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## Planning ahead: College seniors' concerns about career–marriage conflict

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### Abstract

Career–marriage conflict (CMC) reflects the reality that for many college seniors, the next decade of their lives will be spent launching a career, often a very demanding one, building a long-term romantic relationship, and coordinating the demands of two careers. We focus on the antecedents and correlates of these concerns. Based on social-role theory, we hypothesized that seniors whose mothers worked outside the home while the seniors were children would express less concern about CMC than seniors with at-home mothers. We also hypothesized that seniors' expectations about the timing of their marriages and childbearing relate to their concerns about CMC, with students who plan to delay family formation having fewer CMC concerns. These hypotheses were supported through an analysis of secondary data from a sample of 324 college seniors at a private university in the Northeast.

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### 1. Introduction

Now that the modal American family is a two-earner family (Hayghe, 1990), the task of combining career and marriage is more complicated than it was in previous

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times. Today's young couples are often trying to build *two* careers and a marriage (Peake & Harris, 2002). Thus, the first ten or so years after college graduation will be a time for launching a career, often a very demanding one, building a long-term romantic relationship, and then coordinating the demands of two careers.

The task of combining career and marriage may be less anxiety provoking for those seniors who, during their formative years, had mothers who were employed outside the home. Social-role theory (Eagly, 1987) suggests that these seniors might be more likely to view career women as familiar and non-threatening, and would themselves expect to be such women or to be married to such women in the future. Consistent with this theory, Stephan and Corder (1985) found that adolescents from dual-career families were more likely than were those from "traditional" families to aspire to dual-career families themselves. Importantly, social-role theory suggests that these attitudes are not dependent on whether their parents managed their work–family conflicts easily, but depend simply on exposure to the norm of a working mother.

In contrast, seniors reared in a family where the mother did not work outside the home are less likely to have had such exposure. Seniors without such exposure may be more anxious about their future ability to combine career and marriage. In this study, we focus exclusively on the relationship between *mothers'* early work pattern (i.e., number of years the mother worked while the participant was growing up and amount of time in full- vs. part-time work) and college seniors' concerns about CMC. This decision was based primarily on the anticipated variability in mothers' as compared to fathers' work history during the majority of seniors' early years.

Among college-age men and women who anticipate having a family, we believe that two strategies to minimize work–family conflict might be to (a) use a career-altering strategy, such as choosing occupations with "family-friendly" hours, and/or (b) use a family-altering strategy, such as choosing to postpone child bearing until after their career is more established, or to have fewer children. Some evidence for the first strategy comes from a study in which physicians who opted to limit their work hours (usually in order to have more family time) were generally concentrated in such medical specialties as anesthesiology and family medicine, which have regular work hours (Lundgren & Barnett, 2000). Interestingly, among graduating senior medical students, the percentages choosing such "controllable-lifestyle" specialties increased between 1978 and 2001, whereas preference for general surgery, a more prestigious but less family-friendly choice with intense and less predictable hours, decreased from 12.1% in 1981 to 6.1% in 2001 (Bland & Isaacs, 2002). We expect that future family considerations may affect the career plans of students in fields other than medicine as well; hence we utilize a sample that is diverse in terms of college major and anticipated career.

As noted earlier, another strategy for minimizing CMC is to postpone childbearing until after one's career is established (Marini, Shin, & Raymond, 1989) and/or to limit one's family size. Previous research indicates that the more children one has, the less time one has for each child, potentially increasing work–family tension (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982; Hennig & Jardim, 1978; Nock & Kingston, 1988). Further, in a study of over 6,500 Canadian employees, Duxbury and Higgins (2001) found that

high levels of family-to-work interference were associated with having larger families at a younger age.

The link between women's education and delayed childbirth is well established. For women with 16+ years of education, median age at first birth rose by 3.8 years to 29.5 between 1969 and 1994, with 45.5% of first births among these women occurring at age 30 or older, quadrupling the rate found in 1969 (Heck, Schoendorf, Ventura, & Kiely, 1997). Spain and Bianchi (1996) report that in a 1992 sample of US women 18–34, employed women plan smaller families than those not in the labor force (2.0 vs. 2.4 children) and are significantly more likely to plan never to have children (10.5% vs. 6.0%). Bachu (1999) reports that nearly 30% of college-educated women aged 40 to 44 in 1998 were childless.

As far as young men are concerned, they increasingly prefer to marry women who have completed their education and are financially independent (Oppenheimer, 1997). Thus, male college seniors may expect that their future wives will have completed their education and begun establishing themselves in their own careers before marriage, and, like their female counterparts, male seniors may wish to establish themselves in their own careers before starting their families. With the economic and organizational leverage they will have accrued, these men and women might be better able than younger, less well-established colleagues to negotiate flexible schedules that will enable them to participate more in their families, thereby minimizing conflict. Thus, influences emanating from the family of origin as well as from current economic, demographic, and attitudinal realities affect the career and family expectations of college seniors.

Most of the literature on college students' future plans focuses on their choice of major or career (Eccles, 1993; Farmer, 1985; Ware & Steckler, 1983). We know, for example, that students' employment expectations influence their course choices and area of concentration (Eccles, 1994). We also know that considerations of future work conditions (e.g., earnings, work hours, support for child care) may affect students' career choices (Arnold, 1993; Covin & Brush, 1991; Levy, Sadovsky, & Troseth, 2000; Wheeler, Candib, & Martin, 1990). Of course, career decisions ultimately impact marital and family functioning. For example, if one partner's career requires a 60± h work week, that partner will be less available to share household and child-care responsibilities, leaving the other partner with an unequal caring burden. Such perceived inequality can result in CMC for both men and women (Milkie & Peltola, 1999; Ozer, Barnett, Brennan, & Sperling, 1998). However, scant systematic attention has been paid to the antecedents and correlates of college seniors' concerns about future CMC per se.

Because our interest is in college seniors' global perceptions of their future CMC potential, we focus on their overall judgments about their and their future partner's ability to manage career and relationship commitments. This focus differs from the multidimensional conceptualization of work–family conflict prevalent in current research on working families (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991). Specifically, the distinction between work interfering with family and family interfering with work (Gutek et al., 1991; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997) has received considerable attention. However, these distinctions may not be as clear to

young adults as they look ahead to their own ability to manage the demands of work and family. Moreover, as discussed above, issues of parenting may be beyond the thoughts of today's college seniors. Finally, the above distinctions were made only after considerable research using global measures. Thus, given the early stage of the research on CMC, we use a global measure that concerns future career–marriage conflict potential.

In the present analysis, in addition to examining the impact of maternal work history and family plans on anticipated CMC, we include as covariates gender, minority status, number of children planned, natal family size, mother's education, religious affiliation, and negative affectivity, because these factors may be associated with anticipated CMC.

Until recently it has been assumed that women experience more work–family conflict than do men. Studies of previous cohorts of college seniors indicated marked gender differences, with women more than men reporting being less able to make firm career plans because of expected future conflict between their work and family aspirations (Almquist & Angrist, 1993; Angrist & Almquist, 1975; Arnold, 1993; Novack & Novack, 1996). However, recent research suggests that: (1) young men are now reporting that family is at least as important to them as work (Radcliffe Public Policy Center, 2000); (2) professionally trained women and men want to be both challenged at work and engaged at home (Boston Bar Association, 1999); (3) working men now experience as much work–family conflict as do women (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998); (4) equal percentages of men and women have made career sacrifices (e.g., refused to work overtime, turned down a promotion) to accommodate family responsibilities (Milkie & Peltola, 1999); and (5) increasing percentages of young men and women 18 and older endorse the idea that it is preferable for both partners in a marriage to share economic duties (Moen, 1999; Twenge, 1997). Based on these findings, we believe that issues of CMC might also be as paramount for men as for women.

It is difficult to specify a priori how race might affect expected CMC, and the small cell sizes in this data set preclude analyses of specific racial groups, so, following Carr et al. (1998), we collapse racial groups into underrepresented and non-underrepresented racial groups and include this dichotomous variable as a covariate in our analyses. Natal family size was entered as another covariate. With more children, working parents may experience a parental squeeze and higher work–family conflict (Nock & Kingston, 1988), raising concerns among their children about their own ability to manage multiple demands. We enter mother's education as an additional covariate because it is a carrier variable for a number of family factors (e.g., maternal employment, work schedule, and career attainment; maternal age at birth of first child, and so on) which might influence their children's work and family expectations. We also include religious affiliation as a covariate, because the likelihood of implementing the strategies we examine for limiting future work–family conflict might not be acceptable to more religious seniors. Although one's specific religion might well influence career–family expectations, the small cell sizes in the present sample preclude analyses of specific religious groups, so, following Mincy and Dupree (2001), we collapsed current religious preference into no vs. some religious

affiliation. Finally, we enter negative affectivity (NA) as a covariate in our analyses. NA is a mood-dispositional trait to experience the world negatively (Burke, Brief, & George, 1993; Brennan & Barnett, 1998) which has been related, albeit indirectly, to work–family conflict (Stoeva, Chiu, & Greenhaus, 2002).

In sum, we tested the following hypotheses: (1) Maternal work history relates to college seniors' concern about future CMC, with those whose mothers worked more (i.e., more years, full- vs. part-time) expressing less concern, and (2) Planned timing of marriage and childbearing relates to college seniors' concern about future CMC, with those choosing to delay marriage and childbearing expressing less concern.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The data were collected as part of a larger study of future expectations and aspirations of college freshmen and seniors attending a private university in the north-eastern US (Steele, James, & Barnett, 2002). As part of this larger study, 333 women and 333 men in their final year of university were contacted by mail during the spring semester. They were asked to complete a questionnaire for a chance to win a gift certificate in a lottery. The students who were contacted were a representative sample of the undergraduate population, with one exception; because of the nature of the study, we oversampled women in their final year who were in a male-dominated academic area. The response rate was 48.7%, which compares quite favorably with other mail surveys of college students.

The senior class sample was drawn on the basis of the student's declared major as recorded by the University, with a designation of majors as gender-congruent, gender-incongruent, and gender-neutral based on the sex ratio of students in that major. If at least 60% of the students in a major were male, the major was considered to be gender-congruent for males and gender-incongruent for females. If fewer than 40% of students in a major were male, the major was considered gender-incongruent for males and gender-congruent for females. All other majors were considered to be gender-neutral. For example, a child development major was treated as gender-congruent for a female and gender-incongruent for a male. An engineering major was treated as gender-congruent for a male and gender-incongruent for a female. English and political science are examples of gender-neutral majors.

Of the 975 students in the senior class whose major could be classified in terms of gender-congruence, 666 were selected using the following criteria: We selected all females with gender-incongruent ( $n = 94$ ) and gender-congruent ( $n = 155$ ) majors and a random sample with gender-neutral majors ( $n = 84$ ). We also selected all males with gender-incongruent majors ( $n = 54$ ) and random samples with gender-congruent ( $n = 169$ ) and gender-neutral ( $n = 110$ ) majors.

Among the respondents, 201 (62%) were women and 123 (38%) were men. They ranged in age from 21 to 32 years ( $Mean = 22.99$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ) and varied widely in academic area, with 2 (.6%) in arts, 52 (16.1%) in engineering, 24 (7.4%) in

humanities, 47 (14.5%) in math and science, 196 (60.5%) in social science, and 3 (.9%) in other academic areas. Consistent with the university's population, most students were White (68.7%) and from middle-class to upper-middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds.

## 2.2. Procedures

Data collection took place between February and May, 2000. We followed standard procedures for mail surveys, with a postcard reminder followed by a telephone reminder call. The initial mailing included a questionnaire, a cover letter describing the lottery prize drawing, and a self-addressed stamped return envelope.

## 2.3. Measures

*Concern about future career–marriage conflict (CMC)* was operationalized by responses to a four-item measure developed for this study. It was based, in part, on an earlier study (Barnett, 1971) of the post-college graduation plans of college seniors that reflected the fact that career plans need to be integrated with both expected and ideal age of first marriage. The development of the measure also reflects Goodnow's (1997) thesis that theoretical formulations of planning should include an interpersonal planning component. The four items assessed the degree to which participants, in thinking about their future, worry about: their career conflicting with their partner's career; their career conflicting with their romantic relationship; their partner's career conflicting with their own career; and their partner's career conflicting with their romantic relationship. Participants responded on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (A great deal) to 4 (Not at all). The four items were highly correlated, and hence were averaged to create a composite, which had a Cronbach alpha of .92.

*Family plans* was operationalized as responses to four items developed for this study. The items assessed ideal and expected age of marriage as well as ideal and expected age of having children on the following response scale: 1 (Younger than 20), 2 (21–25), 3 (26–30), 4 (31–35), 5 (36–40), and 6 (Older than 40). Again, based on the correlations, these items were averaged to create a composite, with a Cronbach alpha of .83.

*Mother's work history* was operationalized as responses to four questions: Did the respondent's mother work at all in the years between the respondent's birth and age 11? If so, was she working mostly full-time, mostly part-time, about equally full- and part-time? How many years did the respondent's mother work when the respondent was age 12 to age 16? Of those years, was she working mostly full-time, mostly part-time, about equally full- and part-time? Number of years worked was weighted by 1 if she mostly worked full-time, by .745 if she worked about equally full- and part-time, and by .5 if she worked mostly part-time. Scores for the two age periods were summed. Thus, the theoretical range for the scale was 0 to 17.

*Underrepresented minority status* was coded as a dummy variable (1 = underrepresented minority, 0 = else). Based on a comparison between the racial/ethnic distribution in the US population (US Bureau of the Census, 1999, Table 19, p. 19) and the

distribution in this university, a 1 was scored if the respondent checked at least one of the following categories: Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander. A 0 was scored if the respondent checked only White and/or Asian.

*Gender* was coded as a dummy variable (1 = female, 0 = male).

*Religious affiliation* was coded as a dummy variable (1 = identified a religious affiliation, 0 = identified as agnostic, as atheist, or as having no religious affiliation).

*Number of children planned* was the number of children seniors said they would ideally like to have.

*Mother's education* was assessed by asking respondents to categorize the highest level of education their mothers had obtained on a scale ranging from 1 (Less than high school diploma) to 6 (Doctorate, medical, or law degree).

*Natal family size* was assessed by summing respondent reports of the number of older and younger brothers and sisters they had and then adding one to represent the respondent.

*Negative affectivity* (NA) was assessed using the Trait Anxiety Scale (Spielberger, 1983), a 10-item frequency of feelings scale which is a recognized measure of the NA construct (Watson & Clark, 1984). Test–retest correlations ranged from .73 to .86 in college populations over a two-year period (Spielberger, 1983). This scale had a Cronbach alpha of .84.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Descriptive findings

The majority of the students were White (70.2%). Some 70.1% of the seniors identified themselves as having a particular religious affiliation, whereas 29.9% identified themselves as agnostic, atheist, or having no religious affiliation. On average, the seniors planned to have between two and three children (*Mean* = 2.53, *SD* = 0.78) and expected to marry and have children between the ages of 26 and 30 (*Mean* = 3.17 on a scale where 3 represents ages 26 to 30 and 4 represents ages 31 to 35, *SD* = 0.49, *range* = 1.50–4.75). This is consistent with recent census data on average age at first marriage: 25.0 for women and 26.7 for men (US Census Bureau, 1998). On average, male and female seniors are generally between “somewhat” and “a little” concerned about future CMC, with concerns rated closer to “a little” (*Mean* = 2.68, *SD* = 0.81). Females expect to marry and have children at significantly younger ages than do males (Males: *Mean* = 3.29, *SD* = 0.50; Females: *Mean* = 3.11, *SD* = 0.47; *t* = 3.20, *p* < .01; again, ratings were made on a scale where 3 represents ages 26 to 30 and 4 represents ages 31 to 35). The effect size was modest (*d* = .37) and probably reflects the slight gender difference found in the census data. On average, the seniors reported that their mothers worked the equivalent of about seven full-time years from their birth to age 16 (*Mean* = 7.22, *SD* = 5.65).

Table 1 shows the intercorrelations between study variables. The bivariate correlations show fairly weak patterns between variables. The most consistent pattern is

Table 1  
Intercorrelations among measures

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Family plans	–	–.03	.04	<u>–.18</u>	<u>–.15</u>	<u>–.23</u>	–.03	–.01	.06	.10
2. Mother's work history		–	<u>.14</u>	.03	<u>–.12</u>	–.08	<u>.16</u>	<u>–.13</u>	<u>–.13</u>	.10
3. Underrepresented minority status			–	.05	<u>.12</u>	.09	<u>–.21</u>	<u>.28</u>	.03	–.06
4. Gender				–	.04	<u>.20</u>	.00	.02	.10	.06
5. Religious affiliation					–	<u>.14</u>	.07	.01	–.07	.00
6. Number of children planned						–	–.01	<u>.21</u>	–.05	.06
7. Mother's education							–	<u>–.17</u>	<u>–.15</u>	.06
8. Natal family size								–	.03	.06
9. Negative affectivity									–	–.07
10. Concern about career–marriage conflict										–

Note.  $N = 324$ . Dummy-coded variables are as follows: underrepresented minority status (1 = underrepresented minority, 0 = else), gender (1 = female, 0 = male), religious affiliation (1 = some religious affiliation, 0 = agnostic, atheist, or none). Correlations which are underscored are significant at the  $p < .05$  level.



between maternal work history and several covariates. Specifically, mother's work history is positively, albeit modestly, correlated with underrepresented minority status and mother's highest level of education, and is negatively correlated—again, modestly—with having a religious affiliation, number of siblings in the natal family, and negative affectivity. Also of interest is the pattern of correlations with the religious affiliation variable; in addition to being associated with lower maternal commitment to the labor force during one's childhood, having some religious affiliation was associated with planning to marry and have children earlier as well as planning to have more children.

### 3.2. Hypothesis testing

We estimated a simultaneous multiple regression model with concerns about future CMC as the outcome variable, two predictors (mother's work history and own family plans), and seven covariates (gender, underrepresented minority status, religious affiliation, number of children planned, mother's education, natal family size, and negative affectivity). The main-effects model was significant,  $F(9, 298) = 1.92$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $R^2 = .055$  (see Table 2). Both predictors were significantly associated with concerns about future CMC. Specifically, seniors whose mothers had worked more during their childhood years expressed less concern about future CMC. Conversely, seniors whose mothers had worked less expressed more concern about such conflict. These findings support Hypothesis 1. In addition, seniors who planned to marry and have children later expressed less concern about future CMC than those who expected to marry and have children earlier. These findings support Hypothesis 2. Consistent with more recent trends, there was no main effect of gender. Nor were any of the other covariates significant predictors of CMC.

Table 2  
Predictors of college seniors' concern about future career–marriage conflict

Variable	Expected career–marriage conflict		
	<i>B</i>	$\beta$	( <i>SE</i> )
Family plans	.24*	.14	(.10)
Mother's work history	.02*	.13	(.01)
Underrepresented minority status	–.29	–.12	(.15)
Gender	.13	.08	(.10)
Religious affiliation	.06	.04	(.10)
Number of children planned	.07	.07	(.06)
Mother's education	.02	.03	(.04)
Natal family size	.07	.10	(.04)
Negative affectivity	–.07	–.06	(.07)
Model $R^2$		.06	
Adjusted $R^2$		.03	

Note.  $N = 324$ . Higher scores on the career–marriage conflict measure represent lower concern about future conflict.

\*  $p < .05$ .

Following Cunningham (2001), we disaggregated the maternal work history variable into two components: maternal work history when the respondent was 0 to 11 years old, and maternal work history when the respondent was 11 to 16 years old. Because these two variables were highly collinear, we were unable to include both in a single regression model. However, additional analyses (not shown) indicated that mothers' early work history had a much greater influence on the outcome variable ( $\beta = .149, p = .014$ ) than did mothers' later work history ( $\beta = .050, p = .400$ ). Moreover, when mothers' early work history was included in a regression model, the findings were extremely similar to those shown in Table 2.

We also examined the possibility that gender-role ideology (GRI), as assessed using a well-validated two-item measure (see Bond et al., 1998; Moen, 1999), might affect expectations of CMC. GRI was not a significant predictor of CMC, and because it was collinear with maternal work history, it was omitted from further analyses.

In order to determine whether effects were moderated by underrepresented minority status or by gender, we followed the approach outlined by Aiken and West (1991). To minimize the problems of multicollinearity associated with such analyses, we centered each predictor on its sample mean and computed interaction terms using the centered values. We then estimated two separate interaction-effects regression models. The first had eight interaction terms of the form GENDER  $\times$  VARIABLE (e.g., gender  $\times$  religious affiliation, gender  $\times$  family plans), while the second had eight interaction terms of the form UNDERREPRESENTED MINORITY STATUS  $\times$  VARIABLE. Interaction terms were entered in groups of eight instead of separately in order to minimize Type I errors. In neither case did the set of interaction terms account for a significant increment to  $R^2$  over and above that explained by the main-effects model. Thus, the relationships between covariate and predictor variables, on the one hand, and concerns about future CMC, on the other, did not vary by underrepresented minority status or by gender.

#### 4. Discussion

There were two main findings of this study. College seniors whose mothers worked during their growing up years expressed less concern about future conflict between their and their partner's careers and their romantic relationships than did seniors whose mothers did not work (or worked very little), as did college seniors who expected to delay their own marriage and childbearing. These findings did not differ by minority status; both overrepresented (i.e., White/Asian) and underrepresented minority students who were less concerned about future CMC had mothers who had worked more during their childhoods and expected to delay their own marriage and childbearing.

Moreover, these results did not vary by gender; males who had few concerns about future CMC were as likely as comparable females to have had mothers who worked more during their childhoods and to expect to delay their own marriage and childbearing. These findings support the study's two hypotheses and provide additional confirmation for social-role theory. The importance of the mother's work

history is consistent with a body of literature (Kerpelman & Schvaneveldt, 1999; Thorne & Gilbert, 1998) indicating that, as young men and women approach adulthood, their focus on anticipated roles is heightened. In this context, “parents are particularly important influences. . . as their young adult children determine appropriate role identity investments” (Kerpelman & Schvaneveldt, 1999, p. 193).

It is important to note that our explanatory variables accounted for only 3% of the variance in CMC. Thus, social-role theory has only limited utility in predicting the antecedents of CMC. Early family influences, while explaining some unique variance, are inadequate by themselves to predict future career–marriage conflict potential. Future research needs to focus more heavily on concurrent influences including peer, economic, and cultural pressures.

In contrast to previous studies, it appears that, at least with respect to concerns about future CMC, the “future selves” (Wurf & Markus, 1991) of today’s female and male college seniors are converging. Male and female college seniors who were reared in a household with an employed mother, especially one employed full-time, expect less difficulty in integrating their future romantic relationship with either their or their future partner’s career than their classmates whose mothers worked less or not at all. To the extent that their mothers combined work and family commitments, these students seem confident that they, too, can accomplish this balance. This family history is quite important, given that almost all of the seniors in the sample see themselves as working and having a family within ten years. Those whose mothers “showed them the way” appear to have an advantage; i.e., they express fewer concerns about future CMC, compared to those students whose mothers had different career–family arrangements. These findings are consistent with studies indicating that parents’ household labor patterns and mothers’ labor force participation affected their children’s later views on the ideal division of household labor (Cunningham, 2001).

Although considerable research has addressed college seniors’ future “multiple role planning” (i.e., career, marriage, and parenting; McCracken & Weitzman, 1997), no previous study has focused on the antecedents and correlates of concerns about future CMC. The present study addressed this gap in the literature. Another contribution is the development of two new scales, concern about CMC and family plans, with encouraging psychometric properties.

It is of some interest that none of the covariates were significantly related to future career–marriage concerns. Specifically, there was no significant association between mother’s highest level of education, natal family size, or number of children planned and concerns about future CMC. Insufficient variation on these variables might account for the findings. For example, 74.8% of the seniors’ mothers had completed a bachelor’s degree or higher. The majority of the seniors, 57.7%, were either only children or in two-child sibships, and 85.2% were in families with one to three children. Similarly, 52.5% plan to have one or two children, and 91.1% plan to have between one and three.

One limitation of this secondary data analysis is that we did not have data on the marital status of the seniors’ parents. This limitation is especially important because minority families (especially African–American, Hispanic/Latino, and American

Indian/Alaska Native, but not Asian, families) are more likely than are White families to have a single head of household (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Since single working parents are likely to experience more career–family conflict than their married or partnered counterparts, social-role theory would predict that college seniors with single working mothers might anticipate higher levels of CMC. However, the preponderance of dual-earner families in the population suggests that the majority of college seniors with working mothers in this sample would also have had exposure to two working parents negotiating the demands of work and family. Future research on the linkages between college seniors' expectations of CMC should include data on parents' marital status and marital history. Such data would help disentangle whether the primary predictor of low expected CMC is maternal employment per se or being reared in a two-earner family.

Although we did not have sufficient numbers of underrepresented minority students to analyze different ethnic groups separately, it is also reasonable to suppose that effects would depend on one's specific group membership. For example, a study by Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, and Hofferth (2001) found that paternal involvement in childrearing differed depending on whether fathers were White, African American, or Latino. Moreover, our results may have differed if we had operationalized CMC in a more multidimensional fashion. How young adults conceptualize CMC may vary, and these different conceptualizations may affect their expressed anticipation of such conflict in the future. In addition, just as research on work–family conflict has been extended to look at work–family enhancement (i.e., the ways in which simultaneous occupancy of work, and family roles results in heightened quality of life), so too might future work on CMC be extended to assess college seniors' expectations about career and marriage having enhancing effects.

These findings might inform counseling practice in several ways. First, widely held gendered assumptions about CMC that might influence counseling interactions need to be re-thought. Second, serious attention might be paid to college seniors' concerns about CMC so that they may be helped to consider various strategies for reducing such conflict.

In sum, our findings suggest that students whose mothers worked during their early childhood and students who planned to start a family later anticipate less career–marriage conflict. Future research is needed to estimate the relationship between parental marital status, race, and concerns about future career–marriage in samples large enough to permit analysis of particular minority groups. Another potentially fruitful area for future research would be to follow college seniors over time to determine how their eventual ability to cope with CMC is related to their parents' work history. It remains to be seen whether their expectations will be sustainable under the pressure of the “real” work world.

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