

Work-Family Stress and Altruism at Home

The Roles of Psychological Capital and Social Support

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Abstract

Through a lens of organizational psychology this paper discusses the nature of altruism at home in the context of work and family stressors. Altruism in the care of the home is characterized by self-giving out of love, creating a nurturing environment for the flourishing of family members. This implies on-going acts of generous behavior in service of the closest family members. We propose that this form of sustained altruism may be challenged by the stressors stemming from work-family conflict. This paper proposes that the individual resource of psychological capital and the external resource of social support can serve to enable the individual to continue their desired altruistic behaviors amid the stress of work-family conflict.

Keywords: *Work-family conflict, Social support, Psychological capital, Family life, Altruistic behavior, Stress*

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This paper explores potential influences that challenge the nature of altruistic behavior in the home. We examine this dynamic through a psychological lens.

Altruism is the selfless concern for the well-being of others shown through actions benefiting others without seeking personal gain.¹

Altruism in the care of the home is characterized by self-giving out of love, creating a nurturing environment for the flourishing of family members. In a practical context altruism in the home can take the form of caregiving, educating children, creating a clean and orderly environment, cooking healthy meals, as well as cleanliness and care for the clothing and rest of each family member. Healthy families have many personal examples of parents' ongoing altruistic actions. Consider just one example of an essential home task, that of preparing family meals daily—over the course of a long, married life, the calculation of a minimum of 300 family dinners prepared annually over 50 years of marriage is quite an impressive commitment of over 15,000 meals in a lifetime. This is a tangible example of a homemaker's altruism.

Beyond performing the daily tasks themselves, altruism also involves sharing the knowledge and skills of homemaking necessary for personal growth and development. Homemakers consistently live this self-giving behavior in the service of those they love but may find themselves constrained by conflicting work and life demands. Following a theoretical overview of stress and work-family conflict related to altruism, this paper discusses the interactions of the individual developmental state, psychological capital, and the role of social support underlying altruistic behavior in the care of the home. This is followed by a proposed framework for gaining an empirical understanding of how psychological capital and social support resources may serve as potential buffers of work-family stress and a homemaker's altruistic behavior.

1 ALTRUISM IN A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Starting with definitions in the psychological context, we focus on an understanding of altruism as a pure form of prosocial behavior, wherein one is motivated by an unselfish interest in helping another.² We take an intentionalist view of altruism that describes prosocial behavior and altruism in complementary terms, where prosocial behavior emphasizes the action itself and altruism further explores why that action is taken. In this context, altruism pursues the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare and prosocial behavior reflects a broader category of acts that result in the welfare of others but that may be based on mixed motives, both altruistic and egoistic. Building on Batson's empathy-altruism hypothesis,

¹S. FEIGIN, G. OWENS, F. GOODYEAR-SMITH, *Theories of Human Altruism: A Systematic Review*, «Annals of Neuroscience and Psychology», 1/1 (2014), pp. 1-9.

²C. D. BATSON, *Empathy-Induced Altruistic Motivation*, in M. Mikulincer, P. R. Shaver (eds.), *Prosocial Motives, Emotions and Behaviors: The Better Angels of our Nature*, American Psychological Association, New York 2010.

the intentionalist perspective of altruistic motivation is “motivation with the ultimate goal of increasing another’s welfare” or as Pfattheicher et al. summarize, altruism is voluntary behavior intended to benefit another, not performed with the expectation of receiving external rewards or avoiding externally produced punishments.³

Broadly speaking, empathy is a strong motive for prosocial behavior.⁴ Altruism can be defined as empathy for an individual in need, and our research is particularly directed toward altruism motivated by a close relationship between the benefactor and the recipient, that is, the closest relationship of family member.

Before examining the relationship between altruism and stress, we define the concept of stress. Stress has been explored across a variety of disciplines from medicine to biology, physics to psychology.⁵ In 1956, building on the work of his predecessors, the biologist, Selye, defined stress as a non-specific response in the human body to any demand made upon it.⁶ McGrath (1971) further defined stress as the imbalance between an environmental demand and the individual’s capability to respond to the demand.⁷

The relationship between altruism and stress is complex in that altruism can have either positive or negative stress effects depending on the context and how the altruistic behaviors are enacted. Engaging in altruistic acts can foster psychological well-being providing a sense of meaning or purpose and consequently mitigating feelings of stress. However, constant altruistic behavior, particularly in the caregiving roles of parents and homemakers, can lead to exhaustion and anxiety.

Having looked at altruism and stress broadly, let’s consider the specific form of stress that is work-family conflict. Work-family conflict is a recognized strain impacting individual and family well-being.⁸ In 1985, Greenhaus and Beutell defined work-family conflict as “a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some re-

³S. PFATTHEICHER, Y. A. NIELSEN, I. THIELMANN, *Prosocial Behavior and Altruism: A Review of Concepts and Definitions*, «Current Opinion in Psychology», 44 (2022), pp. 124-129.

⁴K. M. BRETHERL-HAURWITZ, M. STOIANOVA, A. A. MARSH, *Empathic Emotion Regulation in Prosocial Behaviour and Altruism*, «Cognition and Emotion», 34/8 (2020), pp. 1532-1548.

⁵R. L. KAHN, *Stress in Organizations*, in M. D. Dunnette, L. M. Hough (eds.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, vol. 3, 2nd ed., Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto (CA) 1992, pp. 571-650.

⁶M. H. APPELEY, R. TRUMBULL, *Development of the Stress Concept*, in M. H. Appley, R. Trumbull (eds.), *Dynamics of Stress: Physiological, Psychological and Social Perspectives*, Springer US, Boston (MA) 1986, pp. 3-18.

⁷J. E. MCGRATH, *Social and Psychological Factors in Human Stress*, Psychology Department, University of Illinois, 1971.

⁸J. H. GREENHAUS, E. E. KOSSEK, *The Contemporary Career: A Work-Home Perspective*, «Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior», 1/1 (2014), pp. 361-388.

spect.”⁹ A result of these dueling demands of work and family is that participation in either role is difficult due to the responsibilities required of the other role competing for an individual’s limited time and energy.¹⁰ Consequently, work-family conflict can arise from simultaneous pressures in each domain whereby work demands can enter the family domain, creating work-to-family conflict. This conflict can be further delineated into three forms: time, strain, and behavior-based conflict.¹¹ Researchers agree that the general behavioral demands of a role, the time devoted to a given role, and the strain resulting from that role are domain elements of work-influencing family.¹²

The stress of work-family conflict arises from the strain of prolonged conflict-ing role demands and depleted resources.¹³ Workers increasingly strive to counteract these stressors whereby home life can suffer from work role demands. In this context, a homemakers’ stress from the depleted time and energy may reduce their ability to selflessly care for their home and family.

Having considered how work-family stress might compromise one’s ability to sustainably and altruistically care for the home and family, we will explore two types of resources that may serve to buffer these challenges. We propose that an individual’s psychological capital and their social support may serve to moderate the impact of these stressors on desired altruistic behavior at home.

2 PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL

“Psychological capital is a higher order conceptual framework for understanding and capitalizing upon human positive psychological resources.”¹⁴ Comprised

⁹J. H. GREENHAUS, N. J. BEUTELL, *Sources of Conflict between Work and Family Roles*, «Academy of Management Review», 10/1 (1985), p. 77.

¹⁰K. M. SHOCKLEY, W. SHEN, M. M. DeNUNZIO, M. L. ARVAN, E. A. KNUDSEN, *Disentangling the Relationship Between Gender and Work-Family Conflict: An Integration of Theoretical Perspectives Using Meta-Analytic Methods*, «Journal of Applied Psychology», 102/12 (2017), p. 1601. C. E. SMITH, J. H. WAYNE, R. A. MATTHEWS, C. E. LANCE, T. L. GRIGGS, M. W. PATTIE, *Stability and Change in Levels of Work-Family Conflict: A Multi-Study, Longitudinal Investigation*, «Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology», 95/1 (2022), pp. 1-35.

¹¹D. S. CARLSON, K. M. KACMAR, L. J. WILLIAMS, *Construction and Initial Validation of a Multi-dimensional Measure of Work-Family Conflict*, «Journal of Vocational Behavior», 56/2 (2000), pp. 249-276.

¹²S. DE GIETER, R. DE COOMAN, Y. BOGAERTS, L. VERELST, *Explaining the Effect of Work-Nonwork Boundary Management Fit on Satisfaction and Performance at Home Through Reduced Time-And Strain-Based Work-Family Conflict*, «Applied Psychology», 71/1 (2022), pp. 129-153.

¹³S. E. HOBFOLL, J. FREEDY, *Conservation of Resources: A General Stress Theory Applied to Burnout*, in W. B. Schaufeli, C. Maslach, T. Marek (eds.), *Professional Burnout: Recent Developments in Theory and Research*, Taylor & Francis, Washington (DC) 1970.

¹⁴F. LUTHANS, C. M. YOUSSEF-MORGAN, B. J. AVOLIO, *Psychological Capital and Beyond*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2015, p. 6.

of four (4) components: hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, psychological capital is a state in which the individual (1) has confidence, that is, a sense of self-efficacy, to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) makes a positive attribution, optimistically, about succeeding now and in the future; (3) perseveres toward goals and, when necessary, redirects paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustains and bounces back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success.¹⁵ Psychological capital is a personal psychological resource that may enable individuals to face challenges and stress.¹⁶ Psychological capital (PsyCap) can augment both tangible, such as economic and financial, and intangible forms of capital, for example, human and social capital, contributing to individual and family well-being. Broadly speaking, the qualities of hope, efficacy, resilience and optimism help individuals approach challenges with a positive attitude, improving their well-being, performance, and satisfaction.

3 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL & WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

Research suggests that strong psychological capital, that is, individuals with higher levels of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism are better equipped to manage the stressors associated with managing work and family roles. They are more likely to employ effective coping strategies, maintain a positive outlook, and bounce back from setbacks, thereby reducing the impact of work-family conflict on their overall well-being. Additionally, they may be more likely to seek out and utilize social support networks which can further mitigate the negative effects of work-family conflict.¹⁷

4 PSYCHOLOGICAL CAPITAL AND ALTRUISM

So how do the characteristics of psychological capital influence one's capacity to engage in altruistic behaviors? When individuals are hopeful, they tend to have a positive outlook on life and consequently are more likely to engage in actions that contribute to the well-being of others. Hopeful individuals are more likely to believe that helping others can lead to positive outcomes and may be

¹⁵*Ibidem*, p. 2.

¹⁶O.L. SIU, *Psychological Capital, Work Well-Being, and Work-Life Balance among Chinese Employees: A cross-lagged analysis*, «Journal of Personnel Psychology», 12/4 (2013), pp. 170-181.

¹⁷J. B. AVEY, T. S. WERNING, F. LUTHANS, *Can Positive Employees Help Positive Organizational Change? Impact of Psychological Capital and Emotions on Relevant Attitudes and Behaviors*, «The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science», 44/1 (2008), pp. 48-70.

more motivated to take action to help those in need, even in difficult situations, potentially increasing their likelihood of performing altruistic acts.

Individuals with high self-efficacy may believe that their actions will make a positive impact, motivating them in their efforts to help others. If someone believes they have the resources or abilities to help, they may be more inclined to engage in altruistic acts. When homemakers are confident in their abilities, they may be more likely to generously give of their talents in family life. And though altruistic behaviors can be emotionally taxing, those with high resilience can maintain their emotional well-being and continue to help others despite setbacks. They are likely to bounce back from burnout or fatigue, enabling them to continue to care for others. Finally, optimistic individuals are more likely to believe that their altruistic actions will lead to positive outcomes. This optimistic outlook can provide continued altruistic motivation as they expect their actions to have beneficial impact.

Psychological capital helps people feel motivated, confident, and emotionally resilient, which in turn enhances their willingness and ability to help others. Consequently, altruistic acts become more sustainable when individuals have the psychological resources to support them. With this in mind, we propose that this positive psychological state will moderate the potential dampening effects of work-family conflict on a homemaker's continued altruistic behaviors.

5 SOCIAL SUPPORT

A second potential resource is social support, a resource frequently studied for its contribution to reducing work-family conflict.¹⁸ Social support serves as a coping mechanism to compensate for negative effects of stressors.¹⁹ Support from work or nonwork sources can be experienced as either emotional or instrumental.²⁰ Emotional support is defined as caring, sympathetic behaviors such as listening and expressing understanding. Instrumental support is tangible assistance such as help with household responsibilities.²¹ Three types of support include social

¹⁸K. A. FRENCH, *et al.*, *A Meta-Analysis of Work-Family Conflict and Social Support*, «Psychological Bulletin», 144/3 (2018), p. 284. L. B. HAMMER, E. E. KOSSEK, W. K. ANGER, T. BODNER, K. L. ZIMMERMAN, *Clarifying Work-Family Intervention Processes: The Roles of Work-Family Conflict and Family-Supportive Supervisor Behaviors*, «Journal of Applied Psychology», 96/1 (2011), p. 134.

¹⁹L. T. THOMAS, L. THIEDE, D. C. GANSTER, *Impact of Family-Supportive Work Variables on Work-Family Conflict and Strain: A Control Perspective*, «Journal of Applied Psychology», 80/1 (1995), p. 6.

²⁰G. A. ADAMS, L. A. KING, D. W. KING, *Relationships of Job and Family Involvement, Family Social Support, and Work-Family Conflict with Job and Life Satisfaction*, «Journal of Applied Psychology», 81/4 (1996), p. 411.

²¹R. AYMAN, A. ANTANI, *Social Support and Work-Family Conflict*, in K. Korabik, D. S. Lero, D. L. Whitehead (eds.), *Handbook of Work-Family Integration*, Academic Press, San Diego (CA) 2008,

embeddedness, enacted support, and perceived social support.²²

Social embeddedness uses indicators of the presence of social ties as proxies for support. Examples of these social ties could be contact with friends, extended family, marital status or interaction with coworkers. To understand the nature of relationships such as the closeness or frequency of interaction, social embeddedness is evaluated through an analysis of an individual's social networks. Research points to the value of access to social networks to benefit from social support, for example, having an informal community network becomes key to parents' use of social support.

Enacted support refers to actions performed by others who provide assistance.²³ Specific supportive actions are described as "enacted" to distinguish from what is termed "available" support which the individual may not actually receive.²⁴ Enacted social support refers to what individuals actually *do* when they provide support. In the home or family domain, there is a wide range of enacted support, from a spouse or extended family members providing childcare, grocery shopping, or family transportation, that is, offering their own altruistic behaviors which in turn may enable the homemaker to continue their own altruistic efforts.

Perceived social support describes the individual's subjective evaluation of the presence and effectiveness of support in general. Perceived support is measured in two ways – in terms of the availability and the adequacy of support. Availability refers to whether the individual finds the support to be sufficient when needed and whether she finds it to be appropriate to meet current subjective needs.

6 SOCIAL SUPPORT AND WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT

Support from family and friends can be significant for the experience of work-family conflict.²⁵ Both instrumental and emotional assistance from family are found to be negatively related to the conflict individuals feel from family demands influencing-work. Families may find it difficult to provide social support to workers when the demands of the worker's job interfere with the demands of the worker's family.²⁶

pp. 287-304.

²²M. SMI JR., *Distinctions between Social Support Concepts, Measures, and Models*, «American Journal of Community Psychology», 14/4 (1986), pp. 413-445.

²³M. BARRERA JR., *Distinctions between Social Support Concepts, Measures, and Models*, «American Journal of Community Psychology», 14/4 (1986), pp. 413-445.

²⁴A. VAUX, P. BURDA, D. STEWART, *Orientation toward Utilization of Support Resources*, «Journal of Community Psychology», 14/2 (1986), pp. 159-170.

²⁵R. AYMAN, A. ANTANI, *Social Support and Work-Family Conflict*, cit.

²⁶S. SONNENTAG, L. TAY, H. N. SHOSHAN, *A Review on Health and Well-Being at Work: More Than Stressors and Strains*, «Personnel Psychology», 76/2 (2023), pp. 473-510.

7 SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ALTRUISM

Finally, what is the relationship between social support and altruism? Strong social ties are a well-known buffer against stress. Altruism often involves creating or strengthening social connections. Social support provides individuals with a sense of belonging and connection to others. When one feels supported, they are often more inclined to engage in altruistic behaviors, as they experience social bonds and a sense of responsibility to help those in their family or social network.

Social support systems also often involve the sharing of values, norms, and behaviors. In supportive environments, individuals are more likely to observe altruistic behavior in others, which can encourage them to engage in similar selfless acts. In a family context, this modeling of altruistic behavior becomes a valuable form of education and care for family members.

Relationships with spouses, extended family members, friends and community networks can facilitate an individual's ability to altruistically care for their home and family.

8 CONCLUSION

This practical and theoretical background provides the foundation for future empirical research to examine hypotheses regarding the relationships between psychological capital, social support, work-family conflict and sustained altruistic behavior in the home. We predict that high psychological capital will moderate the negative influences of work-family conflict on altruistic behavior and similarly that strong social support networks will enable homemakers to continue their altruistic care for their family in the face of work-family conflict.

The outcomes of this research can serve to guide decision-making and intra-family interaction to better support the needs of spouses and parents as they strive to generously serve their families. We propose that strengthening these individual and social resources will better enable homemakers to altruistically care for their families in the face of the inevitable stresses of work and family life.

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