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# When Family Calls: How Gender, Money, and Care Shape the Relationship between Family Contact and Family-to-Work Conflict

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## Abstract

The fluid boundaries between work and family life and the dynamic ways these domains are shaped by communication technology represent an important area in work-family research. However, surprisingly little is known about how family contact at work affects functioning in the work role—especially how these dynamics may change and unfold over time. Drawing on longitudinal data from the Canadian Work, Stress, and Health Study (2011–2017), the present study examines the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict. We find that increases in family contact over time are positively associated with more family-to-work conflict, but gender and three salient family-related conditions—financial strain, providing care for family members, and difficulties with children—are key moderators of this focal relationship. We discover that the focal association is significantly stronger for women and for those with elevated levels of financial strain, caregiving responsibilities, and difficulties with children over time. We discuss these results by integrating border theory with stress amplification and the cost of caring.

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work and family, gender and family, quantitative, family processes, organizational psychology

**Introduction**

Communication technologies have fundamentally changed the boundaries between work and family life. Smartphones, tablets, and laptops facilitate constant connectivity and availability, so that bosses, coworkers, family, and friends can reach us whenever we are at home or at work. Research has mainly focused on how these technologies enable work to creep into home and produce problems for family and personal life, including the common experience of engaging in work-related text messaging, emailing, or phone calls in the presence of family members (Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Voydanoff, 2005a). However, the potential consequences for role functioning of frequent family-related contact while individuals are at work are an important yet surprisingly underexplored area. In the present study, we refer to “family contact” as the frequency with which workers contact and are contacted by their family members during their work hours. Though family contact may be welcomed or benign, at times it might also have the potential to interrupt work flow and the quality of work-related role functioning. Some features of family or personal life, especially those that involve strains, may hinder the energy and concentration that one might otherwise devote to work; this process reflects what scholars have called *family-to-work conflict* (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Family-to-work conflict is a chronic inter-role stressor that captures the process whereby the family role detracts from the time, attention, and performance of the work role (Glavin & Peters, 2015; Voydanoff, 2005b). Approximately 58% of Canadians in a recent national sample report moderate or high levels of family-to-work interference, with this stressful experience increasing over time (Duxbury & Higgins, 2013). This incompatibility between family and work roles has clear consequences for workers’ health and work-related functioning, as research has demonstrated that family-to-work conflict is linked with higher levels of psychological distress, depression, and poor work performance (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Minnotte & Yucel, 2017; Nohe, Michel, & Sonntag, 2014; Young & Schieman, 2012). Despite these growing concerns, the antecedents of family-to-work conflict are still far less understood than work-to-family conflict (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Paulin, Lachance-Grzela, & McGee, 2017). Some studies have situated financial strain, the presence of children, and other family demands as determinants of family-to-work conflict (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Michel, Kotrba,

Mitchelson, Clark, & Balt 2011; Schieman & Young, 2011), but it is surprising that increasing levels of family contact over time have not been explicitly investigated given the changing nature of the work-family boundary caused by the proliferation of communication technologies. Though prior research has examined family contact and family-to-work conflict separately, no studies—to our knowledge—have investigated the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict, or the statuses and conditions that moderate their relationship. To address these gaps, we analyze four waves of panel data from a large and diverse sample of working Canadians interviewed from 2011 to 2017 to discover how these processes unfold over time.

Our study addresses the following objectives. First, we seek to provide evidence on the relationship between changes in family contact and family-to-work conflict over time. It is possible that increases in family contact over time reflect greater interruptions and impairments to work-related functioning that can contribute to perceptions that aspects of the family role interfere with the quality of work role functioning. Second, we answer recent calls from scholars that more research is needed on the ways that conditions in personal and family life may shape the ways that workers incorporate personal and family matters into their workday (Rose, 2015). To do this, we examine family-related conditions as potential moderators of this association. Specifically, we ask: How do three key family-related conditions—financial strain, providing care for family members, and difficulties or strains with children—moderate the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict? Third, we evaluate potential gender differences in these relationships with the theoretical motivation that men and women may diverge in their experiences of the work-family interface. Finally, we use fixed effects regression techniques to account for unobserved time-invariant confounders (e.g., personal history and personality dispositions) that may bias the relationship between family contact and family-to-work conflict.

## Literature Review and Hypotheses

### *Conceptualization and Importance of Family Contact*

Border theory is a widely used framework to study the work-family interface (Clark, 2000; Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Voydanoff, 2005b). A core assumption of border theory is that workers are motivated to manage the boundary between their work and nonwork domains in ways that facilitate work-family balance—so that they can function optimally and enhance satisfaction with their roles. Border theory postulates that there is a continuum that designates how individuals segment or integrate their work and family roles (Ashforth,

Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996). On the one hand, completely segmented boundaries between the work and family domains would entail keeping work and family roles entirely separate and distinct from each other. On the other hand, completely integrated work-family boundaries means that there is no distinction between work and family. Permeability refers to the degree to which aspects from one domain are able to more easily pass through the borders of other domains. However, scholars disagree about the consequences of permeability—and the blurring of work-family boundaries—for the quality of role functioning in work and nonwork domains.

Some scholars assert that blurring the boundaries between work and family can help individuals minimize conflict between these domains because it offers flexibility to manage competing role demands (Ashforth et al., 2000; Raghuram & Wiesenfeld, 2004). Alternatively, others contend that blurring the work-family boundary represents a stressor that fuels conflict between these domains because it can detract from the attention and energy devoted to the present role (Chesley, 2005; Glavin & Schieman, 2012; Voydanoff, 2005b). Though most of the prior research tends to support the harmful aspects of blurring the work-family boundaries, these studies have primarily focused on work permeating into the family domain. Here, we expand the scope of prior research by examining the potential consequences of the opposite direction—that is, family contact permeating the work border.

Family contact could be conceived as a form of spillover that can be positive or negative. Family contact at work—especially with the use of the mobile phone—is primarily for the “microcoordination” and planning of family matters, including when individuals are leaving the work role to return to the home sphere, arranging to meet with family members, finding out the location and activities of their children, and organizing the transportation of goods and children (Wajcman, Bittman, & Brown, 2008). Through her interviews with managers and engineers, Rose (2015) found that some participants rationalized that taking care of family and personal matters while at work could even enhance their work role functioning—for example, it might help them *save time* instead of worrying about family matters in ways that waste work time.

Though family contact at work may be desirable to some, these activities can also be perceived as interruptions that interfere with work (Du, Derks, & Bakker, 2018; Ventura, 1995). For example, stressful calls from family members may transfer negative and distracting thoughts and emotions to the individual during their work time. For individuals who have internalized the ideal worker norm and try to demonstrate their devotion to work (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2003), they may feel that their family detracts from their ability to fulfill their work obligations; others at work, such as supervisors

and coworkers, might also appraise frequent family contact as a violation of the ideal worker norm. The tension between family responsibilities and the ability to uphold the standards of the ideal worker norm could generate family-to-work conflict. Some prior research found that the frequency of incoming and outgoing calls with family members is marginally associated with increased family-to-work spillover (Wajcman et al., 2008). Another cross-sectional study found that a measure of family-to-work role blurring—including the frequency of receiving family contact, multitasking, and thinking about family while at work—represented a stressor with deleterious consequences for psychological well-being and marital satisfaction among working mothers (Paulin et al., 2017). Our study builds upon this prior research by emphasizing that family contact is not only received but that workers themselves can initiate it. Taken together, these theoretical ideas and empirical evidence provide a rationale for the following:

Hypothesis 1: Increased levels of family contact will be associated with increased levels of family-to-work conflict over time.

### *Do Gender and the Quality of Family Roles Moderate the Relationship between Family Contact and Family-to-Work Conflict?*

After establishing the focal association proposed in Hypothesis 1, our attention then shifts to document and describe potential contingencies in that association. For the reasons outlined in the following sections, we focus on gender and three prominent concerns in the family and household: financial strain, caring for relatives with health issues, and having to manage children's problems.

*Gender contingencies.* Cultural ideologies have shifted somewhat so that active involvement in family life is an expectation for both women and men (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015; Winslow, 2005). Yet, there is still some suggestion that the consequences of family contact at work for actual or perceived role functioning might be different for women and men. According to the traditional gender perspective, men and women attach different meanings and responsibilities to their work and family roles (Kelly et al., 2014; Pleck, 1977; Simon, 1995). Traditional expectations about gender roles revolve around women being primarily responsible for family members and prioritizing the home sphere over the work sphere—a thesis that aligns with the “family devotion schema” (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996). Previous research supports these ideas by documenting that women

experience higher levels of family-to-work conflict than men (Chesley, 2005; Keene & Reynolds, 2005).

Despite their increasing participation in the labor force, these ideas suggest that when facing the need to compromise between work and family roles, “[w]omen’s devotion to the family trumps all other commitments” (Blair-Loy, 2003, p. 52). Among women who have internalized the family devotion schema, the border that delineates work and family may be more permeable for them in the family-to-work direction; that is, when family calls, women may feel more obligated to answer. For example, Rakow and Navarro (1993) suggested that cellphone use is a way that women can remain available and reach out to their families even as they work. Moreover, women are more likely to email family and friends than men (Hupfer & Detlor, 2007), and they are also more likely than men to use their mobile phone to contact their spouse around dinner time and their children after school hours (Wajcman et al., 2008). Previous research, therefore, supports the idea that despite their increasing incumbency in the paid work role, women continue to be expected—by members of their families and in society more generally—to be the primary contact for family needs and dependent care (Russo et al., 2018). Though the gendered consequences of family contact remains a key gap in knowledge, other research found that the presence of children under 5 years old was associated with more negative family-to-work spillover for women relative to men (Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, & Kiger, 2007). In addition, mothers who have children with physical disabilities or emotional and behavioral problems report higher levels of family-to-work conflict and other issues balancing their work and family roles than fathers (Brown & Clark, 2017). Collectively, these ideas about the traditional gender perspective and the discoveries from prior research lead us to hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: The positive association between family contact and levels of family-to-work conflict over time will be stronger for women compared to men.

In addition to this two-way interaction, we also consider the possibility that gender shapes the moderating effects of financial strain, caregiving, and difficulties with children. In analytical terms, we examine whether or not gender further functions to influence the degree of the predictions presented in Hypotheses 3–5.

*Financial strain as a contingency.* Financial strain is a prominent chronic stressor in the stress process model that has become even more widespread with the

surging costs of basic necessities like food, clothing, and housing (Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981; Schieman & Young, 2011). Financial strain can proliferate in ways that spill over into other roles. For example, Schieman and Young's (2011) cross-sectional study of American workers found that financial strain is positively associated with family-to-work conflict. We extend that research by integrating border theory and the stress process model in a longitudinal framework to examine whether the combination of increased financial strain and family contact are even more detrimental for producing family-to-work conflict than either one is on its own. While border theory suggests that family contact breaches the borders of work in ways that potentially generate stressful interruptions, a *stress amplification* hypothesis predicts that family contact might be even more problematic for individuals who simultaneously experience increases in other chronic stressors over time such as financial strain.

Family contact and financial strain may have synergistic stressful effects that spawn distractions at work and detract from one's ability to focus undivided attention on work tasks. One way that family contact can create interference between family and work roles is through the demands that are embedded in family contact. For instance, if the worker receives a call from a partner or other family member asking them to pick up groceries or other goods on the way home from work, this might be considered a family demand that can challenge workers' capacity to fully concentrate in their work role. If this type of contact occurs and the respondent also feels the intensification of financial strain, then the nature of the communication might have more unpleasant, demanding, or stressful overtones—and consequences for role functioning. Family demands that have particular financial overtones (e.g., covering the costs of a child's dental appointment or making necessary purchases for the household) may activate feelings of financial insecurity; these psychological processes might further diminish one's capacity to perform optimally in the work role. Taken together, these ideas contribute to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Increases in financial strain will amplify any observed positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict over time.

*Caregiving as a contingency.* Aside from the chronic nature of financial strain, the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict might be exacerbated by other concurrent role stressors. For example, caregiving constitutes one of the most salient sources of role-related stress for family

members (Duxbury & Higgins, 2013; Pearlin, 1989). According to Statistics Canada (2013), 46% of Canadians aged 15 years and older provide care to family or friends with a long-term health condition, disability, or aging-related needs. Consistent with the concept of the “cost-of-caring,” caregiving is a time- and energy-intensive endeavor that may take a toll on caregivers’ energy and attention available for other roles, such as one’s job (Kessler & McLeod, 1984; Young & Schieman, 2012). Approximately 60% of caregivers in Canada also work at a paid job or operate a business (Statistics Canada, 2013). Given the prevalence and requirements of caregiving, it is essential to understand how this process connects with and potentially influences the family-work interface.

The demands on time, energy, and attention involved in caring for a relative with health issues can often be unpredictable; in this regard, a caregiver might chronically feel “on-call” for family roles when engaged in paid work. Receiving caregiving-related contact at work might involve a range of coordinating services, such as managing a relative’s healthcare appointments, arranging transportation, or even simply discussions about health-related challenges. Consistent with the theoretical ideas of stress amplification and cost-of-caring, caregiving potentially represents a chronic role-related stressor that—when combined with family contact—might impede one’s capacity to dedicate undivided attention to job tasks. Even if a worker is not able to “answer the call” immediately, the mere exposure to the contact from a family member in need might alter their level of concentration and affect, as they contemplate the reason for family contact during work hours (Altomonte, 2016). Based on these ideas, we propose the following:

Hypothesis 4: Caregiving will exacerbate any observed positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict over time.

*Children’s problems as a contingency.* One of the most salient family-related stressors for parents involves the experience of caring for children with difficulties. We suspect that escalations in this stressor over time might also amplify the link between family contact and family-to-work conflict. Common difficulties with children include problems at school, with friends or peers, and health (Milkie, Nomaguchi, & Schieman, 2019). Working parents who must manage these difficulties provide attention, coordination, and problem solving that may create challenges for the work role. And yet, surprisingly little is known about the ways that working parents of children with difficulties experience family contact and how this shapes the family-work interface (Matthews, Booth, Taylor, & Martin, 2011).

Although prior knowledge about children's difficulties as a moderator of the relationship between family contact and family-to-work conflict is limited, quantitative and qualitative studies have established a link between children's problems and elevated levels of family-to-work conflict (Breevaart & Bakker, 2011; Grzywacz et al., 2005; Matthews et al., 2011; Voydanoff, 2005c). As Hochschild (1997) observed, work might serve to insulate individuals and provide needed respite (or "haven") from family demands (also see Morris, 2012). However, frequent family contact at work might provide a mechanism that channels stressful family demands and undermines the capacity to perform optimally at work—and this, in turn, potentially erodes the segmentation of role boundaries that is necessary to situate the work role as a haven from family stressors. This weakening of the boundary between family and work spheres may become more acute when children's problems intensify over time. Based on these theoretical ideas and empirical evidence, we hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 5: Increases in children's problems over time will amplify any observed positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict.

## Methods

### Sample

To test the hypotheses, this study uses data from a longitudinal panel of Canadian workers, interviewed in 2011, 2013, 2015, and 2017. To be eligible to participate in the study, respondents had to be the following: (a) residing in Canada, (b) 18 years of age or older, (c) currently working or running an income-producing business, (d) employed in the civilian labor force, and (e) living in a non-institutional home. The sampling frame is composed of a regionally stratified unclustered random probability sample generated by random-digit-dial methods. These data are ideal for our objectives because they include repeated measures of all focal variables—and the panel design enables analytic techniques to control for all unobserved time-invariant confounders. The final sample in 2011 was 6,004, with a response rate of approximately 40%. Follow-up interviews with respondents were conducted every 2 years, yielding a sample of 4,423 respondents in Wave 2 (74% retention), 3,805 respondents in Wave 3 (63% of Wave 1), and 3,378 individuals in Wave 4 (56% of Wave 1). The total number of person-wave observations for most of the analyses is  $n = 15,159$ , but that changes to  $n = 6,193$  when we restrict our final model to only those respondents with children.

## Measures

**Dependent variable.** *Family-to-work conflict* is measured as a four-item index. The items assess the following experiences in the past 3 months: “How often did your family or personal life keep you from doing as good a job at work as you could?”, “How often did your family or personal life keep you from concentrating on your job?”, “How often did your family or personal life drain you of your energy you needed to do your job?”, and “How often did you not have enough time for your job because of your family or personal life?” Response choices were (a) *very often*, (b) *often*, (c) *sometimes*, (d) *rarely*, and (e) *never*. Responses were reverse-coded and then averaged to form the family-to-work conflict index, with higher scores indicating more family-to-work conflict ( $\alpha = .88$ ). Similar measures of family-to-work conflict have been used in prior research (Glavin & Peters, 2015; Voydanoff, 2005b).

**Independent variables.** *Family contact* is a two-item index that is measured by assessing the frequency of the following experiences in the past 3 months: “How often did family members contact you during your work hours?”, and “How often did you contact family during your work hours?” Response choices were (a) *very often*, (b) *often*, (c) *sometimes*, (d) *rarely*, and (e) *never*. Responses were reverse-coded and then averaged to form the family contact index, with higher scores indicating more family contact ( $\alpha = .83$ ). This measure of family contact has been used in prior research (Milkie et al., 2019). Moreover, factor analyses indicate that the two items that measure family contact and the four items that measure family-to-work conflict load on separate constructs (results available upon request).

*Gender* is coded as men = 0 (the reference category) and women = 1.

*Financial strain* is a 3-item index that is measured by assessing the frequency that respondents experienced the following in the past year: “Have trouble paying the bills?” and “How often did you not have enough money to buy food, clothes or other things your household needed?” Response choices were (a) *very often*, (b) *often*, (c) *sometimes*, (d) *rarely*, and (e) *never*. Respondents were also asked “How do your finances usually work out by the end of the month?” Response choices were (a) “A lot of money left over”, (b) “A little money left over”, (c) “Just enough to make ends meet”, and (d) “Not enough to make ends meet”. Similar to recent work (Koltai, Bierman, & Schieman, 2018), after reverse-coding the responses to the first two questions, all items were standardized and then averaged to create the index ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

*Caregiving* is measured with one item that asks: “How often in the last 3 months have you provided help or assistance to a relative or family member because of their health problems or disability?” Following recent research

(see Glavin & Peters, 2015), we classified respondents in three groups that contrast those who reported “none or rarely” (low caregiving) with those who reported “sometimes” (some caregiving) and “often or very often” (high caregiving).

*Children’s problems* is a 3-item index that is measured by asking respondents to report the frequency that their children experienced the following in the past 3 months: “Problems at school?”, “Problems with friends or peers”, and “Health problems?” Response choices were (a) *very often*, (b) *often*, (c) *sometimes*, (d) *rarely*, and (e) *never*. Responses were reverse-coded and then averaged to create the index, so that higher scores equate to more frequent children’s problems ( $\alpha = .62$ ). Prior studies have used this same measure (Milkie et al., 2019). Some readers might wonder if the “children’s health problem” item aligns closely with the caregiving item. In separate analyses, we found that the children’s health problem item has a slightly stronger correlation with the caregiving item than the other items about children’s problems with school or friends. However, factor analyses confirmed that the three children’s problems items load more strongly on one underlying factor in a way that demonstrates these are distinct from the caregiving item.

*Control variables.* To mitigate concerns over time-varying confounding, all of our regression models include an extensive set of sociodemographic and work-related control variables. We control for survey year, education, personal income (logged and continuous in dollars), marital status, number of children at home (continuous), occupation, job sector, and several other job-related demands and resources, including work hours (continuous in hours), job pressure, authority, autonomy, schedule control, and work location. These sociodemographic and employment-related variables are widely recognized as confounders in the work-family and stress literature.

*Sociodemographics.* *Education* is coded as an ordinal variable: less than high school (reference category), high school or GED, specialized vocational training or some college/university, college graduate, and post-graduate.

*Marital status* is measured as a categorical variable: married (reference category), living with partner, divorced/widowed/separated, and never married.

*Occupation* is a categorical variable: executive/administrator/management (reference category), professionals, technical, sales, administrative support, service, and production.

*Job sector* is a categorical variable with the respondent employed by: government (reference category), private for profit business, non-profit organization, and self-employed/business owner.

*Job qualities.* *Job pressure* is a three-item index that assessed the frequency of the following experiences in the past 3 months: “How often did you feel overwhelmed by how much you had to do at work?”, “How often did you have to work on too many tasks at the same time?”, and “How often did the demands of your job exceed the time you have to do the work?” Response choices were: (a) *very often*, (b) *often*, (c) *sometimes*, (d) *rarely*, and (e) *never*. The items were reverse-coded and then averaged to create the job pressure index, whereby higher scores indicate more job pressure ( $\alpha=.85$ ).

*Job authority* is measured as a three-item index. Respondents were asked, “At your job, do you supervise or manage other people?”, “Do you influence or set the rate of pay received by others?”, “Do you have the authority to hire or fire others?” We coded “no” responses as 0 and “yes” responses as 1. We summed these responses to create the job authority index, such that higher scores indicate more job authority ( $\alpha=.69$ ).

*Job autonomy* is a three-item index that asked respondents the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements: “I have the freedom to decide what I do on my job”, “It is basically my own responsibility to decide how my job gets done”, and “I have a lot of say about what happens on my job”. Response choices are (a) *strongly agree*, (b) *somewhat agree*, (c) *somewhat disagree*, and (d) *strongly disagree*. The responses were reverse-coded and then averaged to create the job autonomy index; higher scores indicate more job autonomy ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

*Schedule control* is measured as a two-item index. The first question asks, “How much control do you have in scheduling your work hours?” Response choices are: (a) *complete control*, (b) *a lot*, (c) *some*, (d) *very little*, and (e) *none*. The second question asks: “Who usually decides when you start and finish work each day at your main job?” Response choices include: (a) *someone else*, (b) *you are able to decide within limits*, and (c) *you are entirely free to decide*. After reverse-coding responses to the first question, these items were standardized and then averaged; higher scores indicate more schedule control ( $\alpha = .77$ ).

*Work location* is measured as a categorical variable: mainly away from home at a fixed location (reference group), mainly at home, mainly on the road, at various client or customer locations, or something else.

## Analytic Plan

We use fixed effects analyses to test several models predicting family-to-work conflict. All models include the full set of control variables. In Table 2, Model 1 tests the direct effects of changes in family contact on changes in family-to-work conflict. Next, in Models 2–5, we examine whether the

association between family contact and family-to-work conflict differs across gender and levels of financial strain, caregiving responsibilities, and children's difficulties. Finally, we use three-way interactions to test gender differences in how financial strain, caregiving responsibilities, and difficulties with children shape the relationship between family contact and family-to-work conflict over time. The Hausman test was used to determine whether random effects models were more appropriate than fixed effects models. Each test revealed that variables comprising the time-invariant error term were correlated with the predictors in the model, indicating that the random effects models would be biased, so we opted for fixed effects models (results available upon request). To handle missing data, our analyses use multiple imputation by chained equations (MICE) with ten imputations. The outcome variable was used in the imputation procedure, but fixed effects regressions only used cases without missing values on the outcome variable (Von Hippel, 2007).

## Results

All descriptive statistics for the Wave 1 and pooled (Wave 1 to Wave 4) variables are displayed in Table 1. Analyses shown in Table 2 estimate the focal association between family contact and family-to-work conflict. In Model 1, we observe that when individuals increase their level of family contact over time, this is associated with increases in family-to-work conflict ( $b = .086$ ,  $SE = .009$ ,  $p < .001$ ), net of all controls for sociodemographic characteristics and job qualities. This pattern supports Hypothesis 1: Frequent family contact at work represents a stressor that is linked to inter-role conflict between family and work. In addition, increases in financial strain and caregiving are associated with elevated levels of family-to-work conflict.

Moreover, in Models 2 through 5, we test whether the positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict depends on gender, financial strain, caring responsibilities, and difficulties with children. In Model 2, we test potential gender differences in the focal association between family contact and family-to-work conflict. Though family contact is positively associated with family-to-work conflict, we observe that this is even stronger for women relative to men ( $b = .050$ ,  $SE = .018$ ,  $p < .01$ ). We display this interaction effect in Figure 1, with predicted values of changes in family-to-work conflict across family contact and gender.

Model 3 shows that increases in financial strain amplifies the positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict over time ( $b = .017$ ,  $SE = .009$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This indicates that increases in family contact at work are associated with even greater family-to-work conflict among those

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics (Means, Percentages, and Standard Deviations).

Variables	Wave 1		Pooled Wave 1 to 4	
	M or %	SD	M or %	SD
<i>Dependent Variable</i>				
Family-to-work conflict (1-5)	1.85	.76	1.87	.78
<i>Explanatory Variables</i>				
Family contact (1-5)	2.49	.96	2.50	.95
Financial strain	-.033	.80	0.00	.85
Low caregiving	58.34%		58.01%	
Some caregiving	20.81%		21.43%	
High caregiving	20.85%		20.57%	
Children's problems	1.85	.73	1.87	.71
Women	59.17%		59.18%	
Education:				
High school	17.41%		15.24%	
Vocational training/some college	25.10%		25.43%	
College grad	36.07%		36.77%	
Post-grad	15.06%		17.09%	
Logged personal income	10.63	1.01	10.79	.87
Marital status:				
Living with partner	15.00%		14.57%	
Div./Sep./Wid.	15.89%		15.39%	
Never married	17.59%		15.40%	
Children at home (0-7)	0.80	1.08	0.77	1.06
Occupation:				
Professionals	31.38%		28.88%	
Technical	15.42%		18.59%	
Sales	7.01%		6.13%	
Admin support	8.95%		7.18%	
Service	12.59%		11.27%	
Production	14.16%		12.36%	
Sector:				
Private for-profit	47.49%		45.71%	
Non-profit organization	6.66%		7.11%	
Self-employed	15.87%		15.65%	
Work location:				
Mainly at home	8.19%		8.77%	
Mainly on the road	4.63%		4.71%	
Client/customer locations	11.21%		10.72%	

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

Variables	Wave 1		Pooled Wave 1 to 4	
	M or %	SD	M or %	SD
Something else	1.64%		0.61%	
Work hours	39.24	13.17	38.81	12.75
Autonomy (1–4)	2.93	.81	2.94	.80
Schedule control	-.013	.88	0.00	0.90
Job pressure (1–5)	3.06	1.10	3.04	1.08
Job authority (0–3)	.89	1.03	.90	1.04

Note. Ranges are reported in parentheses beside the variable name.

with intensifying strains associated with financial matters. Stated differently, if we randomly selected any two individuals in our sample who experienced an increase in the frequency of family contact over time, the worker who also experienced larger increases in financial strain is more likely to experience elevated levels of family-to-work conflict. This finding supports Hypothesis 3 and its depiction of stress amplification.

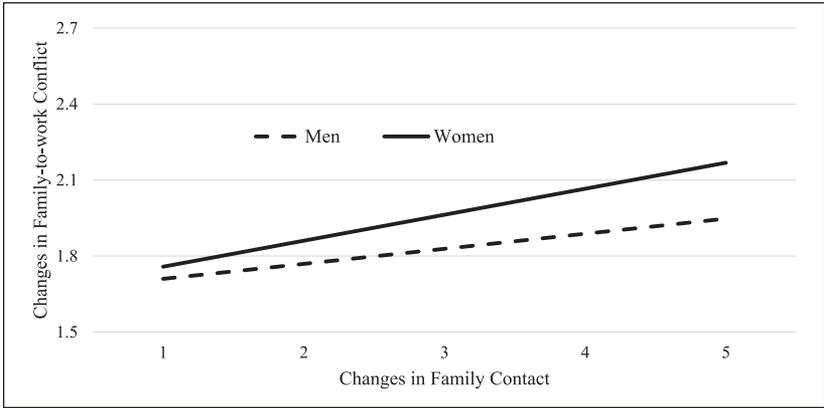
In Model 4, we test whether caregiving responsibilities exacerbate the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict. Increases in family contact are associated with even higher levels of family-to-work conflict for Canadian workers who provide high levels of caregiving ( $b = .042$ ,  $SE = .017$ ,  $p < .05$ ), relative to fewer caregiving responsibilities. Figure 2 illustrates this interaction pattern, with predicted values of changes in family-to-work conflict across family contact and low and high levels of caregiving. In contrast to high caregiving, moderate levels of caregiving do not influence the nature of the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict.

Finally, in Model 5, we restrict the sample to parents in order to examine the moderating effect of children's difficulties on the relationship between family contact and family-to-work conflict. We find that increasing children's difficulties over time amplifies the positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict ( $b = .035$ ,  $SE = .015$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Specifically, the positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict is significantly stronger among individuals who report having increased difficulties with children. Supplemental analyses (not shown) reveal that this interaction effect holds net of the degree to which parents divide their child-care tasks (e.g., getting children ready for daycare or school, helping with homework, and organizing family activities) and the perceived fairness in the

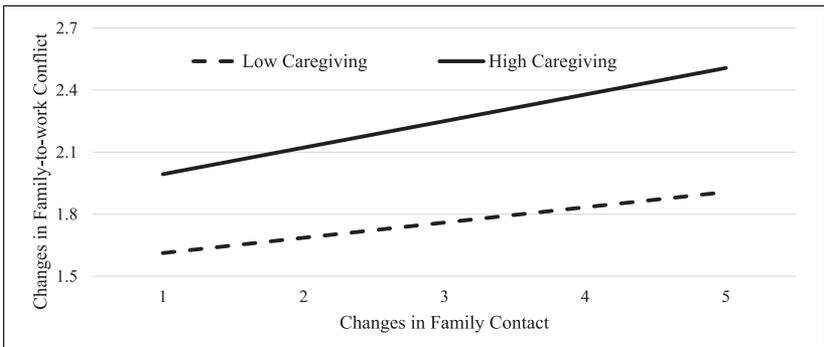
**Table 2.** Fixed Effects Regressions of Family-to-work Conflict on Family Contact.

	Total Sample (n = 15,159)		Total Sample (n = 15,159)		Total Sample (n = 15,159)		Parents Only (n = 6,193)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 4	Model 5	
Family contact	.086*** (.009)	.084*** (.009)	.080*** (.011)	.056*** (.014)	.028 (.032)			
Financial strain	.082*** (.012)	.039 (.025)	.082*** (.012)	.082*** (.012)	.096*** (.019)			
Some caregiving	.098*** (.017)	.098*** (.017)	.146*** (.045)	.098*** (.017)	.057* (.026)			
High caregiving	.346*** (.019)	.347*** (.019)	.239*** (.048)	.346*** (.019)	.326*** (.033)			
Difficult Children					.017 (.048)			
Family contact x Financial strain		.017* (.009)						
Family contact x Some caregiving								
Family contact x High caregiving								
Family Contact x Gender								
Family contact x Difficult children						.050** (.018)	.035* (.015)	

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses. All models adjust for survey year and time-varying confounders: sociodemographic characteristics (education, personal income, marital status, number of children at home, occupation, and job sector), and working conditions (work hours, job pressure, job autonomy, schedule control, job authority, and work location).  
 \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed test).



**Figure 1.** Predicted value of changes in family-to-work conflict (varying by changes in family contact and gender), with all covariates held at their means.



**Figure 2.** Predicted value of changes in family-to-work conflict (varying by changes in family contact and caregiving), with all covariates held at their means.

division of these parenting tasks. Notably, this interaction effect also holds net of caregiving responsibilities, as well as in additional analyses that excludes caregiving responsibilities (these supplemental analyses and results are available upon request).

We also tested three-way interaction terms for gender differences in how financial strain, caregiving, and children’s difficulties moderate the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict. No gender differences in the stress amplification or cost-of-caring were found (results not shown, but available upon request). In addition, we tested whether parental

status was an influential contingency in the focal association between family contact and family-to-work conflict, and may even shape how gender, financial strain, and caregiving moderate the focal association. We found no significant parental status differences in any of these two- and three-way interactions—therefore, our observations seem to generalize in similar ways to both parents and non-parents.

## **Discussion**

Understanding the configuration of the border between family and work—and how individuals and their families change the way they manage this border over time—are crucial given their potential consequences for role functioning and inter-role conflict. However, most research to date has focused on the direction of work permeating into the home domain and interfering with the family role. In this paper, we investigate a relatively understudied phenomenon: the relationship between increases in family contact at work over time and family-to-work conflict. Then, we elaborate on that focal association by testing for key contingencies in that process, specifically focusing on gender, financial strain, caregiving, and children's problems. While we discover that increases in family contact over time are positively associated with family-to-work conflict, we also demonstrate that this focal association is stronger for women, and for those with more financial strain, caregiving duties, and difficulties with children.

Though family contact may be seen as benign and perhaps even welcome, we find that it may also channel demands that potentially disrupt the work role. Increases in the frequency of family contact at work over time implies the implementation of a weaker and more permeable border between family and work that may come with benefits of flexibility, but it also potentially fragments what would have been undivided attention to the work role. This finding supports the theoretical claim that workers internalize the ideal worker norm of their workplace, such that workers recognize how changes in activities may impede their concentration or effort in the work role over time—including increasing the level of family contact they might have while at work (Paulin et al., 2017). That is, when non-work-related matters increasingly permeate into the work domain, an ideal worker might be more likely to perceive this activity as interfering with their ability to meet the expectations of their work role (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). Though in current times it is becoming a more common practice to blur the boundaries between work and family roles, this finding implies that a strong border between family and work that keeps these domains segmented may offer some protection from inter-domain conflicts. On the other hand, if workers perceive their

workplaces as more family-friendly and tolerant of family contact, then this may relax or alter the ideal worker norm and alleviate some of the conflict that arises when family and work roles become more integrated. Though we cannot address the influence of family-friendly workplace norms and practices given data limitations, future research should address the influence of family-friendly workplaces on workers' engagement in family contact, and how these different workplace contexts change the ideal worker norm and therefore shape the consequences of family contact on the work role. Moreover, future research might also consider how individuals' preferences to integrate or segment their work and family lives may shape not only the regularity of family contact at work but also its association with family-to-work conflict. Here it is critical to recognize how preferences may condition the effectiveness of workplace policies and practices designed to help workers manage their work and family roles—and whether or not workers even consider using these policies.

One lingering question is: Are there any differences in the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict that depend on whether the contact with family members was initiated or received? To address that question, supplemental analyses (not shown) reveal that when these items are considered individually, we found that increases in both initiating and responding to family contact have positive associations with family-to-work conflict over time. However, increases in initiating family contact is no longer significantly associated with family-to-work conflict once we statistically control for responding to family contact. In contrast, increases in responding to family contact over time is still associated with elevations in family-to-work conflict after controlling for the frequency individuals initiate family contact. Though some caution should be exercised over the interpretation of these results, these findings add further nuance to the determinants of family-to-work conflict. When workers initiate contact with their family members, this may still involve some stress from violating the ideal worker norm and could affect their functioning in the work role. However, when initiating family contact they have more control over the timing of the contact and they can better prepare themselves mentally which might be relatively more conducive to their work role than when they have to respond to family contact at a moment's notice. Therefore, initiating family contact and having more control over the timing of these permeations might be less harmful for work-related functioning than when having to abruptly respond to family calls without warning.

One other major contribution of our study involves gender difference: The detrimental association between family contact and family-to-work conflict is stronger among women, compared to men. Despite advances in

their careers, women may still be expected to be the primary contact for all family-related matters—even while they are at work. In line with the family-devotion schema and gender role expectations, women may feel a stronger sense of obligation to take the call with family members at work regardless of the potential consequences for their work role. This pattern suggests that family-work borders may be more permeable for women relative to men pertaining to family contact at work. While speculative, it is possible that there are gender differences in how workers navigate the border between work and family, such that men and women diverge in when and how they respond to family contact at work. Both men and women may receive a high volume of calls and text messages from family members at work, but they can let these phone calls go to voicemail, read the text messages later, turn on silence mode, or even turn their phones off (Wajcman et al., 2008). If men are more likely than women to exercise these types of control over their family-work boundary (i.e., let phone calls from family members go to voicemail and then call back during their work break), then this may explain why family contact may not be as harmful to men's work role. Though we lack measures to test this idea explicitly, we encourage future research to examine any potential gender differences in the extent to which individuals exercise control over what permeates the family-work border. Collectively, we find the overarching gender difference in the association between family contact and family-to-work conflict over time, but no gender difference in the moderating roles of financial strain, caregiving responsibilities, and difficulties with children.

We find that financial strain exacerbates the positive association between family contact and family-to-work conflict. In line with the theoretical rationale of stress amplification (Minnotte, Minnotte, & Bonstrom, 2015; Young & Schieman, 2012), the stressful interruptions and distractions that family contact creates for the work role are even more harmful in the context of another pernicious stressor like financial strain. Financial strain likely induces a threatening uncertainty about the future that raises the prominence of the work role and taints the quality of family contact at work with more stressful undercurrents. Moreover, this result supports the theoretical predictions of border theory and the stress process model such that communicating with family at work may enable the stressful household condition of financial strain to more easily permeate the work sphere and create conflict between family and work (Clark, 2000; Pearlin et al., 1981). Some readers may wonder whether family contact mediates the association between financial strain and family-to-work conflict, such that financial strain increases family contact, which, in turn, increases family-to-work conflict. Separate analyses using fixed effects reveal that changes

in financial strain do not significantly predict changes in family contact (results available upon request). Taken together, this observation extends ideas about stress amplification in the stress process model and integrates it with scholarship on the family-work nexus by documenting how the household context of financial strain further problematizes the weak border between the family and work spheres.

The extent to which family contact increased family-to-work conflict was even stronger for those with more caring responsibilities—including caring for an unhealthy relative and managing children's problems. Our findings advance the theoretical arguments of border theory, cost-of-caring, and stress amplification by synthesizing these distinct perspectives to demonstrate that family contact at work makes it more likely that the stresses and burdens of a demanding caregiving role will permeate the work role. Being able to connect with family while at work is a form of a flexibility that is thought to help employees balance their work and family roles—particularly for those with more caregiving responsibilities (Duxbury & Higgins, 2013). Without this flexible arrangement, employees with demanding caregiving responsibilities likely struggle to reconcile their work and family roles, and may have to scale back on their work hours or even quit their jobs to take care of their family members (Statistics Canada, 2001). However, workers are often expected to be unencumbered by responsibilities outside of their work role (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015), so family contact at work may signal a violation of the ideal worker norm to employers and coworkers. Nevertheless, more research is needed to determine whether this may be better than the alternative of scaling back for employees with these demanding family roles, especially since this may take a toll on gender equality at the workplace as women are more likely than men to scale back on work for caregiving responsibilities (Duxbury & Higgins, 2013). In line with this goal, we also encourage scholars to examine the potentially positive spillover effects of being able to connect with family while at work (Demerouti, Bakker, & Voydanoff, 2011). From a family-level perspective, for instance, family contact at work may be especially beneficial for the worker's partner, their children, and other care-receivers (Paulin et al., 2017; Russo et al., 2018). These ideas indicate that the dynamic ways in which the family-work nexus is configured as segmented or integrated—and the different consequences produced by these arrangements—should be at the forefront of relevant policy suggestions for promoting work-family fit for Canadian women and men.

Before concluding, we wish to acknowledge two main limitations of the present study. First, we acknowledge that the causal ordering is not definitive. Though we rely on theory to suggest that family contact at work may

generate family-to-work conflict, we cannot rule out reverse causality or reciprocal relationships. For instance, it is plausible that individuals who had a recent dispute with family may experience higher levels of family-to-work conflict and therefore engage in more contact with their family at work to resolve it. Second, fixed effects analyses uses within-individual variation to estimate the coefficients, so our results do not generalize to individuals who report stable levels of family contact over the 6-year study period. However, these fixed effects techniques offer advantages as well, such as accounting for all unobserved, time-invariant confounders—including personal history, family background, and personality—that would have biased these results.

## **Conclusion**

Work-family scholarship has a long tradition of highlighting the importance of work-family balance for workers and families. More recently, these scholars identified how the border between family and work represents a salient factor in determining work-family balance. Family contact at work epitomizes the weak border between family and work. The present study advances work-family research by demonstrating that progressively permeating the work border with more family contact over time may increasingly detract from time, energy, and attention that would have been dedicated to the work role. Moreover, we find that women experience the consequences of family contact for family-to-work conflict more than men. Finally, using theoretical ideas of stress amplification and the cost of caring, the present study highlights three key family-related conditions that moderate the focal association. Increases in family contact lead to even higher levels of family-to-work conflict for those with financial strain, caregiving responsibilities for unhealthy relatives, and children with difficulties. Taken together, our findings illustrate the downsides of integrating family and work domains across central family-related conditions and gender.

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