WORK AND FAMILY CONFLICT: EXPECTATIONS AND PLANNING AMONG FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Young women today anticipate full engagement in both career and family. The competing demands of family and work often result in work-family conflict. We administered a survey to 124 female college students exploring the importance they place on work and family roles, their expectations for combining these roles, and their attitudes toward planning for multiple roles. The results suggest that although college women are expecting to have demanding careers and involved family lives, they are not planning realistically in order to facilitate the combining of career and family roles with a minimum of conflict.

Increasing numbers of young women have extended their professional aspirations to include high-level careers in fields traditionally dominated by men. They have embraced the message that they can have it all – a demanding career and a rich family life. Research has shown that high work involvement coupled with high family involvement is positively related to work-family conflict (Cinamon & Rich 2002a). Work-family conflict has been linked to physical and mental health risks, diminished performance of employee and parenting roles, absenteeism, turnover, and reduced life satisfaction (Adams, King, & King 1996; Greenhaus & Beutell 1985; Grzywacz & Bass 2003). Hewlett (2007) estimates that two thirds of highly qualified women have left the workforce or are underemployed. Mason and Ekman (2007) found that many ambitious professional women upon having children enter a "second tier" within their professions and are unlikely to regain their original career status. Recent studies suggest work-family conflict explains why increasing numbers of educated professional women are choosing to "opt out" of the workforce altogether (Belkin 2003; Stone 2007).

In exploring young women's career and family goals it is necessary to examine how young women are planning for the combination of work and family roles in their lives. In a study of the career decision-making processes of young women, Gerson (1985) found that young women who were focused on having a career and family avoided assessing the contradictions inherent in such desires. Most young women failed to consider potential problems of combining career and family. Many of their family and work decisions were based on limited information concerning future consequences. However, Hewlett (2002) has found that, in order to successfully combine career and family, women must be highly intentional in their planning for each.

The purpose of this study was to explore the importance female college students place on work and family roles, the expectations they have for combining the two roles, and their attitudes toward planning for multiple roles. This study is unique because it examines the relationship between current awareness of work-family conflict and planning for the future. A better understanding of young women's expectations may yield strategies to alleviate potential work-family conflict, allowing more women to achieve greater success in both work and family roles. This research is important because the forfeiture of the potential contribution of talented and skilled women comes at considerable individual and social cost. Due to the changing demographics of the workforce and organizational remodeling driven by global expansion and competition, it is crucial that female talent be better utilized (Hewlett 2007).

ROLE IMPORTANCE

Determining the importance of certain identities is the first step toward exploring expectations of future life role performance. Cinamon and Rich (2002a) examined the importance professional men and women placed on life roles and identified three distinct profiles: 1) "family" – those who placed high importance on the family role and low importance on the work role; 2) "work" – those who placed high importance on the work role and low importance on the family role; and 3) "dual" – those who attributed high importance to both the work and family roles. In a later study of 126 married men and 87 married women who were professionally em

ployed, Cinamon and Rich (2002b) found gender differences in the attribution of importance of these roles. The profile distribution of women was: 44.2 percent Family, 16.3 percent Work, and 39.5 percent Dual, and the profile distribution of men was: 32.5 percent Family, 33.3 percent Work, and 34.2 percent Dual. That such a large proportion of women rated both work and family roles as highly important indicates a shift away from the traditional ranking of family roles as higher in importance than work roles for contemporary American women.

Combining Work and Family Roles

Contemporary college women expect to have both a career and a family. A survey of female college students at a large northeastern university revealed that many held high occupational aspirations coupled with strong commitments to marriage and family life (Moen 1992). These women had ambitions to be successful doctors, lawyers, and executives as well as to marry and have as many as three children. A study of senior college women from three institutions reported that 94 percent indicated the importance of having a career and almost all of these women also planned to have children (Hoffnung as cited in Weitzman 1994). Baber and Monaghan (1988) explored the expectations of college women and found that all of the women in their sample planned careers, rather than jobs, and more than 97 percent expected to have children. Women have more educational opportunities than ever before. They represent a higher percentage of students enrolled in business, law, medical schools, and other graduate programs (Gilbert 1993). With such a substantial investment in education, young women appear to be unwilling to sacrifice career for family and view occupational work in professional fields as central to their self-identity.

Women's increasing interest in participation in occupational roles has not been accompanied by a decreasing interest in participation in family roles. Rather, many women anticipate role expansion – adding involvement in career roles to traditional family roles. In Spade and Reese's (1991) survey of 320 male and female undergraduates 99 percent reported that having a good marriage and family was important with no gender difference. Both men (94%) and women (93%) also expected work to be important. While

these undergraduate men and women had similar career aspirations, factor analysis measuring orientation toward household activities found performing household roles was significantly less important for men (mean = -.22) compared to women (mean = .25). Fiorentine (1988), Machung (1989), and Burke (1994) also found that college women who had career aspirations equivalent to men anticipated having responsibility for the majority of housework and childcare.

Studies indicate several variations of dual-earner families that range from traditional/conventional to role-sharing (Gilbert 1993). In a traditional lifestyle, although both partners may be employed the woman takes primary responsibility for household and childcare tasks while the man's primary role is that of financial provider. In a role-sharing lifestyle, both men and women are equally active in family and career domains (Gilbert, Dancer, Rossman & Thorn 1991). Gilbert's studies of college students indicate a possible shift away from expectations of a traditional lifestyle. Gilbert found that both undergraduate women and men were moderately committed to egalitarian role-sharing marriages.

Work-Family Conflict

Women, as well as men, experience distress when work ambitions and family responsibilities clash. Efforts to balance the competing demands of both family and work frequently result in work-family conflict. Kahn et al. (as cited in Duxbury & Higgins 1991 19) described work-family conflict as a

> form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect.

Participation in one role is made more difficult by participation in another role.

Several studies have shown that women experience more work-family conflict than men (Cinamon & Rich 2002b; Hochschild & Machung 1989). Stanfield's (1985) research on women in dual career families identified four determinants of role strain: time management, childcare, division of household labor, and guilt. Although many men in dual career families have increased the amount of household responsibilities they assume, most often women still bear the major

responsibility for such household management activities as cleaning, cooking, caring for the children, and shopping (Allen & Hawkins 1999). One of the main sources of role strain for women is childcare, including providing and/or arranging for childcare as well as formulating a philosophy of childrearing. Wives in dual career families bear a disproportionate share of the responsibility for childcare (Hochschild & Machung 1989). Guilt is experienced when women feel they cannot meet all the demands and pressures of their commitments.

According to Moen (1992), there are two types of strategies women use in their attempts to maintain their standards of work and family identities: accommodating work to family and accommodating family to work. Tactics for accommodating work to family include scheduling work and family sequentially, remaining employed but reducing number of hours worked, and selection of less demanding occupations. Tactics for accommodating family to work include having fewer children, delaying childbearing, altering child-rearing ideologies, and purchasing time-saving products and services. Because work arrangements are highly structured and more resistant to change, most women focus on altering domestic organization, decisions and beliefs to better adapt to work demands (Gerson 1985).

An important question is whether young women who place a high value on both work and family involvement are likely to anticipate future role conflict. Prior research found that college women expressed low concern about future role conflict (Alpert, Richardson, Perlmutter, & Shutzer 1980; McBain & Woolsey 1986). However, recent research has reflected the tendency for women to express concern about future work-family conflict. Luzzo (1995) found that over 60 percent of undergraduate women interviewed anticipated difficulties juggling the demands of work and family roles. In Burke's (1994) research 55 percent of the undergraduate and graduate business students interviewed agreed that combining work and family roles would often be difficult.

Plans for Combining Work and Family Roles

Research indicates that most women place increasing importance on work goals, the importance of family roles has not lessened, and the conflicts among the two roles have not diminished (Phillips & Imhoff 1997). Historically women have adopted a contingency approach to the career/family dilemma, choosing a traditionally female occupation which they attempt to arrange around their family responsibilities (Angrist & Almquist 1975). Hackett and Betz (1985) found that women have lower expectations for many work related behaviors and thus fail to fully realize their potential in career endeavors. Other researchers (Robinson & McIlwee 1991) have found that despite comparable educational qualifications and occupational attitudes, women have not achieved levels of occupational status comparable to men. The failure of many women to make full use of their talents and abilities in professional pursuits results in losses both to themselves and to a society that needs their skills (Betz 1994).

Men and women have been found to approach career planning from different perspectives. Men more often used a "plan-ahead" strategy, specifying career goals and methods necessary to achieve them, while women have used a more short-term approach (Stewart, Stewart, Friedley, & Cooper 1990). Women have been found to plan ambitious careers but remain unclear about the specifics. Gerson (1985) found that women who focused on career goals, but also wanted to have families, avoided assessing the contradictions inherent in such desires. These women chose to deal with potential problems of combining both roles by not addressing them.

According to Spade and Reese (1991), the undergraduate women in their study are bound to face conflict because they have failed to consider the level of labor required to realize their plans for work and family roles. The women Orenstein (2000) studied expressed contradictory ideas about combining work and family roles. Women with high career aspirations revealed hopes that by the time they had children, the problem would disappear. Baber and Monaghan's (1988) study of college women indicated that their career expectations seemed to exist in a separate sphere from family expectations. Their plans for combining roles did not take into account current workforce policies and practices. They also expected that spouses would assume equal responsibility for parenting and household chores, in spite of research showing that women consistently

bear an unequal burden for family work (Seward, Yeatts, & Stanley-Stevens 1996). These women's plans seemed to be based on a foundation of unrealistic optimism (McKenna 1993). Many seemed to believe that if they are sufficiently organized and flexible they can manage both roles with few problems. However, anticipating the realities of a multiple-role lifestyle would make it easier to cope with the inevitable difficulties when they occur. These studies show that many women have not planned adequately to overcome potential conflicts.

METHOD
Sample
The sample consists of 124 female undergraduates, aged 18 to 25, and enrolled in a large public university in the southwest in 2004. Participants were primarily single (89.6%) and of middle to upper-middle class status; 19.4 percent had family income between $50,000 and $74,999, 12.1 percent had family income between $75,000 and $100,000 and 13.7 percent had family income in excess of $100,000. Sixty-five percent of the women were white, 13 percent were African-American, and 8 percent were Hispanic.

Procedures
Data were obtained through the use of a 46 item questionnaire distributed to students in four sociology classes, including introductory and senior level courses. The questionnaire included questions regarding career goals, plans for marriage and children, importance of work and family roles, anticipated work-family conflict, expected lifestyle, attitudes toward planning for multiple roles, and demographic traits.

Indicators of Work-Family Conflict
Anticipated Work-Family Role Conflict: This variable refers to foreseeable difficulties related to combining work and family roles. Participants responded to two statements, "How much conflict do you expect from work and family demands?" and "How much difficulty do you anticipate you will have combining work and family roles?" Participants assessed their expected levels of difficulty as "none," "some," or "a great deal."

Expected Lifestyle: This variable reflects the participants' expectations for combining work and family roles. Eight statements from

the Orientations Toward Occupational-Family Integration scale (Gilbert et al 1991) were used to assess participants' expectations for combining roles using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1) not at all to 5) very much. Participants evaluated statements such as

> I see myself discontinuing work while my children are young.

and

> I see myself and my spouse both employed full time and to a great extent sharing the day-to-day responsibilities for raising the children.

Participants received scores on two scales – traditional and role sharing. High scores on the traditional scale indicate an endorsement of the view that although both partners may be employed the woman should take primary responsibility for household and childcare tasks, while the man's primary role should be that of financial provider. High scores on the role sharing scale indicate an endorsement of the view that both men and women should be equally active in family and career domains. Internal consistency coefficients and test-retest reliabilities (one month intervals) reported by the instrument developers exceeded .76 for both scales (Gilbert et al 1991). Correlations between the two scales were low and negative, supporting the validity of the OOFI and suggesting that respondents do not generally see themselves as committing to both lifestyle choices.

Attitudes Toward Planning for Multiple Roles: This variable encompasses the amount of planning for work, career, and role combination that the participant has already undertaken. The degree to which plans and strategies have been considered indicates realistic or unrealistic attitudes toward multiple-role planning. Eight statements from the Attitudes Toward Multiple Role Planning Scale (ATMPR; Weitzman & Fitzgerald 1996) were used to assess attitudes toward planning for future roles using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1) strongly disagree to 5) strongly agree. Participants evaluated statements such as

Table 1: Preferences for Life Role, Career and Children

	Percent	# of Cases
Attribution of Life Role Importance		
Place higher importance on work role	21.8	27
Place higher importance on family role	7.2	9
Place high importance on both roles	71.0	88
Choice of Career		
Non-traditional	63.7	79
Traditional	14.5	18
Undecided	21.8	27
Plans for Children		
None	15.3	19
One	10.5	13
Two	52.4	65
Three	19.4	24
More than three	2.4	3
N=124		

I'm very clear how to plan for combining my career and family responsibilities.

and

I have little or no idea of what being both a career person and a parent will be like.

High ATMRP scores indicate a more realistic approach toward multiple role planning. Across several samples, Weitzman and Fitzgerald (1996) reported adequate internal consistency of the scale (alphas ranging from .68 to .84). The authors reported results of a confirmatory factor analysis that supported the validity of the scale.

Factors Associated with Work-family Conflict

Work-family Role Importance: This variable reflects the relative importance the participant places on work and family roles. A participant may place a high priority on the family role, the work role, or she may place a high value on both roles. Ten statements from the Life Role Salience Scale (Amatea, Cross, Clark, & Bobby 1986) were used to assess participants' attribution of importance to work and family roles using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1) disagree to 5) agree. Participants evaluated statements such as

It is important to me that I have a job/career in which I can achieve something of importance.

and

I expect to be very involved in the day-to-day matters of raising my children.

Across various adult samples, the scales have shown an average internal consistency ranging from .79 to .94 (Amatea et al 1986). The authors report positive correlations of the scale with behavioral career and role involvement indices which support construct validity.

Career goals: Career goals were assessed by an open-ended question asking the participant to list her specific career goal. Occupations were coded for traditionality using data from the United States Department of Labor that shows the percentage of women and men in a wide range of occupations (United States Department of Labor, 2000). An occupation was coded as traditional if more than 66 percent of the employees were female. An additional question asked if the participant had had a chance to speak to someone who was performing the job the participant hoped to obtain.

Marriage and motherhood: Four questions assessed marital and motherhood plans. Participants were asked if they were married, if they planned to get married, and if they planned to have children. They were asked how many children they would like to have and at what age they would like to have their first child.

RESULTS

Seventy-one percent of participants place a high value on both work and family roles. When asked to specify a future career, 63.7 percent listed a non-traditional career, 14.5 percent listed a traditional career, and 21.8 percent were undecided (Table 1). Most of

Table 2: Anticipated Work-Family Conflict by Importance of Life Role

Role Importance	Anticipated Work-Family Conflict			# of Cases
	None	Some	A Great Deal	
	Percent	Percent	Percent	
Place high importance on both roles	13.6	69.3	17.1	88
Do not place high importance on both roles	44.4	41.7	13.9	36
N=124				

Gamma = -.451

Chi-Square = 14.084: significant at .001

the non-traditional careers listed could be classified as very demanding and included such choices as physician, lawyer, law enforcement agent, research scientist, and political leader.

Almost all participants expressed plans to marry. About 85 percent plan to have children, and more than 74 percent plan to have two or more. When asked at what age they would like to have their first child, responses ranged from 20 to 36, with a mean age of 27.6. The attitude toward delayed childbearing, which began among educated white women in the early 1970s (Baber & Monaghan 1988), appears to be continuing, with 25.7 percent of participants planning to have their first child after age 30.

Although 71.6 percent of participants who place high importance on both work and family roles expect to have a role-sharing lifestyle, 44.3 percent of them responded positively to the statement

> I see myself working full time and pretty much taking primary responsibility for maintaining the household and raising the children.

Similarly, all of the participants to whom both roles were important agreed with the statement

> I expect to be very involved in the day-to-day matters of raising my children.

Given the importance of both work and family roles to this sample of college women, we would expect them to anticipate some conflict between these roles. Over 86 percent of participants for whom both roles were important anticipate at least some level of work-family conflict (Table 2). One factor which might affect the expectation of conflict between work and family roles is the experience of the participants' mothers. More than

79 percent of the mothers of the participants to whom both roles were important worked, and 75 percent of them also performed the majority of the household chores and childcare. It seems reasonable to suggest that many participants saw their mothers experience difficulty managing both their work and family roles.

The college women in this study who place high importance on both work and family roles did not have a realistic orientation toward planning for these multiple roles. According to participants' scores on the Attitudes Toward Multiple Roles scale, only 11.4 percent of participants for whom both roles are important have a very realistic approach toward planning for combining work and family roles. Furthermore, 30.7 percent agreed with the statement

> I don't worry about managing my career and family responsibilities because I'm sure it will sort itself out sooner or later.

This supports Gerson's (1985) findings that college women avoid the issue of planning for multiple roles. Additionally, over 55 percent of the participants for whom both roles are important agreed with the statement

> I have little or no idea of what being both a career person and a parent will be like.

While 60.2 percent said they have had a chance to talk with someone who is doing the job they hope to do in the future, and 93 percent have had some experience with children, usually babysitting, it is clear that they are not seriously planning how to combine the work and family roles they desire in the future.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that most college women do not engage in serious planning

regarding their expectations for combining career and family roles, and those who do plan, wait until they are married. They seem to be unaware of the potential difficulties they may face in the future. The college women in this sample did not have a realistic orientation regarding how to blend their career and family goals.

The practical implications for failing to adequately plan for combining involved motherhood with a demanding career are wide-ranging. They affect the women themselves and their families, as well as society in general. The direct costs to women include lower earnings due to underemployment, lower cumulative earnings from periodic absences from the workforce, as well as frustration due to thwarted career goals.

And, families bear the brunt of unresolved work-family conflict as higher levels of stress affect all family members. Effective planning for both roles would enable women to meet the challenges of a multiple role lifestyle, thus allowing them to achieve success in both roles with less distress.

Plans for a role-sharing lifestyle assume a partner who is also committed to sharing equal responsibility for parenting and household work. Although men are increasingly expressing egalitarian beliefs (Gilbert 1993), these values are not yet reflected in their daily participation in family work (Seward, Yeatts, Seward, & Stanley-Stevens 1993). Children in dual-career families are affected as well. As Gilbert's (1993) research shows, young adults' views of integrating work and family life are affected by their family experiences. The lack of successful role models has an impact on the future plans and choices of children in all types of families. Another cause for insufficient planning comes from corporate and social policies based on outmoded gender role stereotypes, employment models, and cultural values (Friedman & Greenhaus 2000). And, as a result, employers face considerable turnover costs when professional women leave their jobs. Retention of qualified women is an ongoing concern of firms committed to diversity and the advancement of women. Society suffers an immeasurable loss from the underutilized talent and expertise of educated women A network of social, political, and economic support is necessary to reduce the conflict between family and work.

It is as yet unknown to what extent these young women's expectations will be realized. It is impossible to ascertain from this study how these women can be so confident about their ability to have a demanding career while at the same time being very involved in mothering. Further research into the specifics of how these young women envision handling the inherent conflicts between career and family is necessary. What explains their lack of planning even though they seem to be aware of the potential for difficulty? McKenna's (1993) research into unrealistic optimism may provide a clue. McKenna found that the vast majority of individuals are optimistic that their chances of experiencing a positive event are better than those of most people. This concept might explain why so many participants in this study (63.6%) agreed with the statement

> I'm not going to worry about how to combine my career with my family until I'm actually involved with both those roles.

Yet, waiting until one is actually involved in both these roles is far too late if one hopes to implement effective strategies for combining the two (Hewlett 2002).

At first glance, work-family conflicts appear to be the result of individual choice. However, a closer look finds that there are structurally imposed constraints that give rise to them. Women currently make up nearly half of all professional school graduates, yet their number at the top of their fields remains disproportionately low (Stone 2007). If work-family conflict causes women with high levels of education and training to leave the workforce or segue into the "second tier," the status quo is continually reproduced, leaving little hope for needed structural change.

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