

Employed mothers: Interrole conflict, spouse support and marital functioning

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SUMMARY

Increased participation by mothers in the labour force may exert a negative effect on working mothers themselves (e.g. interrole conflict) and influence the marital relationship negatively. Recent research suggests that not all individuals experiencing psychological distress suffer psychological strain (e.g. marital discord). Rather, variables such as social support moderate negative effects of psychological stressors. To test this, sixty-four employed mothers (*M* age = 36 years) completed interrole conflict and spouse support scales. Marital satisfaction, verbal and nonverbal communication were the criteria operationalized to assess marital functioning. Using moderated multiple regression analyses, interrole conflict and spouse support predicted marital satisfaction and verbal communication significantly. In addition, spouse support may moderate negative effects of interrole conflict on marital satisfaction and verbal communication. With regard to nonverbal communication, spouse support was both a significant main effect and possibly a moderator of interrole conflict. The role of spouse support, conceptual and treatment implications, and future research priorities are identified.

INTRODUCTION

The structure and organization of the contemporary family is in a state of flux (Campbell, 1981). Specifically, the entrance of married women into the labour force in significant numbers is a major change which may exert profound effects on marital and family relationships (McCroskey, 1982). The proportion of married women in the labour force in the United States has nearly doubled in the past two decades. More than 50 per cent of school children now have mothers who are employed; and it is predicted that 66 per cent of all mothers will be employed by 1990 (Campbell, 1981). Thus, maternal employment is already the modal pattern. It has been suggested that the psychological consequences confronting the employed mother and father differ (Scanzoni, 1978): In contrast to the situation with fathers, mothers' roles operate *simultaneously* rather than *sequentially*, thereby intensifying the demands to be faced and the conflict experienced (Hall, 1972).

Hall (1972) suggests that the major problem facing employed women is interrole conflict (arising from competing demands among multiple roles) rather than intrarole conflict (a function of conflicting expectancies within a specific role), although they obviously experience both forms of conflict. Nonetheless, the majority of research on

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0142-2774/86/030167-12\$06.00
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Received 3 January 1985
Revised 7 July 1985

the employed mother or wife has focused on the *fact* or *status* of employment (whether the mother or wife is employed or not) (Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1982), rather than psychological experiences (such as interrole conflict) associated with employment and the consequences thereof. This may explain the discrepant results as to the detrimental or beneficial effects of employment status on the mother and her family (Hoffman, 1979; Smith, 1981): It may be the interrole conflict experienced by employed mothers (rather than the mere status of employment) that is associated with behavioural problems of preschool boys and girls (Barling and Van Bart, 1984).

In contrast to the effects of maternal interrole conflict on children the present study focuses on the association between the mother's interrole conflict and her own marital functioning. It is hypothesized that high interrole conflict would be negatively associated with marital functioning. In this present study, three aspects of the marital relationship are operationalized: marital adjustment/satisfaction, verbal communication and nonverbal communication. The use of multiple criteria of marital functioning is essential to obtain a comprehensive perspective of marital functioning (O'Leary and Turkewitz, 1978). Marital adjustment is assessed because of its primary role in global life satisfaction (Glenn and Weaver, 1981) and its extensive use in marital treatment and research. Verbal and nonverbal communication are studied since marital therapists rate marital communication as the most common component of marital distress (Geiss and O'Leary, 1981).

Research findings are not definitive regarding the effects of employment on marital functioning. There is support both for a positive and detrimental effect of employment on marital satisfaction (Barling and Lansdown, 1984). Again, the fact that the psychological experience of employment is typically ignored, with a focus on the fact of employment predominating, may contribute to the equivocal findings. Role theory in general and interrole conflict in particular, may be important in integrating the worlds of work and the family (Kanter, 1977; Houseknecht & Macke, 1981).

A trend within recent psychological research has been to downgrade possible linear relationships between stressors and strains, focusing instead on critical moderating variables (Billings and Moos, 1982; Kobasa and Puccetti, 1983). A moderator denotes that the relationship between two variables is not consistent across varying levels of a third. However, the moderator may exacerbate or decrease the effects of stressors on strains. When the effect of stressors is reduced, the moderator is sometimes referred to as a 'buffer' variable. In such situations, information is provided regarding the psychological processes through which the impact of potentially negative stressors can be alleviated. Since most of the research on 'buffer' variables is of a cross-sectional design, however, causal inferences about 'buffering' (rather than moderating) processes are not justified (James and Brett, 1984).

With regard to the potentially deleterious consequences of interrole conflict, the function of coping mechanisms and moderating variables is relevant (Beutell and Greenhaus, 1983). Social support has been suggested and shown to be important in moderating the impact of stress on psychological and physical health (House, 1981). The extent to which the family as a whole accomodates the wife's employment is most important in determining subsequent marital adjustment (Houseknecht and Macke, 1981). It is possible that perceived spouse-specific support may be more influential as a moderator since family issues are most important for the mothers' interrole conflict (Cooke and Rousseau, 1984). Consequently wife's perception of support from their

husbands is studied as a potential moderator as it may fulfil a critical role in the process whereby women reconcile employment and family roles (Holahan and Gilbert, 1979a; Houseknecht and Macke, 1981). Spouse support will serve as a moderator variable if, given high levels of both interrole conflict and spouse support, marital functioning is not impaired, whereas high levels of interrole conflict together with low levels of spouse support result in marital distress.

There has been some criticism regarding the absence of unifying conceptual and operational definitions of social support (Tardy, 1985): Spouse support is typically conceptualized as interpersonal transactions involving diverse forms of support, viz. emotional, attitudinal, and physical support provided to the employed mother by her husband; and operationalized accordingly. A further point of conceptual and methodological concern is whether spouse support has a direct relationship with marital functioning, a moderating role, or both. Previous research on the role of social support is deficient in not focusing adequately on the conceptual distinctions involved (French, 1982). However, the use of moderated multiple regression (MMR) analyses (Zedeck, 1971) facilitates an examination of this issue. It is hypothesized that interrole conflict will have a direct effect on marital functioning, while spouse support will exert both a direct and moderating effect on the marital relationship.

METHOD

Subjects

Questionnaires were distributed initially to a sample of 950 women employed full-time in ten different organizations in South Africa. Of these 950 questionnaires, 320 (33.7 per cent) were returned, of which 263 (27.7 per cent) contained complete responses. However, organizational restraints had precluded pre-selection according to whether respondents were in full-time employment *and* married *with* dependant children. This further reduced the relevant sample to 64 mothers in full-time employment. Although it is not possible to show conclusively that this final sample of 64 white collar working mothers (M age = 36.0 years, SD . = 9.9, range = 18–63 years; M number of children = 2.1, $S.D.$ = 1.3, range = 1–6; M years of education = 12.8, $S.D.$ = 2.5, range = 8–18 years; M years of marriage = 13.7, $S.D.$ = 9.4, range = 1–40 years) were representative of all original respondents, they did not differ significantly from the initial 263 respondents in terms of age, educational attainment, years of marriage or organizational position ($p > 0.05$).

Assessment

Dependent variable — marital adjustment

Locke and Wallace's (1959) 15-item Short Marital Adjustment Test (SMAT) assessed global marital adjustment or satisfaction. This self-report measure has been shown to be both reliable and valid in numerous studies over a 20 year period (O'Leary and Turkewitz, 1978), and together with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Spanier, 1976), remains the measure of choice for assessing marital adjustment (O'Leary and Turkewitz, 1978; Spanier and Lewis, 1980). The SMAT was used in this study rather

than Spanier's DAS, as the SMAT is shorter, yet retains its reliability and validity. Importantly, the SMAT consistently differentiates between clinically distressed and non-distressed couples (O'Leary and Turkewitz, 1978; Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981).

Dependent variable — marital communication

Navran's (1967) 25-item Primary Communication Inventory (PCI) is a self-report questionnaire, assessing verbal (18 items) and nonverbal (6 items) communication. The reliability and validity of the PCI are adequate, and the PCI remains the most frequently used self-report measure of marital communication (O'Leary and Turkewitz, 1978).

Independent variable — interrole conflict

Holahan and Gilbert's (1979a,b) 34-item questionnaire assessed the conflict between the four major life roles, viz. worker, parent, spouse and self. All 34 items are rated on a five-point scale from 1 (causes no internal conflict) to 5 (causes high internal conflict). Six subscales are derived, viz. worker versus parent, worker versus spouse, worker versus self, parent versus spouse, parent versus self and spouse versus self. Satisfactory reliability (internal consistency) has been reported for the six scales (Holahan and Gilbert, 1979b).

Moderator variable — spouse support

Since no adequate scale currently exists for the assessment of spouse support (possibly because of its recent emergence in the literature), a relevant questionnaire had to be constructed anew. Four items were generated to assess attitudinal, emotional and physical spouse support. The four items used were 'How would you describe your husband's attitude toward your work?' 'How much does your husband help with the housework?', 'If you have children, how much does your husband help with their care?' and 'How much emotional help does your husband give you in regard to your work?' All four items are rated on a seven-point scale. The reliability of the spouse support scale was satisfactory ($\alpha = 0.78$), and a large range of scores was obtained on this measure ($M = 18.34$, $S.D. = 6.17$). The validity of this scale is suggested by the significant correlations between spouse support and marital adjustment ($r = 0.70$), verbal ($r = 0.65$) and nonverbal ($r = 0.46$) communication (all $df = 62$, $p < 0.01$).

Procedure

Ten diverse (in terms of goal orientation) organizations agreed to distribute questionnaires to white females in full-time employment with the voluntary nature of the research being emphasized. Subjects were informed that the aim of the research was the assessment of attitudes of different groups of people to their work and family lives; and their confidentiality was assured. The questionnaires took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

RESULTS

The MMR approach was used to assess the influence of interrole conflict and spouse support on marital functioning. MMR assesses the interactional effect most adequately by using an hierarchical analytic strategy which first partials out the separate contributions of the independent variables or main effects. This is essential in testing the potential moderating effect of spouse support. Moreover, MMR eliminates the need for arbitrarily-defined groups, allows unequal cell sizes and facilitates the examination of possible nonlinear moderator effects (Zedeck, 1971). Finally, MMR is a more stringent analysis than the subgrouping procedure (e.g. La Rocco and Jones, 1978) especially when the potential moderating variable is of a non-dichotomous nature, as is the case with spouse support.

If the interactional term is significant, the nature of the moderating function must be examined. Spouse support will have reduced (or 'buffered') the influence of interrole conflict if the high conflict/low support group exhibits poorer marital functioning than the high conflict/high support group (Thoits, 1982). Stated somewhat differently, spouse support will serve a 'buffering' function if (a) a negative correlation exists between interrole conflict and marital adjustment in situations of low spouse support, *and* (b) the interrole conflict/marital functioning relationship is characterized by a zero correlation when spouse support is high. However, despite the use of the MMR strategy, all analyses remain exploratory rather than causal or confirmatory given the cross-sectional nature of the experimental design (James and Brett, 1984).

The two fundamental assumptions of multiple linear regression were assessed first. While all the relationships between the dependent and independent variables were linear, the assumption of multicollinearity (i.e. low correlations between the independent variables) was violated: Twelve of the 15 correlations between the six independent variables were ≥ 0.50 , the mean correlation was 0.56 (range: 0.38 - 0.75), and all were significant ($p < 0.01$). Consequently, these six scales were subjected to a principal components analysis with varimax rotation to establish any possible commonalities. Only one factor emerged (loadings: worker versus spouse: 0.85; worker versus parent: 0.87; worker versus self: 0.90; spouse versus parent: 0.63; spouse versus self: 0.60; parent versus self: 0.73; eigenvalue = 4.85), with the highest loadings invariably involving the worker role. A KR 20 reliability coefficient of 0.95 was derived from the six interrole conflict subscales, further confirming its homogeneity¹. Consequently, interrole conflict was treated as a unidimensional variable (in contrast to Holahan and Gilbert [1979a,b]) for all subsequent analyses in this research. As a result, only three MMRs were required, using marital adjustment, verbal and nonverbal communication as the separate dependent variables². Table I presents the Pearson correlations between these three dependent variables, spouse support and interrole conflict.

¹Interestingly, a similar phenomenon prevailed for a separate group of working fathers (Barling, 1986): The six interrole conflict scales were substantially intercorrelated, and a factor analysis yielded one factor with very high internal consistency.

²There was no relationship between age, educational status, number and age of children, or company position and the three criteria of marital functioning. Consequently, a covariance analysis partialling out the effects of these variables was not required.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between interrole conflict, spouse support, marital adjustment, verbal and nonverbal communication ($N = 64$)

	<i>M</i>	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Interrole conflict	53.97	19.73	1.00				
2. Spouse support	18.34	6.17	-0.30*	1.00			
3. Marital adjustment	101.08	30.51	-0.45*	0.70*	1.00		
4. Verbal communication	64.78	10.67	-0.31*	0.65*	0.67*	1.00	
5. Nonverbal communication	25.98	4.02	-0.24†	0.46*	0.42*	0.60*	1.00

† $p < 0.05$.* $p < 0.01$.

Interrole conflict, spouse support and marital adjustment

Interrole conflict was a significant correlate of marital adjustment ($F(1,62) = 15.89, p < 0.01$), as was spouse support ($F(1,62) = 38.64, p < 0.01$). More importantly, the interrole conflict \times spouse support interaction was highly significant ($F(1,62) = 26.27, p < 0.01$; accounting for 2 per cent of the variance) (see Table 2). Evidence for the moderating role of spouse support can be inferred from the marital adjustment scores of working mothers who were low in spouse support and high in interrole conflict (see Figure 1): Their scores on the SMAT are substantially lower ($M = 79.67$) than the other three groups, while the difference between this group and the high interrole conflict/high spouse support group ($M = 103.27$) is statistically significant ($t(30) = 2.49, p < 0.01$). Thus, in the absence of spouse support, high interrole conflict is associated with lower marital satisfaction.

The fact that spouse support exerts both a main and moderating effect on marital adjustment is also suggested, as spouse support is associated with marital satisfaction whether interrole conflict is high ($t(30) = 2.49, p < 0.01$) or low ($t(30) = 2.43, p < 0.01$).

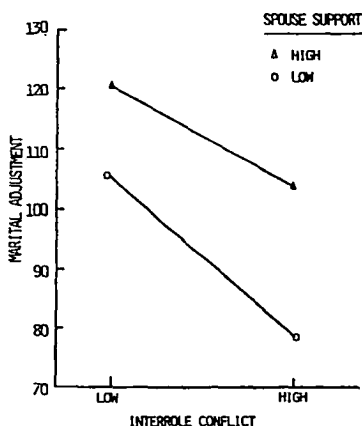


Figure 1. Effects of interrole conflict and spouse support on marital adjustment

Table 2. Summary results of the three MMR analyses

	Marital adjustment			Verbal communication			Nonverbal communication		
	<i>R</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>r</i> ² change	<i>R</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>r</i> ² change	<i>R</i>	<i>r</i> ²	<i>r</i> ² change
Interrole conflict (A)	0.45	0.20	0.20	0.31	0.10	0.10	0.24	0.06	0.06
Spouse support (B)	0.74	0.55	0.35	0.65	0.43	0.32	0.46	0.21	0.15
A × B	0.75	0.57	0.02	0.66	0.44	0.01	0.52	0.27	0.06

It must be noted, however, that a statistical confound precludes an unequivocal interpretation that spouse support serves as the moderator. Zedeck (1971) points out that a true moderator is *not* associated with the dependent variables. In the present research, both the hypothesized main effect (interrole conflict) and moderator variable (spouse support) are correlated with all three dependent variables (see Table 1). Consequently, any suggestion that spouse support moderates the influence of interrole conflict is not definitive; other hypotheses remain plausible and will be elaborated upon in the Discussion.

Interrole conflict, spouse support and verbal communication

Both interrole conflict ($F(1,58) = 6.17, p < 0.02$) and spouse support ($F(1,58) = 21.9, p < 0.01$) were significant predictors of verbal communication. In addition, the interaction between interrole conflict and spouse support accounted for a significant increment in the amount of variance in verbal communication ($F(1,58) = 14.63, p < 0.01$; 1 per cent of the variance) (see Table 2). As can be seen from Figure 2, spouse support again served both as a main and possibly moderating effect: spouse support was related to verbal communication whether employed mothers were high ($t(27) =$

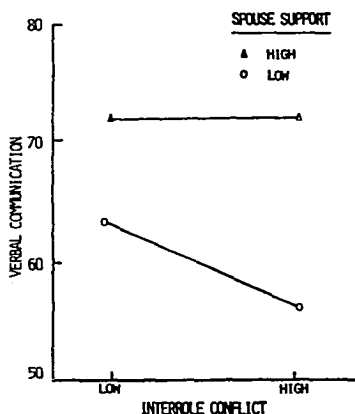


Figure 2. Effects of interrole conflict and spouse support on verbal communication

3.72, $p < 0.01$) or low ($t(29) = 3.46$, $p < 0.01$) in interrole conflict. Moreover, verbal communication was lowest for high interrole conflict/low spouse support mothers ($M = 57.8$), whose verbal communication differed significantly from the group of high interrole conflict/high spouse support mothers ($M = 72.22$; $t(27) = 3.0$, $p < 0.01$).

Interrole conflict, spouse support and nonverbal communication

Unlike the effects on marital satisfaction and verbal communication, interrole conflict exerted no significant influence on nonverbal communication ($F(1,60) = 3.66$, $p < 0.05$). However, spouse support again served both as a predictor ($F(1,60) = 8.26$, $p < 0.01$) and a possible moderator of interrole conflict ($F(1,60) = 7.03$, $p < 0.02$) on nonverbal communication. From Figure 3, the conditional effect of spouse support in moderating the effects of interrole conflict on nonverbal communication becomes evident. Whereas spouse support exerts no influence on nonverbal communication at low levels of interrole conflict ($t(30) = 0.87$, $p > 0.05$), there is a significant effect on nonverbal communication when interrole conflict is high ($t(30) = 3.04$, $p < 0.01$). Again, mothers in the high interrole conflict/low spouse support condition manifested poorer nonverbal communication than their counterparts in the high interrole conflict/high spouse support group ($M: 23.95$ versus 28.55 respectively; $t(30) = 3.04$, $p < 0.005$), suggesting the moderating role of spouse support.

DISCUSSION

Interrole conflict was negatively and significantly associated with marital adjustment and verbal communication, but not with nonverbal communication, whereas spouse support served both as a main effect and a moderator variable. In general, this

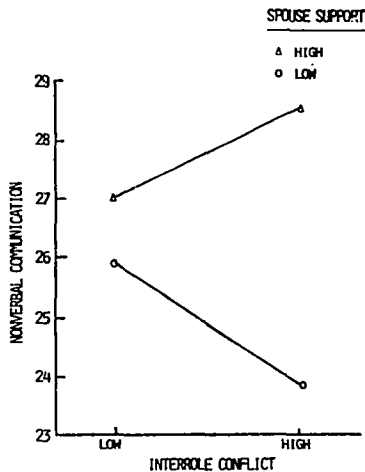


Figure 3. Effects of interrole conflict and spouse support on nonverbal communication

presents an interesting phenomenon: In contrast to a perspective focusing on the *fact* or *status* of employment, assessing the *quality* of employment-related experiences allows a prediction of the association between work experiences and marital functioning. More specifically, the experience of interrole conflict was negatively associated with marital adjustment and verbal communication. The fact that interrole conflict was not related to nonverbal communication may be more a function of the manner in which nonverbal communication was assessed than the experience of interrole conflict. Despite earlier support for the verbal and nonverbal communication dimensions derived from the PCI (O'Leary and Turkewitz, 1978), Beach and Arias (1983) question whether these two dimensions are the most parsimonious or valid factors derived therefrom. They suggest a focus on the perceptual discrepancy between spouses. However, data was not available from husbands in the present research, and the influence of interrole conflict and spouse support on Beach and Arias' (1983) operationalization of marital communication could not be assessed.

The function fulfilled by social support has generated controversy in recent research (Billings and Moos, 1981, 1982; Thoits, 1982). The use of an MMR analysis in this research shows that support (in this instance, spouse support) exerts a direct effect and may fulfil a moderating role as well. Spouse support is associated with marital adjustment, verbal and nonverbal communication, independent of interrole conflict. In addition, potentially negative consequences to marital functioning arising from interrole conflict are ameliorated if spouse support is high. The same phenomenon pertained to all three dependent variables: given high interrole conflict, marital adjustment, verbal and nonverbal communication were significantly higher in situations of high rather than low spouse support. Across all three dependent variables, spouse support accounted for more of the variance as a main effect (see Table 2) than as a moderator of maternal interrole conflict. Nonetheless, the significant interaction effect in all three instances is of greater conceptual importance (Kerlinger, 1973): The effects of interrole conflict on marital adjustment, verbal and nonverbal communication is dependent on the level of spouse support.

Over and above the statistical significance of these results, their applied or clinical significance is indicated through the use of the SMAT. It is generally accepted that scores < 90 on the SMAT are indicative of a marriage 'at risk' (Rosenbaum and O'Leary, 1981). It becomes apparent, therefore, that the marital adjustment ($M = 79.67$) of employed mothers who are in a situation of high interrole conflict together with an absence or relative lack of spouse support is 'at risk' (see Figure 1). In contrast, the presence of spouse support moderates such interrole conflict: as long as spouse support is high, high levels of interrole conflict are not associated with SMAT scores indicative of marriages 'at risk' ($M = 107.27$; see Figure 1).

Thus, support from one's husband may assist employed mothers (Hall, 1972) cope with their own interrole conflict. This is not dissimilar from Beutell and Greenhaus' (1983) findings that a husband's non-traditional sex-role stereotypes moderate the negative consequences of interrole conflict. Both these findings have important implications for the treatment of employed mothers' interrole conflict. It is clear that treating (and understanding) interrole conflict requires explicit cognizance that such experiences occur within the context of the marital dyad and family situation. Husbands' supportive behaviour and attitudes may help reduce the opposing role demands on, and unrealistic role expectations of the employed mother. In turn this

may decrease employed mothers' interrole conflict. In contrast, a focus on societal attitudes (the level at which beliefs regarding the deleterious effects of the employed mother are generated and maintained) (Etaugh, 1974; Fallows, 1983; Smith, 1981), may not be practical in the short term.

However, cross-sectional designs in which the effects of interrole conflict and spouse support are necessarily confounded provide truncated tests of true mediating hypotheses. Moreover, in the present research, both spouse support and interrole conflict were related to all three criteria of marital functioning. Thus, it is not possible to conclude unequivocally that spouse support moderates the influence of interrole conflict. Rather, on the basis of the data obtained, it is also possible that both interrole conflict and spouse support serve as main effects, and that interrole conflict moderates the influence of spouse support on marital functioning. Thus, receiving little or no spouse support might exacerbate the employed mothers' interrole conflict, further increasing the significant relationship between spouse support and marital functioning (see Table 1). Nonetheless, two points must be noted. First, irrespective of which variable is the true moderator, simultaneously experiencing high interrole conflict and low spouse support is associated with clinically significant decrements in marital adjustment, as measured on the SMAT (see Figure 1). Second, in trying to ascertain which variable is the moderator, it is unlikely that a null relationship can be obtained between spouse support and marital functioning. Moreover, the possible interactive effect of interrole conflict *with* spouse support must be separated from the direct effect of one of these two variables on the other. Consequently, assessing the main effects and moderating roles of spouse support and interrole conflict on marital functioning within a longitudinal design is essential (James and Brett, 1984).

A further limitation is that an 'economic determinism' (Kanter, 1977) is implicitly accepted in such cross-sectional designs. Although it is usually argued that in normal circumstances employment experiences influence family functioning (Evans and Bartolome, 1981), there are data suggesting that mothers' work performance is influenced negatively by their children's health status (Salkever, 1980). It remains imperative, therefore, to use true causal analyses in future research.

There may also be an autocorrelational confound inherent in this data, as it is all derived from self-report. It might be worthwhile, therefore, to obtain external (e.g. husband) ratings of wives' role and marital performance. In terms of the communication data obtained, this would facilitate an examination of between-spouse perceptual discrepancy as the measure of marital communication (Beach and Arias, 1983). In addition, there may be a sampling bias inherent in this research. The 64 working mothers assessed here represent a more heterogeneous sample than might normally be encountered (M age = 36 years, range = 18-63 years). Although it is unlikely that age in this sample is a statistical confound since it was not related to either interrole conflict, spouse support or any of the three dependant variables, future research might focus on mothers with homogeneous groups of younger children. Likewise, there is some question about the representative nature of the sample because of the response rate. However, the final sample ($N = 64$) did not differ from the original sample of 263 working women in terms of age, educational attainment, length of marriage or company position.

Finally, future research should also assess the effects of (a) interrole conflict on other aspects of marital functioning, such as psychological and physical abuse (Barling and Rosenbaum, in press), (b) maternal interrole conflict on husbands'

marital functioning, and (c) the consequences of husbands' interrole conflict (Barling, 1986). In any such research, the source of the interrole conflict warrants attention. The results of the present study and that of Barling (1986) suggest that Holohan and Gilbert's (1979a,b) scale is unidimensional, as are other interrole conflict scales published subsequently (Kopelman, Greenhaus and Connolly, 1983; Parry & Warr, 1980). However, it is still possible that various sources of interrole conflict (a) differentially predict diverse aspects of marital functioning, and (b) are influenced differentially by the various types and sources of social support, and this should be investigated in any further research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Portions of this research were submitted by the senior author in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the M.A. (Clin. Psych.) degree to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa. The financial assistance of NIMH Grant MH35340 to Dr K. Daniel O'Leary, Principal Investigator, a Human Sciences Research Council award, a Senior Bursary from the Senate Research Council of the University of the Witwatersrand and the Freda Lawenski Bursary to the senior author are gratefully acknowledged. Comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript from K. D. O'Leary, C. Fullagar, I. Arias, J. W. Mann and S. D. Bluen are gratefully acknowledged.

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