

# Mothers' and fathers' views on work and family: Commitment, reward, stress, and role strain

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## Introduction

Dual-income families have become the norm among two-parent families in the United States (Halpern & Murphy, 2005). However, much of the research on work-family integration has focused on mothers' experiences with work-family role conflict. A better understanding of how fathers balance work and family life is important given the changing expectations for men to be actively engaged in family life, particularly parenting. It is also important to explore how different work situations (e.g., full-time, part-time) and parents' prior expectations for work and family impact work-family integration. This investigation expands upon previous research by studying mothers' and fathers' work-family integration in terms of work status, role-strain, parenting stress, and parents' prior expectations for work and family life. We focused on the following questions:

### Question 1

How does work status relate to mothers' and fathers' perceptions of work-family role strain and parenting stress?

### Question 2

How does work status (e.g., part-time, full-time) relate to mothers' and fathers' commitment to and reward from their occupational and parenting roles?

### Question 3

How do parents' prior expectations for work and family relate to current work-family integration?

## Method

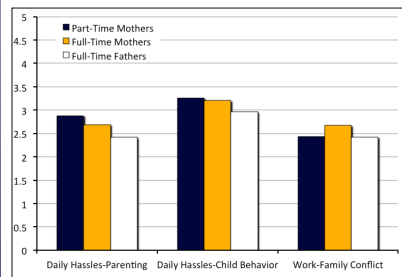
Participants were 164 mothers and 110 fathers of preschool-aged children living in the Northeastern United States. Most parents were married (74.5%), received at least some college education (87.0%), and were Caucasian (90.4%). Based on their responses to several questionnaires, participants provided the following measures: (1) Work Schedules: Parents reported both their current work status (full-time, part-time, and not working) and a retrospective account of their expectations for work and family before having children (full-time, part-time, and not working). (2) The Work-Family Role Conflict scale provided an overall measure of role strain (Bohen & Viveros-Long, 1981). (3) Parenting Daily Hassles (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990) measured the frequency of minor stresses due to parenting and child behavior. (4) The Life Role Salience Scales (LRSS, Amatea et al., 1986) assessed commitment to and reward from parental and occupational roles.

## Results

Analyses were conducted using one-way ANOVAs. To examine whether parents' work schedules related to work-family role strain and parenting stress, we divided the sample into three groups: mothers working full-time ( $n = 96$ ), mothers working part-time ( $n = 42$ ), and fathers working full-time ( $n = 87$ ) (due to small  $n$ s, mothers not working outside the home and fathers working less than full-time were omitted).

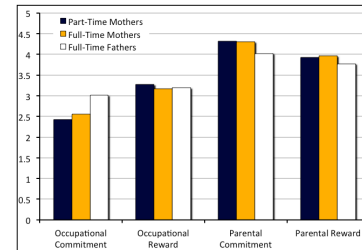
### Question 1

Mothers working full-time reported significantly more work-family role conflict than mothers working part-time and fathers working full-time, ( $F(2, 222) = 6.26, p = .002$ ). Regardless of work status, mothers experienced more parenting hassles ( $F(2, 239) = 13.23, p = .000$ ), and child behavior hassles ( $F(2, 239) = 5.19, p = .006$ ), than fathers (See Figure below).



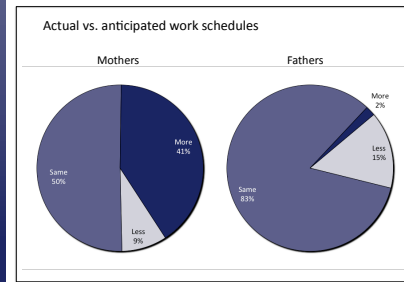
### Question 2

With regard to commitment to and reward from parental and occupational roles, fathers working full-time were less committed to and experienced fewer rewards from parenting than mothers working full-time ( $F(2, 235) = 3.84, p = .023, F(2, 238) = 3.26, p = .04$ ). Fathers working full-time were more committed to their careers, regardless of mothers' work status ( $F(2, 237) = 9.98, p = .000$ ); however, mothers (regardless of work status) and fathers reported similar levels of occupational reward ( $F(2, 235) = .32, ns$ ; See Figure above and to the right).



### Question 3

To examine the degree to which prior expectations regarding employment related to work-family integration, we examined discrepancies between parents' prior expectations for work and their current work status. Descriptive analyses revealed few discrepancies between fathers' prior expectations for work and their current work schedules; thus, fathers' prior expectations for work were not analyzed further. By contrast, there was considerable variability in mothers' expectations for employment and their current work schedules, with 65 mothers currently working more than they had anticipated, 14 mothers working less than anticipated, and 81 mothers with work schedules that matched their expectations (see Figure below). Discrepancies between prior expectations and current work status were unrelated to work-family role strain and parenting stress. However, mothers working more than anticipated were less committed to their careers than mothers whose work schedules were consistent with their expectations ( $F(2, 152) = 5.19, p = .007$ ).



## Discussion

Work-family integration is partially defined by an individual's expectations for parental roles and career roles (Giele, 2008). Our findings document similarities and differences in mothers' and fathers' views of work and family which are linked to both current work status and parents' prior expectations.

Despite cultural shifts in gender roles, fathers in this sample reported greater commitment to career roles than mothers. By contrast, mothers were more committed to parenting and experienced greater rewards from parenting than fathers. To the degree to which role commitment and reward reflect patterns of work-family integration, these findings confirm that family responsibilities continue to be divided along traditional gender lines (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005).

Perhaps because of their greater investment in parenting, mothers reported more parenting stress than fathers. This may also be due to an imbalance in division of household labor. Perceived inequities in division of household labor have been associated with lower levels of family satisfaction and parent well-being (Frisco & Williams, 2003). Further investigation of the links between work status, division of household labor, and parenting stress are warranted.

Discrepancies between mothers' prior expectations for work and family and their current work status were also related to their attitudes about their careers. In addition, mothers working full-time experienced more work-family role strain than both fathers and mothers with part-time employment. These findings support the call for more flexible employment options for dual-career families that allow parents to better align work-family realities with work-family expectations.

## Reprints

(including references) available at:

<http://web.simmons.edu/~turnerg/SRCD11/TurnerEtAl2011.pdf>

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Turner, L. B., Spritz, B. L., & Turner, G. F. W. (2011, April). *Mothers' and fathers' views on work and family: Commitment, reward, stress, and role strain*. Poster session presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Montreal, QC.

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