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Work-to-family conflict and the family dinner: what makes a difference?

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Despite the abundant benefits that have been associated with family meals, families report that they share fewer meals together than in the past. Although parents' work (e.g., work hours) is recognized as a barrier to family meals, the role of the individual in determining family meal frequency has received relatively little attention. With this in mind, this study investigated two important person factors that may aggravate or attenuate the negative relationship between work-to-family conflict (WTFC) and family dinner frequency using survey data from employed parents ($n = 206$). Specifically, parents' negative affectivity (NA) and family meal atmosphere were examined as moderators. As hypothesized, the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency was stronger for high-NA individuals than for low-NA individuals. However, no support was found for the moderating role of family meal atmosphere. Findings suggest that WTFC may be more deleterious for high-NA individuals due to their tendency to strongly react to stressors and highlight the necessity to consider both situational and individual factors in understanding work-family experiences.

Keywords: work-to-family conflict; family dinner; negative affectivity; family meal atmosphere

A pesar de los abundantes beneficios que se han asociado con las comidas familiares, las familias reportan que comparten menos comidas juntos que en el pasado. Aunque el trabajo de los padres (por ejemplo, horas de trabajo) es reconocido como una barrera para las comidas en familia, la parte del individuo en la determinación de la frecuencia de comidas en familia ha recibido relativamente poca atención. Con esto en mente, este estudio investigó dos factores personales importantes que pueden agravar o atenuar la relación negativa entre los conflictos familiares y los conflictos de trabajo (WTFC) y la frecuencia de la cena de la familia utilizando datos de encuestas de padres empleados ($n = 206$). Específicamente, la afectividad negativa de padres (NA) y la atmósfera de comida de la familia fueron examinados como moderadores. Como se postuló, la relación entre WTFC y la frecuencia de la cena familiar era más fuerte para personas con alto NA que para las personas de bajos NA. Sin embargo, no se encontro apoyo para el papel moderador de ambiente familiar y comida. Los resultados sugieren que WTFC puede ser más perjudicial para los individuos de alto NA debido a su tendencia a reaccionar fuertemente a los factores estresantes y resaltar la necesidad de considerar tanto los factores situacionales e factores individuales en la comprensión de las experiencias de trabajo y familia.

Palabras claves: trabajo-a-conflictos familiares; la cena familiar; la afectividad negativa; ambiente familiar y comida

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The importance of family meals has garnered considerable attention in recent years. Research has consistently shown a wide range of psychological and physical health benefits associated with frequent family meals (Eisenberg, Olson, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Bearinger, 2004; Fulkerson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2006; Kingon & O'Sullivan, 2001; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003). Despite the various merits of family meals, the frequency of family dinners has decreased (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Nicklas et al., 2004). Previous studies have indicated that factors related to parents' work are among the chief barriers to the family meal. For example, greater occupational time demands and perceptions of work-to-family conflict (WTFC) have been negatively associated with the family dinner frequency (Allen, Shockley, & Poteat, 2008).

A topic that has been largely overlooked in previous research on family meals is individual factors. Although it has been suggested that parents play a crucial role as gatekeepers of the family meal (Fiese & Schwartz, 2008), little is known about the role of specific individual differences. Considering individual differences are important because the extent that WTFC relates to the family dinner frequency may differ across individuals. According to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Voydanoff, 2001), an individual's social context can be conceptualized as multiple ecological systems that are hierarchically arranged (e.g., microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem). Work and family are examples of microsystem whereas WTFC exemplifies a mesosystem as the linkage between microsystems. These systems are thought to be closely intertwined such that an individual's experiences are affected by interactions among the different entities. Importantly, the environment not only influences but also is influenced by the individual in that various individual differences shape the person-environment interactions (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). With this in mind, it is expected that individual differences might moderate the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency.

The objective of the present study is to examine the moderating role of individual variables in the relationship between WTFC and the frequency of family dinners. Specifically, we investigate trait negative affectivity (NA) and perceived family meal atmosphere. In doing so, we expect to gain further understanding of the relationship between WTFC and individuals' behaviors related with family meals. Also, we help answer the call for more research on the role of individual differences in work-family experiences (Allen, in press).

WTFC and family dinner

WTFC is based on role theory, which postulates that roles stem from others' expectation about appropriate behavior in a particular position and that role accumulation may result in role conflict if the multiple roles that individuals hold are incompatible (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). WTFC is a type of interrole conflict that occurs when fulfillment of work demands makes it difficult to successfully perform in the family domain (Greenhaus, Allen, & Spector, 2006; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Three types of WTFC have been recognized (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985): time-based (i.e., time spent at work inhibits the fulfillment of family demands), strain-based (i.e., pressures from work hinder successful performance in the family domain), and behavior-based (i.e.,

effective behaviors at work are not congruent with behaviors that are necessary to meet family demands).

Given that WTFC reflects the degree that work interferes with family, it is plausible that level of WTFC is closely linked with the frequency of family dinners. Family dinners are one activity that families share as a unit on a daily basis. Also, family dinners are often a resource-consuming task because they require planning, shopping, cooking, serving, and cleaning processes. This suggests that employees who experience WTFC may be more likely to skip family dinners. Supporting this idea, previous research showed that WTFC was negatively associated with family dinner frequency (Allen et al., 2008). Consequently, we expect a negative relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency.

Hypothesis 1: WTFC negatively associates with family dinner frequency.

Negative affectivity

NA is a dispositional tendency to experience aversive emotional states, such as anger, anxiety, distress, nervousness, or worry (Watson & Clark, 1984). As a stable and pervasive individual difference, NA relates to one's cognitive style such that high-NA individuals tend to ruminate over their failures and have less favorable self-concepts. Furthermore, high-NA individuals are known to react stronger to stressful situations than do low-NA individuals (Spence, Farber, & Taylor, 1954).

Differential reactivity (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995) is a theoretical framework that suggests NA may play a moderating role in the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency. Differential reactivity suggests that the degree that individuals are affected by stressful situations differs because of personality differences in reactivity to stressors. Considering that WTFC has been conceptualized as a life stressor (Greenhaus et al., 2006), it is plausible that high-NA individuals interpret and react to WTFC in a more aversive way than do low-NA individuals. Thus, high-NA individuals who experience WTFC may perceive family dinner as a daunting task more so than do low-NA individuals. Also, a low desire for affiliation has been reported among high-NA individuals in stressful situations (Teichman, 1974). This suggests that high-NA individuals may be more inclined to skip family dinners while experiencing WTFC because the family dinner is a time that all family members gather to share food and their daily lives. In conclusion, we expect that the negative relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency will be stronger for high-NA individuals than for low-NA individuals.

Hypothesis 2: NA moderates the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency such that the relationship is stronger among high-NA than low-NA individuals.

Family meal atmosphere

Family meal atmosphere reflects the mood of family meal time (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Story, & Fulkerson, 2004). Favorable perceptions of family meal time indicate that an individual enjoys the family meal experience. Family meal atmosphere has been shown to be an important factor that affects adults' eating behavior such as dietary choices (Boutelle, Birnbaum, Lytle, Murray, & Story, 2003). Building on this

finding, we argue that favorable perceptions of family meals may function as a buffer against WTFC by promoting more family dinners despite WTFC.

Positive experiences that result from an individual's work and family interactions have been suggested to be valuable resources that aid the individual's adaptation across different domains (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973). As a perception that is developed from an individual's interactions in the family domain, a favorable family meal atmosphere might help the individual overcome barriers to family dinner. Thus, it is expected that those who perceive family meal time as pleasant will make the effort to engage in family dinners even in the presence of barriers, such as WTFC. On the other hand, individuals who find family meals of little pleasure may easily give up on family dinners when faced with WTFC. In sum, we expect that the negative relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency will be weaker for individuals who have positive perceptions of family meal time than for those who do not view family meals favorably.

> Hypothesis 3: Family meal atmosphere moderates the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency such that the relationship is weaker among those who report a more favorable family meal atmosphere than those who report a less favorable family meal atmosphere.

Method

Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of employed parents who were recruited from 11 after-school programs located in the southeastern region of the USA ($n = 206$). To be eligible, individuals had to work a minimum of 20 hours a week and have family responsibility (e.g., living with at least one child). Participants completed a hard copy survey at the after school or completed it at home and brought it back to the after school on the next day. Participation was voluntary and no compensation was granted.

The majority of the participants were female (64.1%). The average age of the sample was 38.08 years (SD = 6.68). The majority was White/Caucasian (53.4%), followed by Black/African-American (23.8%), Asian/Pacific Islander (12.1%), Hispanic (7.8%), and other (2.9%). In regards to marital status, 68.9% were married, 14.6% were living with a partner, and 16.5% were single. In terms of education, 10.7% had a high school degree, 23.8% had attended some college, 45.7% had a college degree, 2.9% had attended some graduate school, and 17% had a graduate degree. On average, participants worked 40.43 hours per week (SD = 10.59) and had 1.68 children at home (SD = 0.75).

Measures

Family dinner frequency

The frequency of family dinner was assessed with a single item, 'How many times does your entire family have dinner together in a typical week?' Responses ranged from zero to seven.

Work-to-family conflict

Three subscales (time-, strain-, and behavior-based WTFC) from Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams (2000) were used to assess WTFC ($\alpha = 0.88$). Each subscale consisted of three items. Sample items include 'The time I must devote to my job keeps me from participating equally in household responsibilities and activities,' 'When I get home from work I am often too frazzled to participate in family activities/responsibilities,' and 'Behavior that is effective and necessary for me at work would be counter-productive at home.' The response to each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*).

Negative affectivity

NA was measured with five adjectives from the positive and negative affect schedule-expanded form (the PANAS-X; Watson & Clark, 1994). Reliability was $\alpha = 0.75$. The scale assessed the extent that participants experience feelings *on the average.* Example items are 'scared' and 'nervous.' The response to each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from one (*very slightly or not at all*) to five (*extremely*).

Family meal atmosphere

Family meal atmosphere was assessed with four items that assess communication and enjoyment during the meal (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2004). Example items include 'I enjoy eating meals with my family' and 'In my family, mealtime is a time for talking with other family members.' The response to each item was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from one (*strongly disagree*) to five (*strongly agree*). Reliability was $\alpha = 0.85$.

Demographic variables

Participants provided demographic information including gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, number of children living at home, and paid employment hours per week. In analyses, gender, ethnicity, and marital status were dummy coded (male = 0, female = 1; White/Caucasian = 0, all others = 1; single = 0, married or living with a partner/significant other = 1, respectively). Descriptive statistics for all demographic variables are listed in Table 1.

Results

Hypotheses were tested using moderated hierarchical regression (Aiken & West, 1991). For each regression, gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, number of children living at home, and paid employment hours per week were entered at Step 1 as control variables, the predictor variables were entered at Step 2, and the interaction term was entered at Step 3. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between demographic and focal variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Intercorrelations among study variables.

	Variable	*M*	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Frequency	4.89	1.73	–									
2	WTFC	2.69	0.85	−0.32**	–								
3	NA	1.49	0.53	−0.15*	0.06	–							
4	Atmosphere	4.43	0.60	0.46**	−0.31**	−0.22**	–						
5	Gender	0.64	0.48	0.05	−0.06	0.00	0.20**	–					
6	Age	38.08	6.68	−0.08	0.10	−0.05	−0.13	−0.31**	–				
7	Ethnicity	0.47	0.50	0.05	0.12	−0.04	0.10	0.09	−0.23**	–			
8	Marital	0.84	0.37	−0.03	0.11	−0.10	0.06	−0.09	0.10	−0.06	–		
9	Children	1.68	0.75	0.04	−0.01	0.02	−0.03	−0.16*	0.07	0.03	−0.08	–	
10	Work hr	40.43	10.59	−0.03	0.25**	0.02	−0.09	−0.16*	−0.03	−0.02	−0.02	−0.07	–

Notes: Results based on $n = 206$.
Frequency = Family dinner frequency per week; WTFC = Work-to-family conflict; NA = Negative affectivity; Atmosphere = Family meal atmosphere; Children = Number of children living in the household; Work hr = Number of hours of working per week.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

Table 2. Moderated regression results of NA and WTFC on family dinner frequency.

	Family dinner frequency		
Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Demographics			
Gender	−0.00	−0.01	0.01
Age	−0.08	−0.04	−0.05
Ethnicity	0.01	0.06	0.07
Marital	−0.02	0.01	−0.01
Children	0.02	0.01	0.03
Work hr	−0.02	0.06	0.07
Predictors			
WTFC		−0.33**	−0.32**
NA		−0.14*	−0.19**
Interaction			
WTFC X NA			−0.20**
F	0.26	3.44**	4.03**
df	6, 187	8, 185	9, 184
Overall R^2	0.01	0.13	0.17
Δ in R^2		0.12**	0.04**

Note: Standardized coefficients are shown.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

In support of Hypothesis 1, the beta weight associated with WTFC was significant after taking into account the control variables and each of the individual predictors ($\beta = -0.33, p < 0.01, \beta = -0.20, p < 0.01$). Hypothesis 2 was supported ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04, p < 0.01$). Results are shown in Table 2. Simple slope analysis suggested that the negative relationship between WTFC and the frequency of family dinners was stronger for high-NA individuals ($\beta = -0.47$, $p < 0.001$) than for low-NA individuals ($\beta = -0.14, p = 0.13$). Figure 1 illustrates the nature of the interaction. Hypothesis 3 that stated the moderating role of family meal atmosphere was not supported ($\Delta R^2 = 0.00, p = 0.63$). Results are shown in Table 3.

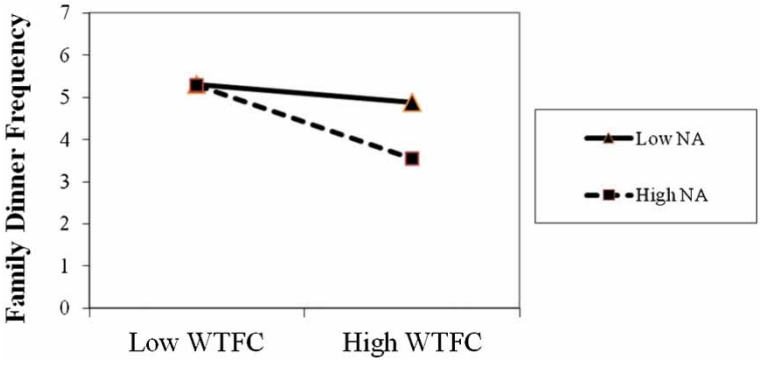

Figure 1. Interaction of WTFC on family dinner frequency as a function of NA.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine the role of individual differences on the frequency of family dinners among employed parents. Building on previous research that demonstrated a negative relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency (Allen et al., 2008), we examined the moderating role of NA and perceived family meal atmosphere. Consistent with Allen et al. we found that those who reported more WTFC also reported fewer family dinners. Notably, this finding held after taking both work hours and a variety of demographic factors into consideration, suggesting that subjective perception of work that interferes with family explains family dinner frequency above and beyond the demographic variables and the time spent on the work.

As hypothesized, the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency was stronger for high-NA individuals than for low-NA individuals. Specifically, the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency was significant only for high-NA individuals whereas no significant relationship was found among low-NA individuals. This finding reinforces the idea of differential reactivity (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995) as it indicates that WTFC is more deleterious for high-NA individuals due to their tendency to strongly react to stressors.

Contrary to our expectation, we found no support for the buffering effect of family meal atmosphere against WTFC. Individuals who perceive family meal time as pleasant did not differ from those who have unfavorable perception in terms of the family dinner frequency. Research on negativity bias that has demonstrated that the psychological effects of bad is stronger than good (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) may shed light on this finding. That is, even if an individual had favorable perceptions of family meal time, the experience of WTFC might have prevailed because the detrimental effect of negative events outweigh the beneficial effect of positive events.

Interestingly, NA and family meal atmosphere were negatively associated. This suggests that NA might have swayed individuals' perception of family meal atmosphere such that the presence of NA, a negative trait, suppressed positive perceptions of family meal time. The results highlight that future research is warranted to explore potential interaction effects among various individual differences on family meal frequency.

Theoretical and practical implications

The current study has two important theoretical implications. First, identifying NA as a significant moderator in the relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency, this study is consistent with the fundamental principle of ecological systems theory in the work-family context (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Voydanoff, 2001). That is, our results indicate that both NA (an individual characteristic) and WTFC (part of the mesosystem) play a part in family dinner frequency. Second, we expand the work-family literature by examining individual differences. Scant research on the role of individual differences in the work–family interface and lack of an integrated model that encompasses situational and person factors have been stated as critical limitations of the literature (Allen, in press; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000). The present study helps address this gap and echoes the previous call for more research on

Table 3. Moderated regression results of family meal atmosphere and WTFC on family dinner frequency.

	Family dinner frequency		
Variable	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Demographics			
Gender	−0.00	−0.06	−0.06
Age	−0.08	−0.02	−0.02
Ethnicity	0.01	0.02	0.02
Marital	−0.02	−0.03	−0.02
Children	0.02	0.04	0.04
Work hr	−0.02	0.05	0.05
Predictors			
WTFC		−0.20**	−0.21**
Atmosphere		0.40**	0.38**
Interaction			
WTFC X Atmosphere			0.03
F	.26	7.32**	6.50**
df	6, 187	8, 185	9, 184
Overall R^2	0.01	0.24	0.24
Δ in R^2		0.23**	0.00

Note: Standardized coefficients are shown.
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$.

individual variables and their interaction with environmental factors as predictors of work-family experiences.

The current study also provides practical implications. Results indicated that the extent that WTFC affects family dinner frequency varies as a function of individuals' NA such that it is only high-NA individuals who reported fewer family dinners when experiencing WTFC. This suggests that high-NA individuals and their family members might be at an increased risk in terms of nutrition and health considering the profound benefits of family meals on individuals' health and well-being (Eisenberg et al., 2004; Kingon & O'Sullivan, 2001; Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Story, 2007). With this in mind, it might be helpful to provide tailored organizational programs that take key individual differences into account in order to support employees who are more vulnerable to WTFC. From an employee's perspective, high-NA individuals are advised to be aware of WTFC and actively adopt strategies to reduce it as the adverse impact of WTFC seems to be stronger for them.

Limitations and future directions

We acknowledge several limitations of the current study. First, this study is based on a cross-sectional design. Although WTFC is a theoretically sound antecedent of behavior in the family domain (Frone, 2003), causal conclusions cannot be drawn due to the nature of the study design. Also, because a convenience sample was used in this study, future study is warranted to examine the generalizability of the current findings. Third, the data were collected via self-report only, which raises the issue of inflated relationships due to common method variance. However, self-report was

deemed to be an appropriate way to collect data because of the characteristic of the variables of interest in the current study (e.g., NA, the perception of family meal atmosphere). Furthermore, it has been argued that we cannot presume that correlations observed in self-report studies are inflated (Spector, 2006) and that interactions, such as that observed in this study, are unlikely to be produced by the presence of a common method (Evans, 1985). Lastly, the current study assessed the frequency of family dinners only, which provides little information about the family meal environment. Further research that examines qualitative characteristics of the family meal such as the presence of distracters (e.g., a television), parallel eating (i.e., family members eat in different places), or serial eating (i.e., family members eat at different times) is needed.

The current study offers promising avenues for future research. First, research is needed to investigate whether relationships between WTFC and other aspects of family meals are qualified by individuals' NA. For example, previous research has shown that food choice is used as a coping strategy by employees who experience WTFC and that commonly used strategies were emotion-focused (e.g., treating oneself or family members with quick and easy food) rather than problem-focused (e.g., changing job or work shift; Devine et al., 2006). Given that high-NA individuals are known to rely on coping strategies that are emotion-focused, passive, and hostile (Bolger, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1986), the observed link between WTFC and inadequate food choice coping strategies might be stronger among high-NA individuals.

Another fruitful area for future research involves multi-source data collected from family members. Based on ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Voydanoff, 2001), it is plausible that the interplay among individual characteristics of family members influences the quantity and quality of family meals. For example, one family member's favorable approach toward family meals may offset another member's unfavorable perception or vice versa. Understanding such intrapersonal dynamic interaction among family members would help capture a more comprehensive picture of family meals.

Conclusion

The current study extends the extant literature by demonstrating that the strength of a negative relationship between WTFC and family dinner frequency differs across individuals as a function of their tendency to experience negative emotional states (NA). Grounded on ecological systems theory, our findings underscore the necessity to consider both situational and individual factors in future research inquiry into the family meals.

Notes on contributors

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