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HOW WELL DO SPOUSES RATE THEIR PARTNERS' WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT?
PERCEPTION DISCREPANCIES AND MARITAL QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between how accurately spouses perceive their employed wives' or husbands' work-family conflict (i.e. work-family conflict discrepancy) and couples' reports of marital quality (i.e. marital support and strain). Data came from a sample of 425 couples who participated in the Work- Family Health Network Study. Employees in an IT telecommunications company were recruited to participate as well as their spouses. The findings indicate that spouses are more likely to under or overestimate employees' work-family conflict than accurately estimate it. ANCOVA results showed that work-family conflict discrepancy (over, under, or accurate) reports were only significantly associated with spouses' reports of marital quality. Work-family conflict discrepancy was not associated with employees' reports of marital quality. There were no gender differences in work-family conflict discrepancy. However, there was a significant work-family conflict discrepancy by spouse gender interaction predicting employee report of marital strain. When husbands accurately reported on employed wives' work-family conflict, their employed wives reported significantly less strain than when wives were accurate or over-report employed husbands' work-family conflict. We consider the implications of our findings for research and practitioners' roles in couples' experiences of work-family conflict and marital quality.

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INTRODUCTION

Balancing work and family in modern society is a challenging task for couples. Individuals can experience conflict between work and family roles when the demands are incompatible in some way, either due to time constraints, psychological strain, or behavioral expectations (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Research has shown that work-family conflict is associated with lower satisfaction with individuals' jobs (Adams, King, & King, 1996; Frone, Barnes, & Farrell, 1994), marriage (Coverman, 1989), and family (Carlson, KacMar, & Williams, 2000; Frone, Barnes, & Farrell, 1994). Poor job outcomes associated with high work-family conflict include increased stress, turnover, and absenteeism and lower productivity in the workplace, a significant concern for employers (Allen & Herst, 2000). Furthermore, work-family conflict can lead to negative emotional displays and blame attributions amongst couples, resulting in lower marital quality and family satisfaction (Green, Schaefer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2010). Thus, work-family conflict is an important issue not only for working adults' health and well-being, but couples', too.

The primary focus of researchers studying work-family conflict has been based on individuals' reports (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Bellavia & Frone, 2005). In these studies, individuals reflected on their own experiences of work-family conflict and their perceptions were linked to individual outcomes. Studying work-family conflict at the couple level, however, is important for various reasons. First, although not all couples in the present sample are both working, the number of couples in dual-earner relationships has dramatically increased in the last two decades (Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Staines & Pleck, 1983). The percent of married and working women with young children increased by over thirty-one percent between 1970 and 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Second, the evidence of crossover effects, when the stress of

one partner influences the other partner, highlights the fact that work-family conflict can be a shared experience for couples (Westman, 2001). Moreover, to cope with the strains of the demanding workforce, couples may adopt specific strategies to help one another cope with work-family conflict as well as protect the relationship (Becker & Moen, 1999). Overall, because the majority of couples living in the U.S. are currently in dual-earner relationships, it is important to understand how well couples are coping with the stress of managing multiple, demanding work and family roles together rather than individually. One step toward this goal is investigating how well spouses can perceive each other's work-family conflict experiences.

The present study investigated how well spouses perceive their partners' experiences of work-family conflict and the implications of the accuracy for their marriage. The sample is comprised of 425 married couples who participated in a larger study about the effects of workplace practices for employee, family, and organizational well-being. Within each couple unit, the target employee, who was recruited for participation in the larger study, reported on his/her own work-family conflict at his/her workplace, and the spouse of the target employee rated the target employees' work-family conflict a via telephone interview. The two reports were compared to determine how well spouses understand the employees' experiences. We addressed the following questions: (a) How accurate are spouses' perceptions of the target employees' reports of work-family conflict? (b) How does spousal support and strain differ depending on whether the spouse over, under, or accurately reports on employees' work-to-family conflict? and (c) Does the association between the accuracy of spouses' perceptions of employee WFC (i.e., over, under, or accurate) and relationship quality differ by spouses' gender?

THEORHETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is based on two theoretical frameworks: family systems theory and symbolic interactionism. Family systems theory states that each member of the family influences and is influenced by every other member (Cox & Paley, 2003). By interacting with each other, experiences within each couple unit are interconnected. Thus, interactions can enable spouses to learn about each other's experiences of work-family conflict and influence their perceptions of marital quality as a result. Therefore, it is important to study individuals within the context of their families and the subsystems within the family, such as the marital relationship (Cox & Paley, 2003).

An important tenet of family systems theory is that each family member must adjust when faced with new circumstances. How well couples work together when faced with new challenges, such as difficult experiences with work-family conflict, can influence both individual well-being and perceived marital quality. If marital quality is reduced as a result of work-family conflict, individuals' well-being may be negatively impacted and vice versa. (Cox & Paley, 2003). Perceptions of work-family conflict may have the ability to impact marital quality because they can influence couples' behaviors and attitudes towards each other. For instance, husbands who do not understand how stressed their wives are may not realize that their wives are in need of more spousal supportive behaviors, such as helping with household chores or taking care of children. In short, each spouse may influence, and be influenced by their spouses' perceptions. As such, we investigate how accurately couples perceive each other's' work-family conflict because it can potentially increase or decrease marital quality.

The present study is also largely based on symbolic interaction theory, which focuses on how individuals within the family unit interact through the use of symbols such as words,

behaviors, and roles (Charon, 1995). Within families, symbolic interactionism suggests that each individual has a personal set of symbols that are significant because they express meaning to the self and others through communication (Charon, 1995). This concept is important because couples can use specific words and behaviors to communicate emotions, such as frustration and concern, when discussing work-family conflict with their spouses. If the symbols are misinterpreted, couples may face difficulty communicating and sharing their experiences. As a result, the marriage may suffer in the form of reduced spousal support and increased spousal strain.

An important component of symbolic interaction theory is the concept of role-taking. Role-taking is best described as taking the perspective of another individual or imagining the world in their shoes (Charon, 1995). When individuals are experiencing work-family conflict, role-taking may help partners understand each other's feelings of stress or strain due to conflicting demands. If spouses cannot engage in role-taking effectively, they may be more likely to inaccurately perceive their partners' work-family conflict experience. As a result, inaccurate perceptions may lead to marital problems such as lack of understanding and ineffective communication (Charon, 1995). These problems can potentially lead to lower marital quality, operationalized here as decreased spousal support and increased spousal strain. Conversely, if couples accurately interpret their partners' symbols, behaviors and words by engaging in role-taking, they should have more accurate perceptions of work-family conflict and therefore better reports of relationship quality.

Work-family Conflict and Couples

Existing studies of perceived work-family conflict at the individual level have noted that an important next step is to examine perceptions of work-family conflict at the couple level (Milkie, 2010). Jones and Fletcher (1993) the first researchers to attempt to fill this gap in by investigating how accurately couples perceived each other's work stressors. The majority of couples in their sample were found to have accurate perceptions of their partners' perceived work strains. Men and women were accurate 78.4% and 64.7% of the time, respectively. However, they did not investigate the quality of the couples' marital relationships. Instead, Jones and Fletcher measured the direction and extent of occupational stress crossing over to partners' psychological strain levels and mental well-being. This gap in research creates the need to study couple perceptions and marital quality.

Research that examines other important relationship measures, such as spousal support and strain, is also needed. Whalen (2000) investigated the association between spousal supportive and strain behaviors and individual well-being and health. Partner support and strain were predictive of well-being measures such as life satisfaction and positive and negative mood. Partner strain was predictive of health problems including diabetes, stroke, and heart attacks. Thus, because marital supportive and strain behaviors can have effects on individuals, it is important to understand how work-family conflict can influence these behaviors. The present study aims at closing some of the gaps in this area of research.

Most closely related to the present study is Nomaguchi and Milkie's (2011) study of couples' perceptions of work-family conflict and relationship quality. Over half of their sample reported inaccurate perceptions of their partners' perceived work-family conflict. Husbands were more likely to overestimate wives' work-family conflict. Conversely, wives were more likely to

underestimate husbands' work-family conflict, though not statistically significant. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2011) also found that inaccurate perceptions were associated with relationship quality. When husbands overestimated their wives' work-family conflict, husbands reported higher relationship satisfaction. When wives underestimated their husbands' work-family conflict, both spouses reported lower relationship satisfaction. These findings suggest that gender may play a key role in how accurately partners' perceptions of work-family conflict are.

The Role of Gender

Role-taking is based on the notion that shared meanings develop among people through social interactions. From these interactions, shared meanings of gender are derived. It is important to mention gender because it may influence the accuracy of couple perceptions and, in turn, marital quality. Gender and gender roles are learned across the lifespan and instruct men and women regarding how they "should" feel about and behave in their work and family roles (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Milkie, 1999). Traditionally, women do the majority of household chores and childrearing regardless of their job status (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1996). Conversely, men are still expected to invest more time in their job responsibilities before their family responsibilities, potentially leading to wives' own perceptions of high work-family conflict (Duxbury, 1991). In sum, gender and the expectations associated with being male or female may present an obstacle for couples experiencing work-family conflict, and may explain the accuracy of perceptions and associated marital quality.

Role-taking enables individuals to be more mindful of others' experiences and adapt their own behavior in response. Research suggests that women role-take more frequently and exhibit more competence in role-taking (Cast, 2004). One potential reason for this is women are more likely to partake in both paid and household labor. As a result, their experiences may better equip

them to understand men's views of work and family because they typically balance both roles more frequently (Collins, 1992). Men, on the other hand, are less likely to role-take and therefore are more likely to inaccurately estimate their spouses' perceived work-family conflict.

Nomaguchi and Milkie (2011) studied couples' perceptions of work-family conflict and how they are associated with relationship satisfaction. Using symbolic interactionism to explain gender differences, they argued that gendered cultural expectations for men and women are prevalent in modern day relationships. Husbands overestimating wives' work-family conflict was associated with husbands' perceptions of better marital quality. This finding may be due to cultural expectations and beliefs in our society that women "should" want to feel at home. On the other hand, wives underestimating husbands' conflict was associated with both spouses' perceptions of poorer relationship quality. A possible explanation for this is that women assume men do not place being a caretaker in the household as a main priority. As a result, women typically report that men do not experience high work-family conflict even though that assumption may be inaccurate (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2011). Although not measuring gender roles in this study, we test whether accuracy of perceptions and marital quality depend on spouse gender.

The Present Study

The growing number of dual-earner couples has increased the need for research on couples' perceptions of work-family conflict and marital quality. The present study attempts to address some of the gaps in this area of research by replicating and extending the work done by Nomaguchi and Milkie (2011). We take a similar approach by grouping couples into three categories: (1) spouse underestimated; (2) was accurate; (3) or overestimated their employed spouses' work-family conflict and tested the relationship of accuracy of perceptions to

relationship quality. We also examine gender differences using symbolic interactionist theory, and extend upon the findings by applying the concept of role-taking to explain the relationship of couples' perceptions of work-family conflict and marital quality.

We extend upon existing research in several ways. First, we measure relationship quality only amongst married couples, excluding cohabiting couples. This allows for a deeper understanding of work-family conflict and relationship quality specific to the marital context. Research has shown that married and cohabiting couples differ in how they act, such as how the division of labor is determined within the household. Specifically, being a married woman is associated with doing more housework than a cohabiting woman (Shelton & John, 1993). Furthermore, when couples are married, traditional roles tend to dominate the relationship due to socially constructed ideologies. These ideologies do not hold true in cohabiting relationships (Stafford et al., 1977). These research findings suggest that women's roles depend on marital status. Thus, we restrict the sample to married couples.

Second, we try to get a more complete picture of marital quality by assessing both positive (i.e., marital support) and negative (i.e., marital strain) dimensions of the marital relationship. Nomaguchi and Milkie (2011) operationalized relationship quality based on supportive and positive marital behaviors such as emotional support, the sense of still being in love, and relationship happiness. Investigating strain behaviors in marital relationships, such as criticism and arguments, will allow us to test if work-family conflict discrepancy is linked to negative dimensions of the marital relationship. Third, we will assess work-family conflict with a reliable and well-validated five-item scale by Netmeyer et al. (1996), as opposed to the two-item scale used in Nomaguchi and Milkie (2011).

In sum, based on family systems and symbolic interactionism theoretical frameworks, and existing research, we address the following questions and hypothesize:

Research Question 1: How accurately do spouses report on the target employees' experience of work-family conflict?

H1a: The majority of couples will have a spouse who over or underestimates employees' work-to-family conflict.

H1b: Wives will be more likely to accurately report employees' work-to-family conflict than husbands. Husbands will be more likely to overestimate their employed wives' work-family conflict.

Research Question 2: To what extent is the work-family conflict discrepancy of spouses' ratings associated with marital support and strain?

H2: Compared to spouses who over or under-reported employees work-family conflict, spouses who were accurate will report higher support and lower strain in the relationship. This will also hold true for employee reports of the relationship.

Research Question 3: Do the associations between work-family conflict discrepancy and marital quality differ by spouse gender?

H3a: Under-estimating work-family conflict will be associated with lower support and higher strain, but only when the spouse is male.

H3b: Over-estimating work-family conflict will be associated with higher support and lower strain when the spouse is female.

We control for demographic characteristics that may influence perceptions of marital quality and work-family conflict. These characteristics are race, marital duration, presence of children, and spouse gender.

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Data were drawn from a larger study known as the Work, Family Health Study (King, Karuntzos, Casper, Moen, Davis, Berkman, Durham, & Kossek, 2013). The aim of the larger study was to evaluate specific workplace practices in relation to work-family conflict and the well-being of employees, families, and the organizations over a period of eighteen months. Data were collected from 823 employees in 26 different work groups in an IT telecommunications company. From this sample, data were also collected from all willing married individuals and partners of the target employees ($N = 455$). From the 455 couples with employee and spouse/partner data, 30 were dropped if they were in a cohabiting relationship given that past research has shown that different processes may occur between married and cohabiting couples (Stafford et al., 1977; Shelton et al., 1993). This brings the final sample size to 425 married employees and spouses. For the purpose of this study, we used data collected at baseline.

Data for the present study were collected from Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) instruments developed for the target employees and the target employees' spouses. Employees were interviewed in the workplace about their work conditions, health, stress, parent-child relationship, and marital quality. Employees' spouses were interviewed via telephone on their own work, family, and health and also rated the employees' experiences.

Table 1 highlights background information about the target employees and their spouses. The sample of target employees was comprised of 68% males with an average age of 46 years old ($SD = 8.68$). The majority of employees was White (69%) and had completed at least four or more years of education after high school (80%). The employees, on average, worked about 46 hours per week and worked for their respective company for about 14 years. Sixty-seven percent

reported having children in the home and were married for an average of sixteen and a half years. Seventy-one percent reported making greater than or equal to \$100,000 per year. It is important to note, however, that only 384 employees disclosed their total household income.

The sample of the target employees' spouses was comprised of a mostly White (70%), working (77%), and college educated (65%). Employees' spouses were an average of 45 years old and mostly female (68%).

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Target Employees and Spouses* (N = 425)

Target Employee	M or %	SD	Range
Male	68%		
College education or more	80%		
Non-Hispanic/White	69%		
Children in home	67%		
Age	45.99	8.68	27-70
Work hours/week	45.55	5.61	30-70
Company tenure (yrs.)	13.85	8.90	.16-42
Marital duration (yrs.)	16.57	9.76	.25-45.83
Household Income	132,620.69	40,035.18	83,000-240,000
Spouse			
Female	68%		
College education or more	65%		
Non-Hispanic/White	70%		
Age	45.25	9.32	26-71
Work status (working)	77%		

^a Only 384 employees disclosed their total household income.

Measures

Work-family Conflict Discrepancy. First, work-to-family conflict was measured by a scale developed by Netmeyer and colleagues (1996). The scale measures how much time and effort devoted to work roles conflicts with family responsibilities. The scale has five items and Likert response options (1= *strongly disagree*, 2= *disagree*, 3= *neither*, 4= *agree*, 5= *strongly agree*). Examples of items given include, “The demands of your work interfere with your family or personal time,” “Your job produces strain that makes it difficult to fulfill your family or personal duties” and “The amount of time your job takes up makes it difficult to fulfill your family or personal responsibilities.” Items were averaged so that higher numbers indicate greater work-family conflict. Table 2 provides the means, standard deviations, ranges and Cronbach alphas. Cronbach’s alpha for work-family conflict in this sample .92.

Second, the target employees’ spouses were given the same 5 items about work-family conflict, but were reworded so the spouses rated the employees’ work-family conflict. Examples of items included are “The demands of your spouse’s work interferes with his/her family time,” “The amount of time your spouse’s job takes up makes it difficult for him/her to fulfill his/her family responsibilities,” and “Things your spouse/partner do at home do not get done because of the demands of his/her job”. Cronbach’s alpha for spouses’ report of work-family conflict in this sample was .91.

Finally, we created the work-family conflict discrepancy variable to group couples based on how accurately or inaccurately they rated employees’ work-family conflict. A difference score of zero meant that the spouses were completely accurate in estimating their employed partners’ perceived work-family conflict and were coded as “1”. If the difference score was positive, spouses overestimated the target employees’ perceived work-family conflict and were

coded as “2”. If the difference score was negative, spouses underestimated the target employees’ perceived work-family conflict and were coded as “3”.

We examined two measures of marital quality (see Table 2). *Spousal support* was the sum of 5 items asking, *How much* (a) Does your spouse/partner really care about you? (b) Does he/she understand the way you feel about things? (c) Does he/she appreciate you? (d) Can you open up to him/ her if you need to talk about your worries? (e) Can you relax and be yourself around him/her? Item values ranged from (1= *not at all* to 4= *a lot*). Employee ($\alpha=.85$) and spouse ($\alpha=.84$) reports of support were high in reliability. *Spousal strain* was the sum of 5 items asking, *How much* (a) Do you feel your spouse/partner makes too many demands on you; (b) Does he/she argue with you; (c) Does he/she make you feel tense; (d) Does he/she criticize you; (e) Does he/she get on your nerves? Higher numbers indicate more support or strain in the relationship. Employee ($\alpha=.84$) and spouse ($\alpha=.82$) reports of strain were also high in reliability.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Independent and Dependent Variables (N = 425)*

<i>Independent Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>α</i>
Employee report of WFC	3.10	.95	1-5	.92
Spouse report of E WFC	2.78	.92	1-5	.91
<i>Dependent Variables</i>				
Employee report of support	18.43	2.20	5-20	.85
Employee report of strain	9.58	3.07	5-20	.84
Spouse report of support	18.39	2.28	5-20	.84
Spouse report of strain	9.06	3.10	5-20	.82

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses examined descriptive information of the sample. We examined the means, standard deviations, ranges, skewness, and kurtosis to check for potential outliers and that the variables were normally distributed (see Table 2).

Our first research question assessed how accurate spouses' perceptions of employees' work-family conflict are. As shown in Table 2, employees tended to report neutral levels of work-family conflict when rating their own work-family conflict on a scale from 1-5 ($M = 3.10$). Spouses of the target employees, on average, underestimated the employees' work-family conflict ($M = -.32$). It is also important to note that there was a wide range in spouse discrepancy scores, however. Specifically, at least one spouse under-reported the target employees' work-family conflict by 3.6 and one over-reported by 2.6.

Next, we ran frequency models on the work-family conflict discrepancy variable we created. Table 3 shows that our first hypotheses were partially supported. The hypothesis that the majority of couples would have a spouse who over or underestimates employees' work-family conflict was fully supported. Only 8.24% of spouses accurately perceived the employees' work-family conflict, compared to the 34.59% who overestimated and the 57.18% who underestimated.

To test whether wives or husbands are significantly more likely to under, over, or accurately report employees' work-family conflict, we ran a Chi-Square test with the work-family conflict discrepancy score and spouse gender. The hypothesis that wives will be more likely to accurately report employees' work-family conflict was not supported. The Chi-Square test was not significant, indicating the cells were not significantly different from one another. Table 3 shows that 5.65% of wives were accurate compared to 2.59% of husbands. Finally, the

hypothesis that husbands would be more likely to overestimate the employees' work-family conflict was not supported. Husbands were, in fact, more likely to underestimate (38.35%) wives' work-family conflict than overestimate (24.24%), although not statistically significant.

Table 3. *Chi-Square Results of WFC Discrepancy Category by Spouse Gender (N = 425)*

WFC Discrepancy	Female (0)		Male (1)		Total	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Under-reported	163	38.35	80	18.82	243	57.18
Accurate	24	5.65	11	2.59	35	8.24
Over-reported	103	24.24	44	10.35	147	34.59
Total	290	68.24	135	31.76	425	100

Note: Chi-square was not significant ($p > .05$)

Our second research question examined how relationship support and strain differed depending on whether the spouse over, under, or accurately reported on the employees' work-to-family conflict. ANCOVA analyses were run to test mean differences in marital support and strain between couples with a wife who over, under, or accurately reported their employees' work-family conflict. We ran correlations with marital support and strain and background variables that have been shown to be associated with these dependent variables. The goal was to determine if there were third variables that could confound the findings. We ran analyses for nine demographic variables: spouse gender, employee education, employee race, presence of children in the home, whether or not the spouse worked, household income, duration of employment, hours worked per week, and marital duration.

Employee race, presence of children and spouse gender were significantly correlated with marital support and strain for both the target employees and their spouses. When employees were

White, they experienced significantly more support ($r = 0.16, p < .01$) and less strain ($r = -0.17, p < .01$). The same held true for spouses of target employees for support ($r = 0.13, p < .01$) and strain ($r = -0.15, p < .01$) outcomes. When children were present in the home, the target employees experienced significantly less support ($r = -0.13, p < .01$) and more strain ($r = 0.22, p < .01$). Employees' spouses experienced significantly less support ($r = -0.15, p < .01$) and more strain ($r = 0.18, p < .01$) when children were present in the home, as well. Finally, when spouses of the target employees were female, the employees experienced significantly more support ($r = 0.11, p < .01$). When the spouse was male, the female employees experienced significantly more strain ($r = -0.19, p < .01$). These three variables were selected as covariates. Although marital duration was not found to be significant, we still controlled for marital duration in our sample because research has shown that longer marital duration is associated with higher marital quality (Orbuch et al., 1996).

Our hypothesis that spouses' accurate reports of target employees' work-family conflict would be significantly associated with increased marital support and decreased marital strain was not fully supported. The work-family conflict discrepancy score was significantly associated with spouses' reports of support and strain ($p < .05$), but not the target employees' reports of support and strain ($p > .05$).

Spousal Support

The work-family conflict discrepancy variable was significant when predicting the spouses' reports of marital support, $F(2, 418) = 7.19, p < .05$. The results indicate that when spouses over-report how much work-family conflict the employees experiences, spouses reported significantly less marital support compared to spouses who under-reported and

accurately reported, $F(2, 418) = 8.92, p < .05$). Table 4 shows the means by work-family conflict discrepancy group.

Slight trends were also found. Spouses who accurately perceived the target employees' work-family conflict tended to report higher marital support when compared only to spouses who over-reported, $F(2, 418) = 3.27, p = .07$). Spouses who underestimated employees' work-family conflict perceived higher marital support than spouses who were accurate or overestimated the target employees' work-family conflict, $F(2, 418) = 3.79, p = .05$).

Spousal Strain

The work-family conflict discrepancy score was also significant when predicting spouses' reports of marital strain, $F(418, 2) = 4.30, p < .05$). Spouses who over-reported the target employees' work-family conflict reported significantly more strain compared to spouses who under-reported, $F(418, 2) = 8.37, p < .05$). Spouses who under-reported the target employees' work-family conflict reported significantly less strain compared to spouses who were accurate or over reported, $F(2, 418) = 4.85, p < .05$).

Table 4. *Means of Marital Support and Strain by Work-Family Conflict Discrepancy (Under-report, Accurate, Over-report)*

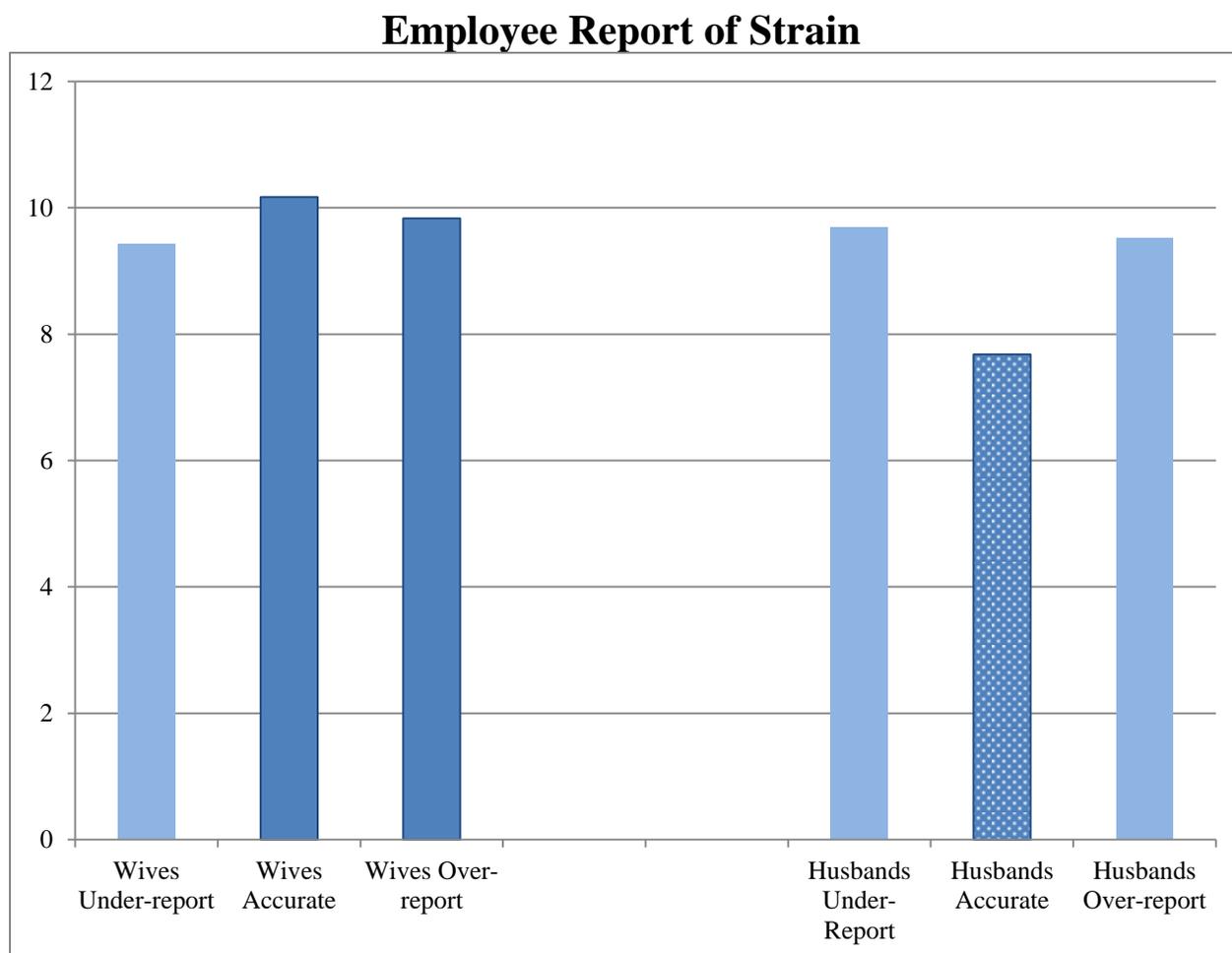
	Spouse Under-report <i>n</i> =243	Spouse Accurate <i>n</i> =35	Spouse Over-report <i>n</i> =147
<i>Employee Report</i>			
Support	18.53	18.43	18.26
Strain	9.52	9.39	9.74
<i>Spouse Report</i>			
Support	18.70 ^b	18.59 ^b	17.83 ^a
Strain	8.70 ^a	9.29 ^b	9.60 ^b

Note: Means are adjusted for race, marital duration, presence of children, and spouse gender. ^{ab} Indicates means are significantly different at $p < .05$.

Our third research question asked if the association between the accuracy of spouses' perceptions of employee work-family conflict and reports marital quality differed by spouse gender. To address this question, an interaction term between work-family conflict discrepancy and spouse gender was included in the ANCOVA model. We found a significant interaction between spouse gender and work-family conflict discrepancy predicting employee report of strain, $F(2, 416) = 2.85$ $p = .06$. It is important that this finding be interpreted with caution because the significance is just over .05. Follow-up tests using contrast statements were conducted to determine under which conditions the association between the work-family conflict discrepancy and employee strain differed by spouse gender.

Figure 1 shows the interaction between work-family conflict discrepancy and spouse gender on employees' report of marital strain. Husbands who accurately reported on employed wives' work-family conflict have employee wives who report significantly less strain compared to wives who accurately or over-reported employed husbands' work-family conflict.

Figure 1-1. *Interaction Between Work-family Conflict Discrepancy and Spouse Gender on Employees' Reports of Marital Strain*



DISCUSSION

With the growing number of dual-earner couples in today's economy, the need for research of work-family conflict with couples, as opposed to individuals, has increased. The delicate balance of work and family may affect various aspects of working individuals' lives, and marital quality is certainly an important one. We assessed the relationship between work-family conflict and marital quality, operationalized as marital support and strain, and the interaction of spouse gender. By studying both spouses' perceptions of marital quality as well as positive and negative dimensions of the marital relationship, we hoped to gain a clearer picture of couples' experiences with managing work and family and their implications for marital quality. The first theory we selected to guide our study were family systems theory to provide insight as to how couples' influence and are influenced by each other. We selected symbolic interactionism as our second theory to explain how cultural meanings of gender can influence individuals' perceptions. Specifically, symbolic interactionism theorizes that role-taking competency and understanding spouses' behaviors in marital interactions can impact marital quality. The results of the present analyses indicate that perceived work-family conflict may significantly impact perceived marital quality, but it depends on which spouse is reporting.

Only thirty-five spouses were able to accurately report the employees' work-family conflict experience. The vast majority of spouses either over or under-reported employees' work-family conflict. In Nomaguchi and Milkie (2011), less than half of their sample was able to accurately report employees' work-family conflict, as well. The low number of accurate couples may also be due to our strict measurement of accuracy (i.e., the difference=0 and not within a given range). However, our results show the number of accurate couples in the sample, and it is

important to understand that the majority of spouses have misperceptions of employees' work-family conflict even though they may be slight.

When we tested the associations between perceived work-family conflict and marital quality, we found that the work-family conflict discrepancy score was only significantly associated with the spouses' own reports of the marital quality (i.e., marital support and strain). Spouses' reports of the target employees' work-family conflict was not linked to employee reports of marital quality. A possible explanation for this finding may be the result of self-reporting bias. This particular sample of spouses may have been more likely to overestimate their employed spouses' work-family conflict to stress that work-family conflict is a serious issue in their marriages. Underestimating spouses, on the other hand, may have reported less work-family conflict for their spouses to minimize any issues within their marriages.

When spouses over-reported the employees' work-family conflict, the spouses were more likely to experience less marital support and more marital strain, contrary to Hypothesis 3b. This finding suggests that spouses experience more distress when they feel that the employees have too much work-family conflict. A possible interpretation of this finding is that the employees with spouses who over-report their work-family conflict are not as competent in balancing work and family. It is also possible that when interacting with the employees, the spouses who over-report the work-family conflict are less likely to engage in accurate role-taking. Perhaps, for instance, spouses who over-report employees' work-family conflict are more inclined to perceive any strains experienced by the employee as more conflicting than they truly are during the couples' interactions.

Spouses who under-reported the employees' work-family conflict tended to report more positive marital outcomes, such as more marital support and less strain. This finding suggests

that, in general, low work-family conflict perceptions are associated with higher marital quality. Furthermore, this association demonstrates how influential the role of perceptions may play, even when inaccurate. Although work-family conflict was underestimated, marital quality was still high. Therefore, perceptions of work-family conflict, specifically underestimating, may impact marital quality more than the actual level of employees' work-family conflict. This suggestion is consistent with prior research.

Finally, the spouses who underestimated employees' work-family conflict may simply represent a portion of the sample with "rose-colored glasses." Certain individuals may be more innately inclined to underestimate work-family conflict and perceive high marital quality, regardless of true work-family conflict levels.

We also tested the association of perceived work-family conflict and marital quality by spouse gender. Our findings indicated that work-family conflict discrepancy and spouse gender interaction was only significant when the target employees reported on their marital strain. Husbands who accurately report on wives' work-family conflict have employee wives who report significantly less strain compared to when wives are accurate or over-report employed husbands' work-family conflict. These findings did not support our third hypothesis that over-reporting wives' work-family conflict would be linked to decreased marital strain. Husbands who accurately perceive wives' work-family conflict may be competent role-takers and thus able to interpret the correct meanings of employed wives' symbols and behaviors pertaining to work-family conflict. This finding aligns with previous research that understanding work-family conflict can improve marital quality (Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998).

According to assumptions of symbolic interactionism, wives may be more likely to view their husbands' from a traditional perspective through learned meanings of what it is to be a man

or a woman (Charon, 1995). Therefore, because women may view their husbands traditionally, they may believe that husbands experience less work-family conflict because they are taught to focus on their careers and thus more likely to experience strain.

Interestingly, Nomaguchi and Milkie had different findings regarding overestimating and underestimating partners' work-family conflict. They found that husbands' overestimating wives' work-family conflict was associated with their own increased perception of marital quality. Furthermore, wives' under-reporting husbands' work-family conflict was significantly associated with husband and wives decreased marital quality. As previously mentioned, we found that underestimating work-family conflict had significant, positive effects for marital quality. These discrepant findings imply that more research is needed to understand the relationship between perceive work-family conflict and marital quality, and what role gender plays in this relationship.

The findings of this study align with evidence from previous research. Several studies, including the present, have found negative outcomes associated with work-family conflict. Specifically, work-family conflict has been linked negative behaviors and emotions within the marital relationship such as withdrawal and anger. Work-family conflict has also been shown to increase the number of negative marital interactions, and decrease marital adjustment and quality (Rogers & Amato, 2000). With that said, the present study of perceived work-family conflict and negative marital outcomes supports previous findings that work-family conflict may affect couples and, in turn, the marital relationship.

The present study has several methodological strengths. First, we used reliable and well-validated scales to assess perceived work-family conflict and marital quality. Due to the study's design, we were able to collect data from both spouses. We also matched each participant's

reports of work-family conflict and marital quality with their respective spouses. Prior research has often collected data from participants and their partners and averaged the findings. By studying employees and their spouses together, we were able to capture a more accurate description of the work-family conflict discrepancy score and each partner's perceived marital quality. An additional strength of this study is that we investigated both positive and negative dimensions of the marital relationships whereas Nomaguchi and Milkie (2011), for example, only measured positive marital outcomes. For instance, we were able to understand the negative role over-reporting work-conflict may have on couples' marital quality.

LIMITATIONS

There are limitations within this study that are important to note. First, the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow us to test causality. It may be that marital quality impacts how well spouses interpret employees' work-family conflict experience. This study is also not generalizable to various populations of people such as minorities, lower income households, or blue-collar workers because the majority of participants were White, in the middle to upper class, and working in professional organizations. Typically, these other populations have access to fewer resources, and it is important to study how being a member of minority populations affects the present study's findings.

Although we were able to test whether or not spouses accurately perceived the target employees' experiences, we were unable to study the employees' reports of their spouses' work-family conflict and the relationship to marital quality. Having both spouses report on each other's perceived work-family conflict would provide a clearer understanding of work-family conflict and perceived marital quality.

Furthermore, we cannot determine how strong of a role, if any, role-taking played when couples reported their spouses' perceived work-family conflict and marital quality. Measuring the direct interpretation of spouses' behaviors, symbols, or shared meanings in the interactions between spouses would address this limitation and yield information regarding the different perceptions by spouses.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research may address these issues in several ways. First, the literature would benefit from a longitudinal design studying the relationship between work-family conflict and marital quality. Couples' ability to accurately perceive work-family conflict may change over the course of marriage, thus impacting marital quality. It is also important to study lower income and minority households, as their experiences may drastically differ due to different daily struggles such as engaging in different types of work, working nonstandard hours, and having fewer resources (Davis et al., 2008; Demerouti, 2012; Moen et al., 2000). Third, research is needed to measure couple perceptions by a continuous variable to understand *how* accurately or inaccurately couples report on their partners' work-family conflict experience. By understanding how accurately or inaccurately couples report on each other's work-family conflict, organizations and counselors may be more equipped to design more effective interventions and processes to reduce work-family conflict and improve marital quality.

Finally, future researchers should investigate personal aspects of individuals that influence how accurately or inaccurately they are able to perceive the work-family conflict experienced by their spouses such as gender ideology and role-taking competency. Understanding what personal characteristics influence spouses' tendencies to accurately, over-report, or under-report employees' work-family can introduce new counseling techniques, as

well. Specifically, counselors can target these particular qualities of individuals' to help clients increase role-taking abilities and, in turn, enhance marital quality.

By investigating the relationship between spouses' reports of employees' work-family conflict discrepancy and marital quality and how spouse gender influences the interaction, our research contributes to the role perceptions play in marital relationships. The research presented here suggests that perceptions play a significant role in aspects of marital quality, such as support and strain. It could be that perceptions of work-family conflict have a stronger effect on marital quality than actual levels of work-family conflict. Future research in how spouses arrive at their perceptions of employees' work-family conflict is needed.

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