

## 6. DISCUSSION

The focus of the present study was on interpersonal contributions to the pursuit of work-and family-related goals in employed parents with preschool children. The combination of family and work is a central task in middle adulthood and bears the potential for both stress and enhancement, which might be particularly challenging if both members of a couple participate in the labor force (Havighurst, 1952; Hooker et al., 1996; Klumb & Lampert, 2003; Lachman, 2004; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000). Personal goals can be seen as an individual reference point that reflects what people are aiming at and by means of which they evaluate the success in central life domains (Brunstein et al., 1999; Heath et al., 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Personal goals therefore seemed to provide an adequate framework to examine both processes as well as developmental outcomes associated with the endeavor to combine work and family in employed parents.

The model of selective optimization with compensation addresses the developmental dynamics associated with the setting, pursuit and achievement of personally important objectives (P. B. Baltes & M. M. Baltes, 1990; Freund & P. B. Baltes, 2000). Within the present study I adopted a theoretical orientation that aimed at integrating individual and social aspects involved in the successful management of work and family goals in partnerships (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1998). In accord with this theoretical framework, the present study emphasized three aspects and operationalized selection, optimization and compensation as follows: In line with the selection principle it was investigated how time-related characteristics, namely time-intensity and temporal flexibility, of personal goals that employed parents set in the domains of work and family are related to the organization of goals within the partnership. According to the optimization principle it was further examined how characteristics in the organization of personal goals at the level of the couple - interpersonal goal conflict and convergence – affect goal-relevant means and influence the ability to pursue and progress on personal goals. And following the compensation principle it was investigated whether access to grandparental childcare constitutes a social resource for personal goal pursuit, possibly buffering the effect of interpersonal goal conflict at the level of the couple on individual goal pursuit.

Previous research has led to inconsistent findings concerning the effects of the combination of work and family in middle adulthood (Klumb & Lampert, 2004; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Repetti et al., 1989 for reviews). At least in part this might be due to a focus on single individuals, which neglects the extent to which closely interrelated partners influence

each other in their attempts to successfully combine their work and family goals. Hence, the present study tried to connect research on goal-directed development with knowledge on the social dynamics in partnerships by means of an investigation of the impact of the quality of interpersonal goal relations for the management of work and family goals in working parents with preschool children. In doing so, I aimed at overcoming some methodological shortcomings by giving special attention to the following issues: First, by investigating a sample of dual-earner couples with preschool children I was not only not restricted to inferences about the management of work- and family goals in women but also was able to consider mutual influences among husbands and wives (Barnett, 1998; Kashy & Kenny, 2000). Secondly, by focusing on both interpersonal goal conflict and convergence, I explicitly investigated the positive and the negative sides of combining work and family in closely interrelated individuals (Klumb & Lampert, 2004; Riediger, 2001). Thirdly, I did not restrict myself to an examination of subjective indicators of successful development but complemented measures of subjective well-being by an assessment of bodily indicators of physiological arousal (Frankenhaeuser, 1994). And fourthly, by implementing a combination of a short-term longitudinal study with bursts of measurements, I examined both everyday processes as well as higher level outcomes (Klumb & Perrez, 2004; Nesselroade & Ghisletta, 2003; Wheeler, Martin, & Suls, 1997).

The following discussion is organized in five parts. I will start by an evaluation of the interpersonal goal relations questionnaire for the purpose of the present investigation. The second part forms the core of the discussion and focuses on the relationship between individual goal characteristics and the quality of interpersonal goal relations followed by separate sections on the effects of interpersonal goal conflict and convergence with respect to everyday goal pursuit and long-term outcomes. Subsequently, results on the proposed beneficial effects of having a grandparent to turn to for childcare are discussed. And finally, results on the link between goal pursuit and goal progress on one side and experiential and physiological indicators of successful development on the other side are discussed together with implications from exploratory findings on divergences between the latter two. The third part is devoted to a discussion of (mainly absent) gender differences and their interpretation with respect to the sample of the present study. In the fourth part, limitations of the chosen approach are discussed. And finally, an outlook for further research is given.

### 6.1. The Quality of Interpersonal Goal Relations Questionnaire

Prior research on intraindividual goal relations and social interactions converges in the observation that positive and negative dimensions do not represent opposite poles of the same factor. Additionally, it has been shown that the mechanisms linking positive and negative dimensions with adaptive life-management differ (Riediger, 2001; Riediger & Freund, 2004; Rook, 1998; Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993). Hence, it seemed important to assess conflict and convergence in interpersonal goal relations separately in order to allow for an investigation of their differential impact on the successful management of multiple goals within the present sample.

I developed a theory-based questionnaire that specified two specific structural sources of interpersonal goal convergence - action facilitation and resource expansion - and two sources of interpersonal goal conflict - action hindrance and resource limitation (Deutsch, 2000; Wilensky, 1983; see 2.2.1.1.). In line with expectations, the interpersonal goal relations questionnaire had a two-factor structure with action hindrance and resource limitation loading on the first factor (interpersonal goal conflict) and action facilitation and resource expansion loading on the second factor (interpersonal goal convergence). The two-factor structure was not only present with respect to all four work and family goals but could be replicated on each of the 16 pairs of goals. The two factors representing interpersonal goal conflict and convergence were only moderately correlated ( $r = -.33^{**}$ ), supporting the notion that they do not present opposite poles of a single dimension. Overall the psychometric qualities of the newly developed questionnaire were satisfactory (see 4.2.2.2.), warranting its use for the present investigation.

I could rule out an important methodological concern that the interpersonal goal relations questionnaire represents a new measure of relationship satisfaction or social support. Neither interpersonal goal conflict nor interpersonal goal convergence have been reliably correlated with relationship satisfaction (Sander & Boecker, 1993) or social support (Cohen et al., 1985). Nevertheless the associations were in the expected directions (see section 4.2.2.2. for details).

At this stage the questionnaire not only goes into great detail but also requires a high level of reflection on side of the study participant. Hence, in order to be applied in research on more diverse samples, simplifications would be useful.

## **6.2. Antecedents and Consequences of the Quality of Interpersonal Goal Relations**

The present study focuses on the following four aspects with regard to the successful combination of work and family goals in employed parents with preschool children: (1) The extent to which each parent's time-related characteristics of personal goals are related to the social organization of work and family goals between the partners, (2) how interpersonal goal conflict and convergence affect the ability to work on personal goals in both husbands and wives, (3) whether grandparental support in the form of childcare provides compensatory means for the successful pursuit of work- and family- goals in employed parents with preschool children, and (4) if success in the pursuit of work and family goals is reflected by high levels of subjective well-being and low levels of physiological arousal in the present sample. In the sections below I will discuss the relevant findings regarding these aspects for the successful management of work- and family in the employed mothers and fathers of this study.

### **6.2.1. Individual Goal Characteristics and their Relationship with Conflict and Convergence in Interpersonal Goal Relations**

Within the present study it was proposed that both partners' time-intensity and temporal flexibility in the pursuit of personal goals would be related to conflict and convergence in interpersonal goal relations. Specifically, it was expected that partners who hold very time-intensive goals that can only be pursued at fixed points in time would perceive high interpersonal goal conflict. Partners whose work and family goals require little time and are high in temporal flexibility in contrast, were thought to report high interpersonal goal convergence.

These hypotheses were based on the following lines of thinking: (1) According to the SOC-model, people have to be selective in the setting of their goals in order to make the best out of limited resources. Selection basically means a narrowing down of personal goals from the pool of available options to fit developmental circumstances (Freund & P. B. Baltes, 2000). Hence, employed parents who select resource-adequate work- and family- goals should be more successful in combining their multiple goals. (2) In line with the observation that time is a particularly limited resource in parents who are still in the beginning of their career, one straightforward indicator of the resource-adequacy of personal goals seemed to be the extent to which working parents choose work-and family goals that match their limited time and flexibility during this phase in life (Barnett & Shen, 1997; Biernat & Wortman, 1991; Bittman & Wajcman, 2000). It therefore seemed reasonable to believe that a selection

of work and family goals that are modest in time-intensity and high in temporal flexibility would be crucial for the management of work- and family goals in the present sample. (3) Due to the fact that the successful development of closely interrelated individuals is intertwined, it is important to consider both partners' goal characteristics and link them to the organization of personal goals at the level of the couple (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1998). In line with the saying 'Every chain is as strong as its weakest link,' it was assumed that perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict and convergence would depend not only on an individual's time-related goal characteristics but also on whether the respective partner constrains him- or herself to an adequate selection of personal goals as well.

The findings of the present study provide partial support for these hypotheses. In line with my assumptions, a reliable positive association between individual time-intensity of work and family goals and perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict emerged, explaining 11.4 percent of the variance in interpersonal goal conflict. Individual temporal flexibility of personal goals and partners' time-related goal characteristics, in contrast, seemed to be independent of perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict. Additionally, neither partner's time-intensity or temporal flexibility in work and family goals was predictive of differences in interpersonal goal convergence.

But why would perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict not be related to the flexibility with which personal goals can be pursued and how can it be explained that perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict seem to be independent of the goal characteristics of the respective partner? And secondly, what factors might predict differences in interpersonal goal convergence?

One reason for the absence of the expected associations between temporal flexibility and the time-intensity of partner's goals and differences in perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict could lie in the fact that within the present study goal characteristics were only reported with respect to the two most important work and family goals. Even though results from freely produced personal goals confirmed that work and family goals are named with the highest frequency within the present sample, these goals only represent a subset within each person's goal-system. Hence, it might well be that perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict on side of a wife might be related not only to the time-intensity and temporal flexibility of her husband's work and family goals but also to the time-intensity and temporal flexibility of his leisure goals.

Research on long-term career patterns in dual earner couples might explain why both partners' concurrent time-related goal characteristics seemed to be independent of

perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence. Hoff and Ewers (2003) for example propose that dual-earner couples might agree on a sequential patterning of their professional development when they become parents. Research shows that this is often accomplished by scaling back and placing limits to the involvement in work on side of one partner and does not necessarily mean that this particular person leaves the labor force altogether (Becker & Moen, 1999). Such conscious long-term patterns at the level of the couple would probably lead to a selection of less time-demanding goals on side of one partner and more time-demanding goals on side of the other partner, resulting in an independence of concurrent time-related goal characteristics and general perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence. Hence, my prediction with respect to the negative association between time-intensity and temporal flexibility in work and family goals and perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence might only apply to those working mothers and fathers of the present sample that do not have such long-term agreements.

To sum up, the present study found evidence for a negative association between the selection of very time-intensive work and family goals and perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict. Future research on the quality of interpersonal goal relations in couples might benefit from an inclusion of the characteristics of personal goals employed parents hold besides their work- and family-related goals at a given point in time. It might also address processes and arrangements that extend over a longer period of time, anticipating possible differentiation of who is likely to perceive conflict or convergence in the organization of goals within the partnership at a given point in time. I will come back to this question in a later section and, when talking about an outlook for future investigations at the end of the discussion chapter, elaborate on the role of long-term processes and arrangements.

### **6.2.2. Conflict and Convergence in Interpersonal Goal Relations and Individual Goal Pursuit**

The collective expansion of the model of selective optimization with compensation states that social interactions have a gain-loss dynamic. For a positive outcome to occur, interrelated individuals have to have a shared understanding regarding their respective goal structures (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1998). Within the present study it is assumed that the quality of interpersonal goal relations provides one structural characteristic that helps to differentiate more successful from less successful development in each member of the couple. It is assumed that differences in the relationship between the work and family goals

of employed parents affect goal-relevant means and are therefore related to the engagement in goal-relevant actions in everyday life as well as long-term progress on personal goals.

The basic assumption underlying this study is that perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict are negatively related to everyday goal pursuit and long-term goal progress, whereas perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence are positively associated with everyday goal pursuit and goal progress. Because research and theory suggest that positive and negative aspects in partnerships not only represent separate dimensions but also involve different mechanisms that link them with specific outcomes (Rook, 1998), the results on the consequences of interpersonal goal conflict and convergence are discussed in separate sections.

#### **6.2.2.1. Interpersonal Goal Convergence: Everyday Goal Pursuit and Long-Term Goal Progress**

With respect to the positive side of interpersonal goal relations I had proposed that interpersonal goal convergence of both actor and partner would be positively associated with the pursuit of work and family goals in everyday life and should therefore lead to high levels of goal progress in the long run. Convergence in interpersonal goal relations is thought to reflect a shared understanding between both partners that enriches opportunities for personal goal pursuit and optimizes means leading to higher levels of functioning for everyone involved (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1998).

Overall, expectations about the positive relationship between interpersonal goal convergence and personal goal pursuit and progress could be confirmed in the present study. Individual perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence reliably positively predicted the engagement in goal relevant activities and the amount of goal progress in both husbands and wives. The statistical procedures that were used in the present investigation account for independence in data obtained from repeated assessments in couples. As a result the amount of explained variance (1.1 % in goal pursuit; 5.6 % in goal progress) is small but significant because it represents reliable variance.

This finding adds to previous research in two important ways. First, it extends prior research on the beneficial effects of intraindividual goal facilitation on everyday goal pursuit and long-term goal progress (Riediger, 2001; Riediger & Freund, 2004). The present study can show that the positive effects of goal convergence between two partners parallel results obtained from an investigation of goal convergence within individual goal systems. Hence, it

seems reasonable to assume that both intraindividual as well as interindividual goal convergence play an important role for the pursuit and attainment of personal goals.

Secondly, the present study confirms research on the positive effects of cooperation on performance outcomes that have been reported in a variety of domains. Studies concerned with group performance in the work-setting show that a coordination of goals between team members is reliably positively related to levels of performance (e.g. Durham, Knight, & Locke, 1997; Gowen III, 1986). Similarly, researchers interested in marital decision-making find that cooperation between partners is positively associated with the efficiency in the completion of everyday tasks (Berg, Johnson, Meegan, & Strough, 2003). Hence, the present study provides evidence for the positive effect of cooperation between partners and extends existing research by showing that effective organizers benefit individually from a positive relationship between own and partner's work and family goals.

In extending these individual-level results and in order to link them to the literature on group performance, I also looked at goal pursuit patterns at the level of the couple. Exploratory results that aimed at not only capturing individual benefits from interpersonal goal convergence but also taking goal pursuit patterns of both partners into account, showed a tendency for couples with high interpersonal goal convergence to display a greater amount of simultaneous goal pursuit as compared to couples with low interpersonal goal convergence. Hence, the present study shows that individual perceptions of high interpersonal goal convergence are positively related to individual goal pursuit in daily life and that, compared to couples with low interpersonal goal convergence perceptions, individuals living in couples where both partners perceive their goals to be highly convergent are better able to pursue their work and family goals at the same time as their partner. These findings give support to propositions by those life-span scholars who emphasize that mature development is comprised of individual agency combined with interpersonal cooperation because they underscore the benefits of an interdependent development (M. M. Baltes & Silverberg, 1994).

Nevertheless, the findings of the present study do not provide evidence that perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence on side of one's partner or the composition of both partners' perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence have an effect over and above the described individual level results. The absence of these expected associations does not necessarily mean that partner- or compositional effects do not play a role for individual goal pursuit. Due to the fact that these hypotheses were investigated within a very homogenous sample I would argue instead that in order to be detected, a greater amount of variability and



possibly a bigger sample would be useful. I will come back to considerations with respect to selectivity and power in the section on limitations.

Taken together, these results imply that indeed, interpersonal goal convergence seems to be an important factor contributing to the successful pursuit of work and family goals in employed parents with preschool children. Despite the fact that a coordination of personal goals between interrelated individuals might require some effort, this study supports the notion that a convergent goal structure at the level of the couple optimizes means for individual goal pursuit and goal progress and contributes to the successful management of work- and family-related goals in employed mothers and fathers alike.

### **6.2.2.2. Interpersonal Goal Conflict: Everyday Goal Pursuit and Long-Term Goal**

#### **Progress**

The assumption underlying the relationship between interpersonal goal conflict and the pursuit of work and family goals in everyday life as well as long-term goal progress was that partners with highly conflicting goals would report fewer activities furthering their goals, display a high variability in goal pursuit, and, finally, would not observe much goal progress as compared to partners with low interpersonal goal conflict.

These hypotheses are based on the assumption that partners whose goals are in conflict might be at increased risk of experiencing interference and undermining when attempting to work on their goals in everyday life and would not have adequate means to bring them to successful completion (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1998; Deutsch, 2000; Wilensky, 1983).

In line with expectations, individuals with partners perceiving their goals to be in conflict were less successful in the pursuit of their goals than individuals with partners who did not report much interpersonal goal conflict. Individuals with perceptions of high interpersonal goal conflict, in contrast, tended to engage in more activities furthering their work and family goals in everyday life than individuals with low perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict. Despite the fact that individuals with high interpersonal goal conflict tended to report more everyday goal pursuits, they displayed the expected higher goal pursuit variability than individuals with low interpersonal goal conflict. In the long run, neither partner's perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict were related to the amount of overall goal progress, at least when taking progress on work and family goals together. When differentiating between progress on work- and progress on family-related goals however, then women with high perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict showed less progress with respect

to their work goals but not with respect to their family goals, whereas men's perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict were unrelated to progress on work and progress on family goals.

How can these results be explained? Why would individuals with perceptions of high interpersonal goal conflict engage in more goal-relevant actions than individuals with perceptions of low interindividual goal conflict? In order to interpret this counterintuitive finding, it might help to leave the level of the couple aside for a moment and ask what happens at the individual level when people perceive their goals to be in conflict with those of the respective partner.

Self-regulation theories concerned with goal pursuit at the level of the individual propose that goal-directed behavior is based on feedback-loops (e.g. Brandtstaedter et al., 1999; Carver & Scheier, 2002; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). Within these models, goals are seen as individual reference points towards which a person wants to move. Given that a person has a binding goal, he or she needs to identify adequate circumstances where this goal can be pursued and jump at all opportunities that allow progress toward it. Ideally, goal-directed behavior helps in decreasing the distance between the starting point and the chosen goal, finally leading to goal achievement. During this process people can be disturbed by the environment leading to setbacks that have to be counteracted by an increase in efforts. This adjustment of efforts to situational difficulties and hindrances serves goal progress after the experience of failures (Brandtstaedter et al., 1999; Carver & Scheier, 2002; Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). Theories of adaptive life-management would suggest a different mechanism that could also account for the observed individual-level results. According to the SOC-model (Freund & P. B. Baltes, 2000) and Social Production Function Theory (Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink, & Verbrugge, 1999) losses of goal-relevant means and resources represent selective pressures. Perceptions of high interpersonal goal conflict might signal to the individual that the social circumstances for personal goal pursuit are bad and that he or she needs to make selective use of available resources by focusing on goal-relevant activities and spending less time and energy on goal-irrelevant tasks. Hence, theories of self-regulation and adaptive life-management suggest that from an individual point of view, perceptions of conflict in interpersonal goal relations might be indicative of aversive social circumstances for personal goal pursuit that needs to be counteracted either by an increase in effort or by a selective focus on goal-relevant activities over other goal-irrelevant activities. Following this line of thinking, it then appears reasonable that within the present study individual perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict are related to a tendency to report more goal pursuit in everyday life.

However, the increase in goal pursuit that has been observed in individuals with high perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict seems to be ambiguous. On one hand it shows that individuals with high interpersonal goal conflict are not paralyzed, as suggested by research on the detrimental effects of intraindividual goal conflict on personal goal pursuit (Emmons & King, 1988), because the employed mothers and fathers of the present study evidently still manage to act on their work and family goals in everyday life. On the other hand, employed parents with high interpersonal goal conflict also display patterns of high goal pursuit variability, which basically means that they report both many activities furthering and many activities hindering their goals. One straightforward interpretation of such high variability in goal pursuit is that employed parents are subject to many disturbances in everyday life. Hence, within the present study it seems that despite the observed increase in everyday goal pursuit among individuals with high perceptions as compared to individuals with perceptions of low interpersonal goal conflict, the former do not manage to efficiently work on their goals over extended periods of time.

If one links these individual-level explanations back to the level of the couple, one can easily picture what happens if two closely interrelated individuals employ the same strategy to counteract difficulties in the pursuit of their goals. Showing that perceptions of high interpersonal goal conflict tend to be associated with an increase in individual goal pursuit efforts, it can be assumed that employed parents who are confronted with this particular situation might make a bad situation worse and continuously withdraw joint time and action possibilities from each other. The results of the present study indicate that individual perceptions of interindividual goal conflict tend to be positively associated with everyday goal pursuit and that partners' perceptions of interindividual goal conflict are negatively related to everyday goal pursuit. Additionally, results on the relationship between the daily goal pursuit of both partners show that partners' goal pursuit tends to be negatively interrelated if interpersonal goal relations are perceived to be highly conflicting (see Appendix C). This picture suggests an escalation of difficulties under conditions of high interpersonal goal conflict because both partners behave in a way that seems to maximize individual goal pursuit, possibly at the cost of partner's goal pursuit. Support for my interpretation that conflict between partners can give rise to highly individualized behavior that might disregard the partner to a certain degree comes from research on everyday problem-solving in married couples (e.g. Berg et al., 2003), which demonstrates that under an experimental condition that explicitly asked couples to work on a task together, partners with

low-affiliation exchanges tended to submit two separate plans for how the task should be completed.

In the next section I will turn to possible explanations for the observation that interpersonal goal conflict was unrelated to overall progress on work and family goals in the present sample of employed parents. Studies linking intraindividual goal conflict with goal progress have led to inconsistent results. While King and colleagues (King et al., 1998) provide evidence for a negative association between goal conflict and goal progress, Riediger (2001; Riediger & Freund, 2004) does not find a reliable association between conflict in individual goal relations and progress on multiple goals at all. The present study extended research on intraindividual goal relations to an investigation of interpersonal goal relations, thereby examining explicitly how co-acting persons influence each other's goal progress. In doing so reliable actor- and partner-effects of almost equal sizes but opposite directions (actor effect:  $b = .33$  ; partner effect:  $b = -.38$ ) were observed when I investigated the relationship between perceptions of interindividual goal conflict and everyday goal pursuit. In assuming that goal progress per definition requires individuals to work on their goals in everyday life, the two opposing effects could very well account for the observed Null finding. Hence, the results obtained with respect to everyday goal pursuit shed light on the fact that no association was found between interindividual goal conflict and long-term goal progress. This interpretation points to the importance of investigating not only a focal person but also closely interrelated individuals because results obtained from single individuals might tell a considerably different story than findings from interrelated persons.

Because I was concerned that the relationship between interpersonal goal conflict and overall goal progress could be due to gender differences or be related to systematic qualitative differences between work and family goals, I will next turn to a discussion of results accounting for these factors in the present sample. When differentiating the effects of interpersonal goal conflict between progress on work and progress on family goals in husbands and wives, wives' perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict were reliably negatively related to their progress on work goals only. Husbands' perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict, in contrast, were unrelated to both progress on work and progress on family goals.

Despite the fact that no association was found between perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict and progress on family goals in either husbands or wives, a strong gender effect emerged, indicating that women progressed more on their family goals than men regardless of differences in interpersonal goal conflict. These gender-specific results parallel well

replicated findings from the work-family literature which show that when partners become parents, husbands tend to focus more on work-issues and wives focus more on family-matters even if both partners continue to participate in the work force (C. P. Cowan & P. A. Cowan, 1992; C. P. Cowan, P. A. Cowan, Heming, & Miller, 1991; Eckenrode & Gore, 1990; Kahn, 1991). Hence, the findings of the present study, which show that gender rather than interpersonal goal conflict plays a more important role in predicting who reports progress on family goals, and that interpersonal goal conflict hampers progress on work goals only in women, parallel results from other studies with more heterogeneous samples.

I would like to add a short comment on the importance of investigating both members of the couple within the context of the present study. The results with respect to interpersonal goal conflict clearly demonstrate the usefulness of including both partners in research on relationship phenomena (Kenny & Cook, 1999). What would have happened if I had investigated a sample of unrelated working mothers and fathers? I probably would have been struck by the observation that perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict are independent of overall progress on work and family goals and that individuals with high perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict tend to engage in more goal-relevant activities than individuals with low interpersonal goal conflict. I might even have come to the conclusion that interpersonal goal conflict is not as counterproductive as it actually proves itself to be when interdependence in behavior is taken into account in our sample of employed parents with preschool children.

Overall, the results of the present study show that interpersonal goal conflict hampers the successful pursuit of work and family goals in the employed mothers and fathers of this study. When interpreting these findings it is important to keep in mind that they refer to only a short time-interval in the lives of the employed parents of this sample. Unless indicated otherwise, no gender differences were found in the described associations. I will elaborate possible reasons for this in a later section.

How do the described findings of the present study connect to processes that operate over months and years? In the next paragraph I want to frame the results of the present study in reference to research on the role of conflict in long-term development. When one takes a broader perspective on the effects of interpersonal conflict as it unfolds over an extended period of time, it becomes clear that conflict has a dual nature. Even though most people would choose not to have it, conflict provides an experience that is necessary for the advance of social development, which in the best case promotes the reorganization and growth in partnerships (Laursen, 2001; Laursen & Collins, 1994). Hence, conflict has been described as

a catalyst for change (Laursen, 2001). Support for this formulation comes from longitudinal studies on the development in partnerships that provide evidence that conflict and negative interactions in couples might be detrimental to marital satisfaction and mental health at the time they occur but can lead to beneficial outcomes in the long run (e.g. Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Vinokur & van Ryn, 1993).

These observations are in line with models of adaptive life-management. The SOC-model for example emphasizes the role of loss-based selection in the presence of loss in social resources as encountered by individuals with high perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1998; Freund & P. B. Baltes, 2000). Similarly, self-regulation theories point to the benefits of adjusting personal goals to situational circumstances and disengaging from unattainable goals (Brandstaedter & Greve, 1994; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). I therefore examined whether perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict were related to long-term plans concerning an involvement in the domains of work or family within the present sample. Exploratory analyses revealed that perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict were negatively related to plans for a greater involvement in the work domain in employed mothers but not in employed fathers. This finding has two important implications. First, it shows that employed parents with high interpersonal goal conflict are planning to do something about their current situation. The described findings suggest a dynamic in couples with high interpersonal goal conflict that in the long run might lead to a reorganization of conflicting goals between the partners.

Secondly, these exploratory findings also show that it is the woman who plans to make concessions in the work-domain, and not the man. These results are in accordance with research on dual-earner couples in less select samples than the one of the present study. Becker and Moen (1999) for example showed that in their sample of middle-class dual-earner couples it was mostly the women who scale back their involvement in paid work and not the men. Similarly, Hoff and colleagues (e.g. Hoff & Ewers, 2003) report that an integration of work and family by way of making concessions in the work domain is a strategy that seems to be characteristic of the women of their academic sample and not for the men. Hence, despite the fact that processes of loss-based selection might foster adaptive life-management in employed mothers and fathers, it still seems to be the women's job to make the effort and put up with concessions in the work-domain, at least during a stage in life where children are small.

Overall, the results on the relationship between perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict and everyday goal pursuit and goal progress suggest a complex picture. Findings

from everyday life show that the effects of interpersonal goal conflict on side of actor and partner differ substantially. The described opposing forces seem to express highly individualized and less partner-oriented attempts to manage the pursuit of work and family goals. In the long run individual perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict only hamper progress on work-goals in women and it is also the women with high perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict who report future plans concerning a lower involvement in the work domain. Hence, despite the fact that I find little evidence for gender differences in the present sample, they do seem to play an important role when things get rough.

### **6.2.3. On the Buffering Effect of Access to Grandparental Childcare**

I had proposed that employed parents would benefit from having a grandparent to turn to for childcare and that this source of support would buffer the negative effects of perceptions of high interpersonal goal conflict between the partners. These predictions were based on the following lines of thinking: Research on intergenerational relations provides evidence that grandparents evince considerable concern for their adult children's achievements and that a substantial proportion of grandparents provide frequent help to their children by taking care of small grandchildren (e.g. Herlyn, et al., 1998; Mayr- Kleffel, 1991; Ryff et al., 1994). Given that the availability of childcare has been shown to be an important predictor of mothers' participation in the labor force and that grandparents are a reliable source of support especially under special circumstances such as illness of a child or work travel (e.g. Buechel & Spiess, 2002; Herlyn, et al., 1998), it seemed reasonable to assume that access to grandparental support in the form of childcare would contribute to the successful management of work and family goals in employed parents. In line with research on the effects of social support on work-family conflict (e.g. B. B. Baltes, Young, & Pratt, 2004) it was further predicted that grandparental support in the form of childcare would be particularly helpful in the presence of difficulties such as interpersonal goal conflict between employed parents and that grandparental childcare serves as a compensatory means buffering the negative effects of interpersonal goal conflict between the partners on individual goal pursuit.

The results of the present study provide partial support for the described hypotheses. Within the context of this study, no direct positive effect on the pursuit of work and family goals could be observed for access to grandparental childcare. However, I did find evidence for the proposed buffering effect of grandparental childcare in employed parents with high

perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict, explaining two percent of the variance in everyday goal pursuit.

Why did I find the proposed buffering effect but no positive main effect for access to grandparental childcare in the sample of employed parents with preschool children? The social support literature provides two alternative explanations for an absence of the expected positive main effect of grandparental support in the form of childcare. The first refers to the conditions under which social support is mobilized. It might well be that employed parents seek external sources of support only when they are confronted with a situation that cannot be solved alone (Peeters, Buunk, & Schaufeli, 1995). Hence, it could be the case that grandparents enter the picture fairly late when difficulties are already manifest, but once they do, then it is to the benefit of employed parents.

Secondly, the literature also shows that social support can be a mixed blessing. Research on stress, social support, and well-being provides ample evidence that social support can offset stress in a variety of domains and contributes to well-being (Antonucci, 2001; Asendorpf & Banse, 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Schneewind, 2000; Schwarzer & Leppin, 1989). However, research also shows that unasked-for support is associated with negative affect because it can be perceived as a statement of incompetence (e.g. Smith & Goodnow, 1999). In light of these lines of research, it might well be that grandparental support in the form of childcare can have positive and negative effects and that it is important to consider inter-couple differences. It therefore seems essential to specify conditions underlying the costs and benefits of social support. The present study presents one step in this direction by providing evidence that grandparental childcare provision helps employed parents to pursue their goals in everyday life under conditions of high interpersonal goal conflict between the partners.

In order to get a deeper understanding of the buffering effect of grandparental support in the form of childcare, it would have been desirable to examine whether grandparental childcare is more important with regard to the time employed parents have for their goal pursuit or in fostering planned actions. Such a differentiation might have given insight in whether grandparental childcare offsets time-based interpersonal goal conflict, strategy-based interpersonal goal conflict, or both. However, due to the fact that these two sources of interpersonal goal conflict were highly correlated in the present sample (see section 4.2.2.2), this question had to be left to further investigations.

To conclude, the findings of the present study show that grandparental support in the form of childcare might be mobilized fairly late and does not need to be unanimously positive



but that it depends on specific constellations within the partnership of adult offspring. Under conditions of high interpersonal goal conflict grandparental childcare seems to be a key resource that has the power to compensate for losses in goal-relevant means in employed parents with preschool children.

#### **6.2.4. The Relationship between Goal Pursuit and Goal Progress and Subjective as well as Bodily Indicators of Well-Being**

The aim of the present study was to link the quality of interpersonal goal relations to multiple indicators of developmental success. In the preceding sections it was shown that perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict and convergence are systematically associated with everyday goal pursuit and that interpersonal goal convergence is a reliable predictor of progress on work and family goals within this sample of employed parents with preschool children. In the next section I will turn to a discussion of the results linking everyday goal pursuit and goal progress, which are thought to reflect developmental success at the behavioral level, to experiential and physiological indicators of adaptive life-management.

In line with telic theories of subjective well-being and models of self-regulation, which are based on the idea that goal-related actions represent a reference point for the affect-regulating system (e.g. Carver & Scheier, 1990; Diener et al., 1999), a positive relationship between everyday goal pursuit and goal progress on one side and subjective indicators of well-being on the other side was expected.

Due to the fact that measures of subjective well-being are vulnerable to response biases, salivary cortisol was included as a physiological indicator of well-being. According to the biopsychosocial model of stress by Frankenhaeuser (1991; 1994), goal pursuit should not only be associated with positive affect but also be related with low levels of cortisol secretion. Involuntary inactivity and activities hindering personal goals, in contrast, were proposed to be associated with increased cortisol secretion. It was therefore expected that goal pursuit feeds back on the HPA axis and that the performance of activities furthering work and family goals would be reflected by lower levels of cortisol than the experience of goal-blockage or an engagement in activities hindering personal goals.

Results from the present investigation support both of these hypotheses. In line with expectations, a reliable positive association between everyday goal pursuit as well as goal progress and different measures of well-being was found. In everyday life, levels of goal pursuit were reliably positively related with all three facets of the Multidimensional Affect Scale (Steyer et al., 1997), explaining 1.8 to 2.6 percent of the variance in affect.

Additionally, long-term goal progress was positively associated with positive mood, psychological well-being and goal-specific satisfaction. Overall, these findings support theoretical expectations about the close connection between goal-directed behavior and well-being at different levels of abstraction (Diener et al., 1999). More specifically, this study supports propositions of life-span scholars who emphasize the emotional benefits of being able to work on age-related goals during different phases of life (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999) by providing evidence that being able to work on and progress towards work and family goals contributes substantially to the subjective well-being of young parents who participate in the labor force.

The assumption concerning the negative relationship between everyday goal pursuit and levels of cortisol was confirmed at two levels. First, it was shown that at the occasion-level, low goal pursuit was reliably associated with acute stress responses. This finding extends prior research from laboratory experiments (e.g. Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1994; Kudielka et al., 2004) and studies on the relationship between unspecific daily stressors and cortisol (e.g. Smyth et al., 1998; Eck, Nicolson, Berkhof, & Sulon, 1996) by means of specifying one underlying mechanism linking personal evaluations of daily experiences with HPA-reactivity. The empirical evidence from the present study shows that employed parents who are either unable to pursue their personal goals or who perceive their daily activities as hindering their work and family goals display higher levels of free cortisol than employed parents who engage in actions furthering their personal goals. Hence, in line with propositions by Frankenhaeuser (1994), differences in the ability to act on personal goals do account for differences in HPA reactivity as indicated by levels of free cortisol in saliva.

Secondly, it was found that when relating aggregates of goal pursuit per day with the total cortisol secretion over the respective day (as indexed by the “area under the curve,” which is a measure of chronic stress; Pruessner et al., 2003), a reliable negative association was present. Hence, it was not only the case that participants who engaged in activities furthering their personal goals in everyday life displayed lower concurrent HPA reactivity but also that employed parents had a higher overall cortisol output on days characterized by low goal pursuit as compared to days with high goal pursuit.

The described findings concerning endocrine correlates of differences in the successful pursuit of personal goals in everyday life complement results addressing the relationship between goal pursuit and well-being in important ways. The results of the present study show that goal-related actions are linked not only with concurrent affective responses but also with physiological reactivity. The literature suggests that such acute stress reactions

are in so far adaptive as they mobilize energy necessary to meet the needs of current circumstances (McEwen & Seeman, 1999). However, if individuals are repeatedly confronted with stressful events over an extended period of time, less adaptive secondary effects may result. According to the concept of allostatic load (McEwen & Seeman, 1999), individuals that are subject to chronic stress might not be able to efficiently downregulate their physiological arousal after the occurrence of an acute stressor, leading to a persistent activation that comprises a risk factor for the development of mental and physical illness in the long run. Despite the fact that to my knowledge no longitudinal studies exist that directly tested the pathway between everyday stressors and long-term health outcomes in a prospective design, there is ample evidence on the co-occurrence of HPA over activity and negative states such as burnout, cognitive dysfunction, depression, diabetes or cardiovascular disease (e.g. Deuschle et al., 1997; Donnelly et al., 1995; Pruessner et al., 1999; Seeman et al., 1997; Steptoe et al., 2003). Because the present study showed a negative relationship between everyday goal pursuit and both acute as well as chronic stress responses within the present sample, it has to be kept in mind that prolonged periods during which individuals want to but cannot pursue their goals might set them at risk to experience negative health outcomes in later phases of life.

Overall, subjective and bodily indicators of well-being were thought to point in the same direction. However, results from a study by Brandtstaedter and colleagues (1991) show that measures of subjective well-being and cortisol can diverge, as well. From a health-psychological perspective it is particularly relevant to investigate such divergences in order to identify people who feel good when they might actually take a health risk. One such group of people that might display divergent patterns of subjective and bodily indicators of well-being might be those study participants with high perceptions of interindividual goal conflict who successfully pursue their goals in daily life. I therefore compared this group with a group of individuals who indicated high perceptions of interindividual goal convergence and also showed high levels of goal pursuit. Exploratory findings revealed that such divergences between affective and physiological reactions occur more often in the group with high interpersonal goal conflict than in the group with high interpersonal goal convergence. However, the observed divergences between mood and cortisol did not emerge on the scale positive-negative mood, where I expected them but on the scale alertness-fatigue. Hence, it seems that individuals with high perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict frequently report being tired when their cortisol is very high. This finding might have some relevance for research on recovery and vital exhaustion because laboratory studies provide evidence for a

negative relationship between sleep quality and cortisol and the occurrences of higher cortisol baselines in populations with an increased risk of cardiovascular mortality (Kristenson, Orthomer, Kucinskiene, Bergdahl, Calkauskas, Balinkyniene, & Olsson, 1998; Vgontzas, Zoumakis, Bixler, Lin, Prolo, Vela-Bueno, Kales, & Chrousos, 2003).

Overall, the findings of the present study support the proposition that goal-directed behavior is reflected by high levels of subjective well-being and low levels of physiological arousal. Within the context of the present study, preliminary evidence suggests that affective and bodily responses can display divergent patterns. Future research might want to elaborate on this issue by specifying conditions under which such patterns prevail in order to design interventions for individuals who carry a risk for the development of mental and physical illnesses without any awareness because they feel good about their current situation.

### **6.3. Gender Differences**

Within the context of the present study, little evidence for the presence of gender differences in the investigated constructs and mechanisms was found. On one hand this is good, because it underscores my assumption that similar processes operate in women *and* men under the not very widespread condition of a similarly high socioeconomic resourcefulness among husbands and wives like in the present sample. On the other hand it gives rise to two questions: First, if the employed mothers and fathers of this study also display similarities on additional constructs that are known for their gender sensitivity. And second, whether such similarities are also present in other studies on dual-earner couples. In the following section I will discuss findings with respect to one such construct, namely gender role orientation (Spence & Helmreich, 1978), followed by a discussion of the gender-specific results that were detected within the present investigation.

The construct of gender role orientation aims at measuring differences in the content of roles seen as appropriate for women and men. Femininity-expressivity refers to socioemotional other-oriented self-attributes, whereas masculinity-instrumentality reflects independent agency-oriented self-definitions (Greenglass, 2001). Large-scale investigations on women and men across a wide range of age-groups provide evidence for a strong association between biological sex and differences in gender role orientations (Helmreich, Spence, & Gibson, 1982). Nevertheless, studies differentiating between level of education and employment status show that highly educated women who participate in the labor force do not differ in their instrumentality as compared to their male colleagues and that men married to employed women score higher on expressivity than men married to housewives

(e.g. Abele, 2002; Cunningham & Antill, 1984; Frankenhaeuser, Lundberg, Fredrikson, Melin, Tuomisto, & Myrsten, 1989; Sieverding & Alfermann, 1992). Hence, despite the fact that no a priori hypotheses were developed concerning this construct within the present investigation, similarities between the employed mothers and fathers of the present sample on the two dimensions of expressivity and instrumentality were thought to provide additional evidence for the absence of gender differences in the sample under study.

Indeed, results revealed no gender differences in expressive and instrumental self-ratings between the employed mothers and fathers of this study. This finding has two important implications: First, it provides a cross-validation of the mainly absent gender differences in the results of the present study. And secondly, it shows that the sample under study differs systematically in their gendered attitudes from the overall population but nevertheless seems to be representative for dual-earner couples.

In a next step I will turn to a discussion of the findings on gender differences within the present investigation. Gender differences in the examined constructs and mechanisms were found with respect to the following aspects: First, men's open goals contained reliably more leisure goals than women's goal systems. Second, perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict were negatively related to progress on work goals only in women but not in men. Third, women reported more progress on family goals than men regardless of differences in interpersonal goal conflict. And fourth, when asked about plans for their future involvement in work, women were much more likely to indicate intentions to lower their involvement than men.

The direction of these gender-specific results resembles findings from other studies on gender differences in employed parents. Research on women's and men's time-use for example shows that while the gap between women's and men's contributions to household work seems to decrease with the amount of time wives spend on paid work, childcare still seems to be primarily done by women (Biernat & Wortman, 1991; Ferree, 1991). In parents with small children this not only goes along with a "second shift" after the job in employed mothers (Frankenhaeuser et al., 1989; Hochschild, 1989) but also leads to substantial gender differences in both the amount of leisure time (which on average is 2 hours per week in employed mothers with small children but 8 hours per week in fathers) as well as the maximum duration of leisure episodes (Bittman & Wajcman, 2000). Hence, gender differences in the allocation of time to unpaid work in employed parents with small children shows that there is very little time for hobbies in employed mothers, which might explain why in the present sample women are much less likely to report leisure goals than men.

The findings concerning gender differences in progress on work and family goals as well as intentions to change the involvement in the work domain suggest that within the sample of the present study mothers make more concessions with respect to work and prioritize family goals to a greater extent than fathers. This interpretation is in line with longitudinal investigations on women's and men's long-term career patterns in well-educated samples. Using biographical information, Hoff and Ewers (2003) found that within the 15 years after graduation from University, men's careers mostly followed a continuous development whereas women's career patterns were characterized by discontinuities. These discontinuities observed in women's professional development did not necessarily mean that women left the labor force but rather that they moved into positions allowing for restricted work schedules. Retrospectively, these efforts were not perceived as favoring private goals over work goals but rather as serving an integration or balance between work and family. These findings converge with results from a prospective study of dual-earner couples (Becker & Moen, 1999). In their description of long-term career patterns of women and men, Becker and Moen (1999) find four distinct career patterns: two high-powered careers, placing limits, having a one-job one-career marriage, and trading off. While the first pattern was rarely present in dual-earner couples with children, examinations of the other three patterns which all involved a reduced commitment to work on side of one partner revealed that women disproportionately did the scaling back. However, the authors also find that in some couples husbands and wives trade family and career responsibilities over the life course. Hence, the gender-specific results obtained in the present investigation seem to parallel results from other studies looking at greater time-spans. Nevertheless, as indicated by Moen and Becker (1999), it might well be that they are specific to the early childrearing years which does not exclude that the employed mothers and fathers of this study eventually change their responsibilities towards a greater job-involvement on side of the women.

The findings of the present study suggest that if socioeconomic resources are similar between husbands and wives, similar processes seem to operate. It could be shown that interpersonal goal conflict is not restricted to women and interpersonal goal convergence is not restricted to men. However, even in this privileged sample several gender differences emerged that show that at least during the early childrearing years, women are confronted with greater concessions in the work domain than men.

#### **6.4. Limitations**

In the following section I will focus on limitations and weaknesses of the present investigation. These limitations concern the generalizability of results but also have important implications for future research. Special attention will be given to the following aspects: (1) problems in the assessment of the quality of interpersonal goal relations, (2) homogeneity of the present sample, (3) weaknesses associated with the use of a time-sampling approach, (4) reliance on self-report measures, and (5) restrictions in the time-frame under investigation.

(1) The approach used to assess individual perceptions of conflict and convergence in interpersonal goal relations not only produces very detailed information but also requires a high degree of reflectivity on side of study participants. Given the high level of education in the present sample, I do not have any doubt with respect to the capability of the subjects of answering these questions. However, the questionnaire might have exceeded the patience of some participants resulting in missing data on this particular construct. Hence, when using this in-depth assessment procedure, it might have been more effective to administer the questionnaire in the presence of a research assistant and not via internet in order to be able to respond to questions on side of participants and to avoid missing data.

Before answering the interpersonal goal relations questionnaire, participants had to list the goals they thought their partner wanted to pursue in the domains of work and family. Hence, ratings were based on the relationship between goals assumed to be pursued by the partner and own goals. This raises the question to which extent partners have knowledge of each other's goals. Post hoc ratings of actual and assumed goals revealed an agreement in only one third of the goals. This finding is consistent with results from other studies (Wiese, 2004) and shows that even in partnerships, people do not necessarily know about each other's goals. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the associations between each partner's goal relations ratings and goal pursuit reflect actual differences in the effects of interpersonal goal conflict and convergence on behavioral outcomes because secondary analyses that were based on correct reports of partner's goals only led to similar results (see Appendix D).

Within the present study goal relations ratings referred to individual perceptions of the degree to which partner's goal pursuit affect the pursuit of own goals. Hence, I do not have any information on the extent to which participants perceive their own goal pursuit to have an impact on their partner's ability to pursue his or her goals. Future studies might want to elaborate on this because such information would help to examine whether perceptions of differences in interpersonal goal relations reflect actual differences in the organization of

personal goals at the level of the couple or whether other personal characteristics have an impact on individual perceptions.

And finally, I did not consider whether participants differed in the production of self-centered and other-related goals. This might be an important aspect because goal pursuit in individuals who hold goals including other persons probably depends much more on the behavior of significant others than in individuals with self-focused goals (Smith, 1996). Hence, goal pursuit is probably more strongly intertwined with actions taken by social partners in individuals holding goals that include others as compared to individuals holding goals that do not involve other people. In line with this thinking it might be interesting to investigate the relationship between agentic versus communal goal orientations in married partners and how they effect the successful pursuit of personal goals for everyone involved.

(2) The present investigation is based on a very homogenous sample of highly educated parents where both partners participate in the labor force. This seemed to be a necessary prerequisite in order to capture the processes of interest. However, this sample homogeneity comes with at least two restrictions. First, similarities between participants of the present study restrict the amount of variability in the sample and might be one reason why I did not detect any compositional effects at the level of the couple. Secondly, it certainly affects the generalizability of results. It can be assumed for instance that there is a greater probability of finding gender differences in couples where both partners vary in their level of education. And conflicts between work and family goals might have a higher prevalence in employed parents with smaller financial resources because of limitations in the ability to outsource household chores (Ferree, 1991). Finally, the positive effect of access to grandparental support in the form of childcare might differ depending on the availability of public childcare. Research by Hank, Kreyenfeld, and Spiess (2003) for example shows that access to grandparental childcare is positively related to women's decisions to have a child in Western Germany where less daycare is available for small children as compared to Eastern Germany.

(3) One of the greatest strengths of time-sampling methodology also is its greatest weakness: While the endeavor to capture life as it is lived allows for an examination of everyday processes in individuals' own environment, the researcher is also confronted with a multitude of situational influences that are hard to control for (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). For example, within the present study everyday goal pursuit might not only be related to differences in interpersonal goal relations between employed mothers and fathers but also to additional factors such as social interactions in the work setting (Kamarck, Shiffman,



Smithline, Goodie, Paty, Gnys, & Jong, 1998). Due to multiple influences from an individual's natural environment, investigations based on time-sampling methodology often explain only small amounts of variance as was the case in the present investigation. Therefore, this particular approach is not superior but rather complementary to more traditional designs (Reis, 1994; Schönplflug, 1994). Hence, in future studies it might be interesting to examine the effects of differences in interpersonal goal conflict and convergence on the performance of tasks using laboratory experiments in order to examine how they operate in more controlled settings. One could investigate for instance if working parents with perceptions of high interpersonal goal conflict develop different plans for the performance of tasks that need to be fit into a typical workday than working parents with perceptions of low interpersonal goal conflict.

(4) Results from the present investigation are mainly based on self-reports. Despite the fact that self-reports are the primary tool to learn about individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in most psychological investigations, an exclusive reliance on self-reports bears the risk of observing artificial statistical associations resulting from shared method variance (Brett, Brief, Burke, George, & Webster, 1990; Chan, 2001; Schwarz, 1999). The more global the construct under investigation and the less guided the thought process, the greater the likelihood that study participants apply a rule of thumb in answering the questions of interest by referring to varying pieces of presently accessible information (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). For this reason, overall goal progress ratings for instance, might be less reliable than reports of everyday goal pursuit.

Within the present study four steps were taken in order to reduce artificial associations in the presented results: First, questionnaires were carefully screened for item overlap (P. B. Baltes & Shweder, 1996). Secondly, online-assessments of participants' behaviors and feelings were used which reduce the effects of memory biases in retrospective reports and incorporate context effects as part of the design (Bolger et al., 2003; Schwarz, 1999). Thirdly, subjective mood ratings in everyday life were complemented by an assessment of free cortisol in saliva in order to be able to relate subjective measures of well-being to physiological indicators of distress. And finally, when analyzing the relationship among everyday predictors and criteria, I used a multi-level approach, centered the predictors around each person's mean, and tested for the effects of autocorrelation in the data (Brett et al., 1990; Schwartz & Stone, 1998). Nevertheless, this is not to say that it would not have been desirable to have access to externally observable data to cross-validate the results of the present investigation. One possibility with respect to the assessment of differences in

interpersonal goal relations might be to complement questionnaire-based approaches by video-based observations of couples discussing the relationship among their work and family goals. Another possibility to assess “hard data” would be to use log-files that record the amount of time people devote to a computer-administered seminar serving their professional development in addition to self-reports of goal pursuit. Goal pursuit in the family domain, in contrast, is probably hard to assess without a reliance on individuals self-reports.

(5) The present study is based on a short-term longitudinal design covering an average of 6 weeks and including a one-week time-sampling phase. This relatively short time-interval enabled me to investigate the relationship between the quality of interpersonal goal relations and measures of successful development at different levels of abstraction. However, it did not allow for a consideration of long-term processes shaping the management of work and family goals of employed parents in the long run. Hence, it remains an open question how the participants of the present study adjusted their goals during the transition to parenthood and to which extent both partners negotiated their goals prior to entering the study. Additionally, I do not know whether reports of interpersonal goal relations are stable over time, if interpersonal goal conflict escalates in the long run, or if it finally leads to a reorganization of goals at the level of the couple. Obviously, these kinds of questions require retrospective biographical information, prospective longitudinal data, or both. The present study represents a first step towards an examination of processes associated with differences in the successful management of work and family goals in employed parents and benefits from subsequent studies using different methodologies and varying time-frames.

## **6.5 Outlook**

The present study shows that the quality of interpersonal goal relations and social support by grandparents have an impact on the successful management of work and family goals in employed parents with preschool children. Based on the discussed findings I would like to close with a few comments on ideas about further research and practical implications.

One aspect that already emerged during the discussion concerns the operation of long-term processes and arrangements between the partners. It would be interesting to know whether partners with high perceptions of interpersonal goal convergence have long-term agreements that help them to coordinate their work and family goals at a given point in time. One such couple-level strategy could be a sequential patterning of both partners' careers leading to one-career one-job constellations characterized by switches of family responsibilities and career aspirations over the life-span (Becker & Moen, 1999; Hoff &

Ewers, 2003). Another aspect concerning the long-term consequences of the observed differences in interpersonal goal relations would be the question whether perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict tend to persist over time or whether they give rise to developmental change. The literature provides evidence for two opposing hypotheses with respect to the developmental consequences of interpersonal conflict in married couples: Research by C. P. Cowan and P. A. Cowan (1992) suggests that interpersonal conflicts during the early childrearing years amplify differences between the partners, whereas Gottman and Krokoff (1989) demonstrate that perceptions of interpersonal conflict can act as a catalyst for change. It remains open for future research to provide a description of conditions under which one or the other is likely to occur.

Instead of examining patterns of long-term change, one could also think about designing experiments to find out how different couples deal with interpersonal goal conflict. Following research on collaborative problem-solving by Berg and colleagues (Berg et al., 2003) one could develop an everyday planning task that requires partners to negotiate their work and family goals in the laboratory. For example, partners could be instructed to make plans for the pursuit of their work and family goals on a typical day. Videotaped interactions between husbands and wives could then be coded along a scheme by Gottman (1994) which proved to be useful in the identification of different interaction sequences such as active listening or negative affect reciprocity (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998). The different interaction sequences observed during the planning task could then be related to individual and collective task outcomes. As a result one might be able to differentiate behavior that sets the stage for an escalation of conflicts from behavior that promotes the constructive resolution of conflict in interpersonal goal relations.

Within the present investigation a systemic approach was taken in order to examine how characteristics in the organization of personal goals between employed parents affect the ability to pursue and progress on work and family goals for everyone involved. In an extension of this perspective it would also be interesting to consider other social contexts that might have an impact on the management of work and family goals in employed parents such as social partners in the work setting (Cranach, 1996; Gowen, 1985; B. B. Baltes, Young, & Pratt, 2004). Such an investigation would shed light on the generalizability of the findings of the present study because it would provide evidence as to whether similar processes operate across different settings.

From a health psychological point of view it seems promising to further elaborate on conditions under which subjective and physiological indicators of well-being are likely to

diverge. The present study took a first step by showing that employed parents with high perceptions of interpersonal goal conflict simultaneously feel tired and display high levels of cortisol. The identification of such patterns is insofar important as they may help to describe individuals who are at risk of experiencing specific stress-related health problems later on (Ehlert, Gaab, & Heinrichs, 2001).

The present study examined factors associated with the management of work and family goals in dual-earner couples with preschool children focusing on indicators of developmental success in employed parents. Conflicts between the goals of parents and difficulties in the pursuit of personal goals might not only affect parents themselves but also have an impact on the development of their children. Hence, as a further step it would be important to investigate the relationship between family dynamics and developmental outcomes in children (P. A. Cowan & C. P. Cowan, 2002; Kreppner, 2001). McHale and Rasmussen (1998) for example show that behavioral observations of low family harmony and discrepancies in parental involvement during a triadic play session when the child was an infant were associated with teachers' ratings of hostile-aggressive and anxious-fearful behavior in children three years later. Hence, future studies might want to consider how differences in developmental success of employed parents affect children's cognitive, social and emotional development.

I would like to close with a few words on practical implications. The present study shows that a substantial amount of participants perceived their goals to be in conflict with those of the respective partner and that conflict in interpersonal goal relations was associated with difficulties in the management of work and family goals in employed parents. C. P. Cowan and P. A. Cowan (1995) show that the transition to parenthood presents a great challenge for couples, and they provide evidence for the usefulness of interventions targeting risk and protective factors during and after this transition. Referring to the findings of the present study and given that individuals tend to overestimate the degree to which their goals are apparent to others (Vorauer & Claude, 1998) one first step might be to encourage partners to talk about their personal objectives and take the effort to coordinate their goals.