

# Managing Work, Family, and School Roles: Disengagement Strategies Can Help and Hinder

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The extent to which individuals manage multiple role domains has yet to be fully understood. We advance past research by examining the effect of interrole conflict among three very common and critically important life roles—work, family, and school—on three corresponding types of satisfaction. Further, we examine individual-based techniques that can empower people to manage multiple roles. In doing so, we integrate the disengagement strategies from the work recovery and coping literatures. These strategies focus on taking your mind off the problems at hand and include cognitive disengagement (psychological detachment, cognitive avoidance coping), as well as cognitive distortion (escape avoidance coping). We examine these strategies in a two-wave study of 178 individuals faced with the challenge of managing work, family, and school responsibilities. Findings demonstrated a joint offsetting effect of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance coping on the relationship between work conflict and work satisfaction. Findings also indicated an exacerbating effect of escape avoidance coping on the relationship between work conflict and work satisfaction, school conflict and school satisfaction, and between family conflict and family satisfaction. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

*Keywords:* work–life balance, interrole conflict, disengagement, work recovery, coping

There is a large body of research that examines how individuals manage work and nonwork roles (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000), most of which has focused on the conflict that results from multirole involvement (interrole conflict; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The negative consequences of interrole conflict have been well established. In particular, the experience of interrole conflict has been found to be negatively related to satisfaction (Allen et al., 2000). Surprisingly, there is little research examining what can be done to offset the negative experience of interrole conflict. Studies that have been conducted focus on organizational initiatives, such as the implementation of new policies (e.g., flextime, on-site daycare; Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990). Placing responsibility in the hands of the organization is imperative and indispensable; however, it represents only one half of the equation. What is missing is a focus on strategies that can empower individuals to manage their lives. A focus on the individual is critical, as the harsh reality of the corporate world is that many employees cannot select themselves into organizations that offer family friendly policies. Further, in situations where family friendly policies do exist, there are innumerable reasons why employees are cautious about their use. For example, employees may fear the social repercussions of working from home, or may fear that using

such programs may reflect lower organizational commitment that may be detrimental to career advancement.

Two distinct literatures shed light on individual strategies that may offset the negative effect of interrole conflict—the work recovery and coping literatures. These literatures have emerged as separate research streams, despite the fact that both consider disengagement strategies. The work recovery literature considers the effects of psychological detachment, or cognitively disconnecting, in order to manage stress (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Similarly, the coping literature considers the effects of avoidance coping, or cognitively withdrawing from stressors (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although there is some research on avoidance coping in the context of the work–life literature (e.g., Hecht & McCarthy, 2010; Rotondo, Carlson, & Kincaid, 2003), there has been minimal research examining psychological detachment in this context (e.g., Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009). We extend past research by integrating these two literatures in the context of managing multiple roles. In doing so, we move beyond the work and family roles to include that of the student role (e.g., Butler, 2007). The lack of research on the school domain is unfortunate, as students frequently manage a full course load with family and employment responsibilities. Further, we consider the extent to which disengagement strategies buffer or exacerbate the relations between school, work, and family conflict and satisfaction in each of these domains.

## School, Work, and Family Conflict and School, Work, and Family Satisfaction

Interrole conflict refers to difficulty participating in one role due to simultaneous participation in another role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). According to role theory (Katz & Kahn, 1978), individuals are a part of multiple roles over the course of their lives, and managing the responsibilities and expectations of each role is challenging and can lead to conflict. Resource depletion theory

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This article was published Online First May 20, 2013.

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We thank Sabine Sonnentag, Samantha Montes, and Tracy Hecht for their helpful comments on this article.

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suggests that individuals have a finite amount of personal resources, such as attention and energy, and using these resources on the demands of one role results in fewer resources for dealing with the responsibilities of other roles (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964). Further, attitudes and behaviors associated with one role spill over to the other role (Leiter & Durup, 1996). Ultimately, this conflict is associated with strain symptoms such as anxiety and fatigue, as well as affective outcomes such as lower levels of satisfaction (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Past research focuses almost exclusively on the work and family domains (Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood, & Lambert, 2007). Although there is some research examining conflict across work, family, and school (e.g., Biggs & Brough, 2005; Giancola, Grawitch, & Borchert, 2009; Gigliotti, 2007; Gilbert & Holahan, 1982; Home, 1998; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gómez, 2004), we take a more nuanced approach by examining how conflict across these three domains affects satisfaction in the corresponding life roles. In the context of the current study, *school conflict* reflects the extent to which school-related responsibilities interfere with the ability to meet the demands of work and family, *work conflict* reflects the extent to which work-related responsibilities interfere with the ability to meet the demands of school and family, and *family conflict* reflects the extent to which family related responsibilities interfere with the ability to meet the demands of school and work.

Traditional models of interrole conflict and satisfaction have focused on cross-level relationships (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992), such that conflict arising from one role (e.g., work-to-family conflict) affects satisfaction in the other domain (family satisfaction). However, recent theory and research suggests a source-attribution perspective (Michel & Hargis, 2008), whereby interrole conflict in one domain (e.g., work-to-family conflict) results in lower satisfaction in the originating domain (work satisfaction). This perspective uses segmentation theory to suggest that conflict ensuing from one domain results in lower affective outcomes to that *same domain* (Zedeck & Mosier, 1990). This occurs through a cognitive appraisal process (Lazarus, 1991) where individuals attribute blame to the originating domain that was the cause of conflict. Three recent meta-analyses support the source-attribution model by demonstrating that conflict exerts significantly larger effects on satisfaction in the originating domain and accounts for significantly more variance than cross-domain models (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011; Michel & Hargis, 2008; Shockley & Singla, 2011). Based on source attribution perspective, we propose:

*Hypothesis 1a:* School-based conflicts (*school-to-work* and *school-to-family*) will be negatively related to school satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Work-based conflicts (*work-to-school* and *work-to-family*) will be negatively related to work satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 1c:* Family based conflicts (*family-to-school* and *family-to-work*) will be negatively related to family satisfaction.

## Psychological Disengagement

*Psychological disengagement* refers to the process of mentally distancing oneself as a strategy of dealing with stressful situations (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986). It is relevant to the work recovery and coping literatures, as both examine techniques that involve distancing oneself to manage stress. Specifically, the work recovery literature has advanced the notion of *psychological detachment*, which refers to psychologically disengaging from work (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). If, for example, one is confronted with multiple deadlines, an individual might cope by switching off mentally and reading a book or listening to music. Along a similar line, the coping literature has advanced the notion of *avoidance coping*, which refers to strategies that withdraw the individual, physically and cognitively, from a stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). If, for example, one is confronted with multiple deadlines, from an avoidance perspective, an individual might cope by avoiding dealing with the stressor and reading a book or listening to music.

The pioneers of the two respective fields have noted the overlap between the construct of *psychological detachment* from the work recovery side, and *avoidance coping* on the coping side (Lazarus, 1993; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Where the two literatures differ is in their predictions of the effectiveness of these strategies. The work recovery literature consistently positions psychological detachment as an adaptive strategy that can help individuals deal with stress (e.g., Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2008). In contrast, the coping literature consistently conceptualizes avoidance coping as a maladaptive strategy that can exacerbate the experience of stress (e.g., Ingledeu, Hardy, & Cooper, 1997). Considering sleep as an example, the coping literature conceptualizes sleep as a maladaptive strategy because it stems from avoiding one's stressors (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). In the work recovery literature, however, sleep is considered adaptive, as it serves to replenish one's resources (Sonnentag et al., 2008).

To date, psychological detachment and avoidance coping have not been simultaneously examined in one study. In fact, only one prior investigation has examined and found support for detachment as a moderator of the relationship between interrole conflict and satisfaction (Moreno-Jiménez et al., 2009). Thus, it remains to be seen how various disengagement constructs are related to each other, as well as their potential combined effects as buffering agents on roles that extend beyond work and family.

## Psychological Detachment

The work recovery literature draws on the conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) as the theoretical framework to depict the recovery process. COR theory suggests that individuals have a finite amount of resources (e.g., attention, energy) which they seek to conserve. Attending to multiple role demands requires various resources, and over time these resources are depleted, leading to strain reactions such as fatigue (Zijlstra & Sonnentag, 2006). This framework emphasizes the need for recovery to restore resources.

Psychological detachment involves "switching off," or not thinking about role demands, and is expected to be an adaptive strategy in managing multiple role responsibilities. It can facilitate the replenishment of resources that have been depleted from the exertion of effort on various roles (Zijlstra & Sonnentag, 2006).

Similar to resting when sick with the flu in order to restore one's physical health, recovery in the psychological sense implies "taking a break" from life's demands to restore depleted resources. Empirical research supports the benefits of engaging in detachment (e.g., [Sonnetag et al., 2008](#)). Thus, if an individual is faced with the demands of work, family, and school, mentally distancing as a means of replenishing resources may buffer the negative effect of conflict on satisfaction. We propose:

*Hypothesis 2:* Psychological detachment will moderate the negative relationships between: (*H2a*) school conflict and school satisfaction, (*H2b*) work conflict and work satisfaction, and (*H2c*) family conflict and family satisfaction, such that the relationships will be stronger for individuals engaging in low levels of psychological detachment and weaker for individuals engaging in high levels of psychological detachment.

### Avoidance Coping

The coping literature draws on the transactional model put forth by [Lazarus and Folkman \(1984\)](#) as the theoretical framework by which individuals cope with stressors. This model suggests that coping occurs in two stages. In the primary appraisal stage, individuals assess the situation to identify whether it is threatening. In the secondary appraisal stage, individuals evaluate their ability to adequately deal with the stressor and select a relevant coping strategy.

There has been a very limited amount of attention devoted to coping strategies in the work–life literature. In fact, it has been estimated that research on coping strategies represents less than 1% of the studies on work–life conflict ([Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005](#)). In general, this research has focused on various forms of social support ([Eby et al., 2005](#)). Research on specific coping strategies was recently reviewed by [Thompson, Poelmans, Allen, and Andreassi \(2007\)](#). Research indicates that direct action coping strategies have positive effects on work–life conflict ([Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008](#)), venting has negative effects on work–life conflict ([Andreassi, 2011](#)), and positive thinking has no effect on work–life conflict ([Haar, 2006](#)). A handful of studies have also examined avoidance coping and yielded mixed findings—some have found that it is detrimental ([Andreassi, 2011; Haar, 2006; Rotondo et al., 2003](#)), although others have found it to be beneficial ([Hecht & McCarthy, 2010; Innstrand, Langballe, Espnes, Falkum, & Aasland, 2008; Paden & Buehler, 1995; Rantanen, Mauno, Kinnunen, & Rantanen, 2011](#)).

These mixed findings may be due to the fact that avoidance coping contains two underlying components—one that deals with stressors by cognitively distancing from the situation (*cognitive avoidance*) and one that concerns a distorted view of reality that involves escapist-type fanciful thinking (*escape avoidance*; [Folkman & Lazarus, 1985](#)). In fact, consistent with this reasoning, we found that past research has tended to confound the two components (e.g., [Pisarski, Bohle, & Callan, 1998](#)). Although the first component, cognitive avoidance, is likely to prove facilitative, the second component, escape avoidance, is likely to play a maladaptive role.

**Cognitive avoidance coping.** *Cognitive avoidance* reflects a mental separation from a stressor. It distracts individuals in order to prevent them from thinking about the stressor, and shares a

theoretical overlap with psychological detachment. This mental distancing is posited to be beneficial, as it serves to replenish depleted resources that can be redirected toward various tasks ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)). For example, individuals may divert their attention to leisure activities and, thus, dwell on more pleasing thoughts ([Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002](#)). Consistent with this proposition, [Lazarus \(1993\)](#) suggested that avoidance coping might actually be facilitative, and empirical research has demonstrated that avoidance coping can be adaptive ([Cohen, Evans, Stokols, & Krantz, 1986](#)). Further, avoidance coping has been found to buffer the effects of role conflict and role overload, and lead to higher levels of satisfaction ([Rantanen et al., 2011](#)). We propose:

*Hypothesis 3:* Cognitive avoidance coping will moderate the negative relationships between: (*H3a*) school conflict and school satisfaction, (*H3b*) work conflict and work satisfaction, and (*H3c*) family conflict and family satisfaction, such that the relationships will be stronger for individuals engaging in low levels of cognitive avoidance coping and weaker for individuals engaging in high levels of cognitive avoidance coping.

**Escape avoidance coping.** In contrast, *escape avoidance* reflects evasion from a stressor and distortion of reality. Parallels can be drawn between escape avoidance and cognitive theories of depression ([Beck, 1967](#)). Distorted cognition engenders "excessive fantasy involvement, magical thinking, and overvalued ideas" ([Bowins, 2004](#), p. 12). This type of cognitive appraisal represents a "mental form of giving up, resigning one's self to the current situation as it is" ([Rotondo & Kincaid, 2008](#), p. 499). Individuals who use escape avoidance may lack self-efficacy or control in managing conflicting role demands ([Rotondo et al., 2003](#)). Importantly, the tendency to process information in irrational or distorted ways has been linked to maladaptive emotional and behavioral consequences ([Beck, 1967](#)). Moreover, spending time on escapist or wishful thoughts further drains valuable resources such as time and energy that could otherwise be committed to attending to role demands ([Edwards & Rothbard, 2000](#)). Thus, escape avoidance coping is likely to be detrimental, in that it serves as an evasion from role responsibilities and intensifies the negative consequences of interrole conflict. In fact, it is possible that the escape avoidance component may have been driving the negative effects of avoidance coping that have been observed in past studies. We propose:

*Hypothesis 4:* Escape avoidance coping will moderate the negative relationships between: (*H4a*) school conflict and school satisfaction, (*H4b*) work conflict and work satisfaction, and (*H4c*) family conflict and family satisfaction, such that the relationships will be stronger for individuals engaging in high levels of escape avoidance coping and weaker for individuals engaging in low levels of escape avoidance coping.

### Psychological Detachment and Cognitive Avoidance Coping

As described, both theory and research support the positive effects of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance separately. Theoretically, the COR perspective emphasizes the need to replenish depleted resources to avoid negative consequences, and the recovery perspective proposes engaging in strategies that in-

involve mentally distancing oneself from thoughts of role responsibilities as a means of recharging. Empirically, research supports detachment as a beneficial strategy (Sonnentag et al., 2008) and cognitive avoidance has also been demonstrated to be beneficial in certain contexts (Rantanen et al., 2011). As a result, the combined effect of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance may prove to be a particularly strong buffer of the relationship between conflict and satisfaction in these roles. Thus, we also predict three-way interactions between conflict, psychological detachment, and cognitive avoidance coping:

*Hypothesis 5:* The relationships between: (*H5a*) school conflict and school satisfaction, (*H5b*) work conflict and work satisfaction, and (*H5c*) family conflict and family satisfaction are jointly moderated by psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance coping, such that the negative relationships will be: strongest for individuals engaging in low levels of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance coping; weakest for individuals engaging in high levels of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance coping; and moderate for individuals engaging in all other combinations of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance coping.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited from a large North American university and invited to participate in a two-wave study. Participation required that individuals were working at the time of the study, or had worked in the 12 months prior. A total of 218 participants completed the Time 1 online survey, which included measures of interrole conflict, psychological detachment, avoidance coping, and demographic information. Of those individuals, 178 completed the Time 2 online survey 1 month later (response rate = 82%), consisting of satisfaction measures. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 ( $M = 20.30$ ), and 57% were female. They held jobs in a range of industries (e.g., finance, sales, service) and worked an average of 21.43 hours per week. Only four percent of participants worked on campus. Seventy-four percent of participants indicated living with family members, where *family* was defined as “relatives including mother and father, brothers and sisters, children, aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents.”

We were also able to obtain information on the level of involvement and perceived demand associated with each role for a subsample ( $N = 55$ ) of our participants. On an adapted 7-point (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) involvement scale (Frone & Rice, 1987), participants indicated an average involvement with their school role of 4.99 ( $SD = 1.05$ ), an average involvement with their work role of 4.67 ( $SD = 1.05$ ), and an average involvement with their family role of 5.10 ( $SD = 1.06$ ). On an adapted 7-point (*strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*) perceived demand scale (Boyar, Carr, Mosley, & Carson, 2007), participants indicated an average perceived demand in the school role of 5.36 ( $SD = 1.06$ ); an average perceived demand in the work role of 4.64 ( $SD = 1.13$ ); and an average perceived demand in the family role of 4.42 ( $SD = 1.40$ ).

### Measures

Participants responded to each measure using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Internal consistency reliabilities of all measures were found to be high, as evidenced in Table 1.

**School conflict.** We used two subscales (four items each) adapted from Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian (1996). The subscales reflected school-to-work conflict (e.g., “Being involved in my studies at school means that things I want to do at my job do not get done”) and school-to-family conflict (e.g., “Being involved in my studies at school interferes with my family related activities and events”). An average school conflict score was also computed.

**Work conflict.** We used two subscales (four items each) adapted from Netemeyer et al. (1996). The subscales reflected work-to-school conflict (e.g., “Being involved in my job takes up so much time that it makes it difficult to fulfill my responsibilities as a student”) and work-to-family conflict (e.g., “Being involved in my job takes up so much time that it makes it difficult to fulfill my family responsibilities”). An average work conflict score was also computed.

**Family conflict.** We used two subscales (four items each) adapted from Netemeyer et al. (1996). The subscales reflected family to-work conflict (e.g., “Being involved in my family life produces strain that interferes with my ability to fulfill job-related duties”) and family to-school conflict (e.g., “Being involved in my family life means that things I want to do at school do not get done”). An average family conflict score was also computed.

**Psychological detachment.** We used the four-item psychological detachment scale from the Recovery Experience Questionnaire (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). Items were adapted slightly to reflect our focus on three life roles (e.g., “I distance myself from my responsibilities”).

**Avoidance coping.** We used the avoidance scale from the Ways of Coping Questionnaire (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Consistent with the conceptualization of avoidance coping as comprising a cognitive and escape component, four items assessed cognitive avoidance (e.g., “I refuse to think about it too much”), and four items assessed escape avoidance (e.g., “I hope a miracle will happen”).

**School satisfaction.** We used a three-item scale adapted from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993). A sample item is “I am satisfied with being a student.”

**Work satisfaction.** We used a three-item scale adapted from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993). A sample item is “I am satisfied with my job.”

**Family satisfaction.** We used a three-item scale adapted from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Pavot & Diener, 1993). A sample item is “I am satisfied with my family life.”

**Controls.** To provide conservative tests of the hypotheses, the following variables were controlled: age, sex, and hours worked per week. Age and sex were controlled due to past research suggesting these variables operate differentially on interrole conflict processes (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002; Matthews, Bulger, & Barnes-Farrell, 2010). Number of hours worked per week was controlled given that it may have an impact on the experience of conflict and/or satisfaction in the three domains.

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistency Reliabilities, and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
1. Age	20.30	1.68	—																	
2. Sex <sup>a</sup>	1.40	.49	.11	—																
3. Hours worked/week	21.43	15.01	.12	.03	—															
4. T1 school conflict <sup>b</sup>	3.81	1.07	-.08	-.06	.04	<b>.85</b>														
5. T1 school-work conflict	3.65	1.19	-.02	-.04	.04	.80***	<b>.84</b>													
6. T1 school-family conflict	3.98	1.38	-.11	-.06	.08	.86***	.37***	<b>.90</b>												
7. T1 work conflict <sup>b</sup>	4.12	1.24	-.04	-.10	.08	.66***	.53***	.56***	<b>.93</b>											
8. T1 work-family conflict	3.93	1.37	-.01	-.07	.10	.64***	.51***	.55***	.93											
9. T1 work-school conflict	4.28	1.29	-.08	-.12	.06	.58***	.48***	.49***	.72***	<b>.89</b>										
10. T1 family conflict <sup>b</sup>	3.18	1.26	-.04	-.00	.09	.56***	.48***	.45***	.39***	.34***	<b>.94</b>									
11. T1 family-work conflict	3.02	1.28	-.02	.01	.08	.50***	.47***	.37***	.33***	.27***	.90***	<b>.92</b>								
12. T1 family-school conflict	3.34	1.47	-.04	-.01	.08	.52***	.41***	.46***	.38***	.36***	.68***	.94	<b>.92</b>							
13. T1 detachment	3.70	1.29	-.12	.09	-.03	.02	.02	.03	.15	.23***	.07	.11	.03	<b>.84</b>						
14. T1 cognitive avoidance	3.64	1.06	-.01	-.09	-.06	.02	.13	-.09	.05	.07	.04	.13	.20**	.04	.12	<b>.73</b>				
15. T1 escape avoidance	4.16	1.11	-.01	-.18**	-.03	.15	.15	.08	.03	.03	.03	.21**	.20**	.19**	.08	.33***	<b>.72</b>			
16. T2 school satisfaction	4.34	1.21	-.11	-.09	.03	-.32***	-.16*	-.35***	-.20**	-.19*	-.16*	-.14	-.08	-.17*	.08	.06	-.16*	<b>.88</b>		
17. T2 work satisfaction	4.15	1.25	.04	.07	.11	-.21**	-.10	-.24**	-.20**	-.24**	-.14	-.16*	-.06	-.21**	-.02	-.14	-.10	.46***	<b>.90</b>	
18. T2 family satisfaction	4.94	1.49	-.17*	.05	-.06	-.17*	-.09	-.19**	-.07	-.13	-.01	-.14	-.12	-.14	-.02	-.07	-.16*	.36***	.34***	<b>.93</b>

Note. N ranged from 163 to 212. T1 = Time 1 variable. T2 = Time 2 variable. <sup>a</sup> Sex (1 = Female, 2 = Male). <sup>b</sup> Reflects the unit-weighted average of two conflict facets. Internal consistency reliabilities appear across the diagonal in bold, except for age, sex, and hours worked/week, where internal consistency was not assessed. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for all variables. Predictor variables were mean-centered.

School-Based Regression Analyses

Table 2 presents the regression analyses for the relationship between school conflict and school satisfaction. Results indicated a main effect of Time 1 school conflict on Time 2 school satisfaction, controlling for age, sex, and hours worked per week ( $\beta = -.33, p < .001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1a was supported. The two-way interaction between school conflict and psychological detachment was not significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2a was not supported. However, findings indicated a two-way interaction between school conflict and cognitive avoidance, such that cognitive avoidance moderated the negative relationship between school conflict and school satisfaction. The nature of the moderation effect is presented in Figure 1. Simple slopes analyses revealed that school conflict was significantly and negatively related to school satisfaction at higher levels of cognitive avoidance ( $b = -.24, t_{(167)} = -2.16, p < .05$ ) and at lower levels of cognitive avoidance ( $b = -.46, t_{(167)} = -4.18, p < .001$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 3a was supported. Moreover, results indicated a significant two-way interaction between school conflict and escape avoidance, such that escape avoidance moderated the negative relationship between school conflict and school satisfaction. The nature of the moderation effect is presented in Figure 2. Simple slopes analyses revealed that school conflict was significantly and negatively related to school satisfaction at higher levels of escape avoidance ( $b = -.49, t_{(167)} = -4.15, p < .001$ ) and at lower levels of escape avoidance ( $b = -.22, t_{(167)} = -2.21, p < .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis

Table 2  
School-Based Regression Analyses

	T2 School Satisfaction			$\Delta R^2$
	$\beta$	SE	R <sup>2</sup>	
Step 1: Controls				.02
Age	-.12	.11		
Sex	-.06	.10		
Hours worked/week	.05	.10		
Step 2: Main effects			.17***	.15***
T1 school conflict	-.33***	.09***		
T1 psychological detachment	.07	.07		
T1 cognitive avoidance	.08	.09		
T1 escape avoidance	-.15*	.09*		
Step 3: Two-way interactions			.24**	.07**
T1 school conflict X				
T1 psychological detachment	.12	.06		
T1 school conflict X				
T1 cognitive avoidance	.17*	.08*		
T1 school conflict X				
T1 escape avoidance	-.20**	.07**		
T1 psychological detachment X				
T1 cognitive avoidance	-.06	.07		
Step 4: Three-way interaction			.25	.01
T1 school conflict X				
T1 psychological detachment X				
T1 cognitive avoidance	-.12	.05		

Note. N = 159. T1 = Time 1 variable. T2 = Time 2 variable. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

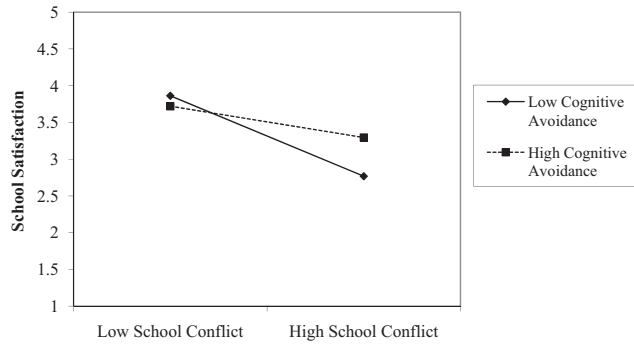


Figure 1. Cognitive avoidance coping as moderator of the negative relationship between T1 school conflict and T2 school satisfaction.

4a was supported. Finally, the three-way interaction between school conflict, psychological detachment, and cognitive avoidance was not significant. Thus, Hypothesis 5a was not supported.

### Work-Based Regression Analyses

Table 3 presents the regression analyses for the relationship between work conflict and work satisfaction. Results indicated a significant main effect of Time 1 work conflict on Time 2 work satisfaction while controlling for age, sex, and hours worked per week ( $\beta = -.22, p < .01$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1b was supported. The two-way interactions between work conflict, psychological detachment, and cognitive avoidance were not significant. Thus, Hypotheses 2b and 3b were not supported. However, findings indicated a two-way interaction between work conflict and escape avoidance, such that escape avoidance moderated the negative relationship between work conflict and work satisfaction. The nature of the moderation effect is consistent with findings for school-based conflict (see Figure 2). Simple slopes analyses revealed that work conflict was significantly and negatively related to work satisfaction at higher levels of escape avoidance ( $b = -.30, t_{(168)} = -3.05, p < .01$ ) but not at lower levels of escape avoidance ( $b = -.10, t_{(168)} = -1.07, p > .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 4b was supported. Finally, results indicated a significant three-way interaction between work conflict, psychological detachment, and cognitive avoidance in predicting work satisfaction. The nature of the three-way interaction effect is presented in Figure 3. To test the

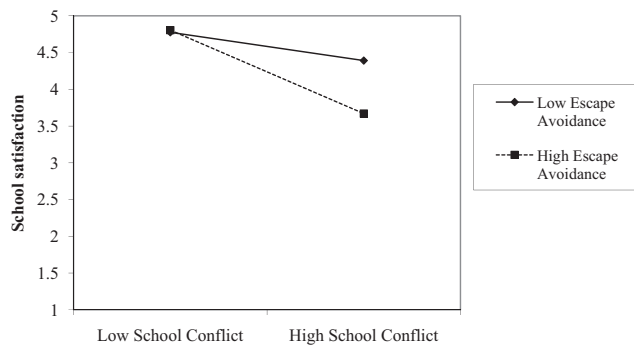


Figure 2. Escape avoidance coping as moderator of the negative relationship between T1 school conflict and T2 school satisfaction.

Table 3  
Work-Based Regression Analyses

	T2 Work Satisfaction			
	$\beta$	SE	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1: Controls			.02	
Age	.01	.12		
Sex	.09	.10		
Hours worked/week	.11	.10		
Step 2: Main effects			.11**	.09**
T1 work conflict	-.22**	.08**		
T1 psychological detachment	-.02	.08		
T1 cognitive avoidance	.20**	.09**		
T1 escape avoidance	-.15	.09		
Step 3: Two-way interactions			.16*	.06*
T1 work conflict X T1 psychological detachment	.11	.06		
T1 work conflict X T1 cognitive avoidance	.10	.07		
T1 work conflict X T1 escape avoidance	-.16*	.07*		
T1 psychological detachment X T1 cognitive avoidance	-.08	.07		
Step 4: Three-way interaction			.20**	.04**
T1 work conflict X T1 psychological detachment X T1 cognitive avoidance	-.20**	.04**		

Note.  $N = 160$ . T1 = Time 1 variable. T2 = Time 2 variable.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

simple slopes, we plotted one work conflict-work satisfaction slope for each of the four combinations of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance with one standard deviation cutoffs above and below the mean (see Table 4). As illustrated in the table, the relationship between work conflict and work satisfaction was most strongly negative among individuals engaging in both low levels of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance. Thus, Hypothesis 5b was supported.

### Family-Based Regression Analyses

Table 5 presents the regression analyses for the relationship between family conflict and family satisfaction. Results indicated

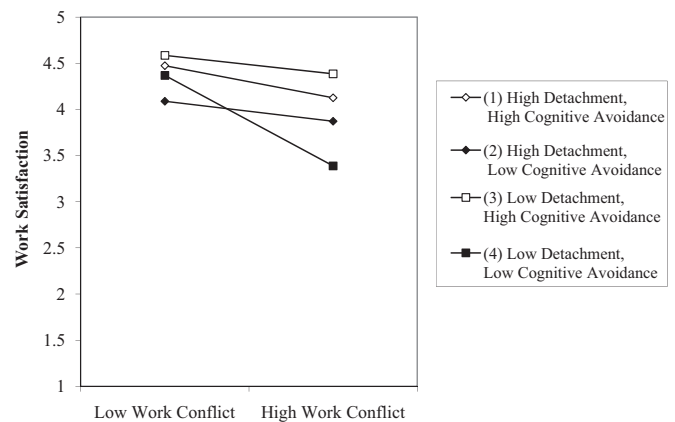


Figure 3. Three-way interaction plot of T1 work conflict, T1 psychological detachment, and T1 cognitive avoidance coping predicting Time 2 work satisfaction.

Table 4  
Simple Slopes for Three-Way Interaction Between Work Conflict, Psychological Detachment, and Cognitive Avoidance in Predicting Work Satisfaction

Group	Slope	<i>t</i>
1 (high detachment, high cognitive avoidance)	-.21	-1.60
2 (high detachment, low cognitive avoidance)	.07	.49
3 (low detachment, high cognitive avoidance)	-.06	-.37
4 (low detachment, low cognitive avoidance)	-.49***	-4.01***
Slope difference		
1 and 2		-.39
1 and 3		-.52
1 and 4		2.04*
2 and 3		-.04
2 and 4		2.70**
3 and 4		2.33*

Note. Group numbers correspond to groups listed in Figure 3. Slope difference tests were calculated as per Dawson and Richter's (2006) recommendations.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

a marginally significant main effect of Time 1 family conflict on Time 2 family satisfaction while controlling for age, sex, and hours worked per week ( $\beta = -.14, p = .08$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 1c was not supported. The two-way interaction between family conflict and psychological detachment was not significant. Thus, Hypothesis 2c was not supported. Findings indicated a marginally significant two-way interaction between family conflict and cognitive avoidance, such that cognitive avoidance moderated the negative relationship between family conflict and family satisfaction. Thus, Hypothesis 3c was not supported. Results indicated a two-way interaction between family conflict and escape avoidance, such that escape avoidance moderated the negative relationship between family conflict and family satisfaction. The nature of the moderation effect is again consistent with that found for school-based conflict (see Figure 2). Simple slopes analyses revealed that family conflict was significantly and negatively related to family satisfaction at higher levels of escape avoidance ( $b = -.23, t_{(169)} = -2.09, p < .05$ ) but not at lower levels of escape avoidance ( $b = .00, t_{(169)} = -.00, p > .05$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 4c was supported. Finally, the three-way interaction between family conflict, psychological detachment, and cognitive avoidance was not significant. Thus, Hypothesis 5c was not supported.

### Discussion

Drawing from the work recovery and coping literatures, we examined the extent to which three disengagement strategies, psychological detachment, cognitive avoidance coping, and escape avoidance coping, may buffer and/or exacerbate the negative effects of conflict experienced in three key life roles (work, family, and school) on their corresponding domains of satisfaction. There are a number of important findings. First, we proposed and found that conflict originating in the school domain is associated with lower school satisfaction, and conflict originating in the work domain is associated with lower work satisfaction. Second, we found evidence that within the school domain, cognitive avoidance buffered the negative relationship between conflict and satisfaction. However, psychological detachment did not demonstrate a

buffering role in any of the three domains. In the work domain, we found evidence that cognitive avoidance, in combination with psychological detachment, buffered the negative relationship between work conflict and work satisfaction. Finally, across all three domains we found that escape avoidance exacerbated the negative relationships between conflict and satisfaction. Taken together, these findings provide support for the facilitative effects of cognitive avoidance and the debilitating effects of escape avoidance coping.

### Contributions to Theory and Research

The findings of the current study advance our theoretical knowledge in a number of ways. First, past research has focused almost exclusively on organizational strategies for managing conflict across multiple roles. However, many have emphasized the need to address how individuals can reduce interrole conflict (e.g., Eby et al., 2005). Our study filled this gap by focusing on strategies that individuals can use to manage the experience of interrole conflict—psychological detachment, cognitive avoidance, and escape avoidance. In doing so, we provide a framework for future research to examine disengagement strategies in the context of the work–life literature, as well as other realms (e.g., volunteer).

Our second contribution is the reconciliation of the work recovery and coping literatures through the comprehensive examination of three constructs that share theoretical overlap, yet offer distinct predictions. All three reflect disengagement strategies, yet are unique. Detachment is conceptualized as a strategy of not thinking about one's responsibilities in order to recover needed resources. Cognitive avoidance is similarly conceptualized as a strategy of not thinking about one's responsibilities. Escape avoidance reflects

Table 5  
Family-Based Regression Analyses

	T2 Family Satisfaction			
	$\beta$	<i>SE</i>	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1: Controls			.03	
Age	-.17*	.14*		
Sex	.09	.12		
Hours worked/week	-.03	.12		
Step 2: Main effects			.08	.05
T1 family conflict	-.14	.10		
T1 psychological detachment	-.04	.10		
T1 cognitive avoidance	-.01	.11		
T1 escape avoidance	-.13	.12		
Step 3: Two-way interactions			.11	.04
T1 family conflict X				
T1 psychological detachment	-.06	.07		
T1 family conflict X				
T1 cognitive avoidance	.18	.08		
T1 family conflict X				
T1 escape avoidance	-.20*	.09*		
T1 psychological detachment X				
T1 cognitive avoidance	-.07	.08		
Step 4: Three-way interaction			.11	.00
T1 family conflict X				
T1 psychological detachment X				
T1 cognitive avoidance	-.04	.05		

Note.  $N = 160$ . T1 = Time 1 variable. T2 = Time 2 variable.

\*  $p < .05$ .

a strategy of evading one's responsibilities. Findings from the moderated multiple regression analyses also provide empirical support for the conceptual distinction between these constructs. Consistent with predictions, we found that escape avoidance is a detrimental strategy for managing role conflict, in that it exacerbates the negative effect of work, school, and family conflict on work, school, and family satisfaction. In contrast, cognitive avoidance is an adaptive strategy that buffers the negative relationship between school conflict and school satisfaction. Detachment on its own did not have an effect on the relationship between the various conflict domains and corresponding domain satisfaction. Further, the correlation among these three constructs were found to be low to moderate ( $r$ s ranging from  $-.08$  to  $.33$ ), consistent with the low correlation [Sonnetag and Fritz \(2007\)](#) found between cognitive avoidance and detachment ( $r = .06$ ).

At the same time, our findings highlight the conceptual similarity across two of these constructs. As predicted, results from our three-way regression indicate that engaging in the combination of detachment and cognitive avoidance buffered the negative relationship between work conflict and work satisfaction. Taken together, these findings advance past research on coping in the work-life literature by providing an in-depth examination into disengagement strategies and providing empirical clarification of past inconsistent findings on coping strategies. These findings also provide an integrated theoretical foundation from which future investigations of disengagement strategies can be based. We encourage researchers to examine cognitive and escape avoidance separately, and to consider the joint effect of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance. This has implications for research in several fields, including work-life balance, work recovery, coping, stress, and anxiety.

Finally, we extend the examination of interrole conflict from a work and family framework to one that includes the school domain, thereby addressing a critical problem in a growing population. Findings indicated that individuals who experience conflict stemming from school responsibilities that impinge upon their work and family roles are more likely to experience lower levels of school satisfaction. Further, these findings add to the recent source-attribution perspective, which explicates how conflict in one role affects satisfaction in the originating domain ([Amstad et al., 2011](#); [Michel & Hargis, 2008](#); [Shockey & Singla, 2011](#)).

### Study Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

The current study contains two notable strengths, as well as corresponding limitations. First, we were able to collect data on predictor and criterion at two separate points in time. This helps to minimize concerns over common method bias ([Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003](#)). We do, however, acknowledge that some caution needs to be applied when interpreting the causal nature of these results, as this is not a true experimental design. Specifically, it is possible that satisfaction levels had an impact on the experience of interrole conflict. Nevertheless, our research is consistent with past work demonstrating that work-family conflict affects satisfaction over time (e.g., [Grandey, Cordeiro, & Crouter, 2005](#)).

An additional strength of the current study is that we focused on an important yet overlooked group of individuals faced with the

challenge of managing three important roles. This represented a unique opportunity to examine how individuals manage school, family, and work. Nevertheless, future work should expand these results to consider mature students, for example individuals who are in executive programs or continuing education courses.

Given that this is the first study to theoretically and empirically examine psychological disengagement strategies in the context of work recovery and coping, there are a number of avenues for future research. First, this study presented a framework outlining adaptive and maladaptive disengagement strategies and considered similarities and differences among them, thus providing a foundation for future work. One possibility is consideration of the temporal distinction between the detachment and coping constructs. The work recovery literature suggests that individuals should benefit from momentarily detaching during periods that are not designated work hours, implying a short-term process of recovery ([Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007](#)). In contrast, the coping literature typically frames avoidance coping from a dispositional perspective (e.g., [Carver & Scheier, 1994](#)), implying a long-term strategy. Research is needed to determine a precise time frame by which these constructs operate. Experience sampling methodology would be valuable in this regard, particularly if used in combination with longitudinal assessments.

Future research should also examine the role of disengagement strategies in promoting or suppressing enrichment across multiple life roles (interrole facilitation; [Greenhaus & Powell, 2006](#)). Given that strategies such as psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance allow individuals to replenish depleted resources, these strategies should promote enrichment across work, family, and school, and their combined effect would similarly be expected to facilitate role enhancement. Escape avoidance should work against role enhancement given its focus on maladaptive cognitive strategies. Further, given that negative experiences tend to overshadow positive ones ([Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001](#)), research may find that disengagement strategies have a stronger effect on the experience of conflict than on enrichment.

Finally, future research should extend consideration of interrole conflict to other role domains, such as volunteer roles and/or coaching roles. We would expect conflict to similarly exert an effect on the originating domain. Consideration of the individual and combined effects of disengagement strategies on more proximal outcomes, such as weekly levels of well-being, stress, burn-out, and satisfaction, as well as on outcomes that extend beyond satisfaction and well-being, such as general levels of task and extra role performance, would also be valuable.

### Practical Implications

This study points to the value of psychologically disengaging from one's role responsibilities in order to mitigate the negative consequence of work, family, and school conflict. This facilitates the management of multirole responsibilities and further contributes to minimizing the potentially harmful effects of conflict among one's roles. Findings also suggest that engaging in low levels of psychological detachment and cognitive avoidance strategies is particularly detrimental, especially when dealing with role conflict stemming from work demands. In fact, participating in these strategies even moderately is beneficial, as it will decrease



the likelihood that conflict across the work role will lead to lower work satisfaction.

These findings have important implications for individuals, organizations, and educational institutions. They suggest that students and employees should be encouraged to psychologically disengage as an adaptive means of managing multiple role responsibilities. This can be accomplished by ensuring that individuals have designated spaces (e.g., communal student areas, employee lounges) to do so. Our findings also extend past research that has pointed to strategies such as meditation (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004) and building support networks (Sonnentag, 2001) as a means of recovering resources, by highlighting the importance of completely disengaging from thoughts of work, school, or family. In other words, regardless of the specific activity chosen for recovery, the beneficial effects may not be realized unless one also mentally distances from role responsibilities. Recovery will not be maximized if individuals are participating in these activities while thinking about role-related demands (i.e., work projects).

From a practical perspective, our findings also point to the detrimental impact of escape avoidance coping, as they suggest that fantasizing or having irrational thoughts carries maladaptive consequences. Instead of using escape avoidance, individuals should strive to approach problems with a proactive and rational mindset. Several techniques drawn from the clinical psychology literature may help in doing this. For example, positive self-talk (Meichenbaum, 1975) involves changing negative, dysfunctional self-statements (e.g., "I wish the problem would go away") to positive, functional self-statements (e.g., "I can break the problem into smaller steps and face them one by one"). The clinical approach of mindfulness therapy may also prove advantageous, as it involves self-regulation and encourages individuals to recognize thought patterns and develop habits of awareness that are focused on acceptance of thoughts (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005). This type of training has been used to reduce stress and anxiety (Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010).

### Conclusion

Our research focuses on the buffering, or exacerbating, effect of disengagement strategies in the context of managing work, family, and school roles, and integrates two distinct literatures that discuss disengagement strategies. Practically, this study points to the value of "clearing your mind"—cognitively avoiding and psychologically detaching from one's role responsibilities to avoid exacerbating the negative consequence of interrole conflict on satisfaction. It further cautions against the use of escapist coping strategies in managing multiple responsibilities from work, family, and school. We hope this work stimulates additional research that examines nuanced associations between multiple life roles, and that bridges the gap between the work recovery and coping literatures.

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Received July 20, 2012

Revision received January 25, 2013

Accepted February 27, 2013 ■

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