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Work-family conflict and mental health in newlywed and recently cohabiting couples: a couple perspective

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Combining work and family can be a significant source of tension and conflict. For young dual-earner couples especially it is a challenge to find a balance. We examine the impact of negative work-to-family and family-to-work spillover on feelings of depression and life satisfaction, as well as crossover effects between partners. Of particular interest are differences between married and cohabiting partners. Dyadic data stemming from a subsample of the Belgian survey 'Relationships in Flanders' (2010) are used (*N* newlywed couples = 376, *N* recently cohabiting couples = 344). Regressions confirm that both work-to-family and family-to-work spillover are major stressors. In line with gender role theories, men seem somewhat more affected by family-to-work spillover; women by work-to-family spillover, also when their partner allows work to interfere with family. Overall, the cohabiting do not feel more distressed, but do feel less satisfied with life. Moreover, interesting differences appear when comparing both groups.

Keywords: cohabitation; gender; marriage; mental health; sociology; work-family conflict

Introduction

During the last decades, family life in Western societies has faced new transitions. First, women entering the labour market led to an increase of dual-earner households, making the traditional male breadwinner family exceptional rather than the norm (McInnes, 2006). Data from 15 European countries, for example, show that women's activity in paid labour in 1960 was less than half of that of men (44%); by 2003 it had risen to 79% (McInnes, 2006). Although women's participation in paid labour is not matched by a similar increase in men engaging in household tasks (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000; Carton, 2003; Geist, 2005; Hochschild, 1989), men are taking steps towards participating more in nonpaid labour and childcare. This may be viewed as positive considering the focus on gender equality, but combining different roles has also been found to be advantageous for self-esteem and to relate to lower levels of psychological distress (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Nevertheless, when demands set by different roles conflict this may become an important source of stress (Goode, 1960). Role conflict is one of the most important factors influencing personal wellbeing (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Fincham & Beach, 2010). Moreover, it may be that combination pressure is reciprocal in couples, influencing not only the individual, but also one's partner (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). Prior studies have already shown examples of how partners influence each other's health

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and health-related behaviour (e.g., Backett, 1992; Monden, 2007; Monden, Van Lenthe, Kraaykamp, & de Graaf, 2003). Therefore dual-earner families may face an increased risk of work-family conflict and poor mental health.

Second, Western societies face the growth of new types of family arrangements. Since the 1970s, especially, secularisation processes and the rise of individualistic values have altered the meaning of family, facilitating a diversity of non-marital unions including single adult households, different types of post-divorce family arrangements, and growing numbers of unmarried couples who choose to cohabit either as a 'try out' before getting married, or as the equivalent of marriage (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Cherlin, 2004; Lesthaeghe, 2010; Schoen, Landale, & Daniels, 2007). Following the example of Scandinavian countries, Germany and the Netherlands, the Belgian federal law of 1998 (operative since 2000) granted legal status to cohabiting couples, thus offering legal protection to non-married couples as well (Castelein, 2007). Ten years later, in 2010, 36,095 new cohabitations were registered in Belgium, alongside 42,159 new marriages the same year, proving that cohabitation can no longer be ignored (Statistics Belgium, 2013). However, cohabitation remains less institutionalised than marriage (Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). The small amount of research that contrasts the cohabiting with the married has found somewhat different gender arrangements between the two. On the one hand, cohabiting couples seem to have a more equal division of labour between men and women as they experience less normative regulation (Baxter, 2005). On the other hand, they are also characterised by a stronger focus on the self, more uncertainty, and lower levels of commitment, which is reflected in a heightened chance of dissolution (Baxter, 2005; Brown, 2000; Marcussen, 2005; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009). Whether and to what extent these differences also translate into different dynamics when it comes to coping with work-family conflict is as yet unclear.

Despite their growing numbers, cohabitations are often overlooked in general surveys; partly because these couples are difficult to trace in public registries, especially when not registered as cohabiting. Moreover, viewing cohabitation as an equivalent to marriage is a relatively recent phenomenon, adding to the difficulty since the married population on record are overall significantly older than the cohabiting (*if* the latter are actually included). Furthermore, population statistics on couples legally registered as cohabiting are not exclusive and may also include siblings or friends living together. These issues have been addressed in the multi-actor survey 'Relationships in Flanders' (Relationships in Flanders, 2010). In offering population-based dyadic data on both newlywed and recently cohabiting couples, this study is unique. Sample bias has been a particular concern, as prior studies were often based on small samples of American, white, middle-class couples who volunteered or were selected in a therapeutic setting. Our sample includes both factual and legally cohabiting couples and includes the married and cohabiting of similar age, eliminating bias from cohort effects.

Though research on work and family often focuses on women only (Baxter & Alexander, 2008; Fokkema, 2002; Noor, 2004), increasingly, the perspective of men is also being considered (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Craig & Sawrikar, 2009; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003). This study goes a step further by studying men and women in their dyadic relationship because we expect that patterns of mutual influence between partners may exist in work-family conflict. We expect a woman's experience of work-family conflict will also influence her partner's wellbeing and vice versa (i.e., crossover-effects, see Chen & Li, 2012; Kenny et al., 2006). Furthermore, in line with research by Brock and Lawrence (2008) and Stier, Lewin-Epstein, and Braun (2012), we study young couples both with and without children. Although we recognise that the presence of young children redefines how work-family conflict is experienced, work-family conflict is an issue also for the childless. These couples may experience stress, not only from work interfering with family life, but also from family-related duties or worries that interfere with work, such as stress stemming from new responsibilities

that accompany living independently (financial, household, etc.); searching for, constructing or renovating a house; caring for an ill family member; fertility problems; or conflict with one's partner concerning any of these issues.

A better understanding of how both processes of spillover (intra-individual) and crossover (between partners) in young couples contribute to personal wellbeing is necessary. Reports of a general increase in both work-family conflict and mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, stress and burnout indicate that contemporary society has reached its limits, and show the need for more insight into influencing factors (Symoens & Bracke, 2007). In sum, we study (1) to what extent combination pressure is linked to the wellbeing of young men and women in dual-earner couples, (2) whether this effect is limited to the individual or is bidirectional, and (3) whether and to what extent differences in patterns exist between the married and the cohabiting.

Theoretical background, hypotheses and research design

Insight into the interplay between the work and home environment is crucial to the understanding of individual wellbeing (Baxter & Alexander, 2008). When a person fails to maintain a balance between different roles, stress levels increase. Although spillover can also be positive when it enhances rather than hinders a person's capability to fulfil different role obligations, this study focuses on negative spillover. We study both spillover from work-to-family (when work-related issues interfere with family) and from family-to-work (when family-related issues interfere with work). Both are strongly related, but conceptually and empirically distinct (Duxbury, Higgins, & Lee, 1994; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992). Both predict decreases in support between family members and lower levels of marital satisfaction (Chen & Li, 2012; Symoens & Bracke, 2007), as well as heightened chances of burnout and less satisfaction with work (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Symoens & Bracke, 2007). A shortage of time and energy, and problems concerning inconsistent role expectations are most often cited as causes (Bellavia & Frone, 2005; Greenhaus et al., 2003; Higgins, Duxbury, & Johnson, 2000).

Both work-to-family spillover and family-to-work spillover relate to lower levels of mental health in both men and women (H1).

Work-family conflict in dyadic, gendered relationships

Research about the work-family interplay is predominantly actor-based, usually focusing on women because they hold a dual career more often than men do, working full-time in paid labour and managing household responsibilities as well as childcare (Hochschild, 1989). More insight is needed, however, into men's experiences of work-family conflict, as they too currently combine different roles. Moreover, when we combine insights from role theory and gender-role socialisation theory, we expect to find that the impact role conflict plays in personal wellbeing differs between men and women. According to traditional role theory, people have a hierarchical view of roles, with one salient or highly valued role on which actions and cognitions largely depend and to which people prefer to devote a maximum of time and energy (Reitzes & Mutran, 1994; Thoits, 1983). Gender-role socialisation theory points to the centrality of work for men and to the importance of success in paid labour to their wellbeing (Courtenay, 2000). For women, the family is thought to be most salient, and connectedness and success in maintaining a well-functioning intimate household are deemed more important. This leads us to expect that men's wellbeing is affected most when family obligations hinder efficiency and efficacy at work,

while it is especially troublesome for women when work interferes in family life (Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Tamres, Janicki, & Helgeson, 2002). Though we may question whether and to what extent traditional role theory still holds in a-typical, dual-earner households in contemporary, modern societies, we hypothesise the following:

> The experience of family-to-work spillover more strongly relates to the mental health of men than the experience of work-to-family spillover (H2a). In contrast, work-to-family spillover more strongly relates to women's mental health than family-to-work spillover (H2b).

Previous studies on work-family conflict mostly focused on the individual, ignoring the interdependent nature of couple relationships (Bryant & Constantine, 2006; Marks & MacDermid, 1996; Symoens & Bracke, 2007). We advocate a family-system perspective in which family members are interconnected and are studied within their family-relations network (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Kenny et al., 2006). More specifically we choose a couple approach, which recognises that the close connection of men and women in dyadic relationships may lead partners to hinder, promote or control each other's thoughts, behaviour and emotions (Kenny et al., 2006, p. 144). Prior studies have documented a spousal similarity in depressive symptoms that is due not only to assortative mating (Katz, Beach, & Joiner, 1999), but also to shared (family) influences (Desai, Schimmack, Jidkova, & Bracke, 2012; Tower & Kasl, 1995). Therefore, dialectics in couple relationships are central to this study. Conforming to the idea of interdependence (Kenny et al., 2006) and to the research of Brock and Lawrence (2008) on stress spillover in marriages and marital satisfaction, we argue that high levels of role strain hinder not only an individual's but also a partner's wellbeing. Because it is the family and not work that binds partners, we expect crossover effects especially when work interferes with family life. Furthermore, because the family is thought to be salient, especially for women (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987; Niles & Goodnough, 1996; Rosenthal, 1985, cf. gender-role theory), we expect crossover effects to be more visible in women.

> The experience of work-to-family spillover relates more strongly to a partner's mental health than the experience of family-to-work spillover (H3a). This partner effect is especially pronounced in women (H3b).

Marks (2009) found that role-balanced individuals indirectly improve their spouse's wellbeing: they are more willing to help with supportive behaviour in terms of attentiveness and care and in dealing with difficult situations. Chen and Li (2012) also confirmed that the role balance of both individuals and of their partners affects marital satisfaction in men and women. These are two of only a few studies that offer deeper insight into the mutual influence of work and family processes in couples. Our study differentiates from theirs by focusing on role strains, offering a first glimpse at the other part of the story, in a different context (Flanders, a major region of Belgium), comparing two types of partner relationships (newlyweds and recently cohabiting couples).

Different types of partner relationships, different effects?

We compare newlyweds with recently cohabiting couples to explore the impact of varying levels of normative regulation and relationship commitment and (un)certainty. Though results are not always in agreement, most studies – European as well as American – have concluded that the cohabiting are, overall, somewhat worse off than the married, reporting lower levels of mental health (Brown, 2000; Marcussen, 2005; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009) and higher rates of alcohol

use (Horwitz & White, 1998; Li, Wilsnack, Wilsnack, & Kristjanson, 2010; Marcussen, 2005). This is often referred to as the 'cohabitation gap'. This gap may be due to differences in perceptions concerning the centrality of relationships, and to overall lower levels of commitment and certainty in the cohabiting (Cherlin, 2004; Marcussen, 2005; Soons & Kalmijn, 2009; Stavrova, Fetchenhauer, & Schlösser, 2012). Other studies however failed to reproduce this cohabitation gap (e.g., Musick & Bumpass, 2012; Ross, 1995) or at least for some countries (Stavrova et al., 2012). Despite these inconsistencies, cohabitation does not seem to provide the same psychological benefits as marriage (Marcussen, 2005) and differences in relationship quality and commitment may still indirectly influence wellbeing. Relational uncertainty corresponds with several markers of distress, such as appraising unexpected events more severely and perceiving irritations as more threatening (Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010). Our proposition is thus that relational uncertainty relates to more negative emotion (Knobloch, Miller, & Carpenter, 2007), but that it also mediates the link between combination pressure and mental health: family-to-work spillover is expected to have less impact on the wellbeing of those who are more committed because they are more certain of the relationship and thus of the investment they are making when putting work (temporarily) second. Inversely, an interrupted family life is expected to weigh more heavily on those who feel more committed because the family is more important to them.

> Problems of family-to-work spillover carry more weight for the cohabiting, while problems stemming from work-to-family spillover carry more weight for the married (H4a); also one's partner his or her problems of work-to-family spillover carry more weight on the wellbeing of married respondents (H4b).

Furthermore, not only marriage, but having children together, is an important indication of commitment towards the relationship. Because the married are more likely to have children than the cohabiting, the presence of shared children in the household should be considered when comparing married and cohabiting couples, especially since marriage often follows (decisions concerning) fertility.

Figure 1 depicts the research design. Spillover effects are indicated by solid-line arrows (i.e., the paths from the two indicators of spillover of men to men's well-being, and from the two

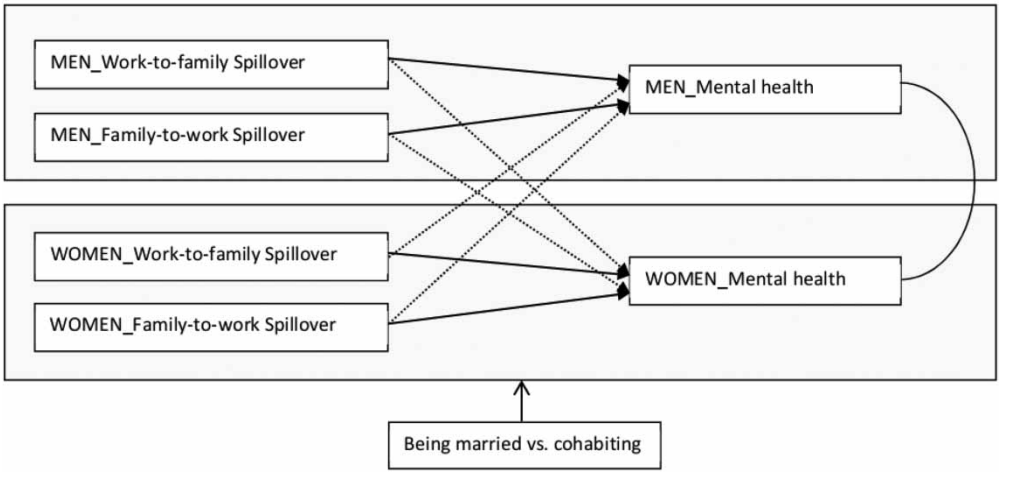

Figure 1. Spillover and crossover effects of work-family conflict on mental health in couples

indicators of spillover of women to women's well-being), crossover effects are indicated by dotted-line arrows (i.e., the paths going from men's experiences of spillover to women's mental health and those going from women's experiences of spillover to men's mental health). The curved line indicates the interrelatedness of partners.

Method

Data and participants

We used data from the sample of newlywed and recently cohabiting couples from the survey 'Relationships in Flanders' (Mortelmans et al., 2011, Relationships in Flanders, 2010). The sample was based on a selection of heterosexual couples, taken from the Public Register, who married for the first time or started to cohabit in the year before the sampling extraction (August 2009). The selection of cohabiting couples was based on domicile and not on the legal definition of cohabitation, to include those not registered as cohabiting. Couples in which one or both partners did not have Belgian nationality since birth, who had been married before, or who were younger than 18 or older than 40, were also excluded. Respondents were contacted individually for participation, and data was gathered by means of a computer-assisted personal interview (CAPI) in 2010. Regarding the married, 1100 couples were contacted for participation. In 39% of these couples, both partners participated. In 35% of the 1128 cohabiting couples contacted, both participated. In total, complete couple information was available for a sample of 799 couples. For purposes of this study, we selected dual-earner couples (i.e., at the time of interview both partners were in paid labour). No further restrictions were made. The final sample includes 720 couples (376 married, 344 cohabiting). Individuals ranged in age from 19 to 40. ($M_{men} = 28$ years, $M_{women} = 26$ years). There are no significant age differences between the newlyweds and the recently cohabiting (Table 1). The average duration of the married relationships (68 months, or five years and eight months) is about one year and three months longer than the average duration of the cohabiting relationships (53 months; Table 1; $p < 0.001$). The total duration of the relationship refers to the time passed since the couple first started dating, including as such any period of pre-marital cohabitation for the married as well. Almost all respondents are in full-time employment, men slightly more than women (98% of men, 81–84% of women), and average household incomes of both the married and the cohabiting are 2500–3000 euro/month (income category 15). Further, 31% of the married have minor resident children. This is almost twice as many as cohabiting couples (18%). Most also have only one minor child (married: 83%, cohabiting: 66%).

Measures

An eight-item version of the Centre for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) was used to measure *feelings of depression*. The CES-D was constructed to identify populations at risk of developing depressive disorders (Radloff, 1977). Respondents were asked to indicate how often in the week before the survey they felt or behaved in a certain way (felt depressed, felt that everything was an effort, had restless sleep, felt lonely, felt sad, could not get going, enjoyed life, or were happy). Response categories ranged from 'none or almost none of the time' (0) to 'all or almost or all of the time' (3). Scale scores for the CES-D8 were assessed using non-weighted, summated rating and ranged from 8 through 32, with higher scores indicating a greater frequency and severity of depressive complaints. Two positively formulated items (enjoyed life and were happy) were reversed. Reliability and validity are confirmed across gender and countries (Van de Velde, Bracke, Levecque, & Meuleman, 2010), and different

Table 1. Description of the sample, women and men (Relationships in Flanders, 2010).

	MEN					WOMEN				
	Cohabiting ($N = 344$)		Married ($N = 376$)			Cohabiting ($N = 344$)		Married ($N = 376$)		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	sig.	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	sig.
Work-to-family spillover	4.96	3.15	4.90	3.22		5.26	3.14	5.17	3.00	
Family-to-work spillover	1.80	1.71	1.81	1.55		1.91	1.70	1.81	1.58	
Depressive feelings	3.54	2.92	3.30	2.63		4.25	3.19	4.13	3.26	
Life satisfaction	8.14	1.26	8.47	1.10	***	8.02	1.17	8.32	1.20	***
Age	28.06	4.38	28.61	3.95		25.95	3.81	26.31	3.44	
Relationship duration (months)	52.07	32.81	68.56	34.83	***	53.14	34.59	67.78	36.22	***
Household income	15.70	1.50	15.80	1.32		15.54	1.57	15.70	1.33	
	%		%		sig.	%		%		sig.
Full-time employment	98.3		97.9			84		81.1		
Part-time employment	0.9		1.3			9		9.8		
Half-time employment	0.9		0.8			7		9		
Children (minors)	17.7		30.6		***	17.7		30.6		***
1	11.6		25.0			11.6		24.7		
2	5.5		4.5			5.5		4.8		
3+	0.6		1.1			0.6		1.1		

Difference is significant *** at the 0.001 level, ** at the 0.01 level, * at the 0.05 level.

educational levels (Missinne, Vandeviver, Van de Velde, & Bracke, 2014). Cronbach's alpha is estimated at 0.98. Scores were rescaled to a 0–24 scale. *Life satisfaction* was measured using the Cantril Self-Anchoring Ladder (Cantril, 1965). Respondents were asked how satisfied or dissatisfied they were with life. Answers ranges from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied). This measure was also used in the third round of the European Social Survey (www.europeansocialsurvey.org) and is classified as an indicator of wellbeing, in agreement with several other studies (e.g., Bierman, Fazio, & Milkie, 2006; Marks & Lambert, 1998).

In line with Frone et al. (1992) and Stier et al. (2012), and conforming to operationalisation in the ISSP survey (www.issp.org), work-family conflict is captured by four indicators – two indicators measuring work-to-family spillover and two measuring family-to-work spillover. Respondents were asked how often some specific situations had occurred in the previous three months (I came home from work too tired to do the chores that need to be done; it has been difficult for me to fulfil my family responsibilities because of the amount of time I have spent on my job; I have arrived at work too tired to function well because of the household work I have done; I have found it difficult to concentrate at work because of my family responsibilities). Answers ranged from 1 (never) to 7 (daily). The first two items measure work-to-family spillover (range 1–13, Cronbach's alpha = 0.74), the latter two measure family-to-work spillover (range 1–13, Cronbach's alpha = 0.79). Items 1 and 3 refer to a shortage of energy (strain-based conflict); items 2 and 4 refer to lacking time (time-based conflict). Correlations between the four items are significantly positive, but do not indicate a problem of multicollinearity ($r = 0.214$ ($p < .01$) to $r = 0.656$ ($p < .01$)). Confirmatory two-factor analysis shows clustering of items 1 and 2 and of items 3 and 4. With these four items, two of the main three types of work-family conflict – as described by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985; see also Carlson, Kacmar, & Willams, 2000; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998) – are captured. Conflict stemming from incompatible behaviour (behaviour-based conflict) is not included.

Further, the following variables were added to the analysis: age of the respondent (in years), duration of the relationship (in months), the number of minor children in the household and household income.

Data analysis

Because of the non-independence of observations (individuals coupled within partner relationships), gender-specific multivariate regressions were performed using PASW 18. Stepwise regressions were performed. In the first step, the baseline model included only spillover and crossover effects. Because the mental health of partners is slightly correlated ($r_{\text{depresive feelings}} = .204$, $p < .001$; $r_{\text{life satisfaction}} = .347$, $p < .001$; see Table 2), our analyses controlled for the partner's well-being to make sure that crossover effects were not spurious effects stemming from similarities in mental health between partners. Second, we introduced a comparison between the married and the cohabiting, as well as the control variables that tested whether possible differences found in marital status might be attributable to something other than age, children, income or time effects. Finally, interactions with marital status were tested. Only significant interaction terms are shown. Descriptive results and correlations between core variables are shown in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively. Results of the multivariate regressions are presented in Table 3.

Results

Descriptive results and correlation statistics

Both men and women on average report more problems of work-to-family spillover than family-to-work spillover (Table 1). Significant differences in spillover between the married and the cohabiting are not found. With regard to mental health, men overall feel less depressed than women ($p_{\text{married}} < .001$, $p_{\text{cohabiting}} < .01$). This conforms to previous research showing a general mental health advantage in men over women, regardless of age or marital status (Van de Velde, Bracke, & Levecque, 2010). Those who cohabit are not significantly more depressed than the married ($p > .05$, Table 1), but they do report lower scores for life satisfaction ($p < 0.001$).

Self-reported experiences of family-to-work (F-WS) and work-to-family spillover (W-FS) correlate positively for both men and women ($p < .001$, see Table 2). Also, within couples all

Table 2. Correlations between core variables (RiF, 2010).

	W-FS women	F-WS women	W-FS men	F-WS men	Depression - women	Life satisfaction - women	Depression - men
W-FS women	1						
F-WS women	0.35***	1					
W-FS men	0.222***	0.144***	1				
F-WS men	0.128***	0.181***	0.33***	1			
Depression -women	0.284***	0.248***	0.208***	0.094**	1		
Life satisfaction - women	−0.232***	−0.116**	−0.158***	−.047	−0.471***	1	
Depression - men	0.154***	0.141***	0.304***	0.302***	0.204***	−0.212***	1
Life satisfaction - men	−0.105**	−0.136***	−0.249***	−0.232***	−0.188***	0.347***	−0.493***

Correlation is significant *** at the 0.001 level, ** at the 0.01 level.

Table 3. Spillover and crossover effects

	WOMEN								MEN							
	Depressive feelings				Life satisfaction				Depressive feelings				Life satisfaction			
	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig.	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig.	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig.	B	S.E.	Beta	Sig.
(Constant)	1.744	.288		***	5.995	.348		***	1.149	.248		***	6.194	.342		***
Work-to-family spillover	.212	.042	.201	***	−.080	.015	−.207	***	.183	.034	.207	***	−.059	.014	−.158	***
Family-to-work spillover	.315	.076	.164	***	−.012	.027	−.017		.339	.067	.194	***	−.102	.028	−.137	***
Partner W-FS	.094	.041	.092	*	−.021	.015	−.056		.037	.036	.041		.010	.015	.025	
Partner F-WS	−.118	.080	−.059		.083	.029	.113	**	.050	.066	.030		−.035	.028	−.048	
Partner depression/life satisfaction	.147	.046	.127	***	.312	.037	.315	***	.111	.033	.129	***	.317	.037	.314	***
(Constant)	5.133	1.452		***	6.076	.630		***	.898	1.257			6.504	.601		***
Work-to-family spillover	.215	.042	.203	***	−.083	.015	−.216	***	.188	.034	.212	***	−.060	.014	−.160	***
Family-to-work spillover	.287	.076	.149	***	−.003	.028	−.005		.139	.096	.080		−.101	.028	−.136	***
Partner W-FS	.094	.041	.092	*	−.022	.015	−.060		.041	.036	.045		.010	.015	.025	
Partner F-WS	−.103	.081	−.051		.086	.029	.117	**	.030	.067	.018		−.037	.028	−.051	
Partner depression/life satisfaction	.260	.063	.224	***	.296	.038	.299	***	.176	.044	.204	***	.298	.037	.295	***
Cohabiting	.780	.375	.121	*	−.233	.087	−.099	**	.202	.389	.036		−.274	.087	−.116	**
Age	−.059	.034	−.066		−.005	.012	−.014		.041	.025	.062		−.022	.010	−.079	*
Resident children	.455	.195	.090	*	−.114	.071	−.061		.025	.166	.006		.066	.069	.035	
Household income	−.157	.081	−.071	*	.018	.030	.023		−.063	.073	−.032		.046	.030	.055	
Relationship duration	.002	.003	.017		.001	.001	.020		.000	.003	.005		−.002	.001	−.067	
Partner depression *cohabiting	−.227	.084	−.189	**					−.133	.062	−.146	*				
Family-to-work spillover *cohabiting									.355	.126	.186	**				

Results of the multivariate regressions (RIF, 2010).
Parameter estimate is significant *** at the 0.001 level, ** at the 0.01 level, * at the 0.05 level.

measures of spillover correlate significantly ($p < 0.001$), but intra-individual correlations remain highest ($r_{men} = 0.330$, $r_{women} = 0.350$). For both men and women, feelings of depression correlate positively with the experiences of spillover ($r = 0.248$ to $r = 0.304$, $p < .001$) and to a lesser degree with spillover experienced by the partner ($r = 0.094$, $p < .01$ to $r = 0.208$, $p < .001$). The same holds for feelings of satisfaction with life (see Table 2). Finally, partners indeed seem to resemble each other in mental health ($r_{\text{depressive feelings}} = 0.204$, $p < .001$; $r_{\text{life satisfaction}} = .347$, $p < .001$). These significant correlations of men and women's experiences of work-family conflict and mental health in couples prove the non-independence of observations and the importance of these issues from the perspective of the couple.

Spillover and crossover effects of work-family conflict in recently married and cohabiting couples

Baseline results

As expected, we found that both men and women experience problems of family interfering with work and problems of work interfering with family as significant stressors for individual well-being (H1): the more spillover, the more depressive feelings and the less life satisfaction they report (all parameter estimates are significant at the $p < .001$ level). Problems of family-to-work spillover significantly relate to lower levels of life satisfaction only in men. Standardised effect scores of this baseline model reveal that work-to-family interference has a somewhat worse impact on depressive feelings and life satisfaction scores than family-to-work interference. This holds for both men and women, though it is more pronounced in women.

Crossover or partner effects appear significant only for women. For women, depressive feelings increase with increasing levels of work-to-family spillover in their partner. Thus, a woman whose partner often allows work to interfere in family life feels, overall, more depressed than a woman whose partner does not. Contrary to expectations, the experience of family-to-work spillover in men relates to higher (and not lower) levels of life satisfaction in women, but only when it does not relate to less life satisfaction in men.

Further, results of the baseline model confirm that the wellbeing of men and women in couple relations is significantly related to each other over and above spillover and crossover effects: the more satisfied one's partner, the higher one's reported levels of life satisfaction ($p < .001$); and the more depressed one's partner, the more depressed one will be, regardless of gender ($p < .001$).

Introducing marital status

The second part of Table 3 differentiates between the married and the cohabiting, and includes the other socio-demographic variables. Some important nuances are revealed. First, and also when controlling for all variables, life satisfaction scores of cohabiting men and women are significantly lower compared to those reported by married men and women ($p < .01$). Cohabiting women also report significantly higher levels of depressive feelings compared to their married counterparts ($p < .05$). These differences in wellbeing are in addition to those stemming from differential experiences of work-family conflict, or from age, child, financial or time effects. Second, the final model reveals that problems of family-to-work spillover significantly relate to more depressive feelings in cohabiting men only, not in married men. The impact of family-to-work spillover on depressive feelings in cohabiting men ($B = 0.494$ $(0.139 + 0.355)$ $p < .01$) is 3.5 times higher compared to their married counterparts ($B = 0.139$, n.s.). Third, while life satisfaction scores of partners relate equally in the married and cohabiting, feelings of depression between partners are significantly related only in the married. Furthermore, controlling for all other variables, having minor

children in the household is related to more depressive feelings in women; a higher household income is related to less. These effects do not significantly differ between the married and the cohabiting. For men, no additional effects were found.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the link between work-family conflict and mental health in young dual-earner couples, a group which is likely to experience extra pressure as they face the difficult combination of building a career while starting a family. Taking the interdependent nature of partner relationships into consideration, analyses were performed using a couple perspective to provide insight into both spillover and crossover effects, and gender differences in these effects. Additionally, differences between the newlywed and recently cohabiting couples were studied. As a study of Marcussen (2005) revealed that overall, cohabiting couples experience somewhat less normative regulation and report lower levels of commitment to the partner relationship compared to married couples, we questioned whether this would be translated into differences in mental health scores and in the relative impact of spillover and crossover effects.

Overall, results showed that the cohabiting report lower levels of life satisfaction than the married, and multivariate regressions revealed that if conditions were the same among the cohabiting and the married, cohabiting women would also report significantly higher levels of depression compared to their married counterparts. Because married and cohabiting women differ significantly only with regard to relationship duration and having minor children at home (cf. Table 1), and because only for the latter an effect was found on women's mental health, it may be that these results indicate a protective effect of marriage for women against the negative aspects of (young) motherhood. Further research on this is needed.

Spillover effects

The experience of work-family conflict is clearly a major stressor: higher levels of spillover – from work-to-family and from family-to-work – relate to more feelings of depression in both men and women (H1). Support was found for the hypothesis that women's wellbeing is more strongly affected by the disturbance of family life (H2b), although when family duties threaten efficiency and efficacy at work, it also relates to more feelings of depression in women as well. This is in line with recent research indicating that women are increasingly attributing high importance to their work role (Mencken and Winfield in Cinamon and Rich 2002), perhaps as much as men do. In contrast, we expected men to value work especially and thus to be more affected when there is interference with action and efficiency at work (H2a). Results confirm that problems of family interfering with work relate to men's wellbeing more than problems of work interfering with family; however, this is true only for the cohabiting and only relates to depressive feelings. For married men, a troubled family life seems to be more stressful (H4a). Further research is needed to track the underlying mechanisms for these differential effects in men. It is possible too that reducing the rate at which one develops a career is felt as less of a problem by married men because (1) their priorities are different than the cohabiting, or (2) they are more confident about their investment in family when cutting back on work. Overall, for most respondents, work-to-family spillover is experienced as somewhat more stressful. This is also more often reported by both men and women compared to problems resulting from family-to-work spillover; therefore, it may be especially in the work sphere that extra efforts in tempering the negative effects of combining multiple roles can prove efficient.

Crossover effects

Considering crossover effects between partners, we argued that, in particular, work-related stress that is brought into the family would influence each other (H3a), especially women (H3b) and especially among the married (H4b). In line with our expectations, results showed that levels of work-to-family spillover in men positively relate to levels of depressive feelings in their partners. Our argument, based on gender roles, is that women value relationships and a warm and loving family in particular and thus are more vulnerable than men to *any* factor threatening family life; also, having a spouse or partner who is rarely home detracts from family life. It may therefore be this 'lost warmth' that makes women in general sadder and increases their risk for developing depressive feelings. To our surprise, but in line with findings from Brock and Lawrence (2008), results also revealed a positive crossover effect of men's experience of family-to-work spillover on women's life satisfaction scores. Thus, women with a partner who prioritises family responsibilities over work feel more satisfied with life overall, but only if this does not imply lower wellbeing in men. This finding may indicate that these women more often believe that family is highly valued by their partner as well; it may also indicate that this positive effect is due to a more egalitarian distribution of household and caring tasks in these couples. Contrary to expectations, the data did not reveal differences in crossover effects between married and cohabiting couples.

Discussion

We should also note some limitations and ideas for further research. First, the RiF survey is a cross-sectional dataset; we should therefore be careful when making causal statements. As such, it is only our hypothesis that differences in relationship commitment and uncertainty may be at stake when comparing the mental health of married and cohabiting couples. Further data and research should include measures that capture these concepts in order to get better insight into this, and to separate causal from possible selective explanations. Nevertheless, different studies have proved that selection effects should not be overestimated in explaining the relationship between union type and psychological wellbeing (Brown, 2000; Burt et al., 2010; Horn, Xu, Beam, Turkheimer, & Emery, 2013; Lamb, Lee, & DeMaris, 2003). In particular, the study by Lu, Qian, Cunningham, and Li (2012) shows that selection effects are more present when cohabitation is exceptional, but seem to disappear when it becomes a normality in society. Therefore, as in Flanders, where cohabitation has now become very common (for example, in 2010, for every four new marriages, approximately 3.5 new cohabitations were registered at the city hall), selective effects may be of little relevance. Although it was not possible to study dynamics or effects, this survey is nevertheless well suited to the study of gendered differences within couples *across* (new) family arrangements, which was at the core of this research. However, we should also keep in mind that the analyses are done on a sample of young newlywed and recently cohabiting couples. Therefore, the question remains whether crossover effects are stronger or weaker in couples whose relationships are less recent, and, if so, whether this difference can be explained by duration or generation effects. Furthermore, follow-up research should focus on gaining a better understanding of whether and to what extent patterns in partner relationships change (a) on getting married, for those who are currently cohabiting, and (b) in the event of first childbirth, for those who are currently childless. Focusing on these two areas of research may provide insight into the issue of selection and the intermingled impact of marriage and childbirth on relationship commitment.

Second, from a methodological point of view, we should keep in mind that the use of survey data implies that the 'worst cases', especially with regard to combination pressure and mental

health, are likely missed: those who are too busy or distressed are more difficult to include in survey research (Vercruyssen, Roose, & Van de Putte, 2011). Also, although mental health was measured using feelings of depression and life satisfaction, future research should broaden its range to study indicators of positive affect such feelings of mastery and competence, and of health-related behaviour, such as substance abuse, sleeping problems and reckless behaviour. This would be especially interesting, as men and women express stress differently.

Third, though it was not our focus, the experience of role conflict and the extent to which spillover relates to mental health is also influenced by internal factors such as the attitude of individuals towards their social position (Brehm et al., 2000). For example, men and women who report high levels of work-to-family spillover are happier if they believe in the value of their work or are pursuing a career, compared to those who work only from financial necessity. Future research should try to determine to what extent individual attributions of importance to work, family or both (Cinamon & Rich, 2002) relate to differences in the experience of combination pressure, and whether there are differences in these individual attributions between the married and the cohabiting, as our result suggest.

Finally, the importance of support in intimate relationships for both individual and dyadic wellbeing has been widely proven (Barry, Bunde, Brock, & Lawrence, 2009; Brock & Lawrence, 2008, 2009). Further research could provide valuable insight into work-family enhancement or positive spillover (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), and into how men and women from different family types try to obtain or maximise role balance (Marks & MacDermid, 1996), both for themselves and their partner, by giving and receiving different types of support.

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