



Partnership status and satisfaction with work–life balance

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ABSTRACT

Does entering a romantic relationship enhance or detract from employees' work–life balance (WLB)? While different theoretical predictions can be made about how being in a relationship contributes to employees' satisfaction with WLB, the literature lacks a robust investigation into this question. Using longitudinal data from Germany ($n = 609$; $k = 2,358$), this research examined if and how transitions in and out of non-marital relationships over six years relate to employees' varying levels of satisfaction with WLB. Results showed that employees were less satisfied with WLB when they were romantically partnered (vs. unpartnered), which contrasts previous cross-sectional findings. In an additional study ($N = 779$) validating the first study's measures using a similar sample, and comparing partnered vs. unpartnered employees cross-sectionally, we found that partnered individuals feel more, not less, satisfied with WLB. Taken together, these findings suggest caution in interpreting the effects of time-varying variables in cross-sectional studies. When examined longitudinally, taking on a partner role was related to reduced satisfaction with WLB, highlighting the need to attend to the variability in needs and challenges unmarried individuals face in work–life interface research.

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Much research has examined factors promoting or undermining employees' satisfaction with work–life balance (WLB) as employees' feelings about WLB have important implications for workplace and personal outcomes (Brough et al., 2014). However, compared to the amount of research examining how demands (e.g., working hours; Valcour, 2007) and resources in work roles (e.g., supervisor support; Abendroth & Den Dulk, 2011) contribute to satisfaction with WLB, relatively little attention has been paid to the contribution of demands and resources in one's personal life (Brough et al., 2020). One important life role that employees take on is that of a romantic partner. Entering a romantic relationship is a common and significant life event that entails new demands and challenges, but that also provides a new potential psychological resource. The various challenges and opportunities of romantic partnering mean that different theoretical predictions can be made about the effect of a transition from singlehood to a romantic relationship on satisfaction with WLB (Rothbard et al., 2020). However, the literature currently lacks empirical studies testing these conflicting perspectives. Thus, the current research uses longitudinal data to examine how people's satisfaction with WLB varies as a function of being in a romantic relationship.

Theoretical perspectives on the interface between work and partner roles

Individuals hold multiple social and professional roles in their lives with different (and sometimes conflicting) sets of expectations and responsibilities. Some roles are more important or salient than others, and those that are prioritized guide how individuals invest their time and energy (Greenhaus & Beutell,

1985; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). One of the life roles that is particularly salient in adulthood is that of a romantic partner. Consistent with Super's (1980, 1982) conceptualization of role salience, adults spend considerable time in their role as a romantic partner (i.e., *participation*; Voorpostel et al., 2010), feel attached to the role (i.e., *commitment*; Stanley et al., 2010), and express different values through occupying that role (i.e., *value expectations*; Knee et al., 2002).

Broadly, there are two perspectives based on role theory that guide thinking about the interface between work and romantic partner roles (Barnett & Gareis, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2020). The first takes a scarcity approach and rests on the premise that resources are finite and are drained as demands increase (Goode, 1960; Marks, 1977). From this depletion-focused perspective, occupying multiple roles creates strain or conflict as the various roles deplete the zero-sum reservoir of time, energy, and commitment (also see Marks, 1977 for how the three resources may be unique). Indeed, research has shown that increased demands from work (e.g., longer work hours) or life roles (e.g., having more children) can create overload or conflict issues (Byron, 2005). While there may be different ways in which multiple roles interfere with each other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), experiencing interference between roles indicates the need to make trade-offs and can undermine satisfaction with WLB (Grawitch et al., 2010).

In the context of work and partner roles, such interference may manifest itself in numerous ways because maintaining a relationship requires investment of resources just as completing tasks at work does. For example, romantic partners expect each other to fulfil multiple needs (Finkel et al., 2014) including providing support and care when distressed (Kammrath et al.,

2020) or sharing excitement about a partner's good news (Peters et al., 2018). The amount of time, energy, and attention invested into the relationship to meet these needs may drain the available resources to devote to work. Alternatively, resources invested into work may prevent one from putting as much effort into their relationship as desired. Thus, from the depletion-focused perspective, adding the role of being a romantic partner to one's life is likely to be associated with experiencing more stress juggling work and personal responsibilities, which in turn may undermine satisfaction with WLB.

Another perspective is based on role accumulation theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Sieber, 1974) which focuses on the positive outcomes afforded by occupying multiple roles. Although different researchers use different labels such as enrichment, enhancement, or facilitation, to describe such positive interdependencies (but see Carlson et al., 2006 for some distinctions), the common idea is that multiple roles can have synergistic effects, for example, by means of augmenting resources or transferring them. Greenhaus and Powell (2006) describe two mechanisms by which one role can benefit the other, one involving direct application of resources from one role to another and the other operating through increased positive affect. When applied to the interaction between work and partner roles, the former may manifest as factors such as communication skills developed in the relationship helping communication in the workplace. The latter may manifest as positive mood emerging from interactions with a partner being carried over to the workplace. Overall, from the enrichment-focused perspective, having a partner role provides an additional source of potential psychological resources, and thus may be linked with improved levels of satisfaction with WLB.

Existing evidence and limitations

Most research speaking to the role of partnership status in work–life interface has examined how being married (vs. unmarried) is associated with relevant variables. However, results from this body of research do not provide strong support for either the depletion- or enrichment-focused theoretical predictions. For example, in Byron's (2005) meta-analysis, marital status was not significantly associated with work interference with family or family interference with work. Lapiere and colleagues' (2018) meta-analysis also revealed no significant link between marital status and work-to-family enrichment although there was a small positive link between marital status and family-to-work enrichment. Other individual studies with a broader view on life domain have also found no significant differences between married and unmarried individuals in terms of interference or enhancement (Hsieh et al., 2005; Panisoara & Serban, 2013) or global perceptions of WLB (Amazue & Onyishi, 2016). However, in a recent study that accounted for partnership status of unmarried individuals, Denson and Szélenyi (2020) found that compared to married or partnered unmarried individuals, unpartnered individuals reported poorer WLB.

While the literature does not seem to suggest a clear contribution of partnership status to WLB experiences, there are at least two features of previous research that prevent us from concluding that partnership status may

not play an important role. One concerns the way partnership status has been operationalized. Specifically, when the distinction is made between individuals who are married versus unmarried (e.g., Amazue & Onyishi, 2016), the heterogeneity that exists within unmarried groups can be overlooked. Treating those who are and are not dating as one group and comparing them against the married group can obscure the link between partnership status and WLB and may explain why significant group differences have rarely been found. On the other hand, when the distinction is made such that married and dating individuals are collapsed (e.g., Denson & Szélenyi, 2020), the differences between marital and non-marital partnerships are overlooked. Unlike being in a non-marital relationship, being married typically entails taking on multiple new roles aside from that as a romantic partner that may also affect WLB (e.g., role of a daughter-in-law; Uddin, 2021). Thus, when married individuals are included in a group compared against unpartnered individuals, it is unclear to what extent we can attribute any differences in WLB experiences to their differences in partnership role. In short, the categories by which we distinguish partnership status have important implications for findings and their interpretations. Ideally, a comparison should be made between partnered vs. unpartnered individuals among unmarried individuals.

Another perhaps more critical limitation of previous research is the use of cross-sectional data. While examining group-level differences can tell us how different partnered and unpartnered individuals are on average, this approach does not provide a good test of the predictions from role theory perspectives regarding the effect of taking on or leaving a partner role. Consider the possibility that there are some unmeasured characteristics associated with partnership status that could also shape WLB experiences. For example, those who have more flexible work arrangements may be more likely to enter a relationship and importantly, also feel more satisfied with WLB. In this case, our group comparison might indicate higher levels of WLB satisfaction among partnered (vs. unpartnered) individuals, but such results would not be an accurate reflection of the role of partnership status per se. Further, if it were in fact the case that having a romantic partner reduces satisfaction with WLB, we might observe a non-significant group difference emerging from those more satisfied with WLB being more likely to enter relationships (which however undermines their satisfaction with WLB).

For a more precise test of the predictions from depletion-focused and enrichment-focused perspectives, we need to examine changes in WLB within a given person as a function of changes in partnership status. Drawing on longitudinal data and focusing on within-person changes helps overcome limitations such as confounding effects of stable unmeasured characteristics. If analyses show that satisfaction with WLB is lower when a person is partnered (vs. unpartnered), then we can infer support for the depletion perspective; if we find that satisfaction with WLB is higher when a person is partnered, we can infer support for the enrichment perspective.

Research overview

Our aim was to examine whether people's satisfaction with WLB changes as they move in and out of partnership. Addressing the limitations of the previous research, we made a more precise distinction between single and partnered status by focusing only on unmarried individuals, and also examined within-person differences in WLB rather than between-group differences. Of note, we did not formulate any unidirectional hypothesis as the predictions from both the depletion- and enrichment-perspectives were reasonable. To put the results in broader context, we also examined how partnership status is linked with satisfaction with one's life and career. Examining all three satisfaction outcomes can help paint a more comprehensive picture of employees' lives across partnership status (e.g., are any differences across partnership status specific to levels of satisfaction in the WLB domain or generalizable across domains?).

Following our primary study, we conducted an additional study to help address two remaining questions. First, as our primary study relied on unvalidated single-item measures, we sought to provide support for their validity and thus our conclusions. Second, to gain insight into the mechanisms underlying differences in people's WLB satisfaction as a function of partnership status, we examined how partnered vs. unpartnered individuals differ in the degree to which they report interference and enrichment between work and life. Overall, we expected this study to complement our primary study by illuminating any between-group differences in satisfaction with WLB along with variables that speak to theoretical mechanisms.

In sum, our primary research questions can be summarized as follows:

Primary Study: How does an individual's satisfaction with WLB differ when they are in vs. out of a romantic relationship?

Additional Study: How do individuals who are in vs. out of a romantic relationship differ in satisfaction with WLB as well as interference and enrichment between work and personal life?

Primary study

Methods

Participants and procedure

We used data from the 6th to 11th waves (2013–2018) of German Family Panel study (pairfam release 11.1; Brüderl et al., 2015) in which the WLB measure was available. Additional details on the study and information on data access can be found at <https://www.pairfam.de/en/>. German-speaking participants living in private households were recruited in 2008 and were contacted annually to complete a survey. We analysed 2,358 surveys from 609 individuals who were working (i.e., reported full-time, part-time or marginal employment, self-employed, or other) at all waves and experienced at least one partnership transition across the waves. We only included participants who did not report experiencing a job transition (to ensure that factors other than

Table 1. Participant characteristics ($n = 609$).

	<i>M (SD) or %</i>
Sex	53% Male
Age	29.17 (7.62)
Marital history	
Never married	88%
Divorced	11%
Widowed	0.005%
Parental status	22% Parents
Education (years)	13.16 (2.56)
Net personal income (Euros)	1413.68 (742.85)
Employment type	
Full-time employment	70%
Part-time employment	13%
Marginal employment	7%
Self-employed	7%
Other	4%
Work arrangement	
Only during the day and on weekdays	56%
Fixed shift, never on weekends	3%
Fixed shift, also on weekends	10%
Changing shifts, never on weekends	1%
Changing shifts, also on weekends	13%
Other or no regulation of working hours	16%
Weekly working hours	37.76 (13.18)

partnership status remain relatively constant) or a marriage (as we focused on non-marital partnerships) across the waves. The median number of reports participants completed was four; the median number of reports in which participants were partnered and unpartnered were both two. Power analysis based on 1,000 simulations indicated that this provides adequate power (>99%) to detect a standardized level-1 direct effect of .10 (a standardized random slope fixed at .09 and ICC at .50; Arend & Schäfer, 2019). Full information on participant characteristics (based on the earliest report of the given participant) are presented in Table 1.

Measures

All items were answered on a 11-point Likert scale (0 = *Very dissatisfied*; 10 = *Very satisfied*). Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are presented in Table 2.

Satisfaction with work and life balance. Participants answered the question "How satisfied are you with the proportion of time that you spend on the job or for your vocational training or university education relative to the time that you spend on your personal life?"

Satisfaction with life. Participants answered the question "All in all, how satisfied are you with your life at the moment?"

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

	1	2	3	Unpartnered <i>M (SD)</i>	Partnered <i>M (SD)</i>
1. Satisfaction with WLB	—	.52	.41	6.22 (1.78)	5.96 (1.74)
2. Satisfaction with life	.16	—	.53	7.18 (1.55)	7.66 (1.28)
3. Satisfaction with career	.27	.22	—	7.57 (1.53)	7.47 (1.49)

Correlations above the diagonal represent between-person correlations and below the diagonal represent within-person correlations calculated using the *rmcorr* package (Bakdash & Marusich, 2017). Means and standard deviations of person-means across single and partnership periods are presented. $p < .001$.

Satisfaction with career. Participants answered the question “How satisfied are you with the following domains of your life? – Career.”

Analyses and results

To examine the within-person effect of a partnership, we conducted multilevel analyses in R using the *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2015). Intraclass correlations, indicating the proportion of variance in the outcome variable available to be explained by between- or within-person variability, were first calculated from a random intercept model. Results suggested substantial between- and within-person variance; specifically, 63% of the variance in satisfaction with WLB existed within person. We then examined whether there are differences in satisfaction with WLB when participants were unpartnered vs. partnered by including partnership status as a predictor (person-mean centred; Yaremych et al., 2021). We modelled both fixed and random effects of partnership status. We included the proportion of reports an individual completed when dating as a Level 2 predictor. We also included a linear effect of wave (note however that an exploratory growth curve model revealed no significant linear change in participants' satisfaction with WLB across the years).

We first conducted our analyses without any covariates, then with two different sets of covariates: first including sociodemographic variables (i.e., sex, age, sexual orientation, marital history, parental status, and education), and the second also including job-related variables (i.e., weekly working hours, employment type and work arrangement). As discriminant analyses, we ran the same sets of analyses predicting satisfaction with life and career.

Within-person effect of partnership status

Our model showed a significant link between yearly partnership status and satisfaction with WLB, $b = -0.27$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $[-0.43, -0.12]$, $r_{\text{effect}} = .14$, such that being single, on average, was associated with higher satisfaction with WLB. In other words, people reported lower levels of satisfaction with WLB during waves when they were in a relationship than during waves when they were unpartnered. The proportion of reports when dating (i.e., between-person effects of partnership) was not associated with satisfaction with WLB. These effects remained unchanged with the covariates included.

Discriminant analyses

When we ran the same set of analyses with satisfaction with life as the outcome, the results showed that individuals were more satisfied with life overall when they were partnered (vs. unpartnered), $b = 0.44$, 95% CI = $[0.33, 0.56]$, $p < .001$, $r_{\text{effect}} = .32$. With satisfaction with career as an outcome, there was no effect of partnership. $b = -0.04$, $p = .57$, 95% CI = $[-0.17, 0.09]$, $r_{\text{effect}} = .02$. The results remained unchanged with the covariates were included.

Additional analyses

Because our primary analyses showing that individuals reported higher satisfaction with WLB during the waves when they were unpartnered (vs. partnered) focused on average levels of satisfaction with WLB across partnership status, they cannot speak to whether the effect is driven by starting a relationship, exiting a relationship, or both. To explore this question, we conducted follow-up analyses using two separate subsets of the full data: (1) data on *entrance* (i.e., participants were unpartnered at wave t and dating at wave $t + 1$; 460 individuals' 487 transitions) and (2) data on *break-up* (i.e., participants were dating at wave t and unpartnered at wave $t + 1$; $n = 331$ individuals' 353 transitions). Note that as these analyses required consecutive reports of a transition, the sample size was smaller than what our primary analyses utilized.

We examined the effect of an event (entrance or break-up) using the same approach as in the primary analyses (but did not model a random slope of an event). The first model showed that entering a relationship was associated with lower satisfaction with WLB, $b = -0.37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = $[-0.58, -0.15]$, $r_{\text{effect}} = .15$. That is, an individual showed decreased satisfaction with WLB in the year they entered a relationship. In contrast, our model on break-ups showed a positive link between the event and satisfaction with WLB, $b = 0.25$, $p = .03$, 95% CI = $[0.02, 0.47]$, $r_{\text{effect}} = .11$, such that an individual showed increased satisfaction with WLB in the year they exited a romantic relationship. Taken together, these results suggest that lower satisfaction with WLB when in a partnership may be driven by both lowered satisfaction as one enters a relationship and heightened satisfaction as one exits a relationship.

Brief discussion

Our results support the depletion perspective in that entering a romantic relationship was associated with decreases in satisfaction with WLB. However, in the absence of evidence supporting the validity of our single-item measures, it is unclear whether these measures adequately captured our constructs. We addressed this question by conducting an additional study. Further, we were limited in this study in exploring potential mechanisms underlying the link between partnership status and WLB experiences. In the additional study, we assessed the degree to which work and life interfere with or enrich each other. We examined how individuals with and without a partner differ in these outcomes as well as satisfaction with WLB.

Additional study

The goal of this study was twofold: (1) to validate the single-item measures used in our primary study and (2) to extend our understanding of group-level differences in satisfaction with WLB by examining whether and how partnered and unpartnered individuals differ in work–life interference and/or enrichment. One additional goal we hoped this study would achieve was to reconcile the seeming discrepancy between our longitudinal findings and previous cross-sectional findings suggesting better WLB among partnered individuals (e.g., Denson & Szelényi, 2020).

Given that previous work differed from our primary study in multiple ways, it was difficult to attribute the differing results solely to the within-person vs. between-person nature of the comparisons. In this new cross-sectional study, we ensured equivalence to the primary study in aspects such as the way partnership status was operationalized and the precise outcomes tested. As such, if we now find that being in (vs. out of) a relationship is associated with similar or higher levels of satisfaction with WLB as suggested by previous cross-sectional work, we can conclude with more confidence that the within-person approach adopted in our primary study was key to our findings. In contrast, if we find that being in (vs. out of) a relationship is associated with lower satisfaction with WLB just as our primary study suggested, then we are more justified to conclude that other methodological differences such as operationalization of partnership status may have affected our findings. Overall, whether we would conceptually replicate our primary findings in this study was an open question; thus, no hypotheses were made.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Pre-registration of our research questions and analytic plan as well as the final data used for analysis can be found at https://osf.io/gv4ku/?view_only=13c82524aceb4e678cf8ecfeb43fb133. This study was approved by the research ethics board at the University of Toronto. We aimed to recruit 400 unpartnered and 400 partnered individuals, equally distributed across men and women from Prolific. This provides an adequate sample size for measurement invariance testing (necessary to make valid group comparisons¹; Chen, 2007), and to detect a small effect size ($f^2 = .02$) with 90% power (α set to .01 to assume stringent inference criteria) in the planned regression model with the largest number of covariates (Faul et al., 2007). We added other criteria in addition to being currently employed in order to recruit a sample demographically similar to that in our primary study. Participants had to be between 20 and 49 years old and for partnered individuals, in the relationship for a year or less (to be consistent with our focus on changes in partnership status). Due to difficulty recruiting participants who met all the criteria, we ultimately loosened the criteria to being in a relationship for a maximum of 1.5 years. Further, given national differences in norms and policies related to WLB (Fernandez-Crehuet et al., 2016), we also specified nationality

and country of residence to be consistent with the sample in our primary study: Germany or Ireland or the United Kingdom; the latter two countries because they have adjacent ranking on WLB to Germany (Fernandez-Crehuet et al., 2016).

After excluding individuals who failed an attention check, indicated having provided dishonest responses, or withdrew data, the final sample consisted of 396 unpartnered (182 men, 204 women, 10 others; $M_{age} = 30.60$; $SD_{age} = 7.38$) and 383 partnered individuals (188 men, 189 women, 5 others; $M_{age} = 29.12$; $SD_{age} = 6.72$). Partnered individuals had been partnered for an average of eight months ($SD = 3$ months) with most reporting dating one partner exclusively ($n = 366$). Thirteen participants were engaged to be married ($n = 13$) and four were dating multiple partners. Most participants had never been married, but 28 in the unpartnered sample and 21 in the partnered sample had divorced and one participant in the unpartnered sample was widowed. Most participants (87% and 81% of the unpartnered and partnered sample, respectively) did not have a child. Participants completed a series of questionnaires that included all single-item measures used in our primary study and multi-item measures described below. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables are shown in Table 3.²

Measures

Satisfaction with work and life balance

Participants completed Valcour's (2007) 5-item measure of satisfaction with WLB ($\alpha = .92$). They rated how satisfied they were with different aspects of WLB such as "the way [they] divide [their] time between work and personal or family life" on a scale ranging from 1 (*Very dissatisfied*) to 5 (*Very satisfied*).

Work–nonwork interference/enhancement

Participants completed Fisher et al. (2009) measure which includes five items assessing *work interference with personal life* (e.g., "My personal life suffers because of my work"; $\alpha = .92$), six items assessing *personal life interference with work* (e.g., "My personal life drains me of the energy I need to do my job"; $\alpha = .88$), three items assessing *work enhancement of personal life* (e.g., "My job gives me energy to pursue activities outside of work that are important to me"; $\alpha = .84$), and three items assessing *personal life enhancement of work* (e.g., "My personal life gives me the energy to do my job"; $\alpha = .81$). All items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Unpartnered <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Partnered <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
1. Satisfaction with WLB (SI)	–									6.72 (2.13)	6.93 (2.12)
2. Satisfaction with WLB	.71	–								3.40 (0.92)	3.63 (0.85)
3. WIPL	–.64	–.70	–							3.03 (1.02)	2.89 (1.06)
4. PLIW	–.15	–.21	.26	–						2.30 (0.81)	2.22 (0.81)
5. WEPL	.47	.46	–.48	–.03	–					2.70 (0.95)	2.88 (0.96)
6. PLEW	.36	.43	–.36	–.31	.51	–				3.04 (0.88)	3.52 (0.80)
7. Life satisfaction (SI)	.44	.48	–.39	–.26	.45	.61	–			6.17 (2.10)	7.49 (1.84)
8. Life satisfaction	.36	.44	–.35	–.20	.47	.61	.85	–		3.64 (1.35)	4.54 (1.22)
9. Career satisfaction (SI)	.45	.40	–.32	–.12	.47	.43	.65	.63	–	6.98 (2.11)	7.47 (1.96)
10. Career satisfaction	.31	.30	–.22	–.07	.52	.39	.47	.51	.72	3.38 (1.06)	3.52 (1.00)

WLB, work–life balance; WIPL, work interference with personal life; PLIW, personal life interference with work; WEPL work enhancement of personal life; PLEW, personal life enhancement of work; SI, single-item measure.

$|r| > .07$ is significant at $p < .05$ and $|r| > .12$ is significant at $p < .01$.

Satisfaction with life

Participants completed Diener et al.'s (1985) 5-item measure of satisfaction with life (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal"; $\alpha = .90$) on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*).

Satisfaction with career

Participants completed Shockley et al.'s (2016) 3-item measure of career satisfaction (e.g., "I am enthusiastic about my career"; $\alpha = .81$) on a scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*).

Analyses and results

Measure validation

To examine whether the single-item and multi-item measures capture the same constructs, we ran three confirmatory factor analysis models (Matthews et al., 2022; also see our pre-registered plan). For example, for satisfaction with WLB, a model specifying a single latent construct with both the single-item measure and five items from Valcour's measure were fitted. For all three constructs, we found support for validity of the single-item measures as the models all demonstrated a good fit to our data: CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05 (90% CI = [0.03, 0.07]), SRMR = .01, for satisfaction with WLB; CFI = .98, RMSEA = .09 (90% CI = [0.07, 0.12]), SRMR = .02, for life satisfaction, and CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05 (90% CI = [0.00, 0.10]), SRMR = .01, for career satisfaction. In all models, standardized factor loadings of the single-item measure exceeded .75. Full results can be found in the Supplemental Material.

Differences in satisfaction with WLB constructs

As illustrated in Figure 1, results from Welch's *t*-tests showed that partnered individuals were significantly more satisfied with WLB compared to unpartnered individuals, $t(775) = 3.60$, $p <$

.001, 95% CI = [0.10, 0.35], $d = 0.26$, when using the multi-item measure. This difference was not significant when using a single-item measure, $t(777) = 1.33$, $p = .19$, 95% CI = [-0.10, 0.50], although the pattern was similar. Partnered individuals did not differ from unpartnered individuals in the extent of personal life interference with work, $t(776) = -1.38$, $p = .17$, 95% CI = [-0.19, 0.03], $d = 0.10$, but they reported significantly lower levels of work interference with personal life, $t(773) = -2.00$, $p = .05$, 95% CI = [-0.30, -0.002], $d = 0.14$. Partnered individuals also reported significantly higher levels of enhancement from both work to personal life, $t(775) = 2.52$, $p = .01$, 95% CI = [0.04, 0.31], $d = 0.18$, and personal life to work, $t(773) = 8.10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI = [0.37, 0.61], $d = 0.58$. None of these results changed in two regression models we fitted including the same sets of covariates as in the primary study.

Lastly, for interested readers, we fitted a model predicting satisfaction with WLB, controlling for interference and enhancement variables. The effect of partnership status remained largely unchanged when controlling for either or both types of interference as well as enhancement from work to life. However, when enhancement from life to work was included in the model, the effect of partnership status was no longer significant, $b = -0.07$, $p = .12$. Possibly, partnered individuals' higher satisfaction with WLB has to do with their personal life benefitting their work life to a greater degree. Interpreting these results as speaking to the mechanism, however, requires caution as inferences about longitudinal mediational processes cannot be reliably made in cross-sectional data (O'Laughlin et al., 2018).

Brief discussion

The results from this study support the validity of the previously used single-item measures. For satisfaction with WLB, the results also suggest that the single-item measure may be less sensitive to capturing group-level differences compared to

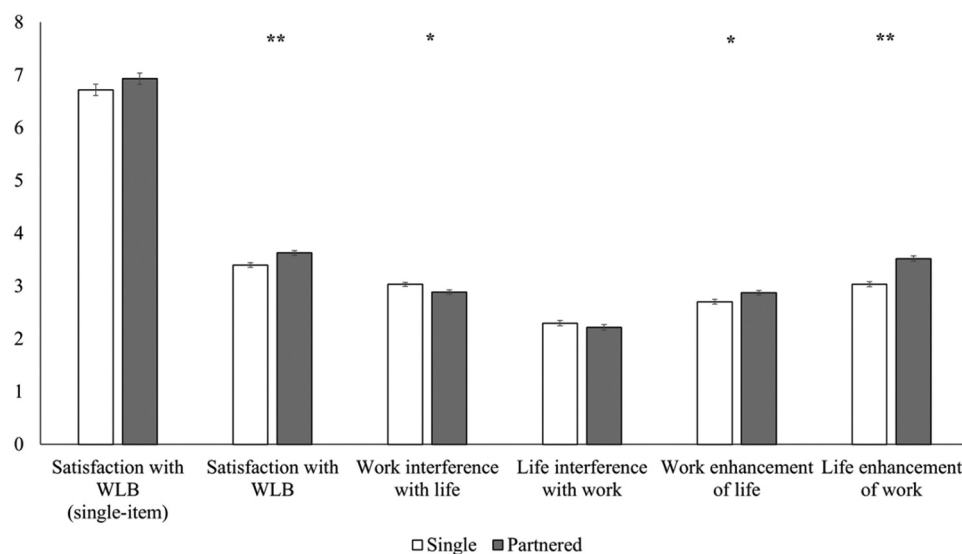


Figure 1. Differences in work–life balance constructs across partnership status.

Note. WLB, worklife balance.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

a multi-item measure (see [Figure 1](#)). Nevertheless, cross-sectional comparisons in these data were consistent with previous cross-sectional findings in that partnered (vs. unpartnered) individuals were just as or more satisfied with WLB.

General discussion

This research examined variability in satisfaction with WLB among unmarried employees as a function of changes in partnership status. Results tracking individuals' transitions into and out of a relationship indicated that satisfaction with WLB was on average lower when a given individual was partnered (vs. unpartnered). People evidenced reduced satisfaction with WLB in a year they started dating compared to the previous year when they were not in a relationship, as well as improved satisfaction with WLB in a year they left a relationship compared to the previous year when they were dating. These findings support the depletion perspective (Rothbard et al., 2020) and are consistent with the notion that taking on the additional role of a romantic partner comes with more responsibilities requiring an adjustment of resource allocation between work and personal life. Making efforts to redress the balance can be stressful and in turn undermine employees' satisfaction with WLB even though participants did feel more satisfied with their lives overall and were not any less satisfied with their career when in (vs. out of) a relationship. Put differently, when unpartnered, people might be more satisfied with the way they balance work and life given the absence of a highly interdependent relationship that may place demands on their time over which they have limited control (Righetti & Impett, 2017).

Contribution to the existing literature

These findings are noteworthy particularly in the light of group-level differences found in previous research and in our own additional study. Specifically, when we compared partnered individuals' WLB experiences against those of unpartnered individuals at a single time point, partnered individuals were more, not less, satisfied with WLB overall. Our additional study also showed that partnered (vs. unpartnered) individuals reported less work interference with life while experiencing more enrichment between work and life. Combined with our longitudinal data, these data suggest that unpartnered individuals' lower levels of satisfaction with WLB in cross-sectional data likely warrant explanations other than the effect of a partnership. One possibility is that partnered employees differ from unpartnered employees in personality characteristics that are related to feelings about WLB. For example, people higher in conscientiousness may be more likely to be in a relationship (Stavrova & Ehlebracht, 2015) and to have more positive perceptions of their WLB (J. S. Michel et al., 2011). In this case, we may find that partnered (vs. unpartnered) individuals are more satisfied with WLB, but this difference might be reflective of personality differences rather than mechanisms related to partnership status. Such selection effects are hard to rule out in cross-sectional data and are one of the potential reasons for the discrepancy between our longitudinal and cross-sectional findings.

Acknowledging such limitations in cross-sectional research and accounting for them in interpreting research findings are critical in advancing theory development. Specifically, a non-significant link between marital status and work-family enrichment can lead researchers to conclude that such contextual factors cannot adequately capture resources or that being married per se does not guarantee rich resources (Lapierre et al., 2018). However, such conclusions are not warranted from cross-sectional analyses; a compelling possibility remains that rather than a relationship being a poor source of resources, there may be other factors (e.g., personality) that obscure the potential benefits that relationships provide. To capture the unique contribution of time-varying factors such as partnership status more accurately, researchers need to examine within-person variations in WLB experiences while accounting for other relatively time-invariant factors (also see Rohrer & Murayama, 2021). Accumulation of such longitudinal evidence will be essential in integrating different moderators into a comprehensive theoretical framework on WLB and its contributors (Lee & Sirgy, 2018).

Moreover, a good understanding of how employees' life roles contribute to WLB experiences will help generate new lines of research that can extend our understanding of employees' WLB experiences. For example, the lack of group-level differences in WLB experiences in a cross-sectional study would have shifted researchers' attention away from this seemingly "peripheral" variable; in contrast, a potential negative effect of entering a partnership on WLB satisfaction as uncovered in our research can lead to follow-up studies examining what type of demands and responsibilities follow initiation of a relationship and are of particular concern to employees.

One notable aspect of our research is that we focused on non-marital partnerships, which not only helped us capture the unique contribution of having a partner role to WLB experiences but also highlighted the diversity of needs and struggles unmarried employees may experience. Arguably, much more research on WLB has been devoted to studying the married population (e.g., Yucel, 2017) than has attended to the heterogeneity among the unmarried population. For example, most work has focused on examining the role of marital status, overlooking the full range of meaningful differences within the unmarried population. Our research suggests the value of being careful in identifying the demographic of interest and understanding varying experiences of WLB among this group that is relatively underexplored.

Relatedly, the "family-friendly" organizational cultures that attempt to support employees' WLB often inadvertently exclude unmarried individuals (Casper & DePaulo, 2012). For example, unmarried individuals may be asked to be more accommodating (e.g., more travel) and feel inhibited in their request to use a WLB policy (Kirby & Krone, 2002; Perrigino et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, unmarried/childless employees report feeling that their nonwork roles are not as respected and perceive greater inequity in WLB policies compared to employees with a spouse/child (Casper et al., 2007). Our research echoes earlier calls to create singles-friendly work environments (Casper & DePaulo, 2012) and to broaden the focus on "family" to "life" (Kelliher et al., 2019). Specifically, our findings suggest that unmarried individuals might take on life roles

outside of the traditional concept of “family” that may affect their WLB and thus underscore organizations’ need to be more inclusive in designing and evaluating WLB policies (e.g., by incorporating ways to support different needs of diverse groups).

Future directions and limitations

One important avenue for future research is to identify the mechanisms underlying the partnership effect. A longitudinal study tracking an individual’s changing perceptions of how much time or effort they need to invest in the work and non-work domains of their lives as they enter or exit a relationship can provide insights into what about being in a relationship may be associated with reduced satisfaction with WLB. Along with the extent to which a partnership creates additional demands or pressures, it will be worth exploring what benefits it offers as well. Although the direction of our effects did not seem to support the enrichment perspective (Rothbard et al., 2020), it is possible that partnership indeed offered some psychological capital that could enhance satisfaction with WLB; their effects might simply have been weaker than (thus cancelled out by) what negative impact partnership-related demands had.

Furthermore, examining what organizational initiatives or work arrangements can attenuate the link between partnership status and WLB (i.e., better support employees’ transitions in and out of a relationship) will have practical relevance for organizations. Given the evidence on the effectiveness of self-training interventions in promoting satisfaction with WLB (e.g., A. Michel et al., 2014), it may be useful to examine whether such programmes can also help employees during their relationship transitions. Of note, our work also suggested a potential challenge to targeting WLB as an outcome by identifying a divergence between how satisfaction with WLB vs. with life or career changes as one enters a relationship. This suggests that in implementing and evaluating WLB policies, organizations will need to be mindful of multiple outcomes, and the effects in both the short-term and long-term.

Future research could also address several limitations of our studies. First, our studies were conducted within a limited cultural context. It will be important to replicate the current findings in cultures with different work and life values. Second, although we have some confidence about the validity of the single-item measures, they are nevertheless limited. Future research could improve our research by employing a well-validated, multidimensional measure (Wayne et al., 2021) that allows for examining multiple facets of WLB and thus exploring in depth which facets are affected and in what ways by the presence of a partnership. Indeed, single-item measures may be inadequate especially for assessing constructs that are multidimensional or conceptually complex. They may also raise concerns about usability to the extent that they are hard to understand. Nevertheless, there also exist empirical findings that challenge these claims; for example, Matthews et al.’s (2022) work suggested that these concerns about the ability to capture a broad construct and usability may not be critical at least in the case of single-item measures they tested.

Finally, while our research focused on the unique contribution of taking on a partner role on WLB experiences, longer follow-ups of individuals in a non-marital relationship are

needed to address a related question: what happens as a non-marital partner role develops into a married spousal role? Such investigations will help uncover how similar or different non-marital and marital relationships are in terms of creating new demands and providing resources, which will also have important implications for future discussion on how married and unmarried individuals should be treated in the workplace.

Notes

1. Prior to making comparisons, we established measurement invariance of all constructs assessed using multi-item scales across relationship status. Please see the supplemental material for full results.
2. We had also pre-registered a plan to examine differences in work centrality between unpartnered and partnered individuals. This was to test the idea that, if unpartnered individuals were more satisfied with WLB, this effect might be partly accounted for by them valuing work to a greater degree. Even though we found unpartnered individuals to be less, not more, satisfied with WLB, we nevertheless tested this and found no significance group difference, $t(768) = 0.79, p = .43$.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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