

The Effects of Spousal Support and Gender on Worker's Stress and Job Satisfaction: A Cross National Investigation of Dual Career Couples

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationships between the level of spousal support that a dual career marriage participant receives and the individual's job satisfaction and work stress. Results indicate that a high level of spousal support leads to higher levels of job satisfaction. Data analysis also suggests that gender moderates the relationship between spousal support and work stress. At a low level of spousal support, both men and women reported approximately equal stress. However, data show that a high level of spousal support reduces men's work stress, but does not significantly decrease women's stress level.

Introduction

The traditional marriage has undergone dramatic changes in the past three decades, both in the United States and in other countries. One organizationally relevant change is the increasing prevalence of workforce participation by both marriage partners. The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that such dual career couples will comprise 81% of all marriages by the end of 1995 (Reynolds & Bennett, 1991). Based on this forecast, companies would be well advised to capitalize on the inherent advantages, and also prepare for the potential challenges, of dual career marriages.

If an organization ignores members of dual career couples it will shut itself off from a large number of dynamic and able employees, and may forego a potential competitive advantage (Kaufman, 1989; Samuelson, 1976). To retain and attract valued employees, forward thinking business managers should formulate human resource strategies attractive to dual career participants (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; McCook, Folzer, & School, 1991). To successfully develop these strategies, companies must have reliable information on salient aspects of dual career relationships.

At many major organizations, policies are being changed to accommodate participants in dual career marriages. For example, O'Melveny & Myers, a large

national law firm, has relaxed long standing anti-nepotism rules and hired several married couples. Adopting an even more aggressive policy is Martin Marietta. To attract top employees this company has begun active recruitment and hiring of couples (Robbins, 1993; Toufexis, Sachs, & Wilson, 1987). To aid such progressive policy makers, increased research on dual career couples in the workplace is needed (Sitterly & Duke, 1990).

To date, most studies on dual career couples have focused on how such relationships effect marriages (Cook, 1989; Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Feinauer & Williams-Evans, 1989; Hiller & Dyehouse, 1987; Reynolds & Bennet, 1991), and have largely ignored workplace aspects. More recently, researchers have begun to focus on worker effects rather than marital effects (Bird & Russel, 1986; Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Rosin, 1990; Robbins, 1993; Steffy & Ashbaugh, 1986). However, much research is still needed on the complex relationships inherent in dual career marriages, and also on how these relationships affect worker outcomes (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991).

This paper examines the relationship between the support an employee receives from his or her working partner and the employee's job satisfaction and stress levels. Also examined are the moderating effects of worker gender and country of employment. Data analysis suggests

that high levels of spousal support increases worker satisfaction and decreases men's work stress levels.

Background

In the 1970's and 1980's attitudes changed about women working and their career choices. Before this time, outside of a few specialized fields, women in the workforce were a rarity. Now female employees are becoming more prevalent, even in traditionally male dominated jobs (Yogev, 1982). Along with an increase in female workers has come a rise in the numbers of dual career marriages (Guinn, 1989; Reynolds & Bennett, 1991; Sitterly & Duke, 1990).

One strategy for companies to become more competitive in the human resource market is to change personnel policies to attract and retain participants in dual career marriages (Kaufman, 1989). To implement this strategy, companies should go beyond simply removing barriers against dual career participants to actively encouraging employment of these individuals (Cook, 1989; Mikalachki & Mikalachki, 1991; McCook, Folzer, & School, 1991; Reynolds & Bennett, 1991). In this way forward thinking managers can increase their potential labor pool, and thus be able to hire and retain more talented workers (Kaufman, 1989). Such adaptive managers require information on workplace effects of dual career relationships to gain the maximum benefit from these workers.

Previous research by Steffy and Ashbaugh (1986) examined the relationship between spousal support and worker stress. These researchers conceptualized spousal support as being the level to which one partner offered tangible and emotional aid in the other partner's career. In this research it was posited that spousal support could act as an extra-work resource to aid workers in achieving desirable work outcomes. This definition will be used in this paper.

Steffy and Ashbaugh (1986) utilized a path analysis to examine the relationship between spousal support and stress. Using a sample of 118 nurses participating in dual career relationships, the researchers found a negative relationship between spousal support and work stress. Other research shows that spousal support tends to reduce job burnout (Izraeli, 1988), improve marital adjustment (Feinauer, & Williams-Evans, 1989), and reduce work-home conflict (Wiersma & Van-der-Berg, 1991). All of these outcomes are related to aspects of work stress.

Results from the preceding studies indicate a possible moderating variable in the spousal support/work stress relationship, due to the varying strengths of the

relationships (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Cooper, 1989; Hunter, Schmidt, & Jackson, 1982). Worker's gender is indicated as a potential moderating variable. This indication is due to the weaker relationship between spousal support and work stress in all female samples, as compared to mixed gender samples (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Bacharach, 1989; Cooper, 1989). Previous study results also suggest a stronger relationship between spousal support and stress reduction for men than for women. This proposition is indicated by a weaker relationship within the all female sample. These findings lead to the following hypotheses.

- H1: Worker gender will moderate the relationship between level of spousal support received and worker stress.
- H1a: At low levels of spousal support both men and women will show equally high levels of stress.
- H1b: At high levels of spousal support men will show lower levels of stress than women.

A somewhat different line of inquiry was taken by Rosin (1990). This researcher examined the effects of spousal support through a qualitative approach. Structured interviews with fifteen men provided data for a detailed analysis of experiences in dual career marriages. Results implied a direct relationship between job satisfaction and spousal support. However, since only men were studied, it is unclear if these findings are generalizable to women.

It is tentatively proposed that spousal support will decrease work stress for both men and women, since work satisfaction is a more general construct than work stress (Robbins, 1993). However, since job satisfaction is linked to work stress (Robbins, 1993; Rosin, 1990) it is expected that there will be a stronger relationship between spousal support received and job satisfaction for men than for women. These propositions lead to the following hypotheses;

- H2: There will be a significant and positive relationship between level of spousal support received and job satisfaction for both men and women.
- H2a: Worker gender will have a moderating effect in the relationship between level of spousal support received and job satisfaction.
- H2a: There will be a stronger relationship between level of spousal support received and job satisfaction for men than for women.

Other research on dual career couples has indicated that country of employment may moderate spousal support's effect on work place outcomes, especially in relation to work stress (Izraeli, 1988). This moderating effect may be due to differences in marriage norms among cultures,

different job characteristics between countries, or a combination of these and other factors. It is therefore expected that country of employment will moderate the relationship between level of spousal support received and work stress and job satisfaction. This proposition is formally stated in hypotheses 3 and 4.

H3: Country of employment will moderate the relationship between level of spousal support received and worker stress level.

H4: Country of employment will moderate the relationship between level of spousal support received and worker job satisfaction.

Methodology

This research is part of a larger international study measuring various aspects of dual career marriages and workplace outcomes (Bures, Henderson, and Worley, 1992). The survey instrument is derived from a questionnaire developed and tested by King and Winett (1986). Questionnaires were completed during the years 1990 and 1991 by workers identifying themselves as partners in dual career marriages. Participants were employed at private financial organizations and public institutions of higher education. These organizations were located in the Southeastern United States, Maritime Canada, and Western Australia.

As with most research on dual career marriages, individual partners, rather than paired couples, were studied (Bird & Russell, 1986; Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Rosin, 1990). This research design does introduce the possibility of bias, since spouses may disagree on the level of support given/received. Due to questionnaire length (questions used in this article as well as other data collected) the researchers believed that requiring spouses to participate would decrease the usable sample size to a point of endangering research feasibility.

The independent variable used in this analysis was the level of job support received from a worker's spouse. Variables used to test for moderating effects were worker gender and country of employment. Spousal support is conceptualized as the degree to which a spouse is supportive of the respondent's work (Steffy & Ashbaugh, 1986). This measure was operationalized by asking each respondent to answer the following question: "In general, how supportive is your spouse when it comes to your working?" Respondents would then classify their spouse on a five point scale from extremely unsupportive to extremely supportive.

Most workers classified their spouses as being extremely supportive (a score of 5), with 54% of all workers choosing

this category. Also, few respondents chose the extremely unsupportive classification. To minimize the discrepancy between classifications, workers reporting an extremely supportive spouse were classified as receiving high levels of spousal support. All other workers were classified as receiving low levels of support. This coding technique is similar to others used in cognitive referent rating measures (Graen & Scandura, 1987).

Dependent variables were the levels of stress experienced by workers as a consequence of their jobs, and worker job satisfaction. Stress was measured by the summation of two questions. One question asked respondents how much stress they felt at work due to their jobs. The other question asked how much stress the same workers perceived to occur at home as a result of their jobs. Each question was on a five point scale, with 5 representing an extreme amount of stress, and 1 indicating a minimal amount of stress. The resulting combined stress score ranged from 2 to 10. Job satisfaction was measured by a single question asking workers how satisfied they were with their job. This question was measured on a 5 point scale. A global, general statement question is considered to be the most valid measure of job satisfaction (Robbins, 1993).

Both of these measures were transformed using the *z* transformation (Gonick & Smith, 1993). The resulting transform has a zero mean and a unity standard deviation, useful to researchers in making comparisons between the effects of various independent variables. By using the *z* transform researchers can readily see how much the dependent variable changes in relation to a unit change in the independent variable.

Analysis of variance was used to examine study data. Testing for moderators followed the technique proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986). These authors suggested examination of the interaction term between the independent variable and the potential moderator variable. If there is a significant interaction, researchers are justified in concluding that the hypothesized variable acts as a moderator (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994). Therefore, for both job stress and job satisfaction, interaction terms were examined between level of spousal support and gender, and level of spousal support and country of employment. Examining only the relationships hypothesized reduces the capitalization on chance inherent in examining all possible interactions (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1988).

Results

From the survey, 1,136 usable questionnaires were collected. Of these, approximately 39% were completed by

men and 61% by women. Public industry respondents accounted for approximately 60% of completed surveys, with private industry accounting for the remaining 40%. Roughly one third of respondents came from each country. Demographics from this survey are listed in table 1.

Male	441
Female	695
Private Sector	674
Public Sector	462
U.S.A	390
Canada	367
Australia	379

There is a .58 correlation between perceived stress from a person's job at home and at work. This association is significant at the .01 level, high enough to demonstrate adequate reliability. Given this convergence, the measures were combined to produce a single stress variable.

For stress levels, results show a significant interaction effect between spousal support and gender. This finding

supports hypothesis 1. Simple effects tests were used to follow up significant interactions (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1988). These tests support hypotheses 1a and 1b. The simple effects show no significant difference in stress between male and female workers when spousal support is low. When spousal support is high women have significantly higher stress levels than men. Congruent with these findings, simple effects show no significant difference in stress levels for women regardless of level of support received. In comparison, simple effects do show that men who receive high levels of spousal support have significantly lower stress. Based on these findings, hypotheses H1a and H1b are supported. Results are presented in table 2.

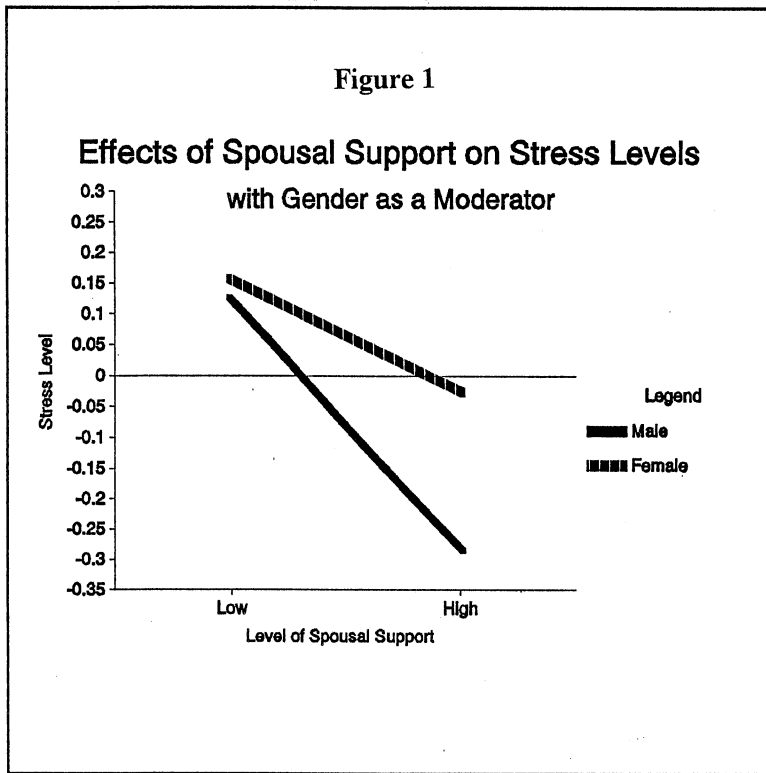
The interaction between gender and level of spousal support is presented graphically in figure 1. In this graph, stress levels for female workers are shown to decrease with a high level of spousal support, but this decrease is not significant.

Table 3 presents means, standard deviations, and number of observations in each cell. This table provides a quantitative assessment of work stress differences for the subpopulations indicated through moderator analysis. Findings show that men and women have approximately equal work stress levels (.12 and .15 respectively) when they receive a low level of spousal support. With a high level of spousal support, men's stress levels decrease by .40, as compared to a .17 decrease for women.

Test	F statistic	p-value
Main test of moderator effect	4.27	p < .05
Simple Effects		
For Gender across Levels of Spousal Support		
High	9.5014	p < .01
Low	0.1266	p > .10
For Spousal Support across Gender		
Male	17.7720	p < .01
Female	5.5514	p > .025 ²

Analysis of variance results show a significant relationship between spousal support and job satisfaction. Workers receiving high levels of spousal support have average job satisfaction scores of .14, as compared to a job satisfaction score of -.17 when spousal support is low. However, no significant interaction between spousal support and gender is indicated. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is supported, but hypotheses 2a and 2b are not.

Results also show no significant interaction between level of spousal support and country of



finding is most interesting considering the link between job satisfaction and job stress.

Also, hypotheses 3 and 4 are not supported. This result may be due to low variance between the cultures of the sampled countries. Previous studies analyzing cultural norms have shown similarities between the nations sampled in this study (Hofstede, 1983; Nath & Sadhu, 1988; Ronen & Shenkar, 1985). Researchers may wish to replicate this study in countries with greater cultural dissimilarity. Such an investigation may prove beneficial since dual career research from Israel provided results divergent from other study findings (Izraeli, 1988). Another possible line of inquiry may be to classify samples by dominant national culture, rather than by nationality alone.

Results from this study also imply that companies may need to rethink strategies for reducing individual stress and increasing job satisfaction. Currently, most businesses utilize individual intervention techniques. In other words, intervention plans are designed to aid

employment for either work stress or job satisfaction outcomes. Therefore, hypotheses 3 and 4 are not supported. Analysis results for hypotheses 2 through 4 are presented in table 4.

individuals in reducing their own stress (Mayfield & Mayfield, 1991) or increasing job satisfaction. Companies may need to enact more comprehensive plans to foster the support given by a worker's partner.

Conclusions

Study findings suggest that spousal support has a differential impact on men and women's work stress levels. Data analysis indicates that high levels of spousal support reduces men's stress more than women's stress levels. While such a finding seems to be compatible with past research, the reasons for these outcomes need to be investigated. Gender appears to have no significant moderating effect in relation to job satisfaction. This

This article indicates that spousal support significantly influences worker outcomes. Therefore, companies may wish to take steps in ensuring spouses of workers, as well as the workers, have some level of loyalty to the organization. Recent work has shown that in order to benefit from reciprocated loyalty organizations must provide commitment and support to individuals (Van Dyne, Graham, & Dienesch, 1994).

Methods for extending this mutuality to spousal

relations are not as clear. Some possibilities can be inferred from companies that have addressed, and are continuing to address, the dual career phenomenon. Successful examples include: aiding spouses of new hires in their own job search, either by hiring the spouse within the same organization or support for extra-organizational job

Table 3.
Descriptions Of Sub-populations For The Dependent Variable Work Stress

	Male	Female
High Spousal Support	m = -.28 s ² = 1.07 n = 236	m = -.02 s ² = .93 n = 378
Low Spousal Support	m = .12 s ² = .71 n = 205	m = .15 s ² = 1.14 n = 323


Table 4.
Tests Of Spousal Support's Effect On Job Stress With Moderator Tests

Test	F statisti	p-value
Spousal Support Effect	29.25	p < .01
Moderator Tests of the Spousal Support/Job Satisfaction Relationship		
Moderator = Gender	.01	p = .95
Moderator = Country of Employment	2.06	p = .11

searches; providing services to help couples with domestic responsibilities, such as day care; and providing more flexible schedules to accommodate the dual career situation.

No single research study is complete, including this analysis of dual career spousal support. One limitation of this work is the research setting. Industries in the sample were restricted to finance and higher education, even if a number of organizations from different countries were sampled. In order to determine generalizability across industries, future replications need to compare results across various industries. Also, studies need to focus on the similarities and differences in support needs for married and single workers, as well as investigating the reason for the support level's differential effects on men and women.

Suggestions For Future Research

While this is a preliminary examination of the role of spousal support, results demonstrate its importance to organizations. Future research should be directed toward defining strategies with which organizations may most effectively encourage spousal support. These strategies, contingent on moderators, should also be evaluated for their relationships to key outcome variables, such as performance, turnover, and job satisfaction. In particular, these future studies should distinguish the variance in effects for dual career versus single career employees. Finally, this recommended future agenda may help pave the way to more a satisfied, loyal, work force and an improved bottom-line. 

*** Footnotes ***

1. All authors share first authorship, order is alphabetical.
2. The critical level of the simple effects test is equal to the critical level of the interaction test divided by the number of simple effects tests, or .05/2.

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