Is It Better to Receive Than To Give? Empathy in the Conflict–Distress Relationship

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The moderating effect of partner empathy on the relationship between both directions of work–family conflict (work-to-family and family-to-work) and psychological distress of both the job incumbent and partner are examined in this study. Considering empathy as a specific dimension of emotional social support, we hypothesized that receiving empathy would buffer negative spillover to the job incumbent while giving empathy would exacerbate negative crossover to the partner. A study of 270 job incumbents and their partners revealed that receiving partner empathy fully moderated spillover effects due to family-to-work conflict but had no effects with work-to-family conflict. We also found it interesting that giving partner empathy moderated the crossover effects on family-to-work conflict but had no effects with work-to-family conflict. Implications of these findings and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: work–family conflict, empathy, distress, social support

Work–family conflict is “a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect” (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). Work–family conflict has been identified as a key predictor of psychological distress (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997; Rantanen, Kinnunen, Feldt, & Pulkinen, 2008). The distress that ensues from the experience of work–family conflict can be viewed as an aversive, self-focused emotional state such as anxiety, discomfort, or worry (Batson, 1991).

Work–family conflict is thought to be quite detrimental not only to job incumbents, but also to their partners and family members (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Westman, 2001). The relationship between work–family conflict and negative outcomes across a job incumbent’s work and family system has been explained by the dual processes of spillover and crossover (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Westman, 2001). When job incumbents experience conflict between their work and family roles it may spill over to result in anxiety, depression, discontentment, confusion, and frustration (Eckenrode & Gore, 1981). However, other factors may come into play in the spillover and crossover processes, either buffering or exacerbating the effect that conflict has on distress (Westman, 2001). In this research, we seek to explore empathy as a particular dimension of emotional social support with the potential to buffer, or even alleviate, the negative spillover effect of work–family conflict on job incumbents’ psychological distress. Simultaneously, we investigate empathy’s potential to exacerbate the negative crossover effects of work–family conflict on partner psychological distress.

Based on the social support literature, we posit that empathy might be a critical factor to explore, as theoretically it may act to both buffer and exacerbate the conflict–distress relationship. Viewed as the “spark of human concern for others, the glue that makes social life possible” (Hoffman, 2000, pp. 3),
empathy is one dimension of emotional social support (Fenlason, Johnson, & Beehr, 1997; Miller, Birkholt, Scott, & Stage, 1995; Zellars & Perrewè, 2001). We consider empathy as the tendency to observe, know, and be sensitive to another's feelings and emotions. Thus, we conceive of the empathizer cognitively and emotionally opening to another individual and argue that while receiving empathy in a time of distress is likely beneficial by potentially buffering spillover effects, giving it may be detrimental by potentially exacerbating crossover effects. Exploring the moderating role empathy plays in the relationship between work–family conflict and psychological distress makes a significant contribution to the literature. First, we consider empathy’s role in both directions of role conflict: the work-to-family direction as well as the family-to-work direction. Second, we respond to calls in the work–family literature to consider empathy’s role in crossover effects (Westman, 2001) as well as in spillover effects. Hence, we consider empathy from the perspective of the person receiving the empathy as well as from the perspective of the person giving the empathy. Third, we analyze matched data from both job incumbents and their partners, which allows us a more complete picture of this unique dimension of social support. Thus, this research fills a gap not only in social support research but also in our understanding of how each direction of work–family conflict may uniquely operate in the processes of crossover and spillover.

Background and Hypotheses

Empathy Dimension of Social Support

Social support is most typically categorized as being either instrumental or emotional (Adams, King, & King, 1996). Emotional social support “includes activities such as talking, listening, and expressing concern or empathy for a distressed individual” (Zellars & Perrewè, 2001), whereas instrumental social support refers to more active helping behaviors focused on problem-solving (Kaufmann & Beehr, 1986). Emotional social support may result in a sense of heightened well-being and resilience in the face of ongoing conflict (Humphrey, 2006; Lawrence, 2006).

The content of emotional social support is generally understood to be multidimensional. Traditionally, research has focused on three dimensions of social support: positive, negative, and nonjob related (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994). Positive social support related to work–family conflict focuses attention on positive aspects of one’s job and builds optimism. Negative social support is commiserative in content, focusing on the difficult aspects of work. Nonjob related social support generally focuses on distracting from the issue at hand. However, Zellars and Perrewè (2001) identified a fourth, more neutral dimension of emotional social support, termed empathy. Empathy allows people to feel understood and joined in whatever circumstance they are experiencing without doing anything to fix or alleviate the experience. This new identification of empathy as a specific dimension of social support has only recently begun to receive empirical attention. Except for a few studies (Adams et al., 1996; Begley, 1998; Kahn, Schneider, Jenkins-Henkelman, & Moyle, 2006) the emphasis in the management literature on the effects of emotional social support has been quite limited, and we are aware of only one study focusing more specifically on empathy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2009). Our study is designed to fill this gap in the literature.

Definitions of empathy abound and are hotly debated. For example, empathy has been defined in the psychological literature as the vicarious experiencing of another person’s emotions (Eisenberg et al., 1991; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). In contrast, Zellars and Perrewè (2001) define empathy as “an expression of understanding for another’s feelings or situation” (p. 460). More recently, Bakker and Demerouti (2009) base their study of empathy on two dimensions identified by Davis (1983)—that of perspective taking (the tendency of a person to entertain the point of view of others) and that of empathic concern (the tendency to experience feeling of warmth, compassion, and concern). In an attempt to capture the full domain of cognitive and emotional components involved in the experience of empathy, we define empathy as the tendency to observe, know, and be sensitive to another’s feelings and emotions.

Very little is known about the potential moderating effects of this newly identified fourth dimension of social support called empathy. Building on the work of Zellars & Perrewè (2001), we endeavor to empirically drill down into this relationship, specifically narrowing our focus to understand the differential effect that empathy has on both spillover and crossover effects.

Negative Spillover and Empathy Received

Work–family conflict has been established as a bidirectional concept, with family responsibilities impacting work and with work responsibilities impacting family (Barnett, Marshall, & Sayer, 1992;
Carlson, Witt, Zivnuska, Kacmar, & Grzywacz, 2008; Crouter, 1984; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Kirchmeyer, 1992; Marshall & Barnett, 1993). Negative spillover predicts that the stress from work or family will spill into the other domain (Bolger et al., 1989). For example, a job incumbent who experiences high levels of stress at work will likely experience that stress as contaminating his or her time with family. Westman (2006) suggested that several mechanisms may precede spillover and/or crossover including empathic processes, common stressors (i.e., financial difficulties, life events) that lead to common strains, and communication between partners (i.e., coping strategies, social undermining, lack of social support). More specifically for negative spillover, the antecedents of status enhancement and having preschool-age children have been found (Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, & Kiger, 2007).

Given the dearth of literature on the consequences of empathy as it relates to role conflict, we begin with a brief review of theory and findings related to its umbrella concept, social support. Lawrence (2006) points to a huge literature base establishing the relationship between social support and stress, which in its sum seems to indicate the beneficial effects that social support has on its recipients. Findings in this literature suggest that social support can be viewed as an important buffer of stress (Antonovsky, 1979; Bernas & Major, 2000; Carlson & Perrewè, 1999; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Etzion, 1984; Etzion & Westman, 1994; Frone, 2000; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; House, 1981; Humphrey, 2006; Thoits, 1986).

Considering empathy as an unexplored dimension of social support, we argue that empathy may be beneficial to the person who is empathized with, thereby mitigating established spillover effects. Some individuals who sense that their partner is suffering or distressed may react in an other-oriented manner, seeking to alleviate the distress through an empathic response (Batson, 1991; Goubert et al., 2005). A partner who is high in empathy will focus on their partner’s experiences and emotions, engendering a sense of being understood and joined. When job incumbents share their experiences of work–family conflict with an empathic partner, the job incumbent may feel a sense of relief in knowing that they don’t have to handle the conflict alone. The partner provides emotional support by validating the job incumbent’s feelings about the situation and assuring them that the stress of what they are experiencing is understood. In vicariously experiencing the job incumbent’s emotions, the partner may reflect or mimic the facial expressions of their loved one, providing a visual confirmation that the job incumbent is being heard and understood (Preston & de Waal, 2002). Therefore, empathy may act to buffer the job incumbent’s distress.

Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1:** Work-to-family conflict is positively related to job incumbents’ psychological distress and that relationship is moderated by partner’s empathy such that strong perceived empathy received buffers the effect of conflict on distress.

**Hypothesis 2:** Family-to-work conflict is positively related to job incumbents’ psychological distress, and that relationship is moderated by partner’s empathy such that strong perceived empathy received buffers the effect of conflict on distress.

**Negative Crossover and Empathy Given**

Negative crossover considers effects that extend beyond the job incumbent to affect his or her work and family partners (Bolger et al., 1989; Westman, 2001). For example, a job incumbent who experiences high levels of stress at work may find that his or her partner reports higher stress as a result. Workaholism (Bakker, Demerouti, & Burke, 2009), job demands (Demerouti, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2005), and workload (van Emmerik & Jawahar, 2006) have been shown to predict crossover effects. However, little is known as to the role of empathy in this process and how it impacts the partner giving the empathy.

Previous study of the impact that empathy has on the empathizer has mostly been confined to developmental and social psychologists, with little if any direct application to the management literature. However, both theory (Bowlby, 1969) and empirical research (e.g., Ickes & Simpson, 1997; Ickes & Simpson, 2001; Siegel, 2001; Siegel, 2007; Simpson, Ickes, & Grich, 1999; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996) indicate that emotional states such as distress, empathy, and well-being in infants and children set the stage for the experience of those same states in adults. Therefore, in the absence of adult studies on the impact of empathy on the empathizer, we turn to these developmental studies to inform our thinking about the role of empathy in crossover distress.
Studies in the field of developmental psychology indicate that individuals vary in the degree to which they are able to regulate their emotional responses, with some people becoming highly distressed in the face of another person’s distress, while others are better able to modulate their own arousal (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1992; Fabes, Eisenberg, Karbon, Troyer, & Switzer, 1994; Hoffman, 1982). Despite the various individual differences in coping and emotional arousal, taken as a whole, these studies do suggest that empathy is associated with personal arousal, as well as the attempt to help others in distress (Batson, 1991; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990; Eisenberg et al., 1994; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Furthermore, research indicates that higher levels of empathy are associated with higher levels of vicariously experienced distress (Ungerer et al., 1990).

In seeking to apply this research to the experience of work–family conflict, we examine the effects of empathy on crossover. The research suggests that although having an empathic partner helps the job incumbent, it might come at a cost to the partner. In other words, we argue that although empathy may buffer spillover effects for the job incumbent, it may simultaneously exacerbate crossover effects for the partner. We are not alone in this theorizing. Westman (2001) also postulated that empathy would exacerbate crossover effects. Citing findings by Eckenrode and Gore (1981) that husbands’ life events increased their wives’ stress, supplemented by Riley and Eckenrode’s (1986) findings that undesirable events in one partner’s life may play a significant role in the other partner’s distress, Westman (2001) argued that the role of empathy should be more explicitly investigated in the crossover literature. Similar to the hypothesized buffering effect, we expect that this exacerbating effect may not hold for the unempathic partner. In other words, the partner low in empathy may be self-oriented (Batson, 1991; Goubert et al., 2005) and may not take on the experience vicariously. Thus, the stress of the job incumbent would fail to create additional stress in the unempathic partner.

In summary, past research has shown the impact of work–family conflict on the distress of the partner (Barnett, Gareis, & Brennan, 2008). We propose that when that partner has high empathy it may exacerbate the crossover of conflict onto the distress of the partner. Thus, the partner who empathizes with a role-conflicted partner is quite likely to become wrapped up and identified with the ensuing distress that he or she feels on behalf of the partner. Therefore, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 3:** Work-to-family conflict is positively related to partner psychological distress and that relationship is moderated by partner empathy, such that strong perceived empathy given exacerbates the effect of conflict on distress.

**Hypothesis 4:** Family-to-work conflict is positively related to partner psychological distress and that relationship is moderated by partner empathy, such that strong perceived empathy given exacerbates the effect of conflict on distress.

**Method**

**Sample**

The focus of this study was full-time job incumbents and their partners. With the assistance an online data collection service, 270 participants were recruited. This manner of collecting data has been successfully used in the management literature (Judge, Ilies, & Scott, 2006; Neubert, Kacmar, Carlson, Chonko, & Roberts, 2008; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). The primary advantage of this approach is that specific characteristics can be stipulated to ensure the sample is representative of the population of interest. We were interested in respondents who were employed fulltime, had a supervisor, and who had a partner who would complete a survey. Approximately 57% of the job incumbent sample was male with an average age of 36, whereas 43% of the partner sample was male with an average age of 35. Of these couples, 75% had children living with them.

**Measures From Job Incumbent**

**Work–family conflict.** We used the work–family conflict scale developed by Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams (2000) with nine items for the work-to-family direction and nine items for the family-to-work direction. An example of a work-to-family item is, “My work keeps me from my family activities more than I would like.” A sample family-to-work item is, “Due to stress at home, I am often preoccupied with family matters at work.” Responses used a 5-point scale with endpoints of “1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.”

**Perceived empathy received.** We developed four items consistent with our definition in an effort
to fully capture the complement of cognitive and emotional activities that might be perceived by the job incumbent as indications of partner empathy. The items are “My spouse/partner is empathetic,” “My spouse/partner knows my emotions,” “My spouse/partner is a good observer of my emotions,” and “My spouse/partner is sensitive to my feelings and emotions.” Responses used a 5-point scale with endpoints of “1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.”

**Psychological distress.** We used a 10-item measure designed to assess an individual’s psychological distress (Ilfield, 1976). The stem read “Looking back over the last three months, help us understand how you have been feeling. Read each item carefully and circle the number which best describes your current situation. For this questionnaire, work is defined as employment, school, housework, volunteer work, and so forth.” Example items are “I feel fearful,” “I feel stressed at work,” and “I feel lonely.” Responses used a 5-point scale with endpoints of “1 = never, 5 = almost always.”

**Measures From Partner**

**Perceived empathy given.** We used the same 4-item measured for the job incumbent to assess the empathy they received but in this case we asked the partner how much empathy they perceived they had given to the partner. Thus, they were the same items just modified to focus on giving empathy. An example item is “I am empathetic to my spouse/partner.”

**Psychological distress.** We used the same 10-item measure employed for the job incumbent to assess the partner’s psychological distress (Ilfield, 1976), except the item that read “I feel stressed at work” was modified to read “I feel stressed at managing life.”

**Control variables.** In order to eliminate spurious results due to the potential influence of demographic characteristics, we controlled for age, gender, and number of children living at home from the source of the dependent variable (Westman, 2001). In other words, when examining the job incumbent’s psychological distress we included his or her controls but when examining the partner’s psychological distress we included his or her controls. Age and number of children were measured using open-ended items.

To provide a more conservative test of the model, we wanted to eliminate variance that could be accounted for by problem focused social support received by the job incumbent from the partner. We used a 5-item measure developed by House (1981) and used by Allen, Amason, and Holmes (1998). A sample item is “My spouse/partner is ready to help me with a work problem whenever I need it.” Responses used a 5-point scale with endpoints of “1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.” Further, perceptions of a job incumbent’s work–family conflict could differ among partners who work outside the home versus those who do not. To control for these effects, we controlled for the number of hours per week that the partner worked.

**Data Analysis**

We conducted hierarchical moderated multiple regression analyses to examine the hypothesized relationships. We centered the predictors prior to conducting the analyses to minimize the influence of multicollinearity among the interactions and main effects (Aiken & West, 1991). In step 1 we entered the control variables. In step 2 we entered the independent variables and the moderator. In step 3 we entered the cross product terms.

**Results**

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations. Not surprisingly, work-to-family and family-to-work conflict were correlated at .63 but these constructs have been shown to be discriminant (Carlson et al., 2000). Also, the level of distress experienced by the job incumbent and the partner were correlated at .58 consistent with them being in a partnership. Finally, the perceived empathy received and the perceived empathy given were correlated at .64 as would be expected.

The standardized regression coefficients for the hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis on the job incumbent’s psychological distress can be found in Table 2. For the job incumbent, the perceived empathy received was used as the moderator. The final model accounted for 24% of the total adjusted $R^2$. For the work-to-family direction the interaction was not significant, thus failing to find support for Hypothesis 1. The family-to-work conflict by empathy interaction was significant, consistent with Hypothesis 2.

We followed Aiken and West’s (1991) procedure to graphically depict the forms of the significant interactions. Figure 1 presents the plot of the FWC by perceived empathy received interaction on a job incumbent’s psychological distress. Figure 1 indicates that family-to-work conflict is positively related to psychological distress for those who do not have an empathic partner. The simple slopes were signifi-
cantly different from zero ($t = 3.42, p < .01$). Conversely, for those who had an empathic partner the family-to-work conflict did not contribute to greater psychological distress as the slope of the regression line for high empathy was not significantly different from zero ($t = .948, ns$).

The standardized regression coefficients for the hierarchical moderated multiple regression analysis on the partner’s psychological distress can be found in Table 3. In this model, the partner’s perceived empathy given was used as the moderator. The final model accounted for 33% of the variance in psychological distress of the partner. For work-to-family conflict by empathy, the interaction was significant but in the opposite direction of that predicted in Hypothesis 3. For family-to-work conflict by empathy, the interaction was significant and in the predicted direction of Hypothesis 4.

Figure 2 presents the plot of the FWC by perceived empathy given interaction of a partner’s psychological distress. This pattern of effect was the opposite of what was predicted and in fact was a similar pattern to the job incumbent. Thus, for those partners high in empathy, the increase in family-to-work conflict did not impact the partner’s experience of distress. The simple slopes were not significantly different from zero ($t = .778, p = ns$). However, if a partner is not empathic then when the job incumbent incurs more family-to-work conflict it leads to the partner experiencing higher levels of distress. In this condition, the simple slopes were significantly different from zero ($t = 5.00, p < .01$).

### Discussion

The goal of this research was to examine the moderating role of a partner’s empathy in the relationship between work–family conflict and psychological distress of both the job incumbent and the job incumbent’s partner. While extant research on emotional social support has investigated the effects of this construct on organizational outcomes such as burnout (Kahn et al., 2006) and turnover (Begley, 1998), little research has explored the effects of empathy, a dimension of emotional support, in the work–family domain, particularly with respect to spillover and crossover effects. Our research fills this gap by exploring the relationships among conflict, empathy, and psychological distress across both the work and family domains. We predicted that receiving empathy from one’s partner would buffer the spillover effects of conflict on distress, but that giving empathy to a partner would exacerbate the crossover effects.
effects of conflict on distress. This study in fact found that it was not better to give than to receive but that both giving and receiving empathy buffered the effects of family-to-work conflict on the experience of distress.

Regarding our spillover hypotheses, we found that incumbents who had an empathic partner did experience less psychological distress, but that interestingly the impact of conflict on distress appeared to operate uniquely in this study based on the direction of the conflict. In the case of work-to-family conflict spillover on job incumbent distress (Hypothesis 1), empathy did not play a role as predicted. One reason for these results may be that it is difficult for a partner to empathize with work spilling over to family. Since the partner is not in the job incumbent’s work domain it is hard for a partner to truly understand the demands that come from this domain. Thus, even though the partner is empathetic in nature they can’t truly understand the source of the conflict so their ability to emotionally support the job incumbent is minimized and thus does not significantly help the job incumbent. Another possible explanation is that work-to-family spillover causes a partner to have to pick up the slack at home because of the job incumbent’s responsibilities at work. Thus, the extra demands trigger the job incumbent’s feelings of guilt for

Table 2

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Note. The standardized coefficients are presented.
*p < .05. **p < .01.
imposing more domestic work on the partner and thus cause the job incumbent greater distress.

Our prediction did hold for the family-to-work conflict direction of spillover such that a partner high in empathy was able to buffer the impact that family-to-work conflict had on distress for the job incumbent (Hypothesis 2). In other words, as family demands spill over into the work domain, having a partner’s empathy can buffer the ability of that conflict to make the job incumbent experience distress. This finding is consistent with previous findings that social support moderates the stressor–distress relationship (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Thoits, 1986). Though prior research established that empathy from coworkers is beneficial for employees (Zellars & Perrewè, 2001), our research is the first to establish that partner empathy also has important implications for the job incumbent and that this moderator affects the spillover process. Taken together these findings provide evidence of the complexities that characterize the spillover processes.

In the case of work-to-family conflict crossover on partner distress (Hypothesis 3), empathy did not play a role as predicted. As noted in the discussion of Hypothesis 1, this may be because the partner has difficulty observing, knowing and being sensitive to the job incumbent’s stress in the work domain and thus, empathy is not a significant moderator in the work-to-family direction. However, we did find that for the family-to-work direction of conflict empathy

<p>| Table 3                                                                 |
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* $p < .05$.  ** $p < .01$.  

Note. The standardized coefficients are presented.

![Figure 2](image-url)  

**Figure 2.** Family-to-work conflict to partner psychological distress moderated by perceived empathy given.
given by the partner moderated the relationship such that greater empathy given buffered the effect of conflict on distress. Therefore, although we found statistically significant relationships, they were not in the direction we predicted in Hypothesis 4. Thus, partners who were low in giving empathy experienced greater distress which is opposite of what we predicted. There are a number of possible explanations for this finding. Perhaps, empathy increases understanding of the situation and subsequently reduces resentment experienced on the part of the individual offering empathy (Paleari, Regalia, & Finchman, 2009). This would suggest that empathy buffers the impact of the conflict on the experience of distress. On the other hand, the conservation of resources model (Hobfoll, 1989) offers an alternate explanation that assumes a reverse causal order of what we originally predicted. Perhaps a distressed partner is emotionally depleted and therefore unable to muster the resources required to provide empathy to another. Likewise, a partner with more resources may be more resilient when faced with the other partner’s conflict and thus is better equipped to provide empathy. It is important for work–family researchers to consider the partner’s experience and perspective because partner stress and satisfaction have been found to significantly impact job incumbent stress and affect (Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Westman, Etzion, & Horovitz, 2004). Essentially, a feedback loop exists between the partner and job incumbent, such that partner psychological distress is transmitted to the job incumbent and vice versa, thereby perpetuating distress and ultimately inhibiting job incumbent productivity. Despite the importance of understanding this phenomenon, little research has been done in this area. In fact, to our knowledge this study is the first to answer the call for investigation of the effects of empathy in the cross-over process (Westman, 2001).

To summarize, our findings show that for both the job incumbent and the partner, high empathy is associated with less distress in the family-to-work direction. However, in the work-to-family direction, empathy does not play a moderating role. We conjecture that the reason that empathy works differently depending on the direction of the conflict is that it is easier for the partner to observe, know, and experience the stressors inherent in the family domain that might be creating conflict for the job incumbent. On the other hand, the partner does not have direct access to the work domain, so it may be more difficult for him or her to observe, know, and experience the work-related circumstances that create conflict for the job incumbent.

**Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions**

As with all research, there are areas of strength and opportunities for development. One strength of the current study is that it builds on previous research which identified a unique dimension of emotional social support, specifically empathy, and sheds light onto its role in the social support literature (Zellars & Perrewè, 2001). A second strength of this study is that it demonstrates that empathy plays a role beyond more traditional types of social support in the relationship of work–family conflict and psychological distress. Thus, it expands our understanding of the relationship between conflict and distress in the workplace. Finally, this research broadens the scope of work–family conflict to include the partner in our understanding of the far-reaching effects of work–family conflict on the psychological distress of the family. Research on the effects of work–family conflict on partner distress is limited. Our research

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1 Additionally, we performed analyses to test gender as a moderator and also test a three-way interaction between empathy, conflict, and gender. These analyses revealed that gender did not interact with empathy to affect psychological distress for either the job incumbent or the partner, and the three-way interaction was not significantly related to either the job incumbent’s distress or to the partner’s distress. While these results may be a bit unexpected, there is evidence in the empathy literature that may help explain these nonfindings. Cohn’s (1991) meta-analysis demonstrated that while empathy tends to be higher in girls up through the high school years compared to the empathy of boys, these gender differences decline among college students and furthermore there appear to be no differences among older adults. Thus, one might not expect to find an interaction between gender and empathy among a sample of adults who are employed full time. It may be that as individuals mature into adulthood, they acquire social skills and an awareness of other’s feelings that helps them perceive and understand the thoughts and feelings of those with whom they interact. In an interesting finding, although gender didn’t have an interaction effect, it is correlated with perceived empathy as reported by both the job incumbent and the partner. Thus, female job incumbents reported less empathy provided by their partners than male job incumbents reported. Conversely, female partners indicated that they provided more empathy to the job incumbent than the level of empathy male partners said they provided. Some evidence suggests that women may be more empathic than men (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Hatcher et al., 2005) and likewise our data suggest that both sexes perceive women as more empathic and men as less empathic.
helps fill this gap in the literature, and suggests that the direction of conflict determines the effect on the partner, particularly when empathy is considered. Using a matched sample of job incumbents and partners, we were able to see that the crossover of conflict worked uniquely depending on the direction of conflict.

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. The interesting findings for the direction of conflict on the partner call for further investigation as to why this phenomenon occurs. Future research could benefit from including additional information about the work experience of the partner, as well as behavioral consequences of the partner. Are partners who work more likely to empathize? Do empathic partners pick up more of the family demands when their partner is faced with conflict? Another limitation is that this research is cross-sectional in nature. Researchers should replicate these findings using a longitudinal approach so that evidence of a causal chain can be investigated. Specifically, a longitudinal design might elucidate our finding that partners low in empathy experienced greater distress. Though opposite of our predictions, this finding could be explained in reverse causal order by the Conservation of Resources model (Hobfoll, 1989), which would suggest that distressed partners are so involved in their own distress that they lack the resources to provide empathy to another. Finally, understanding the process between these key variables of conflict and distress could benefit from further investigation especially in understanding the complex issues associated with crossover effects. For instance, what factors might mediate the job incumbent’s conflict to partner distress relationship? Conflict for the job incumbent might lead to withdrawal from interpersonal relationships, aggression, or physical health problems that may crossover to affect a partner’s distress or anxiety.

In conclusion, this study examined the relationship between work–family conflict and psychological distress for both the job incumbent and the partner. This research fills a gap by examining a newly identified dimension of emotional social support, empathy, and its role in this relationship. For the work-to-family conflict direction the empathy of the partner does not buffer the spillover for the job incumbent nor does it exacerbate the distress on the partner who is empathetic. It may be that empathizing with conflict that is from a less salient or familiar domain (like a partner’s work) is more difficult and thus less effective than when the conflict source is more familiar (i.e., family domain). However, for the family-to-work direction of conflict an empathic partner buffers both the spillover for the job incumbent as well as the crossover for the partner. It appears that the fact that both the source of conflict and the location of the empathic party are in the same domain (in this case the family) may indeed inspire the partner to respond in such a way that distress is buffered for both parties. Thus, more research is needed to understand the bidirectional nature of work–family conflict and dimensions of emotional social support.

References


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