

## Must We Forget Work to Dive Into Life? Psychological Detachment in Work-Family Research

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**Abstract** With the increase of work demands and the wide-spread use of smartphones, people have to deal with more and more work demands in their family life, which breaks the boundary between work and family, impedes recovery and leads to more work-family conflict. In this paper, we summarize the research on psychological detachment in the work-family domain and find that psychological detachment from work is influenced by family-related policies in organizations and buffers the impact of work stress on family life. A crossover effect of psychological detachment has been found in couples. Thus, we can say psychological detachment is of great importance to illustrate the psychological process in the work-family interface. However, psychological detachment is not necessarily a prerequisite of a satisfactory family life, for work-family interpersonal capitalization can boost marital satisfaction. Besides, the effect of psychological detachment is moderated by role salience and segmentation preference. Further, we summarized the latest findings about psychological detachment in work-family enhancement and family-work conflict/enhancement, which may inform future studies.

[Sun Fuzhuo. **Must We Forget Work to Dive Into Life? Psychological Detachment in Work-Family Research.** *Rep Opin* 2018;10(12):1-6]. ISSN 1553-9873 (print); ISSN 2375-7205 (online). <http://www.sciencepub.net/report>. 1. doi:[10.7537/marsroj101218.01](https://doi.org/10.7537/marsroj101218.01).

**Key words** psychological detachment; work-family interface; work family conflict; work-family interpersonal capitalization

### 1. Introduction

According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, in 2016, the number of employed women in China has increased by 16.56 million since 2010, accounting for 43.1% of the total employed population. The considerable number of women in the labor market means that the traditional idea of gender roles (i.e., that men are breadwinners and women are homemakers) no longer has its social basis. Men and women must take responsibility for both work and family; thus, the work-family relationship has become an important research topic. However, due to the widespread use of smartphones, many companies require employees to respond to work demands after work. With work constantly permeating into family life, people are unable to adequately set boundaries between work and family by time and place. A psychological boundary is also needed to effectively organize work and family domains and to cope with inter-role conflict and stress in both domains.

In a study on respite, Etzion, Eden, and Lapidot (1998) coined the item "detachment," which refers to an "individual's sense of being away from work situation." Psychological detachment means not only not working but also not thinking about work (Sonnetag, 2005) and it is the core concept of recovery (Eden, 2001). In Sonnetag's stressor-detachment model, psychological detachment

is the mediator of work stress and personal well-being (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015).

When a person psychologically detaches from work, he or she can get rid of work stress and strengthen the work-family boundary, which is the prerequisite for restoring one's own resources and fulfilling family responsibilities. Generally speaking, psychological detachment is the mediator between work stressor and marital satisfaction or work-family conflict (Demsky, Ellis & Fritz, 2014; Germeys & De Gieter, 2016). Does psychological detachment have the same effect on the work-family relationship across different types of families? Is psychological detachment indispensable in order to live a happy family life? In this paper, studies of psychological detachment in the work-family relationship will be reviewed. This review may shed light on the causes and mechanisms of work-family/family-work conflict and work-family/family-work enhancement.

### 2. Psychological detachment

*Psychological detachment* is defined as the absence of work and work-related thoughts. The term also refers to being engaged in one's hobby, family activities, or parenting work. Exploratory factor analysis shows that psychological detachment is a unique recovery experience that is distinct from relaxation, mastery, and control (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007). Studies have shown that psychological

disengagement is moderately related to different kinds of work stress and psychological well-being and weakly related to personality variables and coping styles (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007). For people with different personality traits and coping styles, psychological detachment plays an important role in work stress and happiness.

The most widely used measurement for psychological detachment is a subscale of the recovery experience questionnaire developed by Sonnetag (2007). The questionnaire includes four factors: psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control. The psychological detachment subscale consists of four items and has good reliability ( $\alpha=.84$ ) (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011; Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015).

Psychological detachment involves neutral emotional valence and does not necessarily lead to good or bad consequences (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007, 2015). In the absence of psychological detachment, people are likely to be immersed in repetitive thoughts, rumination and worry, which hinders an employee from playing his or her role in the family. A lack of psychological detachment may also overlap with reflecting on positive events at work and generating exciting ideas of work (Meier, Cho, & Dumani, 2016). This kind of positive emotion may have a positive impact on family life.

### **3. Theoretical bases of psychological detachment in work-family research**

The study of psychological detachment in the work-family relationship is generally based on the conservation of resources theory and boundary theory.

The conservation of resources theory proposes that people "strive to retain, protect and build resources." Stress arises when resources are lost or when an individual is under the threat of losing resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Individuals will use resources to prevent the loss of resources or acquire new resources (Hobfoll, 2002). The theory explains how the work and family domain interact with each other from a resource perspective. It is generally believed that job demands consume resources and family can help individuals to restore resources (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2000). However, leaving work places is not equal to getting rid of work demands. All kinds of work stressor can permeate into family life and hinder the process of recovery, including remote work through the internet, work messages that need a timely reply, and the intrusion of work-related thoughts. In other words, an individual is still under the threat of losing resources, unless he or she psychologically detaches from work. According to the conservation of resources theory, psychological detachment is the key variable between the work and

family domains (Sanz-Vergel, Demerouti, Bakker, & Moreno-Jiménez, 2011).

Border theory propose that people establish and maintain boundaries between different life domains to simplify and organize their surrounding environment (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). There are three forms of work-family boundaries: spatial, temporal, and psychological (Clark, 2000). The permeability between boundaries allows content in one domain to enter into another and cause impact (Hall & Richter, 1989). According to the border theory, the concept of psychological detachment is the indicator of boundary permeability, which helps explain the effects related to work-family psychological boundaries (e.g., spillover effects).

### **4. Psychological detachment in work-family research**

#### **4.1 Work-family conflict and psychological detachment**

Work-family conflict is the inter-role conflict that occurs when work and family roles are incompatible, and this conflict can involve time, energy or behavior (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Framed in the conservation of resources theory and the effort-recovery model, psychological detachment can help people to restore energy, thus can explain the mechanism of energy-based work-family conflict.

One study showed that psychological detachment mediates the impact of workplace aggression on work-family conflict. Those who have high psychological detachment have less work-family conflict (Demskey, Ellis, & Fritz, 2014). Psychological detachment also mediates the negative impact of workload on marital satisfaction. Workload can reduce employees' psychological detachment, and thus reduce marital satisfaction. The effect is stronger in those who prefer work-family segmentation (Germeys & De Gieter, 2016). In addition, psychological detachment can not only buffer the effect of workplace stress on family life, but also mediate the impact of work-family/family-work conflict on personal well-being (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009).

Besides, psychological detachment does not have the same importance for people with different work/family salience to reduce work-family/family-work conflict. A diary study showed that psychological detachment from the family can reduce family-work conflict for employees with low work salience, whereas psychological detachment from work is more important for employees with high family salience and can significantly reduce work-family conflict (Sanz-Vergel, Demerouti, Bakker, & Moreno-Jiménez, 2011).

#### 4.2 Psychological detachment and the crossover effect between family members

The psychological detachment of one person can affect his or her partner and further affect outcome variables in family life, such as marital satisfaction and family well-being. Working at home, which is a typical lack-of-detachment behavior, leads to more spouse-reported work-family conflict and more complaints (Green, Schaefer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2011). This interaction pattern may further lead to escalated conflicts between partners and a decline in marital satisfaction.

Further research on the mechanisms of interaction between partners suggests that psychological detachment and work-family segmentation preferences can crossover between partners and have further effects. With psychological detachment and relaxation as the main experience, one's recovery has a positive predictive effect on relationship satisfaction and well-being of the partner (Rodríguez-Muñoz, Sanz-Vergel, Antino, Demerouti, & Bakker, 2017). An employee's work-family segmentation preference can affect his or her partner's psychological detachment, which can affect the well-being of both partners (Hahn, Binnewies, & Dormann, 2014; Hahn & Dormann, 2013). A diary study showed that one's emotional well-being at night is affected by psychological detachment of oneself and one's partner. The more psychologically detached from work, the more the sense of tranquility experienced at night. But this effect only occurs in families without children (Hahn, Binnewies, & Dormann, 2014). In general, the presence of a child can impair the crossover effect between partners.

Psychological detachment is not a sine qua non for a happier family life. A lack of psychological detachment may also be positive for the partner. A study on dual-earner families showed that individuals who travel frequently can gain resources from a satisfactory travel and crossover the experience to the partner by sharing the travel experience with the partner (Bakker et al., 2009). A recent study using experience sampling method found that employee's work engagement may contribute to family satisfaction and work-family balance, which is mediated through work-family interpersonal capitalization (Ilies, Liu, & Zheng, 2017).

#### 4.3 Psychological Detachment and Organizational Policy

At the organizational level, the organization's work/family-related policies also affect the employee's family life by affecting the employee's level of psychological detachment after work. For example, more and more organizations advocate "borderless work", which allows employees to complete work

"anytime, anywhere." This working pattern breaks the boundary between work and family while improving work efficiency. This prevents employees from psychological detachment after work and interferes with the work-life balance of employees (Mellner, Aronsson, & Kecklund, 2014).

Psychological detachment is the mediator between borderless work and employee work-family balance. A work borderless work in time (i.e., working in non-working hours) is significantly positively correlated with longer working hours and lack of psychological detachment. Lack of psychological detachment further results in more sleep problems and less sleep time (Mellner, Kecklund, Kompier, Sariaslan, & Aronsson, 2016). A study conducted in China also found that work connectivity behavior after hours (WCBA) reduces one's psychological detachment, which leads to time conflicts and energy conflicts between work and family (Ma, Zhou, Xie, & Zhang, 2014).

Organizational norms for the work-family boundary and individual border management affect individual psychological detachment through the use of communication tools outside the workplace (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011). By consciously establishing boundaries for the use of work-related communication tools in family life, psychological detachment and sleep quality can be improved (Barber & Jenkins, 2014). Work-family segmentation norms perceived by employees moderates the effect between work-related smartphone use and psychological detachment, and for individuals with high work-family segmentation, work-related smartphone use will result in more lack of psychological detachment (Derks, van Mierlo, & Schmitz, 2014).

#### 5. Discussion and future directions

The studies on the work-family relationship have mainly focused on several perspectives, such as, role conflict, border theory, social identity theory, culture and social support. These studies from different perspectives are relatively isolated in theory. Furthermore, these research perspectives focus on the impact of family, organization, social culture and other environmental factors on individuals, but ignore the individual psychological process of the work-family interface. Psychological detachment just makes up for these shortcomings. On the one hand, psychological detachment describes a key psychological state, that is, psychologically away from work, and explains the psychological process of individuals crossing the work-family boundary from the perspective of self-regulation. On the other hand, psychological disengagement is the precondition of completing the role transformation from work to family, individual recovery and setting the work-non-work field

boundary. It has explanatory power under different theoretical frameworks and plays a role as a bridge between theories. And psychological detachment is influenced by personal factors such as neuroticism, conscientiousness, overcommitment, attachment type, and role salience (Potok & Littman-Ovadia, 2014; Sanz-Vergel, Demerouti, Bakker, & Moreno-Jiménez, 2011; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). The introduction of this variable into the work-family research also provides a new path for studying individual differences in the work-family relationship.

Influenced by positive psychology and positive organizational behavior, there are two research trends in the field of work-family conflict. The first trend involves a switch in the research focus from inter-domain conflict to positive impacts between domains. The second trend involves a switch from focusing on the impact of work on family to focusing on family-to-work impact. In addition, some Chinese researchers have suggested that the localization of work-family research should also receive more attention.

### 5.1 Positive effects of the lack of psychological detachment

In studies on work-family conflict, psychological detachment has explained how stressors at work influence family life. As the work-family/family-work enhancement has drawn more and more attention, researchers believe that psychological detachment does not necessarily bring the best results in the family domain.

Work-family capitalization, defined as “discussing positive work events and experiences with one’s spouse or partner at home” (Ilies et al., 2011, p. 116), is a positive state of psychological non-detachment. Recent researches on this concept have illustrated how work can positively influence life. Psychological detachment emphasizes the relief from work, whereas work-family interpersonal capitalization refers to talking with spouses or other family members about positive events or experiences encountered at work. This recall is not a consumption, but a supplement to the resources in the family. The study found family interpersonal capitalization can positively impact job satisfaction, the effects of which transcend the pleasures of positive events or the number of positive events (Ilies, Keeney, & Scott, 2011). This behavior mediates the impact of work engagement on family satisfaction and work-family balance (Ilies, Liu, Liu & Zheng, 2017). Some studies have found that work-family interpersonal capitalization plays a mediating role between work engagement and work-family enhancement (Sonnentag, 2014), indicating that the cognitive path of that work input affects family life; others also

believe that this behavior plays a regulatory role (Culbertson, Mills, & Fullagar, 2012). Studies on the positive effect of lack of psychological detachment will shed light on the explanation of mechanism of work-family enhancement, a cognitive rather than emotional path.

### 5.2 The reverse process of psychological detachment

Psychological detachment describes the psychological process of individuals crossing the work-family boundary. Correspondingly, when going back to work, the individual has to go through a process of detaching from the family and reconnecting to the work. This process shows how family life impacts work. The impact may play a crucial role in job commitment and performance. Sonnentag et al. (2016) coined the term *psychological reattachment*, which refers to thinking about work-related events before the start of a day’s work and psychologically getting prepared for work.

Through psychological reattachment, the individual remobilizes his or her energy, redirects his or her attention to work, and allocates resources to work. A study shows that the level of psychological detachment at night can positively predict the level of psychological reattachment in the morning and further predict the level of work engagement during the day (Sonnentag & Kühnel, 2016). This concept is useful in the examination of the role of the family sector in the field of work and further research is warranted.

### 5.3 Cross-cultural study of psychological detachment

A meta-analysis showed that current researches on psychological detachment are mainly conducted in Europe, and only a very small number of studies are conducted in the US or other regions. There is no significant difference in the results of the antecedent and outcome variables of psychological detachment (Wendsche & Lohmannhaislah, 2016) amongst the researches. However, if we turn our vision to Asia, in the collectivism cultural context, which emphasize dedication and individual commitment to the organization, employees are more likely to have higher work salience and less able to fully psychologically detached from work during non-working hours, thus weakening the role of psychological detachment.

In addition, with the aging of the population the increase in living expense in many developed countries, young people are under increasing pressure to raise children and support older adults. The family is not only a place for recovery, but also a source of great stress. Under the family pressure, refusing to psychologically detach from work may also be a way to get rid of family stress. It is of great significance to

explore the true connotation and influence of psychological detachment in different culture backgrounds. And qualitative method should be used more so that we can use know more about employees' true attitude about work and family relationship.

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11/24/2018