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“A lot of sacrifices:” Work-family spillover and the food choice coping strategies of low wage employed parents

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Abstract

Integrating their work and family lives is an everyday challenge for employed parents. Competing demands for parents' time and energy may contribute to fewer meals prepared or eaten at home and poorer nutritional quality of meals. Thus, work-family spillover (feelings, attitudes, and behaviors carried over from one role to another) is a phenomenon with implications for nutrition and health. The aim of this theory-guided constructivist research was to understand how low-wage employed parents' experiences of work-family spillover affected their food choice coping strategies. Participants were 69 black, white and Latino mothers and fathers in a Northeastern U.S. city. We explored participants' understandings of family and work roles, spillover, and food choice strategies using open-ended qualitative interviews. Data analysis was based on the constant comparative method. These parents described affective, evaluative, and behavioral instances of work-family spillover and role overload as normative parts of everyday life and dominant influences on their food choices. They used food choice coping strategies to: 1) manage feelings of stress and fatigue, 2) reduce the time and effort for meals, 3) redefine meanings and reduce expectations for food and eating, and 4) set priorities and trade off food and eating against other family needs. Only a few parents used adaptive strategies that changed work or family conditions to reduce the experience of conflict. Most coping strategies were aimed at managing feelings and redefining meanings, and were inadequate for reducing the everyday hardships from spillover and role overload. Some coping strategies exacerbated feelings of stress. These findings have implications for family nutrition, food expenditures, nutritional self-efficacy, social connections, food assistance policy, and work place strategies.

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work-family; food choice; low wage; parents; United States

Background

Employed parents face daily challenges to their food choices resulting from the need to integrate demanding work and family lives. Increasing family work hours, work/family conflict, and work schedule inflexibility give rise to fewer family meals prepared or eaten at home, typically of poorer nutritional quality. These circumstances make food choices among employed parents in many western cultures an issue with importance for health promotion and disease prevention, especially among low-income families. Our aim in this study was to understand how the integration of work and family roles was related to the food choice coping strategies of low-wage employed parents.

Most U.S. parents are employed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005), and weekly work hours have increased among dual-earner couples (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, 2002), single mothers, the poor, and members of racial/ethnic minorities (Jacobs & Gerson, 2001; Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 2001; Presser, 1999). The increase in work hours among low income families has been accompanied by increases in low-paying service-sector jobs, nonstandard work hours, and with the need to work overtime or more than one job (Wharton, 2006). Similar trends have been reported in several western countries (Statistics Canada, 2002; Brannen, 1998; Drew & Emerek, 1998; Eurofound, 2005)

It is not surprising that most U.S. working parents report work-family conflict, characterized by their struggle to integrate the conflicting demands of work and family roles (Thomas & Thomas, 1990; Voydanoff, 2002), or that the proportion of working parents who report “a lot” of work-family conflict is increasing (Winslow, 2005). A quarter of European working parents report that working hours do not fit very well or at all with family and social commitments (Eurofound, 2005). Experiences of conflict may differ by gender and ethnicity (Roehling, Jarvis, & Swope, 2005; Winslow, 2005). Reported consequences of work-family conflict include job dissatisfaction, higher job turnover, decreased life satisfaction, work-related stress, lower productivity, and burnout (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Frone, 2003; Frone, Russell, & Barnes, 1996).

Poor physical and mental health has also been associated with high levels of the strain resulting from work-family conflict (Frone, 1996; Frone 2003), especially among workers with less control at work (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). As more mothers have become employed and family work hours have increased, time spent on household work, including meal preparation has decreased (Bianchi, 2000). Between 1965 and 1995, the overall daily time spent on meal preparation decreased by 39% in the U.S. (Sayer, 2001; Shelton, 1992). Concurrently there has been an increase in meals eaten and prepared outside the home that are typically disproportionately high in calories, fat, salt and sugar, and disproportionately low in fruits and vegetables and other nutrient dense foods (Blisard, Lin, Cromartie, & Ballenger, 2002; Guthrie, Lin, & Frazao, 2002). Overall, the diets of working-class adults show room for improvement, including too few servings of fruits and vegetables and too many servings of red meat (Sorensen, Barbeau, Stoddard, Hunt, Kaphingst, & Wallace, 2005; Emmons, Stoddard, Fletcher, Gutheil, Suarez, & Lobb, et al., 2005). Because parents play such a critical role in determining the diets of their children, as meal providers and role models, pressures on parents' food choices have great importance for the nutrition and health status of their children (Patrick & Nicklas, 2005).

From an ecological perspective, stressors inside and outside the family are proposed to affect individual and family behavior through daily or weekly, real or perceived, scarcity of time and energy (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002; Moen, Harris-Abbott, Lee, & P. Roehling, 1999; Perry-Jenkins & Gillman, 2000; Repetti & Wood, 1997; Voydanoff, 2002). Spillover between work and family, defined as positive and negative feelings, attitudes, and behaviors that are carried over from one role into another, (Googins, 1991, p.9) can contribute to positive or negative coping behaviors as a way to integrate role demands and benefits (Moen, 2003). Dietary outcomes associated with negative spillover from work to family include increased alcohol use (Grunberg, Moore, & Greenberg, 1998), fewer meals eaten (Dumas, Margolin, & John, 2003) and dissatisfaction with food choices (Devine, Connors, Sobal, & Bisogni, 2003). If work demands too much of parents' time or energy, they may feel that they have no personal resources left to deal with family meals and healthful food choices. Low-wage jobs and limited financial resources may increase the demands on low- and moderate-income workers or restrict their ability to meet those demands.

Among employed parents, work and family provide the primary social environments for food choices. Job conditions and processes such as low status jobs (Marmot, Smith, Stansfield, Patel, North, Head et al., 1991), poor occupational conditions (Sacker, Bartley, Firth, & Fitzpatrick, 2001), high workloads (McCann, Warnick, & Knopp, 1990), high work demands (Hellerstedt & Jeffery, 1997), and low work control (Ng & Jeffery, 2003; Wickrama, Conger, & Lorenz, 1995) have been associated with less healthful employee diets compared to high status jobs and low job demands (Cohen, Stoddard, Saroukhhanians, & Sorensen, 1998). Shift work and multiple jobs may limit workers' ability to participate in family meals. Job-related skills or work place resources such as access to healthful food or time for family tasks at work may enhance parents' abilities to meet family role demands.

Family conditions such as the presence of a spouse and the age and presence of children may affect time and financial demands on working adults. Family roles may also increase opportunities for eating family meals at home and provide instrumental and social support for food acquisition and meal preparation, though this differs by gender (DeVault, 1991; Schafer & Schafer, 1989). Eating family meals together has been associated with better child nutrition (Gillman, Rifas-Shiman, Frazier, Rockett, Camargo, Field et al., 2000; Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll, & Perry, 2003).

Individual characteristics have also been associated with dietary behavior. Women, older adults, and adults with more formal education and income generally report better diets (Berrigan, Dodd, Troiano et al., 2003; Li, Serdula, Bland, Mokdad, Bowman, & Nelson, 2000). Dietary behavior also varies by ethnicity (Arab, Carriquiry, Steck-Scott, & Gaudet, 2003) and gender (Coltrane, 2000; DeVault, 1991; Schafer, Schafer, Dunbar, & Keith, 1999). Greater income and education make available a broader range of family and work adaptive strategies that can have an impact on food choices, because of access to more information, skills, or household help (Moen & Wethington, 1992).

Aspects of work, family, and the individual have been independently associated with food choice behaviors and dietary intake. But people live multidimensional lives, and their food choices occur in environments in which work, family, and individual concerns must be integrated. Working parents' attempts to develop strategies to cope with conflicting family and work roles represent everyday challenges to the food choices of ordinary people. Until now, these challenges have been widely recognized but not examined systematically.

Coping has been defined as "the things people do to avoid being harmed by life strains." (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978, p.2). Coping strategies may include things people do to change the conditions that cause strain, to try to control the meaning of the strain, or to control

the emotional consequences of strain. (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978). We defined food choice coping strategies, for the purposes of this study, as the ways that people actively conceptualized and managed food selection in response to the emotional, temporal, or physical strain of conflicting work and family roles.

Food choice strategies are habitual guides that people develop for selecting food and drink for consumption (Sobal, Bisogni, Devine, & Jastran, forthcoming). The current study was designed to build on a prior investigation of influences on fruit and vegetable consumption (Devine, Connors, Sobal et al., 2003). In that study, participants identified work as a source of personal and social resources and demands, and an environment for food choices. Those findings suggested that additional conceptual development was needed to understand how low- and moderate-wage employed parents experienced the social processes and conditions from family and work roles and how integration of these roles affected their food choice coping strategies. The current study was designed to fill this gap in the literature.

Study design

A preliminary theoretical model, based on prior work with the same audience and social theories, guided recruitment and study design. The preliminary model emphasized the dynamic interaction of individual characteristics with social processes and conditions from work and from family on individual and family food choices. This model used an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000) and it was conceived and designed in the contemporary sociological framework of studying daily life as a form of dynamic adaptive strategy that reflects not only the current demand, but also the history of the interaction or relationship (Bourdieu, 1979; Finch, 1989; Giddens, 1991; Moen & Wethington, 1992). We define work-family integration here as reciprocal adjustment to role demands and benefits at the work-family interface. Work refers here to paid employment outside the home, although we recognize that parents who are not employed also work. Work and family roles influence physical health and health behaviors by limiting or enhancing access to economic, social and health resources; exposure to health risks; health attitudes; and health promotion opportunities (Verbrugge, 1982). A constructivist approach was used because we were interested in knowing how people experienced and explained their food choices in relation to their work and family roles.

Methods

Participant recruitment

We recruited low-wage employed parents through community agencies, newspaper advertisements, posters in neighborhood stores and at worksites, and using snowball techniques. We recruited mothers and fathers between 25 and 51 years of age, working 20 or more hours a week in one of four low-wage occupational groups (service, clerical, sales, or production occupation) and having at least one child 16 years of age or younger living at home three or more days a week. All participants lived in a multi-ethnic metropolitan area in Upstate New York with a population of about one million people. We recruited roughly equal numbers of working fathers and mothers who were black, white, and Latino, the three main racial/ethnic groups in the area. We sought out diversity in job type, and household type. Data analysis was on-going, and the results of preliminary analysis guided subsequent recruitment. Snowball techniques were used to find participants with particular ethnic backgrounds, work (e.g. late shift) or family conditions (e.g. single father) as we pursued emergent findings. We continued recruiting and analysis until no new themes emerged from interviews, and theoretical saturation was reached (Sobal, 2001).

Data collection

Two women interviewers conducted the approximately one-hour, in-depth interviews in English, at participant's homes or community settings between June, 2004 and May, 2005. The participants of Hispanic origin were all comfortable with interviews conducted in English. All interviews were audiotape recorded, transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were reviewed by interviewers for accuracy. Each participant provided written informed consent and received monetary compensation for participation. Interviews were pre-tested with three participants, with similar characteristics to those who participated in the study. The semi-structured interview guide was based on the preliminary conceptual framework and the published literature. Interviews focused on how working parents managed food and eating. They included questions about eating and food preparation routines and strategies on work and non-work days; work conditions and processes related to food and eating (e.g. kinds of food and drink available at work); family conditions and processes related to food and eating (e.g. role in getting food on the table at home); food choice coping strategies (e.g. food and eating when things get busy at home or at work); and personal and family health and nutrition concerns and satisfactions. Open-ended questions were used to elicit study participants' experiences with food and eating in their own words, and to provide them with an opportunity to talk about what was important to them. Probing was used to follow up on themes raised by participants. Member checks were used during interviews and in follow-up telephone calls to a few participants to check on interpretations of responses or seek additional information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviewers recorded field notes after each interview that included methodological, analytic, environmental, and interview quality observations.

Data analysis

We conducted continuous data analysis using procedures based on the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specific steps in the analysis included 1) review of interview transcripts, field notes, and demographic information by the entire research team, 2) peer debriefing of each interview at weekly research meetings which included the interviewers; 3) development of an initial coding scheme using open coding for emergent themes, 4) thematic coding of interviews using qualitative data analysis software, 5) iterative revision of the coding scheme as additional interviews were coded; 6) comparison of 2–3 interviews by coders to ensure similar interpretation of codes used; 7) development of a conceptual model to represent the experience of work-family spillover by study participants; 8) interpretation of findings in the context of existing theory and empirical research.

Findings

Thirty-five employed mothers and 34 employed fathers from 25 to 51 years of age participated in this study (Table 1). Participants self-identified as belonging to one or more of the three main racial/ethnic groups in the research community: black, white, and Latino. While most participants had a spouse or partner living with them, 15% of fathers and 46% of mothers were single parents. While all participants had one or more children 16 years of age or younger living with them, some shared child custody with ex-partners. At least two-thirds reported household incomes below the county median (2000). Study participants worked 20 or more hours a week in service, clerical, retail sales, and production jobs, the four lowest wage occupational groups in the research area. Participants' jobs reflected gendered occupational patterns in the research community (2001). For example, we recruited fewer women than men in production and more women in clerical positions. Seven participants held more than one job, and participants worked a variety of weekly and daily schedules, with about a third having variable work schedules.

A spillover framework for the integration of work and family on food choices

The low-wage working parents who participated in this study presented daily work and family lives filled with competing demands on their time, energy and sense of well being. Participants presented influences on their food choice strategies within each of these role settings and as a result of overload from the two roles combined. Study participants described primarily negative, but sometimes positive, spillover from work to family and family to work and role overload from the two combined as a process with three components: 1) affect or feelings, 2) interpretation and evaluation of feelings, and 3) behavior, in the form of food choice coping strategies. This spillover process was presented as reciprocal among the three components; food choice coping behaviors were interpreted as both the result and source of threats to family roles and contributors to feelings of guilt or satisfaction arising from work-family spillover and role overload.

Work conditions and processes affecting food choices

Study participants presented work conditions as stressors on both food choices at work and outside of work. Job conditions that were portrayed as sources of stress and negative spillover from work to home included: job schedule (overtime, hours, shifts, varied schedules); travel on the job; lack of job security; low pay; lack of job flexibility; and distance of the job from home. The characteristics of the food available at the workplace also contributed to job dissatisfaction; this included: high availability of baked products and sweets, food used as a reward by supervisors, high food costs, low food quality, and concerns about the safety of the food available at work. Participants also described social processes at work as contributing to their experiences of job stress. These included: a stressful work climate, job strain including high physical and mental demands of work; and low job satisfaction.

Examples of negative spillover dominated the interviews. The few positive examples of spillover from work to family included the inverse or absence of negative spillover factors, specifically: free or low cost food at work, job flexibility that allowed time during the workday for family or personal tasks or for personal down-time; a positive work climate, and a feeling of job satisfaction.

Family conditions and processes affecting food choices

The participants described some family conditions as sources of stress and negative spillover from home to work. These included: being a single parent; having young children; lacking help with food at home from a partner or other family member; a partner or a child with health problems; caretaking responsibilities for other family members; inadequate household income; long distances from work and child care; and limited transportation. Other conditions portrayed as challenges to food choices at home included: a partner's work schedule that interfered with help at home or presence at mealtimes, family or child activities that competed for mealtime (e.g. sports), marital and family strain, low marital or parental satisfaction, and lack of family support for healthful food choices.

Participants less frequently brought up positive spillover from family to work. Family conditions that contributed to positive spillover from family to work included the inverse or absence of many of the negative conditions, specifically, regular help from partners, extended family and friends with food and eating; foods or meals brought from home to work; flexibility in the family schedule that allowed more time to get ready for work or time for oneself; living close enough to work to come home for meals or to start meal preparations; and having enough household income to allow for a broader range of food purchases at work.

Individual characteristics and food choices

These working parents also identified personal physical or mental health status, food and nutrition ideals, food-related skills and pride and satisfaction with cooking and food preparation, and life course food experiences as shaping the way they managed food and eating in the context of work and family responsibilities.

Characterizations of work-family spillover

The participants described work-family spillover as a process with affective, interpretive, and behavioral components, interacting in a reciprocal manner, which parents experienced primarily as negative, and more rarely as positive, influences on food choices. Spillover was most apparent at transition times, either before work when parents were trying to get everyone fed and “processed” for work or school, or after work when they were trying to fit in all of the family evening activities and get the children to bed. During those transition times a meal was often portrayed as just one more thing to get done.

In addition to directional spillover effects from work to family or family to work, many of these working parents described feeling pressures on food choices from the overload of their combined work and family roles.

In the affective domain, these parents described negative feelings of being “used up,” “too tired to eat,” “chaotic,” “always tired,” “exhausted,” “too rushed and too hurried to eat,” “stressed out,” and “guilty.” A few described positive feelings of pride in food management skills, being personally energized by work, or feeling relaxed about time. “Crazy days” when demands outstripped available resources were the rule rather than the exception for most of these employed parents. A married father in the study described his feelings on these days:

We’re all so frustrated and tired that nobody wants to make anything. Nobody wants to go anywhere to get anything. We’ve basically skipped a meal. It’ll be like okay, whatever you want, eat it.

A single mother described her feelings about work family pressures:

Every day’s pressure, it just wears and tears on you, and a lot of times you do take it home...cause you’re so tired, you can’t do as much with your kids as you should... with me being a single mom, my kids are relying on me, and I’m relying on my job.

In the interpretive domain, participants interpreted and evaluated these feelings from work or family. Mothers and fathers who presented negative interpretations of work or family demands explained that they did not have the time or energy to be good parents and feed their families ‘right,’ to enjoy food and/or cooking with their families, to make healthful personal food choices or to make time for personal recreation or relaxation.

One mother said: “you feel kinda sad because your kids just ate fast food and leftovers.” Another mother regretted the loss of meal time together: “I think the other compromise is not being able to slow down and eat together.” A third mother compromised on her own diet: “I’ll make them [children] eat and then I eat junk.”

Mothers and fathers presented somewhat different interpretations of spillover. The working mothers in this study interpreted compromises in food choices as conflicting with their personal expectations about maternal roles such as preparing healthy family meals that children liked, eating meals with their children, and knowing what their children were eating. For some mothers, making sure their children went to bed with “something on their bellies” was the best they could do most days.

But they're eating. You know and they're eating something that's not necessarily bad but it's not as good as what I could be making either. So that does kind of bother me.

The fathers in this study were less likely to raise the issue of parental satisfaction when talking about work and family spillover and eating. Many of these fathers, particularly those who worked early morning hours, late shifts, or lots of overtime, missed being able to eat meals with their families. But fathers generally focused on missing the family time, not on the food or the opportunity to prepare food for the family. One single father of two who worked two jobs and was at home for dinner only twice a week was hard pressed to describe what his children ate, but he did not portray this as a concern.

Participants who drew positive interpretations of work and family demands sometimes described time pressures as manageable because of their personal skills in planning meals, managing their time to shop for groceries on work breaks, or bringing leftovers from home to eat at work. However, this planning sometimes took a considerable time commitment. One mother often spent her day off partially cooking and packaging meat so that her daughter or husband could prepare dinner quickly on weeknights.

Behavior: food choice coping strategies

In the behavioral domain, participants described four main categories of food choice coping strategies to manage the integration of work and family roles, and one category of adaptive strategies to change work and family conditions. The five categories of coping strategies are shown in Table 2. Exemplar quotations are provided in the table to illustrate each strategy, but each strategy presented was described by multiple participants. The four main categories of food choice coping strategies included: 1) managing the feelings of stress and fatigue from spillover (treating, parallel eating and compensating), 2) reducing the time and effort used for food and meals (skipping meals, simplifying and speeding up, multitasking, planning ahead, and getting help with food), 3) redefining and reducing expectations (redefining eating together, serial eating), and 4) setting priorities and trading off (prioritize food and eating, trade off). Most of these coping strategies were aimed at managing the feelings of stress arising from spillover and overload and reducing expectations – not with addressing the sources of spillover and overload.

Only a few participants related long-term adaptive strategies they used to try to ease conflict between work and family roles. On the work side, some participants told of leaving or planning to leave a demanding job for a less demanding one or changing a job shift to allow more coordination with a partner. Other adaptive strategies reported by parents included restricting weekly time for activities outside the home such as sports, or taking advantage of work flexibility to bring their children to work. A few single parents had romantic partners who helped with meal preparation or cared for their children.

A single food choice practice sometimes met a variety of needs. For example, fast food was variously described by parents as a strategy to cope with work fatigue or strain, to speed up a meal, to treat the family, or to have relaxed family time together. Takeout or fast food meals were described both as ways to speed up meals as well as sources of stress. For some of these parents, especially mothers, quick meals were sources of stress because they were not consistent with their food and eating ideals and threatened health and nutritional status for themselves and their children. These threats fed back into the interpretive and affective domains as feelings of “guilt on the mom” or dissatisfaction about having no time to eat “like I should.” One mother said that she had “sacrificed that as far as me eating [healthy]. I’ll just grab something.”

Many of these low-wage workers also described money pressures and short-term and insecure jobs that restricted food choices. At least half of the participants had worked less than a year at their current jobs, some for less than a month. Some parents described holding on to less desirable jobs that paid little and restricted family time in the hope that these jobs would lead to something better. This was a particular burden for single parents, especially for single mothers. Troubled family relationships also placed a limit on the amount of help available at home to some parents. Many participants described detailed strategies for saving money on food purchasing and provisioning at home and at work (e.g., shopping at discount stores, skipping meals, limiting eating out or takeout food).

Discussion

Work-family spillover and role overload were experienced as everyday hardships that necessitated daily food choice coping strategies by the low-wage working parents who participated in this study. While some experiences of spillover were positive, negative spillover from work to family was presented by participants as a dominant influence on their food choice strategies. This study expands prior work in this area by explicitly identifying the sources of negative and positive spillover at work and at home, as well as the coping strategies people used to accommodate the effects of spillover and overload on their food choices.

The working parents who participated in this study were coping with both the feelings and the problems created by conflicting work and family demands. For many, the food choice coping strategies they described were not ultimately effective in reducing spillover. In some cases, the coping strategies themselves elicited guilt and dissatisfaction with parental and spousal roles as well as with personal nutrition choices.

Only a few of these parents described adaptive strategies to change the situations in which they found themselves and reduce spillover by switching to less demanding jobs. Expressions of insecurity with current jobs and hopes for better work conditions in the future were more typical. These findings suggest that parents did not feel that they had the power to change the situations in which they found themselves, another possible contributor to these feelings of dissatisfaction and guilt. Mastering and controlling situations is given high value in American culture and Western culture in general (Giddens, 1991). Although they were trying to live up to highly valued social ideals for feeding their families and themselves well, these parents faced daily demands on their time and energy that did not allow for fulfillment of those ideals. Nor did the coping strategies available to them likely produce a sense of overall mastery and control over crucial aspects of life, positive emotions that would help them support and sustain more effective coping efforts (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). Work-family contexts that constrain personal control and limit time and energy resources may leave working parents without opportunities to experience self-efficacy in feeding themselves and their families in ways that they perceive as healthful (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983). Dietary self-efficacy is recognized as a good predictor of food choice behavior (e.g. AbuSabha & Achterberg, 1997). These findings direct attention to the importance of social and structural environments on working parents' self-efficacy related to food choices.

The finding that most strategies described by these working parents were aimed at coping with the feelings of stress, not with addressing the sources of spillover and overload stands in contrast to use of long-term adaptive strategies to ease spillover by dual career couples with higher incomes and education (Moen, 2003). The low-wage adults in the current study did not present many opportunities to reduce the sources of work-family spillover in their lives. The job insecurity that was characteristic of their work lives made them reluctant to consider job changes because they needed the income, low as it was. The job stressors described by many of these parents, such as varied hours, overtime, multiple jobs, and shift work made it harder

for them to use strategies aimed at reducing spillover or overload by planning ahead or taking time off to address family needs.

Two types of coping strategies described by these parents may have negative implications for nutrition and health: quick meals and treating with food. These working parents characterized the “quick” meals (e.g. hot dogs, pizza, boxed macaroni and cheese, canned ravioli) that they used as a core strategy for coping with work-family spillover as being less healthy than they would like. In an environment where work-family spillover and overload is commonplace, treating the family with food to cope with everyday stress, may increase the food consumption of less healthful foods. It is of concern that these strategies appeared to be pervasive in this sample. If working parents are regularly relying on quick fall-back meals and treats as regular coping strategies then their nutritional limitations have implications for both child and parental nutrition and health. The prevalence of these strategies and their relationship to dietary intake needs to be confirmed.

Part of the cost of work-family spillover for low-wage working families may also be a devaluing of family eating. Several of the food choice coping strategies described by these parents reduced expectations for family and personal meals. Some working parents in this study reduced dinner to just another household chore. This transformed eating into meeting physiological needs, without necessarily satisfying nutritional needs, family social needs, personal enjoyment, or providing role satisfaction. Often these reduced expectations resulted from the need to balance the time and energy spent on food and eating against other important family, work, or personal activities such as children’s homework, family social activities, or leisure. In this balancing act, a few of the working parents in this study prioritized food and eating, but many other parents prioritized other valued activities or responsibilities. These latter parents described reducing their expectations for food preparation, eating time, and meal quality, thus devaluing food and eating. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) noted the devaluation of some family functions as a logical outcome of coping strategies that required prioritizing some family responsibilities over others to deal with work-family conflict. Value negotiation has been previously identified as a basic process in the construction of food choices (Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Devine, 2001). The current findings suggest that, in circumstances where food and eating are consistently short-changed, value negotiations around work-family spillover, expectations for food and eating and nutritional efficacy need to be examined.

A sub-group of these working parents defined family meals as meals eaten in restaurants, frequently fast food or pizza restaurants. These regular eat-out or takeout meals were anticipated and valued as one of the few calm, quiet, and rewarding times of the week, when everyone in the family was present and satisfied with the food, and tired mothers could relax and eat with everyone else. These events met a real need for these hard working parents, but have important nutrition and health implications because of the lower nutritional quality of meals typically eaten away from home. Links between family meals and the nutritional quality of children’s diets (Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, Story, Croll & Perry, 2003) suggest that work-family spillover may have importance as a contributor to child nutrition and weight status.

The working mothers who prepared meals ahead of time and made enough food to last more than one meal also described the down-side of such strategies. Some of these mothers spent large parts of non-work days shopping and preparing food, often at the cost of other family activities or personal recreation. Although they may have saved time on work nights, these strategies often demanded considerable weekend time and contributed to mothers’ feelings of time scarcity (Jabs, 2006). In a context where time for household work is declining and parents feel that their time with their children is limited, these strategies may carry a cost that some parents are not willing to pay.

These findings provide support for a role overload interpretation among these low-wage working parents (Marks, 1977). Study participants most often described negative work to family spillover, and only a few participants described examples of positive spillover from work to family or family to work. Only some of these parents appeared to benefit from role enhancement (Sieber, 1974). These few may have benefited because their work situations were flexible enough to facilitate positive spillover or because the workers themselves had better personal resources. Role quality has been proposed as a better predictor of health than roles per se (Barnett & Gareis, 2006). The poor quality of work roles described by many in this low-wage working population provides support for this hypothesis.

The constructivist approach and the in-depth nature of these interviews allowed us to discover the specific strategies that were used by these working parents in their daily struggles to manage food choices in the light of conflicting work and family demands. These findings are likely to be most useful in understanding the experiences of other low-wage urban working parents. We expect that parents with different socio-cultural characteristics may have different experiences and use different strategies. It is possible that those parents who participated in this study were managing better than some others because they could find the time to talk to our interviewers. Alternatively they may have had greater financial problems so our modest compensation was of greater value to them. Work-family spillover should be explored with other groups of parents to add their understandings to this picture.

These findings also need to be quantitatively assessed in a larger population to determine the extent of the problem and the relationship of spillover to dietary intake. These findings suggest several opportunities for future research. The conceptual framework of work-family spillover and the specific food choice coping strategies that emerged from this study will serve as the sources of new quantitative measures of food choice strategies related to work-family spillover. These measures can be used to assess the impact of work-family spillover and associated food choice strategies on nutrient intakes. For example, one could assess the dietary impact of feelings of time pressure, fatigue, and work stressors and the use of dietary strategies as the use of quick meals, take-out meals, or food used as a treat on dietary quality. An additional open question that could not be addressed by the cross-sectional study design is the extent to which working parents adjust to spillover and overload over time and develop long-term coping strategies by changing work and family conditions. This question may be especially pertinent among workers with frequent job changes. A longer study that follows parents over time is needed to answer this question.

We undertook this research to learn more about the widespread phenomenon of spillover that is commonly recognized but poorly understood. Work-family spillover has important implications for food assistance policy, for employers, and for nutrition and health professionals who work with families. Dietary standards for food assistance policy in the U.S. (1999) are based on the assumptions that all food is purchased in a grocery store and prepared from scratch at home. These assumptions do not match the experiences of most of the working parents in this study, many of whom lack the time, energy, and skills to meet these expectations. If these findings are supported in future research, they suggest that the assumptions underlying food assistance policies need to be re-examined.

The impact of conflicting work and family demands on work place productivity, job satisfaction, and personal health means that there is a need to find creative practical solutions to the problems of work-family spillover and overload in the workplace. This is important for the health of parents as well as their children. The high prevalence of overweight and obesity among adults and children means that public health practitioners need to use every promising solution to promote healthy eating and active living including work-family spillover as a possible contributor to both parent and child nutritional status and body weight outcomes. Such

solutions might include reduction of job stressors, increased access to affordable healthy foods at work and at school, increased job flexibility and dependable transportation options that ease transition times for parents, promotion of physical activity at work, or vegetable and fruit mini-markets at or near the workplace. Development of healthy quick meal options that incorporate low-cost and convenient foods, as well as reinforcing how family meals can be used to meet other family goals, would also help families adopt more healthful and satisfying coping strategies.

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Table 1

Characteristics of Study Participants

		Men (n=34)	Women (n=35)
Age (years)	25–29	4	9
	30–39	14	14
	40–51	16	12
Race/Ethnicity	Black	9	13
	White	22	22
	Asian	1	0
	>1 Race	2	0
Education	Hispanic/Latino	10	10
	High school or less	13	10
	Some college	8	13
Marital	College degree (2–4 yr.)	13	12
	Married/living as married	29	19
	Not married/no partner	5	16
Youngest child at home	<5 years	13	14
	≥<13 years	18	16
	≥13 years	3	5
Household annual income	<\$10,000	3	5
	\$10,000–19,999	2	8
	\$20,000–29,999	3	8
	\$30,000–39,999	13	5
	\$40,000–49,999	4	4
	≥\$50,000	9	5
Job type	Service	14	16
	Clerical	6	12
	Sales	5	6
	Production	9	1
Work hours/week	Part-time (20–34)	1	10
	Full time (35–44)	21	23
	Overtime/extra (45 +)	12	2
Work schedule	Weekdays	21	26
	Weekdays + weekends	13	9
Work shift	Day	19	27
	Evening	7	6
	Night	0	2
	Day + Evening	8	0
Work hour variability	Always same	24	27
	Varies day and/or hours	10	8

Food Choice Coping Strategies

Table 2

Category	Examples
1. Manage feelings of stress and fatigue Treat oneself or children with food after a "bad" day or week at work	"I feel like I need to be rewarded... I'll think to myself 'well I get to have this' because you know nothing else is going right and I'm tired and I just want something quick and easy" "We'll have our little family night... We'll get a movie and pizza and wings and stuff on a Friday or Saturday night. That's just their treat, you know for mommy being home at night." "Usually we're all in different rooms [eating] in front of different TV programs."
Parallel eating: family eats in different places Compensate by eating "better" on days off	"On my days off I usually try to cook something so that I know that they're eating... well as opposed to opening up with ...[canned ravioli]"
2. Reduce time and effort for food Skip meals	"On [stressful] days like that I don't eat at all. I just forget about eating." "I'm heading from one work to another work ... maybe I'll have some time before I fall asleep to eat"
Simplify & Speed up: take out, eat out, quick meals, drink instead of eat, rush	"I'm not a fan of fast food restaurants but ... I just gotta get them food and I just try to do the best I can." "TV dinners... an absolute blessing... they're not good for you in the slightest but they're just... when things are stressful"
Multi-task: eat while doing something else	"[I] sip off my [cola] now and then... I just work right through it [lunch]." "Hurry up and eat, we're out the door"
Plan meals ahead; anticipate busy times	"I'm driving and eating the slice of pizza." "Something portable that they [children] can eat in the car on the way"
Get help with food from partner or child	"During the week-end I do a lot of cooking." "I also will buy things... that I can cook on the stove quickly."
3. Redefine meanings and reduce expectations Redefine family eating Serial eating: family eating at different times	"My husband and daughter have it [dinner] all done... prepared and ready." "Getting together for the family meal at the pizza place, that's one of our family traditions." "She's (wife) already made my dinner. So when I get home (after working the late shift), I just got to throw it in the microwave."
4. Set priorities and make tradeoffs Prioritize food and eating Tradeoff nutrition vs. other demands: Nutrition vs. family activities	"I always find time to cook and give them something healthy... I like cooking for my kids."
Nutrition & family meals vs. quick meals	"We'll come home and eat dinner first. It'll be very rushed, very late. I may just give her a (snack) and get myself a little sandwich or something just to get food in our stomachs. Um, and then take her to the activity and all the while it's 'Come on come on come on, come on'... And we'll come home and there'll be this homework that has to be done."
Family meals vs. income	"One of the biggest compromises is nutrition definitely. It's um it's always the quick easy things that are the worst for you and high in fat and high in salt or sugar"
Knowing what son eats vs. income	"The tradeoff I think is definitely not having a very nutritious meal and just grabbing something." "Cause I'm forced to work 2 jobs with my wife being out of work. So I wish I could have more time off, more time with the family, more time to cook."
5. Change work and family conditions – adaptive strategies Change job or hours	"Ship him [son] off on the bus. He'll eat breakfast at school; he'll eat lunch at school. Then I'm at work. He gets home and 'OK what did you eat yesterday honey?'"
Limit outside activities New partner helps out	"I actually switched jobs two years ago because ... I couldn't think anymore by the time I got home... I needed a little more flexibility in my schedule." "We don't do half the activities that other people do. I don't know how other people do it." "My boyfriend just make the lasagna so I'll leave him to do all of that cause I be tired."