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Do Creative Work Activities Create Stress?

The demands associated with creative work activities pose key challenges for workers, according to new research out of the University of Toronto that describes the stress associated with some aspects of work and its impact on the boundaries between work and family life.

Researchers measured the extent to which people engaged in creative work activities using data from a national survey of more than 1,200 American workers. Sociology professor Scott Schieman (UofT) and his coauthor and PhD student Marisa Young (UofT) asked participants questions like: "How often do you have the chance to learn new things?"; "How often do you have the chance to solve problems?"; "How often does your job allow you to develop your skills or abilities?" and "How often does your job require you to be creative?" They used responses to these questions to create an index that they label "creative work activities."

The authors describe three core sets of findings:

- * People who score higher on the creative work index are more likely to experience excessive job pressures, feel overwhelmed by their workloads, and more frequently receive work-related contact (emails, texts, calls) outside of normal work hours;

- * In turn, people who experience these job-related pressures engage in more frequent "work-family multitasking" - that is, they try to juggle job- and home-related tasks at the same time while they are at home.

- * Taken together, these job demands and work-family multitasking result in more conflict between work and family roles - a central cause of problems for functioning in the family/household domain.

According to Schieman, "these stressful elements of creative work detract from what most people generally see as the positive sides of creative job conditions. And, these processes reveal the unexpected ways that the work life can cause stress in our lives" stress that is typically associated with higher status job conditions and can sometimes blur the boundaries between work and non-work life."

This research also discovered that people who score higher on the creative work index are more likely to think about their work outside of normal work hours. However, when this occurred, many said that they didn't feel "stressed out" by these thoughts. Schieman adds: "There are aspects of creative work that many people enjoy thinking about because they add a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment to our lives. This is quite different from the stressful thoughts about work that keep some of us awake at night: the deadlines you can't control, someone else's incompetent work that you need to handle first thing in the morning, or routine work that lacks challenge or feels like a grind."

The full study, "The Demands of Creative Work: Implications for Stress in the Work-Family Interface," appears in the Spring 2010 issue of the journal *Social Science Research*.

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