

## RESEARCH BRIEFS

### TENDING TO WORK DURING FAMILY TIME: AT WHAT COST?

SATORIS S. CULBERTSON  
Kansas State University

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Do you ever excuse yourself from dinner with your family to take a call from work? Have you ever dropped what you're doing at home to attend to a work situation, perhaps even returning to the office? How often do you find yourself cancelling or rescheduling family activities due to work demands? If these scenarios sound familiar to you, what impact do you think they have on your work and family? How do your loved ones react? Did their reactions alleviate your stress or exacerbate a tense situation?

These are the questions addressed in a recent study by Dawn S. Carlson (Baylor University), K. Michelle Kacmar (Texas State University), Suzanne Zivnuska (California State University), and Merideth Ferguson (Utah State University). As Carlson and her colleagues noted, there is an ever-present need in today's hectic world to juggle competing demands between work and family. To manage their various obligations, individuals must often transition between their work and family roles. These transitions can be physical, such as leaving home to go to the office, or psychological, as when an individual mentally transitions from a family discussion to a workplace issue when a boss telephones on the weekend. Whereas boundary transitions can be planned, such as when individuals purposefully leave for work and later return home, Carlson and her colleagues were more interested in what they termed "interposed transitions." These unplanned transitions can occur when an individual is pulled away from family activities for workplace issues that arise. In their study, Carlson and her colleagues sought to determine the extent to which these interposed boundary transitions lead to deleterious or positive outcomes for individuals, both at home and at work.

The predominant view regarding boundary transitions is that they lead to increased stress and greater conflict between work and family for individuals. This is because the transitions from one role (e.g., work) disrupt and interfere with the demands

and expectations of the other role (i.e., family). So when an individual must take a call from work, it is depleting their resources by taking time and energy away from the family. This resource depletion is distressing and results in work-family conflict.

Nevertheless, Carlson and her colleagues argue that the effects of boundary transitions may not all be bad. Rather than focusing purely on the negative outcomes that exist from transitioning across one's work and family boundaries, they chose to also examine positive outcomes of such transitions. For example, transitioning between roles may also lead individuals to feel like they are able to efficiently address work demands and feel more involved with and connected to their coworkers and job overall. As such, individuals may feel energized or have their esteem enhanced, thereby experiencing an accumulation of emotional resources that can spill over from work to family and actually benefit employees by enriching their home lives. In short, Carlson and her colleagues hypothesized that boundary transitions would be related to both an increase in work-family conflict due to resource depletion, as well as to work-family enrichment due to resource accumulation.

Carlson and her colleagues also examined the role of one's spouse in the relationship between boundary transitions and work-family conflict and enrichment. They hypothesized that to the extent that one's spouse feels greater strain from the boundary transition, there is likely greater conflict and less enrichment between work and family. So if a spouse is caused stress by his or her partner taking time away from family to deal with workplace matters, causing the spouse to feel they must "pick up the slack" (e.g., for household or childcare chores), then conflict is magnified and the accumulation of resources that would lead to work-family enrichment is minimized.

In addition to speculating about the effects of boundary transitions on the spouse and subsequent work-family conflict and enrichment, Carlson and

her colleagues also explored the extent to which the conflict and enrichment experienced by individuals leads to feelings of job embeddedness. Job embeddedness involves feelings of connectedness with one's workplace and coworkers as well as one's perceived cost of leaving a job. To the extent that employees feel embedded to their jobs, they will feel a greater level of attachment with the organization, be less likely to quit, and will feel as if their personal goals are aligned with those of the organization. In short, work-family conflict should lead to lower job embeddedness while work-family enrichment should lead to heightened embeddedness.

Finally, Carlson and her colleagues hypothesized that boundary transitions would impact one's relationship tension, or the extent to which partners feel annoyed by one other. They speculated that individuals experiencing greater conflict would experience more tension, while those who experience an accumulation of resources through work-family enrichment would be less irritated by one another.

### STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

To test their hypotheses, Carlson and her colleagues examined survey data from 639 married couples where both spouses were employed full time. The majority of the respondents were Caucasian, were married for an average of 16 years, and had between one and two children.

Surveys were filled out online and participants received rewards for completing them. One member of the couple was considered the "focal participant" for the purposes of this study, and his or her spouse was designated the "spouse." The focal participant responded to questions that assessed family-to-work boundary transitions, work-to-family conflict, work-to-family enrichment, and job embeddedness. The spouse completed questions that assessed the boundary management strain that is transmitted to the spouse (i.e., the spouse's emotional reaction to his or her partner's boundary transitions). Both the focal participant and the spouse completed items assessing relationship tension.

### KEY FINDINGS

As expected, Carlson and her colleagues found that transitioning from family time to work time was associated with both greater conflict as well as greater enrichment. So there appears to be a simultaneous depletion and accumulation of resources

that results from boundary transitions. Also as predicted, the strain that spilled over to the spouse exacerbated the conflict and reduced the enrichment that individuals experienced. Lastly, the work-family conflict that resulted from the boundary transitions (and spouse stress) was associated with decreased job embeddedness and heightened relationship tension. On the other hand, predictions regarding the links between boundary transitions, work-family enrichment, and both job embeddedness and relationship tension were not supported.

In summary, the results suggested that while transitioning from home to work can yield positive consequences for individuals in the way of greater job embeddedness, it appears to come at a cost thanks to heightened conflict and relationship tension. As Carlson and her colleagues noted, "the experience of family-to-work transitions is a double-edged sword that comes at the cost of greater relationship tension and work-family conflict but also has the benefit of more job embeddedness" (p. 170). Moreover, these negative effects were even stronger when spouses experienced strain from the boundary transitions.

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Carlson and her colleagues' research revealed that boundary transitions are not entirely negative. It does appear that there is an advantage to dealing with work matters while in the family domain, at least with respect to feeling attached to and embedded within one's work. However, there are also negative outcomes, particularly with regard to the effects on one's partner. To the extent that spouses feel distressed by the interruptions, employees are more likely to feel greater conflict between their work and families, and are more likely to experience relationship tension. Given the role that marital distress can play on productivity levels and likelihood of remaining employed, it is important to address the extent to which employees are expected to make family-to-work transitions.

Carlson and her colleagues made several suggestions for handling boundary transitions. First, they noted that employees and managers should consider how transitions are requested or expected. They suggest that accommodations should be made with regard to how disruptive some requests may be compared to others. For instance, sending an email that allows an employee to respond at his or her convenience may be less distressing to the employee and the employee's spouse than a telephone call.

Second, employees and managers should consider how frequently requests are made that prompt family-to-work transitions. If it seems that such requests are made frequently, managers may want to consider potential ways to mitigate them. For example, rather than requesting employees take time away from their families to address workplace issues, managers might hire additional help during busy times, shift deadlines when possible, and adjust priorities as needed. Along these lines, managers may want to give employees the ultimate discretion to decide whether they can or should transition back to work once they are home. Some employees and their spouses may be more amenable to such transitions, while others may find such boundary transitions particularly distressing. Finally, Carlson and her colleagues suggest that organizations consider

evaluating the need for employees to make such transitions back to work during non-work hours. They note that some companies, such as Volkswagen, have implemented policies prohibiting employees to access their email servers during non-work hours to help facilitate and encourage the separation between work and family. Perhaps more employers should take this approach, as the cost does indeed appear to be substantial when it comes to borrowing time from home to pay for work demands.

#### **SOURCE**

Carlson, D. S., Kacmar, K. M., Zivnuska, S., & Ferguson, M. (2015). Do the benefits of family-to-work transitions come at too great a cost? *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 20*, 161–171.