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Getting worked up over work: a dyadic perspective on work-related ICT use and relationship quality

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Introduction

Over the past decades, organizations have become increasingly demanding in terms of their employees' flexibility and agility. The increased use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT), such as smartphones, is largely to blame for the resulting blurring of borders between the work and home domains. Being constantly online makes it harder to **detach** after work and fulfil one's role at home, leading to work-to-family conflict (**WFC**) (Derks, van Mierlo & Schmitz, 2014). **WFC** is associated with copious negative outcomes such as lower **relationship quality** and **well-being** (Buxton et al., 2016; Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). To date, research on this topic was limited to single individuals' perceptions, whereas the examination of crossover effects – the transfer of a psychological state from one person to another – was often neglected. Furthermore, previous cross-sectional studies only give limited insight into the dynamics of these highly flexible variables, which often differ from day-to-day. The current study aims at addressing this research gap by exploring the effects of **work-related ICT use** on **WFC**, **detachment** and **relationship quality** in dyadic relationships using a diary-based approach.

Hypotheses

H1. **Detachment** is a mediator for the relationship between **ICT use** and **relationship quality**

H2. **WFC** is a mediator for the relationship between **ICT use** and **relationship quality**

H3. Attitude toward work related **ICT use** whilst with the partner moderates the relationship between work related **ICT use** whilst with the partner and **WFC**.

H4. **Person A's relationship quality** is positively related with **person B's relationship quality** and vice versa.

H5. **WFC of person A** is negatively related to the **relationship quality of person B** and vice versa.

H6. Person A's attitude toward work related **ICT use** whilst with partner, positively moderates the relation between the **person B's work related ICT use** whilst with their partner and **person B's WFC** and vice versa.

Sample

N: 506 observations (57 couples)
Inclusion criteria: Both partners work > 20 hours/week, at least one partner has a flexible work arrangement
Age: 21-56 (♀ M=37.39, SD=12.26; ♂ M=35.40, SD=11.46)
Working hours/week: ♀ M=42.50, SD=11.26; ♂ M= 37.91, SD=7.81
**Flexwork hours/week:** ♀ M=5, SD=1.60 ♂ M=4.31, SD=1.93

Measures

Dimension	Items	α	Sample Item	Source
Work related ICT use during partner time	4	.80	How often were you called about work-related matters?	Schieman & Young (2013)
Detachment	4	.95	Today, during my free time, I didn't think about work at all.	Sonnentag & Fritz (2007)
WFC (caused by Job A)	3	.81	Today work kept me from private activities more than I liked	Ezzedeen & Swiercz (2007); Carlson et al. (2000)
WFC (caused by Job B)	3	.86	Today work kept my partner from private activities more than she/he liked.	Ezzedeen & Swiercz (2007); Carlson et al. (2000)
Attitude toward work related ICT use whilst with partner	3	.80	Using my smartphone/tablet/laptop for work while I spend time with my partner is beneficial.	Chau & Hu (2001)
Relationship Quality	4	.91	Our relationship is very stable.	Norton (1983)

Figure 1. *Conceptual model showing the direct effects between ICT use, detachment, WFC and relationship quality for person A and person B.*
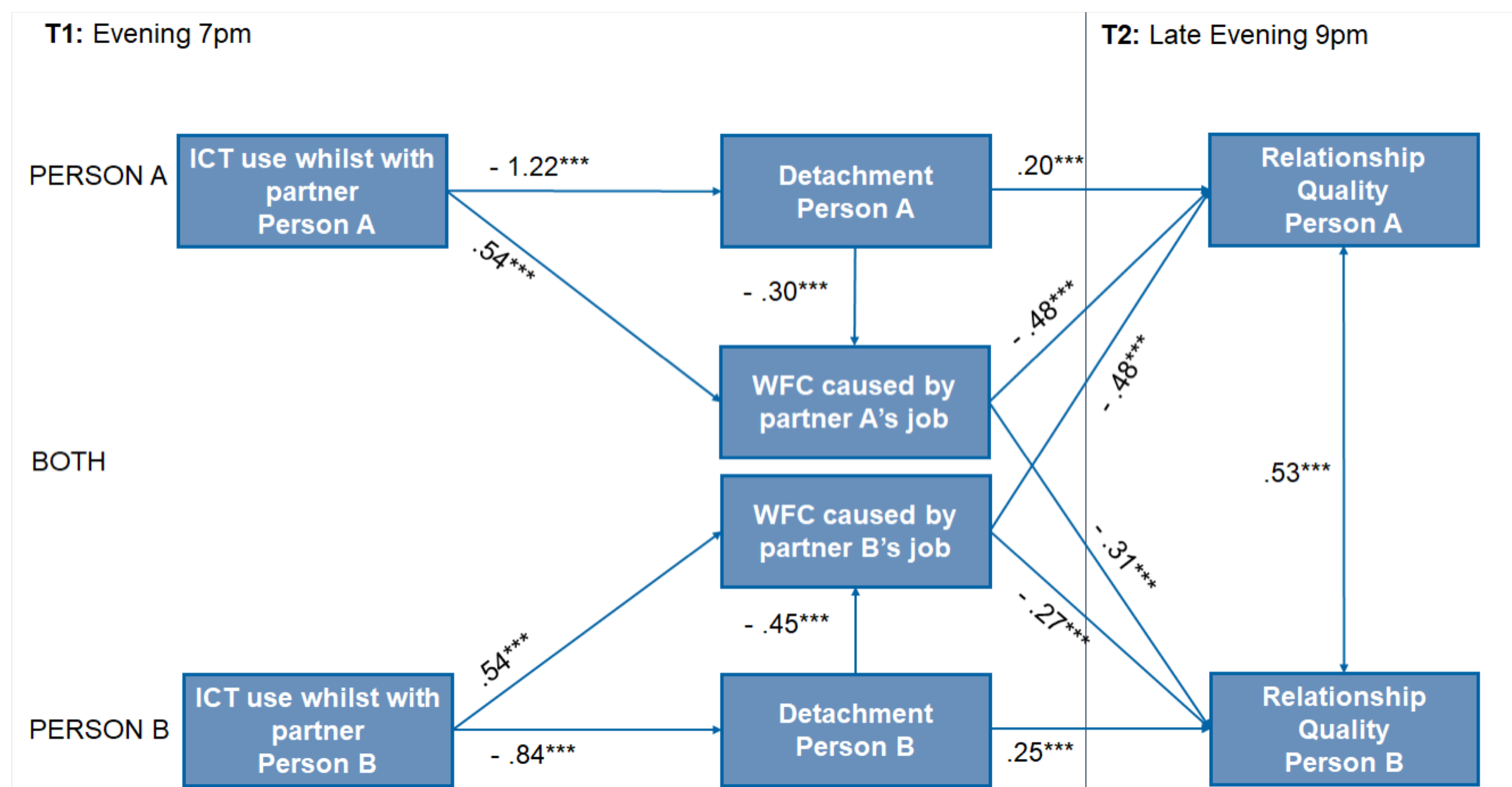
Notes. Unstandardized regression coefficients. N=150-227. p > .05, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001. Covariates: age, number of children. Person A = female, Person B = male. ICT Use: 0 = no use, 1 = use. Attitude: 0 = positive, 1 = negative.

Figure 2. *Slopes of linear regression for detachment on WFC at values of ICT use. The shaded areas correspond to 95% confidence intervals.*
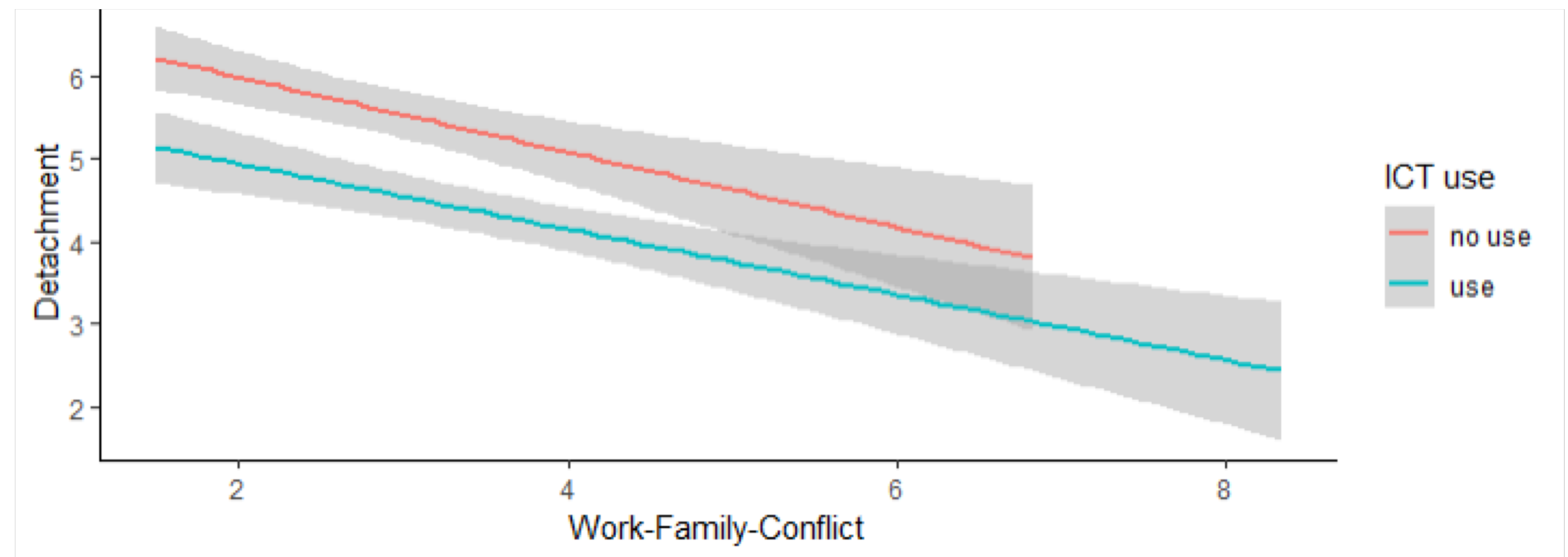
Work related **ICT use** during partner time acts as catalyst for the relationship between **detachment** and **WFC**, leading to higher **WFC** and lower **detachment** in the **ICT use** group.

Discussion

In line with the results of previous studies, we find that the effects of work related **ICT use** on **relationship quality** are mediated by **detachment** and **WFC** (Chesley, 2005; Kossek et al., 2012; Derks et al., 2014; Dettmers, 2017). Contrary to our hypothesis, attitude has no significant effect on the relationship between **ICT use** and **WFC**. Future research could reevaluate this finding using an alternative measure. Crossover effects occurred between both partners' perceptions of **WFC** and **relationship quality**. Therefore, **WFC** caused by one partner's job influences the other partner's **relationship quality** and vice versa. Thus, both partners' work related **ICT uses** seem to be similarly important in the individual partner's perception of **relationship quality**.

Practical implications

- Employers should take a clear stand on after hour **ICT use**, which may include: Rules and limitations for after hour **ICT use**, such as restricting access to company communication tools during the evening and/or the night.
- Employees should be made aware of the effects that work related **ICT use** during partner time can have on their relationship quality
- Employees are advised to be more vocal towards their employers and/or colleagues if they feel uncomfortable with their work related **ICT use** after work (e.g. feeling stressed by regular work emails during off-hours)

References
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