The Role of Romantic Relationships on Athletes’ Performance and Well-Being

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Guided by the work-family interface literature, this study examined the concept of spillover in a sample of elite athletes. It was conceptualized that there would be potential negativity and interference between athletes’ intense demands of competitive sport and efforts to maintain positive relationships with their partners. Antecedents and consequences of the potential spillover phenomenon were assessed in a sample of 87 elite-level athletes who had either romantic or marital, heterosexual relationships. Findings indicated that while trust, commitment, and communication were not strongly related to spillover, negative transactions were. Moreover, the occurrence of spillover was negatively related to sport satisfaction and positively to depressive symptoms. Finally, it was found that a mechanism by which perceived negative transactions were linked to athletes’ satisfaction and depression was through spillover.

Spillover can help explain how personal relationships and sport are likely to contribute to athletes’ performance accomplishment and overall well-being.

Sport performers are surrounded by a network of people such as parents, friends, coaches, and relationship partners. The quality of the relationships athletes develop in and out of sport are important because they may positively or negatively impact athletes’ performance success and overall well-being. One relationship that has received little research interest but has attracted media attention over the years is the athlete-partner relationship. There are a number of anecdotal examples demonstrating the influence partners can have on an athlete’s career (e.g., Radcliffe, 2004), and highlighting that complete dedication to sport can influence athletes’ personal relationships (e.g., Montgomerie & Mair, 2002). The significance of athletes’ personal relationships is now even being acknowledged by high profile national and international coaches (see e.g., The Independent: Football, 2006). Moreover, sport psychologists have maintained that athletes’ experiences in one context often unavoidably influence their behavior in other contexts (Coppel, 1995; Iso-Ahola, 1995; Whelan, Meyers, & Donovan, 1995). Surprisingly, however, there appears to be no single empirical study that examines the role of romantic or marital relationships established between athletes and their partners. Thus, the current study aimed to explore the manner in which athletes’
perceptions of their romantic or marital relationship impinges upon their satisfaction with sport and emotional well-being.

Berscheid (1999) and other relationship researchers (e.g., Reis & Rusbult, 2004) have ascertained that the quality of a two-person relationship depends on the stressors present in the relationship’s environment. One aspect of the environment to which the athlete-partner relationship is linked is the athlete’s sport. The sport environment often consumes the life of the high-level athlete, and such an environment is naturally comprised of numerous stressors that can positively or negatively affect the athlete’s physical and emotional well-being. For example, athletes, especially elite athletes who approach sport as a full-time engagement, are expected to regularly participate in training sessions and perform in competitions. Both training sessions and competitions demand physical and mental exertion over long, hard, and irregular hours. Athletes are expected to train most days of the week, often compete on weekends and holidays, and travel away from home for considerable amounts of time. Moreover, due to the uncertain and short-lived nature of their professional careers (e.g., injuries, burnout, short contracts, aging-out), athletes have to fully commit to their sport to demonstrate their talent, excel, and economically prosper. It is thus likely that athletes’ sport participation and personal relationships are closely linked, and their associated demands can potentially lead to stressors (e.g., conflict, disagreements, depression, anxiety), complicating the successful attainment of professional goals. The following discussion outlines research that has described and explained the link between work and personal relationships.

**Theoretical Foundations**

The work-family interface has been at the center of attention for social scientists in the areas of occupational and family psychology since 1977. Kanter (1977) was among the first to discuss the interdependence of work and family roles while at the same time Pleck (1977) introduced the notion of asymmetrically permeable boundaries between the life domains of work and family. Asymmetrically permeable boundaries between work and family refer to the unequal frequency of demanding intrusions from one domain into the other. The interface of family and work is considered to be a potential stressor (e.g., Pearlin, 1989). Subsequently, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) defined work-family conflict as interrole conflict where the demands of functioning in the two domains of work and family are incompatible.

The concept of work-family conflict is conceptualized bidirectionally so that work (i.e., work-to-family conflict) and family (i.e., family-to-work conflict) affect each other (see Frone, 2003). More recently, the conceptualization has been further extended to include a discussion of work-family facilitation in an attempt to provide a richer picture of the work-family interface. Work-family facilitation is defined as the extent to which participation in one life domain is made easier through participation in another (e.g., Butler, Grzywacz, Bass, & Linney, 2005; Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000; Grzywacz & Butler, 2005). Frone (2003) has explained that work-family balance is comprised multiple dimensions of bidirectional (i.e., work-to-family and family-to-work) conflict and facilitation.
Empirical research has supported the linkage between work and family (e.g., Aldous, 1982; Pittman & Orthner, 1988) and has documented predictors of work-family conflict including behavioral involvement (Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991), psychological involvement (Carlson & Kacmar, 2000), and work and family demands (e.g., Crouter, 1984; Frone, Yardley, & Markel, 1997). Outcomes of work-family conflict have also received considerable attention, including various facets of satisfaction and performance (e.g., Aryee, 1992; Rice, Frone, & McFarlin, 1992), emotional health concerns such as anxiety and depression, physical well-being, and heavy alcohol use (e.g., Barnett, 1994; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Schieman, McBrier, & Van Gundy, 2003).

The work-family conflict literature has been further expanded to highlight the role of interpersonal relationships. Theoretical research postulates that the health and well-being of individuals are influenced by experiences of work-relationship conflict (e.g., Hammer, Colton, Caubet, & Brockwood, 2002). Research suggests that higher levels of work stress, increased work pace, and high workloads are associated with negative marital interactions (e.g., Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & Crawford, 1989; Swanson & Power, 1999). Although there are an accumulated number of research studies that examine the influence of work on personal relationships, the impact of the quality of personal relationships on work has received less attention. Rogers and May (2003) explained that the quality of personal relationships is likely to shape individuals’ work experiences. Hence, partners who have established strong, warm relationships are more likely to be supportive and encouraging to each other’s work than partners who have established poor relationships. Support for this is found in Rogers and May’s (2003) study in which marital discord was related to declines in job satisfaction, while marital satisfaction was related to increases in job satisfaction. It has also been found that home-related stressors such as arguments and childcare responsibilities are linked to stress experienced at the workplace (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Long Dilworth, 2004).

Goals of the Present Study

The present study contributes to the understanding of work-family conflict by addressing its antecedents and outcomes. Because it has been purported, however, that the extant work-family literature contains synonymous and overlapping concepts creating confusion (see Higgins & Duxbury, 1992; Long Dillworth, 2004), this study used the term of “spillover” to refer to negative feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that might emerge in one domain and are carried over into another (cf. Googins, 1991). Furthermore, this study has adopted the perspective that spillover is comprised of negativity and interference occurring simultaneously in both the relationship domain (i.e., within athletes’ romantic and marital relationships) and the work domain (i.e., elite competitive sport). Unspecified directional conceptualizations and measures have previously been used in the literature (e.g., Pleck, Staines, & Lang, 1980). This approach allows for the recognition that the relationship domain and the work domain are not separate worlds; they are highly interdependent domains and sometimes individuals fail to cope as they struggle to perform in both domains (cf. Piotrkowski, 1978).
The conceptual model guiding this study is presented in Figure 1. The antecedents included a number of qualities or properties of personal relationships, including interpersonal trust, commitment, negative transactions, and communication quantity. The outcomes we examined formed components of well-being and reflected one’s state of being happy, successful, and emotionally healthy. Two components of athletes’ well-being were specifically examined: (a) state of being positive and satisfied with sport and performance and (b) indicators of negative emotional well-being (i.e., depression). Extending previous research by using a sample of elite-level athletes and the context of sport as the vocational backdrop, we explored the following three questions. First, are relationship qualities such as interpersonal trust, commitment, communication quantity, and negative transactions associated with spillover? Second, is spillover associated negatively with sport satisfaction and positively with depression? Third, does spillover mediate the association between personal relationships and sport satisfaction as well as depression?

**Method**

**Participants**

Data for this study were obtained from 87 athletes (48 were female and 39 were male) performing at high sport performance levels. Specifically, 87% performed at national and international levels and the remaining 13% were working toward achieving such status. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 56 years ($M = 26.71, SD = 7.29$). The participants performed in such sports as track and field, archery, diving, badminton, basketball, boxing, cycling, cricket, curling, equestrian, football, ice skating, martial arts, modern pentathlon, rugby, softball, swimming, tennis, triathlon, and water polo. Overall, 55% participated in individual sports and 39% participated in team sports. The career length in the specified sport ranged from 2 years to 30 years ($M = 10.34, SD = 6.06$). Of the participants, 64% reported completing the questionnaire “in-season” (i.e., competition phase) and the remaining 36% were “out-of-season” (i.e., preparation phase).

**Instrumentation**

**Relationship-Related Antecedent Variables.** This group of variables measured properties or qualities of relationships. A shorter version of the Trust Scale (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985) was used to measure levels of trust within the athlete’s personal relationship or the extent to which the athlete’s partner is deemed trustworthy. Seven items were employed, including, “Though times may change and the future is uncertain, I know that my partner will always be ready and willing to offer me strength and support” and “When I share my problems with my partner, I know s/he will respond in a loving way even before I say anything.” The internal consistency of the trust items with this sample was .78.

Rusbult, Martz, and Agnew’s (1998) 7-item Commitment Scale was used to assess athletes’ levels of commitment to the relationship partner. Examples of items included, “I feel very attached to our relationship – very strongly linked to
Figure 1 — Conceptual model of the antecedents and outcomes of spillover.
my partner” and “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner.” The internal consistency of the commitment scale with this sample was .88.

Negative transactions were measured by employing items from the Checklist of Interpersonal Transactions (CLOIT-R; Kiesler, 1996). The six items selected captured athletes’ perceptions of hostile and cold transactions as enacted by their partners. In other words, hostile and cold transactions were encapsulated in athletes’ perceptions of their partners’ attacks, aggressive and abusive acts, as well as discipline, condemnation, and inability to show acceptance. For example, “My partner is hesitant to express approval or acceptance of me” and “My partner grumbles, gripes, nags or complains about me or our situation.” The internal consistency of the items with this sample was .69. The items of all three scales used a seven-point response scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

The quantity of communication by which the athlete acknowledged his/her partner’s views and vice versa was the final relationship quality measure. It was measured using six items from the Marital Communication Inventory (Noller & Feeney, 2002) including, “Indicate the extent to which your partner acknowledges your views about likes, dislikes, and interests” and “Indicate the extent to which you acknowledge your partner’s views about health concerns and fitness.” The response scale ranged from 1 (very little) to 4 (completely). The internal consistency of these items with this sample was .80.

**Sport and Health-Related Outcome Variables.** This group of variables reflected the subjective well-being of the athletes and included their satisfaction with sport and symptoms of depression. Sport satisfaction was measured using the satisfaction with performance subscale (3 items) from the Athlete Satisfaction Questionnaire (Riemer & Chelladurai, 1998). Items included, “I am satisfied with the improvement in my performance over the previous season” and “I am satisfied with the improvement in my skill level thus far.” The response scale ranged from 1 (not at all satisfied) to 7 (extremely satisfied). The internal consistency of the three items was .80.

Depression was measured using Derogatis’ (1983) revised version of the Depression Subscale. The 13-item subscale measured symptoms of negative mood and affect, such as signs of withdrawal, lack of motivation, loss of energy, feelings of hopelessness, and thoughts of suicide. The prefix was “State how much discomfort the following have caused in the last 7 days, including today.” Examples of items were “Feeling low in energy or slowed down,” “Feeling blue,” and “Worrying too much about things.” The response scale ranged from 1 (none) to 5 (extreme) with a midpoint of 3 (moderate). The internal consistency score for this scale was .78.

**Negative Spillover.** Three items were created to measure spillover. The prefix of the three items stated, “In your opinion to what degree do . . . ?” and the three items included (a) “relationship concerns interfere with your sport performance;” (b) “sport commitment interferes with your relationship with your partner,” and (c) “you and your partner have arguments about your sport.” The response scale ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). The internal consistency of the scale was .70.
The summated score for each of the measures was averaged across items so that the scores correspond to the response scale used.

**Procedures**

Athletes were contacted directly or indirectly via e-mail, telephone, or letter to raise their awareness and interest in the study. This initial contact aimed to highlight the aims and implications of the study, criteria for participation (i.e., adult athletes who participate at high performance levels and who have a partner); it also raised issues pertaining to confidentiality and anonymity, as well as the voluntary nature of the study. Athletes who expressed an interest to participate were supplied a packet containing the questionnaires, a letter explaining the aims of the study, instructions to complete and return the questionnaires, as well as a stamped and addressed envelope. Ethical approval from the University’s Ethical Advisory Committee was obtained before data collection.

**Results**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the seven measures. The means indicate that participants generally trusted their partner, were committed to the relationship, acknowledged their partner’s views and felt that their partner acknowledged their views, and did not perceive their partner to be cold or hostile in their transactions. Moreover, the participants thought that their sport and relationship did not interfere greatly with one another, were generally satisfied with their athletic performance, and stated that symptoms of depression were only mildly experienced. The four antecedent variables of interpersonal trust, commitment, hostile interactions, and communication quantity were significantly related to one another. Hostile interactions were negatively related to inter-

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>M</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Interpersonal Trust</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>.78</td>
<td>.40***</td>
<td></td>
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<td>2. Interpersonal Commitment</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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<td>-.64***</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
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<td>3. Hostile Interactions</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>.47***</td>
<td>-.37***</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Communication Quantity</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.59***</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>-.58***</td>
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<td>5. Negative Spillover</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>-.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Sport Satisfaction</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>-.24*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>-.29**</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Depression</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-.16</td>
<td>.26*</td>
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*p < .05, **p < .01 ***p < .001 (two-tailed).
personal trust, commitment, and communication quantity. All four antecedent variables apart from commitment were significantly related to the postulated mediator variable of spillover, with hostile and cold interactions having the highest correlation and communication quantity the next highest correlation. Spillover was significantly related to both outcome variables of sport satisfaction and depression.

Structural equation modeling (SEM) with LISREL 8.72 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 2005) was used to test the path model depicted in Figure 1. SEM and multiple regressions yield identical estimates of direct effects (path coefficients). However, SEM with maximum likelihood estimation is used over multiple regression because it offers statistical indices of the overall fit of the model to the data. While there are no absolute standards in the literature about the sample size required for testing such path models as the one depicted in Figure 1, Kline (2005) recommended that the ratio of the number of cases to the number of model parameters be 10:1. The model tested here had 7 parameters and 87 cases exceeding the minimum sample size of 70.

Using maximum likelihood, various indices were employed to assess the model fit including the chi-square statistic ($\chi^2$), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Nonnormed Fit Index (NNFI), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). A good model fit is reached when the CFI and the NNFI are close to 0.95, the RMSEA is close to 0.06, and chi-square is nonsignificant (see Hu & Bentler, 1999). The model provided a satisfactory fit to the data, $\chi^2 (8) = 7.18, p = .52$, RMSEA = .00, NNFI = .96, CFI = 1.00. Figure 2 presents the standardized path coefficients for this model. The path coefficients of spillover with hostile interactions, commitment, sport satisfaction, and depression are significant at the .05 level. Negative spillover is directly associated with hostile interactions and depression and inversely associated with commitment and sport satisfaction.

Discussion

Results reinforce the documented association between spillover and outcome variables such as satisfaction and depression (e.g., Aryee, 1992; Barnett, 1994; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Perry, 1982; Rice et al., 1992; Schieman et al., 2003). In addition, this study extends previous work by highlighting what specific relationship properties or qualities are likely to affect spillover (e.g., Rogers & May 2003). The first question we set out to examine was whether relationship qualities such as interpersonal trust, commitment, communication quantity, and negative transactions would be associated with negative spillover. The findings were mixed. Spillover demonstrated a weak and nonsignificant association with relationships marked by trust and communication. Thus, it cannot be stated that frequently acknowledging each other views, thoughts, and opinions via verbal and/or non-verbal channels could contribute to decreased negativity and interference between the two domains of athletes’ sport and personal relationships. While the reason for this result cannot be determined by this study, it is possible that the association between trust and spillover could have been stronger if trust was less common in the relationship. Lack of trust is thought to destabilize relationships (Rempel et al., 1985) and hence its relative absence may have contributed more convincingly to spillover. More research is warranted to clarify these associations.
Figure 2 — Summary of standardized path coefficients. (Solid lines represent significant paths, $p < .05$, and broken lines represent nonsignificant paths.)
Somewhat unexpectedly, according to the findings of our structural equation modeling, commitment was positively associated with negative spillover, though the association was small. This finding may highlight the active role relationship members play to make the relationship more lasting, effective, and satisfying. Maintaining a relationship requires relationship members to invest resources such as time, energy, and effort; relationship members are further expected to accommodate and make sacrifices for one another. Hence, this act of maintaining high levels of commitment or dependence with one’s partner may hypothetically collide with other life domains. This finding may highlight the difficulties associated with balancing important life domains such as sport and relationship issues. Athletes may be especially vulnerable in achieving a balance between their personal relationships and intensive sporting careers.

Some athletes, particularly those who compete at elite levels, are viewed as self-focused with an all-consuming attitude of “eat-drink-sleep-sport” (see Coppel, 1995). The intense and competitive nature of sport requires athletes to generate athletic identities based on their athletic involvement and dedication (cf. Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). On one hand, strong athletic identities help athletes increase their sport commitment and cope with the demands of competitive sport. On the other, athletes with an exclusive athletic identity (i.e., cannot separate their role as an athlete from other roles) may be at an increased risk for depression, low physical and emotional health, and feelings of isolation (Brewer et al., 1993). Thus, we speculate that athletes with exclusive athletic identities who enter into personal relationships are possibly more likely to experience struggles in reconciling their personal and sport lives. In the light of Brewer et al.’s (1993) suggestion, it would be interesting to examine whether the effects of these results would be stronger with a sample of athletes who have exclusive sport identities as opposed to athletes who have less exclusive sport identities.

Another finding is that perceived negative transactions as enacted by the athletes’ partners were associated with spillover. Specifically, the less the athlete perceived his/her partner to be uncooperative, noncompliant, provocative, and unfeeling (i.e., less supportive) the less the athlete was likely to experience spillover. This finding highlights that the athletes in this study perceived that their partners’ transactions did not contain a great deal of negative behaviors. One way to understand this could be through the reciprocity principle, which suggests that individuals perceive their partner’s relationship transactions based upon their own feelings and behaviors toward their partner (see Kelley & Stahelski, 1970; Kenny, 1994; Kiesler, 1996). A dominant theoretical explanation for the phenomenon of reciprocity has been interdependence theory. According to the theory, it is possible that the low level of hostile transactions experienced is the result of the benefits people incur in their personal relationships. From the athletes’ point of view, they may be feeling that their relationships have a positive impact on their sport participation. From the partners’ point of view, they may be feeling that the relationship meets their needs and expectations. Interdependence theory would suggest that such benefits have the potential to lead to harmonious and lasting personal relationships.

The second hypothesis we sought to examine was whether spillover would be negatively associated with athletes’ sport satisfaction and positively associated with athletes’ depression. Results of the structural equation modeling supported
this pattern of association and highlight that spillover has negative consequences for athletes’ sport and emotional well-being. Finally, it was demonstrated that spillover can act as a mediator between relationship quality properties (i.e., commitment, negative transactions) and such outcomes as satisfaction and depression. Overall, this finding suggests that while higher levels of commitment can result in high levels of spillover, fewer negative transactions can result in lower levels of spillover, and in turn spillover can result in personal costs such as increased depressive symptoms and a decrease in sport satisfaction.

The findings of this study provide insight into the concept of spillover employing a sample of elite level athletes. With caution, these findings can be helpful to educational and public service providers including sport psychology consultants in terms of the role of spillover in the athlete-partner relationship, as well as its likely antecedents and consequences. It could potentially prove beneficial if educators’ and practitioners’ efforts are directed toward identifying and reducing hostility and antagonism in the athlete-partner relationship, while helping establish an effective balance between personal relationships and the demands of a career in competitive sport.

**Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Some of the limitations of this study should be noted. First, the study is cross-sectional and correlational in nature. Longitudinal data would permit a more precise investigation of the direction of the effects. It may also be that a reciprocal effect of the athlete-partner relationship on spillover exists; thus the temporal order among these sets of variables is theoretically and practically important and could be addressed using longitudinal data. Second, effects of the athlete-partner relationship on spillover was assessed by asking only the athletes to report their interpersonal feelings, thoughts, and behaviors as well as their perceptions of the occurrence of spillover. We do not know whether reports from the athletes’ partners would reveal similar data. Third, the sample size was relatively small and hence there was relatively low power to achieve statistically significant results. Although some statistically significant associations were found, future research should be mindful when trying to replicate the findings of this study. Finally, this study employed a sample of elite athletes, thus limiting its generalizability to other samples of athletes who although not elite, may also devote considerable time and energy to their sport activities.

More research is warranted to understand the role, magnitude, and occurrence of spillover in the athlete and/or their partner’s life. Future research could consider athletes’ levels of identification with sport (e.g., athletic identity) when investigating the bidirectional nature of spillover (e.g., Eagle et al., 1997; Frone, 2003; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Frone et al., 1997). Research separating spillover into two components, namely, sport-to-family/relationships and family/relationships-to-sport is likely to provide insight into the specific domain(s) that interferes the most (sport versus family or relationships) and the specific consequences for the individual and the dyad. Lastly, it would be helpful to explore the manner in which sport and family or relationships facilitate one another (cf. Butler et al., 2005; Grzywacz & Butler, 2005).
Another future direction is the exploration of athletes’ subjective experiences of the sport-family/relationships interface employing qualitative research designs such as interviews, diaries, and focus groups. Longitudinal research designs could explore the temporal links between personal relationships and sport participation as the athlete enters and exits periods of athletic preparation (a less stressful period) and athletic competition (a more stressful period). The developmental trajectory of relationships as members undergo personal and interpersonal life changes such as career termination or athletic injury, the birth of a child, and relocation is an alternative research direction. Dyadic research would be important in uncovering issues related to crossover effects. For example, crossover effects occur when a relationship member’s (e.g., athlete) personal experiences of stress influence the other member (e.g., partner). Thus, athletes’ perceptions of spillover may not only affect their own levels of emotional well-being but also their partners’ levels. Research on crossover effects within the work-family/relationships interface is an emerging trend worthy of additional investigation (see Hammer, Bauer, & Grandey, 2003).

Conclusion

Results from this study contribute to the work-family interface literature by highlighting the occurrence of the phenomenon of spillover in elite athletes’ personal relationships and sport life domains, its antecedents, and consequences. The findings underscore the need for more research in this area. Research that incorporates more comprehensive and multifaceted conceptual frameworks, as well as sophisticated analytical techniques, will promote a more thorough understanding of spillover and how it operates within the relationship and sport domain.

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Endnote

1. The word “partner” refers to spouse (wife or husband), fiancé, girlfriend, or boyfriend.

References


