

Relationship between similarity in work-family centrality and marital satisfaction among dual-earner couples



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ABSTRACT

This study employed a dyadic approach to test two opposing hypotheses about the joint effect of two partners' work-family centrality on their marital satisfaction. The similarity hypothesis predicts that similarity in work-family centrality would be positively related to marital satisfaction; in contrast, the complementarity hypothesis suggests that similarity in work-family centrality would be negatively related to marital satisfaction. Data were collected from 533 Chinese dual-earner couples. Results of polynomial regression and response surface analysis provided support for the complementarity hypothesis rather than the similarity hypothesis. Additionally, marital satisfaction was higher when there was low-low (vs. high-high) couple congruence in work-family centrality. This study extends research on work-family centrality and provides a new perspective on understanding dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Work and family are two important domains in adults' lives, and each has its unique function (Grzywacz, 2016). Work-family centrality refers to a value judgment about the relative importance of the work role versus family role (Carr, Boyar, & Gregory, 2008). People with high work-family centrality believe that work is a central activity in their lives, and thus they tend to allocate more time and energy to the work domain than the family domain. By comparison, people with low work-family centrality believe that the family role is more significant in their lives, and thus they tend to prioritize family tasks. Previous studies have documented that work-family centrality has significant implications for individuals' work-related outcomes such as psychological detachment, work engagement, job satisfaction and retention (Carr et al., 2008; Wang, Luo, Zhang, & Wu, 2016; Zhang, Ma, Xie, Tang, & Zhou, 2013). However, we know little about the potential influence of work-family centrality on people's family life. Devoting time and energy to work/family necessarily depletes the time and energy available to devote to family/work, considering that time and energy are limited resources (Goode, 1960). Consistent with this argument, work-family

centrality might influence not only work-related outcomes but also family life.

Hence, the primary goal of the current study was to examine the relationship between work-family centrality and marital satisfaction. More specifically, considering that previous research suggested that the combination of two partners' characteristics could lead to different marriage relationship outcomes (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), the present study used a dyadic approach to test the association between similarity in work-family centrality and marital satisfaction among dual-earner couples. Similarity in work-family centrality refers to the degree to which the two members of a couple have the same assessments of the relative importance of work versus family roles. Higher/lower similarity in work-family centrality indicates that the absolute difference between two partners' scores on work-family centrality is smaller/bigger. Results from this study have the potential to make several contributions. First, with a dyadic approach, this study helps to deepen our understanding of the influence of work-family centrality at the couple level and then expands the research on work-family centrality. Second, by testing two competitive hypotheses about the effect of similarity, this study contributes valuable information related to mate selection. Finally, by examining the effects of different similarity patterns, this study helps to facilitate theory development in research on couple similarity.

Couple similarity is an important topic in the study of marital satisfaction. Some researchers believe that similarity is the "glue" of marriage (Scanzoni & Scanzoni, 1976). The similarity hypothesis indicates that couple similarity might positively predict couple relationship satisfaction and this hypothesis has been confirmed by numerous studies

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(Chi, Epstein, Fang, Lam, & Li, 2013; Gaunt, 2006; Wilson & Cousins, 2003). There are four aspects of the explanation for the similarity hypothesis. First, similar couples will feel comfortable interacting with their spouses because they can maintain their own preferred style of behavior. Second, they are more likely to validate each other's world view and have more common topics to talk about than dissimilar couples. Third, they might develop a more effective communication pattern than dissimilar couples (Chi et al., 2013). Lastly, similar couples might understand each other better (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001) and provide more effective support for each other. In line with the similarity hypothesis, similarity in work-family centrality might also be positively related to dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

However, as an alternative to the similarity hypothesis, the complementarity hypothesis tells a different story when it comes to the relationship between couple similarity and marital satisfaction. According to the complementarity hypothesis, couple diversification can positively predict marital satisfaction, whereas couple similarity might be harmful to marital quality (Winch, Ktsanes, & Ktsanes, 1954). This hypothesis also has been supported by empirical studies (Badr, 2004; Keizer & Komter, 2015; Shiota & Levenson, 2007). Researchers argue that enacting similar roles might at times make for a great deal of conflict (Murstain, 1971). For instance, if both partners are highly motivated to handle the family money, the result may be collision rather than satisfaction. Conversely, couples with more dissimilarity might have diversified skills to fulfill tasks and pursue goals in marital life with less attendant conflict (Shiota & Levenson, 2007). For example, tasks might be completed better when one partner is concerned with the entirety, and the other is concerned with the details. It has been found that complementarity in needs is positively related to the progress toward a permanent union for long-term couples (Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962).

As mentioned earlier, working people may experience competition between work and family owing to the limited amount of time and energy. Individuals with high work-family centrality need their spouses to spend more time and energy to maintain family functions. By comparison, individuals with low work-family centrality might need their spouses to gain more resources such as income for their family. In line with the complementarity hypothesis, when one partner is work focused and producing high income (i.e., high work-family centrality) and the other partner takes primary responsibility for raising the family (i.e., low work-family centrality), a dual-earner couple may experience more synergy between work and family, and thus higher marital satisfaction, than a dual-earner couple in which both partners are family caretakers or both are primarily devoted to work.

Taken together, these results suggest that similarity in work-family centrality might be a double-edged sword in a dual-earner couple's marriage. In addition, owing to the lack of research on the association between work-family centrality and marital satisfaction, we cannot predict the total influence of similarity in work-family centrality on dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction. Thus, we tested two opposing hypotheses respectively based on the similarity hypothesis (Gaunt, 2006; Wilson & Cousins, 2003) and the complementarity hypothesis (Winch et al., 1954).

Hypothesis 1a. Similarity in work-family centrality will positively predict dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

Hypothesis 1b. Similarity in work-family centrality will negatively predict dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

Further, it is important to differentiate two scenarios of high similarity in work-family centrality: when husbands and wives are congruent at high levels of work-family centrality and when they are congruent at low levels of work-family centrality. A previous study showed that people tend to invest more time and energy into roles that are high on centrality, because these roles have significant implications for their well-being and self-esteem (Simon, 1992). Moreover, success in these roles seems to be more psychologically rewarding than success in less

central roles (Burke & Stets, 2014). It has been found that high work-family centrality positively predicts work-to-family conflict (Carr et al., 2008; Zhang, Li, Wei, & Yang, 2011), which is a significant risk factor for low marital satisfaction (Carroll, Hill, Yorgason, Larson, & Sandberg, 2013).

It is reasonable to deduce that work-family centrality might be negatively associated with marital satisfaction at the individual level. In addition, numerous studies have confirmed the reciprocal relationship between two partners' marital satisfaction (i.e. Bakker, Demerouti, & Burke, 2009; van Steenbergen, Kluwer, & Karney, 2014). Thus, when husbands' and wives' work-family centrality are both high, they may experience lower marital satisfaction because in this situation, the division of household labor might induce conflict and dissatisfaction. In contrast, when husbands' and wives' work-family centrality are both low, although they may achieve less success in the work domain, they have a common goal of raising a family. They may both invest a lot of time and energy in the family domain, resulting in high marital satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2. Marital satisfaction will be lower for couples who are congruent at higher levels of work-family centrality.

It is also important to differentiate two types of non-congruence in work-family centrality: when the husband's work-family centrality is higher than the wife's, and vice versa. Due to the traditional gendered division of labor, men are expected to be more agentical and successful in the role of breadwinner (work role), whereas women are expected to be more communal and successful in the role of caregiver (family role) (Eagly, 1987). Until a few decades ago, the labor division pattern in China was still characterized by the Chinese saying, "the man goes out to work, while the woman looks after the house." Hence, these gender role expectations might remain dominant in today's Chinese society. When a husband's work-family centrality is higher than the wife's, their work-family time investments will be more consistent with gender role expectations. By comparison, when a wife's work-family centrality is higher than her husband's, their work-family intersection might be inconsistent with gender role expectations. According to social role theory, work-family value (i.e., work-family centrality) is more likely to produce positive outcomes if consistent with gender role expectations than if inconsistent with gender role expectations (Leslie, Manchester, & Kim, 2016).

Hypothesis 3. Marital satisfaction will be higher when a husband's work-family centrality is higher than his wife's rather than when a wife's work-family centrality is higher than her husband's.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 533 full-time dual-earner couples from Central and East China. These couples volunteered to independently fill out two identical anonymous questionnaires in their home. They were recruited by 34 psychology undergraduates of a Chinese university. Each student was asked to approach 20 dual-earner couples among their family members or friends. The questionnaires were in Mandarin and had code numbers to identify male and female completers. Of the 680 packages with questionnaires distributed, 533 were returned completed, resulting in a response rate of 78%.

About 80% of the couples were married for more than 3 years, 14% were married from 1 to 3 years, and 6% were married within one year. Three hundred and fifty-four couples had at least one child under the age of 18, and the other couples had no children under the age of 18. Three hundred and twenty-seven couples had elderly domestic helpers, and the other couples had no elderly domestic helpers. About 90% of the couples had no paid domestic helpers, and the other couples had paid domestic help. The mean age of the men was 37.38 years ($SD = 7.32$)

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Years of marriage	2.75	0.55	–						
2. Children under the age of 18	0.66	0.47	0.36***						
3. Elderly domestic helpers	0.61	0.49	0.06	0.32***					
4. Paid domestic help	0.10	0.30	0.03	0.09***	–0.01				
5. Work-family centrality (H)	2.66	0.82	0.02	–0.01	0.03	–0.06			
6. Marital satisfaction (H)	5.08	1.00	0.02	–0.04	–0.06	0.02	–0.29***		
7. Work-family centrality (W)	2.52	0.76	0.00	0.00	0.07	–0.04	0.17***	–0.21***	
8. Marital satisfaction (W)	4.89	0.97	–0.07	–0.10*	–0.09*	0.01	–0.19***	0.49***	–0.20***

Note. (H) and (W) represent husbands' and wives' variables, respectively.

* $p < 0.05$.*** $p < 0.001$.

and of the women was 35.46 years ($SD = 7.03$). For both male and female participants, the most common level of education was university education (49% for men and 45% for women), followed by junior college education (24% for men and 26% for women).

2.2. Measures

Work-family centrality was measured with the five-item scale developed by Carr et al. (2008). Sample items from this scale are: "In my view, an individual's personal life goals should be work-oriented rather than family-oriented" and "Overall, I consider work to be more central to my existence than family." Participants could respond using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scores on all items were summed and then averaged to create a composite score. When the composite score is higher, participants view work (versus family) as being more central to their lives. Previous studies showed that this scale has good reliability and validity in the Chinese context (Zhang et al., 2011). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.88 and 0.87 for men and women, respectively.

Marital satisfaction was assessed with the ENRICH marital satisfaction scale (Fowers & Olson, 1993). Considering that previous studies suggested that the item about religious beliefs is not suitable in the Chinese context (e.g., Ma, Xie, Tang, Shen, & Zhang, 2016), the concept of marital satisfaction was measured without this item. Thus, in the present study, this scale contained 9 items including 5 reverse-scored items. All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). Cronbach's alpha of this scale was 0.84 and 0.83 for men and women, respectively.

Control variables included years of marriage (within first year = 1; 1 year to 3 years = 2; above 3 years = 3), having children under the age of 18 (yes = 1; no = 0), having elderly domestic helpers (yes = 1; no = 0) and having paid domestic help (yes = 1; no = 0). Previous studies showed that these family characteristics are potential antecedents of marital satisfaction and of the allocation of work-family resources (Lu, Siu, Spector, & Shi, 2009).

3. Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the focal variables are presented in Table 1. Men's work-family centrality was negatively related both to their own ($r = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$) and their wives' ($r = -0.19$, $p < 0.001$) marital satisfaction. Similarly, women's work-family centrality was negatively associated both with their own ($r = -0.20$, $p < 0.001$) and their husbands' marital satisfaction ($r = -0.21$, $p < 0.001$).

The association between similarity in work-family centrality and marital satisfaction was conceptualized as a three-dimensional surface using polynomial regression and response surface analysis (Brunet, Gunnell, Gaudreau, & Sabiston, 2015; Edwards & Parry, 1993; Ilmarinen, Lönnqvist, & Paunonen, 2016). We tested hypotheses by estimating the following equation for men and women (to simplify, all control variables are omitted), respectively:

$$Z = b_0 + b_1H + b_2W + b_3H^2 + b_4HW + b_5W^2 + e,$$

where H and W represent husbands' and wives' work-family centrality, respectively; Z is marital satisfaction. Before computing the second-order terms, we centered H and W. Furthermore, we used the regression coefficients to plot the 3D response surface in which H and W were plotted on the perpendicular horizontal axes, and Z was plotted on the vertical axis. The slopes and curvatures of the surface were tested along the congruence line ($H = W$) as well as the incongruence line ($H = -W$) based on 10,000 bootstrap samples. Specifically, the shape of the surface along each line can be obtained by substituting the corresponding formula ($H = W$ or $H = -W$) into the polynomial regression equation.

The regression coefficients as well as the curvatures and slopes along the two conceptual reference lines are displayed in Table 2. To test Hypothesis 1 (i.e., similarity effect), we examined the response surface along the incongruence line ($H = -W$) in the floor plane as specified by a previous study (Edwards & Parry, 1993). If the curvature along the incongruence line which is calculated as " $b_3 - b_4 + b_5$ " is positive (curved upward), Hypothesis 1a would be supported, whereas if it is negative (curved downward), Hypothesis 1b would be supported. As Table 2 shows, the curvature of the surface along the congruence line was non-significant both for men and women, while the curvature of the surface along the incongruence line was significantly positive both for men (Curvature = 0.40, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.12, 0.67]) and women (Curvature = 0.37, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI = [0.11, 0.64]). Further, both Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 show a U-shaped surface along the incongruence

Table 2

Results of polynomial regression.

Variables	Marital satisfaction (Husbands)		Marital satisfaction (Wives)	
	B	SE	B	SE
Constant	4.80	0.22	5.15	0.22
Years of marriage	0.09	0.08	–0.07	0.08
Children under the age of 18	–0.12	0.10	–0.15	0.10
Elderly domestic helpers	–0.04	0.09	–0.09	0.09
Paid domestic help	0.05	0.14	0.05	0.14
Work-family centrality (H)	–0.28***	0.05	–0.16**	0.05
Work-family centrality (W)	–0.19**	0.06	–0.21***	0.06
H^2	0.15**	0.05	0.11*	0.05
$H \times W$	–0.18**	0.07	–0.23**	0.07
W^2	0.07	0.06	0.03	0.06
R^2	0.14		0.11	
ΔR^2 for the 3 quadratic terms	0.03**		0.03**	
Congruence ($H = W$) line				
Slop ($b_1 + b_2$)	–0.47**		–0.37**	
Curvature ($b_3 + b_4 + b_5$)	0.03		–0.09	
Incongruence ($H = -W$) line				
Slop ($b_1 - b_2$)	–0.09		0.05	
Curvature ($b_3 - b_4 + b_5$)	0.40**		0.37**	

Note. (H) and (W) represent husbands' and wives' variables, respectively.

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.

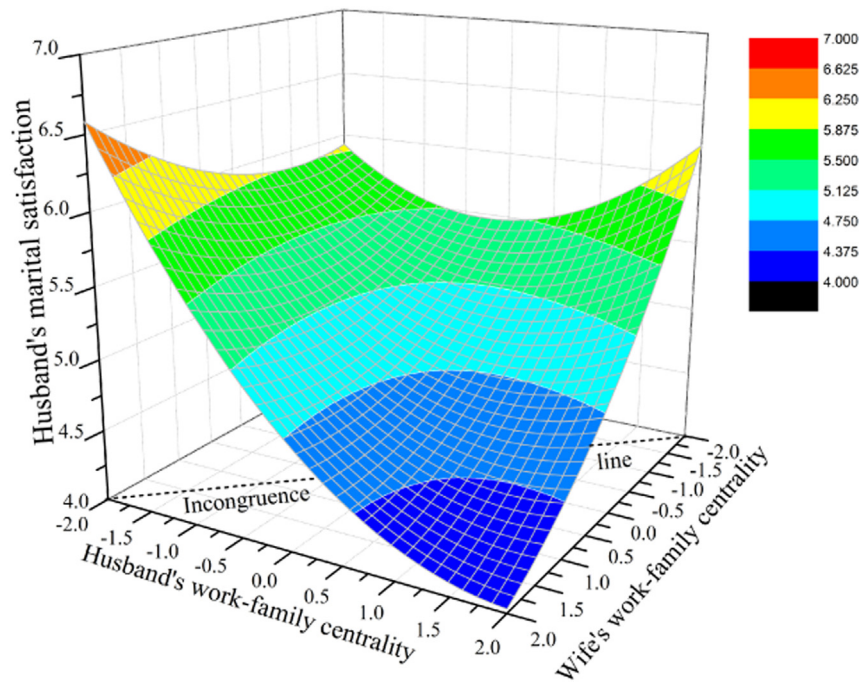


Fig. 1. Surface representing the effect of similarity in work-family centrality on husband's marital satisfaction.

line, such that marital satisfaction was minimized when the two partners' work-family centrality were equal. Meanwhile the marital satisfaction curve increased, both for men and women, as the difference between the two partners' work-family centrality increased. These results indicated that couples' marital satisfaction was lower when one partner's work-family centrality was aligned with the other partner's than when there was any deviation from the congruence line (i.e., moving to its right or left), thus supporting Hypothesis 1b and rejecting Hypothesis 1a.

To test Hypothesis 2 (i.e., effect of different patterns of high similarity), we examined the response surface along the congruence line ($H = W$) (Edwards & Parry, 1993). If the curvature along the congruence line

which is calculated as " $b_3 + b_4 + b_5$ " is equal to zero, and meanwhile the slope along the congruence line (calculated as " $b_1 + b_2$ ") is significantly negative, congruence at low levels of work-family centrality results in better outcomes than congruence at high levels of work-family centrality (Hypothesis 2). As Table 2 shows, for men, the slope of the surface along the congruence line was significantly negative ($-0.47, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.64, -0.30]$) and the curvature of this surface equaled zero; similarly, for women, the slope of the surface along the congruence line was significantly negative ($-0.37, p < 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.52, -0.21]$) and the curvature of this surface equaled zero. Further, both Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 show that marital satisfaction is lower at the front corner (high-high congruence) than at the rear corner (low-low

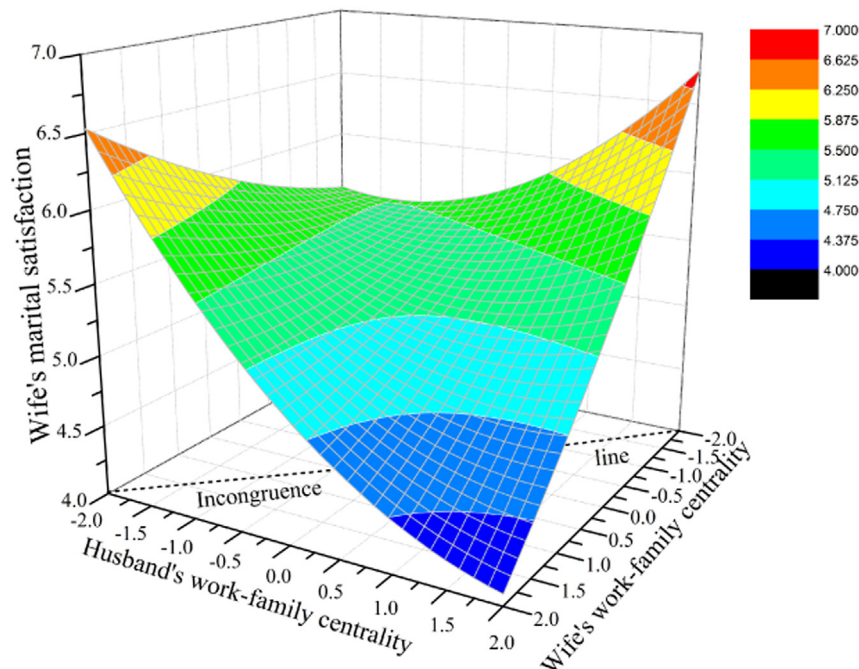


Fig. 2. Surface representing the effect of similarity in work-family centrality on wife's marital satisfaction.

congruence). These findings indicated that the high-high congruence participants had lower marital satisfaction than the low-low congruence participants, thus supporting **Hypothesis 2**.

To test **Hypothesis 3** (i.e., asymmetrical effect owing to gender), we examined the lateral shift of the response surface along the incongruence line ($H = -W$) using **Edwards and Parry's (1993)** approach. When the similarity effect is negative, a positive lateral shift indicates that the response surface along the incongruence line has a shift toward the region where $H < W$. In this condition, an increase in the surface will be more gentle in the $H < W$ region than in the region $H > W$, supporting our asymmetrical hypothesis. In the present study, the quantity representing the lateral shift was non-significantly positive both for men (0.23) and women (0.01), rejecting **Hypothesis 3**.

4. Discussion

As more women entered the workforce, dual-earner households became the norm in many countries such as the United States and China. There is evidence that work-family challenges are prominent for dual-earner couples, who may experience serious work-family conflict and in turn, low marital quality (**Bakker et al., 2009; van Steenbergen et al., 2014**). In line with this thinking, the present study tested work-family centrality as a potential antecedent of dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction. More specifically, we examined the relationship between similarity in work-family centrality and dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

Results of polynomial regression and response surface analysis showed that individuals' work-family centrality and couple similarity in work-family centrality were both negatively related to dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction. Furthermore, we found that different patterns of congruence in work-family centrality were associated with different levels of marital satisfaction. Specifically, couples who were congruent at high levels of work-family centrality had lower marital satisfaction than those congruent at low levels. In addition, the results showed that marital satisfaction was slightly higher when a husband's work-family centrality was higher than his wife's as compared with when a wife's work-family centrality was higher than her husband's; however, contrary to expectations, this difference was non-significant. One possible explanation for this unexpected result is that the gendered division of labor and traditional gender expectations may be fading, due to increased homemaking by men and increased bread-winning by women (**Leslie et al., 2016**). However, our findings might still reflect some vestiges of traditional gender role expectations in China.

The contributions of the present study are three-fold. First, our study contributes to a broader understanding of the influence of work-family centrality. To our knowledge, no other study has examined the relationship between work-family centrality and marital satisfaction. In the present study, we extended research on work-family centrality and found a negative effect of similarity in work-family centrality on marital satisfaction. This result seems to be inconsistent with previous studies, which have demonstrated the job-related benefits of work-family centrality (**Carr et al., 2008; Wang et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2013**). One possible explanation for this inconsistency is that the work role and family role may vie for people's limited resources (**Goode, 1960**). As mentioned earlier, for people with high work-family centrality, the allocation of work-family resources may be propitious to their work role but adverse to their family role. Hence, the potential benefits of work-family centrality may only emerge for job-related outcomes. This study reminds us that we should use a dialectic perspective to view the influence of work-family centrality.

Second, our results suggested that a couple in which one partner is work-oriented and the other is family-oriented might be happier than a couple in which both partners are family caregivers or primarily focused on work outside the home. These findings are valuable for informing mate selection, and provide evidence for the complementarity hypothesis. Although several scholars have proposed that

complementarity in certain characteristics might have positive consequences for marital quality (e.g., **Kerckhoff & Davis, 1962; Klohnen & Mendelsohn, 1998**), this formulation of complementarity has found limited support. Our study found that similarity in work-family centrality was negatively related to couples' marital satisfaction. This suggests that complementarity rather than similarity in work-family centrality has positive consequences for marital quality and supports the complementarity hypothesis. As mentioned earlier, a higher level of work-family centrality might lead to devoting more time and energy in the work domain at the cost of engagement in the family role. One possible explanation for our results is that the complementarity hypothesis rather than the similarity hypothesis may be appropriate when characteristics that are adverse to the marital relationship are considered, given that previous studies have demonstrated that dissimilarity in negative coping styles is positively associated with couples' marital satisfaction (**Badr, 2004**). Additional research is needed to test this explanation directly.

Lastly, this study can help to facilitate theory development in research on couples' similarity by employing polynomial regression and response surface analysis to test the similarity effect. Previous studies usually used one of two types of similarity measure: profile correlation or discrepancy score (e.g. **Gaunt, 2006; Luo et al., 2008**). However, both these two methods ignore the presence of different types of similarity. Polynomial regression and response surface analysis afford us the unique opportunity to test the effects of different similarity patterns. Using these analysis methods, our study firstly found that couples' marital satisfaction was lower when the partners were congruent at high levels of work-family centrality than when they were congruent at low levels of work-family centrality. Additionally, the marital satisfaction of couples in which the husband's work-family centrality was higher than his wife's was not significantly higher than the marital satisfaction of couples in which the wife's work-family centrality was higher than her husband's.

Future research can expand on our study in several ways. First, this study was based on a cross-sectional design. We cannot rule out alternative causal directions such as the possibility that greater marital satisfaction leads to lower work-family centrality. Longitudinal research is needed to provide a more stringent test of our hypotheses. Second, we only examined the association between similarity in work-family centrality and couples' marital satisfaction. Additional research is needed to further identify the potential boundary conditions of this association, and to identify the mechanisms explaining these results. Third, it should be noted that the present findings are specific to dual-earner couples. Future research may attempt to replicate these results in other family situations such as traditional families (families in which the father works and the mother stays home). Finally, our Chinese sample might also pose a concern about generalizability. Previous studies showed that the work ethic in China is based on family such that Chinese strive to bring prosperity to their families by working (**Yang, Chen, Choi, & Zou, 2000**), and that the cultural norm of collectivism legitimizes giving priority to the work role (**Aryee, Fields, & Luk, 1999**). However, the cultural norm of individualism in Western societies probably tells a different story. Thus, generalizability of the findings needs to be further verified in different cultures.

5. Conclusion

Does greater similarity predict better marital quality? This might be one of the most intriguing questions that marriage researchers are attempting to answer. The current study adopted a dyadic approach and provides important insights into the association between similarity in work-family centrality and marital satisfaction in dual-earner couples. Our results showed that similarity in work-family centrality is negatively related to couples' marital satisfaction. Moreover, couples' marital satisfaction was lower when they were similar at high levels of work-family centrality than similar at low levels. These findings

support the complementarity hypothesis and provide a new perspective for understanding dual-earner couples' marital satisfaction.

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