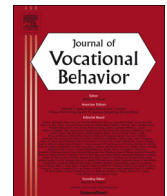


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Work-family guilt as a straightjacket. An interview and diary study on consequences of mothers' work-family guilt

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ABSTRACT

Working mothers often experience guilt when balancing work and family responsibilities. We examined consequences of work-family guilt with an interview study ($N = 28$) and daily diary study ($N = 123$). The interview study revealed that as a result of work-family guilt, parents tended to either reappraise the situation (e.g., emphasizing financial importance of work) or compensate for their guilt by adapting their parenting, adapting their work, and by sacrificing their leisure. Consistently, the diary study (where mothers completed online daily questionnaires over 8 consecutive days) revealed that higher work-family guilt was related to more traditional gender behaviors in mothers. Specifically, mothers (a) thought more about reducing their working hours, (b) reduced the time they planned for themselves, and (c) planned to reserve more time and energy for their children in the future although no changes in actual parenting behaviors were observed. Moreover, the diary study demonstrated that work-family guilt is associated with lower well-being for mothers. Together, these studies illuminate how work-family guilt may motivate mothers to comply with gender norms in which they prioritize caregiving tasks over their work.

1. Introduction

More than ever before, mothers in the U.S. are working outside of the home, an increase from less than half of mothers in 1975 to almost three-quarters of mothers in 2017 (Pew Research Center, 2018). Indeed, an increasing number of mothers work in full-time paid employment (Pew Research Center, 2016). However, somewhat paradoxically, among mothers who are employed full-time, almost half would prefer to either work part-time or to stop working altogether (Pew Research Center, 2013). Furthermore, despite the high percentage of mothers in paid employment, mothers still shoulder a disproportionate amount of domestic work relative to fathers (Craig & Mullan, 2010).

Such statistics have led the popular media to suggest that “mommy guilt” is “getting the better of” working mothers (Redrick, 2011). Indeed, it has been proposed that the reason why so many highly educated, talented women “choose” to opt-out the career path (Belkin, 2003), is because of the guilt they feel about work commitments interfering with their time with their children. However, to our knowledge, there is little empirical work on the consequences of work-family guilt. In this paper, we address this gap in the literature. We examine how work-family guilt may influence parents' (and especially mothers') career choices, their parenting,

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and their well-being. In particular, we aim to illuminate the possible role of guilt in reinforcing gendered roles in mothers both at home and at work.

1.1. Work-family guilt in mothers

Almost all working parents will recognize situations in which their work responsibilities have interfered with their family responsibilities, for example, having to work even though their child is sick, or coming home late and missing a family dinner. Although both fathers and mothers may experience guilt in such situations, feelings of guilt are likely to be especially prevalent in mothers because standards of good parenting are more intensive for mothers than fathers (e.g., Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2017; Martínez, Carrasco, Aza, Blanco, & Espinar, 2011).

Notions of “intensive mothering” assume that the time mothers spend parenting is especially important for the well-being of their children, and that this time is more important than that spent by fathers or by other caregivers (e.g., Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh, Miles-McLean, & Erchull, 2013). Relatedly, there still exists a normative pressure for mothers, but not fathers, to prioritize their family over their work (e.g., Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012; Park, Smith, & Correll, 2010). For example, mothers who do not take parental leave are perceived as failing to adhere to “family prioritization norms” and are judged to be worse parents than mothers who do take parental leave (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). However, there is a Catch-22: mothers who do take maternity leave are evaluated more negatively in a professional capacity (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017).

Taken together, this research suggests that normative notions of what it means to be a good mother are in conflict with norms of what it means to be a successful professional (see also Cejka & Eagly, 1999; Schein, 1973). However, for fathers, the role of a good parent and successful professional align. Fathers are expected to be the breadwinner, so when they prioritize their work, they still fulfill their family obligations (e.g., Blair-Loy, 2003). Indeed, working fathers and non-working fathers are seen as equally competent as parents, whereas working mothers are seen as less competent than mothers who do not work (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

As a result of these gendered norms and the gendered division of labor, there are two reasons working mothers may be more likely than working fathers to struggle to combine work and family. First, because mothers, compared to fathers, spend more of their time caring for children, mothers may be more likely to encounter situations in which they have to choose between prioritizing work or family (e.g., Duxbury & Higgins, 1991). Second, in situations where work interferes with their family (e.g., an unexpected meeting at work prevents parents from watching their child’s football game), only mothers, and not fathers, may be viewed as prioritizing the wrong domain and may be judged more negatively (e.g., Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

In line with the above, research shows that mothers experience more guilt about combining work and family than do fathers (e.g., Borelli et al., 2017; Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2016). Guilt is a moral emotion that people experience when they perceive that they have violated a societal or moral standard (e.g., Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). In situations where work and family conflict, mothers are thus more likely than fathers to violate societal standards. Research shows that women’s descriptions of how employment affected their family were coded by blind raters as including more references to work-family guilt than did men’s descriptions (Borelli et al., 2016). It has also been demonstrated that when mothers and fathers were asked to imagine an identical work-family conflict situation, mothers anticipated more guilt than fathers (Aarntzen, Derks, Van Steenbergen, & Van der Lippe, 2019). Moreover, gender differences in guilt were not found in a more neutral work-family situation, suggesting that it is not an innate tendency of mothers to experience more guilt, but rather that mothers experience more guilt in work-family conflict situations in which they violate the family prioritization norm.

Research demonstrates that experiences of guilt trigger behaviors that are intended to compensate for the guilt-inducing action and to make amends for relationships that were harmed (Ketelaar & Au, 2003; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). For example, Roseman et al. (1994) demonstrated that when participants were asked to remember a guilt situation in their own life, they reported a desire to apologize for their action and to perform remedial actions. Furthermore, individuals who participated in a social bargaining game and felt guilty about not cooperating in a first round of the game (compared to individuals who did not feel guilty) displayed higher levels of cooperation in a subsequent round (Ketelaar & Au, 2003).

Based on this research, we expect that work-family guilt is likely to trigger subsequent behaviors and decisions in order to redress the guilt-inducing act. In the following sections, we argue that work-family guilt is likely to have important consequences for mothers in three distinct ways: (1) consequences for work and career, (2) consequences for parenting, and (3) consequences for well-being.

1.2. Consequences for work and career

One way in which mothers may compensate for feeling guilty is by limiting the time and energy they invest in their work, spending this time and energy on their family instead. Such a strategy is reflected in the number of mothers who choose to step back on the career track because of family reasons. For example, Hewlett and Luce (2005) conducted a survey, completed by highly qualified women, which showed that nearly four in ten women reported that they voluntarily took off time from work, with the majority of women citing family reasons as the most important reason for leaving.

Drawing upon the broader work-family literature, it is known that work-family conflict influences a range of work-outcomes (for meta-analyses, see Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011). For example, work-family conflict decreases job satisfaction, decreases organizational commitment and increases turnover intention. Therefore, guilt arising from work-family conflict, may have an important impact on workplace outcomes. Literature also shows that work-family conflict is positively associated with work hours (Voydanoff, 1988). Since reducing work hours may be a direct way to spend more time with family instead of on work, we expect that as a result of work-family guilt, parents may consider reducing their working hours.

1.3. Consequences for parenting

Another way in which mothers may compensate for work-family guilt is by adapting their parenting, specifically by engaging in reparative behaviors towards their children. Borelli et al. (2017) presented parents with a vignette in which they arrived late at the daycare to pick-up their child because of work-obligations. When they went shopping with their child before going home, their child demanded a lollipop. Parents who reported higher guilt in response to this vignette were more likely to say that they would buy their child a lollipop compared to those parents with lower guilt. On this basis, we suggest that work-family guilt may be associated with higher levels of permissiveness in parenting.

We suggest, further, that work-family guilt may not only increase permissive parenting, which is associated with negative consequences for the child (e.g., lower self-esteem and life satisfaction; Milevsky, Schlechter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007), but may also prompt parents to show more positive parenting behaviors such as spending extra time with their child. For example, using survey data from employed parents, Cho and Allen (2012) demonstrated that parents who experienced higher work-family conflict undertook fewer recreational and educational activities with their children. Importantly, this relationship was weaker for parents who had a higher tendency to experience guilt in general (higher on trait guilt). This indicates that parents who experience more guilt when their work interferes with their family also compensate more in their parental behaviors. However, evidence about the influence of work-family guilt on parenting behaviors is inconclusive. In an experimental study, River, Borelli, and Nelson-Coffey (2019) randomly assigned parents to read either a vignette depicting work-family conflict or a control condition and examined the influence on parents' attempts to calm a crying baby. No effect was found. Importantly, the study also showed that there was no effect of condition on guilt, which we propose may be the reason for the null finding.

In the current research, we hypothesize that work-family guilt is the underlying reason why parents adapt their behavior in response to work-family conflict, and we further explore how work-family guilt may affect parenting behaviors.

1.4. Consequences for well-being

We also expect that work-family guilt will negatively influence well-being. Research on general guilt demonstrates that it is associated with both depression (e.g., Ghatavi, Nicolson, MacDonald, Osher, & Levitt, 2002) and anxiety (e.g., Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Furthermore, guilt has been shown to lead to self-detrimental behavior. Specifically, participants who were manipulated to experience guilt held their hands in ice water for a longer time, and reported this experience to be more painful, compared to participants in a control condition (Nelissen & Zeelenberg, 2009).

This raises the question as to whether the negative consequences of general guilt for well-being extend to work-family guilt. A first cross-sectional study, using data from a survey of working Americans suggests that this might indeed be the case (Glavin, Schieman, & Reid, 2011). Women, but not men, reported higher feelings of guilt when doing more work outside of normal work hours. This guilt, in turn, was associated with more general distress.

1.5. The present research

To examine the consequences of work-family guilt, we conducted two studies using multiple methods. First, in Study 1 ($N = 28$) we conducted in-depth interviews with heterosexual, dual-earning parents to identify the consequences that parents themselves report as a result of work-family guilt. In Study 2 ($N = 122$), we built upon the results of the interview study and reported a daily diary study designed to test whether the relationships between work-family guilt and outcomes reported by individuals in the interview-study indeed exist and whether they can be generalized to a larger population of working mothers.

With the interview study, Study 1, we sought to achieve a deeper understanding of the pervasiveness of work-family guilt in the life of working fathers and mothers. Therefore, we examined how parents reported feeling in work-family conflict situations. Then, for those parents who reported feeling guilty, we examined how they perceive the influence of this work-family guilt and the subsequent consequences it may have. This interview study is exploratory in nature and allows us to further inform our hypotheses on how guilt may result in a variety of consequences in different domains (i.e., work, parenting, and well-being). Theoretically, both fathers and mothers may experience work-family guilt and may suffer from the consequences of work-family guilt. Therefore, we also included fathers in the interviews. However, given the nature of work-family guilt as a gendered phenomenon, we expected work-family guilt and subsequent consequences to be especially pervasive in the life of mothers.

Building upon the interview study, we conducted a daily diary design (Study 2). We chose this design because of its various advantages. First, a diary study allows us to distinguish between *between-individual* differences, such that some individuals may feel more guilt than others, as well as *within-individual* differences, such that how guilty an individual feels may vary across time and circumstances. We were motivated to do so because between-individual effects, where mothers who feel more guilt in general also are less happy, are not necessarily the same as within-individual effects, where on days that mothers experience more guilt, they feel less happy than on days that they experience less guilt (Berry & Willoughby, 2017). To clarify, a common example of such divergence is the relationship between exercise and blood pressure. Those individuals who exercise more have lower blood pressure (i.e., between-individual effect); at the same time, blood pressure tends to increase when individuals exercise (within-individual effect; Berry & Willoughby, 2017). Specifically, with work-family guilt it may be the case that those parents who experience more guilt may not necessarily be less happy than parents who experience less guilt, as they may have found ways to cope with the guilt. At the same time, we may still find the within-individual effect, such that the happiness of individuals decreases on days when they experience more work-family guilt.

A second advantage is that between-individual effects can be tested more reliably because data is collected over multiple days. Thus, compared to cross-sectional data, the measurement of guilt and its hypothesized consequences is more robust and retrospective bias is reduced (Ohly, Sonnentag, Niessen, & Zapf, 2010). Third, a diary study allows us to use lagged within-individual analyses to examine the prolonged influence of work-family guilt on hypothesized outcomes (e.g., does work-family guilt spill over to outcomes the next day?). Finally, these lagged analyses are a good way to investigate the causal relationships between work-family guilt and consequences (Hamaker, Kuiper, & Grasman, 2015).

Based on the previous research discussed above, we expect that work-family guilt will be pervasive in the life of mothers in two ways. First, we hypothesize that work-family guilt will be prevalent in situations in which mothers experience their work interfering with their family. Second, we hypothesize that work-family guilt will have an effect on (a) making adjustments at work, (b) making adjustments in parenting, and (c) individual well-being.

2. Study 1: Interview study

In Study 1, we used semi-structured interviews to explore two research questions: (1) how do parents feel (i.e., their affective state) when they experience work-family conflict, and (2) if parents do experience work-family guilt, what are the consequences?

2.1. Participants

Participants were recruited through flyers distributed by acquaintances in a primary school and using a snowballing technique. This resulted in a participant sample of 14 heterosexual, dual-earner couples, who had at least one child aged 6 years or younger ($N = 28$). Couples had on average 2.21 children ($SD = 0.69$). All couples were cohabiting, and 71.4% were married. On average, participants were 37.39 years old ($SD = 4.18$). On average, female participants were contracted to work for 27.00 h per week, whereas male participants were contracted to work for 38.95 h per week.

2.2. Procedure

We conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, which we audiotaped. Each interview was conducted by the first author (a female interviewer) in the interviewees' own homes. While both members of the couple were typically present during the interview, they were interviewed separately, and in a random order. The duration of the interviews varied from 15 min to 47 min ($M = 28.82$, $SD = 7.16$). Participants gave verbal informed consent before starting the interview.

Each interview began with demographic questions and an explanation of work-family conflict. The interview questions were divided into three parts: 1) questions about participants' own experiences of work-family conflict; 2) questions about guilt, in particular, whether participants felt guilty after experiencing work-family conflict; and 3) questions about the consequences of work-family conflict. See the online supplement (Appendix A) for an overview of the interview procedure and questions. At the end of the interview participants were provided with the opportunity to ask questions and they received a small gift (i.e., chocolates) as a "thank you".

2.3. Data analysis: Thematic analysis method

We audiotaped all interviews and transcribed them verbatim afterwards. We conducted thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) stepwise procedure, to identify commonly recurring themes. The first author read the interview transcripts to identify initial codes in light of the research questions, that is, regarding affective states related to work-family conflict and its subsequent consequences. After the initial codes were developed, we used an inductive approach to organize the codes into broader themes. All of the authors reviewed the themes and some minor changes were made as a result of discussion. This process led to a template in which we organized the codes within themes; each code was accompanied by an example (see Tables 1 and 2 for the final templates). Then, the first author and a student-assistant (who was blind to the research hypotheses) performed a second round of coding where the coders independently applied the codes from the final template to the transcribed interviews. Where coders applied different codes to sections of text, discussion between the two coders led to an agreement in all cases.

3. Results

3.1. Feelings after work-family conflict

We first explored how parents felt when they experienced work-family conflict. Parents primarily reported negative emotions as a result of work-family conflict; however, the negative emotions mentioned were diverse. Based on the thematic analyses, we classified the emotions into three categories: *guilt*, *stress*, and *neutral* (see Table 1 for an overview and examples). We classified emotions as *guilt* when participants indicated that after work-family conflict they "felt guilty", "had the feeling they failed their family", or "felt that they were a bad parent". Emotions were classified as *stress* when participants reported "feeling powerless", "rushed", or that "they perceived it as a difficult situation". Finally, emotions were classified as *neutral*, when participants reported that they could easily "put WFC into perspective" or that they just "perceived it as a part of normal life." The frequency with which each emotion is reported is shown in Table 1, separately for fathers and mothers.

Table 1
Different feelings reported by participants as a result of work-family conflict (WFC)

Theme	Code	Example
Guilt	Felt guilty/Felt as failing: towards child	["How do you feel when you experience this work-family conflict?"] "That makes me uneasy. Yes, then I feel guilty towards my children" (Mother, couple 9)
	Reported by 7 fathers and 13 mothers	
	Felt guilty/Felt as failing: towards partner	"You know, at these moments if I have to call my husband for the umpteenth time, and tell him I'll be back later; can you pick up the children? At these moments I feel guilty towards my husband.... more than towards my children." (Mother, couple 12)
	Reported by 4 fathers and 6 mothers	
	Felt guilty/Felt as failing: towards work	"Because my husband is also my employer, it is easy to solve situations in which our children are sick while we are at work. Then I just go home and work from home. Of course, that is less optimal than working at the workplace. We are very lucky that we can solve it this way, but sometimes I feel a little bit guilty towards work, that I am absent again." (Mother, couple 5)
Stress	Reported by 1 father and 5 mothers	
	Felt guilty/Felt as failing: towards babysitter	["And do you know towards whom you feel guilty?"] "More towards people who babysit our children, not towards my wife or children but more towards my parents or the babysitter, when I arrive late again." (Mother, couple 13)
	Reported by 2 fathers and 2 mothers	
	Felt as a bad parent	"I felt very guilty, not so much because things did not go well at home but because of how it felt.... I just felt a bit like a bad mother." (Mother, Couple 1)
	Reported by 0 fathers and 3 mothers	
Neutral	Felt powerless	"This means that my wife has to bring the children to the day-care on her own in the morning. So that is very stressful and hectic for her and I cannot do much about it... I sometimes feel a bit powerless But that is my work and I can hardly ignore it" (Father, couple 1)
	Reported by 2 fathers and 1 mother	
	Felt rushed	"That was a very busy, hectic time. Then you do nothing else but hurrying. I find that rushed feeling a very negative feeling" (Father, couple 12)
	Reported by 4 fathers and 3 mothers	
Stress	Perceived WFC as a difficult situation	"Sometimes I have to finish some work at home. Then I have to work on my laptop while my husband does something nice with our daughters. Yes, I can find that a bit difficult." (Mother, couple 7)
	Reported by 10 fathers and 7 mothers	
	Put WFC into perspective	"Well, sometimes things go different than you planned. For example, we always eat at 18:00. And sometimes I am not home before 18.00 and then I miss (part of the) dinner. For example, when a work meeting ends late. But I do not get stressed about these situations. It is not a big deal." (Mother, couple 10)
Neutral	Reported by 3 fathers and 1 mother	
	Perceived WFC as part of normal life	"I do the best I can, so I cannot really blame myself. That I sometimes arrive home late that is part of life. It is not always fun, but it is just a given." (Father, couple 4)
	Reported by 2 fathers and 1 mother	

Note. Sample size is 14 couples (14 mothers and 14 fathers).

3.2. Guilt

Parents often mentioned guilt as arising from work-family conflict. Predominantly, parents reported feeling guilty in relation to their children, particularly mothers (13 out of 14 mothers and 7 out of 14 fathers).

[Interviewer: "How do you feel when you experience this work-family conflict?"] "That makes me uneasy. Yes, then I feel guilty towards my children".

(Mother, couple 9)

However, participants also reported feeling guilty in relation to (a) their partner (6 out of 14 mothers and 4 out of 14 fathers), (b) their work (5 out of 14 mothers, 1 out of 14 fathers), and (c) the babysitter (2 out of 14 mothers and 2 out of 14 fathers). See below an example of a mother who reports feeling guilty in relation to her partner.

"You know, at these moments if I have to call my husband for the umpteenth time, and tell him I'll be back later; can you pick up the children? At these moments I feel guilty towards my husband.... more than towards my children."

(Mother, Couple 12)

Some guilt was not directly associated with a person, but rather related to a judgement about themselves as a bad parent (3 out of 14 mothers, no fathers). Consider this statement from a working mother:

"I felt very guilty, not so much because things did not go well at home but because of how it felt.... I just felt a bit like a bad mother".

(Mother, Couple 1)

Table 2
Consequences of work-family guilt reported by participants.

Theme	Code	Example
Compensatory parenting	Gave extra hugs to children	["Does the guilt influence your behavior towards your children?"] "Maybe sometimes I give them an extra hug" (<i>Mother, couple 6</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 5 mothers</i> Spent quality time with children	"I really try to compensate. I do not want to feel guilty. So, when I am at home, I try to be available for my family. And every year I go away one weekend with one of my sons to spend some 100% quality time." (<i>Mother, Couple 1</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 2 mothers</i> Read an extra story to their children	"And you will indeed show a little bit of compensatory behavior towards your children when you are at home". ["What then?"] "Well for example an extra bedtime story, yes, that sort of thing. To brush away your own guilt." (<i>Mother, couple 9</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 1 mother</i> Apologized to their children	"When I feel in control of myself again, I explain what happened to the children. That I was tired and that it had nothing to do with them and that I should not have said or should not have done some things". (<i>Mother, couple 11</i>)
	<i>Reported by 2 fathers and 2 mothers</i> Gave a tasty snack to their children	"Our children do not like it when they have to go to the daycare, and yes you know, then I put some delicious treat in their lunchbox. Just a little indulgence." (<i>Mother, couple 10</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 1 mother</i> Provided their child with a bottle of breastmilk while on the day care	"I was happy that I had the right to pump breastmilk for nine months at my job. That made me feel a bit better. Then I could at least give a nice bottle of breastmilk for my child to the daycare" (<i>Mother, couple 3</i>)
Adapting work	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 1 mother</i> Taking leave days	"I realized that this was not the way I wanted to be as a parent. That is why I started to take parental leave, used all my extra hours, and took some days off" (<i>Mother, couple 1</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 1 mother</i> Reschedule working hours	"I try to do all the work that I bring home in the evening, when my daughters are asleep. So it will not interfere with my caring for them" (<i>Mother, couple 7</i>)
	<i>Reported by 3 fathers and 3 mothers</i> Thinking about quitting	"Sometimes I think I will quit working, then I have enough time for everybody. Then I do not have to choose, because you choose for work and you choose to put your child in daycare." (<i>Mother, couple 3</i>)
Sacrifice personal time	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 2 mothers</i> Sacrifice "own time"	"Sometimes you also want to tell your own story but then I think my story has to wait. They need my attention first." (<i>Mother, couple 14</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 2 mothers</i> Sacrifice leisure activities	"Before we had children, I was away almost every evening, often playing sports, now I often stay at home... I made some personal concessions." (<i>Father, Couple 13</i>)
Time management	<i>Reported by 2 fathers and 2 mothers</i> Organizing leisure activities differently	"I try to be there for my children as much as possible. If I feel I am failing them, I change my schedule. All of my own leisure (like sports, meeting friends) I plan when the children are in school. I do not plan anything for myself in the evenings to be available for my children as much as possible". (<i>Mother, couple 1</i>).
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 2 mothers</i> Outsourcing house work to gain family time	"We regularly outsource services. For example, we have a cleaning lady on Thursday, and I order groceries online. That costs some money, but you also buy extra time with it." (<i>Mother, couple 10</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 1 mother</i> Wake-up call to change schedule	"Sometimes I feel guilty, but my conclusion is then that I should act differently in the future. Overcompensating does not work. For me it is more a wake-up call to change my schedule." (<i>Father, couple 1</i>).
Justifying guilt	<i>Reported by 1 father and 2 mothers</i> Emphasize financial importance of working	"On the one hand, these situations really suck; on the other hand, I also realize that I am an independent entrepreneur and with that I also take care of the main income of the family" (<i>Father, couple 3</i>)
	<i>Reported by 3 fathers and 2 mothers</i> Emphasize WFC is part of life	"It is just part of the job. I cannot say that I will not work anymore during the weekends" (<i>Father, couple 10</i>)
	<i>Reported by 4 fathers and 1 mother</i> Wondering whether things would have been different when they would not work	"If I did not work, there might be other reasons why I might sometimes miss (school) activities with my daughter. For example, I would still have to watch my other child." (<i>Mother, couple 9</i>)
	<i>Reported by 0 fathers and 1 mother</i>	

Note. Sample size is 28 parents (14 mothers and 14 fathers).

3.3. Consequences of work-family guilt

In the second section of the interviews we focused on the consequences of work-family guilt. Participants reported a range of different consequences, but almost all were actions focused on remedying previous behaviors about which they felt guilty. We identified five main categories: *compensatory parenting*, *adapting work*, *sacrificing personal time*, *time management*, and *justifying guilt* (see Table 2 for an overview and examples). Interestingly, the first four categories, which are focused on compensating for previous behaviors, are all reported more often by mothers than by fathers; only the last category, which is more focused on reappraising the behavior (i.e., "justifying guilt"), is more likely to be reported to a larger extent by fathers. The frequency with which each consequence is reported is shown in Table 2, separately for fathers and mothers. Each of these categories is discussed below.

3.3.1. Compensatory parenting

We classified consequences of work-family guilt as *compensatory parenting* when participants indicated that they took actions at home to compensate for their guilt in relation to their children. For example, participants indicated that they “gave extra hugs to their children,” “spent quality time with their children,” “read an extra story to their children,” “apologized to their children,” “gave a tasty snack to their children,” and “felt better, because they were able to provide their child with a bottle of breastmilk while at day care.” Consider the statement below from a mother:

“I really try to compensate. I do not want to feel guilty. So, when I am at home, I try to be available for my family. And every year I go away one weekend with one of my sons to spend some 100% quality time.”

(Mother, Couple 1)

3.3.2. Adapting work

Participants also indicated that they took actions at work as a consequence of work-family guilt. For example, participants described “taking leave days,” “rescheduling their working hours,” or “thinking about quitting their job”. This last example is illustrated by this quote from a mother:

“Sometimes I think that if I quit work then I would have enough time for everybody. Then I would not have to choose, because you choose for work and you choose to put your child in daycare.”

(Mother, Couple 3)

3.3.3. Sacrificing personal time

Many participants reported sacrificing their personal time as a consequence of feeling guilty. This involved a sacrifice of “own-time” and “leisure activities.” One father describes this as follows:

“Before we had children, I was away almost every evening, often playing sports. Now I often stay at home... I made some personal concessions.”

(Father, Couple 13)

3.3.4. Time management

Apart from sacrificing their own time, participants also reported organizing their leisure activities differently, for example, doing their leisure activities when their children are at school. Furthermore, participants reported outsourcing housework to gain family time, and two participants reported seeing work-family conflict as “a wake-up call to change their schedule.”

“We regularly outsource services. For example, we have a cleaning lady on Thursday, and I order groceries online. That costs some money, but you also buy extra time with it.”

(Mother, Couple 10)

3.3.5. Justifying guilt

In contrast to compensatory behaviors, *justifying guilt* is the only category that describes the more cognitive consequences of work-family guilt. For example, participants emphasized the financial importance of working or noted that work-family conflict is part of life, and/or they wondered whether things would have been different if they would not work. Consider this quote below as an example.

“On the one hand these situations really suck; on the other hand, I also realize that I am an independent entrepreneur and with that I also take care of the main income of the family.”

(Father, Couple 3)

3.4. Discussion

Study 1 provides evidence that parents often reported feeling guilty as a result of work-family conflict. Moreover, parents indicated that they changed their behavior in several domains to compensate for their guilt. First, parents reported compensating for their guilt through their parenting, for example, by spending extra quality time with their children. Second, parents indicated adapting their work to compensate for their guilt, for example, by taking extra leave days. Furthermore, parents indicated that they sacrifice their personal time. Finally, parents also indicated that they restructure their life (time management) to gain more family time. Parents also cognitively reappraised the situation as a way of justifying the guilt, for example, by emphasizing the financial importance of working.

This interview study reveals that work-family guilt is an outcome of work-family conflict, and that such guilt has a clear influence on the lives of working parents. Interestingly, the behaviors parents report to compensate for their guilt are all in line with a more traditional maternal role (i.e., parents trying to gain more time and energy for their family and wanting to spend less time on their work). Since guilt may be especially prevalent in mothers (Borelli et al., 2016; Borelli et al., 2017), it may reinforce traditional gender roles in parents. Although the sample is too small for inferential statistics, we do see that mothers experience more guilt and also

report more compensatory behaviors as a consequence of their guilt than fathers, while fathers more often report justifying their guilt compared to mothers.

4. Study 2

In Study 2, we conducted a daily diary study among working mothers to further examine whether work-family guilt results in (a) reducing commitment to work, (b) increasing compensatory parenting, and (c) sacrificing one's own time and time management to gain more family time. In addition, we also examined consequences for well-being, since the literature on guilt more generally suggests that guilt reduces the well-being of individuals (e.g., [Ghatavi et al., 2002](#)).

Since this is the first study to examine the broader consequences of work-family guilt, we decided to specifically focus on mothers for two reasons. First, the literature shows that work-family guilt is more prevalent in mothers (e.g., [Borelli et al., 2017](#); [Aarntzen et al., 2019](#)). Second, in our interview study, we see that mothers not only report feeling more guilt, they also report experiencing more consequences of guilt. Therefore, guilt may influence the daily life of mothers more than that of fathers.

Additionally, although Study 1 suggests that guilt may also result in individuals trying to justify their behavior, we chose not to include this because the complexities of justificatory cognition are difficult to grasp in a diary study. Specifically, the effective use of cognitive justification may lead to a reduction in guilt. Moreover, in line with [Prinsen, Evers, Wijngaards, van Vliet, and de Ridder \(2018\)](#), we argue that direct measurement of cognitive justification may interfere with the justification processes themselves. For example, making participants aware of justification opportunities of prioritizing work may prompt them to cognitively justify prioritizing work in a way that would not have occurred spontaneously. Therefore, we decided to not to include cognitive justification and focus on more concrete, measurable consequences.

In this study, we hypothesized that guilt has a between-individual component, such that some individuals feel more guilty in general than other individuals, as well as a within-individuals component, such that the degree of guilt an individual feels varies across time and circumstances. Therefore, we analyzed our data on both the person-level (i.e., between-participants, across days) and the day-level (i.e., within-participants, between days). Furthermore, we also examined whether guilt had a prolonged influence on consequences using lagged within-person analyses. These analyses addressed whether guilt on one day predicts consequences on the next day and whether guilt on a working day predicts consequences for mothers on their day off (e.g., guilt on a working day predicts how much mothers sacrifice their own leisure time on their day off). In this way, we could assess both the prolonged influence of guilt and examine the causality of the relationship, using temporal precedence as a proxy for causality ([Hamaker et al., 2015](#)).

4.1. Participants and procedure

We recruited 123 working mothers with children aged 13 years or younger in the Netherlands. Our initial goal was to collect usable data from at least 100 mothers (based upon the criteria of [Ohly et al., 2010](#)). Participants were aged between 25 and 50 years ($M = 39.20$, $SD = 5.50$). On average, participants had 2.03 children (range = 1–5; $SD = 0.75$) and the mean age of their youngest (or only) child was 6.47 years (range = 1–13; $SD = 3.87$). Participants worked on average 28.69 h per week ($SD = 8.99$), which is in line with the Dutch average for mothers (i.e., 26 h per week; [Van den Brakel & Merens, 2016](#)).

Participants were recruited via the personal network of nine undergraduate students who helped with data collection as part of their curriculum. Data collection took place in May and June 2017 and mothers participated over a period of eight consecutive days (Saturday to Saturday). Upon signing up, participants provided an email address to which we sent the online surveys and their mobile phone number to which we sent a daily reminder.

On Day 1 we asked participants to complete a 15-minute online survey, to collect demographic information (e.g., age, working hours). We then asked participants to complete a daily online survey over eight consecutive days, including Day 1. In this daily questionnaire we assessed participants' daily levels of work-family guilt towards their family, their daily well-being, and whether or not they performed the behavioral outcomes uncovered in Study 1 - adapting work, compensatory parenting, sacrificing their own time, and restructuring their time management.¹ The daily questionnaire took approximately 5 min to complete. To thank and motivate participants, they were put in a draw to win a gift voucher worth €50. It was emphasized that the research was confidential, and that participants could stop at any given moment without providing a reason. All diary entries that were recorded on the day itself or before 10:30 the following morning were included in our analyses. All other diary entries were marked as missing. This resulted in 826 entries, with a mean of 6.72 entries per person ($SD = 1.84$).

4.2. Daily measures

All items were asked on 5-point scales. For most variables, only a single item was used, to keep the daily diary questionnaire short to facilitate a reasonable response rate. Please note that all consequences of guilt measures (except well-being) were concrete measures of uni-dimensional constructs, based directly upon the interview study, which helps justifies our approach to primarily use single-item or two-item measures ([Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2009](#)).

¹ N.B.: This study was part of a larger study (the diary data is yet to be published elsewhere or considered for publication). In this paper, we only discuss the measurement and results of work-family guilt and all hypothesized outcomes of work-family guilt. More details about the other measurements in this questionnaire are available from the first author.

Work-family guilt was measured using one item: “When you think about how you combined work and family today, to what extent do you feel guilty towards your family. Today I feel...” with a scale ranging from 1 (not at all guilty) to 5 (very guilty), $M = 1.68$, $SD = 0.57$.

Well-being. We adapted the single-item general happiness measurement from Abdel-Khalek (2006) to measure daily happiness: “How happy do you feel today?” on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very unhappy) to 5 (very happy), $M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.68$. Furthermore, we adapted two items of satisfaction with work and satisfaction with family, developed by Fisher, Gibbons, and Matthews (2005), to reflect daily satisfaction with work-family combination: “Today I am satisfied with how I combined work and family” measured on a 5-point scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), $M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.71$.

Reducing Work was measured with considering reducing working hours using two items: “Today I have been thinking about how I can reduce the number of hours that I am spend on work” and “Today I have considered whether I should approach things differently at work, so that I have more time left for home” on a 5-point scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), $r_{range}^2 = 0.87-0.90$, $M = 1.72$, $SD = 0.74$.

Compensatory parenting plans was measured with one item: more time and energy for child. “Today I have been thinking about how to reserve more time and/or energy for my child[ren], for example I thought about hiring domestic help or ordering the groceries online” on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), $M = 1.89$, $SD = 0.81$.

Compensatory parenting behaviors were measured with attentive behaviors towards children using four items (e.g., “How often have you cuddled your child[ren] today?”) on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (less than normal) to 3 (same as normal) to 5 (more than normal), $\alpha_{range} = 0.81-0.82$, $M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.39$; and applying rules consistently with one item using the same 5-point scale: “To what extent were you consistent today in applying rules that you have at home for your child?”; $M = 3.40$, $SD = 0.93$.

Time management was measured with one item: organizing time more efficiently “Today I have been thinking about how to organize my time more efficiently” on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), $M = 2.22$, $SD = 0.82$.

Me-time was measured with minutes spent on own leisure using the sum score of two items: “How many minutes did you spend on your own leisure today (hobby's, sports, me-time etc.) and “How many minutes do you still expect to spend on your own leisure today (hobby's, sports, me-time etc.)”, $M = 139.58$, $SD = 84.11$.

4.3. Results

4.3.1. Preparatory analyses

To analyze our multilevel data (i.e., days nested within participants) we used the mixed model procedure in SPSS 21, with maximum likelihood estimation.

4.3.2. Intra-class correlations

We started by analyzing null models (i.e., estimating the model with only the dependent variable and no predictors), allowing us to calculate the Intraclass Correlations (ICCs; see online supplement, Appendix B). With the ICCs we were able to examine how much of the variance in the dependent variables was due to differences between participants. Specifically, a high ICC shows that greater variance in a variable can be explained by differences between individuals. The results showed that ICCs vary from 0.08 to 0.73 (i.e., the variance that can be explained by differences between participants varies from 8% to 73%). Importantly, for most dependent measures the largest part of the variance was within participants. For example, the ICC of happiness was .27, which indicates that 27% of the variance of happiness was between individuals and 73% of the variance was within individuals.

4.3.3. Correlations (between-participants)

Correlations between all measurements between participants are presented in Table 3, thus correlations for person means (i.e., mean for each individual over eight days) across all variables. In line with a first test of our hypotheses, these correlations suggest that work-family guilt is related to a number of consequences, such as greater consideration of reducing working hours, more plans to keep time and energy for child(ren), spending more quality time with their child(ren), dividing time more efficiently, lower happiness, lower satisfaction with work-family combination, and reducing amount of time planned for self. The correlations demonstrate that attentive behaviors towards children (e.g., giving hugs to their children) were negatively related to guilt, which might indicate that parents do not compensate with attentive behaviors towards their children, but do feel more guilt when they are not able to perform these behaviors.

4.3.4. Overview of main analyses

We examined all hypothesized outcomes of work-family guilt using separate regressions on each outcome (e.g., happiness) in multilevel analyses. First, we examined the **person-level** (i.e., between-individual, e.g., mothers who in general experience more work-family guilt also in general experience lower happiness) and the **day-level** (i.e., within individual, e.g., on days when mothers experience more work-family guilt their happiness is lower than on days when they experience less work-family guilt). It was important to test the person-level and day-level simultaneously to be able to test what part of the variance is explained by differences between participants and what part of the variance is explained by differences within participants. For example, is guilt related to

² Internal consistency of scales was measured by separately analyzing each day and reporting the range of correlations (2 items) or Cronbach's alpha's (> 2 items).

Table 3
Correlations between study variables (between-participants).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Guilt	–								
2. Happiness	–0.36**	–							
3. Satisfaction	–0.66**	0.46**	–						
4. Me-time (minutes)	–0.03	0.18**	0.16**	–					
5. Reduce working	0.61**	–0.40**	–0.52**	–0.17**	–				
6. Parenting: Attentive	–0.26**	0.15**	0.27**	–0.08*	–0.06	–			
7. Parenting: Discipline	–0.00	–0.07	0.02	–0.16**	0.11**	0.33**	–		
8. Plans: Child	0.40**	–0.34*	–0.29**	–0.12**	0.62**	0.08*	0.07*	–	
9. Restructure time	0.37**	–0.22**	–0.21**	–0.06	0.61**	0.05	0.02	0.60**	–

Note. Guilt = Work-family guilt; Happiness = Happiness; Satisfaction = Satisfaction with work-family combination; Me-time (minutes) = Minutes spent on own leisure; Reduce working = Considering reducing working hours; Parenting: Attentive = Attentive behaviors towards children; Parenting: Discipline = Applying rules consistently; Plans: Child = More time and energy for child plans; Plans: Restructure time = Dividing time more efficiently.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

happiness because mothers who in general experience more guilt also experience less happiness or because on days that mothers feel guilty, they experience less happiness or both? To do so, guilt was entered in each regression both as a person-mean predictor, to test our person-level hypothesis, and as person-mean centered predictor, to test our day-level hypothesis. For person-mean centering we took the daily ratings of guilt relative to that person's mean on guilt, so that each participant had an average score of 0 on guilt across days.

After this, we performed lagged analyses (i.e., lag from guilt) to examine whether the effect of guilt on a given day predicted consequences on the following day. Therefore, we modelled all hypothesized consequences of guilt on day i as a function of guilt and consequences of guilt on day $i - 1$.³ Finally, we explored the possibility that guilt only results in consequences, such as compensatory parenting behaviors, when people have the time to enact these behaviors. Therefore, we tested whether guilt on a working day predicted consequences on participants' day off.⁴ For an overview of all results, see Table 4.

4.3.5. Work-family guilt and adapting work

Confirming our hypotheses, we found both a person-level effect (i.e., between-individual effect) and a day-level effect (i.e., within-individual effect, between days) for whether mothers considered reducing their working hours. Mothers who generally experienced more work-family guilt also thought more about reducing their working hours ($B = 0.82, p < .001$). Moreover, on days when mothers felt more work-family guilt they thought more about reducing their working hours compared to days when they experienced less work-family guilt ($B = 0.21, p < .001$).

4.3.6. Work-family guilt and compensatory parenting plans

As expected, we found both a person-level effect and a day-level effect on mothers' compensatory parenting plans. That is, mothers who in general experienced more work-family guilt, tended to make more plans about how to keep more time and energy for their children ($B = 0.56, p < .001$) and on days when mothers felt more work-family guilt they made more plans about how to keep more time an energy for their children in the future ($B = 0.09, p = .01$) compared to days when they experienced less work-family guilt.

4.3.7. Work-family guilt and compensatory parenting behaviors

We also found both a person-level effect and a day-level effect for whether mothers performed attentive parenting behaviors towards their children such as hugging or spending quality time with their children. However, this effect was in a different direction than anticipated. Mothers who in general experienced more guilt, performed less attentive parenting behaviors than mothers who in general experienced less guilt ($B = -0.17, p = .005$) and on days when mothers felt more work-family guilt they did less attentive parenting behaviors compared to days when they experienced less guilt ($B = -0.34, p < .001$). Furthermore, we did not find a significant person or day-level effect of guilt on how consistently parents applied the rules they have for their children ($B = 0.01, p = .87; B = -0.01, p = .73$ respectively).

4.3.8. Work-family guilt and restructuring time

Confirming our hypotheses, we found both a person-level effect and a day-level effect on the degree to which mothers thought

³ To be better able to assess the temporal precedence of guilt and its' consequences, we also examined whether the outcome variables could predict guilt, thus we examined guilt on day i as a function of consequences of guilt and guilt on day $i - 1$ (i.e., **lag to guilt**). For clarity and brevity reasons we put this in the supplemental materials.

⁴ For these analyses we only included observations of a working day immediately followed by a day off. This resulted in the inclusion of 84 days compared to 826 days in the non-lagged analyses.

Table 4
Relationships between work-family guilt and hypothesized consequences.

Measures	Person-level (between participants)	Day-level (within participants between days)	Lag from guilt (next day)	Lag from guilt (working day to day off)
	<i>B</i> (95% CI)	<i>B</i> (95% CI)	<i>B</i> (95% CI)	<i>B</i> (95% CI)
Adapting work				
Considering reducing working hours	0.82** (0.64, 1.01)	0.21** (0.15, 0.26)	0.05 (-0.01, 0.12)	0.19* (0.02, 0.36)
Compensatory parenting plans				
More time and energy for child plans	0.56** (0.33, 0.79)	0.09** (0.02, 0.16)	0.05 (-0.02, 0.12)	0.36** (0.15, 0.56)
Compensatory parenting behaviors				
Attentive behavior towards children	-0.17** (-0.29, -0.05)	-0.34** (-0.40, -0.28)	-0.05 (-0.13, 0.03)	-0.04 (-0.20, 0.11)
Applying rules consistently	0.01 (-0.10, 0.11)	-0.01 (-0.06, 0.04)	0.01 (-0.05, 0.06)	0.14 (-0.03, 0.30)
Restructuring time				
Organizing time more efficiently	0.54** (0.30, 0.77)	0.20** (0.12, 0.27)	-0.02 (-0.10, 0.07)	0.13 (-0.10, 0.36)
Me-time				
Minutes spent on own leisure	-4.93 (-29.39, 19.52)	-24.36** (-35.51, -13.21)	-5.91 (-18.20, 7.08)	-0.85 (-33.89, 32.18)
Wellbeing				
Happiness	-0.31** (-0.46, -0.17)	-0.27** (-0.32, -0.22)	-0.07* (-0.13, -0.004)	-0.25** (-0.40, -0.11)
Satisfaction with work-family combination	-0.81** (-0.97, -0.64)	-0.52** (-0.60, -0.43)	-0.15** (-0.26, -0.04)	-0.32** (-0.58, -0.07)

Note. Unstandardized regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals between brackets are represented in table above.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

about how they could organize their time more efficiently. Mothers who generally experienced more work-family guilt also tended to think more about how they could organize their time more efficiently ($B = 0.54, p < .001$). Furthermore, on days when mothers felt more work-family guilt they thought more about how they could divide their time more efficiently ($B = 0.20, p < .001$).

4.3.9. Work-family guilt and me-time

In contrast to our hypotheses, we did not find that mothers who generally experienced more work-family guilt also generally spent less minutes on their own leisure ($B = -4.93, p = .69$). However, confirming our hypothesis, we found a significant day-level effect of work-family guilt on how much minutes' mothers spent on their own leisure. Specifically, on days when mothers felt more work-family guilt they spent fewer minutes on their own leisure than on days when they experienced less work-family guilt ($B = -24.36, p < .001$). These results suggest that higher work-family guilt is associated with mothers spending less time on their own leisure, even though they might not do this chronically.

4.3.10. Work-family guilt and well-being

Confirming our hypotheses, we found for each of the measures of well-being both a person-level effect and a day-level effect. Mothers who generally experienced more work-family guilt also generally experienced lower well-being; that is, in general felt less happy ($B = -0.31, p < .001$) and felt less satisfied with their work-family combination ($B = -0.81, p < .001$). Furthermore, on days when mothers felt more work-family guilt their well-being was lower than it was on days when they experienced less work-family guilt in terms of both happiness ($B = -0.27, p < .001$) and satisfaction with the work-family combination ($B = -0.52, p < .001$).

4.3.11. Consequences of guilt the next day

For the most part, guilt did not seem to spill over to consequences the next day. However, lagged analyses showed a significant effect from guilt to both measures of well-being. Specifically, larger work-family guilt on day $i-1$ was associated with lower happiness on day i ($B = -0.07, p = .04$) and with lower satisfaction with the work-family combination on day i ($B = -0.15, p < .001$). This suggests that work-family guilt has a persistent influence on well-being, causing happiness and satisfaction with the work-family combination to be still lower the next day.

4.3.12. Consequences of guilt when mothers have the day off

Other than well-being, we did not find evidence that guilt influenced consequences the next day. However, it could be that guilt

only spills over to some consequences (e.g., thinking about reducing working hours) when individuals have the time to reflect upon their work-family balance. Therefore, we also performed lagged analyses to test whether guilt on a working day predicted consequences on days where the following day was participants' next day off. Here, we find that work-family guilt on a working day is significantly associated with a number of consequences when the next day is a non-working day.

First, higher work-family guilt on a working day was significantly associated with mothers thinking more about reducing their working hours on their day off ($B = 0.19, p = .03$). Second, higher work-family guilt on a working day was associated with mothers making more plans about how to keep extra time and energy for their child on their day off ($B = 0.36, p = .001$). Third, lagged analyses from work-family guilt on a working day to well-being on the day off showed a significant effect of work-family guilt to well-being for both measures. Thus, stronger work-family guilt on working days was associated with lower happiness ($B = -0.25, p = .001$) and lower satisfaction with the work-family combination ($B = -0.32, p = .01$) on the mothers' day off. These analyses show that work-family guilt on a working day spills over to mothers' work plans, parenting plans, and her well-being on her non-working day.

4.4. Discussion

In line with our hypotheses, Study 2 revealed that work-family guilt was associated with several consequences for mothers. Both on a day-level and person-level, we found that mothers who felt more work-family guilt thought more about reducing their working hours, made more plans on how to devote more time and energy to their children, tried to divide their time more efficiently, and experienced less happiness and satisfaction with the work-family combination. Additionally, we found that on days that mothers experience more work-family guilt, they spend fewer minutes on their own leisure.

Unexpectedly, higher work-family guilt was negatively associated with mothers' attentive behaviors towards their children (both person- and day-level effect) and we did not find a relationship between work-family guilt and how consistently mothers applied rules they have for their children. This may be because the days when mothers experience guilt are also the days that they have little time for their family, resulting in less time than usual to perform attentive behaviors towards their children. It may also be the case that less time for attentive behaviors leads to greater guilt in mothers.

Moreover, using lagged analyses, we established the causal order of work-family conflict and its' consequences, demonstrating some consequences of work-family guilt (plans to reduce working hours and plans to spend more time with children, happiness, satisfaction with work-family balance) are invasive, because they still influence participants on their day off. Together, the results of Study 2 show that work-family guilt is associated with mothers struggling with making adaptations in their (daily) work-family life and decrease mothers' well-being.

5. General discussion

The present research demonstrates that work-family guilt is associated with many key aspects of the life of working parents. Importantly, the studies suggest that it is not only individual parents that may be affected by work-family guilt, but that their behavior and well-being may crossover to affect the well-being of their whole family, and especially their children (e.g., guilt also influences parenting plans). Study 1 showed that parents try to relieve their work-family guilt either by justifying how they balance their work and family (e.g., after recognizing they felt guilty, they immediately stated the financial importance of work) or by planning to adapt their behavior (e.g., wishing to reduce their working hours). Study 2 demonstrated that work-family guilt is associated with mothers' work, parenting, time management, leisure, and well-being. Specifically, daily work-family guilt is associated with (a) reductions in the time mothers want to spend on work, (b) intensification of the time and energy mothers plan to spend with their children, (c) increases in how much mothers think about dividing their time more efficiently (d) decreases in the time mothers plan for themselves, and (e) reductions in mothers' well-being. Moreover, lagged analysis suggests a causal relationship, such that work-family guilt on a work-day prior to a non-working day led to thinking about reducing their working hours, making more plans about how to save extra time and energy for their child, lower happiness, and lower satisfaction with the work-family combination on the mothers' day off.

Although, on the basis on Study 1 we expected that a possible beneficial consequence of work-family guilt could be that mothers engage in more positive parenting behaviors, such as increasing attentive behavior towards their children (see also [Cho & Allen, 2012](#)), we do not find support for this in our diary study. Instead, guilt seemed to be associated with mothers displaying less attentive behaviors towards their children, both when they experience more guilt in general and on days that they experience more work-family guilt although the causal nature of this relationship is unclear, and analyses from one day to the next day (i.e., lagged analyses) do not show this relationship.

Moreover, in contrast with previous evidence that guilt is associated with more permissive parenting ([Borelli et al., 2017](#)), we did not find a relationship between guilt and how consistently parents applied rules for their children. It is important to note that previous research on parenting rests upon participants' self-reporting of how they plan to handle a certain parenting situation (e.g., whether they would spoil their child with a lollipop in an imaginary situation). Our research demonstrates that while parents may plan to adapt their parenting as a result of their guilt (i.e., making plans to have more time and energy for their children in the future in the diary study and reporting in the interview study that they compensate by spending extra time with their children), we do not find evidence for reported changes in parenting behaviors in the daily diary study. Instead, we found that when mothers experienced high work-family guilt, they actually reported spending less time with their children, and they were unable to compensate for this guilt on their day off. This may be the case because parents simply do not have the time to enact the compensatory parenting

behaviors, particularly at times when work-family conflict is high. Thus, this study reveals a possible lack of connection between parental plans and their actual parenting behaviors, in line with previous literature showing a gap between intentions and behavior (e.g., Sheeran, 2002).

Our findings complement previous research showing that the consequences of guilt more generally can follow two different routes: leading individuals to reappraise their behavior (e.g., Miceli & Castelfranchi, 1998), and prompting individuals to adapt their behavior to remedy the guilt-inducing act (e.g., Cryder, Springer, & Morewedge, 2012). In the context of work-family guilt, we speculate that, depending on whether individuals have a choice to adapt their behavior, they cope with their guilt by either reappraising their behavior or adapting their behavior to compensate for the guilt. Importantly, this *choice* aspect is likely to be gendered; being able to make choices in relation to work is more normative for mothers than for fathers (e.g., Van Steenbergen, 2007). For fathers, it is the default to work, whereas for many mothers work may be perceived more as a self-chosen role. This implies that some mothers may more easily adapt their work-family balance (e.g., working less) and thus compensate for their guilt, whereas this might be more difficult for fathers or for other mothers (e.g., mothers who base their identity on their work, single mothers). For parents for whom working is not a choice, the only option may be to reappraise (i.e., cognitively justify their behavior to cope with the guilt, because they cannot make the decision to work fewer hours). For parents who have a choice, engaging in reparative behaviors may be a better option.

Finally, our findings demonstrate that the behaviors that parents report to compensate for their guilt are in line with “ideal motherhood standards” (e.g., Hays, 1998). Specifically, in the interview study, parents reported compensating for their guilt by decreasing the time and energy they spent on work, increasing the time and energy for their family, restructuring how they spend their time, and sacrificing their me-time. In line with this, the diary study shows that on days when mothers experience more guilt, they think more about reducing their working hours, make more plans to increase the time and energy they have for their children, think more about how to divide their time efficiently, and may sacrifice their me-time. Moreover, the diary study provides evidence that when mothers experience more guilt on a working day, they think more about reducing their working hours and increasing the time and energy they have for their children on their day-off. These behaviors may sometimes compensate for the guilt. For example, when mothers plan to increase the time and energy for their children, this may relieve their guilt. Together, these findings indicate that as a result of their guilt, mothers may be pushed towards more traditional motherhood ideals, in which mothers always put their children's needs first, sacrifice their me-time, and sacrifice their work for the benefit of their children (e.g., Hays, 1998).

Importantly, work-family guilt has ongoing high costs, reducing the well-being of mothers not only on the day itself, but also the next day. We speculate that the guilt that mothers experience results, in part, from the highly normative standards for mothers to prioritize their family (e.g., Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012; Park et al., 2010). When this is the case, mothers may be in a Catch-22 position: they are either unhappy because they feel guilty about not complying with ideal mother standards, or they are unhappy for not making the choices they want, or “should” want (e.g., being ambitious at work) to be able to comply with ideal mother standards.

5.1. Strengths, limitations and future research

Our research has several strengths. First, the interview study allowed us to develop and refine our hypotheses on how work-family guilt may be related to several outcomes. Second, the daily diary study showed that between-individual effects (e.g., mothers who in general experience more guilt, also experience less happiness) and within-individual effects (e.g., on days that mothers experience more guilt, they are less happy) were similar, adding to the robustness of the findings (see Van Steenbergen, Ybema, & Lapierre, 2017 for similar reasoning). Third, the diary study allowed us to perform lagged analyses demonstrating that the effect of work-family guilt spills over to predict consequences on the next day and/or the next day off, including decreases in well-being, thinking more about reducing working hours, and making more plans to spend extra time and energy on the children in the future.

Notwithstanding these various strengths, this research also has its limitations. First, we used single items to measure guilt and many outcome variables in the diary study. We chose to do so to keep the questionnaire as short as possible and to optimize response rates for a study with a high level of time investment using a sample that does not have much time. Research shows that shortening the survey length is a good way to boost overall response rates (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). A disadvantage of this approach is that our measurements may have been more prone to random measurement error and biases in interpretation of the measurement. However, part of this error and bias might be controlled for, and ruled out by, our diary design, in which we used each item eight times per participant. Moreover, research shows that participants themselves especially in longitudinal/diary designs prefer single items and are more motivated to provide accurate, careful responses (Wanous, Reichers, & Hudy, 1997).

Second, we did not directly measure participants' gender beliefs. So, even though we speculate that work-family guilt in mothers arise from gendered norms in our society, we cannot draw this conclusion. Future research should investigate this by measuring the degree to which parents internalized societal gender norms.

Third, although the interview study indicated parents may reappraise their behavior as a result of work-family guilt (i.e., cognitive justification), we did not further investigate this in Study 2. The diary methodology makes it difficult to accurately measure cognitive justification, as making participants aware of how they can justify prioritizing work, may prompt them to cognitively justify prioritizing work in a way that would not have occurred spontaneously. However, an experimental study, in which some participants get the option to justify their work prioritization and others not, might be an interesting possibility to quantitatively further explore how guilt and cognitive justification influence one another.

In the current study, we focused specifically on guilt in mothers and find that mothers (try to) make adaptations to their life to cope with their guilt, but when they feel guilty, they report low well-being. We call on future research to extend this work to fathers.

What happens when fathers experience work-family guilt? Do they make similar adaptations in their life, or does the relationship between work-family guilt and consequences work differently for fathers? A diary study specifically developed to measure consequences of fathers' work-family guilt is worthwhile. Future studies that include both fathers and mothers may also address the extent to which individuals internalize societal gender norms. Guilt may work the same way for egalitarian fathers and mothers (i.e., individuals who do not strongly associate fathers with work and mothers with family), whereas traditional fathers may be protected against feeling guilty and its consequences. Relatedly, popular media suggests that older men regret spending so much time on their work instead of their family (e.g., Ware, 2012). Is that because they did not properly perceive the warning signal of guilt and just reappraised their behavior instead of adapting their behavior? With a longitudinal study on guilt and regret, it might be possible to answer this question.

Future research may also examine to what extent the outcomes (e.g., reducing work) are specific to work-family guilt by including a broader range of emotions, such as shame or anxiety. We argue, though, that work-family guilt is a unique predictor because of its properties as a moral emotion that motivates individuals to engage in compensatory actions and to adapt their future choices and behavior (e.g., Ketelaar & Au, 2003).

Finally, using longitudinal research over a greater span of time may further illuminate the relationship between work-family guilt and parenting behaviors. Although we did not find that guilt is related to compensatory parenting behaviors, we did find that parents plan to spend more time with their children in the future as a result of their guilt. In retrospect, it makes sense that parents who feel guilty about spending a lot of time at work are unable to make up for that by spending quality time with their children the same day, or even the following day. Possibly there is a temporal gap before compensatory parenting behaviors are enacted. Over a greater timespan, such as a few months, parents may have more opportunity to adjust their work-family balance and their parenting. Therefore, these findings need further investigation using a longitudinal design.

5.2. Conclusion

With both an interview and a diary study, we provided evidence that guilt has important consequences for parents', and specifically mothers', work, parenting, time management, and well-being. We conclude that while it is easy to say that gender differences in work-family decisions (i.e., women doing more caregiving tasks, and working fewer hours than men) arise from women *preferring* to devote more time to their family instead of their work (e.g., Belkin, 2003), we should be critical about why women make these choices. In our research we demonstrate that these work-family decisions may in part be driven by the increased guilt that mothers experience about working, a guilt that may result from highly normative standards for mothers to prioritize their family (e.g., Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012; Park et al., 2010). Thus, guilt may limit women in their work and family choices and straightjacket mothers into complying with gender norms in which they prioritize caregiving tasks over work.

Ethical approval

All procedures involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards with the Codes of Ethics of the World Medical Association. Furthermore, the authors of the study received ethical approval at Utrecht University, The Netherlands, before data collection in Study 2 (FETC17-044).

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103336>.

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