Gender Differences in the Psychological Impact of the Dual-Income Lifestyle
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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study was to explore gender differences in role overload, stress, and marital satisfaction in dual-income couples and to measure how these differences change over time. We expected that wives would report lower marital satisfaction and higher role overload and stress than husbands. Further, we expected that age would contribute to differences in marital satisfaction, with older adults being more satisfied than young or middle-aged adults. Married, employed men and women (N = 314) completed our survey. Women reported higher role overload and stress than men. Participants in later adulthood were more satisfied in their marriages than early or middle adults. Our study updates the literature on the examined variables and communicates the importance of egalitarianism in marriage.

Since the 1960s, more women have pursued careers outside the home. These women sought to enjoy the freedom, power, and self-fulfillment that come from vocational achievement that had previously been accessible to only men. Today, millions of women are able to call themselves career women, many of them in dual-income couples (United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2011). These women have made efforts to empower themselves and challenge the boundaries left behind by traditional gender role beliefs. However, many wives are still unequal to their working husbands because the traces of traditional household expectations are evident in the division of their household labor. Wives often perform the majority of household chores—including cooking, cleaning, and childcare—in addition to completing all job-related activities (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Home, 1998; Sayer, England, Bittman, & Bianchi, 2009).

These multiple demands make it difficult for women to fulfill the requirements of each role (Sayer et al., 2009; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998). Husbands tend to not have the same difficulties meeting the needs of their worker and husband roles (Almeida, Maggs, & Galambos, 1993). The extra work put on women in these unequal relationships can contribute to role overload and stress in the dual-income wife (Coverman, 1989; Viers & Prouty, 2001). Several factors, including the egalitarian division of labor, are important for wives’ marital satisfaction (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Meier, McNaughton-Cassill, & Lynch, 2006; Wilkie et al., 1998). The purpose of our study was to explore gender differences in role overload, stress, and marital satisfaction in dual-income couples and to measure how these experiences may differ among age groups.

Role Overload
Since women entered the workforce, there has been little adjustment in the household duties performed by both spouses (Coverman, 1989; Sayer et al., 2009). Women are still the primary caregivers for their families despite having other demands on their time (Home, 1998; Sayer et al., 2009). Women still spend up to twice as many hours devoted to house and family work as men (Meier et al., 2006; Neault & Pickerell, 2005; Parasuraman & Simmers, 2001; Sayer et al., 2009). Even when wives spend long hours at work and have less time at home, husbands do not always increase the amount of...
housework they do (Almeida et al., 1993; Meier et al., 2006).

When wives perform this proportion of household chores after performing tasks in the workplace, it can lead to role overload, which is defined as having several roles and too little time to fulfill the demands of each (Coverman, 1989). Women tend to experience much more role overload than men (Coverman, 1989; Higgins, Duxbury, & Lyons, 2010). When husbands take on more domestic responsibilities, it lowers the wives’ levels of role overload (Coverman, 1989; Frisco & Williams, 2003). If husbands and wives shared household duties more equally, time would not be as short for meeting demands, and role overload would decrease.

Stress
The multiple-role lifestyle of dual-income couples causes stress for husbands and wives (Higgins et al., 2010; Viers & Prouty, 2001). However, women in dual-income couples tend to report more stress than men (Coverman, 1989; Enrich, Hughes, & Tovey, 2007; Higgins et al., 2010; Viers & Prouty, 2001). Women may experience greater stress because role demands are higher for women than for men (Condie & Doan, 1978; Sayer et al., 2009). In their cross-sectional study of husbands and wives, Condie and Doan (1978) found that over several stages of the marital lifespan, more demands were placed upon women in each of their roles than on men. Because wives are still more responsible for performing household chores than their husbands, the stress resulting from this overload may be more prevalent among women than men (Sayer et al., 2009).

Coverman (1989) found a way to lessen the amount of stress felt by dual-income wives. She found that egalitarianism in the marital relationship is negatively associated with wives’ stress levels. When husbands and wives treat each other equally and both contribute to household duties, wives are less stressed. Also, it seems that each spouse’s perception of fairness of the division of household labor can influence stress more than the number of hours of work performed (e.g., Frisco & Williams, 2003; Meier et al., 2006).

Marital Satisfaction
Research has not established a consistent relation between the stressors of the dual-income lifestyle, such as role overload or unequal division of labor (Meier et al., 2006). However, gender differences have been easier to identify. Husbands tend to report greater marital satisfaction than wives (e.g., Fowers, 1991; Frisco & Williams, 2003).

Marital satisfaction can be affected by a number of factors. Women’s marital satisfaction is impacted by the perceived equity in labor division, perceived empathy from their husbands, and the opinions that each spouse holds on the wife’s employment status and involvement in household activities (Meier et al., 2006; Stevens, Kiger, & Riley, 2001; Wilkie et al., 1998). If women hold traditional beliefs about their responsibilities in the family, their marital satisfaction tends to increase from their greater number of household duties but decrease from the duties they have to their employment. If they prefer a more equal share of family responsibilities, their marital satisfaction tends to increase from their dedication to career-related activities and decrease from their responsibilities in the home.

In general, egalitarianism in the relationship increases wives’ marital satisfaction (e.g., Wilkie et al., 1998). When husbands and wives were able to share vocational and household responsibilities more equally, women were more satisfied with their marriages. Wives tend to have more of a preference for egalitarian roles than their husbands (Fowers, 1991; Stevens et al., 2001). The only aspect of gender role beliefs that influenced men’s marital satisfaction was their preference concerning labor division in the household (Wilkie et al., 1998). If they believe that domestic duties are mostly the wives’ domain, they should be fairly happy in their relationships because women maintain most household responsibilities.

Marital satisfaction is also subject to change over the course of a marriage. By middle adulthood, for example, couples may have less housework or chores, or they may have established coping strategies with which to address tension or conflict (Higgins et al., 2010; Santrock, 2007). It is adults in later adulthood, however, who have greater marital satisfaction than young or middle-aged adults (Santrock, 2007).

Purpose of the Study
The aims of this study were to (a) identify gender differences in the experience of role overload, stress, and marital satisfaction in dual-income couples; and (b) to determine whether these experiences are different among partners in early, middle, or late adulthood. We predicted that women in dual-income couples would experience
more role overload and stress than men with a dual-income lifestyle. We also predicted that these women would report lower marital satisfaction than men in dual-income marriages. We expected marital satisfaction to change with age, with participants in later adulthood being more satisfied in their marriages than subjects in early or middle adulthood.

Method

Participants

Three hundred fourteen people completed our survey. The sample consisted of 132 men and 182 women, ranging in age from 21 to 74 years ($M = 44.93, SD = 10.43$). Eighty-two percent of our respondents reported their ethnicity as White, 14% African American, 2% Hispanic, 1% other races, < 1% Asian, and < 1% American Indian. The participants had been married for an average of 17 years, with marriage length ranging from less than 1 year to 42 years.

Measures

Marital satisfaction. The Enrich Martial Satisfaction Scale (EMS; Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1983) is a 25-item scale that includes the Idealistic Distortion and Marital Satisfaction subscales of the ENRICH Inventory. The 5 items from the Idealistic Disturbance subscale measure the likelihood that the marital relationship is viewed unrealistically positively. The score from this subscale is used to correct the score from the Marital Satisfaction subscale. Each of the 10 questions from the Marital Satisfaction subscale corresponds to an area of the marital relationship highlighted in the complete ENRICH Inventory. We used nine of these areas; we omitted the question regarding children because not all subjects had children. Participants recorded their responses on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Higher scores indicate compatibility and satisfaction with most areas in the couple’s marital relationship. A sample item is “I am not pleased with the personality characteristics and personal habits of my partner.” Fowers and Olson (1989) demonstrated validity for the scale by finding that role overload correlated with work to family conflict. They reported an alpha coefficient of .86 for the scale. We found an alpha of .74.

Stress. Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983) developed the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), which is a 14-item scale that measures perceptions of stress. Participants indicated their responses on a Likert scale (1 = never and 5 = very often) with higher scores indicating more perceived stress. A sample item is “In the last month, how often have you been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly?” Cohen et al. demonstrated validity for the PSS by comparing it to a scale that measures depressive symptomatology known as the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depressive Scale (Radloff, 1977) and finding that the PSS measured an independent predictive construct. Cohen et al. reported alpha coefficients ranging from .84 to .86 for the three samples they used. We found an alpha coefficient of .83.

Procedure

Research assistants utilized snowball sampling to mail paper surveys to 718 potential participants. One hundred thirty-two men and 182 women returned their surveys, which gave us a 44% response rate. We received completed surveys from 12 states. Eighty-one percent of surveys were returned from Ohio, New Jersey, Louisiana, Florida, Indiana, Illinois, Texas, Tennessee, California, Alabama, and Washington. In order to be eligible for our study, potential participants had to be married and employed full-time. We informed all respondents that their participation was voluntary.

Results

In order to test our first hypothesis, we used independent samples $t$ tests. We found that experience
of role overload varied by gender, $t(309) = -3.24$, $p = .001$, $d = .37$. Women ($M = 15.55$, $SD = 4.42$) felt more role overload than men ($M = 13.88$, $SD = 4.59$), which supports the first part of our hypothesis. We found that women ($M = 37.07$, $SD = 7.17$) also felt more stress than men ($M = 34.57$, $SD = 7.67$), $t(307) = 2.94$, $p < .01$, $d = .34$, which supports the second part of this hypothesis. We used an independent samples $t$ test to analyze gender differences in marital satisfaction, and our results neared significance, $t(304) = 1.95$, $p = .052$, $d = .22$. Husbands felt more marital satisfaction than wives, but the difference was not significant.

We used a one-way ANOVA to analyze the differences among age groups for role overload, stress, and marital satisfaction. We determined group boundaries by using Newman and Newman’s (2003) ages for identifying life stages (i.e., early adulthood as 24–34 years [$n = 56$], middle adulthood as 35–60 years [$n = 238$], and later adulthood as 61–75 years [$n = 161$]). There were no significant differences among age groups for role overload, $F(2, 305) = .06$, $p > .05$, or stress, $F(2, 302) = 1.48$, $p > .05$. There was, however, a significant difference in marital satisfaction among age groups, $F(2, 299) = 4.01$, $p < .05$. After performing a Tukey HSD post-hoc test, we discovered that adults in later adulthood ($M = 57.07$, $SD = 6.58$) reported being significantly more satisfied with their marriages than participants in middle adulthood ($M = 51.18$, $SD = 9.88$). There were no other significant differences.

**Discussion**

We found that women in dual-income couples experienced significantly more role overload and stress than men in these couples, which supported our first hypothesis. Wives reported significantly higher home role reward than husbands, which supported the first part of our second hypothesis. Husbands reported higher marital satisfaction than wives; this difference approached significance. Later adults reported being more satisfied in their marriages than participants in middle adulthood.

Previous studies (e.g., Coverman, 1989; Entricht et al., 2007) examined connections between multiple role demands and psychological well-being in dual-income relationships and concluded that wives experienced more role overload and stress than husbands. Later adults also reported higher marital satisfaction than middle adults. Because our results were similar, we were able to replicate past results in a newer sample. This finding demonstrates generalizability of the past findings and updates the results.

As mentioned previously, equitable division of household labor, empathetic behaviors by the husband, and egalitarian beliefs about gender roles help women feel less role overload and stress and higher marital satisfaction (Coverman, 1989; Wilkie et al., 1998). If domestic labor were divided more equally or egalitarian partnership beliefs were shared by both spouses, perhaps women would experience less role overload and stress and be more satisfied with their marriages.

The fact that wives in our study reported more problems and marital dissatisfaction indicates that many of the precursors of women’s role overload, stress, and lower marital satisfaction that were established in previous studies are present in many marriages today. Because we have replicated these findings and demonstrated that these problems persist, couples should take steps to cope with the difficulties, such as seeking help from friends or family, scaling back on the number of tasks to perform, or restructuring work or family roles (Higgins et al., 2010).

A limitation of our study was that a large majority of our subjects were from the same ethnic group and geographic area. Because culture, socioeconomic class, and geographic region may influence people’s gender role beliefs and attitudes toward the dual-income lifestyle, it would be beneficial to recruit participants from a more geographically and ethnically heterogeneous sample. We would also like to gather data from a greater number of later adults in future studies in order to more fully explore the relationship qualities of this population and the ways the target variables can change over time.

It is important to note that our study does not account for the effects of extraneous variables, as is a danger of any correlational research. It is possible that there are other explanations for wives’ higher stress or lower marital satisfaction, rather than it being the direct result of being in a dual-income couple. For example, the presence or absence of children has a demonstrated effect on marital satisfaction (Meier et al., 2006; Stevens et al., 2001; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). As we did not account for this factor in our survey, it could have had an unseen effect on our results. In the future, researchers should always include parental status when examining the difficulties of dual-income life.
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