Education and Work-Family Conflict: Explanations, Contingencies and Mental Health Consequences

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Using data from a representative sample of American workers, we examine the association between education and work-family conflict–a form of inter-role conflict in which role pressures from each domain are incompatible in some way. The well-educated tend to occupy professional jobs with more income and pressures, and experience more work-family role blurring activities. These conditions contribute to greater conflict among the well-educated. In addition, people with less than a high school degree report more conflict because of their experience in precarious work with variable shifts. Finally, work-family conflict is associated with distress–but less so among those with the highest and lowest education. We discuss the theoretical relevance of these findings for views about social status, stress exposure, and their implications for mental health.

Is education associated with work-family conflict? If so, what work conditions contribute to that relationship? And, does education modify the association between work-family conflict and distress? In recent decades, the intersection of work and family life–especially conflict between these roles–has become of major scholarly and policy interest (Blair-Loy 2003; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Winslow 2005). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985:77) define work-family conflict as "a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role."[1] A substantial body of research has established that work-family conflict represents a prominent and pervasive stressor that has deleterious health consequences (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Byron 2005; Kelloway, Gottlieb and Barham 1999; Mullen, Kelley and Kelloway 2008). Despite this knowledge, surprisingly little is known about the potential social status influences in the association between work-family conflict and mental health outcomes. We focus particular attention on one potentially intriguing form of social status and stratification–*education*–for several reasons.

First, community-based evidence indicates that individuals with higher levels of education tend to report more frequent exposure to work-family conflict (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Grzywacz, Almeida and McDonald 2002; Mennino, Rubin and Brayfield 2005; Schieman, Kurashina and Van Gundy 2006; Schieman and Glavin 2008). This observation is important because it goes against the grain of theory and research in

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the sociological study of stress, which has repeatedly shown that individuals in higher statuses (i.e., more education) generally tend to experience less frequent exposure to stressors of all kinds (Mirowsky and Ross 2003a; Pearlin 1999). Extrapolating from this "differential exposure" perspective, one would expect that individuals with more education experience *less* frequent work-family conflict. After all, the link between education and a set of work-related conditions purportedly function as resources. However, the fact that population-based evidence appears contrary to this view presents a compelling paradox that has yet to receive careful theoretical and empirical scrutiny. As we will develop further in our hypotheses, the "stress of higher status" view predicts that education is associated with conditions that may be linked with more work-family role blurring and contribute to higher levels of conflict among the well-educated. Here, education's relationship with work-related demands that have unfavorable consequences for the work-family interface may be relevant. Moreover, in the sociological study of mental health, the differential exposure view is an explanation for why the well-educated tend to report *fewer* symptoms of psychological distress (McLeod and Nonnemaker 1999). Therefore, observations that reveal contrary patterns of stress exposure should contribute to a suppression effect in the education-distress association.

A second reason why we focus on education involves the relevance of education as a moderating influence in the link between stressors and health (Mirowsky and Ross 2003b). In stress research, this reflects "differential vulnerability" (Avison, Ali and Walters 2007; Wheaton 1999). In the context of our analysis, if the well-educated report *higher levels* of work-family conflict, then this challenges the claim of education as a resource that protects individuals against stress exposure. In defense of the resource view, however, the differential vulnerability hypothesis posits that the association between work-family conflict and distress should vary across levels of education. Specifically, if it indeed functions as a resource, education should *attenuate* the positive association between work-family conflict and distress. This resource view derives from the well-established benefits of education for human capital and more favorable occupational, economic and work conditions (Schieman and Plickert 2008)—conditions that generally provide protective resources to help fend off the damaging effects of adversity.

We test these ideas by analyzing data from a 2002 nationally representative survey of working Americans—the National Study of the Changing Workforce. This dataset is ideal for addressing our main research questions for two main reasons: (1. it contains individuals who vary substantially in their levels of educational attainment; and (2. it represents a diverse cross-section of occupations and work conditions that may contribute to any observed effects of education. This is especially important because it allows us to examine a range of work-related demands and resources as potential intervening mechanisms.

Theoretical Framework

Education and Levels of Work-Family Conflict: Differential Exposure

From the "differential exposure" perspective, the first set of propositions identifies education-based variation in *levels* of work-family conflict and the potential reasons

for them. Broadly speaking, the stress process model predicts that individuals of higher social status should report less exposure to stressors of all types, which, in turn, should contribute to their lower levels of distress (McLeod and Nonnemaker 1999). However, this empirical expectation does not seem to extend to the association between education and work-family conflict. Several community-based surveys document that the well-educated tend to report higher levels of work-family conflict (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Schieman et al. 2006). To our knowledge, no population-based studies have documented *lower levels* of work-family conflict among the well-educated–findings that are contrary to the differential exposure thesis. We believe that these observations deserve more critical scrutiny given the resource advantages that the well-educated tend to experience in terms of higher occupational status, better pay and more favorable work conditions (Mirowsky and Ross 2003a; 2003b).

What might contribute to the positive association between education and work-home conflict? We apply concepts from the Job Demands-Resources model as a guiding framework to hypothesize several intervening mechanisms based on education's association with job-related *demands* and/or *resources* and their implications for work-family role blurring. A core proposition of the JDR model is that work conditions are organized in two broad categories: demands and resources (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). The levels and interaction of these conditions have been shown to influence workers' experience of job strain and subsequent well-being. According to Bakker and Geurts (2004:348):

> "Job demands refer to those physical, psychosocial, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or mental effort and are, therefore, associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs… Job resources refer to those physical, psychosocial, or organizational aspects of the job that may be functional in meeting task requirements (i.e., job demands) and may thus reduce the associated physiological and/or psychological costs–and at the same time stimulate personal growth and development."

The Demands Hypothesis

We evaluate two core components of the demands hypothesis. The first predicts that education is associated with work-related demands, which, in turn, contribute to higher levels of work-family conflict. There are several core features of working life that represent pressures or strains that may have unfavorable consequences for the work-family interface. This demand perspective has its origins in Karasek's (1979) prominent framework for the analysis of work strain: the Job Demands-Control model. Since the introduction of that model, researchers have paid particularly close attention to role overload and time pressure as focal work-related demands (Duxbury, Lyons and Higgins 2008). However, recent revisions outlined in the JDR model encourage the evaluation of a

wider array of demand-related circumstances in the workplace (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). Applying that model here, we assess the relevance of long hours, job pressure, job insecurity, irregular shift work and unpaid overtime as among the most influential conditions (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Mirowsky and Ross 2003b). We have specifically selected these job conditions because they underscore the *strain* elements of work demands that, in turn, predict greater work-family conflict (Voydanoff 2007).

For these job demands to contribute to education-based differences in work-family conflict, each must be associated positively with education. We suspect that part of the association between education and these particular job demands is related to the conditions of higher status occupations. Population-based research demonstrates that the well-educated are more likely to have higher status occupations (i.e., executives, professionals), which, in turn, tend to encounter longer hours and more job pressures–these are two key conditions that contribute to feeling a "time squeeze" (Hochschild 1997) and less work-life balance (Tausig and Fenwick 2001). By extension, individuals in higher status occupations are exposed to more frequent work-family conflict than their peers in lower status jobs (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Grzywacz et al. 2002; Mennino et al. 2005; Schieman et al. 2006). Thus, in our analyses, we test the hypothesis that the well-educated tend to report more work-home conflict because of their higher status occupations, longer hours and greater job pressures.

The population-based studies cited above suggest a *positive* and *linear* association between education and work-home conflict. The demands hypothesis emphasizes job-related demands as the potential reason for this higher level of conflict among the most educated individuals. Yet, it is also plausible that some work-related stressors that generate conflict are more common among those with fewer years of education. If so, this might contribute to *nonlinear* patterns such that people with lower levels of education (e.g., less than a high school degree) would report more work-family conflict compared to those with moderate amounts (e.g., a high school degree). Prior theory and evidence points to two particular conditions–job insecurity and shift irregularities–which may contribute to a range of personal, social and role difficulties (Batt and Valcour 2003; Grosswald 2003; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Totterdell 2005; Voydanoff 2007). We evaluate whether or not greater exposure to job insecurity and shift irregularities contributes to higher levels of work-family conflict among individuals with low levels of education. Thus, unlike prior research on this topic, our analyses will assess a wider range of job-related demands that might contribute to higher levels of work-family conflict among individuals with the lowest and highest levels of education.

The second component of the *demands hypothesis* highlights the intervening mechanisms between job-related demands and work-family role blurring activity. Desrochers and colleagues (2005:449) define role blurring as "a subjective, cognitive phenomenon involving perceived integration of work life and home life that is situated in a highly interdependent work-family context such as the simultaneous work and family demands that can be present when people bring their paid work into the home." We identify two role-blurring activities as potentially relevant: (1. working at home and (2.

receiving work-related contact outside of normal work hours from an array of sources, including coworkers, supervisors, managers, customers or clients. Both activities have been linked with greater job-related demands and work-family conflict (Schieman and Glavin 2008; Voydanoff 2007). Advances in communication technologies and their proliferation augment individuals' ability to engage in remote work (Batt and Valcour 2003). However, these technologies also expand expectations for the completion of work tasks in ways that privilege work over family life—irrespective of time or place—facilitating processes through which work-related activities creep into family life (Lewis and Cooper 1999; Valcour and Hunter 2005). We draw upon these ideas as a rationale for the proposed intervening mechanisms of the demands hypothesis: The well-educated tend to have more job-related demands that may increase work-family role blurring; in turn, these processes should help to explain why the well-educated tend to encounter more frequent work-family conflict.

The Resources Hypothesis

In contrast to the demands hypothesis, the resources hypothesis underscores that education is associated with favorable work-related conditions. The well-educated are more likely to have higher levels of occupational status and greater earnings (Grusky and DiPrete 1990; Kerckhoff, Raudenbush and Glennie 2001). Moreover, they tend to have greater schedule control, job authority and more non-routine work (Mirowsky and Ross 2003a; 2003b; Ross and Wright 1998; Schieman et al. 2006). As described in Karasek's (1979) original demands-control model, many of these conditions involve forms of job control, including control over the timing and direction of one's own work (i.e., schedule control, job autonomy), as well as other peoples' work (i.e., supervisory duties). Decision-making latitude and job autonomy have been the quintessential indicators of job control (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). In our analyses, we evaluate a broader set of conditions that includes control of the timing of work (schedule control) and others' work (job authority).

According to the resource hypothesis, we should observe that resource conditions—especially those associated with more job control—tend to contribute to less frequent work-family role blurring and work-family conflict. However, prior evidence has yielded unexpected patterns. For example, some job-related resources are associated with *more frequent* role blurring activity—and these conditions are linked with more work-family conflict (Schieman and Glavin 2008; Voydanoff 2007). These patterns challenge claims of the resource hypothesis. Thus, an alternative theoretical perspective is required to articulate the ways that some job-related resources may contribute to the positive association between education and work-family conflict in ways that mirror the impact of job-related demands. We label this the "stress of higher status" hypothesis, which predicts that education is associated with more schedule control, job authority, nonroutine work and better pay, which, in turn, are linked with *more frequent* work-family role blurring. In turn, these patterns may contribute to higher levels of work-family conflict among the well-educated.

We wish to emphasize that these "stress of higher status" predictions imitate intervening patterns like those expressed in the demands hypothesis–albeit for different reasons. In the demands hypothesis, stress of higher status processes are implied when we refer, for example, to more frequent role blurring and work-to-family conflict among the well-educated or workers in higher status occupations; these processes likely entail greater job pressures. Previous research shows that higher status work conditions increase border permeability and interference between roles (Grzywacz et al. 2002; Olson-Buchanan and Boswell 2006; Schieman et al. 2006). This may result from higher status positions demanding, as Blair-Loy (2003:7) phrased it, "an immense time commitment and strong emotional allegiance to one's firm or career." Role blurring often occurs because of the pressures and expectations of higher status conditions; these processes, in turn, can elevate exposure to work-family conflict. It is well-documented that workers with greater job authority tend to have more pressure, overload and work longer hours (Duxbury et al. 2008; Maume and Bellas 2001; Schieman and Reid 2008)–factors detract from any health benefits of greater job authority (Schieman and Reid 2009).

We also evaluate the influence of income alongside these other work conditions. Earnings are linked to education and many of the work-related resources in our model such as job autonomy, authority, schedule control and non-routine work (Mirowsky and Ross 2003b; Schieman and Reid 2008). In addition, high earners tend to have more work-related demands such as job pressure and longer hours (Mennino et al. 2005; Park 2007). In our analyses, we evaluate the influence of earnings as a resource because it may help individuals in the work-family interface. First, income may facilitate individuals' efforts to avoid or minimize difficulties balancing work and family demands (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). Alternatively, low income may function as a stressor that elevates problems in the work-family interface. In several major summaries of the literature, there is a lack of evidence about the direct and indirect influence of income in the work-family interface (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Voydanoff 2007). In a meta-analyses of the antecedents of work-family conflict, Byron (2005) identifies income as a "demographic variable" that is associated with more work-family conflict. Winslow's (2005) analyses found that income is unrelated to work-family conflict in the 1977 Quality of Employment Survey and the 1997 National Study of the Changing Workforce. Collectively, the limited and inconclusive evidence about income's link to work-family conflict and its potential relevance for education-based patterns–net of other work conditions–justifies its centrality in our analyses.

Education, Work-Family Conflict and Distress: Differential Vulnerability

In addition to investigating the ways that job demands and resources contribute to education-based levels of work-family conflict, we also assess if education *moderates* the association between work-family conflict and distress. The rationale for this part of our analysis derives from the "differential vulnerability" view, which proposes

that the resource benefits of education should offset the unfavorable predictions of the demands hypothesis. That is, even if the well-educated report *more* work-family conflict, it should tend to be *less* distressing for them. The basis for this hypothesis is grounded in a tradition of theory and evidence about the resource benefits of education. Education has rewards that extend beyond income or advancement to include "human capital" facets including cognitive flexibility, confidence, and problem solving skills (Mirowsky and Ross 2003b). Moreover, education contributes to personal resources related to a sense of self-efficacy, personal control or mastery (Schieman and Plickert 2008). On balance, people with such resources are better able to meet problems with more causal effectiveness and success, thereby minimizing the distress associated with stressors (Wheaton 1985). Furthermore, education's link to job-related resources may contribute to these hypothesized protective benefits. For example, as we described above, greater access to an array of workplace conditions such as schedule control, authority, autonomy, non-routine work and earnings may enable the well-educated to more effectively manage the stress associated with work-family conflict. Collectively, these resource conditions should contribute to an attenuated association between work-home conflict and distress among the well-educated.

Potential Suppression Influences

Does work-family conflict *suppress* the association between education and psychological distress? This seems plausible because of several interrelated patterns. First, education is associated with lower levels of distress (Mirowsky and Ross 2003a). Second, the positive association between work-family conflict and distress has been established in population studies (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Voydanoff 2007). By extension, if the well-educated report more work-family conflict then it is reasonable to suspect that this pattern will conceal part of the negative association between education and distress. Simply put, education's positive relationship with work-family conflict may *suppress* the overall link between education and distress; were it not for their greater exposure to work-to-family conflict, the well-educated might even report less distress. This proposition speaks to the social gradient in health but from a different angle – it integrates ideas based on the stress of higher status.

Methods

Sample

The data derive from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce, a representative sample of the U.S labor force interviewed by telephone from October 2002 through June 2003. Eligible participants are 18 years of age or older and in the paid labor force, and were randomly selected using a random-digit-dial method. A response rate of 52-61 percent of eligible respondents yielded the full sample, with a 98 percent completion rate (see Bond et al. 2003).[2] We exclude participants with missing values on focal and control measures. This yielded a final working sample of 2,544 individuals.

Focal Measures

Five items are used to assess work-family conflict (Voydanoff 2007): (1. "How often have you not had enough time for your family or other important people in your life because of your job?" (2. "How often have you not had the energy to do things with your family or other important people in your life because of your job?" (3. "How often have you not been in a good mood at home because of your job?" (4. "How often has work kept you from doing as good a job at home as you could?" (5. "How often has your job kept you from concentrating on important things in your family and personal life?" Response choices include "never" (1), "rarely" (2), "sometimes" (3), and "frequently" (4). Responses are averaged; higher scores indicate more work-to-family conflict ($\alpha = .87$).

Psychological distress was measured with five items (Voydanoff 2005). The first three are as follows: (1."In the last month how often have you ...been bothered by minor health problems such as headaches, insomnia, or stomach upsets?" (2. "...had trouble sleeping to the point that it affected your performance on and off the job?" (3. "...felt nervous and stressed." The responses choices for these items are: "never" (1),"almost never" (2), "sometimes" (3), "fairly often" (4), "very often" (5). The final two items ask: (4. "During the past month ...have you been bothered by feeling down, depressed, hopeless?" (5. "...have you been bothered by little interest or pleasure in doing things?" The response choices are "no" (1) and "yes" (5). We averaged the items; higher scores indicate more distress ($\alpha = .75$).[3]

Education is represented as a set of dummy variables: less than high school, high school graduate or GED, some college but no degree earned, college graduate (BA/BS or associate's Degree), and post graduate/advanced degree (MA, Ph.D.). In regression analyses, we use the category of "high school degree" as the reference category.

Occupation and Work Conditions

Participants are categorized into the following occupational groups: executives, professionals, technical, service, sales, administrative and production. We use the modal category "professionals" as the contrast category in all regression analyses. For information about the occupation codes and other details, see the reports provided by the *Families and Work Institute.*[4]

One question asks participants about schedule control (Golden 2001, 2008): "Overall, how much control would you say you have in scheduling your work hours?" Response choices are coded as "none" (0), "very little" (1), "some" (2), "a lot" (3), "complete" (4).

One item asks: "Is supervising or managing other people a major part of your job?" We coded "yes" responses as 1 ("supervisor") and "no" responses as 0.

Participants were asked the extent that they agree or disagree with the following: "I have the freedom to decide what I do on my job," "It is basically my own responsibility to decide how my job gets done," "I have a lot of say about what happens on my job." Response choices are coded as "strongly disagree" (1), "somewhat disagree" (2),

"somewhat agree" (3), and "strongly agree" (4). We averaged the items such that higher scores indicate more autonomy (α = .69; Schieman and Glavin 2008).

We used four items to assess non-routine work (see Mirowsky and Ross 2003a, 2003b): "My job requires that I keep learning new things," "My job requires that I be creative," "The work I do on my job is meaningful to me," and "My job lets me use my skills and abilities." Response choices are coded as "strongly disagree" (1), "somewhat disagree" (2), "somewhat agree" (3), and "strongly agree" (4). We averaged the items; higher scores indicate more non-routine work (α = .70).

Job pressures are assessed with responses to the following five items: "My job requires that I work very fast," "My job requires that I work very hard," "I never seem to have enough time to get everything done on my job," "My job is very emotionally demanding and tiring," and "My job is very physically demanding and tiring." Response choices are "strongly disagree" (1), "somewhat disagree" (2), "somewhat agree" (3), and "strongly agree" (4). We scored and averaged the items such that higher scores indicate more job pressures (α = .62).

One question asks: "How likely is it that during the next couple of years you will lose your present job and have to look for a job with another employer?" Response choices include "not at all likely" (1), "not too likely" (2), "somewhat likely" (3), "very likely" (4).

One item assesses whether or not participants' main job is a regular daytime shift (code 1) vs. some other type of shift (coded 0).

One item asks: "How often are you required to work extra or overtime hours with little or no advanced notice?" Response choices are coded "no" (0) and "yes" (1).

We contrast participants who work "more than 50 hours per week" with workers in two other categories: "1 to 39 hours per week" and "40 to 49 hours per week."

Income is assessed with the question: "How much did you personally earn in all of last year—that is in 2001—from all paid employment before taxes?" To assess potential deviations from linearity, we coded income into quartiles and used the lowest quartile as the reference category. Using categories allows us to retain those who did not report income, coded as "no income reported."

Work-Family Role Blurring Measures

We use one item that was created by the researchers involved in the 2002 NSCW to assess the frequency of exposure to work contact (Voydanoff 2007). It asks: "How often do coworkers, supervisors, managers, customers, or clients contact you about work-related matters outside normal work hours? Include telephone, cell phone, beeper and pager calls, as well as faxes and email that you have to respond to." Response choices are coded as follows: "never" (1), "less than once a month" (2), "once a week" (3), "several times a week" (4), and "once or more times a day" (5). Workers who reported that such contact was "not relevant" for their job were coded as "never."

One item asks: "How often do you do any paid or unpaid work at home that is part of your job?" Response choices are "never" (1), "a few times a year" (2), "about once a month" (3), "about once a week" (4), and "more than once a week" (5).

Socio-demographic and Household Control Measures

Several control measures are included because theory and evidence suggests that socio-demographic factors, family structure, and household conditions may have relevance for the conditions and linkages delineated among our focal associations (Bellavia and Frone 2005; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Voydanoff 2007).

We use dummy-codes for *men* (0) and *women* (1). Age is coded in years. For participants' race, we contrast *white* (1) vs. all *other* categories (0). We contrast *married* (includes common-law) against *never married* and *previously married* in regression analyses. Finally, we include a measure of the number of children under the age of 18 in the household. Additional analyses (not shown) that consider age of children, especially children under 6 years of age, yielded results similar to those associated with the number of children under age 18.

Plan of Analyses

We present our observations in two sections. The first examines the association between education and work-to-family conflict. This part of the analysis seeks to document the *levels* of work-family conflict across education groups. Model 1 (Table 1) regresses work-family conflict on education, adjusting for basic control measures. Subsequent models include occupation and work-related resources, work-related demands, demands and resources simultaneously, and role blurring. We reference the Appendix table to describe education-based patterns in these conditions.

The second section presents analysis of the effects of work-family conflict on psychological distress across education. Model 1 (Table 2) regresses distress on education (all models adjust for control variables). Model 2 includes work-family conflict to assess its contribution to the association between education and distress; we assess potential suppression effects by examining changes in the size of the education differences in distress. To test the differential vulnerability idea, Model 3 includes the interaction between work-family conflict and education. Subsequent models include occupation, demands and resources, and work-family role blurring.

Results

Education and Levels of Work-to-Family Conflict

As shown in Model 1 of Table 1, compared to individuals with a high school degree, those with a college degree or a graduate degree report higher average levels of work-family conflict. Similarly, individuals with less than high school report more work-family conflict. These patterns support the claim of a nonlinear association between education and work-to-family conflict – individuals with a high school degree report the lowest levels. Next, we turn our attention to explaining these differences.

Model 2 includes occupation comparisons. Compared to those in the "professional" category, executives report more work-family conflict while individuals in administrative jobs report less. These patterns contribute slightly to the education-based differ-

Table 1: Regression of Work-Family Conflict on Sets of Focal Independent Variables

Model	1	2	3	4	5	6
Education						
Less than high school[a]	.19*	.16	.22*	.12	.14	.14
Some college[a]	.05	.05	.06	.03	.04	.03
College degree[a]	.20***	.17***	.13**	.16***	.16***	.12**
Post-graduate degree[a]	.27***	.23***	.17*	.22***	.23***	.14*
Occupation						
Service[b]	—	-.03	-.02	-.01	-.06	.01
Technical[b]	—	.03	.04	.04	.01	.08
Production[b]	—	.02	-.05	-.02	-.11	-.01
Administrative[b]	—	-.20**	-.21***	-.01	-.08	-.00
Sales[b]	—	-.02	-.02	.06	.03	.08
Executives[b]	—	.13*	.08	.14**	.11*	.14**
Work-Related Resources						
Supervisor duties	—	—	.18***	—	.03	.00
Schedule control	—	—	-.10***	—	-.05***	-.05***
Job autonomy	—	—	-.17***	—	-.09***	-.09***
Non-routine work	—	—	-.07***	—	-.12***	-.15***
Income quartile group 2	—	—	.14*	—	.03	.02
Income quartile group 3	—	—	.20***	—	.08	.07
Income quartile group 4	—	—	.34***	—	.14**	.12**
Work-Related Demands						
Works fewer than 40 hours/ week[c]	—	—	—	-.27***	-.28***	-.27***
Works 40 to 49 hours/ week[c]	—	—	—	-.15	-.17*	-.16*
Job pressures	—	—	—	.46***	.43***	.41***
Job insecurity	—	—	—	.17***	.15***	.14***
Regular daytime shift	—	—	—	-.11**	-.09**	-.10**
Overtime without notice	—	—	—	.12***	.12***	.11***
Role Blurring						
Work contact	—	—	—	—	—	.02
Working at home	—	—	—	—	—	.08***
Control Measures						
Women	-.05	-.01	.04	.08*	.08*	.08*
Age	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.00*	-.00*	-.00*
White	.14**	.13**	.17***	.11**	.13***	.12**
Married[d]	-.01	-.01	-.01	.03	.03	.02
Number of children in the household	.18***	.17***	.15***	.13***	.13***	.13***
Constant	2.47	2.50	3.36	.587	1.41	1.41
R^2	.03	.04	.12	.31	.34	.35

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001 (two–tailed test).

[a]Compared to High School Degree.

[b]Compared to Professionals.

[c]Compared to Works 50 Hours/Week or more.

[d]Compared to Never Married and Previously Married.

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown. Standard errors available upon request.

ences observed in Model 1. Specifically, the difference between people with high school vs. less than high school becomes significant at the $p < .10$ level. Likewise, the inclusion of occupation slightly reduces the differences between high school graduates and those with college or graduate degrees, although these remain statistically significant. This reduction is attributable to the greater likelihood of professional or executive jobs among the well-educated (see Appendix). Moreover, that levels of work-family conflict are highest among executives is consistent with the stress of higher status hypothesis.

Model 3 shows that schedule control, job autonomy and non-routine work are associated with lower levels of work-family conflict; these patterns concur with the resource hypothesis. By contrast, consistent with the stress of higher status hypothesis we observe that supervisors and people with higher earnings report *more* work-family conflict. Taken together, supervisor duties and income contribute to the education-based differences in work-family conflict, although those differences remain significant. It is also noteworthy that executives' greater likelihood of supervisor responsibilities and higher earnings fully account for their higher work-family conflict compared to professionals. In fact, we find that were it not for their greater job autonomy and schedule control, individuals with graduate degrees and those in executive positions would report even more work-family conflict. Thus, these job-related resources slightly suppress the education- and occupation-based differences in work-family conflict.

To assess their independent influence on education differences, Model 4 includes job-related demands while excluding the resources shown in Model 3. We observe that the following are associated with more work-family conflict: longer hours (50-plus), pressures, instability, not working a regular daytime shift, and being required to work overtime without notice. Here, it is important to differentiate the ways these conditions influence the different parts of the education effect. First, greater job insecurity and shift irregularities among those without a high school degree fully contribute to their greater work-family conflict relative to those with a high school degree (see Appendix). By contrast, the well-educated are more likely to work overtime without notice; this condition contributes slightly to the gap between those with a high school degree and the two most highly educated groups. Ultimately, however, the differences between the college and graduate degree coefficients across models 2 and 4 are trivial at best. The demands associated with job insecurity and irregular shifts are more relevant for explaining higher work-family conflict among the least educated individuals.

Model 5 simultaneously includes job-related resources and demands. First, even with all of these conditions in the model, individuals with a college or graduate degree still report statistically significant higher levels of work-family conflict compared to their peers with a high school degree. This is because of the competing explanatory vs. suppression influences among the demands and resources. They cancel each other out, leaving the initial education-based differences mostly unchanged. Second, resources explain more of the elevated levels of work-family conflict among the well-educated, while demands are more relevant for the gap at the lower end of the education scale. Third, differences in work-family conflict between professionals and individuals in

administrative positions are completely explained by differences in job-related demands. That is, professionals tend to report longer hours and more job pressures, which, in turn, contribute to their elevated levels of work-family conflict. These same patterns also partially explain why income is associated positively with work-family conflict.

When considering the influence of work-family role blurring, Model 6 shows that individuals who more frequently bring work home experience more work-family conflict. Note that work-related contact is also associated positively with work-family conflict, although that effect is significant at the $p < .10$ level. Moreover, individuals with college or graduate degrees bring work home more frequently than their peers with a high school degree (see Appendix). By extension, the inclusion of role blurring activities in the model contributes to the greater work-family conflict among the well-educated. In particular, the contrast between individuals with a high school vs. those with a graduate degree is reduced with adjustment for role blurring. However, Model 6 shows that the elevated work-family conflict among those with college or graduate degrees remains significant net of these adjustments.

Education and the Association between Work-Family Conflict and Distress

Having documented how exposure to work-family conflict varies across education groups, we now turn our attention to the question of whether or not the association between work-family conflict and distress differs across education level. That is, we examine whether level of education *moderates* the association between work-family conflict and psychological distress. However, the first step in this analysis tests whether levels of distress differ by education group and the extent that work-family conflict contributes to these differences; this assesses the prediction about suppression effects.

Results in Model 1 of Table 2 reveal education-based differences in distress. Compared to individuals with a high school degree, those with a graduate degree report a lower level of distress, while those with less than high school report more distress. In Model 2 we observe that higher levels of work-family conflict are associated with more distress. The inclusion of work-family conflict in the model reveals a suppression effect—controlling for exposure to work-family conflict widens the distress gap between individuals with a graduate degree and those with a high school degree. In addition, the lower level of distress experienced by individuals with a college degree (compared to the high school group) becomes statistically significant. These suppression influences indicate that were it not for their exposure to higher levels of work-family conflict, those in the well-educated groups would report even lower levels of distress than their peers with high school credentials. Collectively, these patterns confirm our predictions about the relevance of work-family conflict as a suppressor influence in the association between education and distress. By contrast, it is also worth noting that the inclusion of work-family conflict contributes to the higher levels of distress reported by those with less than high school. This suggests that individuals with the lowest level of education experience more distress partly because of their greater exposure to work-family conflict.

Table 2: Regression of Psychological Distress on Education, Work-Family Conflict, Interactions, Work-Related Conditions and Controls

Model	1	2	3	4	5	6
Education						
Less than high school[a]	.42***	.32***	.33***	.32***	.27**	.27**
Some college[a]	.01	-.02	-.03	-.02	-.01	-.01
College degree[a]	-.05	-.15***	-.16***	-.14**	-.08	-.07
Post-graduate degree[a]	-.13*	-.27***	-.26***	-.24***	-.10	-.08
Work-Family Conflict						
Work-family conflict	—	.50***	.54***	.54***	.47***	.47***
Education and Work-Family Conflict Interactions						
Work-family conflict × Less than high school	—	—	-.23*	-.23*	-.24**	-.25**
Work-family conflict × Some college	—	—	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.04
Work-family conflict × College degree	—	—	-.00	-.00	-.00	.00
Work-family conflict × Post-graduate degree	—	—	-.16*	-.16*	-.17*	-.17*
Occupation						
Service[b]	—	—	—	.11	.04	.02
Technical[b]	—	—	—	-.08	-.09	-.10
Production[b]	—	—	—	.02	-.02	-.04
Administrative[b]	—	—	—	.01	-.02	-.02
Sales[b]	—	—	—	.07	.05	.04
Executives[b]	—	—	—	.06	.11	.11
Work-Related Resources						
Supervisor duties	—	—	—	—	.02	.02
Schedule control	—	—	—	—	.00	.00
Job autonomy	—	—	—	—	-.04	-.04
Non-routine work	—	—	—	—	-.04	-.03
Income quartile group 2	—	—	—	—	-.05	-.05
Income quartile group 3	—	—	—	—	-.13*	-.13*
Income quartile group 4	—	—	—	—	-.28***	-.28***

Next, in our assessment of the moderating effects of education, Model 3 includes the interaction between work-family conflict and education. We observe that the positive association between work-family conflict and distress is weaker for individuals with a graduate degree in comparison to those with a high school degree. This pattern supports the basic prediction of the differential vulnerability view that higher levels of education should attenuate the distress associated with work-family conflict. It is important to underscore, however, that this benefit is limited to those with graduate degrees. We found no evidence that having some college or a college degree buffers the effect of work-family conflict on distress. Somewhat paradoxically, we also observe that those with less than high school experience a weaker positive association between work-family conflict and distress in comparison to those with high school degrees. These results suggest that the differential vulnerability patterns by education may be of a nonlinear nature. That is, individuals with the *lowest* and *highest* levels of education are less vulnerable to the distressing effects of work-family conflict. Moreover, these education contingencies remain stable even after controlling for occupation (Model 4),

Table 2 *continued*

Model	1	2	3	4	5	6
Work-Related Demands						
Works fewer than 40 hours/ week[c]	—	—	—	—	.09	.09
Works 40 to 49 hours/ week[c]	—	—	—	—	-.00	-.00
Job pressures	—	—	—	—	.09**	.09**
Job insecurity	—	—	—	—	.14***	.14***
Regular daytime shift	—	—	—	—	.02	.03
Overtime without notice	—	—	—	—	.03**	.03**
Role Blurring						
Work contact	—	—	—	—	—	.01
Working at home	—	—	—	—	—	-.02
Control Measures						
Women	.25***	.28***	.28***	.28***	.22***	.21***
Age	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.01***	-.00*	-.00*
White	.17***	.11*	.11*	.11*	.13**	.13**
Married[d]	-.14**	-.13**	-.13**	-.13**	-.10**	-.09*
Number of children in the household	.06	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.01
Constant	2.34	1.11	1.00	.957	.705	.702
R^2	.05	.23	.24	.24	.27	.27

*p < .05 **p < .01 ***p < .001 (two-tailed test).

[a]Compared to High School Degree.

[b]Compared to Professionals.

[c]Compared to Works 50 Hours/Week or More.

[d]Compared to Never Married and Previously Married.

Note: Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown. Standard errors available upon request.

work-related demands and resources (Model 5), and work-family role blurring (Model 6). In sum, despite their higher levels of exposure to work-family conflict, our findings reveal that the least and most educated do not experience the same degree of distress associated with this conflict as their peers with high school degrees.

Discussion

It is well-established that work-family conflict is a potent stressor in American society. This fact underscores the importance of understanding the conditions that influence its levels and psychological implications. A survey of the literature reveals a paradoxical pattern that we replicate and investigate further: *Individuals with more education tend to report more work-family conflict.* This observation is important because it challenges prominent theoretical arguments in the sociological study of stress, status inequality and mental health. Specifically, the well-educated *should* have a distinct advantage in two ways that relate directly to the SES gradient in health. First, they should experience less exposure to stressors. Second, they should be less vulnerable to the distressing effects of stress exposure. We test these claims with data from a nationally representative sample of American workers.

Three main contributions emerge from our analyses: (1. there is a nonlinear association between education and work-family conflict such that individuals with a high

school degree report less exposure than people with less than a high school degree and those with college or graduate degrees; (2. we document the competing intervening influences of job-related demands and resources, as well as work-family role blurring; however, education-based differences (at the higher-end) in work-family conflict remain net of these conditions; (3. education moderates the association between work-family conflict and distress, although the patterns are nonlinear, with buffering effects observed at the highest and lowest levels of education.

The classic view of differential exposure in the sociological study of status inequality and mental health is that education is associated with *lower* levels of stress exposure. Our observations challenge this perspective by showing that individuals with a college or graduate degree tend to report *higher* levels of work-family conflict than their peers with a high school degree. When we assessed the relevance of another important indicator of social status–occupation–the evidence further contradicted the notion that people of higher social status uniformly report less stress. Specifically, professionals report more work-to-family conflict than individuals in administrative positions, but executives reported the highest level of conflict–significantly more than professionals. Given that the well-educated are more likely to hold professional or executive positions, these patterns partially explain why people with more education report more work-family conflict. Yet, these education-based differences in work-to-family conflict remain net of occupation.

These patterns are consistent with the alternative perspective that we propose: the *stress of higher status* hypothesis. To elaborate on this perspective, we investigated the impact of specific job conditions. Drawing upon the Job Demands-Resources model, we tested if job demands and resources function as intervening mechanisms. We found that job conditions that more typically characterize demands (e.g., long hours, job pressures) conform to the predictions of the demands hypothesis; that is, they are related to more work-family conflict. In addition, we discovered that different job-related demands have distinct influences on the education differences in work-family conflict. Specifically, job insecurity and irregular shifts contribute to higher levels of work-family conflict among those with less than a high school degree. Collectively, these findings distinguish the ways that different job demands may be relevant for education-based patterns of work-family conflict. Some job demands are experienced more frequently among those with less education–a pattern that is consistent with the traditional framing of the differential exposure hypothesis.

Our observations about the role of job-related resources for explaining education differences in exposure to work-family conflict are informative in several ways. First, several of the job-related resources–especially schedule control, job autonomy and non-routine work–are related to lower levels of work-family conflict. However, because the well-educated tend to report more of these work conditions, they have suppression influences. Specifically, were it not for their greater schedule control, autonomy and non-routine work, the well-educated would report even higher levels of work-family conflict. By contrast, two work-related conditions that can be viewed as resources–supervisory status and earnings–have positive associations with work-

family conflict. Given that the well-educated are more likely to occupy supervisor roles and earn more, these patterns contribute to their higher work-family conflict. Taken together, these findings elaborate on the stress of higher status hypothesis by showing that some job-related resources influence the work-family interface in ways that mirror the effects of job-related demands. In fact, the influence of supervisor status and earnings on work-family conflict is largely due to greater exposure to longer work hours and time pressures. Overall, our analyses disentangle the competing—and sometimes unexpected—effects of job-related demands and resources, challenging the typical views of these conditions and their impact on exposure to work-family conflict.

Do the findings about differential exposure imply that education is *not* the resource for the work-family interface some might have assumed? To our knowledge, no studies have sought to explicitly test whether or not education moderates the association between work-family conflict and psychological distress. Such evidence would help evaluate the resource benefits of education and broaden the discussion about SES gradients in health. Our findings indicate that exposure to work-family conflict is less consequential for distress among those with graduate degrees. However, the benefits did not extend to those with some college or a college degree. Therefore, we conclude partial (nonlinear) support for the view of education as a resource and its link to differential vulnerability. One possible explanation for this education contingency might relate to the well-educated having higher levels of mastery. Unfortunately, the NSCW contains a limited measure of mastery; in separate analyses, we evaluated its influence but failed to find evidence that higher levels of personal agency contribute to education's buffering effect.[5]

On the other hand, we also found that the association between work-family conflict and distress is weaker among individuals with less than high school compared to those with high school degrees. This does not mean that work-family conflict is not associated with distress among the least educated. Rather, at the same level of work-family conflict, individuals with a high school degree tend to experience more distress than their less educated peers. This perplexing finding goes against the grain of most theorizing about differential vulnerability and the well-established SES gradient in health: We would expect that the link between stressors and distress should be greater among those with fewer status advantages. While it seems likely that the meaning of work-home conflict varies between these education groups, we are unable to tease out those distinctions and their influence on the patterns. Supplemental analyses (not shown) to assess potential methodological explanations, such as data sparseness or unusual job arrangements among this group, failed to reveal any problems. Nonetheless, we emphasize caution in the interpretation of this finding until analyses with larger samples is conducted.

In sum, our observations speak to a tradition of theory and research in the sociological study of stress, inequality and mental health. We have sought to expand the ways that researchers conceptualize the link between status advantages and stress exposure. The positive relationship between education and work-family conflict goes against the grain of traditional thinking about status inequality and stress exposure, at least with respect to this prominent form of inter-role stress. Moreover, our findings elaborate on

the work and stress literature. Specifically, some conditions that are typically classified as resources (e.g., supervisor authority, income) contribute to higher levels of work-family conflict due to their links to work-related demands. In the traditional views of job demands and resources, we would expect job authority and income to be linked with less stress exposure. By observing the opposite pattern for work-family conflict, we have brought the stress of higher status perspective into the fore and broadened its implications for role blurring in the work-family interface. These processes might explain why the well-educated, professionals and high earners experience more work-family conflict than their peers in less advantaged positions. Ultimately, we hope these discoveries cultivate new ways of thinking about the distribution of stress exposure across forms of social stratification, and stratification-based differences in distress.

Several limitations of the present study deserve brief mention. First and foremost, our analyses are based on cross-sectional data. Thus, we are unable to definitively rule-out the possibility that some of the causal ordering among our focal associations occurs in the reverse direction. For example, it is plausible that work-family conflict creates conditions that cause some individuals to select into jobs with greater schedule control or job autonomy. Likewise, we cannot make statements about the ordering among work conditions; rather, these are probably best viewed as a package of conditions that coexist as constellations in one's workplace experience. Nonetheless, there are sound theoretical reasons for suspecting that at least some portion of the influence flows in the direction proposed in our analyses. Longitudinal research is needed to more accurately map these interrelationships over time.

The second limitation of our study is the use of several single-item measures. We are hesitant to describe this is a *limitation* because—in some instances—single-items are adequate, reliable and have predictive validity (e.g., self-rated health). Moreover, the primary single-item measures in our analyses are schedule control and role blurring. These items were designed in the NSCW to tap the frequency of experiences with these conditions. It is debatable whether or not multiple item measures for indices would be feasible or significant improvements. For example, the frequency of receiving work-related contact is straightforward and unambiguous. However, future research should assess the qualitative aspects of these experiences and their appraisals for role functioning.

To conclude, our analyses shed light on the association between education and work-to-family conflict. We have applied the ideas of differential exposure versus differential vulnerability in the stress process. Moreover, we have integrated concepts from the Job Demands-Resources model and refined some of its propositions. In doing so, we observe that some conditions influence the association between education and work-to-family conflict in unexpected ways. Our advancement of the stress of higher status hypothesis articulates the ways that some job-related resources have influences that mirror job-related demands. Collectively, these discoveries motivate a broader discussion about the classification and labeling of work conditions and their implications for the work-family interface.

Notes

1. While both directions are important, the work-to-family direction is more common (Bellavia and Frone 2005). Jacobs and Gerson (2004:92) contend that "the spillover from family to work is real, especially for parents, but it is not as pronounced or severe as the opposite dynamic, in which work spills over into the home." Moreover, the different directions of interference are conceptually distinct and have *different* antecedents (Reynolds and Renzulli 2005). It is more logical to assert that systems of stratification—especially those in the work role—create work-family conflict, while household conditions likely generate family-to-work conflict (Grzywacz et al. 2002).
2. An exact response rate could not be determined because of incomplete data on the eligibility of households contacted. Eligibility estimates were used to predict the response rate range (Bond et al. 2003).
3. We use the same response choices/coding as other published research from the 2002 NSCW (Voydanoff 2005). It is evident that "yes" scores on these items are indicative of *some level* of depression. However, by coding "yes" as 5 (instead of some other value) the distress score will be somewhat higher. It would have been more ideal to have the same sort of ordinal response choices as the other three items.
4. See: *http://www.familiesandwork.org.*
5. Two items ask participants how strongly they agreed with these statements: "I am responsible for my own successes at work and in life" and "The really good things that happen to me at work and in life are mostly luck." These items tap work-related mastery; future research should investigate the impact of the generalized mastery as a possible explanation for the moderating effects of education.

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Appendix. Means or Proportions for Key Work-Related Conditions across Education

Variables	Less than High School	High School	Some College	College	Post-Graduate Degree	Total
Work-family conflict	2.57*	2.38	2.43	2.58*	2.62*	2.50
Service	.29*	.16	.14	.05*	.01*	.11
Technical	.02	.02	.05*	.07*	.03	.04
Production	.54*	.38	.25*	.08*	.01*	.20
Administrative	.03*	.19	.23	.15*	.05*	.16
Sales	.06	.11	.10	.08*	.04*	.09
Executives	.04	.09	.14*	.21*	.22*	.16
Professionals	.02	.05	.09*	.37*	.64*	.25
Supervisory duties	.26	.33	.32	.43*	.50*	.38
Schedule control	2.80	2.80	2.91*	2.97*	3.02*	2.92
Job autonomy	2.71	2.84	2.92*	3.04*	3.23*	2.98
Non-routine work	2.62	2.64	2.72*	2.99*	3.31*	2.87
Income	22,524.82	37,578.25	37,663.60	52,317.474*	72,078.00*	47,448.08
Works fewer than 40 hours/ week	.30	.27	.32*	.29	.29	.29
Works 40 to 49 hours/ week	.64	.68	.65	.69	.64	.67
Works 50 hours/ week or more	.06	.05	.03*	.02*	.07	.04
Job pressures	2.79	2.75	2.74	2.77	2.80	2.77
Job insecurity	2.26*	2.01	2.04	1.94	1.81*	1.97
Regular daytime shift	.62*	.74	.70	.81*	.85*	.77
Overtime without notice	3.24	3.01	3.13	3.20*	3.22	3.14
Work contact	2.07	2.11	2.29*	2.73*	3.30*	2.54
Working at home	1.35	1.49	1.72*	2.60*	3.57*	2.22
n	97	597	596	895	359	2,544

*Comparison with the "High School" group is statistically significant at $p < .05$.