

RESEARCH

Role of work-to-family spillover, generative concern, and gender on subjective well-being in full-time working adults

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to investigate full-time working adults and the extent to which generative concern and gender moderate the association between positive and negative work-to-family spillover on life satisfaction and positive and negative affect.

Background: Families are an important and viable support for many people and their well-being. At the same time, an increasing number of women and men are working full-time in the United States, and work is likely to spill over into family life and affect well-being.

Method: Using data from the second wave of the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, 1,570 full-time working adults were examined. Regression analyses, controlling for education, hours worked for pay, parental status, and alternative well-being outcomes, were conducted.

Results: The results showed that generative concern and gender moderated the effect of negative work-to-family spillover on life satisfaction and the effect of positive work-to-family spillover on positive affect, albeit differently for women and men.

Conclusion: The findings emphasize the importance of generative concern as a potential resource in full-time working adults.

Implications: Companies could give employees the opportunity to pass on important skills to others, offer advice, or mentor young employees to strengthen generative concern.

KEYWORDS

gender, generativity, moderation, well-being, workers, work-to-family spillover

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The trend toward later births, higher divorce rates, and longer life expectancy has reshaped families, with midlife adults often taking on multiple family roles such as that of a partner, a parent to children or stepchildren, or an adult child vis-à-vis aging parents or in-laws (Marks et al., 2004; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Wiemers & Bianchi, 2015). At the same time, more and more women and men are working full-time in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), and work is likely to spill over into family life and affect well-being. Therefore, the present study investigates the impact of work-to-family spillover on different aspects of subjective well-being, namely positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction (Diener, 1984; Pavot & Diener, 1993), among full-time working adults in midlife. It also investigates the potential moderating role of generative concern and gender on this relationship.

Work-to-family spillover and subjective well-being

Spillover refers to the impacts of work and family on one another, including affect, values, skills, and behaviors, and to a lesser extent, the transfer of resources (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). The impact of work on family life can be negative and/or positive (Grzywacz et al., 2002). Negative work-to-family spillover occurs, for example, when demands and stress from work spill over into family life and interfere with family-related responsibilities. Specifically, long working hours and overtime have been shown to interfere with family life (e.g., Fursman, 2009; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Gutek et al., 1991; Namazi et al., 2019; Van der Hulst & Geurts, 2001). However, there is also evidence that some degree of control over work hours buffers the impact of long working hours on work-family interference (E. L. Hughes & Parkes, 2007). Positive work-to-family spillover, on the other hand, occurs when, for example, satisfaction or resources acquired at work are carried over into family life and improve the fulfillment of family demands. The presence of positive spillover does not necessarily imply the absence of negative spillover and vice versa, meaning that positive and negative work-to-family spillover are relatively independent experiences that may coexist (Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Kirchmeyer, 1992). By investigating both types of spillover simultaneously, researchers can gain a nuanced understanding of how these distinct experiences uniquely and collectively impact overall well-being. This dual examination allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the complex interplay between work and family life, leading to more effective strategies for enhancing well-being.

Hobfoll's (1989, 2002) model of conservation of resources (COR) suggests that individuals strive to protect and build resources in order to handle stress, and the loss of valued resources is threatening to them. COR theory has been applied to major and traumatic stress and has become widely used in the field of burnout (Hobfoll, 2011). Following COR, scholars assume that positive work-to-family spillover signals a gain in resources such as more energy or creativity, leading to higher well-being, whereas negative work-to-family spillover signals a loss of resources such as lack of energy or time, leading to lower well-being. To date, research has consistently found support for these hypotheses (for meta-analyses see Amstad et al., 2011; McNall et al., 2010; Nohe et al., 2015). In a recent study with full-time employees, Sirgy et al. (2020) found that positive work-to-family spillover was associated with higher satisfaction with family life, which in turn was associated with higher subjective well-being, whereas the opposite was found for negative work-to-family spillover. There is also longitudinal research to show that individuals who experienced negative work-to-family spillover were less satisfied with their life 9 years later, whereas those who experienced positive work-to-family spillover reported higher satisfaction with their life at follow-up (Cho & Tay, 2016).

Only a few studies have conjointly examined positive and negative work-to-family spillover in relation to life satisfaction. They showed that the correlations between positive work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction were positive, and the correlations between negative

work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction were negative (Hecht & McCarthy, 2010; Karatepe & Bekteshi, 2008). However, the longitudinal correlation between negative work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction was larger than the longitudinal correlation between positive work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction (Hecht & McCarthy, 2010). This is consistent with research on the negativity bias, which indicates that negatively valenced events tend to have a greater impact than positively valenced events (Baumeister et al., 2001). Also, COR theory states that resource loss tends to be more salient than resource gain (Hobfoll, 2011).

Women report more negative spillover from work to family than men (Grzywacz et al., 2002; D. L. Hughes & Galinsky, 1994; Rothbard, 2001). A longitudinal study also showed that for women, work–family conflict predicted job dissatisfaction, parental distress, and psychological symptoms 1 year later, whereas for men, low levels of satisfaction or well-being served as a predictor of work–family conflict at follow-up (Kinnunen et al., 2004). Finally, more negative work-to-family spillover was reported within lower socioeconomic status groups (Okechukwu et al., 2012; Wong, 2019), whereas in another study, less negative work-to-family spillover was associated with less education (Grzywacz et al., 2002), warranting further research.

The work-to-family spillover construct is based on theories about how individuals experience various roles, for example, partner, parent, and employee. From the perspective of role conflict or enrichment (e.g., Goode, 1960; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Vieira et al., 2018), multiple roles can lead to the transfer of resources and/or the emergence of tension. With the idea of social roles in mind (Eagly & Wood, 2012), it is known that household responsibilities and division of labor between women and men vary despite the greater gender equality that exists today (Sullivan, 2018). Such divisions of labor within the workplace and home indicate that there are likely gender differences in the experience of work-to-family spillover and how they affect well-being. Existing research on gender differences in work-to-family spillover focuses on parents (e.g., Bernhardt et al., 2023; Lin & Burgard, 2018). Thus, there is a need to consider gender in this relationship in full-time working adults who are both parents and nonparents.

Generative concern and subjective well-being

One personal resource full-time working adults may rely on is generative concern. Erik Erikson (1985) introduced the concept of generativity in the context of a lifespan theory of personality development, stating that “midlife individuals begin to concern themselves with creating or producing something that will affect others, leaving a legacy for younger generations” (Ackerman et al., 2000, p. 18). Generative activities, such as parenting, caregiving, volunteering, teaching, mentoring, and civic engagement (McAdams, 2013; Milardo, 2005) focus on giving back to society and are less oriented toward the individual and thus antithetical to personal impoverishment and self-preoccupation. Although generativity has various aspects, generative concern is considered the most overarching aspect of its expression (McAdams et al., 1993). The present study examined generative concern as an individual difference regarding the concern to engage in activities that contribute to the broad social good and continuation and improvement through the next generation (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). This reflects what Erikson (1985) considered a successful resolution of the Generativity versus Stagnation stage, marked by a care that transcends self-interest. As others have pointed out, generativity can manifest in a variety of settings, including the workplace (Clark & Arnold, 2008; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), and it helps adults live meaningful and fulfilling lives (Erikson, 1982; Keyes & Ryff, 1998). In support of this, generative concern has been consistently linked to heightened subjective well-being (Grossman & Gruenewald, 2020; see Doerwald et al., 2021, for a meta-analysis). Specifically, some studies have found a positive association between generativity and positive affect (Doerwald et al., 2021); for example, Ackerman et al. (2000) found a positive relationship between generative concern and positive affectivity in

midlife and younger adults. In terms of negative affect, some studies have found a negative relationship between generativity and negative emotions (Cheng, 2009; Tabuchi et al., 2015). Furthermore, findings suggest that generative concern is positively related to life satisfaction (Efklides et al., 2003; Navarro-Prados et al., 2018; Scott et al., 2023). In sum, the literature has established the effects of generativity on well-being. The spillover construct suggests that skills and resources may be transferred between work and family domains. Generative concern may be one of these resources that is shared across domains of life, such that generativity may positively influence the relationship between spillover and well-being. In addition, a recent study found that the effects of various resources and skills on well-being are different for women and men (Cholankeril et al., 2023), emphasizing the need to establish how personal resources, such as generative concern, operate differently in women and men.

The present study

Although there is considerable research documenting the impact of work-to-family spillover on subjective well-being (Amstad et al., 2011; Cho & Tay, 2016; McNall et al., 2010; Nohe et al., 2015; Sirgy et al., 2020), few studies have looked at both positive and negative work-to-family spillover in conjunction (Hecht & McCarthy, 2010; Karatepe & Bekteshi, 2008). In particular, the impact of positive work-to-family spillover has been studied less because the work–family literature has long been dominated by the view that individuals who participate in multiple roles such as work and family, inevitably experience conflict and stress that impairs their well-being (Greenhaus & Powell 2006). In addition, there is a need for studies examining working adults who are parents and nonparents. Therefore, the present study examined the impact of these two types of work-to-family spillover on different aspects of subjective well-being in a particularly vulnerable group, namely full-time working adults in their midlife. In addition, there is a need for research to better understand the underlying mechanisms for the association between work-to-family spillover and subjective well-being (Nohe et al., 2015). The present study will therefore investigate the moderating role of generative concern as a personal resource that may help individuals in reducing work-related strain. Specifically, we hypothesized that generative concern would enhance the positive relationship between positive work-to-family spillover and subjective well-being, whereas it would buffer the negative relationship between negative work-to-family spillover and subjective well-being. There is also research suggesting that work-to-family spillover may differ by gender (Grzywacz et al., 2002; D. L. Hughes & Galinsky, 1994; Kinnunen et al., 2004; Rothbard, 2001), so we included gender as an additional moderator. Because long working hours (e.g., Gutek et al., 1991; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Van der Hulst & Geurts, 2001) and education (Grzywacz et al., 2002; Okechukwu et al., 2012; Wong, 2019) have been found to be relevant factors when looking at work-to-family spillover, we included them as covariates. Additionally, generativity is often expressed through child-rearing (Erikson, 1985), so the parental status was included as a covariate as well. Based on the theory of resource conservation (Hobfoll, 2002), we also hypothesized that negative work-to-family spillover would have a larger effect on aspects of subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, positive and negative affect) than positive work-to-family spillover.

METHOD

Participants

Data were drawn from the second wave of the Midlife in the United States national study from 2004 to 2006 (MIDUS 2; Ryff et al. 2017). First, a sample of English-speaking adults

($n = 7,108$) aged 25–74 years were recruited via random digit dialing at MIDUS 1 from 1995 to 1996. Of these, 4,963 participated in MIDUS 2 and completed both the telephone interview and self-administered questionnaires (for details about sample disposition and attrition, see Song et al., 2021). The participants selected for this study reported working for pay at least 35 hours or more per week at their main job (“What about your current employment situation—are you working now for pay, self-employed, looking for work, temporarily laid off, retired, a homemaker, a full-time or part-time student, or something else?” and “When you are working, about how many hours do you work for pay in an average week on your main job?”). This resulted in a sample size of 1,570 full-time working adults, which served as our main sample. In comparison, 833 adults worked part-time for at least 1 hour but less than 35 hours per week.

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the sociodemographic variables for the full-time working adults. Participants were on average 49 years old ($SD = 8.45$), and approximately half of the sample were males (52%). About 91% identified as White and the average level of education was 7.67 ($SD = 2.47$), referring to “3 or more years of college, no degree yet,” or “graduated from a 2-year college or vocational school, or associate’s degree.” At the time of the study, 72% were married, and 83% had at least one child. The highest portion of the participants

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics for sociodemographic variables.

Demographic characteristic	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	49.46	8.45
Gender (males)	52%	
Race/ethnicity		
White	91%	
Black	4%	
Native American or Alaskan Native Islander/Eskimo	2%	
Asian	0.4%	
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.1%	
Other	3%	
Education	7.67	2.47
Marital status		
Currently married	72%	
Separated	2%	
Divorced	14%	
Widowed	2%	
Never married	10%	
Parental status (one or more children)	83%	
Hours worked for pay per week	44.56	8.62
Occupation		
Manager or professional	46%	
Technical sales, administrative support	29%	
Service	6%	
Farming, forestry, and fishing	0.6%	
Precision production	9%	
Operator, laborer, and military	9%	

Note. Possible ranges: 1–12 for highest level of education (1 = no school/some grade school, 12 = PhD, MD, or other professional degree), 35–168 hours worked for pay per week.

worked as a manager or professional (46%), with an average working hour for pay per week of 44.56 ($SD = 8.62$). In contrast, the part-time working adults were on average 56 years old ($SD = 11.72$), and more than half of the sample were females (67%). The racial background, level of education, marital and parental status, and occupation were comparable to the full-time working adult sample (i.e., 92% identified as White, the average level of education was 7.52 [$SD = 2.45$], 72% were married, 89% had at least one child, and 45% worked as a manager or professional). The average working hour for pay per week was 19.24 ($SD = 9.33$).

Measures

Education

The participants indicated their highest grade of completed education (“What is the highest grade of school or year of college you completed?”) on a scale ranging from 1 to 12 with higher scores indicating higher levels of education (1 = no school/some grade school, 2 = eighth grade/junior high school, 3 = some high school, 4 = GED, 5 = graduated from high school, 6 = 1–2 years of college, no degree yet, 7 = 3 or more years of college, no degree yet, 8 = graduated from a 2-year college or vocational school, or associate’s degree, 9 = graduated from a 4- or 5-year college, or bachelor’s degree, 10 = some graduate school, 11 = master’s degree, 12 = PHD, EDD, MD, DDS, LLB, LLD, JD, or other professional degree).

Positive work-to-family spillover

Positive work-to-family spillover was measured with four items: “The things you do at work help you deal with personal and practical issues at home,” “The things you do at work make you a more interesting person at home,” “Having a good day on your job makes you a better companion when you get home,” and “The skills you use on your job are useful for things you have to do at home.” Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from *all of the time* (1) to *never* (5). Items were reverse-coded and then a mean score was calculated, with higher scores reflecting a higher level of positive work-to-family spillover (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .66$).

Negative work-to-family spillover

Negative work-to-family spillover was assessed with four items: “Your job reduces the effort you can give to activities at home,” “Stress at work makes you irritable at home,” “Your job makes you feel too tired to do the things that need attention at home,” and “Job worries or problems distract you when you are at home.” The items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from *all of the time* (1) to *never* (5). All items were reverse-coded and then a mean score was calculated so that higher scores reflect a higher standing on the scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$).

Generative concern

Generative concern was measured with a six-item version of the Loyola Generativity Scale (LGS; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). The items were “Others would say that you have made unique contributions to society,” “You have important skills you can pass along to others,” “Many people come to you for advice,” “You feel that other people need you,” “You have had

a good influence on the lives of many people,” and “You like to teach things to people.” The degree of agreement was rated on a 4-point scale ranging from *a lot* (1) to *not at all* (4). All items were reverse-coded and then a mean score was calculated so that higher scores reflect a higher level of generative concern (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .86$). This six-item version was used in other studies in the family context (e.g., Barnett et al., 2020; Grossman & Gruenewald, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2021).

Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction was assessed with six items where respondents were asked to rate their life overall, work, health, relationship with spouse/partner, and relationship with children. These five items were taken from Prenda and Lachman (2001). A sixth item was added to include satisfaction with their financial situation. Items were rated on an 11-point scale ranging from *the worst possible* (0) to *the best possible* (10). Following Ryff et al. (2017), scores on the two items, relationship with spouse/partner and relationship with children, were averaged to create one “item” that reflects satisfaction with the family relationships. Then, scores were combined to create an overall mean score with higher scores indicating higher levels of overall life satisfaction (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .67$). If participants did not have some aspects of the items (e.g., no children), the mean score was calculated with the remaining items.

Positive affect

Positive affect was measured with four items of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988): “During the past 30 days, how much of the time did you feel ...” (a) “enthusiastic?,” (b) “attentive?,” (c) “proud?,” (d) “active?.” The participants were asked to rate the extent to which they had experienced each emotion on a 5-point scale ranging from *all of the time* (1) to *none of the time* (5). All items were reverse-coded and then a mean score was calculated with higher scores reflecting higher levels of positive affect (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .85$).

Negative affect

Negative affect was assessed with five items of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988): “During the past 30 days, how much of the time did you feel ...” (a) “afraid?,” (b) “jittery?,” (c) “irritable?,” (d) “ashamed?,” (e) “upset?.” Participants rated the degree to which they had experienced each emotion on a 5-point scale ranging from *all of the time* (1) to *none of the time* (5). The items were reverse-coded and then a mean score was calculated, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of negative affect (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .76$).

Statistical analysis

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis and IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 24.0) were used to assess the moderating role of generative concern and gender in full-time working adults. The listwise deletion method was selected so that only cases with complete data were used in the analyses. Three models were estimated using positive and negative work-to-family spillover as predictors for life satisfaction (Model 1), positive affect (Model 2), and negative affect (Model 3). Prior to the analyses, the predictor and moderator variables (except gender) were mean-centered and then multiplied to form the interaction terms. We controlled for educational

attainment, hours worked for pay, and parental status. In addition, the alternative well-being outcomes were entered as control variables (e.g., positive and negative affect in the model with life satisfaction). Significant interactions were plotted separately for each outcome variable. To test whether the two regression coefficients, positive work-to-family spillover and negative work-to-family spillover, differed significantly from one another in each regression model, the z statistic was used with the following formula for the standard error of the difference:

$$\sqrt{\text{Var}(\beta_{11} - \beta_{21})} = \text{Var}(\beta_{11}) + \text{Var}(\beta_{21}) - 2\text{Cov}(\beta_{11}, \beta_{21})$$

Cohen's (1988) classification was used to interpret correlation and effect sizes.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

Table 2 presents the product-moment correlations among the study variables and the descriptive statistics for the males and females separately. In both groups, the correlation between positive work-to-family spillover and generative concern was positive and medium in size. Also, in both groups, the correlation between negative work-to-family spillover and negative affect was positive and medium in size, and the correlation between negative work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction was negative and medium in size. Moreover, the correlation between negative work-to-family spillover and positive affect was negative in both groups, although bigger for the women than the men (medium versus small).

The t test indicates that there were significant differences between women and men on the variables "hours worked for pay per week," positive work-to-family spillover, and negative affect. However, according to Cohen's (1988) classification, only the effect for "hours worked for pay per week" is substantial. Specifically, men worked more hours for pay per week compared to women, and this effect was medium in size.

Main analyses

Life satisfaction

As expected, greater positive work-to-family spillover and greater generative concern were associated with greater life satisfaction, whereas greater negative work-to-family spillover was associated with lower life satisfaction (Table 3). Further, the interaction effect for negative work-to-family spillover, generative concern, and gender was statistically significant, indicating that the association between negative work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction was moderated by the level of generative concern and gender. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between negative work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction for low generative concern, defined as the mean minus 1 SD (i.e., -0.64), and high generative concern, defined as the mean plus one SD (i.e., 0.64) for men and women separately. For men, life satisfaction was high if negative work-to-family spillover was low or negative work-to-family spillover and generative concern were high; life satisfaction was low if negative work-to-family spillover was high and generative concern was low. For women, life satisfaction was also high if negative work-to-family spillover was low and life satisfaction was low if negative work-to-family spillover was high. However, if negative work-to-family spillover was high in women then generative concern did not alter this effect. The control variables education,

TABLE 2 Correlations, means, standard deviations, and empirical ranges for the study variables.

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Education	—	.04	.10**	.07*	.17**	.07	-.05	-.04
2. Hours worked for pay per week	.23**	—	.06	.17**	.09**	.06	.06	.03
3. Positive work-to-family spillover	.23**	.08*	—	.02	.30**	.22**	.20**	-.02
4. Negative work-to-family spillover	.16**	.21**	-.02	—	-.02	-.36**	-.29**	.42**
5. Generative concern	.30**	.14**	.35**	-.05	—	.27**	.28**	-.07*
6. Life satisfaction	.13**	-.05	.26**	-.40**	.23**	—	.47**	-.42**
7. Positive affect	.09*	.01	.24**	-.30**	.33**	.49**	—	-.43**
8. Negative affect	-.07	-.03	-.08*	.32**	-.12**	-.43**	-.43**	—
Males								
<i>M</i>	7.75	46.61	2.86	2.62	2.82	7.49	3.57	1.51
<i>SD</i>	2.49	9.30	0.67	0.64	0.61	1.06	0.69	0.46
Range	1–12	35–130	1–5	1–5	1–4	3–10	1–5	1–4
Females								
<i>M</i>	7.57	42.32	2.93	2.65	2.86	7.44	3.55	1.57
<i>SD</i>	2.44	7.24	0.68	0.68	0.67	1.12	0.75	0.51
Range	1–12	35–120	1–5	1–5	1–4	2.6–9.8	1–5	1–4
<i>t</i> test								
<i>t</i> (<i>df</i>)	1.44 (1566)	10.26*** (1529.5)	-2.12* (1568)	-0.72 (1533.1)	-1.12 (1518.4)	-0.43 (1568)	0.33 (1521.2)	-2.15* (1519.9)
Cohen's <i>d</i>	0.07	0.51	-0.11	-0.04	-0.06	-0.02	0.02	-0.11

Note. The correlations for the male sample are shown above and for the female sample below the diagonal. Possible ranges: 1–12 for highest level of education (1 = no school/some grade school, 12 = PhD, MD, or other professional degree), 35–168 for hours worked for pay per week, 1–5 for positive work-to-family spillover, 1–5 for negative work-to-family spillover, 1–4 for generative concern, 0–10 for life satisfaction, 1–4 for positive affect, and 1–5 for negative affect.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

parental status, and positive and negative affect were statistically significant. The total explained variance was 37%. The two regression coefficients, positive work-to-family spillover and negative work-to-family spillover, differed significantly from one another ($z = 3.47$, $p < .001$), indicating that the effect of negative work-to-family spillover was significantly larger on life satisfaction than positive work-to-family spillover.

Positive affect

As hypothesized, greater positive work-to-family spillover and greater generative concern were associated with greater positive affect, and greater negative work-to-family spillover was associated with lower positive affect (Table 3). Further, the interaction effect for positive work-to-family spillover, generative concern, and gender was statistically significant, indicating that the association between positive work-to-family spillover and positive affect was moderated by the level of generative concern and gender. Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between positive work-to-family spillover and positive affect for low generative concern, defined as the mean minus 1 *SD* (i.e., -0.64), and high generative concern, defined as the mean plus one *SD* (i.e., 0.64) for men and women separately. For men, positive affect was

TABLE 3 Regression analysis for the full-time working adults.

Predictor	Life satisfaction		Positive affect		Negative affect	
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>
Step 1						
Education	0.078***	0.009	-0.068**	0.006	-0.062**	0.004
Hours worked for pay per week	0.020	0.003	0.035	0.002	-0.023	0.001
Parental status	0.058**	0.030	0.005	0.020	-0.026	0.014
Life satisfaction	—	—	0.275***	0.016	-0.228***	0.012
Positive affect	0.266***	0.037	—	—	-0.281***	0.017
Negative affect	-0.204***	0.053	-0.261***	0.035	—	—
Step 2						
Positive work-to-family spillover (PWFS)	0.130***	0.009	0.089***	0.006	0.059*	0.004
Negative work-to-family spillover (NWFS)	-0.235***	0.009	-0.089***	0.006	0.210***	0.004
Generative concern (GC)	0.082***	0.006	0.185***	0.004	0.046	0.003
Gender	0.002	0.024	-0.004	0.016	0.022	0.011
PWFS × GC	-0.030	0.047	0.007	0.031	-0.019	0.022
NWFS × GC	0.017	0.049	-0.011	0.033	-0.046*	0.023
PWFS × Gender	0.015	0.035	-0.003	0.023	-0.011	0.016
NWFS × Gender	-0.021	0.034	-0.007	0.022	-0.045*	0.016
GC × Gender	-0.051*	0.036	0.026	0.024	-0.014	0.017
PWFS × GC × Gender	-0.021	0.047	0.044*	0.031	0.036	0.022
NWFS × GC × Gender	-0.041*	0.049	-0.009	0.033	-0.007	0.023
Intercept	7.450***	0.163	2.953***	0.108	0.925***	0.075
<i>R</i> ²	.372		.350		.300	
<i>F</i> (16, 1551)	57.361***		52.149***		41.536***	

Note. All variables were mean-centered prior to the analyses, with the exception of gender. Gender was coded with -1 for male and 1 for female. Parental status was coded with -1 for nonparent and 1 for parent.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001 (two-tailed).

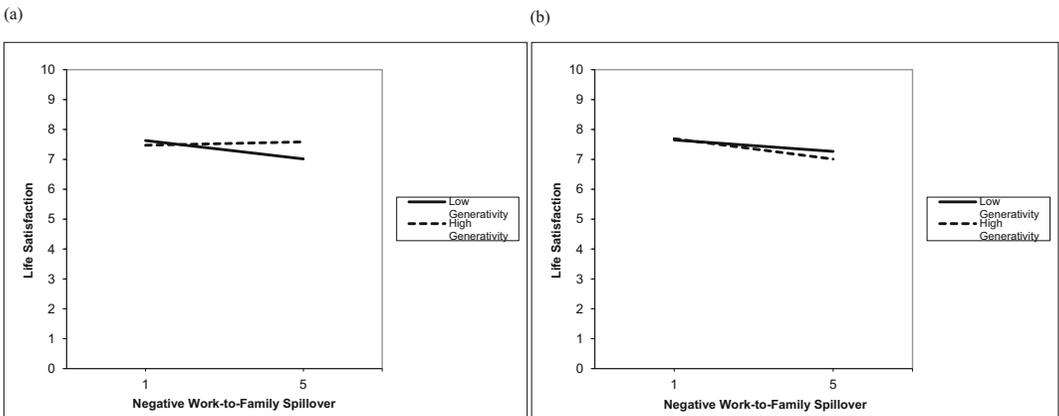


FIGURE 1 Regression lines for working adults showing the moderating effect of generative concern and gender on the relationship between negative work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction for women and men, respectively. a) Men. b) Women.

high if positive work-to-family spillover was high and low if positive work-to-family spillover and generative concern were low. For women, positive affect was high if positive work-to-family spillover and generative concern were high and low if positive work-to-family spillover was low or positive work-to-family spillover was high, but generative concern was low. The control variables education, life satisfaction, and negative affect were statistically significant. The total explained variance was 35%. The two regression coefficients, positive work-to-family spillover and negative work-to-family spillover, did not differ significantly from one another ($z = 0.07$).

Negative affect

As hypothesized, greater negative work-to-family spillover was associated with greater negative affect (Table 3). However, greater positive work-to-family spillover was also statistically associated with greater negative affect. Further, the interaction effects for negative work-to-family spillover and generative concern, as well as for negative work-to-family spillover and gender, were statistically significant, indicating that the association between negative work-to-family spillover and negative affect was moderated by generative concern and gender independently. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between negative work-to-family spillover and negative affect for low generative concern, defined as the mean minus 1 *SD* (i.e., -0.64), and high generative concern, defined as the mean plus one *SD* (i.e., 0.64) as well as the relationship between negative work-to-family spillover and negative affect for gender. Negative affect was high if negative work-to-family spillover was high and generative concern was low, and negative affect was low if negative work-to-family spillover was low. In men, negative affect was high if negative work-to-family spillover was high, whereas in females, negative work-to-family spillover did not alter the effect on negative affect. The control variables, education, life satisfaction, and positive affect, were statistically significant. The total explained variance was 30%. The two regression coefficients, positive work-to-family spillover and negative work-to-family spillover, differed significantly from one another ($z = 4.37, p < .001$), indicating that the effect of negative work-to-family spillover was significantly larger on negative affect than positive work-to-family spillover.

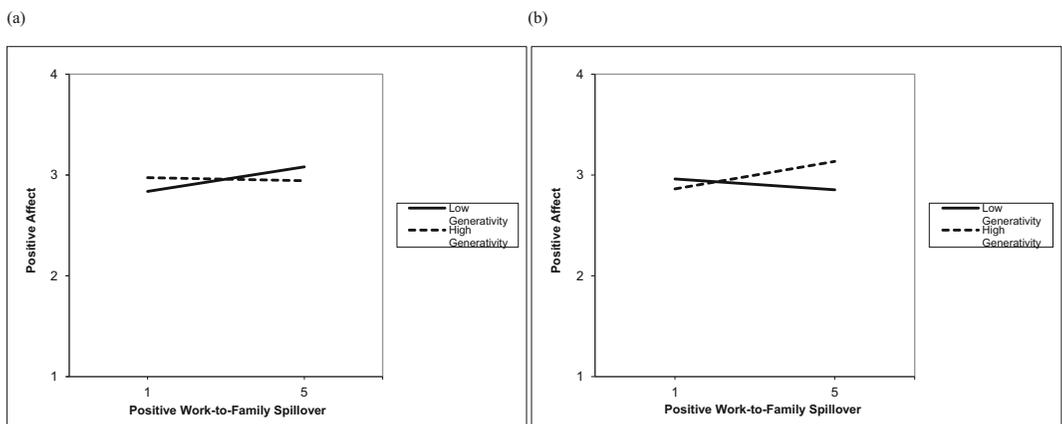


FIGURE 2 Regression lines for working adults showing the moderating effect of generative concern on the relationship between positive work-to-family spillover and positive affect for women and men, respectively. a) Men. b) Women.

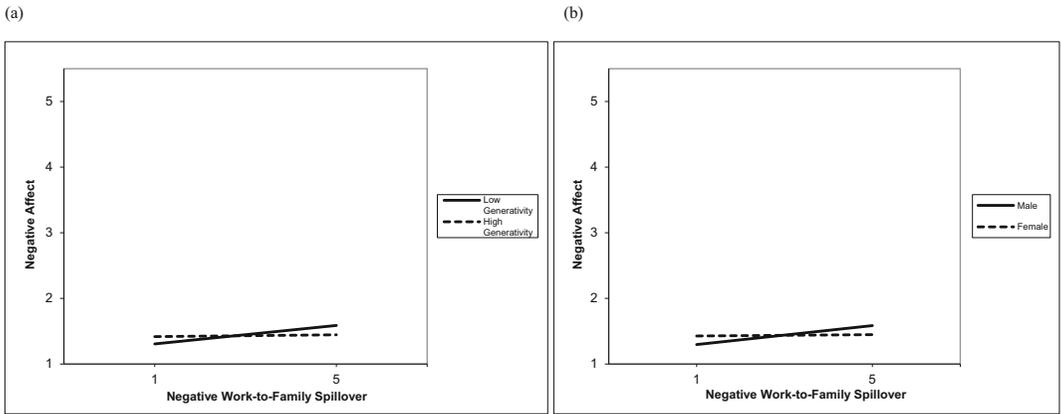


FIGURE 3 Regression lines for working adults showing the moderating effect of generative concern and gender on the relationship between negative work-to-family spillover and negative affect. a) Moderating effect of generative concern. b) Moderating effect of gender.

Additional analyses

Additional analyses were run for the 833 part-time working adults. There was only one significant interaction between negative work-to-family spillover and generative concern on life satisfaction, indicating that high generative concern had a buffering effect when negative work-to-family spillover was high. No moderating effects were found for positive and negative affect.

DISCUSSION

Despite the increasing number of women and men working full-time in the United States (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021) and the trend toward multiple family roles (Marks et al., 2004; Raley & Sweeney, 2020; Wiemers & Bianchi, 2015), there is limited research investigating what buffers or facilitates the association between work-to-family spillover and well-being (Nohe et al., 2015). Following resource conservation theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002, 2011), we examined (a) the impact of positive and negative work-to-family spillover on subjective well-being, controlling for hours worked for pay, education, parental status, and alternative well-being outcomes and (b) the moderating role of generative concern and gender on this relationship in a large sample of full-time working adults from the MIDUS 2 study. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that has examined generative concern as a moderator of this relationship. Generative concern is important for one’s sense of self, purpose, and connection to humanity. Those who are able to develop generativity are more likely to experience greater satisfaction with themselves and their life (Erikson, 1959). As individuals balance work and family, there are often resources and stress that tend to spill over into other domains of living, causing additional support or struggle. Through generativity, adults may achieve a sense of purpose and satisfaction that increases well-being and alleviates some of the negative effects on the individual and on the family. Thus, generative concern may serve as a personal resource for working adults to rely on.

We found that generative concern moderated the association between negative work-to-family spillover and life satisfaction as well as between positive work-to-family spillover and positive affect, though it did so differently for women and men. For negative work-to-family spillover, high generative concern had a buffering effect for men, so that their life satisfaction

was not diminished as much. For positive work-to-family spillover, high generative concern had an enhancing effect for women, so that their positive affect was increased. This gender difference warrants further investigation as it seems that men tend to benefit more from this resource during times of stress than women. One study with adults in their late 50s found that high levels of generativity were predicted by narrative accounts of positive socializing influences coming from the family, teachers and mentors, the education system, and other valued societal institutions and that these relationships differed by gender (Jones & McAdams, 2013). Furthermore, the question arises whether women may benefit from other resources that were not examined in the present study, such as social support from friends or other coping strategies. Conversely, it appears that women may derive greater benefits from generative concern when experiencing high levels of positive work-to-family spillover. Further research is needed to elucidate why generative concern did not have this effect in men, although generative concern was positively associated with positive affect in previous studies (Doerwald et al., 2021; Grossman & Gruenewald, 2020).

Moreover, we found that generative concern moderated the association between negative work-to-family spillover and negative affect in that high generative concern had a buffering effect when negative work-to-family spillover was high and thus served as a personal resource for the full-time working adults to combat the negative impact of work stress. In addition, the impact of high negative work-to-family spillover on negative affect was larger for the men than the women. Finally, we found that the effect of negative work-to-family spillover was significantly larger on life satisfaction and negative affect than positive work-to-family spillover, but no difference was found for positive affect. These results were partially in line with our hypothesis that negative work-to-family spillover will have a larger effect on aspects of subjective well-being than positive work-to-family spillover and echoes previous research (Hecht & McCarthy, 2010).

Practical implications

At the practical level, we suggest strengthening generative concern by participating in meaningful activities that contribute to society, such as parenting, caregiving, volunteering, teaching, mentoring, and civic engagement (McAdams, 2013; Milardo, 2005). This could be done individually outside of work or in the work context, with companies giving employees the opportunity to pass on important skills to others, offer advice, or mentor younger employees. Improving the subjective well-being of full-time workers benefits not only the individual but also the company because there is a positive correlation between well-being and work performance (Ford et al., 2011, for a review and meta-analysis). Likewise, there is evidence for a positive relationship between generative concern and various desirable work and career outcomes (see Doerwald et al., 2021, for a meta-analysis). For example, generativity is positively related to work motivation, occupational self-efficacy, challenging job demands, job autonomy, job satisfaction, and mentoring relationship quality. These findings emphasize the importance of generativity for the employee as well as for the employer.

Strengths and limitations

A major strength of the current study is the large sample size of 1,570 full-time working adults in midlife. This group of people is particularly vulnerable due to their workload and the high probability of having multiple family roles. Because full-time working adults are likely to experience positive and negative work-to-family spillover concurrently, the present study investigated their joint impact on different aspects of well-being. Another strength is that the study considered

gender differences in the relationship between work-to-family spillover and well-being. Although the present study provided new insights into the role of generative concern and gender in the work–family relationship and well-being, it was a cross-sectional study, and further longitudinal studies are needed to establish causal relationships. It must also be acknowledged that 91% of the participants identified as White, and the participants were on average highly educated. Additionally, 83% of the full-time working adults in the sample were parents, highlighting the need for a more balanced representation of parents and nonparents in future research. It is also plausible to expect that cultural demands and inner desires affect generative concern as proposed in the multicomponent model of generativity (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992), which could be examined in future studies. Future studies should also test the moderating role of generative concern on the relationship between work–family spillover and well-being, taking into account participants' multiple family roles. It must also be noted that the measure of generative concern in the present study captured a broad assessment of generativity rather than focusing on perceptions of generativity specifically related to the individual's work role. Also, the MIDUS study used an abbreviated version of the PANAS, so direct comparisons between the results of this study and other studies using the original PANAS may not be equivalent. In addition, our data were based on self-reports and thus biases may be possible, warranting further investigation. The current sample, being approximately 20 years old, reflects a period before the widespread adoption of smartphones, remote work, and social media, all of which have significantly altered work–life dynamics. Additionally, changes in workforce demographics, such as increased diversity and the rise of gig economy jobs, along with the impacts of globalization, have further transformed how individuals balance work and family life since 2004 (Schulte et al., 2020). The implications of these changes should be examined in future studies.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present study suggests that generative concern might be a critical factor when studying the relative impact of positive and negative work-to-family spillover on subjective well-being in full-time working adults. It also indicates a need for further consideration of gender differences, as generative concern seems to benefit men more than women in times of stress, whereas women tend to benefit more than men when they experience high levels of positive work-to-family spillover. This implication is important as it relates to coping resources, providing support that men and women may derive benefits differently. Comprehending personal resources, which frequently aid in managing the demands of multiple roles, can ultimately enhance family dynamics and relationships.

We hope this study will accelerate research on generativity at the intersection of work–family stress and well-being and encourage companies to provide opportunities for their employees to strengthen this personal resource. Displaying awareness of generativity and providing opportunities to engage in generative activities may improve the individual at a personal level as well as in terms of work ethic and the overall culture and environment of the workplace.

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