

NEGATIVE WORK EVENTS INCREASE MARITAL SATISFACTION? AN EXAMINATION OF THE EFFECTS OF SHARING WORK EVENTS WITH THE SPOUSE AT HOME

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INTRODUCTION

The close interconnection between work and family domains and the increasingly permeable work-family boundary frequently result in a spillover effect – a within-person transmission of experiences, both positive and negative, from one domain of life to another (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013). One manifestation of this effect occurs through sharing work events (e.g., Ilies, Keeney, & Scott, 2011). Although past research has demonstrated how sharing positive work events brings numerous benefits, there are a few questions regarding the effects of sharing work events with one's family members that remain unanswered. First, although some past work has examined the effects of sharing work events with one's colleagues (e.g., Watkins, 2020), the findings cannot be directly translated to our understanding of sharing work events with one's spouse. For instance, sharing news about a promotion with a colleague can elicit envy while sharing the same event with a spouse can elicit happiness. As such, a more nuanced understanding of outcomes of sharing work events specifically with one's spouse is needed. The research on event sharing with spouses that does exist, however, is largely focused on positive events (e.g., Culbertson et al., 2012; Ilies et al., 2017). Yet relatively little is known about how sharing negative work events with family (e.g., conflict with one's manager) can influence family outcomes. This gap is surprising, given the commonplace nature of negative interpersonal interactions at work, and the volume of research documenting their effects on employees' family lives (see Schilpzand, De Pater, & Erez, 2016 for a review).

Given the complexity and potential importance of the effects surrounding the sharing of negative events, the first purpose of this study is thus to complement the existing research on sharing positive events experienced at work by taking a broader perspective and considering the valence of the events when examining the consequences of social sharing of various work events in the family. We draw on the crossover research to propose that sharing work events would not only have indirect effects on spousal outcomes (e.g., marital satisfaction), but also, somewhat counterintuitively, that sharing negative (vs. positive) work events would make spouses more satisfied with their marriage. With this, we contribute to the crossover theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2013) by examining whether sharing work events is related to spousal empathy and, if so, whether the feeling of empathy influences spouse's marital well-being (i.e., marital

satisfaction) and behavior (i.e., family role performance) at home. Finally, by relying on an Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM), our study seeks to investigate the temporality of the influences brought about by sharing work events with others. Past research on the influence of sharing work events has been confined to the immediate effect of social sharing in the laboratory setting (McCance et al., 2013) or the effects within a day (e.g., Ilies et al., 2011). However, if sharing work events at home does enhance psychological well-being in employees within the day (consistent with past research), this effect could linger to influence employees' emotional states and well-being the next day at work.

THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

Crossover theory describes the processes through which the experiences of one individual influence those of another individual (Westman, 2001). In general, crossover effects appear between two persons in a close relationship who care for each other and share a large part of their lives together (e.g., married couple). It is this closeness between the couple that leads to one of the proposed mechanisms explaining the crossover process: direct empathic crossover, through which "individuals imagine how they would feel in the position of another and thus come to experience and share their feelings" (Westman, 2001, p. 730). That is, when one consciously "tunes in" to another's experience and emotions, he/she may experience empathic emotions that are isomorphic to that individual's affective state (de Vignemont & Singer, 2006). This suggests that empathy might be an important emotional mechanism in crossover processes between spouses, though it has not yet been tested empirically.

Sharing work events with one's spouse can elicit spousal empathy in two ways. First, as empathy is an emotional reaction to specific situations or events, an employee's active sharing (vs. not sharing) draws the spouse's attention to his/her work experiences and enhances the strength of the situation, which is one of the key situational antecedents of empathy (Davis, 1994). Simply put, for one to empathize with another person, he/she should notice the other's fortune or suffering (Atkins & Parker, 2012). We posit that direct sharing would highlight the sharer's situation and emotions, and therefore elicit empathic emotions. Second, social sharing enhances closeness and intimacy between interaction partners and gives rise to the feeling of empathy by reducing self-other distinctions and resulting in recipient's perception that the sharer is important to his/her well-being (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). When the sharer is more relevant to the self, the recipient is more likely to value the sharer's welfare and to experience empathy (Atkins & Parker, 2012). Thus, we hypothesize:

Hypothesis 1: Sharing (vs. not sharing) an affect-laden work event with one's spouse will lead the spouse to experience a higher level of empathy.

The next question we ask is whether the valence of the events shared matters in triggering spousal empathy, and if so, how? Drawing from an evolutionary perspective, Baumeister and colleagues (2001) argued that negative experiences have greater impact than positive experiences, as the former elicit stronger emotional reactions. Specifically, Baumeister and colleagues reasoned that those who were more attuned to negative stimuli (compared to those who ignored them) had a greater likelihood of surviving threats and consequently had a greater likelihood of passing on their genes to their progeny. As such, over time, humans have evolved to notice bad things more so than good. Following this principle, we propose:

Hypotheses 2: The relationship between sharing (vs. not sharing) events with the spouse and spousal empathy will be influenced by the valence (pleasantness) of the events such that the relationship will be stronger for negative (less pleasant) than positive (more pleasant) events.

We next turn to theorizing about two important outcomes of spousal empathy: marital satisfaction and family role performance. First addressing the relationship between spouses' experience of empathy with marital satisfaction, we posit that empathy serves a crucial relationship-binding role that underscores the value of one's marriage and therefore strengthens spouses' perceptions of a close and rewarding marriage with the focal employee. Empathy theorists have long stressed the social functions of empathy in strengthening affiliative bonds and social cohesion (e.g., de Vignemont & Singer, 2006). For instance, Paleari and colleagues (2005) found that greater empathy led to greater marital quality 6 months later. While this and other studies support the notion that general feelings of empathy can lead to overall greater marital satisfaction, it is likely that daily changes in empathy due to event sharing with the spouse at home would result in daily fluctuations of marital satisfaction (consistent with other attitudes with strong affective component which have been shown to fluctuate daily (Heller & Watson, 2005)). Taken together, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: Greater daily levels of spousal empathy will lead to greater daily levels of marital satisfaction.

One of the most studied behavioral consequences of empathy is prosocial behavior or altruism. A wealth of research testing the empathy-altruism hypothesis (Batson et al., 1989; Batson et al., 2015) supports the notion that feelings of empathy increase prosocial and helping behaviors toward others (for a review see Batson et al., 2015; DeCelles, DeVoe, Rafaeli, & Agasi, 2019). Extrapolating this research, it stands to reason that spouses driven by empathy would express their prosocial motivation through behaviors that are appropriate and common for spousal relationships, such as taking over a portion of their spouse's household responsibilities known as 'family role performance' (Chen et al., 2014). Because these responsibilities require time and effort at home from each of the spouses, it is conceivable that an empathy-driven spouse would take over familial responsibilities to help their partners. As such, we propose:

Hypothesis 4: Greater daily levels of spousal empathy will lead to greater daily spousal family role performance.

As our purpose is to test crossover effects associated with sharing work events, coming back full circle, it is important to evaluate the effects of the end outcomes of sharing from the family domain, back on the focal participant (the employee). Therefore, we test whether higher spousal family role performance decreases the focal employee's distress. We do not offer a formal hypothesis in this respect as it is perhaps not very surprising, yet we believe it is an important validation test that would show that spouses' behaviors do matter for the employees.

STUDY 1

Using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), we recruited 300 (65.4% male; mean age = 34.8, $SD = 10.02$) married and employed US participants ($M_{\text{tenure}} = 5.61$ years, $SD = 7.78$). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: “positive event”, “negative event” or “control.” In the “positive event” condition, participants were asked to imagine that their spouse came home happy because they received a promotion. In the “negative control condition”, participants imagined that their spouse came home unhappy because their contract was not renewed. In the control condition, participants imagined that their spouse came home feeling as usual. In all conditions, participants were told that afterwards, the evening proceeded usual: they had dinner, watched TV, and went to bed. Participants were then asked to respond to follow-up questions regarding their empathy (i.e., “sympathetic,” “compassionate,” and “moved,” $\alpha = .88$; Batson et al., 1989) and marital satisfaction (5 items from the Quality of Marriage Index, $\alpha = .88$; Norton, 1983). The study concluded with participants responding to demographic questions and to a quality check question asking participants to recall the scenario they read earlier and the mood in which their spouse came home in.

Two hundred and three participants passed our quality check question and were included in the analysis. Supporting Hypothesis 1, the results of one-way ANOVA, comparing the control condition with positive and negative events conditions (planned contrast test) revealed that the levels of empathy in the control condition ($M_{\text{control}} = 5.17$, $SD_{\text{control}} = 1.00$) were significantly lower than levels of empathy in the sharing (positive and negative events) conditions combined ($t(200) = 3.82$, $p < .01$). To test the effect of the event valence, we compared the level of empathy in the negative events condition with the positive condition, finding the difference to be also significant ($M_{\text{positive}} = 5.55$, $SD_{\text{positive}} = 1.12$; $M_{\text{negative}} = 6.16$, $SD_{\text{negative}} = 1.11$; $t(153) = 3.40$, $p < .01$). Supporting Hypothesis 2, we thus found that sharing negative events led to greater empathy than sharing positive events.

STUDY 2

We recruited US 81 married participants using a data collection panel managed by Clearvoice. Among the focal participants, 66.7% were female, with an average age of 37.9. All of them were working full-time and had an average of 15.2 years of full-time work experiences. Among the spouses, 33.3% were female, and they were on average 39.1 years old. Most of them were employed (78% - full-time; 10% - part-time).

We conducted a field experiment using ESM design. Participants were first administered a survey with demographic questions. Then, participants and spouses were asked to respond to one daily survey over the course of two weeks (i.e., 10 workdays). The survey for the focal participants was sent out at the end of the workday at 4:00 p.m. and included a manipulation for sharing (vs. not sharing) work event and measures of event pleasantness ($\alpha = .95$; Ilies et al., 2011) and affective distress at work ($\alpha = .93$; Mackay, Cox et al., 1978). The survey for the spouses was sent out at 7:00 p.m., in which we measured spouses’ empathy ($\alpha = .85$; Batson et al., 1989), marital satisfaction ($\alpha = .96$; Norton, 1983), their own family performance ($\alpha = .93$; Chen et al., 2014), and a manipulation check item. On average, there was a 3.8-hour time lag between these two surveys. In total, we received 746 matched daily surveys.

We adopted a 2 (within-person: share event with the spouse vs. not share) by 2 (between-person: positive vs. negative event) design. The focal participants were randomly assigned to either the positive event condition or the negative event condition. Across the 10 workdays, participants were then randomly assigned to either the “share” condition or the “not share”

condition. The daily survey for focal participants contained questions either about the most positive or the most negative event they experienced during their work day. Specifically, participants were given the following instructions: “In 5-7 sentences, please describe the most POSITIVE [NEGATIVE] event you have experienced at work today.” Participants were then asked to either share or not share the event with their spouses.

As a manipulation check, we asked the spouses whether the focal participants “shared any positive or negative news or events that he/she has experienced at work today,” and allowed them to select among “yes, my spouse shared a positive event/experience,” “yes, my spouse shared a negative event/experience,” or “no, my spouse did not share anything that happened at work today.” A total of 234 matched surveys were deleted because the focal participants did not follow the instructions, resulting in the final sample of 512 matched daily surveys from 80 couples (average valid matched daily surveys = 6.4 per couple). We also measured how pleasant the participants perceived each event to be, to use the rated event pleasantness scores as a second manipulation check and also as a substantive moderating variable (as we will explain shortly).

We used Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2017) to conduct analyses in a multilevel structural equation modeling framework (MSEM). We modeled the main effects of event sharing, event pleasantness, spousal empathy, and spousal family role performance using random intercept-random slopes models, whereas the effect of the control variables were modeled with fixed slopes. We tested Hypothesis 2 by modeling the moderation effects of event valence and event pleasantness in separate models. First, in Model 1, we tested the cross-level moderating effect of event valence (manipulation: 1 = positive, 0 = negative) by estimating the effect of event valence on the within-individual relationship between event sharing and spousal empathy. Then, in Model 2, to conduct an alternative test of Hypothesis 2, we examined the within-individual moderating effect of event pleasantness on the relationship between sharing and empathy by creating a product term by multiplying event sharing (manipulation: 1 = share, 0 = not share) with group-mean centered event pleasantness, and modeling the effect of the product term on spousal empathy with fixed slope (Uy, Lin, & Ilies, 2017).

Demonstrating the success of our manipulation of event valence, results showed a positive correlation between event valence and event pleasantness ($r = .60, p < .01$). Attesting to the multilevel nature of our data, we found substantial within-individual variance in our measured variables (i.e., ranging from 27% to 52%). Supporting Hypothesis 1, we found a positive relationship between event sharing and spousal empathy (Model 1: $\gamma = .26, p < .05$; Model 2: $\gamma = .29, p < .01$). As we tested the moderation effects of event valence (manipulation at the between-individual level) and event pleasantness (measured variable at the within-individual level) in separate models (i.e., Model 1 and Model 2, respectively), we report the results from both models below. Although we did not find a significant cross-level moderating effect of our manipulation – event valence on the sharing-empathy within-individual relationship (Model 1: $\gamma = .07, n.s.$), we found a significant within-individual moderating effect of event pleasantness on this relationship (Model 2: $\gamma = -.11, p < .05$). Results from simple slope analyses showed that, sharing (vs. not sharing) less pleasant work-related events resulted in higher spousal empathy (simple slope = $.46, SE = .11, p < .01$), whereas sharing (vs. not sharing) more pleasant work-related events did not (simple slope = $.12, SE = .11, n.s.$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was partially supported (i.e., with event pleasantness).

Supporting Hypotheses 3 and 4, results showed that spousal empathy was positively related to spousal marital satisfaction (Model 1: $\gamma = .17, p < .05$; Model 2: $\gamma = .16, p < .01$) and spousal family role performance (in both Models 1 & 2: $\gamma = .14, p < .01$). Finally, we also found

support for the expected (not formally hypothesized) negative relationship between spousal family role performance and the focal participants' affective distress at work the next day (Model 1: $\gamma = -.16, p < .10$; Model 2: $\gamma = -.17, p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

Employees are often urged to keep their work and family lives compartmentalized in order to prevent negative spillover, as evident in numerous career advice columns to not “bring work home” and in advice from scholars suggesting training employees in work-family segmentation when their job involve negative experiences (e.g., Ilies et al., 2009). While such advice may seem logical at first blush, our research challenges these ideas and shows that not only can sharing work events with one's spouse have beneficial effects for family lives, but also that sharing negative work events in particular can have a stronger positive influence on family outcomes than sharing positive work events.

Our results have several important theoretical contributions. First, our research contributes to the work-family literature by examining how the impact of events at work can cross not only the work-family boundary, but also influence the employee's spouse, through social sharing. We built and tested theory on work and family by proposing that sharing work events, both positive and negative, have crossover effects on employees' spouses through empathy. Given that recommendations for work-family integration vs. segmentation typically suggest training employees to segment work and family roles when they have negative experiences at work and to integrate these roles when they have positive experiences (Ilies et al., 2009), our proposed – and supported – *positive* effect of sharing *negative* events with the spouse is novel and counterintuitive, yet is well-grounded in theory on empathy. Second, we contribute to research on social sharing by proposing and testing spousal empathy as the mechanism through which the crossover process operates. Although the crossover literature has implied that empathy directly mediates crossover, this mechanism has not been empirically tested in past research (Westman, 2001; Westman & Vinokur, 1998). Further, we show that the effects of social sharing and the crossover on employees' psychological well-being can persist to the next day. Finally, our results have implications for employees and their families by underscoring that communication is one way to maintain strong relationships. In particular, sharing work events with one's spouse facilitates the experience of empathic emotions, which generates an emotional bond that strengthens their marriage. This is particularly important when it comes to negative events that employees undoubtedly experience at work at times, and social sharing with the spouse may therefore serve not only as a means for employees to cope with the stressors they experience at work but also as a mechanism that enhances their marriage quality.

Despite the contributions, our paper nevertheless has several limitations, including reliance on self-report data and not capturing the natural occurrence of sharing in either of the experiments. In addition to attending to these issues, future research could build on our study to more comprehensively investigate the role of positive and negative empathy in interpersonal relationships at the workplace or at home. Additionally, our studies focused on the influence of sharing (vs. not sharing) within a specific day for employees' family lives. Future research could more comprehensively investigate the benefits (or perhaps potential drawbacks) of sharing work events with one's spouse or family members on employees' work outcomes on the next day.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS