Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry

Crossover of Stress and Strain between Spouses (2005)

Author: Mina Westman, Tel Aviv University, Israel- Graduate School of Business Administration

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

There is ample evidence that job stress has an impact on workers' mental and physical well-being. Little attention, however, has been paid to workers' significant others' reactions. Job stress arises when demands exceed abilities, while job-related strains are reactions or outcomes resulting from the experience of stress. In this entry, we follow the differentiation of Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler and Wethington (1989) between two situations in which stress is contagious: spillover - stress experienced in one domain of life results in stress in the other domain for the same individual; and crossover - stress experienced in the workplace by the individual's spouse leads to stress being experienced by the individual at home. Whereas spillover is an intraindividual, inter-domain contagion of stress, crossover is a dyadic, interindividual, inter-domain contagion. Thus, the inter-personal process that occurs when a psychological strain experienced by one person affects the level of strain of another person in the same social environment, is referred to as crossover. Thus, spillover is a process by which attitudes and behavior carry over from one role to another. Crossover research is based upon the propositions of the spillover model, i.e., the recognition of the fluid boundaries between work and family life. Spillover is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for crossover. The crossover model adds another level of analysis to previous approaches by adding the intraindividual level and the dyad as an additional focus of research. In other words, crossover is conceptualized as a process occurring from one individual at the work place to his/her spouse at home. This indicates that whereas spillover affects only the individual, crossover can affect the dyad and the family.

Thus, The crossover model adds another level of analysis to previous approaches by considering the inter-individual level and the dyad as an additional focus of research.

The Crossover Process

Westman and Vinokur (1998) and Westman (2001) specified three main mechanisms that can account for the crossover process: (1) common stressors, e.g. economic problems (2) an indirect mediating interaction process, e.g., individual distress causes undermining behavior toward the spouse resulting in
her or his distress and (3) direct crossover through empathic reactions. e.g. one individual who is empathic to the strain of his/her spouse experiences distress as well.

**The Role of Common Stressors in Crossover Research**

The first type of crossover proposed by Westman and Vinokur (1998) is generated by common stressors affecting both partners. They have, however, suggested that the effect of common stressors in simultaneously increasing both partners' strain should be viewed as a case of spurious crossover. In their opinion, the common stressors in a shared environment merely constitute a third variable that independently but simultaneously increases the strain of each spouse, producing a positive correlation between partners' strain that may be erroneously interpreted as a genuine crossover effect. Hobfoll and London (1986) suggested that many stressors make simultaneous demands on both individuals in a dyad. They found that the number of stressful events undergone by others covaried with the reported distress over those events.

**Crossover as an Indirect Process**

The second crossover mechanism specified by Westman and Vinokur (1998) was the indirect crossover of strain, moderated by personal attributes and the interaction between the partners. In other words, the crossover process starts with some individual stress or strain that causes stress and strain in the other person. However, this process is mediated by certain personal (e.g., gender) and personality (e.g. sense of control) attributes and positive (social support) and negative (social undermining) interactions. The explanation of crossover as an indirect process focuses on specific coping strategies and interpersonal transactions, such as social support, social undermining, and communication style.

**Coping strategies** represent efforts to prevent or reduce the negative effects of stress. Only a few studies have examined the relationship between one persons coping and the other’s well-being. Researchers have suggested two main directions of the relationships between one’s coping and the significant other’s well-being. Monnier and Hobfoll (1997) demonstrated that active coping by one partner was negatively related to the significant other’s depression. The other view, proposed by Burke, Weir, & DuWors (1980) is that the individual's strain may determine the spouse’s coping strategies. They found that wives whose husbands reported high occupational demands used more emotion-focused coping strategies, such as distraction, explosive outbursts, and talking to others. However, they used problem-focused coping strategies when their husbands reported lower occupational demands.

The two main views of whether depression affects the spouse’s coping or whether coping affects his/her depression are not contradictory and may even be reciprocal, suggesting a feedback loop. The process may commence at either points with one person’s coping or depression. The important issue is the spiral that starts where one role sender’s state and actions affect the role receiver and vice versa.
The Social Interaction Process

Communication Characteristics refer to what people say to each other or how they react to events in which they are involved. The intensity and openness of the information exchange between spouses affects the crossover process. The literature supporting this explanation implies the need to focus on the couple’s communication pattern in terms of the kinds of interaction likely to enhance the partners' experience of stress or strain. Accurate knowledge of the spouse’s job stress may be an important mechanism in the crossover process. Partners can talk about their job stress, or one can learn about the other's job stress through his/her behavior.

Social support refers to transactions with others that provide emotional, appraisal, informational and instrumental support. Riley and Eckenrode (1986) found that significant others were influenced by each other's distress indirectly, via reduced social support, noting that demand for social support by one caused a drain of resources in the other in the dyad. They underscored diminishing of resources experienced by the providers of social support, both by sharing them and by empathetically experiencing the demands of the needy. These findings may also indicate that the stress experienced by one partner creates demands upon the other to provide support and, when unable to meet these expectations, the other is apt to feel anxious or guilty. Conversely, a crisis experienced by one partner may diminish the social support available to the other. Riley and Eckenrode also found that network events that happened to others such as divorce, job loss, drop of income and so forth were particularly distressing to women who had limited social support resources due to the “cost of helping.”

Social undermining consists of behaviors directed toward the target person that express negative affect, convey negative evaluation or criticism, or hinder the attainment of instrumental goals. The explanation that the crossover process is mediated by negative social interactions is supported by empirical findings from two lines of research. First, research documents distress and its accompanying frustration lead to aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1989). Second, the literature on family processes also reports that stressed couples exhibit high levels of negative conflictual interactions (Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981). The increased distress and its accompanying frustration lead to aggressive behavior or otherwise lead an individual to initiate or exacerbate a negative interaction sequence with the partner.

Direct Empathetic Crossover

The third view expressed in the model is a direct transmission of stress and strain from one partner to the other as a result of empathic reactions. The basis for this view is the finding that crossover effects appear between closely related partners who share the greater part of their lives together. Empathy, which literally means “feeling into”, has been variously defined by different researchers. According to Lazarus (1991, p. 287), empathy is "sharing another's feelings by placing oneself psychologically in that person's
circumstances.” Thus, the core aspect of empathy involves an understanding and recognition of a partner's thoughts and feelings. Riley and Eckenrode (1986) suggested that the effect of the undesirable events one experiences on the significant other's distress may be the result of empathy expressed in reports like "We feel their pain is our own" (p. 771).

The three mechanisms of crossover can operate independently of one another and are not mutually exclusive. Therefore, it is quite possible that some of the proposed mechanisms operate jointly.

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

Most stress theory and research focus on the individual. By focusing on the dyad and the family, crossover research highlights the processes occurring in the family and how stressors generated at work affect the whole family. Crossover research also indicates how transmitted stressors can cause work-family conflict. Furthermore, several studies investigated the phenomenon of crossover of work-family conflict between spouses (Hammer, Allen, & Grigsby, 1997).

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

Findings suggest that one partner's strain affects the well being of the other so that one's strain is often a stressor to the other. Studies have focused on different variables in the crossover process. Some have focused on the crossover of job stress from the individual to the spouse (Burke et al., 1980), some have examined the process whereby job stress of the individual affects the strain of the spouse (Rook, Dooley, D, & Catalano, 1991), and others have studied how psychological strain of one partner affects the strain of the other (Westman & Etzion, 1995). Also, some of these studies found bi-directional crossover from husbands to wives and from wives to husbands (Barnett et al. 1995) while others found uni-directional crossover from husbands to wives but not from wives to husbands Jones & Fletcher, 1996). Thus far, researchers have found evidence for the crossover of adjustment (Takeuchi & Tesl, 2002) anxiety (Westman, Etzion , & Horovitz, 2004), burnout (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2000), distress (Barnett, Raudenbush, Brennan, Pleck, & Marshall, 1995), marital dissatisfaction (Westman, Vinokur, Hamilton, & Roziner, 2004), WFC (Hammer et al., 1997), and physical health complaints (Gorgievski-Duijvesteijn, Giesen, & Bakker, 2000).

The Role of Gender in the Crossover Process

A review of crossover research demonstrates that crossover may be unidirectional or bi-directional. The first stress crossover studies were unidirectional and examined and found effects of husbands' job stress on the well-being of their wives. These studies related to the wives as the passive recipients of stress and strain from their husbands, neither assessing nor controlling wives' job and life stress, and in some cases, had mixed samples of working and non-working wives. Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that
what appears as direct crossover of stress from husbands to wives is an outcome of wives’ job or life stress or of common family stressors or life events affecting both partners.

Reviewing the directionality of the crossover of stress and strain raises the issue of the role of gender in the crossover process. Gender is certainly a potential moderator of the impact of one’s stress on the spouse’s strain, because of differences in the traditional role demands and expectations for men and women. There is some indication that women are more susceptible than men to the impact of stressors affecting their partners. Kessler and McLeod (1984) suggested that because of their greater involvement in family affairs, women become more sensitive not only to the stressful events that they themselves experience but also to those that affect other family members. Johnson and Jackson (1998) suggest that women may act as "shock absorbers", taking on the men's stress. Although the notion that women may be more vulnerable to stress than men is not well established, it does appear that the relevance of the family as a direct source of stress is stronger for women than for men.

Recent studies of dual-career families found bi-directional crossover effects of stress or strain of similar magnitude from husbands to wives and from wives to husbands in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies (Barnett et al, 1995; Westman & Etzion, 1995). At the same time, some researchers detected only uni-directional crossover from husbands to wives (Westman, Etzion, & Danon, 2001). Evidence concerning gender differences in the crossover process is mixed. The findings of bi-directional crossover are more prevalent in samples based on dual career families (e.g. Barnett et al, 1995). Considering the inconsistency of the results concerning the role of gender in the crossover process, and bearing in mind that gender is often confounded with occupation, status, and culture, the role of gender needs to be reexamined in the context of single versus dual-career earners as well as in terms of traditional versus modern gender-role ideology.

Positive Crossover

Westman (2001) has suggested broadening the definition of crossover into contagion of positive as well as negative events. All the reviewed studies investigated negative crossover, of one spouse affects the stress or strain of the other. One possible reason for the neglect of the possibility of positive crossover is that stress research relies heavily on medical models, with their emphasis on negative effects.

The empathy definition mentioned before allows for the sharing of both positive and negative emotions. If the crossover process operates via empathy, one would expect to find not only negative crossover but positive crossover as well. Thus, empathy could just as easily involve the sharing of another's positive emotions and the conditions that bring them about. Thus, positive events and emotions may also cross over to the partner and have a positive impact on his or her well-being.
One can think of many instances of positive crossover, such as enjoyable experiences at one's job leading to the crossover of job satisfaction and engagement, eliciting a good mood in the partner at home. Similarly, supportive family relationships and attitudes can create positive crossover to the work setting. Altogether, positive crossover appears to be a fertile field for enhancing theoretical thinking and making practical contributions to the literature.

Implications for Practice and Research

The crossover model (Westman 2001) is an exploratory tool that can help to close the gap in our knowledge of the ways in which work influences family life, and vice versa. The effect of a job demand may be multiple, affecting the individual, a spouse, family members, friends, managers, and co-workers. Furthermore, findings of crossover reinforce the idea that a more complete understanding of the relationship between family and work stress may be achieved by changing the unit of study from the individual to the family.

Furthermore, whereas crossover is usually defined and studied as a transmission of stress, it is suggested that the scope of its definition and investigation should be broadened to include the transmission of positive events or feelings as well. Future crossover studies should incorporate the crossover processes of positive affect and related experiences. The investigation of positive crossover can add to theoretical thinking and broaden the current boundaries of crossover models. It also carries many practical implications. For example, positive actions taken by management may contribute to additional positive outcomes that have not been originally planned, including eliciting good mood and satisfaction in the spouse.

The focus of crossover research should be extended from the dyad to the whole family. Several researchers have shown the effects of crossover on children. Crossover does have serious implications for the whole family and more research is needed to explore the effects of parental job-stress on children.

Information about the couple as a dyad adds to our understanding of well-being in husbands and wives above and beyond that provided by information about the individual. Thompson and Walker (1982) pointed out that for research to be dyadic, the problem must be conceptualized at the level of the relationship and the analysis must be interpersonal. The focus must be on the pattern of the responses between the two individuals. Crossover research suffers from a paucity of findings specifying the relationship between one person’s stress and strain and the partner’s stress and strain.

There is a need for systematic research of the individual and societal conditions under which one or another form of crossover is more likely to emerge.

The findings of some crossover studies are based on a conceptual model with explicit pathways and therefore offer an important direction for the design of future interventions for couples experiencing stress.
and strain. Some of these findings suggest that such interventions should focus on the reduction of social undermining as it is found to be a powerful mediator of the adverse impact of stress on strain.

Findings also suggest that efforts to reduce the stress and strain of employees should target their spouses too. It would be advisable for management to provide assistance programs to individuals working in stressful conditions and their spouses. It appears that if a distressed spouse is not part of the solution, he or she is likely to become a big part of the problem. Thus, what is needed are programs that train and counsel couples in developing skills for reducing negative interactions and enhancing their relationships. The primary objective of such programs is prevention and ongoing improved functioning, achieved by focusing on techniques designed to help couples manage negative affect and handle conflict situations.

References


**Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:**

Bakker, A.B., Demerouti, E., & Schaufeli, W.B. (in press). The crossover of burnout and work engagement among working couples. *Human Relations*


