to the recovery literature.

Third, our study on vitality crossover adds to the positive crossover literature. Although the literature on positive crossover in romantic couples has steadily grown, much research focused on attitudinal outcomes such as work engagement that are broader in scope (Li et al., 2021; Steiner & Krings, 2016). Similar to vigour (McNair et al., 1981), vitality is a dynamic construct that indicates a state of recovery (Liu et al., 2021), an antidote to the stress accumulation process that is essential for employee health and well-being (for a review, see Sonnentag et al., 2022). By offering a novel insight into the daily crossover of vitality in romantic couples, we expand the theoretical scope of positive crossover research.

Last, as the recovery literature matures, it is critical to understand whether and how stable between-person factors impact the established within-person dynamics of recovery (Steed et al., 2021). Our research addresses this call by examining guilt-proneness as a cross-level moderator, proposing that the potential recovery benefits of me-time among working mothers may differ depending on the individual tendency to feel guilt (Tangney et al., 2009). Such findings could offer nuanced knowledge about whether and to whom me-time is particularly beneficial.

Recovery benefits of me-time

Time spent for the self, me-time, refers to the time individuals spend pursuing their own interests and attending to their own needs (e.g. leisure, self-care). People engage in a wide range of activities during me-time (Mullens & Glorieux, 2022), although they are usually free from their work and family responsibilities. As such, me-time is often described as inherently enjoyable and rejuvenating (Lewis, 2022). Due to these characteristics, spending me-time is likely to facilitate recovery. Recovery is the process during which we replenish and regain resources (e.g. energy, attention, positive mood) to return to pre-stressor levels, and it occurs when we are not being exposed to further demands (Hobfoll, 1989; Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Recovery has been associated with optimal health and well-being outcomes (Sonnetttag et al., 2022).

Previous research has shown that leisure time spent on pleasant activities or on activities that are driven by intrinsic motivation promotes recovery (Ryan & Deci, 2000; ten

Brummelhuis & Trougakos, 2014; van Hooff et al., 2011). In the same vein, studies suggest that working parents who spend less 'pure free time' (i.e. leisure time uncombined with housework or childcare) report worse well-being (e.g. less positive affect, more negative affect, greater stress; Offer, 2016) and that those who experience greater inter-role conflict among work, family and personal domain (i.e. a domain that includes activities one pursues because of his or her own interests) report greater burnout (Wilson & Baumann, 2015). These findings collectively suggest that me-time, during which individuals voluntarily pursue their own interests and fulfil self-care needs, likely results in well-being benefits. Thus, we propose that working mothers' time spent for the self is positively associated with their own vitality.

Although our focus is on the recovery benefits of me-time, we simultaneously consider working mothers' time spent for others, which refers to the time they take to meet others' needs. Working mothers are known to spend considerable time to fulfil others' needs (Bianchi et al., 2006; Sayer, 2016). Such time spent on other-focused, obligatory activities (e.g. dependent care, housework) has a negative, albeit weak, relationship with recovery (Sonnentag et al., 2022; Steed et al., 2021). As the amount of time in each evening is fixed, mothers may spend less time for others on the day they spend more me-time. Therefore, failing to account for whether and how time spent for others relates to working mothers' vitality risks misattributing the positive effects of me-time. In other words, the observed benefits of me-time on vitality might not stem from the me-time itself but rather from its inverse relationship with the potentially detrimental effects of other-focused time. To rule out the possibility that recovery occurs due to the absence of time spent for others rather than the presence of time spent for the self, we include working mothers' daily time spent for others as a control variable.

Hypothesis 1. Working mothers' daily time spent for the self is positively associated with their own daily vitality, after controlling for their daily time spent for others.

Crossover of recovery

Crossover refers to inter-individual transmission of experiences among closely related persons, which occurs both directly and indirectly (Westman, 2001). Direct crossover occurs via contagion because relationship partners have empathy for each other. For instance, husbands became more enthusiastic about their work when their spouses expressed work engagement, as they imagined how their spouses felt and shared the positive state (e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2009). Indirect crossover occurs via interactions between relationship partners, such as coping strategies or communication patterns. For example, employees who experienced abusive supervision negatively interacted with their spouse (e.g. relationship tension), which subsequently reduced the spouses' perceived family functioning (e.g. Carlson et al., 2011). Empirical research to date has supported crossover theory, showing that romantic partners influence each other by passing their positive and negative experiences on to one another (for reviews, see Matei et al., 2021; Steiner & Krings, 2016).

Drawing on crossover theory (Westman, 2001), we hypothesise both direct and indirect patterns of positive crossover, specifically crossover of vitality. We hypothesise that working mothers' vitality directly relates to their husbands' vitality because wives' vitality will be contagious to their husbands who empathise with their spouses. That is, seeing their wife who feels happy and energised can make the husbands happy and energised, as they take on the positive

psychological states of their partners. Evidence suggests that individuals' positive experiences (e.g. marital satisfaction, work–family enrichment) can 'spread' to their partners, resulting in a similar emotional state across the two individuals (Li et al., 2021; Steiner & Krings, 2016).

We further hypothesise indirect crossover of vitality via working mothers' hostile marital interaction, which refers to dyadic interactions that are characterised by negative emotional and behavioural exchanges (Matthews et al., 1996). Hostile and undermining behaviours directed toward the partner have often been examined as a key mechanism of negative crossover (e.g. Bakker et al., 2008; Westman, 2001) because distressed individuals are more likely to initiate or aggravate hostile interpersonal exchanges with their spouses (Danner-Vlaardingierbroek et al., 2013; Meier & Cho, 2018). Although (reduced) negative marital interaction has been postulated as a key mechanism of positive crossover (Steiner & Krings, 2016), to date, only cross-sectional evidence exists. Specifically, wives' work–family enrichment was associated with husbands' marital satisfaction via wives' decreased social undermining perceived by husbands (Liu et al., 2016). In a similar vein, we expect hostile marital interaction to be a mechanism of vitality crossover because negative interpersonal exchanges are likely to be alleviated upon adequate recovery as individuals have recharged and regained resources. On days that working mothers have engaged in me-time, they should feel vital and energised thanks to recovery that occurred during the self-focused time, and thus have more personal resources that enable them to avoid negative interactions with their husbands (Hobfoll, 2002; Meijman & Mulder, 1998). Contrarily, on days that working mothers spend less me-time, we pose that they will report lower vitality, due to lack of recovery, which should relate to more impulsive, hostile, and antisocial behaviours (Baumeister & Exline, 1999; Meier & Cho, 2018). This unpleasant interpersonal exchange, as a stressor, should reduce husbands' vitality (Almeida, 2005). In short, we hypothesise that daily hostile marital interaction mediates the relationship between working mothers' and their husbands' vitality.

Hypothesis 2. Working mothers' daily vitality is positively associated with their husbands' daily vitality.

Hypothesis 3. Daily hostile marital interaction mediates the relationship between working mothers' daily vitality and their husbands' daily vitality.

The moderating role of guilt-proneness

Guilt is a self-conscious emotion experienced when we acknowledge responsibility for a failure to meet social norms (Tangney et al., 2009). As an acutely aversive emotional state, guilt has been considered a form of emotional distress (Baumeister et al., 1994; Glavin et al., 2011). In light of the widespread norm for intensive mothering (Hays, 1996; Liss et al., 2013), guilt has been found to be salient among working mothers (Aarntzen et al., 2019; Borelli et al., 2017). Working mothers who are under normative pressure to prioritise family over their work often encounter guilt-invoking situations (Guendouzi, 2006). Of importance, individuals differ in the capacity to experience guilt, such that guilt-prone individuals are more likely to feel guilty in response to personal wrongdoings and ruminate about their misdeeds (Tangney et al., 2009). Taken together, guilt-prone working mothers may experience greater degrees of guilt when they perceive deviation from the high standards of selfless mother.

Previous studies have shown that working mothers' tendency to feel guilt shapes how they decide to spend their off-job time. For instance, guilt-prone working parents (about 60% of which were working mothers) were found to engage in 'active' parent-child activities—educational and recreational activities that align with the standard of intensive mothering—despite work-interference-with-family they experienced (Cho & Allen, 2012). Similarly, working mothers who generally experience more guilt due to work-family issues (i.e. work-family guilt) tend to exhibit more behaviours that align with traditional gender behaviours, such as considering reducing work hours and planning more time for children (Aarntzen et al., 2019). In sum, working mothers' guilt-proneness relates to a general tendency to choose norm-conforming behaviours during off-job time, because doing so helps avoid feeling guilt (Cohen et al., 2012; Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Expanding this stream of research, we propose that working mothers' guilt-proneness may influence how they experience norm-violating behaviours during off-job time, such as me-time. Specifically, we expect that guilt-prone working mothers are less likely to reap the recovery benefits of me-time. Previous studies have suggested that stable characteristics (e.g. individual differences, routines, enduring work environment) may facilitate or hinder recovery (Sonnentag et al., 2017; Steed et al., 2021). Guilt-proneness is a relevant trait to the present study because guilt-prone mothers are more likely to be affected by the perception of me-time as selfish and a violation of the gender norm. Previous research showed that parents who reported more work-family guilt, compared with those who feel less work-family guilt, fared worse (in terms of life satisfaction) when they engaged in less parent-child activities (Foucreault et al., 2023), indicating that mothers who tend to experience guilt might be more apprehensive about their failure to meet the social norm of being a good mother.

In that me-time prioritises and benefits the self, spending me-time signifies a failure to meet the normative standard of the ideal mother. Acknowledging this failure, guilt-prone mothers likely experience guilty feelings or may ruminate on 'what they should be doing now instead' during me-time (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney et al., 2009), more so than mothers who are less guilt-prone. Guilt-prone mothers may also allow more interruptions into their me-time to address others' needs, as guilt-proneness has been associated with corrective actions to amend selfish decisions (Baumeister et al., 1994). Such tendencies to experience negative emotions, dwell on responsibilities, and tolerate interruptions should diminish the recovery potential of me-time among guilt-prone mothers (Cropley & Zijlstra, 2011; Radstaak et al., 2011; Sonnentag et al., 2022). In sum, we hypothesise that guilt-proneness weakens the positive relationship between working mothers' me-time and their own vitality.

Hypothesis 4. Working mothers' guilt-proneness moderates the relationship between their daily time spent for the self and their own daily vitality, such that the positive relationship is weaker for mothers with higher guilt-proneness than for those with lower guilt-proneness.

METHOD

Participants and procedure

Dual-earner couples who work full-time (i.e. work a minimum of 40 h per week), work the day shift and have at least one child living at home were recruited. First, mothers who are employees of a large public university and a community college in the United States were

recruited via an email invitation sent to the listserv. Snowball sampling (i.e. participants spread the word about this study to their professional and personal networks) was also used. The working mothers recruited their husbands and provided their husbands' email addresses, to which we sent the spouse surveys. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. As compensation, each couple received \$80. The study protocol was reviewed and approved by a University's Institutional Review Board.

All data were collected using an online survey system, which could be accessed via participants' computers and their mobile devices. All participants completed a general baseline survey at the beginning of the study. For the following two work weeks (10 days), working mothers completed a daily survey every night at bedtime, whereas husbands took the survey at bedtime only in the evenings when they interacted with their wives.

In total, 79 couples participated (701 observations). The mean age of working mothers was 40.18 years ($SD = 7.71$). The majority of the mothers were White (72.2%), followed by Asian/Pacific Islanders (10.1%), Black (7.6%) and Hispanic (8.9%). Most mothers had a college degree or higher (88.6%), worked 44.01 h per week on average ($SD = 5.46$) and worked in their current organisation for 7.35 years ($SD = 7.01$). The mean age of the husbands was 42.70 years ($SD = 7.94$). The majority of the husbands were White (67.5%), followed by Black (11.3%), Asian/Pacific Islanders (10%) and Hispanic (10%). Most husbands had a college degree or higher (75.6%), worked 47.18 h per week on average ($SD = 7.47$) and had worked in their current organisation for 8.47 years ($SD = 6.21$). On average, participants reported 1.91 children living in the household ($SD = 0.87$).

Measures

Time spent for the self (daily)

Working mothers reported how much time they spent for the self each day after coming home from work. To guide recall, they were first asked to list various activities they engaged in that evening. Then, they indicated whether each of the listed activities was 'self-focused'. The amount of time spent on each activity was recorded using a similar method to that used by van Hooff et al. (2011). Participants chose a number indicating a time range (1 = 0–15 min, 2 = 15–30 min, 3 = 30–45 min, 4 = 45–60 min, 5 = 60–90 min, 6 = 90–120 min, 7 = 120–150 min, 8 = 150–180 min, 9 = 180–240 min, 10 = more than 240 min), which was recoded to represent actual time in minutes. Mean values of each anchor were taken, assuming that the actual time spent on each activity would be in the middle of the time range associated with each anchor. Time spent for the self was computed by summing the time spent on all activities indicated as self-focused. For example, if a participant indicated 'watching television (4 = 45–60 min)' and 'talking with a friend on the phone (2 = 15–30 min)' as time spent for herself, these responses were recoded as 52.5 and 22.5 min respectively, and then summed up to a total of 75 min spent for the self in that evening.

Vitality (daily)

Both wives and husbands reported their own vitality each evening. Three items selected from the subjective vitality scale (Ryan & Frederick, 1997) were used to measure vitality (e.g. 'At this

moment, I feel alive and vital'.) Response options ranged from 1 (*Not at all true*) to 7 (*Very true*). The (within-person) omega reliability (Geldhof et al., 2014) was .95 for wives and .94 for husbands.

Hostile marital interaction (daily)

Husbands reported their wife's hostile marital interaction using a 5-item scale from Matthews et al. (1996). Example items are 'Tonight, my spouse was critical' and 'Tonight, my spouse shouted or yelled at me'. Response options ranged from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). The (within-person) omega reliability was .90.

Guilt-proneness (general)

Working mothers reported guilt-proneness in the general survey. Six items from the Personal Feelings Questionnaire-2 (the PFQ-2; Harder & Zalma, 1990) were used. The measure assesses the extent to which the emotions are experienced by the respondent on a 5-point scale that ranges from 0 (*Never experience the feeling*) to 4 (*Experience the feeling continuously or almost continuously*). Sample items include 'mild guilt' and 'remorse'. The omega reliability was .78.

Demographic information (general)

Participants reported their gender (0 = man, 1 = woman), age, race/ethnicity (1 = American Indian/Alaska Native, 2 = Asian/Pacific Islanders, 3 = Black, 4 = White, 5 = Hispanic, or 6 = multiracial); education level (1 = did not graduate high school, 2 = high school diploma or GED, 3 = vocational school, 4 = some college, 5 = 2-year college degree, 6 = 4-year college degree, 7 = Master's degree, 8 = Ph.D., or 9 = professional degree [e.g. MD, JD]), average work hours per week, organisational tenure and the number of children living in the home.

Control variable

The time mothers spent for others each evening was included in the analysis as a control variable. Time spent for others was calculated in the same manner as the time spent for the self. Specifically, we summed the time spent on all activities indicated as 'other-focused.'

Analytical approach

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a multilevel path analysis that simultaneously estimates all path coefficients using the Mplus 8.10 program (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017). Data used in the present study are hierarchical as daily reports are nested within individuals. Intraclass correlations (ICC) ranged from .25 to .56 (see Table 1), indicating substantial within-person variance. Thus, the multilevel analytic approach is appropriate to test our hypotheses. We centred the within-person predictors (i.e. working mothers' time spent for the self and time spent for

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and intraclass correlations for all study variables.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD_w</i>	<i>SD_B</i>	ICC						
				(1)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Self-time (W)	130.76	78.88	45.38	.25	-	-.05	.17	.17	-.05	.09
2. Other-time (W)	131.09	85.87	56.08	.30	-.48***	-	-.02	-.04	-.35*	.04
3. Vitality (W)	3.40	1.16	0.97	.41	.10*	-.01	-	.58***	-.12	.12
4. Vitality (H)	3.93	1.02	1.15	.56	.05	.01	.12*	-	-.17	-.04
5. Hostile interaction (H)	1.78	0.66	0.48	.35	-.14**	.04	-.15*	-.21**	-	.10
6. Guilt-proneness (W)	1.89		0.60	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: W = Wife report; H = Husband report; SDW = within-person standard deviation; SDB = between-person standard deviation; ICC (1) = intraclass correlation (proportion of the between-person variance compared with the total variance). Correlations below the diagonal reflect the within-person associations (*N* = 701); correlations above the diagonal reflect the between-person associations (*N* = 79).

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

others) on each individual's mean scores; the between-person moderator (i.e. guilt-proneness) was centred on the grand mean (Enders & Tofighi, 2007). We used the maximum-likelihood procedure with robust standard errors to estimate the fixed and random parameters and modelled the effect of working mothers' time spent for the self on vitality as a random slope (as it is hypothesised to vary depending on guilt-proneness) and the other effects as fixed slopes. To test our mediation hypothesis, we used the Monte Carlo bootstrapping method to obtain bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals (CIs) (Selig & Preacher, 2008). We used the R code available at <https://quantpsy.org/medmc/medmc.htm>.

Before testing the hypotheses, we ran a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (MCFA) using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors to examine the construct validity of the within-person measures. All items were modelled as continuous variables. Results of the MCFA demonstrated that the hypothesised measurement model that comprised three factors (i.e. wives' vitality, husbands' vitality, hostile marital interaction) exhibited a strong fit to the data ($\chi^2[84] = 210.22$, *p* < .001; comparative fit index [CFI] = .972; Tucker-Lewis Index [TLI] = .963; root-mean-square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .046; and standardised root-mean-squared error [SRMR_{within} = .029; SRMR_{between} = .047]).

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics and the correlations among study variables at between- and within-person levels are reported in Table 1. As expected, daily time spent for self-focused activities was positively related to working mothers' daily vitality (*r* = .10, *p* < .05). Daily time spent for the self was negatively related to daily time spent for others (*r* = -.48, *p* < .001). Both the relationship between working mothers' vitality and hostile marital interaction (*r* = -.15, *p* < .05) and the relationship between hostile marital interaction and husbands' vitality (*r* = -.21, *p* < .01) were statistically significant in the expected direction.

Hypothesis testing

Results of the multilevel model for hypothesis testing are found in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 stated that working mothers' daily time spent for the self would positively relate to their own vitality, after controlling for their daily time spent for others. As shown in Figure 1, the direct path coefficient from the time spent on self-focused activities to working mothers' vitality was statistically significant ($\gamma = .19, p < .05$), supporting Hypothesis 1. That is, working mothers reported higher vitality on the days that they spent more me-time than usual.

Hypothesis 2 concerned a positive relationship between working mothers' and their husbands' daily vitality. Supporting Hypothesis 2, working mothers' and husbands' daily vitality were positively associated ($\gamma = .12, p = .022$).¹ Hypothesis 3 proposed that hostile marital interaction mediates the relationship between working mothers' vitality and husbands' vitality. The mediation analysis using 50,000 Monte Carlo bootstrapping cases suggested that the hypothesised indirect effect was .03, with a 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI of (.0003, .042). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 proposed working mothers' guilt-proneness as a cross-level moderator that weakens the positive relationship between working mothers' daily time spent for the self and their own vitality. The moderation analysis showed that the relationship between working mothers' daily time spent for the self and their own vitality did not differ depending on guilt-proneness ($\gamma = .14, p = .23$). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was not supported.

DISCUSSION

Bridging two streams of research on recovery and crossover, we examined the effects of working mothers' time spent for the self on daily recovery and the crossover of vitality among dual-earner couples. In doing so, we empirically tested the contested dominant perspectives toward me-time. On the one hand, we offer evidence for the commonly made claim about the well-being benefits of me-time (Ali, 2020; Grokker, 2014; Saunders, 2021), as mothers' time spent for the self positively relates to their vitality. On the other hand, we challenged the negative

TABLE 2 Unstandardized coefficients and standard errors of the multilevel model.

Variable	Vitality (W)		Hostile interaction (H)		Vitality (H)	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Level 1						
Self-time (W)	0.19*	0.08				
Other-time (W)	0.06	0.07				
Vitality (W)			−0.09*	0.04	0.09	0.05
Hostile interaction (H)					−0.31**	0.11
Level 2						
Guilt-proneness (W)	0.20	0.18				
Guilt-proneness * self-time	0.14	0.12				

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

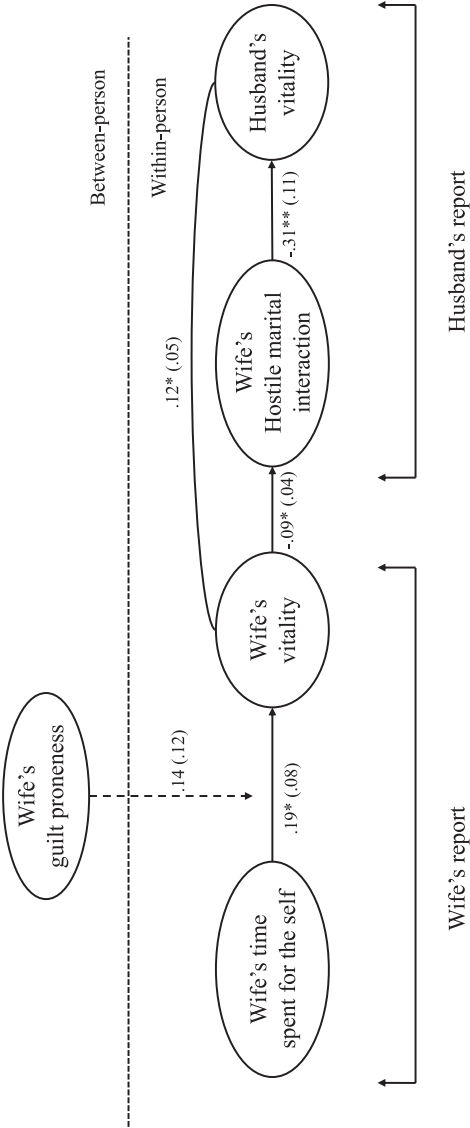


FIGURE 1 Hypothesised multilevel model. The dashed line indicates a moderating effect. Unstandardised estimates are shown with the standard errors in parentheses. Wife's vitality was also regressed on wife's time spent for others as a control variable. The effect of wives' vitality on husbands' vitality has been calculated as the sum of the direct ($\gamma = .09, p = .053$) and indirect (via marital interaction; $\gamma = .03, p = .030$) effects. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

connotation of me-time widely shared among working women (e.g. Aarntzen et al., 2019; Mullens & Glorieux, 2022). That is, although spending me-time is often regarded as selfish, we found that working mothers' me-time was beneficial not only for themselves but also for their husbands due to vitality crossover. Moreover, the well-being benefits of me-time were similar across working mothers regardless of their guilt-proneness.

Key findings and theoretical implications

As the first daily diary study to examine the benefits of me-time among dual-earner couples, our research offers key findings that advance the recovery literature. First, our findings bolster the theoretical notion that spending time free from demands and willingly engaging in pleasant, fun or relaxing activities promotes recovery (Ryan & Deci, 2000; ten Brummelhuis & Trougakos, 2014; van Hooft et al., 2011), as working mothers reported higher vitality at bedtime in the evenings on days that they spent more me-time. Notably, the benefits of me-time were not due to the mere absence of time spent for others, as we controlled mothers' daily time spent for others to ascertain the unique effect of me-time. This finding corroborates the popular sentiment about the benefits of me-time (Ali, 2020; Grokker, 2014; Saunders, 2021) and results from previous qualitative and cross-sectional research (Grisslich et al., 2012; Lewis, 2022). Next, our findings emphasise the importance of adopting the within-person approach to unravel the effects of me-time. Working mothers' me-time appeared to vary substantially day-to-day ($ICC = .25$, see Table 1), and the hypothesised positive relationship between me-time and vitality was observed only within-person, suggesting that a global, cross-sectional assessment is insufficient to understand the dynamics of me-time.

Next, we found evidence for vitality crossover, such that in the evenings, mothers reported higher vitality thanks to more me-time and their husbands also reported higher levels of vitality. This result questions whether spending me-time should be considered 'selfish', which implies striving for one's own personal gain or pleasure while lacking consideration for others. Due to the societal pressure to prioritise others' needs, working mothers commonly appraise spending time for themselves as selfish (e.g. Borelli et al., 2017; Mullens & Glorieux, 2022). Our results dispute this idea by revealing that attending to the self is not at odds with fulfilling others' needs for working mothers, rather it might be a complement.

Our finding broadens the theoretical scope of the recovery literature that has focused on the benefits for individuals who engage in recovery activities (for reviews see Sonnentag et al., 2022; Steed et al., 2021), by documenting far-reaching benefits of recovery that enhances partners' as well as employees' well-being. From the receiving partner's perspective (e.g. husbands in our study), this result highlights the significance of individuals' social environment for daily recovery, thereby adding to the growing stream of research on how members in a dual-earner couple influence and are influenced by each other's stress and recovery process (e.g. Chariatte et al., 2023; Chen & Ellis, 2021). In sum, we call for more research that takes a dyadic approach to understanding recovery.

In support of the crossover theory (Westman, 2001) and consistent with past research (e.g. Bakker et al., 2008), we observed that hostile marital interaction is an underlying mechanism of crossover. Notably, we found hostile marital interaction, a *negative* marital interaction, as a mediator of *positive* crossover. That is, wives' recovery enabled them to avoid acting in an unpleasant and angry manner toward their husbands, which in turn facilitated husbands' vitality. This finding extends prior research that has tended to examine positively valenced

mediators such as well-being and work–family enrichment as the mechanism of positive crossover among couples (e.g. Rodríguez-Muñoz et al., 2018; Sanz-Vergel & Rodríguez-Muñoz, 2013; van Steenbergen et al., 2014). Our research further bolsters the proposition that positive crossover may occur via minimised negative processes rather than solely through positive processes (Liu et al., 2016; Steiner & Krings, 2016).

Many working women associate spending time that prioritises their own needs with guilt because it violates the normative standard of the ideal mother (e.g. Aarntzen et al., 2019; Guendouzi, 2006; Mullens & Glorieux, 2022). Based on research that guilt-prone individuals are more likely to feel guilty in guilt-invoking situations and that they tend to ruminate their misdeeds and be willing to engage in corrective actions, we expected that more guilt-prone mothers might benefit less from me-time than less guilt-prone mothers. However, we did not find support for guilt-proneness as a cross-level moderator. Instead, me-time seemed equally beneficial for working mothers regardless of their guilt-proneness. Thus, although guilt-proneness has been shown to predict working mothers' choices favouring norm-conforming activities during off-job time (e.g. Aarntzen et al., 2019; Cho & Allen, 2012), our findings indicate relationships between daily time spent on the self and daily vitality do not depend on the degree of guilt-proneness after accounting for time spent on others.

We have several speculative explanations as to why the benefits of me-time were universal across working mothers. One possibility is that working mothers justified the me-time they 'earned', hence spending the time without feeling guilt (Lewis, 2022). If so, me-time may not necessarily be perceived as norm-violating, and thus working mothers' guilt-proneness would not have differentiated their experiences of me-time. Alternatively, this null finding might be due to our sample or measure. As shown in Table 1, the mean and standard deviation of guilt-proneness was relatively small. Thus, there might not be enough number of working mothers who are truly guilt-prone. Concerning measure, the tendency to experience work-family guilt, as opposed to general guilt-proneness, might be better suited to the study of working mothers' guilt. In addition, the degree of guilt felt during me-time might vary depending on other circumstances (e.g. the relative amount of daily time spent for the self versus others). Hence, future research measuring both trait and state guilt is warranted.

Practical implications

Based on the findings, working mothers are advised to set aside time that allows for self-care and provides enjoyment. This might be a challenge because time deficit is a common issue (Bianchi et al., 2006; Milkie et al., 2004), especially for employed women who experience guilt for not spending enough time for family members (Guendouzi, 2006). However, our study suggests that the benefit of spending time for the self goes beyond promoting one's recovery because it mitigates negative marital interaction and promotes the spouse's daily well-being. Therefore, acknowledging the importance of me-time and adopting a more favourable perspective toward me-time is merited. Next, our findings demonstrate that vitality crossover occurs in part due to reduced hostile marital interaction. Thus, if adequate recovery is not feasible, couples might want to pay attention to their interpersonal exchanges to prevent potential negative crossover.

Limitations and future research directions

Like all research, the current study has limitations. The sample consisted of members of a dual-earner couple who were parents, and the majority of the participants were highly educated professionals. These sample characteristics limit the generalisability of the results in that the patterns of off-job time use (Berry, 2007) and other factors that might affect the marital relationship dynamic (e.g. gender role attitude; Davis & Greenstein, 2009) are known to differ depending on individuals' education and income levels. Also, our sample size (79 dyads) is slightly smaller than the average in previous diary studies in work and organisational psychology ($M = 83$; Gabriel et al., 2019), which might have yielded insufficient statistical power to detect the cross-level interactions. Future studies with a bigger sample comprising participants from more diverse occupational and demographic backgrounds would be informative.

Our study points to several interesting avenues for future research. First, the underlying mechanisms through which me-time facilitates recovery merits more research. As various activities are typically involved during me-time, we do not yet know about the 'active ingredients' of me-time that contribute to its recovery benefits. For theory advancement, an in-depth investigation of common aspects of the activities engaged during me-time might be helpful. For instance, me-time might be characterised by the two dimensions of self-care (aiming to replenish lost resources) and interests (aiming to generate more resources), which may allow differential recovery experiences. Next, boundary conditions of me-time—when and for whom it is particularly effective—warrant further research. Paralleling research on at-work recovery (for review see Chan et al., 2022), it might be interesting to compare whether formal, pre-scheduled me-time differs from informal, spontaneous me-time in terms of the recovery benefits. Also, perhaps me-time is especially beneficial to working mothers as it serves as a respite from the 'invisible mental load' that women tend to shoulder more so than men (Damingier, 2019; Wayne et al., 2023). Given that individuals are free from family as well as work responsibilities during me-time, it may be fruitful to examine whether and how me-time facilitates recovery from various family demands.

Second, the time usage among cohabiting couples is intricately related. Thus, future research may consider measuring daily me-time from both members of dual-earner couples to explore whether the effects of me-time depend on not only the absolute amount but also the relative amount within the couples. For example, me-time deprivation might result in more adverse outcomes when there is an 'imbalance' between partners' me-time (cf. balance theory, Heider, 1958). Moreover, a parallel assessment of me-time, the resulting psychological processes and well-being outcomes from both partners would allow investigation of how one might benefit not only from their own me-time but also from their partner's me-time, using actor-partner interdependence models (Cook & Kenny, 2005).

Finally, as crossover occurs among individuals who have frequent social interactions (Westman, 2001), examining crossover among coworkers would be a meaningful expansion. Considering the call for more research on the performance consequences of recovery (Steed et al., 2021), it will be fruitful to examine whether and how recovery crosses over among coworkers to enhance team performance and which, if any, organisational characteristics facilitate such positive crossover.

Conclusion

The present study integrates theoretical models of recovery and crossover to understand whether and how working mothers' daily recovery benefits the well-being of dual-earner couples. We found that working mothers' me-time promoted their recovery, reflected in higher vitality. Such benefit did not depend on the mothers' personality trait of guilt-proneness. Moreover, adequate recovery allowed the mothers to interact with their spouses in a less hostile manner, improving their spouse's vitality. In sum, our research suggests that working mothers may consider spending me-time as a 'win-win' strategy rather than from a 'zero-sum' perspective. After all, spending time for the self might not be so selfish.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Analyzed data is available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of South Florida, and all the participants signed an informed consent form prior to their participation. The above is written in the Methods section, in the sub-section of Participants and procedure.

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ENDNOTES

^{1 1} The effect of wives' vitality on husbands' vitality has been calculated as the sum of the direct ($\gamma = .09$, $p = .053$) and indirect (via marital interaction; $\gamma = .03$, $p = .030$) effects.

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