

RUNNING HEAD: Social Comparison and Work-Family Conflict

It's All Relative: Social Comparison and Work-Family Conflict

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ABSTRACT

The workplace is an environment rife with social influences. However, the organizational literature, and particularly the literature on work-family conflict, has largely overlooked these influences. Moreover, *social comparison* specifically has been proposed to be a ubiquitous and important phenomenon within organizations, yet has received very little attention within the organizational literature. As a result, in this paper we perform two studies to explore the impact of social comparison on perceptions of work-family conflict. In the first study we demonstrate that people engaging in more social comparisons regarding work-family conflict perceive greater amounts of work-family conflict. In the second study we experimentally manipulate social comparison and find that for individuals who are more materialistic, comparing themselves to upward others results in greater perceptions of work-family conflict. Practical and research implications of our results are discussed.

Keywords: social comparison, social influences, work-family conflict, experiment

It's All Relative: Social Comparison and Work-Family Conflict

Work-family conflict (WFC) is an occupational stressor that is becoming increasingly important due to factors such as an increase in dual-earner families, a decrease in the boundaries between work and family roles, and an increased interest in employees' health and well-being (Ford, Heinen, & Langkamer, 2007; Guest, 2002). WFC has been shown to relate to important outcomes in the work and family domains such as psychological distress, job dissatisfaction, lowered organizational commitment, turnover, and lowered life satisfaction (Allen et al, 2000; Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000).

Despite the inherently social nature of both the work and family domains, in the WFC literature the impact of the social environment has been largely ignored. When social influences are considered, they are largely over-simplified into the categories of social demands and social support (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Importantly, very little research or theory has directly addressed the potentially powerful role of social influences on perceptions of WFC.

However, there is ample evidence that the social environment has a strong impact on our perceptions (e.g., Asch, 1955; Buunk & Nauta, 2000; Lazarus, 1993). Few would argue that the domains of work and family are immune to these social influences, and in fact many have argued that even the concepts of work and family are actually social constructions (Katz & Kahn, 1966). The purpose of the present paper is thus to help broaden the WFC literature by presenting an initial investigation of one social influence, social comparison, in relation to WFC perceptions.

To this end, we will first discuss the evidence indicating the importance of social influences in the workplace and specifically, in the study of stress. In particular, we will discuss social comparison theory and describe its role in the work environment. We will then turn to the

work-family literature and review existing research on social influences on WFC. Next, we will discuss why social comparisons are particularly likely to play a role in perceptions of WFC and propose the term *work-family focused social comparison* (WFSC) to denote this type of comparison. In Study 1, we will then propose and test some initial hypotheses related to WFSC, based on the social comparison literature and applied to the work-family field. In Study 2, we will conduct an experiment to assess the impact of upward social comparisons on perceptions of WFC.

This study will contribute to the literature in three main ways. First, by beginning to consider aspects of the social environment, we may be able to better understand the process of experiencing and managing WFC. This study will serve as an initial foray into considering these potential influences. Second, because social comparison is a highly influential process that has been applied to many areas of the organizational literature, applying this concept to WFC is an important extension for the social comparison and work-family literatures. Third, by combining survey and experimental methodologies, this study will help advance the work-family literature by providing an alternative set of methodologies not typically seen within this field of study.

Social influences at work

There is ample evidence that the social environment has profound implications for the way that we feel, think, and act (e.g., Buunk & Nauta, 2000). In the broader social psychology literature, researchers have established that people are highly social creatures and that we live in a world imbued with social meaning (e.g., Katz & Kahn, 1966). Moreover, there is evidence that the workplace specifically is a particularly salient source of social information (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). As a result, it is unsurprising that within the work stress literature, the social environment has been found to be quite important. Although much stress research has focused on

the impact of social support and demands (e.g., Dolan & Renaud, 1992; Lindorff, 2001), a few researchers have begun to explore social influences in a more complex way by applying theories from social psychology to explore the role of social identity and social cognition at work.

For example, Ibarra and Andrews (1993) found that the position and connectedness of an employee within the workplace social network could affect their perceptions of somewhat objective workplace conditions such as job autonomy. Similarly, Haslam & Reicher (2006) found that social identity was strongly related to perceptions of stress. In their study, participants were randomly assigned to either high- or low-status groups. Contrary to expectations, the strong social identity experienced by members of the low status group served as a buffer for stress, whereas the weak social identity experienced by members of the high-status group seemed to increase stress.

Relatedly, Schaufeli, van Dierendonck, and van Gorp (1996) found that social exchange predicted burnout. The authors found that perceiving a lack of reciprocity in one's relationships with co-workers and the organization was associated with increases in burnout. Finally, Dick (2000) explored perceptions of potentially stressful events by police officers. She found that social constructions seemed to impact the ways in which police officers perceived stress, in that certain beliefs shared at the group level served to either "normalize" or "pathologize" certain events.

These results indicate that the social environment may, in addition to producing sources of support and demand, actually influence the development of stress perceptions through various types of social influence. We will now turn to one social influence in particular that has been shown to have an impact on our thoughts and behaviors: social comparison. The social

comparison literature is broad and multifaceted, but we will focus our discussion on providing an overview of social comparison theory and how it relates to stressors within the workplace.

Social comparison

The process of social comparison has been described as a fundamental aspect of human behavior that plays a powerful role in daily life (Buunk & Nauta, 2000). The term social comparison denotes the process by which individuals desire, seek out, and interpret information about others in relation to the self. The act (whether conscious or unconscious) of interpreting or “thinking about” information about others *as it compares with information about the self* is seen as the core element of this process (Wood, 1996). The key underlying assumption behind social comparison theory is that individuals desire to maintain stable and accurate self-appraisals, and that often objective information with which to form these appraisals is impossible to come by (Taylor, Buunk, & Aspinwall, 1990).

As such, in an effort to form accurate self-appraisals individuals are driven to seek information from other people as a means to evaluate themselves (Festinger, 1954). This desire, which underlies the majority of social comparison activity, is called “self-evaluation” (Wood, 1989). There is evidence that the desire to hold stable and correct evaluations of ourselves occurs with respect to many different characteristics and circumstances (e.g., abilities, opinions, life events; Festinger, 1954). Researchers have noted that the self-evaluative information found through social comparisons plays a role in important outcomes within organizational settings (Ashford, 1986; Ashford, Blatt, & Vandewalle, 2003).

Social comparison can be either a deliberate, rational process or can occur automatically without intent or motivation (Goethals & Klein, 2000). In the case of automatic or unintentional social comparison, it has been shown that information about other people, even when presented

subliminally, triggers social comparison. Additionally, social comparisons made at work may be the result of formal procedures (e.g., mentoring and performance appraisal) (Greenberg, Ashton-James, and Ashkanasy, 2007). As a result, social comparisons are highly likely in the workplace.

There is also evidence that comparisons to others can impact our attitudes and behaviors in the workplace. For example, by showing that comparison to a more qualified job applicant decreased self-esteem, and comparison to a less qualified job applicant increased self-esteem, Morse and Gergen (1970) introduced the notion that social comparison could have an impact on self-perceptions in the workplace. In addition, social comparison of income has also been found to affect a person's subjective well-being (Hagerty, 2000). In a recent summary of the impact of social comparison in the workplace, Greenberg et al. (2007) noted that comparisons can impact varying workplace processes such as organizational justice, performance appraisal, virtual work, affect, stress, and leadership.

The social comparisons individuals engage in can provide information that leads them to believe others are doing better, worse, or about the same as them. These are termed upward, downward, and lateral comparisons, respectively. Comparison information can result in either assimilation (movement of the evaluation of the self in the direction of the comparison other) or contrast (movement of self-evaluation away from the comparison other) effects. There is evidence that the workplace is more likely to induce contrast effects, however, due to its competitive nature (Brown et al., 2007). As a result, within the organizational environment upward social comparisons generally have negative effects on individual outcomes (e.g., decreased job satisfaction; lower organizational commitment), while downward social comparisons are positively related to these same variables (Brown et al., 2007).

Within the workplace, there are three key reasons to believe that comparisons are more likely to be upward and subsequently to have a detrimental effect on individual well-being. First, work represents a competitive environment (Greenberg et al., 2007), and thus there is great potential for others to be utilizing self-presentational strategies in order to appear as positive as possible. As a result, individuals are more likely to encounter unrealistically positive information about others' status. Although it is possible for coworkers to develop friendships within the workplace wherein honest information regarding others' troubles and hardships is shared, it is much more likely that superficial information regarding families is being encountered about the majority of individuals' coworkers. Second, there is some evidence that the desire for self-evaluation will result in upward comparisons because individuals wishing to self-evaluate are usually focused on improvement (Wood, Michela, & Giordano, 2000). Because social comparison is primarily used for self-improvement and not for the purposes of coping, there is good reason to suspect, therefore, that social comparisons will be upward.

Finally, proximity to others who may be judged as similar as a result of their job title or the fact that they work for the same company may make coworkers a particularly salient target for comparison (e.g., Austin, 1977; Lawrence, 2006). As such, individuals may use coworkers as comparison targets even when those coworkers are not similar. Given these factors, there should be a tendency for workplace social comparisons to be upward in direction. As such, it is likely that individuals making more frequent upward social comparisons will experience negative consequences. Indeed, upward comparisons in the workplace have been associated with lowered self-efficacy, lowered performance, and higher levels of burnout (Carmona et al., 2008; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2006).

In total it seems likely that social comparison and other social factors have an impact on many processes within the workplace. Moreover, it is likely that social comparisons in particular will lead to increased perceptions of stress due to the fact that they are likely to be upward and to induce contrast effects. Given the potential importance of social comparison processes, we will now review the extent to which this and other social factors have been considered in relation to WFC.

The status of social influences in current work-family research

As has been noted, although work-family research has become prolific social influences have garnered little attention in this area. Within the WFC literature, the social environment has largely been considered only as a source of either social support or social demands (e.g., Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011). Social demands (e.g., having young children) are generally treated as an antecedent of WFC while social support (e.g., having a supportive supervisor) is often treated as a buffer against WFC or a mechanism for coping with WFC (e.g., Behson, 2002; Carlson & Perrewé, 1999). Summaries of the WFC literature also reflect this trend. In a recent meta-analysis by Michel et al., (2011) for example, the authors tested a model of WFC where social support from work and family were the only social factors considered. Other recent quantitative and qualitative reviews have also included social factors, but only through the mechanisms of social support and social demand (e.g., Byron, 2005; Eby et al., 2005).

Although social demands and social support are certainly important factors to consider in the area of WFC, considering *only* these factors has prevented the work-family literature from exploring the many potential implications of the socially nested nature of work and family. The process of navigating the roles of work and family is undoubtedly subject to social influences,

however very little consideration has been given to this fact. For example, very little research or theory has addressed the potentially powerful role of other people in helping to mold perceptions of WFC. Given the likelihood that social influences are playing a role in these perceptions, we argue that work-family researchers should begin to consider them in earnest. In this paper we hope to take a first step toward considering the role of the social environment in WFC by proposing that social comparison will relate to WFC perceptions.

Study 1

In addition to the ever-present need to hold accurate and stable self-evaluations, the nature of WFC itself may make it especially susceptible to the influence of social comparison. Specifically, research has shown that social comparison is more likely under conditions of ambiguity or stress (Brown et al, 2007; Schachter, 1959; Taylor, Buunk, & Aspinwall, 1990). Although individuals may desire accurate information regarding the extent to which they are effectively managing the demands of work and family, accurate information is rarely available. Due to the less objective and more ambiguous nature of WFC and other types of stress, they are thus highly susceptible to social influences such as comparison (Lewig & Dollard, 2001). We propose the term *work-family focused social comparison (WFSC)* to denote the process that occurs when individuals compare their work-family circumstances with the work-family circumstances of others.

In Study 1, we asked participants to report the extent to which they engage in WFSC. Note that we do not specify the direction of these comparisons (i.e., upward or downward) because this information may not be consciously available to participants. However, given the arguments described above regarding workplace comparisons, we contend that individuals may receive unrealistically positive information about the work-family balance of others, thus

“stacking the deck” towards upward comparisons. For example, colleagues are motivated to engage in self-presentation to portray a healthy balance between work and family. Thus, when individuals compare themselves to these colleagues, they may be unknowingly comparing themselves to an inaccurately positive standard.

Further, we predict that social comparison will in fact have an impact on individuals’ perceptions of the extent to which they are effectively managing the demands of work and family. In particular, given the prevalence of work-to-family conflict and the likelihood that people will make comparisons within the workplace, we will focus on work-to-family conflict.

Based on the literature on social comparison, we further propose that this process will impact relevant work-family attitudes and emotions. Specifically, as noted by Lazarus, (1993) our perceptions of stressful situations are strongly impacted by appraisal processes like those occurring during social comparison. Due to the fact that participants are expected to receive unrealistically positive information about the work-family experiences of others (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2007), we predict that:

H1: Individuals engaging in greater amounts of WFSC will report higher levels of WFC.

Further, increased perceptions of WFC have been shown to be related to various negative outcomes for individuals, both in and out of the work domain (e.g., job dissatisfaction, lowered organizational commitment, and turnover; Allen et al., 2000). As a result, we propose that the increases in WFC perceptions associated with increased social comparison will also relate to increases in negative outcomes for individuals. Specifically, we propose that WFC will serve as a mediating mechanism between social comparison and turnover intentions and physical health problems. Because social comparison is such a pervasive process and has such a powerful impact

on attitudes, we propose that WFC will be a mediator of the relationship between social comparison and WFC (see Figure 1 for all Study 1 hypotheses).

H2: Individuals engaging in greater amounts of WFSC will report higher intentions to turnover, partially mediated by WFC.

H3: Individuals engaging in greater amounts of WFSC will report greater physical health problems, partially mediated by WFC.

Study 1 Methods

Sample

The data for this study were collected as part of a larger study. Participants were alumni from a large Midwestern university who worked in a wide variety of organizations and occupations (e.g., attorney, art teacher, medical technologist). The sample was stratified on gender and marital status such that there were equal numbers of invitations sent to male versus female and married versus single participants. The sample was also stratified on age such that 15% of the invitations were sent to those below 24 years; 25% to 25-34 years; 35% to 35-44 years; 20% to 45-54 years and 15% to those above 55 years of age.

While the invitation was sent via e-mail to 25,923 alumni, approximately 29% of the invitations bounced back and did not reach the intended participants, leaving a potential sample of 18,405. Out of those who viewed the invitation e-mail (22.5%; N = 4142), 60% (2485) accessed the survey and 46.7% (1935) filled out the survey. To be eligible to be part of the final sample the respondents had to work 30 hours or more per week, be U.S. residents, and fill out the majority of the items from the measures involved. Based on these criteria the responses of 548 participants were discarded (most of these were participants who filled out one or two items and then quit).

The final sample for this study consisted of 1387 alumni who were compensated for participation with a \$15 gift certificate to an online retailer. The mean age of participants was 38 years ($SD = 11.21$) and 47% were male. The marital status of the sample was as follows: 69% married, 28% single, and 3% in a domestic partnership. Fifty-one percent (51%) of the sample had spouses or partners who worked full-time. Fifty-one percent (51%) of the sample did not have any children living at home while 49% had one or more. The ethnic breakdown was as follows: 90% Caucasian, 3.7% African American, 3.2% Asian, and 1.1% Hispanic. On average, respondents worked 46 hours per week ($SD = 8.56$).

Measures

Control variables. Because WFC has been shown to relate to demands from the family and work roles, we included several demographic variables to use as controls. As is often done in the work-family literature, we assessed hours per week of work as a proxy for work demand. This was assessed with a one-item measure asking participants to report how many hours per week they usually worked. Similarly, we followed previous authors in assessing home demand by measuring marital status and number of children at home. Marital status was coded as either married/partnered or single. Number of children was coded as either none or one or more children at home.

Work-family conflict. Work-to-family conflict was assessed using six-items from the measure of WFC developed by Carlson et al. (2000). The measure consists of a series of statements regarding one's work and family situation, to which participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree-strongly agree). The scale assesses both time- and strain-based work-to-family conflict. An example statement is: "My work keeps me from my family activities more than I would like." In

the current study, the reliability of the scale was $\alpha = .91$.

WFSC. A measure of WFC focused social comparison was developed based on past measures of social comparison orientation (e.g., Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Five items were created to reflect the extent to which participants engaged in social comparison related to their effectiveness in managing work and family. Participants were asked to indicate their responses to the following items on a 5-point scale (strongly disagree-strongly agree). Alpha reliability for the scale was .84.

1. I tend to compare myself with others when thinking about how I balance work and family.
2. I don't consider how others are doing when I make judgments of how well I am balancing work and family.
3. I pay attention to how other people balance work and family.
4. If I want to find out how well I am balancing work and family, I look to others for comparison.
5. I feel it is not appropriate to compare my work-family balance to other people's.

Turnover Intentions. Intentions to quit were measured by the following three items from a scale developed by Colarelli (1984): "I frequently think of quitting my job," "I am planning to search for a new job during the next 12 months," and "If I get another job that pays as well, I will quit this job." The response scale ranged from 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Alpha reliability for this scale was $\alpha = .86$.

Physical Health Symptoms. Physical symptoms were assessed using the Physical Symptoms Inventory developed by Spector and Jex (1998). The measure consists of a list of 18 symptoms and asks participants to indicate whether they have had the symptom in the past 30

days. If they have experienced a symptom, participants are asked whether they saw a doctor for that symptom. The 18 items are averaged to arrive at a final score, with higher scores indicating greater physical health problems. Alpha reliability for this scale was $\alpha = .74$.

Study 1 Results

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables. Intercorrelations indicated that the demographic potential control variables were related to the study variables, and as a result in all following analyses all demographic variables were used as controls. For all analyses, results for time- and strain-based conflict did not differ, and the scales were therefore combined for ease of presentation.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that people engaging in a greater amount of WFSC would report higher levels of WFC. Results of linear regression showed that WFSC was significantly positively related to WFC, even after controlling job and family demands, $F(4,1270) = 42.89$, $R^2 = .35$, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $\beta = .13$, all $p < .05$. Thus, hypothesis 1 was supported such that people who engaged in a greater amount of WFSC reported higher levels of WFC.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 predicted that the relationship between social comparison and negative outcomes (turnover intentions and physical health symptoms) would be mediated by WFC. In order to assess mediation, we used Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation procedures followed by a Sobel test to assess the indirect effect of the mediator. All interval level variables were centered before analysis in order to reduce multicollinearity.

First, for Step 1 of the Baron and Kenny approach we found that WFSC was positively related to physical symptoms $F(1,1386) = 18.35$, $R^2 = .01$, $\beta = .11$, $p < .05$. Support for Step 2 was provided by support for H1. For Step 3, we found that WFC was related to physical symptoms after controlling for WFSC $F(2,1386) = 82.15$, $\Delta R^2 = .10$, $\beta = .31$, $p < .05$. To test

whether the mediation was partial or complete, we performed Step 4 and found that after controlling for WFC, WFSC was still significantly related to physical symptoms, but less so than before $F(2,1386) = 82.15$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\beta = .08$, $p < .05$. This result indicated support for partial mediation. Finally, we tested the strength of the indirect effect using the Sobel method. We found that WFSC did in fact have a significant indirect effect on physical symptoms through WFC, $z = 4.36$, $p < .05$.

In regards to turnover intentions, results were similar. For Step 1 we found that WFSC was significantly related to turnover intentions, $F(1,1386) = 154.90$, $R^2 = .10$, $\beta = .32$, $p < .05$. Again, Step 2 was already supported in H1. For Step 3, there was a significant positive relationship between work-family focused WFSC and turnover intentions, controlling for social comparison $F(2,1386) = 36.87$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $\beta = .18$, $p < .05$. For Step 4, we found that after controlling for WFC, WFSC was still significantly related to turnover intentions, $F(2,1386) = 36.87$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $\beta = .12$, $p < .05$, indicating partial mediation. We again conducted a Sobel test and found that the indirect relationship between WFSC and turnover intentions was significant $z = 3.88$, $p < .05$. In sum, both our hypotheses were supported in that WFSC both predicted WFC and possessed a significant indirect impact on negative outcomes through the influence of WFC.

Study 1 Discussion

In the current study, our goal was to provide an initial foray into the examination of social influences in the context of WFC. Specifically, we proposed that social comparison would be relevant to perceptions of WFC and provided a test of some initial hypotheses relating to that proposal. We found not only that people who more frequently use social comparison to evaluate their WFC experience greater amounts of WFC, but also that WFC served as a mediator in the relationship between social comparison and negative outcomes.

Study 2

Although Study 1 demonstrated an initial relationship between WFSC and WFC, the directionality of the relationship is unclear given the nature of the cross-sectional data. That is, it is possible that individuals with greater amounts of WFC engage in WFSC more as a reaction or a coping mechanism. Therefore, we conducted a second study to test experimentally the effect of a forced social comparison on perceptions of WFC. In addition, in Study 2 we evaluate both work-to-family and family-to-work conflict to test the effects of comparison on both directions of conflict. Similarly to Study 1, we expect comparing oneself to others who are better off will result in increased perceptions of WFC.

H1a: Participants in the upward social comparison will report higher perceptions of work to family conflict than participants in the control or downward comparison conditions.

H1b: Participants in the upward social comparison will report higher perceptions of family to work conflict than participants in the control or downward comparison conditions.

In addition to studying the relationship between WFSC and WFC experimentally, in Study 2 we also wanted to incorporate another variable related to the social environment. Specifically, we wanted to examine the impact of materialism on the relationship between WFSC and WFC. For the purpose of this study, materialism is defined as the “mind-set or value regarding the importance of acquisition and possession of objects in one’s life” (Richins & Dawson, 1992, p. 304). Materialism, as a value, reflects the importance people place on acquiring and possessing goods as an integral part of their end goal, including happiness.

In the United States and most other developed nations, obtaining material things has become a desirable goal, and one which is often used to evaluate others (Deckop, Jurkiewicz, & Giacalone, 2010). More materialistic people are more likely to excel within corporate culture, as materialistic values are an important antecedent of productivity (Deckop, et al., 2010). However, research has consistently shown that individuals high in materialism score lower in happiness and life satisfaction (Roberts & Clement, 2007; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Kasser, 2002). Deckop et al., (2010) also found that individuals placing high value on material belongings are also less likely to be intrinsically motivated or satisfied.

Although there are different perspectives regarding materialism, one strongly held perspective is that holding a strong materialistic attitude is harmful to one's well-being (Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Denton, 1997).

Jacobs and Gerson (2001) believe the focus on increased materialism has led to a shift in focus so that now workers are trapped in a cycle of competitive materialism that causes families to focus primarily on materialistic purchases which requires spending more time at work and less time at home. With the increased attention given to materialistic possessions, the workplace is viewed as more rewarding than home and as a refuge from the problems of family life (Hochschild, 1997). Additionally, materialism hinders interpersonal relationships and is negatively related to happiness and subjective well-being (Kasser, 2002). Materialism also reduces the focus on intrinsic needs such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Promislo, Deckop, Giacalone, and Jurkiewicz, 2010). As a result, individuals high in materialistic values are likely to view any obstacle to self, including WFC and FWC as disruptive. Materialism is thus likely to relate to higher levels of WFC (Chan & Prendergast, 2007; Rindfleisch, Burroughs, & Denton, 1997).

H2a: Materialism is positively related to work to family conflict.

H2b: Materialism is positively related to family to work conflict.

In addition to being directly related to WSC, materialism is also likely to moderate the relationship between social comparison and WSC. Social comparison and materialism are closely tied, in that individuals often use the possessions of others as a standard for what they should possess (Chan & Prendergast, 2007). Through these comparisons, individuals are likely to develop ideas of what to talk about, what goals they should strive towards, and their worth as seen through their possessions. Individuals engage in more comparisons more frequently in order to maintain their desired level of possessions in reference to others (Chan & Prendergast, 2007). Therefore, more materialistic individuals are more likely to be affected by social comparisons (Chan & Prendergast, 2007). Therefore, we propose that:

H3a: Materialism will moderate the relationship between upward social comparison and work to family conflict, such that individuals high in materialism will experience a stronger relationship between upward social comparison and work to family conflict than individuals low in materialism.

H3b: Materialism will moderate the relationship between upward social comparison and family to work conflict, such that individuals high in materialism will experience a stronger relationship between upward social comparison and work to family conflict than individuals low in materialism.

Study 2 Methods

Sample

This sample used Amazon's MTurk survey method (N = 231, 48% women, 77.9% Caucasian). In order to participate in this study, individuals had to be at least 18 years of age, working at least 20 hours per week in paid employment and have at least one child at home.

Procedures

The assessment used in the current study included an information page stating the purpose of the study, as well as instructions to answer each question as honestly as possible. Following a demographic section, the survey included questions about one's attitudes towards work and family. Individuals were randomly assigned to one of three conditions based on their birthday. The three conditions were paragraphs containing information high in WFC, low in WFC, and a control group (see Table 2 for details). Following the manipulation, outcome measures were presented.

Measures

Control Variables. In order to control for demographic variables, the survey included questions concerning the participant's age, gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, and education. This was done due to past WFC research that indicates such demographics can influence work and family demands respectively.

Work-family conflict. Work-to-family conflict was assessed using Carlson et al.'s (2000) Work Family Conflict measure. The measure consists of a series of statements regarding one's work and family situation, to which participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert-type scale (strongly disagree-strongly agree). The scale assesses both time- and strain-based work-to-family and family-to-work conflict. Work-to-family conflict is conflict in the direction of work-to-family and family-to-work conflict is conflict in the direction of family-to-work. These are separate scales which can be totaled to

create an overall scale of WFC, but will be considered separately in this study. An example statement is: “My work keeps me from my family activities more than I would like.

Materialism. This scale asks individuals to indicate their attitude towards material belongings on a 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*) likert-type scale (Richins & Dawson, 1992; $\alpha = 0.80$). This scale consists of nine items, including, “*I like a lot of luxury in my life.*” A person scoring higher on this scale indicates more importance placed on material belongings.

Study 2 Results

Hierarchical regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses. To test the interaction hypotheses, Baron and Kenny’s (1986) three-step procedure was used: Controls, social comparison condition and WFC were entered into the first step of the regression equation; materialism was entered in the second step; and in the final step, an interaction term (computed by multiplying the centered scores for the predictor and moderator variables) was entered. To determine whether there was a significant moderating effect, the change in R^2 from Step 2 to Step 3 was examined.

Hypothesis 1a proposed that upward social comparison would result in higher perceptions of work to family conflict. This was not supported as upward social comparison did not significantly relate to work to family conflict perceptions, ($F(1,226) = .577, \beta = -.05, R^2 = .003, p > .05$). Hypothesis 1b proposed that upward social comparison would result in higher perceptions of family to work conflict. This was not supported as upward social comparison did not significantly relate to family to work perceptions, ($F(1,226) = 2.05, \beta = -.10, R^2 = .009, p > .05$).

Hypothesis 2a proposed that materialism would be positively related to work to family conflict. This was supported as materialism was significantly related to work to family conflict,

($F(1,225) = 6.49, \beta = .23, R^2 = .055, p < .05$). Hypothesis 2b proposed that materialism would be positively related to family to work conflict. This was supported as materialism was significantly related to family to work conflict, ($F(1,225) = 5.91, \beta = .20, R^2 = .05, p < .05$).

Hypothesis 3a proposed that materialism would moderate the relationship between upward social comparison and work to family conflict. Specifically, it was proposed that individuals high in materialism would experience a stronger relationship between upward social comparison and work to family conflict than individuals low in materialism. This was also supported, as materialism significantly moderated the relationship between upward social comparison and work to family conflict, ($F(1,224) = 6.27, \beta = .15, R^2 = .077, p < .05$). Specifically, for individuals high in materialism, upward social comparison resulted in higher perceptions of work-family conflict whereas for individuals low in materialism, the relationship between upward social comparison and perceptions of work-family conflict was weaker. These interactions are graphed in Figure 3.

Hypothesis 3b proposed that materialism would moderate the relationship between upward social comparison and family to work conflict. Specifically, it was proposed that individuals high in materialism would experience a stronger relationship between upward social comparison and family to work conflict than individuals low in materialism. This was also supported, as materialism significantly moderated the relationship between upward social comparison and family to work conflict, ($F(1,224) = 5.39, \beta = .13, R^2 = .02, p < .05$). Specifically, for individuals high in materialism, upward social comparison resulted in higher perceptions of family-work conflict whereas for individuals low in materialism there was a weaker relationship between upward social comparison and perceptions of family-work conflict. These interactions are graphed in Figure 4.

Study 2 Discussion

In Study 2, our goal was to examine the relationship between social comparison, materialism, and WFC. Specifically, we first proposed that social comparison would influence perceptions of work to family conflict and family to work conflict. Secondly, we proposed that materialism would influence perceptions of WFC and FWC respectively. Finally, we proposed the materialism would moderate the relationship between social comparison and WFC and FWC. We found that an induced social comparison did not influence participant's perceptions WFC or FWC. However, it was found in Study 2 that materialism did have a direct effect as well as a moderating effect on WFC and FWC. Specifically, we found that individuals who self-reported as higher in materialism tended to experience greater perceptions of WFC and FWC respectively. Additionally, materialism moderated the relationship between upward social comparison and WFC and FWC, such that upward social comparison affected WFC and FWC perceptions for participants who were high in materialism but not for participants who were low in materialism.

General Discussion

Implications for research

Certainly, these findings point to the importance of delving more deeply into the role of social comparison in understanding experiences of WFC, materialism, and stress. Of course, more work is needed to thoroughly establish a link between social comparison, WFC, and potential moderators of this relationship, but our results provide initial evidence that future investigations are merited. We believe that continued exploration into the social comparison process and how it may impact people's perceptions of their WFC will shed light on how and why the social environment may play a role in conflict perceptions. Furthermore, by examining

societal values and influences such as materialism we can begin to explore how all facets of an individuals' life may influence their work and life outcomes.

In the current study, we first used a non-directional measure of social comparison to explore the extent to which individuals compare their work-family experiences to others. This is based on our decision not to assume that individuals are always aware of the direction of their comparisons (e.g., upward versus downward). However, we expected that factors in the work environment would result in WFSC being more likely to be upward. Our findings lend support to this contention because WFSC was linked to higher WFC. If such comparisons were generally downward, social comparison theory suggests that greater comparisons would be associated with less WFC. However, future researchers could tease apart the social comparison process by exploring the extent to which individuals are aware of the nature and direction of the comparisons that they make and the impact of different directions of WFSC. This would yield greater insight into the conditions under which social comparison has the potential to alleviate versus enhance WFC and associated negative outcomes.

Secondly, in the present study we sought to examine how materialism might influence this relationship between social comparison and WFC. We found support for materialism as a moderator of the relationship between social comparison and attitudes. Future researchers could seek to identify other moderators of similar nature, e.g. importance of extrinsic rewards and goals versus intrinsic motivators (Deckop et al., 2010). By further examining these types of factors, researchers could begin to understand the complex nature of social comparison and how that affects WFC and the subsequent results.

More broadly, our results indicate that work-family and stress scholars might do well to move towards a more thorough incorporation of social phenomena into their research. Beyond

social comparison theory, other theories from social psychology that may shed light onto work-family processes include social identity theory and social exchange theory (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Our findings highlight the fact that investigations into social factors beyond simply demands and support are needed.

Implications for practice

Our findings may also yield important implications for practice, particularly with respect to efforts dedicated to helping individuals manage the demands of work and family. When efforts are made to alleviate work and family conflict (e.g., through coaching, training, or organizational policies), it is important to recognize that conflict perceptions may be, at least in part, derived from social information.

Given the competitive nature of work and opportunities for self-presentation, it may be beneficial to help individuals recognize when the comparisons that they are making are unrealistic or inappropriate in order to avoid the detrimental effects of upward social comparison. Further, it is important to consider the psycho-social effects of flexible work policies on individual perceptions of WFC. When individuals are not co-located and/or working the same hours as their colleagues (e.g., when colleagues are telecommuting) there may be even less accurate information available on which to base social comparisons.

Limitations and conclusions

The main limitation of Study 1 is that it was a cross-sectional survey study. In addition, Study 2 utilized a sample from MTURK, a sampling strategy which some have expressed concerns over (e.g., Goodman, Cryder, & Cheema, 2013). Both samples were selected largely as a result of convenience factors. However, the combination of these two studies, and the fact that Study 2 was experimental in nature, does much to compensate for the weaknesses of either

study. Triangulating our results in two separate groups of working individuals does much to enhance both the internal and external validity of our results. Additionally, in Study 1 we did not assess the nature of the social comparisons people were making. For example, we did not evaluate whether the comparisons were upward, downward, or lateral – nor did we have information about to whom participants were comparing themselves. Because there is evidence that people compare to many different types of people, including prototypes or “images” of fictitious others, this is a potential weakness (Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). However, the fact that we were able to manipulate the target of comparison in Study 2 helps ameliorate this concern.

Conclusions

In these two studies, we first established that the tendency to compare oneself with others with respect to work-family conflict is related positively to one’s own perceptions of work-family conflict. We then established that participants comparing themselves to upward others experienced higher perceptions of work family conflict, but only when those individuals had higher levels of materialism. Our data contribute to the literature in two main ways. First, we provide evidence that social influences, more broadly construed, and may be important considerations in the study of stress and WFC. Second, we provide evidence that social comparison may be related to both perceptions of WFC and important outcomes. Overall, we hope that this preliminary investigation of social comparison and work-family conflict will encourage others to explore not only social comparison, but other social influences, in relation to work-family conflict.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among Study Variables

Variable	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1 Hours Worked	1279	45.70	8.56	--						
2 Marital Status	1383	1.33	.54	-.05	--					
3 Children	1382	1.87	1.03	.02	.44*	--				
4 Work-Family Conflict	1387	2.98	.90	.23*	.10*	.22*	.91			
5 Social Comparison	1387	3.22	.76	-.01	.02	.00	.13*	.84		
6 Turnover Intentions	1279	2.61	1.12	-.01	.10*	-.10*	.19*	.14*	.86	
7 Physical Symptoms	1279	1.29	.19	-.01	.04	-.01	.32*	.11*	.18*	.74

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). Alpha reliabilities are listed along the diagonal.

Table 2

Information Viewed in Study 2 Conditions

Upward Comparison	Downward Comparison	Control
<p>Lee works as a Human Resources manager for a Fortune 500 company located in Boulder, Colorado. She is married and has 3 children under the age of 10. Her youngest child just started kindergarten this year. She does her job well, and hopes to gain a promotion within the next 5 years or so. Fortunately for Lee, her work-life balance is excellent. She is able to accommodate her children's schedules so that she very rarely misses any of their sports or school activities. Her employer even allows her to work from home one day per week so that she can spend more quality time with her children. Overall, Lee is very happy with her job and her work-life balance.</p>	<p>Lee works as a Human Resources manager for a Fortune 500 company located in Boulder, Colorado. She is married and has 3 children under the age of 10. Her youngest child just started kindergarten this year. She does her job well, and hopes to gain a promotion within the next 5 years or so. Unfortunately for Lee, work-life balance is terrible. She is not able to accommodate her children's schedules so that she very often misses their sports and school events. Her employer doesn't even allow her to work from home one day per week so that she can spend more quality time with her children. Overall, Lee is very unhappy with her job and her work-life balance.</p>	<p>Lee works as a Human Resources manager for a Fortune 500 company located in Boulder, Colorado. She is married and has 3 children under the age of 10. Her youngest child just started kindergarten this year. She does her job well, and hopes to gain a promotion within the next 5 years or so. Lee's work-life balance is about average. She is able to accommodate her children's schedules some of the time, so that she misses their sports or school activities occasionally but not too often. Her employer sometimes allows her to work from home so that she can spend more quality time with her children, but she is not allowed to do it every week. Overall, Lee is moderately happy with her job and her work-life balance.</p>

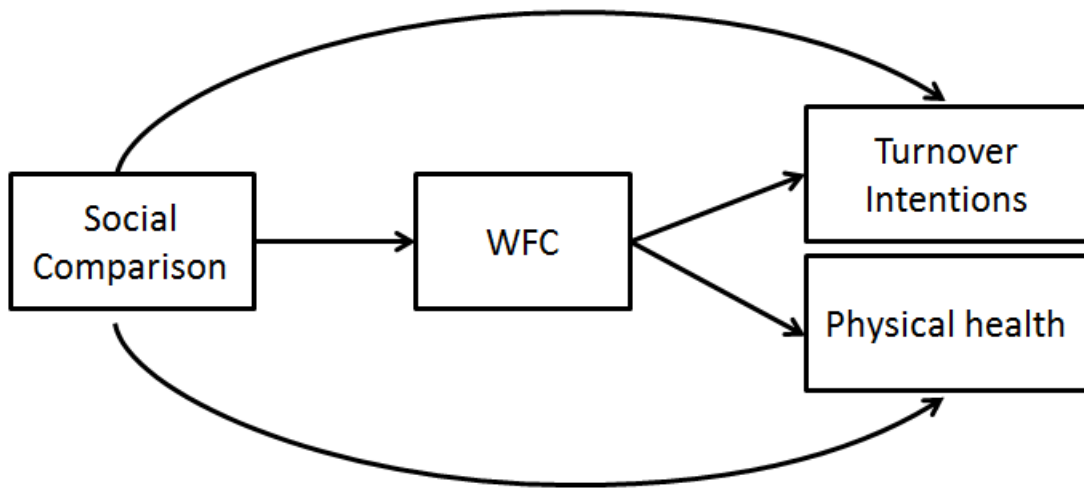


Figure 1
Study 1 Hypotheses

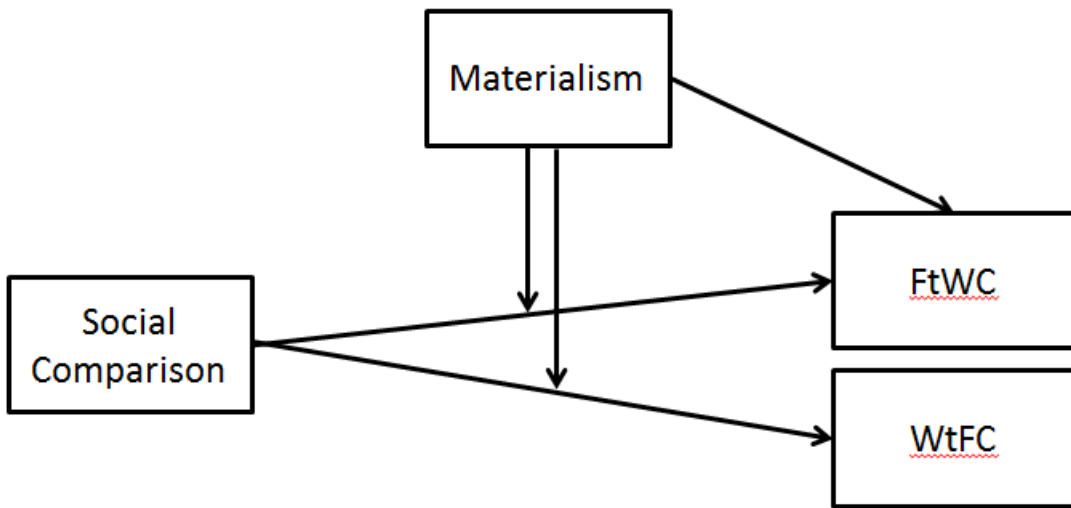


Figure 2
Study 2 Hypotheses

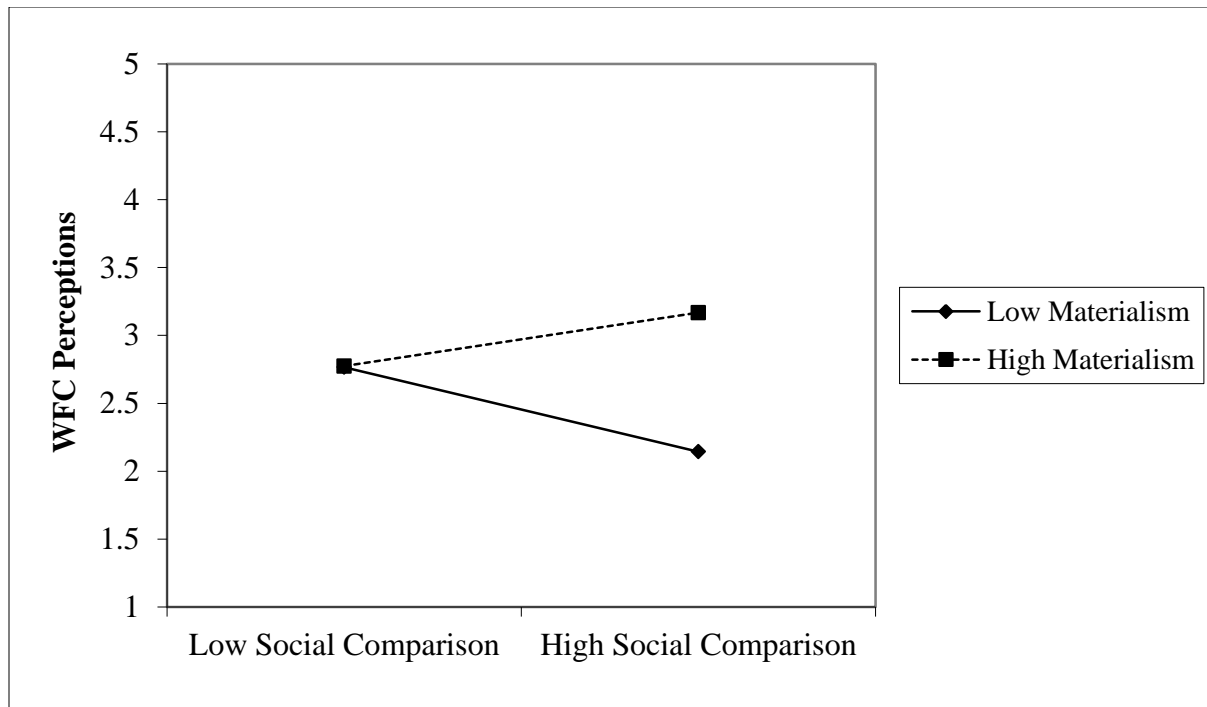


Figure 3

Moderating effect of materialism on WFC perceptions

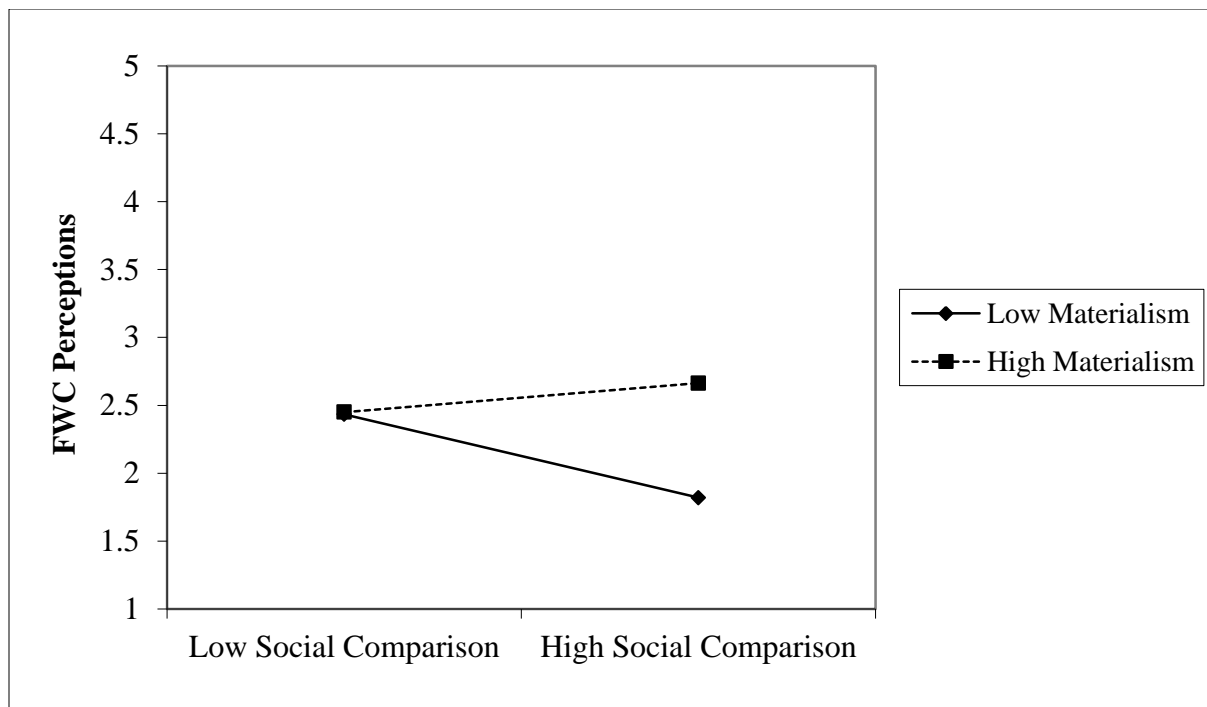


Figure 4

Moderating Effect of Materialism on FWC Perceptions