As the decades progress, so do our ideas about work and family. Whereas in the mid-20th century a typical middle-class American family consisted of a breadwinner husband, a stay-at-home wife, and 2.5 children, the roles and expectations in American families today have changed. More and more women are going to work, both part-time and full-time. Nearly sixty percent of women over the age of 16 were employed in 2004, and in the same year women comprised forty-six percent of the labor force (United States Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, 2005). These changes in the work force have accordingly led to changes in the home. Women no longer have the same amount of time to dedicate to childcare and household tasks as they did in the past, yet these responsibilities cannot be shirked. Thus, employed married women are either expected to maintain the same level of involvement in the home as married women who do not work, or to have a lower level of home involvement regardless of the husband’s effort.

Either way, incongruencies in the demands of home and work are bound to arise for both women and men, leading them to experience work-family conflict (WFC) and family-work conflict (FWC). Work-family conflict can be defined as the extent to which pressures within a person’s work role interfere with responsibilities from their family role (e.g., not having time to do yard work because of a work deadline that requires extra hours; Grant-Vallone & Donaldson, 2001). In contrast, family-work conflict is experienced within the work domain and can be defined as the extent to which pressures within a person’s family role interfere with obligations from their work role (e.g., missing work in order to take care of a sick child). Because WFC has been shown to negatively impact a person’s overall well-being (Grant-Vallone & Donaldson), researchers should continue to gather information about which factors contribute to work and family interference and who these conflicts burden most frequently.

The Role of Stress

Previous studies have shown that WFC is negatively related to overall well-being (Grant-Vallone & Donaldson, 2001) and positively related to psychological distress (Noo, 2002). It is not a far stretch then, to hypothesize that WFC also is associated with high levels of stress. In fact, Fox and Dwyer (1999)
found that three workplace stressors (workload, work variability, and frequency of stressful events) were significantly associated with WFC in their study. These authors also reported that three family stressors (marital tension, no spouse help, and lack of child care) were significantly related to WFC.

While these findings are important, generalizing Fox and Dwyer’s (1999) results can be difficult because of their unique sample of female nurses. Also, even though they found the occurrence of certain stressors to be positively correlated with WFC and FWC, they did not measure their participants’ perceived levels of stress. In their conceptualization, Cohen, Kessler, and Underwood (1995) define stress as the response arising when the requirements of a situation exceed subjective appraisals of one’s ability to cope. Using this definition as a guide, the authors of this study believe it is important to focus on individuals’ perceptions of their own stress rather than the number of stressors present. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine whether individuals’ reports of stress are related to their reports of WFC and FWC.

Parenthood

Parenthood is another factor which has been linked to WFC. Recently, Winslow (2005) found that employed individuals with children under the age of eighteen experienced more WFC than did employed nonparents, regardless of the employee’s gender. However, Winslow’s definition of WFC included both work interfering with family, as well as family interfering with work, and did not differentiate between the two as the majority of current studies do. In another study, Grant-Vallone and Donaldson (2001) did not find a significant difference in levels of WFC between single nonparents and married parents; however, they did report that parents with young children agreed more emphatically than did other participants that they experienced high levels of WFC. In a study of dependent care responsibilities and work attitudes of federal employees, Buffardi, Smith, O’Brien, and Erdwins (1999) found that being the parent of a preschool or school-aged child was related to lower satisfaction with work-family balance in dual-income participants. Going a step further, Bedeian, Beverly, and Moffett (1988) proposed that parental demands indirectly affected life satisfaction through WFC.

Gender Differences

The work and family conflict literature focuses much attention to gender differences. In a study of Israeli workers, Cinnamon and Rich (2002) found that women experience higher levels of both WFC and FWC than men, and that the occurrence of WFC is more frequent for women. Duxbury and Higgins (1991) reported similar findings in their research on American dual-income couples. These authors theorized that one reason WFC occurs less frequently in men is because they often have less home responsibilities than do women. They also proposed that WFC in women with high work involvement is influenced by anxiety and guilt surrounding their ability to perform traditional family roles. In contrast with these findings, Winslow (2005) reported no gender differences in the amount of WFC experienced by employees in her sample for either the year 1977 or 1997. However, it should again be emphasized that Winslow did not differentiate between WFC and FWC in this study, which could account for her differing results. Also, not all of her participants were in dual-income families, which could have an effect on the degree of WFC and FWC experienced.

Although gender roles have begun to change, researchers still report that women spend more time engaged in home activities such as housework and childcare than men (Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001). And even when women’s increasing work hours give them less time at home, men do not necessarily increase their share of household responsibilities (Almeida, Maggs, & Galambos, 1998). It seems then that women maintain more home responsibilities than their husbands, despite being employed outside the home. This imbalance in family obligations could cause women to experience more conflict between work and family than men.

In summary, interest in the study of work and family conflict in dual-income couples has increased throughout recent decades, but there is still a need for research in many specific areas of this topic. Specifically, the differences between work interfering with family and family interfering with work should be addressed, as the relationship is not necessarily bidirectional. Also, because the actual number of stressors present in either work or family settings may differ from individuals’ perceptions of their own stress, participant self-reports of stress should be used in the analysis of the effects of stress on WFC and FWC. Finally, since conclusions regarding the amount of WFC and FWC experienced by men versus the amount experienced by women have thus far been contradictory, more research should be conducted on this topic in an effort to bring resolution to this discussion.

Keeping these research needs in mind, the authors of the current study have three main goals: to determine the relationship between the perceived stress of individuals in dual-income couples and their reports of WFC and FWC; to explore the effect of parenthood on the levels of stress, WFC, and FWC experienced by
individuals in dual-income couples; and to examine gender differences with these variables.

The first hypothesis is that individuals in dual-income couples with high levels of WFC will report higher levels of stress than individuals in dual-income couples with lower levels of WFC. This same pattern of findings is expected when reports of FWC and stress are analyzed.

Also, the authors of the current study make several hypotheses regarding parenthood: First, individuals in dual-income couples with young children (ages 9 and under) will have higher levels of WFC and FWC than nonparents and individuals with older children (ages 10 and older). In addition, individuals in dual-income couples with young children will report higher levels of stress than nonparents and individuals with older children.

Finally, with regards to the debate over gender differences in work and family conflict, the authors of the current study propose that dual-income women will have greater stress than will men in dual-income couples.

The authors would like to address the use of the term dual-income in this study. Throughout the literature, several terms are used to refer to working couples including dual-earner, dual-income, and dual-career; however, these terms are not clearly defined and are sometimes used interchangeably. Some researchers have attempted to define these terms (Hiller and Dyehouse, 1987), but there is not yet a consensus as to how they should be operationalized. For the purpose of this study, the authors chose to describe the participants as dual-income because it is a more inclusive term than dual-career and does not exclude individuals or couples who consider their employment to be a job rather than a career.

Method

Participants

Participants included 173 heterosexual dual-income couples who were married at the time of data collection. The majority of the sample was White (85.0%), followed by 11.0% Black, 1.4% Hispanic, and 2.7% who identified themselves as other. Women ranged from 21 to 65 years of age, with a mean of 44 years. Men were between the ages of 21 and 74, with a mean of 46 years. The average length of marriage for couples was 17 years. Most couples had children (71.9%), but fewer than half of all couples had children living at home (49.3%). Men spent slightly more hours at work (45) on average than did women (39). The sample was highly educated, with 36% of women and 32% of men receiving a bachelor’s degree, and 38% of women and 40% of men receiving a masters degree or higher. The vast majority of participants were employed in white collar occupations (90.8% of women and 89.4% of men). Couples’ combined incomes ranged from $20,000 to over $150,000, with an average between $90,000 and $99,000 per year.

Materials

Demographics. Each spouse in the dual-income couples completed a separate questionnaire. All participants were asked to report demographic information including age, race, education level, hours worked per week, and number and age of all children, specifically children living at home. Questionnaires were identical for each spouse and included 24 items assessing three variables: stress, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict.

Stress. The 14-item Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) developed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) was used to measure stress. An example item includes, "In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?" Items were rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, never to very often, with higher scores indicating greater perceived stress. For the three samples used by Cohen et al., coefficient alphas for the PSS ranged from .84 to .86. An alpha coefficient of .86 was found by the authors of the current study. Cohen et al. compared the PSS to the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depressive Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977), which measures depressive symptomatology and found that the PSS measured a different and independent predictive construct.

Work-family conflict and family-work conflict. The five-item Work-family Conflict Scale and five-item Family-work Conflict Scale developed by Netemeyer, Boles, and McMurrian (1996) were used. An example item from the Family-work Conflict Scale includes "The demands of my work interfere with my home and family life," and an example item from the Family-work Conflict Scale includes "Things I want to do at work don’t get done because of the demands of my family or partner." Responses were rated on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) with higher scores indicating greater WFC or FWC. Netemeyer et al. reported alpha coefficients of .88 to .89 for the Work-family Conflict Scale and .83 to .89 for the Family-work Conflict Scale. The authors of the current study found alpha coefficients of .90 and .82 for the Work-family Conflict Scale and Family-work Conflict Scale, respectively. Negative correlations between WFC and FWC and organizational commitment and job satisfaction were provided by Netemeyer et al. as evidence for the construct validity of...
their scales. They also found positive correlations with job tension, role conflict, role ambiguity, intention-to-leave an organization, and search-for-another-job.

Procedure

The current research was part of a larger study of work and family conflict. Researchers personally approached 812 dual-income and single-income couples to complete the questionnaire using the snow-ball sampling technique; however, only dual-income couples were included in this study. Couples were from 18 states, with 88% of couples living in southern states. Identical paper-based questionnaires and online surveys were used. Participants were instructed to complete the survey independently and were discouraged from discussing their answers with their spouses. Responses were anonymous, and individuals were matched to their spouses based on a mutually agreed upon code word, and if this method failed, by their wedding date. Of the 812 couples who were approached, 283 matching pairs of questionnaires were returned by mail or completed online. An additional 144 surveys received were unable to be matched, yielding a response rate of 33% for individual surveys. Of the total number of dual-income and single-income couples who responded to this survey, 173 dual-income couples were included in this study.

Results

It was expected that individuals in dual-income couples with high levels of WFC would report higher levels of stress than individuals in dual-income couples with lower levels of WFC. Additionally, the same pattern of results was expected in relation to FWC and stress. To test these hypotheses, groups were divided upon code word, and if this method failed, by their wedding date. Of the 812 couples who were approached, 283 matching pairs of questionnaires were returned by mail or completed online. An additional 144 surveys received were unable to be matched, yielding a response rate of 33% for individual surveys. Of the total number of dual-income and single-income couples who responded to this survey, 173 dual-income couples were included in this study.

Discussion

This study yielded several important findings. Dual-income couples with high levels of WFC and FWC reported higher levels of stress than individuals in dual-income couples with lower levels of WFC and FWC, respectively. No gender differences were found in the degree of WFC or FWC experienced, but women reported higher levels of stress than men. Individuals in dual-income couples with young children reported more WFC and FWC than nonparents and individuals with older children; however, there were no significant differences in reports of stress between these groups.

The authors hypothesized that women in this study would report experiencing higher levels of WFC, FWC, and stress than men. Surprisingly, independent samples t test revealed that men and women did not differ in the degree of WFC experienced, t(337) = 1.56, ns, nor in the degree of FWC experienced, t(335) = .54, ns. However, there was a gender difference in the degree of stress experienced, t(327) = 4.42, p < .01, with women (M = 38.28, SD = 7.64) experiencing greater stress than men (M = 34.67, SD = 7.17).

In regards to parenthood, it was expected that individuals in this study with young children would report higher levels of WFC, FWC, and stress than individuals with older children and nonparents. As was predicted, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed significant differences among individuals in dual-income couples with young children, individuals with older children and nonparents on their reports of WFC, F(2, 329) = 3.55, p < .05. The Scheffé post hoc analysis indicated that the significant difference (p = .033) occurred between the individuals with young children (M = 14.46, SD = 5.25) and individuals with older children (M = 12.56, SD = 4.75). A second one-way ANOVA showed significant differences among individuals in dual-income couples with young children, older children, and no children on their reports of FWC, F(2, 327) = 8.32, p < .01. The Scheffé post hoc analysis indicated a significant difference (p = .01) between individuals with young children (M = 11.57, SD = 4.41) and individuals with no children (M = 9.15, SD = 3.39), as well as a difference (p = .01) between individuals with young children and individuals with older children (M = 9.56, SD = 3.84). Contrary to expectations, significant differences were not found among individuals with young children, older children, or no children when looking at levels of stress. This hypothesis was analyzed using a one-way ANOVA, F(2, 319) = 1.12, ns.
& Higgins, 1991) have found that women experience higher levels of both WFC and FWC than men, but other research (e.g., Winslow, 2005) did not show gender differences in work and family conflict, and still others (e.g., McElwain, Korabik, & Rosin, 2005) reported that women had higher levels of WFC, but found no gender differences in WFC. Although contrary to the authors’ hypotheses, the results of the current study support Winslow’s findings of no differences between men and women’s reports of WFC and FWC. It is difficult to determine whether there are in fact no gender differences on these variables, or whether the lack of gender differences in this study is due to characteristics of the sample such as type of employment or hours worked per week.

Past literature supports the finding in this study that parents of young children experienced higher levels of WFC and FWC than nonparents and parents of older children (Grant-Vallone & Donaldson, 2002; Winslow, 2005). Although WFC and FWC are related to stress, and being the parent of a young child is related to work and family conflict, this study did not find the presence of young children in the home to be significantly related to stress. This could be because individuals in dual-income families feel so much stress in their lives that the presence or absence of young children is not enough to make a large impact on the degree of stress they experience.

Several limitations of this study should be taken into consideration when reviewing the results, mainly in regards to the sample. Firstly, despite the researchers’ best efforts at recruiting a diverse sample, the majority of the participants were White. Also, the sample had a higher median income than the actual U.S. population, making generalization of the results to dual-income couples with a lower socio-economic status questionable. In addition, the majority of participants in this study were highly educated, and may not be representative of the population; however, the number of high school graduates enrolling in colleges and universities is on the rise (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2005), so more and more of the population is receiving higher education. Finally, even though participants were instructed not to discuss the questionnaires with their spouses, there was no way for the researchers to ensure participants followed this procedure. It is possible that participants who did communicate with their spouse about the questionnaire responded differently than they would have had the questionnaire not been discussed.

Despite these mentioned limitations, this study has many strengths. Previous work and family conflict research has not always differentiated between WFC and FWC (Winslow, 2005). The authors of the present study felt that the distinction between the two was important, and so examined them separately. Also, this study evaluated participants’ perceived levels of stress rather than the number of environmental stressors present, since people’s perceptions are germane to their feelings. In addition, this study contributed to the growing debate over gender differences in the work and family conflict literature. Finally, the impact of children on work and family conflict was addressed, a topic which has been thus far understudied.

This study has several important implications. First, levels of WFC and FWC are lower for parents of older children than for parents of younger children; therefore, as individuals’ children grow up, they can expect their overall experience of work and family conflict to subside somewhat. It is important for parents of young children to know that they can look forward to lower levels of work and family conflict in the future.

Also, since this study revealed that high levels of WFC and FWC lead to high levels of stress, it would follow that reducing the levels of WFC and FWC would result in less stress. Reducing work and family conflict would be especially beneficial for women, since they experience higher levels of stress than do men.

Several research questions arise in light of the current study’s findings that should be addressed by future work and family conflict studies. Since both WFC and FWC lead to stress, the factors causing WFC and FWC should be determined. Once these factors are identified, it would then be important for researchers to suggest ways in which they could be lessened or eliminated, so that people are presented with tangible ways to reduce the work and family conflict in their lives.

Children of all ages, but especially young children living in the home, contribute to the degree of WFC and FWC experienced. It would be worthwhile for researchers to examine whether the utilization of childcare reduces the amount of WFC parents experience. Also, it would be interesting to determine whether the number of children living in the home impacts WFC and FWC.

The discussion on gender differences in the work and family conflict literature has been thus far inconclusive, probably as a result of the variety of samples used. Therefore, it would be beneficial for researchers to conduct a meta-analysis to determine whether gender differences in the degree of WFC and FWC experienced actually exist.
References