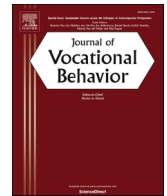




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“Cats in the cradle:” Work-family conflict, parenting, and life satisfaction among fathers

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ABSTRACT

Using data from 1995 to 2016, we examined how work interference with family (WIF) and father involvement relate to life satisfaction synchronously as well as 10 and 20 years later with hypotheses informed by life course theory. Specifically, father involvement was tested as a mediator of the relationships from WIF to life satisfaction among 387 working fathers who participated in three waves of the Midlife in the United States data collection. Moreover, the moderating effect of gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare (GEBC) on the relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction was tested. To test hypotheses, a 5000 bootstrap path model was created wherein direct relationships from WIF (Time 1) to life satisfaction (Time 1, 2, and 3) were modeled as were indirect relationships via father involvement (Time 1); additionally, GEBC (Time 1) was set to moderate the relationships from father involvement to all three measures of life satisfaction. Results suggest WIF was negatively, and father involvement was positively, related to life satisfaction at all timepoints, and that father involvement partially mediated the relationship from WIF to life satisfaction across all timepoints. Results also suggest a stronger relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction among fathers with greater GEBC, which emerged for life satisfaction at Time 1 and at Time 3. Results inform on the short- and long-term ramifications of work-family decisions, with relevance for careers and wellbeing.

“‘When you coming home, dad?’
‘I don’t know when,
but we’ll get together then.
You know we’ll have a good time then.’”
- Lyrics from ‘Cats in the Cradle’

(Chapin, 1974)

The role of fathers has changed substantially in recent decades within the United States (Grau Grau et al., 2022). Historically, the role of father and of breadwinner were ostensibly synonymous with one another (Bear & Glick, 2017; Gatrell, 2024). However, fathers today have the pressure to succeed at work as a means of providing financially for dependents (Schieman & Young, 2011) coupled with an increased pressure to provide a greater share of dependent care and housework than in previous generations (Banister & Kerrane, 2024; Harrington, 2022).

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The competing demands faced by men within the United States to excel both as fathers and as breadwinners under this modern egalitarian gender paradigm set the stage for work-family conflict, defined as having difficulty fulfilling both work and family responsibilities (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This is notable because decisions to prioritize work over family or family over work at one stage of life can have significant consequences not only at the time the decision is made but later in life as well. Under life course perspectives, individuals pass through distinct stages of work-family management wherein they prioritize work over family or vice-versa (X. Han & Mortimer, 2023; Huffman et al., 2013; Martinengo et al., 2010; McMunn et al., 2021; Moen & Sweet, 2004). In addition, research on sensemaking suggests individuals undergo retrospective sensemaking wherein they evaluate and make sense of previous decisions and events (Henningson et al., 2006), such as those made as individuals aim to maximize their performance in their work and family roles. Accordingly, these two frameworks create an opportunity for past decisions related to work and family management to impact psychological outcomes years later. For example, a parent may justify work interfering with family as essential to earning a promotion and to establishing financial security in the 'growth' years of their career, but later regret not spending more time with their child as the child enters adulthood and opportunities to spend time together wane. Moreover, among men, the takeaways from retrospective sensemaking may be nuanced based on one's agreement with the growing societal pressure for men to be involved parents; in example, men who do not view themselves as being expected to care for children may experience lesser harms related to not engaging in this role.

Despite the growing interest in work and family issues and in fatherhood, organizational scientists rarely examine work-family experiences as they evolve across time from the perspective of fathers. Although the expectations for parents within the United States have shifted over the past several decades, societal expectations remain that mothers more so than fathers will be the primary caregiver (Mickelson & Marcussen, 2023). Thus, men continue to face pressure to prioritize work even when detrimental to family role performance. Yet, there has been limited research focused on work and parental involvement across time among men. This is a critical gap considering that engaging in childcare enhances external perceptions of a man's competence if their breadwinner role demands have been met, but a competency penalty occurs if work demands have not been met (Neuenswander et al., 2023). By comparison, these same relaxed caregiving expectations are not present for women who are societally pressured to engage in caregiving behaviors (Prentice & Carranza, 2002) and are more likely to enact them even in the face of competing demands from work and family. Thus, temporal concerns related to how work impacts parental involvement and how parental involvement impacts later life satisfaction are expected to be most pertinent for men and is worthy of specific attention.

To address this, the objective of the current study is to test synchronous relationships between work interference with family (WIF) to fathers' involvement with their children, coupled with lagged relationships captured over several decades with father life satisfaction. Further, we investigate gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare (GEBC) as a moderator given prescribed gender stereotypes posit childcare as a 'feminine' behavior (Hideg et al., 2023). These relationships are tested with a sample of working fathers from the United States who participated in all three-waves of the core Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study with results that may best generalize to working fathers from countries with similar gender egalitarian beliefs.

We extend the work-family literature in several ways. First, our specific focus on working fathers answers the call for greater research attention on fathers as mothers have been the more dominant focus within organizational science (Gatrell et al., 2022). Shining more of a spotlight on fathers is important for several reasons. Fathers are important to study in their own right because research shows men and women have differing expectations regarding what being a "good" parent looks like with societal expectations pigeonholing men into the "breadwinner" role regardless of personal preferences (Bear & Glick, 2017). In addition, despite the common belief women experience more work-family conflict than men, meta-analytic evidence shows men generally experience just as much inter-role conflict as do women (Shockley et al., 2017).

Second, by considering the role of both time and GEBC we advance the literature through revealing the boundary conditions under which father involvement relates to wellbeing for men. Specifically, we examine the strength of the relationship from father involvement to life satisfaction over time as well as whether this relationship emerges for all fathers or only for fathers who view it as their responsibility to be as equally involved as their partner with childcare during their child's developmental years. This is important from a life-long careers perspective as meta-analytic research has supported relationships between life satisfaction and job performance, turnover intentions, and withdrawal behaviors (Erdogan et al., 2012), which have implications for career success, promotability, and actual turnover decisions. More narrowly, by analyzing the interaction of father involvement and gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare, we inform on the degree to which parental involvement is a variable of importance for fathers in general or only among fathers with specific beliefs about childcare egalitarianism.

Third, we shine a light on synchronous and lagged outcomes of WIF for fathers. The WIF literature has grown exponentially over the past several decades, but has largely been informed based on cross-sectional methodologies (Allen et al., 2019). In contrast, based on our life course perspective, we inform how WIF not only has ramifications in the immediate future but also casts a long shadow with potential wellbeing implications to fathers in the decades that follow. Through this, an improved understanding of the long-term wellbeing outcomes associated with WIF will be gleaned via considering cross-sectional ramifications as well as more distal ones.

1. Background

Life course theory describes how individuals navigate career and family relationships across the lifespan (S.-K. Han & Moen, 1999). A life course lens recognizes fluctuations in family resource demands and work-family prioritization occur across time as individuals age and pass through life and family stages (Allen & Finkelstein, 2014; Moen & Wethington, 1999). Accordingly, the way individuals view and experience their work and family roles also evolve and change throughout the lifespan (Allen & Shockley, 2012). In example, prior research has demonstrated the degree of WIF experienced differs as individuals transition through various career and family

stages (e.g., Allen & Finkelstein, 2014; Rantanen et al., 2012).

Additionally, earlier life events, such as parenting, take on new meaning as individuals age, with implications for later life satisfaction (Elder Jr., 1995). Qualitative research shows fathers of adult children report regret for not being as present in their children's lives when they were younger (Glavå et al., 2023). This suggests decisions made to prioritize one role (family/work) over another and relationships to overall life satisfaction can be viewed and interpreted differently across time, allowing for short- and long- term relationships to outcomes such as psychological wellbeing. Through this, work-related demands can be stressors both in the moment (e.g., one experiences strains due to working a great deal of hours), but also have impacts years later as individuals remember and evaluate those decisions in hindsight (e.g., one experiences regret for having worked a great deal of hours and having missed major moments in their child's life). More specifically, this positions time as a contextual factor such that the theoretical pathways through which those negative outcomes present should account for temporal proximity to a given experience, requiring different theories to explain how the same decision relates to outcomes when measured synchronously and using a lagged approach.

In consideration of the key context of the life course, we develop hypotheses that help explain the process by which WIF relates to life satisfaction among fathers both synchronously and across time. Specifically, synchronous hypotheses are informed by resource theory while lagged hypotheses are informed by theories of retrospective sensemaking.

1.1. Synchronous relationship hypotheses

1.1.1. Synchronous relationship between WIF and father involvement

Resource theory states resources used in one role (e.g., work) are unavailable for use in another role (e.g., family) (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). When resources are insufficient to meet the needs of both roles, one must choose which role to prioritize, which can result in work interfering with family (WIF) or family interfering with work (FIW) (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003). Building on this, WIF specifically occurs when performance in the family role suffers as one aims to meet work demands (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Of note to parenting, conflict inhibits employees from engaging in family role activities. This includes caregiving behaviors (e.g., time with children), which are an outcome of WIF (Cho & Allen, 2012; Van Den Eynde et al., 2020). One childcare behavior related to WIF is father involvement with children. This variable is of interest as research shows variability among fathers regarding engagement in fathering behaviors and the meaning they attach to the role, as well as the expectation that encourage men to devote more time to work and less time to family (Banister & Kerrane, 2024). Indeed, while work and family roles have shifted, the expectation that men's role is one of breadwinner rather than caregiver persists (Ladge & Humberd, 2022).

Accordingly, this has relevance for how fathers allocate their resources, with WIF reflecting a tax on one's resources in the home. This resource lens is illustrated with quotes from fathers in qualitative research such as "I quite enjoy it (parenting) when I have the time" (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014, p. 24), which suggest childcare can be viewed as an "optional" activity that can be done with excess resources among fathers. Framing childcare as "optional" is thought to occur because men can perform "acceptably" within their parenting schema via providing materially (e.g., being the breadwinner) more so than by relationship building (e.g., being an involved father). This positions men as vulnerable to WIF when resources are insufficient to meet the needs of both roles as engaging in the work role can meet both work and parenting expectations. In support, men are viewed as more competent for engaging in childcare but only if their work demands are met (Neuenschwander et al., 2023), indicating childcare is a supplementary rather than a core responsibility for men. Thus, based on resource theory, we expect greater WIF is associated with less father involvement synchronously.

Hypothesis 1. WIF relates to lesser father involvement synchronously.

1.1.2. Synchronous relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction

Additionally, as suggested by resource theory, individuals desire to allocate their resources in a way that facilitates success in both work and family roles. This intent is motivated by the rewards of succeeding within each role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). In line with this, self-reported happiness is higher when men are taking care of or interacting with their child compared to periods when they are not engaging in these behaviors (Nelson-Coffey et al., 2019). This suggests father involvement has relevance for wellbeing synchronously within a life stage.

Accordingly, we posit father involvement positively relates to life satisfaction synchronously. Life satisfaction was chosen as the wellbeing outcome of interest given its broad scope reflects an aggregate of one's satisfaction across roles. Importantly, we also note meta-analytic studies consistently show WIF is related to life satisfaction (Allen et al., 2020; Amstad et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2022) as is parental involvement (Dotti Sani, 2022). Thus, we also expect a partially mediated relationship between WIF and life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2. Father involvement is positively related to life satisfaction synchronously.

Hypothesis 3. Fathers involvement partially mediates the synchronous negative relationship between WIF and life satisfaction.

1.2. Lagged relationship hypotheses

1.2.1. Lagged relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction

Based on life course and sense-making theory, we also pose a relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction across time. Life course theory posits individuals undergo stages wherein they prioritize the work or the family role based on career/family stage (X. Han & Mortimer, 2023; McMunn et al., 2021; Moen & Sweet, 2004). However, these stages are not disconnected from one

another in that each stage is a part of a person's overarching life course that can be recalled, remembered, and reevaluated in hindsight. Indeed, a key proposition of the life-course paradigm is earlier experiences shape later-in-life wellbeing (Moen et al., 2008). This proposition has been supported by prior research that has shown, for example, wellbeing is related to job insecurity from a year prior (Kinnunen et al., 2003).

Following this line of thought, theories of sensemaking help explain why WIF and father involvement at one point in time relate to life satisfaction years later, complementing resource and life stage theories. Sensemaking perspectives posit individuals make sense of the world around them as well of their decisions (Henningesen et al., 2006), placing the individual's evaluation of past decisions pertaining to previous resource allocation as part of the critical appraisal process through which experiences relate to outcomes in line with one's available resources and life stage. Regarding fathers, a heavy workload may seem wise at an earlier life and career stage to establish career success (Sturges & Guest, 2004) and to align with gender-based stereotypes that posit men as the breadwinner (Bear & Glick, 2017; Sánchez-Mira, 2024) even if it comes at the expense of family involvement. However, as children move out of the home and become more self-reliant over time, opportunities for parental involvement lessen. In support, qualitative research based on mid-life parents found the most frequently cited regrets for self were primarily regrets about the amount of time spent with the child and the support provided for the child's development (DeVries et al., 2007, p. 12); illustrative quotes include, "I have not spent as much quality time with her as she has grown up" and "How quickly the time passed. I wish we had done MORE things together." This regret in hindsight amounts to retrospective sensemaking, or the process wherein one evaluates previous decisions and events.

Thus, we expect that when individuals look back on life, they will recall instances wherein they failed to adequately live up to the demands of being an involved parent. This is notable because family performance and satisfaction are positively correlated (Wayne et al., 2017). Moreover, experiences of WIF by one's parent relates to lesser quality parent-child relationships as reported by children (Vieira et al., 2016) with relevance for future relationship quality as relationships are built through interactions that accumulate over time (Lollis, 2003). This sets the stage for parenting decisions made at one point in time to relate to general life satisfaction years later. Accordingly, theories of retrospective sensemaking within the context of life course theory suggests father involvement earlier in life has relevance for life satisfaction synchronously and over time as one can recall instances of role performance within a role.

Hypothesis 4. Father involvement partially mediates the lagged negative relationship between WIF and life satisfaction.

1.3. Moderation hypotheses for synchronous and lagged relationships

1.3.1. Gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare as a moderator of the synchronous and lagged relationships between father involvement and life satisfaction

While we expect father involvement relates to life satisfaction at multiple points in time, the strength of these relationships may vary. Specifically, we suggest gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare (GEBC) serves as a moderator across all timepoints. Stereotypes of fathers posit their primary caregiving responsibility is to provide financial resources for his family while mothers provide caregiving (Banister & Kerrane, 2024; Gaunt, 2013). Relatedly, research shows work centrality moderates relationships from job insecurity, reflecting the importance one places in a role impacts outcomes (Otto & Dalbert, 2012). Following this logic, fathers may differently value the worth of their involvement in childcare with relevance for the relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction based on their beliefs about whether fathers should share equally with mothers in childcare responsibilities. This is expected to occur both synchronously and over time as individuals can evaluate their decisions (i.e., engage in sensemaking) at any time after a decision has been made. Specifically, fathers who believe they should be involved may experience more negative outcomes when they are less involved as fathers compared to fathers who hold lesser beliefs about the importance of their engagement in this role.

Hypothesis 5. Fathers' gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare (GEBC) moderate the relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction synchronously and across timepoints such that relationships are stronger among those with greater (relative to lower) GEBC.

1.3.2. Time as a moderator of the strength of the relationships between father involvement and life satisfaction as moderated by GEBC

Moreover, within the context of life course theory GEBC as a moderator may become increasingly relevant over time as fathers have fewer opportunities for involvement, making it challenging to "make up" for time lost with one's child. Under various framings of the family life cycle, children are given increasing levels of autonomy as they age and parental involvement declines over time (Buchanan et al., 2016). For example, parents with a child under 1 year old report an average of 11.9 h of childcare per week while those with a child between 13 and 17 years of age report an average of 0.4 h of childcare per week (Buchanan et al., 2016). Thus, the relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction may intensify across time among those who espouse egalitarian beliefs about childcare. This is expected as family involvement takes on greater importance in later life stages (Chai & Jun, 2017), impacting the evaluation of the quality of one's family- and work- related decisions via retrospective sensemaking through a more family-centric lens.

Hypothesis 6. The moderating effect of GEBC strengthens over time.

2. Methods

Data were drawn from the *National Survey of Midlife in the United States* (MIDUS). MIDUS has been previously been used in published peer-reviewed research on employee work and family experiences (e.g., Allen et al., 2023; Gonzalez-Mulé & Cockburn, 2021;

Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Selvarajan et al., 2016). Data collection for the MIDUS Project began in 1995–1996 when 7108 Americans across the United States were sampled. Two follow up phone surveys occurred in 2005–2006 and 2015–2016, providing data from the same participants over a twenty-year timespan. Given our research questions, participants had to participate in all three waves of the study and only men and those with a child (biological and/or non-biological) under 18 years old were included; U.S. norms consider 18 years old to be a demarcation point for when a child becomes an adult (Arnett & Mitra, 2020). Lastly, inclusion of full-time, 30-h-per-week workers was determined based on norms within the work-family literature (e.g., Shockley et al., 2022); full-time employment also aligns with gender stereotypes of men (van Osch & Schaveling, 2020), furthering its relevance given theoretical rationale rooted in gender norms.

A total of 423 fathers met this set of criteria. Of these 423, 36 did not provide responses to relevant study measures and were removed, leaving a final sample of 387 for hypothesis testing. At Time 1, participants included in the final sample overwhelmingly identified as white (96 %) and were married (88 %). On average, they were 40.94 years old, worked 50.39 h per week, and had 2.30 biological children. Income showed considerable variance across the sample at Time 1 with ~92 % of the sample making at least \$20,000, ~56 % making at least \$40,000, and ~10 % making at least \$100,000 in individual wages over the last calendar year. Given the lagged nature of the dataset, retirement status was also accounted for; 3 % identified as retired at Time 2 and 21 % identified as retired at Time 3. Further demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Additionally, regression analyses were conducted to compare Time 1 demographics of men in the final sample ($N = 387$) to men not in the final sample ($N = 711$); specifically, separate regression analyses were conducted with final sample inclusion status inputted as the lone predictor of each of the below demographic variables. Related to age, men in the final sample were younger ($B = -8.50, p < .001$); this is likely due to inclusion criteria regarding as those with children over 18 years old are likely to be older than those with younger children. Men in the final sample also had higher incomes ($B = 4.52, p < .001$) and were more likely to be married ($B = 0.17, p < .001$); these may have emerged due to self-selection such that those with more income and a long-term partner were more likely to have children. There were no differences in education ($B = 0.13, p = .84$) nor regarding identification as White ($B = 0.001, p = .89$).

2.1. Measures

The complete item wordings for all measures are shown in Table S1. While single-item measures were used for some constructs, the specificity and relevance of the selected items allow for confidence as to the suggested theoretical mechanisms thought to drive relationships. Additional information on the tradeoffs of single-item measures is discussed in the limitations section.

Work interference with family (WIF) was measured with four items scored on a five-point scale that ranged from “All the time” (1) to “Never” (5). The item stem read “How often have you experienced the following in the past year:” and a sample item is “Stress at work makes you irritable at home.” Research has provided psychometric support for this measure (Allen et al., 2023). Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.76, 0.75, and 0.84 at Times 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

Father involvement was measured using one item: “How much thought and effort do you put into your overall relationship with your children these days?” Scores were recorded on an 11-point scale that ranged from “No thought or effort” (0) to “Very much thought and effort” (10).

Gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare was measured using one item, “Men should share equally with their wives in taking care of young children” with responses based on a seven-point scale that ranged from “Agree strongly” (1) to “Disagree strongly” (7). The item was reverse scored so higher scores reflected greater beliefs childcare should be divided equally.

Life satisfaction was measured as a formative construct created by averaging the satisfaction reported by the participants across five areas: life, health, marriage or close relationship, work, and relationship with your children.¹ Items were scored on an 11-point scale that ranged from “Worst possible” (0) to “Best possible” (10). Cronbach alpha reliability was 0.64 at Time 1, 0.63 at Time 2, and 0.70 at Time 3.

Controls. All control variables were taken from the Time 1 data unless otherwise noted. Hours worked and participant age were included as controls given the roles time demands and life stage play in work-family prioritization and life satisfaction (Adkins & Premeaux, 2012; Martinengo et al., 2010). Additionally, marital status was controlled given its relevance for family demands. Marital status was self-reported (not married = 0, married = 1). Overall, these control variables were included to account for differences in (actual and societal) role demands that impact one's time resources and could act as a confound for the cross-sectional estimation of relationships between WIF, father involvement, and life satisfaction. This aligns with role theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), which suggests WIF emerges due to role demands with relevance for behavior enactment and wellbeing, such as lesser involvement in a role and life satisfaction.

Beyond Time 1 measures, retirement status was controlled for life satisfaction at each lagged timepoint given the focus of life stages within the model and the role of retirement as a marker of life stage as it marks one's exit from the workforce. Retirement status was self-reported and scored as not retired (0) or retired (1). Importantly, future retirement status is impacted by temporally previous WIF (Raymo & Sweeney, 2006) and has relevance for life satisfaction (Adawi et al., 2023); thus, we controlled for retirement status at Time 2 and Time 3. From a theoretical perspective, this also aligns with role theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) as retirement removes one's work role with relevance for WIF, father involvement, and life satisfaction in line with previous rationale.

¹ Given our measure of life satisfaction included an item on satisfaction with relationships with children, we examined if relationships to life satisfaction remained significant if this item was removed. Results indicated significance of the hypothesized predictors were unchanged.

Table 1
Sample demographics.

	N	Mean	SD	Median	Min	Max	Range	Skew	Kurtosis
Participant age in years	387	40.94	6.51	41	25	64	39	0.04	0.05
Race: White (No/Yes)	385	0.96	0.21	1	0	1	1	-4.42	17.59
Highest education completed	387	7.86	2.48	8	2	12	10	0.04	-1.17
Income level	384	26.39	4.20	27	2	33	31	-2.00	7.49
Hours worked per week	387	50.39	11.24	50	30	120	90	2.02	7.74
Years employed full-time	386	20.53	6.87	20	1	44	43	-0.05	0.22
Number of biological children	387	2.30	1.24	2	0	10	10	1.49	5.78
Child age in years: 0–6 (No/Yes)	387	0.38	0.49	0	0	1	1	0.50	-1.75
Child age in years: 7–13 (No/Yes)	387	0.57	0.50	1	0	1	1	-0.29	-1.92
Child age in years: 14–17 (No/Yes)	387	0.51	0.50	1	0	1	1	-0.04	-2.00
Married (No/Yes)	387	0.88	0.32	1	0	1	1	-2.35	3.51
Retired - Time 2 (No/Yes)	387	0.03	0.16	0	0	1	1	5.95	33.54
Retired - Time 3 (No/Yes)	387	0.21	0.41	0	0	1	1	1.42	0.03

Notes: Education was scored by highest degree received and coded such that 1 = No school/some grade school, 2 = Eighth grade/junior high school, 3 = Some high school, 4 = GED, 5 = 1 to 2 years of college, 7 = 3 or more years of college, 8 = Associate's degree, 9 = Bachelor's degree, 10 = Some graduate school, 11 = Master's degree, 12 = Ph.D, Ed.D, DDS, LLB, LLD, JD or other Professional degree. Income was scored in \$1000 intervals from 4 (\$1000–\$1999) to 22 (\$19,000–\$19,999), in \$5000 intervals from 23 (\$20,000–24,999) to 28 (\$45,000–\$49,999), in \$25,000 intervals from 29 (\$50,000–\$74, 999) to 30 (\$75,000–\$99,999), and \$50,000 intervals from 31 (\$100,000–\$149,999) to 32 (\$150,000–\$199,999); additionally 1 = “LESS THAN \$0”, 2 = \$0, 3 = \$1–\$999, and 33 = “\$200,000 or more.” All variables containing (No/Yes) were coded such that 0 = No and 1 = Yes. Demographics based on Time 1 data.

3. Results

Data, syntax, and annotated output are publicly available (Regina & Allen, 2024). Table 2 provides means, standard deviations, and coefficient alphas among the variables. Prior to testing relationships between variables, the Time 1 measures of WIF and life satisfaction were inputted within a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA); notably, the Time 2 and Time 3 measures of life satisfaction were omitted given the overlapping content between these measures and life satisfaction at Time 1. The model was analyzed using ‘R’ (R Core Team, 2019; Rosseel, 2012) and a maximum likelihood estimator was used. The sample consisted only of those who responded to all items for all scales; this left a sample of 351. Within this analysis, model fit was examined to ascertain the degree to which constructs displayed adequate discriminant validity, which would be suggested if fit was adequate. We evaluated fit using recommendations from Hu and Bentler (1999) to consider both absolute (e.g., SRMR) and incremental (e.g., CFI) fit indices. Based on these guidelines, fit was acceptable (CFI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.06).

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated prior to hypothesis testing (Table 2).

To test our hypotheses, a 5000 bootstrap path model (Fig. S1) using a maximum likelihood estimator was created in ‘R’ (R Core Team, 2019; Rosseel, 2012) using only participants who responded to all pertinent measures ($N = 387$); this analysis method was chosen as it allowed for all relationships to be tested within one model rather than being tested in a piecemeal fashion wherein each hypothesis was tested within one model, such as by using several regression analyses. To allow for testing of GEBC as a moderator, scores for Time 1 GEBC were centered on the mean (6.20) and an interaction term was created by multiplying father involvement and GEBC. Regarding model construction, all variables were loaded onto their hypothesized outcomes (both direct and partially mediated) and control variables were loaded onto each endogenous variable. Specific to retirement status, retirement status at Time 2 was only loaded onto life satisfaction at Time 2 and retirement status was Time 3 was only loaded onto life satisfaction at Time 3. Based on heuristics and suggestions from Hu and Bentler (1999), fit was generally acceptable (CFI = 0.91, SRMR = 0.04). Accordingly, we proceeded with hypothesis testing based on this path model with all estimates shown in Table 3.

3.1. Synchronous relationships

Hypothesis 1 stated WIF relates to lesser synchronous father involvement. Results indicated a significant negative relationship between WIF and father involvement ($B = -0.34$, $p = .01$), providing support for Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 stated father involvement relates to greater synchronous life satisfaction. Results supported a significant positive relationship ($B = 0.21$, $p < .001$) between father involvement and life satisfaction, providing support for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 stated father involvement partially mediates the synchronous relationship between WIF and life satisfaction. To test this, Preacher and Hayes (2004) bootstrapping methods were used. The 95 % confidence interval did not include 0, providing support for an indirect relationship from WIF to life satisfaction at Time 1 via father involvement ($B = -0.07$, 95 % CI $[-0.14, -0.02]$, $p = .02$). Moreover, the direct relationship from WIF to life satisfaction was also significant ($B = -0.56$, $p < .001$). Taken together, results supported Hypothesis 3.

3.2. Lagged relationships

Hypothesis 4 stated father involvement partially mediates the lagged relationship between WIF and life satisfaction. To test this,

Table 2

Means, standard deviations, coefficient alpha, and correlations for the study variables.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1	WIF	(0.76)															
2	WIF - T2	0.44**	(0.75)														
3	WIF - T3	0.27**	0.40**	(0.84)													
4	Father involvement	−0.10*	−0.06	−0.02	–												
5	Father involvement (T2)	−0.05	−0.07	−0.04	0.37**	–											
6	Father involvement (T3)	0.00	0.06	0.09	0.34**	0.39**	–										
7	GEBC	−0.04	−0.01	−0.12*	0.27**	0.06	−0.03	–									
8	GEBC (T3)	−0.03	0.07	−0.05	0.14**	0.08	−0.02	0.46**	–								
9	Life satisfaction	−0.35**	−0.19**	−0.19**	0.37**	0.24**	0.22**	0.09	0.02	(0.64)							
10	Life satisfaction (T2)	−0.18**	−0.33**	−0.28**	0.20**	0.32**	0.24**	−0.01	0.00	0.46**	(0.63)						
11	Life satisfaction (T3)	−0.09	−0.17**	−0.38**	0.18**	0.13*	0.21**	−0.01	0.02	0.42**	0.54**	(0.70)					
12	Total hours worked	0.18**	0.11*	0.10	0.02	0.04	0.01	0.02	−0.03	−0.01	0.05	0.04	–				
13	Married (No/Yes)	0.13**	0.00	0.01	0.15**	0.01	0.07	−0.04	−0.02	0.12*	0.09	0.10*	0.13*	–			
14	Participant age in years	0.02	−0.06	−0.23**	−0.04	−0.04	−0.01	−0.01	0.01	−0.01	0.08	0.17**	0.03	−0.01	–		
15	Retired (T2) (No/Yes)	−0.03	−0.12*	−0.12*	−0.03	0.04	0.05	−0.10	−0.05	−0.02	0.12*	0.06	−0.04	0.01	0.18**	–	
16	Retired (T3) (No/Yes)	0.02	0.00	−0.14*	0.09	0.00	0.02	0.03	−0.02	0.03	−0.03	0.09	−0.08	−0.05	0.38**	0.04	–
	N	387	365	292	387	383	378	387	386	387	387	387	387	387	387	387	387
	Mean	2.73	2.58	2.50	8.32	8.16	7.80	6.20	6.19	7.82	7.80	7.98	50.39	0.88	40.94	0.03	0.21
	SD	0.60	0.59	0.69	1.58	1.77	2.16	1.32	1.25	0.99	1.02	1.21	11.24	0.32	6.51	0.16	0.41

Notes: All variables were collected at Time 1 unless other noted. WIF is an acronym for Work Interference with Family. GEBC is an acronym for Gender Egalitarian Beliefs about Childcare. T2 is Time 2. T3 is Time 3. $N = 387$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3Unstandardized path estimates [and *p* values] from path model used for hypothesis testing.

	Parental involvement	Life sat. T1	Life sat. T2	Life sat. T3
WIF	−0.34 [0.01]	−0.56 [0.00]	−0.31 [0.00]	−0.21 [0.04]
Father involvement	–	0.21 [0.00]	0.12 [0.00]	0.14 [0.00]
Egal. beliefs about childcare	–	−0.36 [0.04]	−0.20 [0.25]	−0.48 [0.00]
Father involvement * Egal. beliefs about childcare	–	0.05 [0.03]	0.02 [0.34]	0.06 [0.01]
Hours worked	0.00 [0.64]	0.00 [0.48]	0.01 [0.11]	0.00 [0.48]
Marital status	0.79 [0.03]	0.37 [0.04]	0.24 [0.15]	0.35 [0.06]
Respondent age	−0.01 [0.45]	0.00 [0.54]	0.01 [0.15]	0.03 [0.00]
Retirement status T2	–	–	0.65 [0.00]	–
Retirement status T3	–	–	–	0.14 [0.27]

Notes: All variables were collected at Time 1 unless other noted. WIF is an acronym for Work Interference with Family. T1 is Time 1. T2 is Time 2. T3 is Time 3. N = 387.

Preacher and Hayes (2004) bootstrapping methods were used. The 95 % confidence interval for the estimated relationship from WIF to life satisfaction at Time 2 ($B = -0.04$, 95 % CI $[-0.09, -0.008]$, $p = .04$) and Time 3 ($B = -0.05$, 95 % CI $[-0.10, -0.007]$, $p = .04$) via father involvement did not include 0. Additionally, the direct paths from WIF to life satisfaction at Time 2 ($B = -0.31$, $p < .001$) and Time 3 ($B = -0.21$, $p = .04$) were significant as were the direct paths from father involvement to life satisfaction at Time 2 ($B = 0.12$, $p < .001$) and Time 3 ($B = 0.14$, $p = .002$). Accordingly, support for the lagged relationship suggested in Hypothesis 4 was provided.

3.3. Moderated relationships

Hypothesis 5 stated GEBC moderated the relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction synchronously and across timepoints such that relationships are stronger among those with greater (rather than lower) GEBC. To test this hypothesis, the path from the interaction term created by multiplying father involvement and GEBC to life satisfaction at each timepoint was examined. Results did not support a significant interaction effect at Time 2 ($B = 0.02$, $p = .34$). However, results did support a significant interaction effect at Time 1 ($B = 0.05$, $p = .03$) and at Time 3 ($B = 0.06$, $p = .006$). Given this, a simple slopes analysis was conducted to determine the nature of the interaction effects at Time 1 and Time 3 with results shown in Table 4 and Fig. 1. Results indicated the two moderated relationships from father involvement to life satisfaction were conceptually similar; relationships were stronger among fathers who reported greater gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare, aligning with the hypothesis.

Specifically, the relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction at Time 1 was 0.15 at GEBC one standard deviation below the mean ($p < .001$), 0.21 at GEBC equal to the mean ($p < .001$), and 0.27 at one standard deviation above the mean ($p < .001$).

Similarly, the relationship between childcare thought and life satisfaction at Time 3 was not significant at GEBC one standard deviation below the mean ($B = 0.07$, $p = .14$), but was significant at GEBC equal to the mean ($B = 0.15$, $p < .001$) level and at GEBC one standard deviation above the mean ($B = 0.22$, $p < .001$).

Overall, these patterns at Time 1 and Time 3 align with the hypothesized direction while the Time 2 interaction was not significant; this pattern provides partial support for Hypothesis 5.

Hypothesis 6 stated the moderating effect of GEBC on the relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction strengthens over time. To test this hypothesis, the 95 % confidence intervals of the interaction effect were compared for the three different life satisfaction timepoints. Table 5 shows the confidence intervals. As shown, while the interaction effect was significant at Time 1 and at Time 3 and not significant at Time 2, the intervals associated with each of the three paths largely overlap, providing no support for Hypothesis 6. Additionally, simple slope estimates across all three timepoints were examined (Table 4 and Fig. 1). The pattern of relationships is consistent across all three timepoints, providing additional evidence the interaction effect is stable over time.

Table 4

Simple slopes analyses depicting the estimated relationship between father involvement and life satisfaction at different levels of gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare.

Outcome variable	Gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare.	Standardized path estimate for father involvement as predictor
Life Satisfaction: Time 1	−1 SD from mean	0.15**
	0 SD from mean	0.21**
	+1 SD from mean	0.27**
Life Satisfaction: Time 2	−1 SD from mean	0.10*
	0 SD from mean	0.12**
	+1 SD from mean	0.15**
Life Satisfaction: Time 3	−1 SD from mean	0.07
	0 SD from mean	0.15**
	+1 SD from mean	0.22**

Notes: N = 387.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

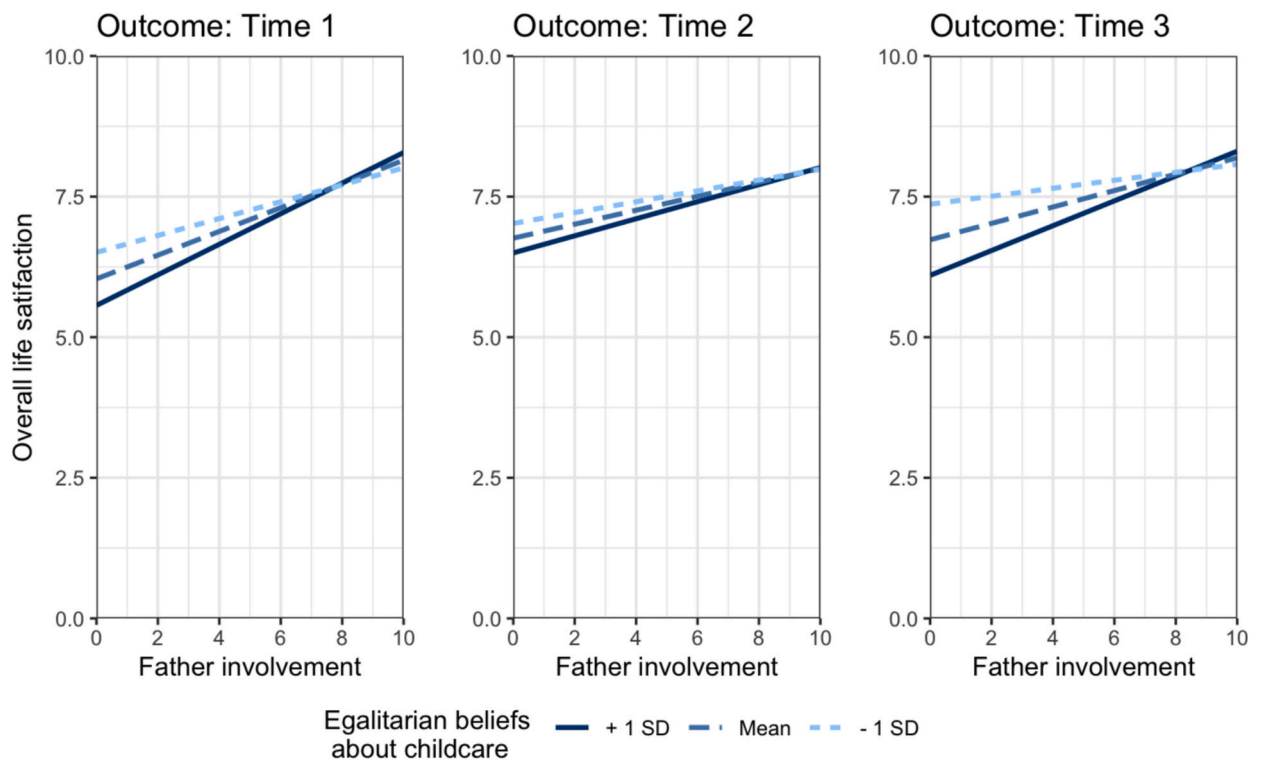


Fig. 1. Interaction effects of father involvement and gender egalitarian about childcare for life satisfaction across three timepoints.

Table 5

Unstandardized estimates of the relationship between the interaction of father involvement and gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare at Time 1 and life satisfaction.

Outcome	Estimate	95 % confidence interval
Life Satisfaction: Time 1	0.046	[0.003 0.088]
Life Satisfaction: Time 2	0.021	[-0.018, 0.068]
Life Satisfaction: Time 3	0.057	[0.012, 0.093]

3.4. Supplemental analyses

To examine the robustness of these findings, two supplemental analyses were conducted.

First, we tested our moderation hypothesis based on gender egalitarianism beliefs assessed at Time 1. This was to temporally align feelings of obligation toward childcare with reports of father involvement at the time parenting would be most intense (i.e., Time 1). However, one's current beliefs of GEBC may also be relevant for how one makes sense of their past decisions and later life satisfaction. While GEBC data was not collected at Time 2, it was at Time 3. Accordingly, we examined the interaction effect of Time 3 GEBC and Time 1 father involvement on Time 3 life satisfaction. Specifically, we regressed life satisfaction at Time 3 on WIF (Time 1), father involvement (Time 1), GEBC (Time 3), the interaction of GEBC and father involvement, and control variables; only those who answered all pertinent items were included in analyses, leaving a sample of 386. As previously found, results show Time 1 WIF ($B = -0.21, p = .04$) and father involvement ($B = 0.12, p = .002$) relate to Time 3 life satisfaction. However, the interaction effect of GEBC and father involvement was not significant ($B = 0.05, p = .12$).

Second, research suggests experiences such as WIF and father involvement may have a static component related to trait-level individual differences. In example, those who are higher on trait neuroticism tend to report greater WIF (Allen et al., 2023). Given this, we examined whether WIF and father involvement are significant predictors after controlling for later experiences. Using path analysis, WIF and father involvement collected at earlier timepoints were inputted as predictors of the same variables collected at later timepoints (e.g., Time 1 and Time 2 WIF were set as predictors of Time 3 WIF). Beyond that, WIF and father involvement were included as controls for synchronous measures of life satisfaction (e.g., Time 2 WIF was set as a predictor of Time 2 life satisfaction) and retirement status was no longer controlled given WIF can only be reported by those with jobs (and, thus, inclusion creates a non-positive definite covariance matrix). Given WIF is only reported by those with jobs, the sample size was reduced to only those who answered all pertinent measures and were employed at all three timepoints; this reduced the sample size to 271 rather than the 387

used for the hypothesized model, reducing statistical power. Fit ($CFI = 0.85$, $SRMR = 0.07$) was worse than the hypothesis testing model ($CFI = 0.91$, $SRMR = 0.04$). Compared to findings from hypothesis testing, lagged relationships from Time 1 WIF and father involvement to life satisfaction were no longer significant ($p > .05$). By comparison, the interaction effect of father involvement and GEBC (both measured at Time 1) remained significant ($B = 0.04$, $p = .02$); the pattern of the simple slopes analysis remained consistent with the previous analyses, such that relationships were stronger among those with above the mean Time 1 GEBC ($B = 0.18$, $p < .001$) compared to those with below the mean Time 1 GEBC ($B = 0.06$, $p = .23$). Additionally, the relationship from synchronous Time 1 relationship between WIF and father involvement remained significant ($B = -0.44$, $p = .003$). Given this pattern of results, the conditional indirect effect was calculated from Time 1 WIF to Time 3 life satisfaction. Results suggested a significant indirect relationship among fathers with high GEBC at Time 1 based on the 95 % confidence interval ($B = -0.05$, 95 % CI $[-0.12, -0.003]$) but not based on the corresponding p value ($= 0.08$); relatedly, research supports the examination of confidence intervals to evaluate indirect effects (Hayes & Scharkow, 2013).

4. Discussion

Meeting the demands brought forth by both one's work and family roles is a challenge for working parents. This study shines light on the specific nature of how these challenges have ramifications for working fathers both synchronously and over time. Results support greater WIF and lesser father involvement relate to lesser life satisfaction synchronously as well as to life satisfaction measured 10 and 20 years later. Moreover, the strength of these relationships is exacerbated for fathers who feel they have a duty to engage in egalitarian caregiving, which notably stands in contrast to the typical gendered expectations of fathers (Bear & Glick, 2017). This advances the literature with relevance for practice and careers in multiple ways.

First, results suggest WIF has a negative relationship to fathers' parental involvement. While the correlation was small in magnitude (-0.10), father involvement is related to a host of desirable outcomes for parent and child (Bulanda & Majumdar, 2009; Eggebeen et al., 2010). Thus, even small effects for a variable of this importance are notable given the implications to parent and child wellbeing. These findings extend prior work that has documented relationships between work demands and child-related interactions (e.g., French et al., 2016). In that engaged fatherhood has a host of benefits for fathers and for their children, the findings provide further reason for organizations to seek ways to enable employees to meet their family demands (Banister & Kerrane, 2024; Bowles et al., 2022). This may include lessening perceptions of organizations as masculinity contest cultures that reinforce traditional gender norms, such as putting work before family (Berdahl et al., 2018; Glick et al., 2018). Through creating cultures that reinforce more egalitarian norms around childcare, fathers may be better able to engage in the behaviors needed to be involved fathers.

Second, WIF and father involvement were related to life satisfaction both synchronously as well as 10 and 20 years later. Specific to father involvement, correlations to life satisfaction are in the ~ 0.20 range. Given life satisfaction reflects one's positive or negative evaluation of their life overall, medium sized correlations suggest a meaningful long-term impact. Accordingly, results suggest lesser involvement in the family role has long-term implications for how one generally feels about the quality of their life. For employees, this may have ramifications for late career industry changes or turnover decisions as individuals seek new opportunities that bring them greater overall satisfaction. Beyond this, life satisfaction reflects mental health which has implications for physical health (Shirom et al., 2005), and, thus, may impact how long these individuals are physically able to continue working before having to retire.

Third, men have relaxed expectations regarding their involvement as parents (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). While this is the case at a societal level, men can vary in the degree to which they agree with this expectation (Bleske-Rechek & Gunseor, 2022; Offer & Kaplan, 2021). Our findings suggest the degree to which a father feels as though men are to be as involved equally as women in parenting one's child relates to the degree to which father involvement relates to life satisfaction years later. Importantly, time is a resource that is not replenishable. For working dads, prioritizing work over family may be intended to assist one's family monetarily as a form of caregiving. However, our results suggest lesser father involvement at one timepoint can have meaningful ramifications two decades later for men with gender egalitarian caregiving beliefs. This may have implications for late career engagement. Research supports individuals who feel as though they are underperforming in one role will overcompensate through trying to overperform in another role (e.g., Dishon-Berkovits, 2021). For these working fathers, lack of involvement in the family role may be viewed as a failure, potentially pushing them toward greater engagement in the work role to compensate. While this engagement could relate to improved performance at work (Dalal et al., 2012), it can also have relevance for workaholism and, in turn, for burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2008) which can have varying positive or negative impacts on one's career.

4.1. Implications for theory

Related to life course theory, we proposed work-family decisions that lessened family involvement would have greater relevance years later (among those who sought to be involved fathers) as individuals entered life stages wherein people typically report greater prioritization of one's family. Given the inherent nature of self-evaluation among humans (Festinger, 1954), theory development should further consider the role of life stage and value changes across these stages in how individuals past decisions and their career and family outcomes at large as well as how these evaluations relate to wellbeing and family/career decision making years later.

Building on this temporal focus, cross-sectional research has largely dominated the work-family literature (Allen & Martin, 2017). Within this study, we leveraged sensemaking theory to hypothesize on how a synchronous work-family relationship (WIF and life satisfaction) that has been supported in meta-analytic work (Allen et al., 2020; Amstad et al., 2011) may also emerge over a longer temporal period. Greater integration of sensemaking perspectives into work-family theorizing, coupled with life course perspectives, could yield useful information as to how the quality of one's work-family decision (i.e., to prioritize work or family) changes over time.

In example, an employee may justify missing a child's soccer game to better their performance at work in hopes of earning a promotion, but later regret that decision months or years later if the additional effort at work at the expense of family does not yield the desired outcome. Moreover, this temporal lag could be even earlier in scope if the child has a memorable game (e.g., scores the game winning goal) that the parent comes to (essentially immediately) regret missing.

Additionally, resource theory proposes individuals seek to allocate resources in a manner that facilitates success in their various roles (e.g., family, work, etc.) (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). However, our results showed GEBC was a moderator of the relationships between father involvement and life satisfaction. Specific to life satisfaction twenty years later (Time 3), father involvement at Time 1 was not significantly related to life satisfaction among fathers whose GEBC were one standard deviation below the mean whereas the relationship was significant among those with a mean or one standard deviation above the mean GEBC. This implies being an involved father was not related to improved wellbeing among those who did not value this role. Accordingly, greater examination of the boundary conditions related to whom success in a given role relates to improved outcomes is necessary. More specifically, the value one places on a given role may be a pertinent boundary condition of resource theory worthy of study.

Supplemental results indicated the lagged relation between Time 1 WIF and life satisfaction 20 years later (Time 3) was not moderated by gender egalitarian beliefs assessed at Time 3. This implies one's temporal alignment of their beliefs with their behaviors drives the moderating relationship derived theoretically from sensemaking. Accordingly, theories of sensemaking should consider individuals may evaluate past decisions based on past identities. For example, a father who is not egalitarian at the time of a work-family conflict may experience lesser regrets about previous work-family conflict experiences later in life than a father who is egalitarian at the time of a work-family conflict even if both hold egalitarian beliefs later on. This may occur because individuals are better able to cognitively separate themselves from a decision they regret if their belief has changed, allowing them to believe they would have handled it differently if it came up now. Thus, future theory on sensemaking could consider how individuals recall past identities when evaluating previous decisions and how the related regret of misalignment between behavior and beliefs may be buffered via cognitive separation of one's current self from their past self due to changing beliefs or ideals. Through this, time and previous beliefs can be viewed as boundary conditions impacting whether or the degree to which sensemaking relates to outcomes, positing it as a consideration for retrospective sensemaking theories moving forward.

4.2. Implications for practice

4.2.1. Implications for working fathers

Beyond theoretical implications, results have implications for how individuals manage their careers. First, working fathers should be cognizant of their values when making career decisions. Specifically, results support father involvement positively relates to life satisfaction twenty years later. However, the relationship is moderated by gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare such that the relationship is strengthened when GEBC is greater; beyond that, the relationship was not significant when GEBC was one standard deviation below the mean. This difference highlights the need for individuals to be mindful when making career decisions. Most specific to these findings, working fathers should consider how much they value their parenting role and make career decisions aligned with those values. In example, an aspect of masculinity contest cultures (MCC) is an expectation that employees are to choose work over family (Glick et al., 2018). Research suggests outcomes of MCC may vary based on gender and preference for competition (Regina & Allen, 2023). Similarly, MCC may be more detrimental to working fathers who wish to be active caregivers than to working fathers who feel less compelled to engage in caregiving. Accordingly, individuals should seek organizations that allow them to best meet their desired level of involvement in their non-work roles if they wish to minimize the strains experienced in the short-term as well as over time. For example, to develop a realistic preview of what is expected, prospective employees could ask current employees about the extent work-family balance is valued at the organization.

In line with this, employees should be mindful of the importance of family supportive resources within the workplace. Research suggests family supportive resources such as family supportive supervision and boundary control allow for greater management of work and family demands (Hammer et al., 2011; Kossek et al., 2006). Given relationships from WIF to father involvement and life satisfaction, these resources could limit these negative outcomes, allowing employees to live fulfilling lives while facilitating a working father's ability to be an involved parent if they so choose. Such resources may also have more distal benefits related to careers if they assist fathers in managing their demands, such as lesser turnover intentions from one's job or field via greater short- and long- term life satisfaction. Accordingly, organizations that value employee wellbeing could consider implementing interventions designed to provide additional family-supportive resources (Von Allmen et al., 2024).

In addition to the relevance of these findings for how men manage their careers, the relationships between WIF and father involvement to life satisfaction also may have implications for career outcomes and success. Meta-analytic research has supported relationships between life satisfaction and job performance, turnover intentions, and withdrawal behaviors (Erdogan et al., 2012) which have implications for career success, promotability, and actual turnover decisions. Moreover, given the lagged nature of the sample and life satisfaction as a broader measure of satisfaction across domains, it is pertinent that job satisfaction (a component of life satisfaction) relates to more positive perceptions of future retirement and, in turn, an earlier anticipating retirement age, after accounting for income (Davies et al., 2017). Through this, the concurrent success and lagged career decisions of workers can be impacted by these work-family considerations via statistical relationships to life satisfaction, positioning these relationships as having relevance throughout one's career. Specifically, the impact on life satisfaction (and, in turn, onto careers) may be most notable among fathers who desire to be involved parents.

4.2.2. Implications for policymakers

Related to policymakers, the mental health of men has been tabbed as a public health challenge (Sher, 2020). Within this study, we find lesser father involvement is connected to long-term life satisfaction, which is associated with depression (Gigantesco et al., 2019) and suicide intent (Zhang et al., 2017). Thus, policy makers could aim to provide additional protections that better allow fathers to be involved parents. One area that could have a significant impact are protections around precarious employment, such as those experienced by shift workers whose work hours can increase or decrease with little warning based on business needs. Research suggests uncertainty regarding work hours facilitates work-family conflicts as this can prevent individuals from having time to enact strategies that allow for the facilitation of both roles (Luhr et al., 2022); in example, someone who has hours added may have insufficient time to find an alternative childcare solution. Accordingly, legislators could pass laws that provide additional protections for precarious employees that will better enable them to manage their work and family demands. For example, Oregon and cities such as Philadelphia have passed laws that require schedules to be posted at least 2 weeks in advance (Morisset & Nagele-Piazza, 2022).

4.3. Limitations

Regarding limitations, we do not employ causal methods. This is most notable in the relationships wherein WIF is posited as a predictor of father involvement despite the variables being collected at the same time. While this order was based on theory, it is plausible father involvement predicts WIF instead. Because the variables were collected at one time, we also acknowledge concerns related to common method variance are present for the synchronous relationships (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Additionally, while we do test lagged measures of life satisfaction as outcomes of WIF and father involvement, the methodology is still survey based. Accordingly, while these relationships are present, we are unable to ascertain whether the predictors “caused” these differences to life satisfaction or whether there was an additional unmeasured variable that better explains the statistical relationships detected.

Second, the data comes from the Midlife in the United States archival dataset; thus, we were limited to the measures included in the dataset. Because of this, we had to use two one-item measures, potentially limiting the scope of our GEBC and father involvement constructs. Accordingly, results should be interpreted based on specific item wordings as the measures may not examine the complete nature of the constructs. Related to GEBC, this concern seems less relevant given the item explicitly asks about egalitarian views, “Men should share equally with their wives in taking care of young children.” Related to father involvement, the item is potentially narrow, “How much thought and effort do you put into your overall relationship with your children these days?” Thus, potential other avenues of father involvement may be missed, such as those related to succeeding in one's breadwinner role. However, the study design does account for this by including moderating relationships from father involvement to outcomes by GEBC, which is thought to account for differing father beliefs around whether the type of father involvement that the item covers is relevant to their self-constructed fatherhood expectation. Moreover, recent research demonstrates that single-item measures can be reliable and show minimal downward bias in criterion validity (Matthews et al., 2022).

Third, data from MIDUS Project is largely populated by white participants as reflected in our sample. Given cultural parenting norms differ by gender and across racial/ethnic groups (Hofferth, 2003), it is possible findings best describe relationships among white fathers. Additionally, the study was limited to those from the United States, and, thus, may not generalize to other countries. For example, social policies such as paid paternity leave that can impact engaged fatherhood vary greatly across countries (Grau Grau & Bowles, 2022). Moreover, cultures differ with regard to precarious manhood beliefs, which can also provide societal pressure as to the appropriate role of fathers (Bosson et al., 2021). To address this, future research should consider testing the nomological network between these variables using more diverse and representative samples.

4.4. Future research directions

First, this study tested lagged relationships between work and family experiences to life satisfaction. Our findings demonstrate the importance of more research that tests the role of time as a boundary condition for various theories. In this study, we test how work-family experiences relates to wellbeing over a period of up-to-twenty years. This provides important information on the lasting nature of the meta-analytically supported relationship that is largely consistent with cross-sectional data (Allen et al., 2020; Amstad et al., 2011). While cross-sectional research is important in understanding how variables are related over a short period of time, we cannot understand the full effects without understanding their long-term implications. Accordingly, research should consider further testing of established cross-sectional relationships over longer temporal periods to achieve a more complete picture of their effects across the lifespan.

Second, we posited father involvement as a mediator of the relationships from work interference with family to life satisfaction; the relationships were generally small. Thus, father involvement did not appear to be the critical mediating mechanism linking these variables to life satisfaction. Future research should consider fleshing out this process to best understand “why” these variables relate to strains by testing other mediators such as interpersonal (e.g., quality of interpersonal relationships) or emotion-related (e.g., guilt or regret) mechanisms in line with sensemaking perspectives. Moreover, additional boundary conditions that tap into one's values or identity could be considered, such as the importance of one's work and/or family identity. Similarly, objective measures of workplace success (e.g., promotions, salary) or child success (e.g., highest education received, job quality) could function as moderators representing whether one's commitment to work yielded positive outcomes. Given the wide range of potential mediators, the use of qualitative methods to ascertain how parents make sense of and rationalize their previous work-family decisions to determine the factors that cause them to assess their previous involvement in work and/or family as a net positive or negative would be of value.

Third, we should consider the role of fit between desired and actual father involvement and work demands in career decisions.

Under resource theory, individuals have finite resources to allocate to their various roles (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000). For those who desire to be involved fathers but have difficulty due to resources depleted by work demands, a greater desire to change jobs and/or careers to allow for greater involvement may emerge. Alternatively, individuals may stay with a given organization or career but self-select a career path (e.g., management track or not management track) based on their perceptions of how those roles may impact their ability to be involved fathers moving forward; this may be especially relevant for roles that require travel that inherently prevent fathers from in-person parenting during these periods. Regarding future career planning, the role of social comparisons to, and of role modeling by those in positions that individuals are considering pursuing, related to father involvement specifically may be particularly relevant and worthy of research. Notably, there is increased pressure for fathers to provide a greater share of dependent care and housework than in previous generations (Banister & Kerrane, 2024; Harrington, 2022), contextualizing this issue as increasingly important for the current generation of working men.

Fourth, within this study we use self-reported father involvement and GEBC as our hypothesized predictors of life satisfaction. However, the robustness of these findings could be further validated via the use of third-party evaluations, such as by one's romantic partner or child. Additionally, alternative measures of father involvement, such as time spent in various aspects of childcare (e.g., cooking meals, assisting with homework, etc.) could be tested in lieu of the self-reported involvement measure collected by MIDUS. Not only would the robustness of the finding that father involvement relates to life satisfaction be clarified through this, but the narrow types of involvement could provide information on the boundary conditions on which aspects are most impactful among working fathers.

Fifth, supplemental results suggested direct effects from WIF and father involvement at Time 1 to life satisfaction at Times 2 and 3 were not significant after controlling for WIF and father involvement at later timepoints. This suggests lagged relationships could have been due to a static component of WIF, which could have emerged through multiple pathways. For example, some individuals may continue to choose high job demand roles with implications for WIF over time (Smith et al., 2022). Alternatively, this could be due to a trait-level disposition to perceive WIF (Allen et al., 2023). Research should investigate lagged relationships to determine the underlying process through which relationships from WIF to outcomes emerge. Information would have rich implications for theories of temporal stressor-strain relationships, such as the allostatic load model, and would pave the way to interventions to address the root causes of related strains given the supports needed to address either pathway could be meaningfully different.

5. Conclusion

Working fathers face work demands that regularly compete with family demands. Our results indicate work demands that interfere with family involvement are negatively, and parental involvement for fathers is positively, related to life satisfaction synchronously as well as 10 and 20 years later. Moreover, the degree to which lesser father involvement related to life satisfaction twenty years later was moderated by gender egalitarian beliefs about childcare, such that the relationship was strengthened by greater perceptions that childcare was a father's responsibility. Overall, results suggest both work interference with family and father involvement have implications for life satisfaction across the life course for men, positioning involvement in the work and family role as critical to the short- and long-term wellbeing of working fathers.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Joseph Regina: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Tammy D. Allen:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing interests that could have appeared to influence the results reported in this paper.

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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.2025.104095>.

Data availability

We have made our data and analysis publicly available via OSF.IO

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