# Career advancement and family balance strategies of executive women

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore coping strategies devised by executive women in family relationships to advance their career and to maintain career/family balance.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative methodology using a sample of 25 executive women explores career advancement and career/family balance strategies within work and family contexts.

**Findings** – Analysis produces multiple career advancement and career/family balance strategies, including professional support, personal support, value system, and life course strategies such as the "ordering" of career and family, negotiating spousal support, and whether to have children.

**Research limitations/implications** – Adaptive strategies facilitate engagement in career and family, even in challenging gender environments, encouraging continued research on executive women's advancement and career/family balance. The idiosyncratic nature of career/family balance calls for greater emphasis on the context and timing of career and family experiences.

**Practical implications** – The paper offers guidance to women seeking to combine executive career and family and to organizations committed to the advancement and retention of women.

**Originality/value** – The paper jointly explores career advancement and career/family balance strategies pursued by executive women in family relationships. It contributes to a growing body of research on the coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies underlying balance between career and family.

**Keywords** Career development, Women executives, Role conflict

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

For decades, researchers have sought to understand why so few women occupy senior management positions, and why many fail to reconcile ambitious career aspirations with family. This body of research has tended to emphasize barriers to women's

advancement and conflicts with family (Beatty, 1996; Cooper and Davidson, 1982; Hewlett, 2002), when individuals can also accrue benefits from combining roles, such as enhanced well-being and greater access to social support (Rothbard, 2001; Ruderman et al., 2002). Moreover, individuals need to develop adaptive strategies – processes by which they "actively construct and modify their roles, resources, and relationships" (Becker and Moen, 1999, p. 995) – to offset conflicts and derive the benefits of assuming multiple roles. There remains, however, a dearth of research on individual-level strategies developed by executive women in family relationships, despite evidence that they face uniquely gendered career/family environments and that couple-level strategies do not always work to their advantage (Tichenor, 2005; Wierda-Boer et al., 2008). Thus, our goal was to discover how married executive women advanced in their careers and balanced career and family. We use the term "career" instead of "work" because careers generally demand greater dedication than do series of jobs, and we understand career/family balance as achieving satisfying experiences in career and family (Clark, 2000; Kirchmeyer, 2000). Our qualitative approach was sensitive to the context of the strategies espoused by our participants (see Hertz, 1999; Kopelman et al., 1983), specifically the rigid nature of executive work and the unique career/family stressors they face. This effort hopes to shift the focus away from the career/family conflict of women in management to the adaptive strategies they developed in response. In doing so, we hope to lay the groundwork for the interdisciplinary study of careers and work-life balance while at the same time sending ambitious women the more empowering message that adaptive strategies may mitigate the risk of their having to sacrifice career for family or family for career.

**Review of the literature**
Most basically, career and family can either hinder or facilitate each other. Given that work-family research has its conceptual roots in role conflict theory (Katz and Kahn, 1978), much of it has focused on the conflict linkage whereby participation in one role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in another (Byron, 2005; Ezzedeen and Swiercz, 2007; Dierdorff and Ellington, 2008; Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Netemeyer et al., 1996). Nevertheless, there is growing awareness that facilitation can coexist with conflict in work/family relationships (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Kirchmeyer, 1992). This notion of facilitation is grounded on theories of role accumulation (Sieber, 1974), which argue that individuals, especially women, derive benefits by engaging in multiple roles, including social support, resource access, and diversified gratification (Barnett and Hyde, 2001; Portello and Long, 2001; Rao et al., 2003; Ruderman et al., 2002).

*Women in management: career and family challenges*
Considerable evidence indicates that men and women experience executive leadership differently such that men's careers tend to be linear while women's are characterized by interruptions and exits (Alimo-Metcalf, 1995; Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008; Lyness and Schrader, 2006; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Ohlott et al., 1994). Much has been said about women's "glass ceiling", an invisible wall separating them from the top (Broadbridge, 2008). Indeed, women's stereotyping as communal beings clashes with commonly held notions that executive advancement requires single-mindedness and the display of agentic traits such as independence, confidence, and assertiveness. Here, women face a double disadvantage: if they display agency, they are penalized for

gender non-conformity, and if they display communal attributes, they are judged as not agentic enough (Korabik, 1990). Women also face a unique biological reality. The foundational career building years generally coincide with women's fertility, and women can find themselves having to make choices that men do not experience. Studies also suggest women have a hard time finding eligible partners to begin with because their professional ambitions are generally not appealing to men (Hewlett, 2002).

There are also social and familial factors that make it harder for married women to put forth the kind of effort and dedication that gets individuals anointed for advancement. Despite record rates of female labor participation and progress in gender attitudes, modern Western family norms still hold women accountable for hearth and home, which makes it harder for them to advance (Bartley *et al.*, 2005; Beatty, 1996; Rowney and Cahoon, 1990; Tichenor, 2005). And although having children does not change their professional orientation (Korabik and Rosin, 1995), women are more likely than men to amend their careers in response to parenting (Blair-Loy, 2001; Stroh *et al.*, 1992). Consequent workforce absences and fewer years of experience undercut their advancement and earnings across occupations (Waldfogel, 1998).

*Advancement and balance strategies*
Adaptive strategies are ways that people address everyday challenges, cope with exacting circumstances, and generally think about their lives (Becker and Moen, 1999; Jennings and McDougald, 2007; Moen and Yu, 2000; Monnier *et al.*, 1998). They consist of thinking about and redesigning one's roles and relationships, manipulating resources and demands to do so (Voydanoff, 2005). In the career domain, ambitious women develop social networks (Ibarra, 1997), enter mentoring relationships (for a meta-analysis, see Eby *et al.*, 2008), and seek promotion opportunities (Brett and Stroh, 2003) to advance. They must also develop an androgynous interpersonal style with which both male and female counterparts are at ease (Korabik, 1990; McGregor and Tweed, 2001; Ragins *et al.*, 1998).

Where family demands are concerned, ambitious women seldom rely on organizational support for fear of reinforcing the communal stereotype (Broadbridge, 2008). Many women executives and those in elite occupations cope by making discreet choices between career and family such as "opting out" or delaying marriage and parenting (Blair-Loy, 2001; Nelson and Burke, 2000; Olson *et al.*, 1990). Women also increase their personal domain resources by relying on spousal support, for example (Brett and Stroh, 2003). However, couple-level adaptive strategies, although packaged as a couple's collective decision, do not necessarily promote women's work-life balance (Pittman and Blanchard, 1996; Wierda-Boer *et al.*, 2008). In sum, challenges and opportunities exist within the career and family domains of women executives; however, the challenges facing them have been more emphasized than their adaptability to challenging environments, justifying an investigation of the adaptive strategies they developed in response to combining executive work and family.

**Research method**
Qualitative research involves a series of techniques aimed at describing, interpreting, and explaining the human experience through inductive reasoning (Patton, 1990). It embodies four defining characteristics: occurrence in natural settings, data origination

from subjective experiences, non-standard data collection and analysis, and flexible information gathering techniques (Lee *et al.*, 1999). We base our approach on a phenomenological epistemology (Moustakas, 1994), a lens that emphasizes the richness of people's "lifeworlds" and their intensely personal perspectives on what constitutes careers, family, and balance. Career and family strategies are experienced differently by people and greatly reflect their context, which makes them ideally understood phenomenologically.

*Data generation*
Our study targeted executive women in family relationships to discover the strategies they developed in response to this dual career/family involvement. Our theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) accounted for career and family variations because making structural changes within these domains is a common coping response among women (e.g. in the career domain, leaving an executive position to stay at home; in the family domain, postponing motherhood) (Gerson, 1986; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Thus, we sought women who were or had been executive members of the senior management team and who are or were married. Referral or snowball sampling was used to locate cases (Welch, 1975). Each interviewee recommended other individuals, a process that was concluded at saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Redundancy of ideas started to occur around the 19th interview in terms of the emergence of social support and values. Participant recruitment was concluded at 25.

*Interview procedures*
Interviews are an efficient way of gathering rich empirical data (Wimpenny and Gass, 2000). Our semi-structured format probed the women's subjective experiences of career advancement and career/family balance. It insured that certain themes were addressed while allowing participants to describe their experiences in detail (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). The conversational style resembled that described by Davey (2008, p. 656) in that it frequently included humor, complicity, and going on tangents. We tried to create rapport by beginning the conversation with general questions before moving to participants' career histories, stressors, and coping strategies. Consistent with inductive approaches, we maintained the flexibility to explore additional questions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Depending on geographic location and convenience of the participant, interviews were conducted either at the respondent's work site or by telephone, and lasted about an hour. The respondents agreed to have the interview recorded and completed a short demographic questionnaire. Recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim while preserving participant anonymity. Interviews were conducted over a period of two years ending in 2007.

*Sample*
Table I presents the participants' demographic profile. Age ranged from 30 to 67 years ($M = 46.89$). Most held at least a bachelor's degree; 13 held graduate degrees. The sample included women in a range of family arrangements, including married women, women who had separated, and women with and without children. Of the 25 women in our sample, 21 were in enduring marriages; three were divorced and one separated. Participants were married for 19.18 years on average. Most women were married before they became executives with seven in their executive role at the time of their marriage.

**Table I.**
Subject demographic profile

| No. | Age | Education | Marital status | Years married | Current partner occupation | Number of children | Average age of children | Weekly domestic work hours |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 46 | Doctorate | Divorced/remarried | 20[a] | Full-time professional | 2 | 14.5 | 3 |
| 2 | 44 | Post-graduate | Married | 20 | Semi-retired | None | – | 1 |
| 3 | 39 | High school | Married | 5 | Senior executive | 1 | 3 | 12 |
| 4 | 45 | Master's | Married | 22 | Full-time professional | 2 | 15.5 | 0 |
| 5 | 30 | Bachelor's | Married | 2 | Full-time professional | 1 | 0.5 | 5 |
| 6 | 41 | Post-graduate | Divorced/remarried | 5[a] | Full-time professional | 1 | 15 | 4 |
| 7 | 51 | Doctorate | Married | 21 | Full-time professional | 3 | 28 | 5 |
| 8 | 57 | Master's | Married | 32 | Full-time professional | 2 | 23.5 | 6 |
| 9 | 67 | Doctorate | Married | 46 | Retired | 3 | 37 | 8 |
| 10 | 54 | Master's | Married | 30 | Full-time professional | 2 | 26 | 12 |
| 11 | 34 | Master's | Married | 6 | Business owner | 2 | 2 | 45 |
| 12 | 40 | Master's | Married | 16 | Full-time professional | 2 | 11.5 | 12 |
| 13 | 57 | Doctorate | Married | 36 | Senior executive | 3 | –[b] | 10 |
| 14 | 59 | Bachelor's | Separated | 30 | Full-time professional | 2 | 27 | 2 |
| 15 | 50 | Bachelor's | Married | 28 | Full-time professional | 4 | 21 | 3 |
| 16 | 51 | Graduate work | Married | 28 | Business owner | 3 | 22 | 10 |
| 17 | 57 | Bachelor's | Married | 18 | Full-time professional | None | – | 5 |
| 18 | 61 | Graduate work | Married | 35 | Business owner | 2 | 25 | 10 |
| 19 | 51 | Doctorate | Married | 26 | Senior executive | 2 | 22.5 | 5 |
| 20 | 56 | Doctorate | Divorced/In relationship | 31 | Full-time professional | 2 | 24.5 | 3 |
| 21 | 36 | Master's | Married | 6 | Senior executive | 1 | 1.5 | 25 |
| 22 | 38 | Bachelor's | Married | 4 | Full-time professional | 2 | 1.25 | 4 |
| 23 | 38 | Master's | Married | 1.50 | Senior executive | None | – | 15 |
| 24 | 38 | Master's | Married | 4 | Full-time professional | None | – | 10 |
| 25 | 32 | Bachelor's | Married | 7 | Business owner | 1 | 2 | 15 |

**Notes:** [a]First husband; [b]data not available

Of the 25 couples, 21 had children. Most of the partners had active professional lives; few women had a full-time stay-at-home spouse. The women also spent 9.2 h on housework each week on average.

Table II presents the participants' work profile. Titles included designations such as "President," "Vice President," and "Director." Employers included private businesses and public corporations across multiple industries and well as government agencies, charities, and universities of various sizes. The women worked long hours at the helm of these organizations: 48.84 h at the office and ten at home each week on average. They were seasoned executives with an average of 11.6 years of executive experience and 6.18 years in their current position. Most (18) earned over $100,000 annually and six over $250,000.

*Thematic analysis*

Qualitative data analysis generally involves a process of data reduction that seeks to enhance the data's meaning. The data are evaluated, simplified, and then reconstituted (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Data analysis generally begins with a holistic interpretation of the participants' experiences through examination of the raw data (Moustakas, 1994). The first author carefully read each transcript to identify the women's career advancement and career/family balance strategies and recorded each distinct idea (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Ideas were then organized into categories such that ideas in one category referred to similar themes. The lead author counted the frequencies of ideas and categories across transcripts, resulting in an initial organization of five career advancement (professional social support, personal social support, other support, value system, and human capital) and four career/family balance categories (professional social support, personal social support, value system, and life course strategies).

To insure the reliability of the categorization process, the second author sorted the ideas into the five career advancement categories and the four career/family balance categories. Then we computed a percentage of agreement using the $p$ statistic to insure coding consistency (number of correctly sorted ideas/total number of ideas) (Light, 1971). Overall, the two authors agreed on 82 percent of the ideas; the remaining ideas were categorized through discussion and agreement. Transcripts were again analyzed with close attention to context. This enhanced immersion into the participants' experiences and validation of the initial code structure where we revised thematic organization and labeling as appropriate. For career advancement, other support and human capital were merged with professional social support to create three categories of career advancement roughly corresponding to the categories that emerged for career/family balance. The emerging framework of executive women's adaptive strategies is presented in Figure 1. It illustrates the coexistence of conflict and facilitation between women's career advancement and family balance, the life course strategies designed to manage this coexistence, and the coping strategies supporting career and family, respectively.

**Study outcomes**

As shown, several categories of career advancement and career/family balance strategies emerged from the analysis, including values and beliefs regarding career and family in the place of one's life, personal social support, professional social support, and life course strategies.

**Table II.**
Subject work profile

| No. | Current position title | Organization type | Industry | Number of employees | Yrs. of managerial experience | Yrs. in position | Weekly work hours |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Executive consultant | Self-employment | Consulting | None | 27 | 3 | 50 |
| 2 | Executive director | Global non-profit | Higher education | 2 | 15 | 3 | 55 |
| 3 | Design director | Publicly traded business | Fashion | 5,500 | 4 | 2 | 42 |
| 4 | Senior operations manager | Privately held business | Insurance | 1,700 | 20 | 9 | 57 |
| 5 | Operations director | Family-owned business | Construction | 200 | 3 | 3 | 40 |
| 6 | Managing director | Privately held business | Consulting | 100 | 9 | 9 | 80 |
| 7 | Senior VP of HR | Publicly traded business | Telecommunications | 70,000 | 9 | 1 | 65 |
| 8 | HR director | University | Higher education | 500 | 8 | 12 | 70 |
| 9 | Executive VP | Global private business | Consulting | 200 | 12 | 12 | 56 |
| 10 | Director of education | Privately held business | Social services | 250 | 15 | 15 | 56 |
| 11 | Founder/managing director | Privately held business | Consulting | 9 | 13 | 5 | 40 |
| 12 | Senior VP | Publicly traded business | Telecommunications | 70,000 | 9 | 6 | 65 |
| 13 | President | University | Higher education | 500 | 18 | 6 | 90 |
| 14 | Executive director | Non-profit charity | Human services | 50 | 15 | 15 | 45 |
| 15 | Senior VP/CFO | Publicly traded business | Insurance | 850 | 8 | 6 | 53 |
| 16 | Director | State government agency | Education | 5,000 | 1 | 1 | 60 |

| No. | Current position title | Organization type | Industry | Number of employees | Yrs. of managerial experience | Yrs. in position | Weekly work hours |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 17 | VP of communications | Publicly traded business | Technology | 7,600 | 16 | 6 | 63 |
| 18 | Director | State government agency | Technology | 12,000 | 15 | 10 | 65 |
| 19 | Senior VP of outreach | Publicly traded business | Media | 550 | 10 | 2 | 63 |
| 20 | President | University | Higher education | 1,200 | 19 | 8 | 75 |
| 21 | VP of HR | Privately held business | Information | 150 | 5 | 4 | 45 |
| 22 | Executive consultant | Self-employment | Consulting | None | 9 | 4 | 50 |
| 23 | Senior VP of marketing | Publicly traded business | Entertainment | 2,400 | 15 | 11 | 55 |
| 24 | National anchor | Publicly traded business | Media | 400 | 12 | 0.50 | 60 |
| 25 | CEO/Partner | Privately held business | Technology | 13 | 3 | 1 | 70 |

Table II.
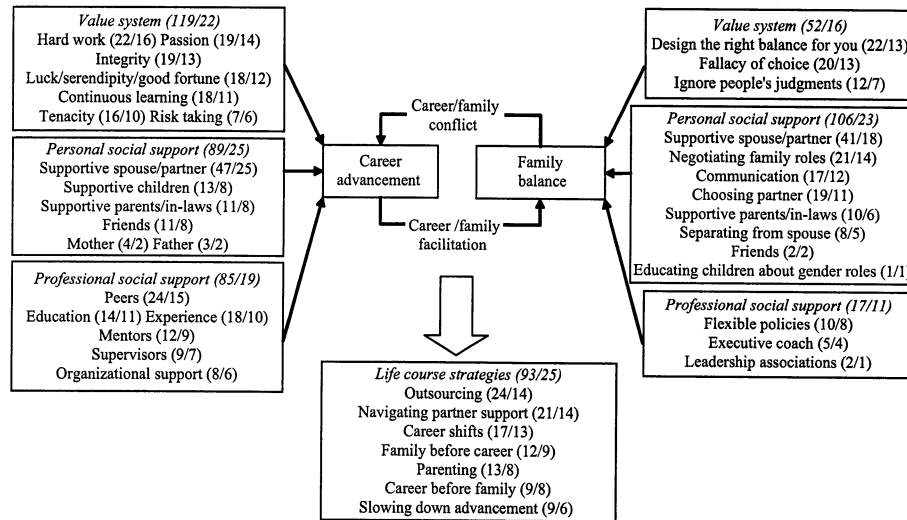
**Figure 1.**
Inductive model of career advancement and career/family balance

| | |
|---|---|
| *Value system (119/22)*<br>Hard work (22/16) Passion (19/14)<br>Integrity (19/13)<br>Luck/serendipity/good fortune (18/12)<br>Continuous learning (18/11)<br>Tenacity (16/10) Risk taking (7/6) | *Value system (52/16)*<br>Design the right balance for you (22/13)<br>Fallacy of choice (20/13)<br>Ignore people's judgments (12/7) |

Career advancement ↔ Career/family conflict ↔ Family balance

Career/family facilitation

*Personal social support (89/25)*
Supportive spouse/partner (47/25)
Supportive children (13/8)
Supportive parents/in-laws (11/8)
Friends (11/8)
Mother (4/2) Father (3/2)

*Personal social support (106/23)*
Supportive spouse/partner (41/18)
Negotiating family roles (21/14)
Communication (17/12)
Choosing partner (19/11)
Supportive parents/in-laws (10/6)
Separating from spouse (8/5)
Friends (2/2)
Educating children about gender roles (1/1)

*Professional social support (85/19)*
Peers (24/15)
Education (14/11) Experience (18/10)
Mentors (12/9)
Supervisors (9/7)
Organizational support (8/6)

*Professional social support (17/11)*
Flexible policies (10/8)
Executive coach (5/4)
Leadership associations (2/1)

*Life course strategies (93/25)*
Outsourcing (24/14)
Navigating partner support (21/14)
Career shifts (17/13)
Family before career (12/9)
Parenting (13/8)
Career before family (9/8)
Slowing down advancement (9/6)

**Notes:** The number to the left indicates the number of times the idea/category appeared across the corpus of transcripts. The number to the right indicates the number of transcripts where the idea/category was expressed

*Value system*

On the career front, values akin to the Protestant work ethic emerged from the analyses, including hard work, integrity, and tenacity. Women discussed how such values generated goodwill from significant others in the organization: "If you're a hard worker and trying to do the right thing, people see that, and they pull you out and you get the better jobs and recognition" (P no. 1). Others discussed the role of ambition in their lives: "I think you need to have that as part of your being and your core; you want to be more than what you are because you know you have the capacity" (P no. 20). It was also important to be passionate about one's line of work and feel in the right place to put forth this hard work: "That when you get comfortable in your own skin and you're comfortable with where you're going, you can be more effective and people can be more effective with you in any context" (P no. 2). These values also paralleled a belief in luck and good fortune. "Preparedness meets opportunity" essentially summarizes the women's attitudes towards advancement.

Predominant among values they held towards career/family is what we term the "fallacy of choice," meaning rejecting notions that choices needed to be made between career and family:

> I don't see why you have to give up anything to be all that you can be. You may not be doing all things at the same level, to the same degree, but I think it's a mistake to say I have to choose marriage or I have to choose career. No, you don't. You can have them both (P no. 6).

> I recommend being in a marriage and trying to have it all. I hate the thought of a whole generation of women thinking that they have to either choose between having a good marriage and having a career (P no. 7).

Having a role outside of wife/mother made women feel "independent" and "whole," allowed them to lead healthier lives, and to be better parents: "To be a good mother, you have to be a whole person, and I don't think you become a whole person by not

balancing professional and personal lives" (P no. 9). The women also recognized the personal shape of each woman's balancing act: "Trust your gut and throw the rules out the window. I wish I had known that earlier on and just been a little bit more relaxed about everything" (P no. 24). To live in a manner consistent with one's values also required women to ignore the judgments of others, in particular less career-oriented mothers, or to correct those who imposed their own values on the women:

> I had to correct people when they said, "Alice is being babysat by her father." And I would say, "You don't babysit your own child. It's not my responsibility that he's taking care of. It's a joint responsibility that we as parents have" (P no. 7).

*Personal social support*

The women in our study drew on personal support from parents, spouse, children, and friends. There was discussion of the parents' role in encouraging their daughters' academic achievements and professional pursuits. Participants described how they were raised to believe they could achieve anything and rarely had their choices questioned. Some parents were also described as "exceedingly accomplished" role models:

> My parents are exceedingly accomplished. [My mom] was an incredible role model. She was Martha Stewart before Martha Stewart popularized it. She's a published author now [and] an Executive Vice President. Here's a woman who did it all, so it never occurred to me that I couldn't do it all too (P no. 6).

Parents and in-laws also enhanced career/family balance by helping with home and children. The children were also cited as a source of support by being proud of their mothers' accomplishments:

> I think that my children have a great deal of respect for me as a professional. And I think that that has impacted them probably almost as much, as far as their own potential to be able to go and be whatever. It has given them the confidence, as much as my relationship with them as a mom (P no. 9).

Where career/family balance was concerned, however, their support required some "education":

> We got to the point with our kids where we started to shift their perception, in terms of them thinking "this is mom's job" because, believe me, when you're home with your kids for seven years, you have to do everything. They see things and start to say, "Well, Mom does that." And when I went back to work full-time, we really had to start re-educating them and saying, "It's the family's job, and all of us are part of the family" (P no. 16).

Finally, husbands were cited as a significant support source in both personal and professional realms, providing financial, professional, and emotional support. For example, partners' income made it possible for women to make career changes they could not have otherwise. They also provided direct career support in the form of technical assistance and encouragement and validation, especially when they occupied common professions:

> It always helped that he was in the business. So he sort of knew the game and what the dynamics are, what the expectation is, and how decisions are made so that when I'm, you know, bitching, it was much easier for him to identify (the problem) and not be dismissive, like, "Oh you're great and you'll be fine!" (P no. 24).

At times, the women were grateful for the things their spouses did not do, whether that was giving women "the attitude" after they returned home from a business trip or entertaining "domestic goddess" expectations:

> He does not give me a hard time; he doesn't tell me that I'm not meeting his expectations on any level, whether that is I spend too much time working, I'm distracted, I'm not helping with the household stuff. He never complains that I'm not living up to some standard of wife (p no. 2).

*Professional social support*

Several mentioned leveraging professional support from supervisors, mentors, peers and others in their field. Analyses revealed a strategic approach to social support on the part of women whereby they deliberately sought social support from inside and outside the organization to advance and to enjoy gratifying work experiences: "And I also think that one of the things I have done particularly well here, I think it's kind of a strength I have, is teambuilding. So I have a wonderful work environment" (p. 14). There was also mention of how important peers were to their performance:

> If you have someone to bounce things off that understands (what) you're talking about, knows the situation, who can give you good feedback, because sometimes when you do tell a friend about work, they don't have any clue (P no. 4).

Another participant mentioned that she had created her own social support network because no one had ever told her, "We're going to take you to the next level" (P no. 13). She described how the gradual isolation of advancement also required filtering these relationships:

> I think you can become increasingly isolated the higher up you go in an organization. Your folks are not your peers anymore, so you have to make sure you have [a] pocket of individuals [who] will always be honest with you, and you need to accept that honesty (P no. 13).

Some women managed to cultivate support within heavily male-dominated organizations. Participant number 21 started as a trainee at a large technology-oriented and male-dominated government agency and worked her way up until reaching the highest non-elected position. Though she was passed over for promotion several times, her success once promoted led the agency to change eligibility rules. Participant number 12 was passed over four times while an engineer at a nuclear energy company. When she was promoted, she had become pregnant. Her supervisor insisted she not take the job because her priorities "were going to change." Even in the more flexible academic environments, women still worried:

> But it was also important to me that my bosses knew that I could do the job, that I could get the job done, and that it would not suffer at all because of my commitment, personal obligation, and love for my family (P no. 8).

It seems that institutionalized gender norms can coexist with support for women's advancement, and many participants recalled the critical role of their mentors and supervisors:

> My boss is my number one resource. He's amazing. He's one of the original founders of the company, and he is just passionate and loves the business and has very similar management skills as I do – a lot of positive reinforcement, empowering his people to do their job without stepping on anyone's toes, but getting in there and fighting for what he believes (P no. 3).

> It was absolutely fantastic that in my first full-fledged sort of corporate role that I had a terrific female mentor who was also my boss and who communicated quite openly with me and who most importantly made sure that my accomplishments were known throughout the company to the appropriate people so that there was awareness and pride within in the organization [for] the good job that I did (P no. 22).

Conversely, there was less discussion about the supportive role of formal organizational policies in regards to either career advancement or career/family balance. One woman stated that organizations were in fact not doing enough:

> I think employers really have to fix it so that women get to go home, and also so that men get to go home. It shouldn't be a situation where the men are working until midnight every night (P no. 7).

### Life course strategies

Several "life course" strategies emerged from the thematic analysis, meaning career and family decisions family that unfold over a lifetime (Han and Moen, 1999; Moen *et al.*, 1994).

*Navigating spousal support.* Although the women's partners were reported as supportive, lack of support within the relationship was reported as well. Women had to adapt to this coexistence of support and undermining in their intimate relationships through means we identified as acceptance, rationalizing, and negotiating. Most commonly cited as unsupportive was lack of household help and "limiting" the woman's work, which at the same time enhanced her career/family balance. To the extent that such limiting was exercised in the spirit of health and balance, it was accepted by women. Sometimes lack of support necessitated dialogue to resolve differences. At other times, an "upfront" negotiation was required:

> You have to try to get an agreement with your partner about how you're going to do things. That needs to be decided upfront. Because, okay, it was fine when I was working part-time that I still assumed responsibility for the house; that was fair. But then, when I'm working full-time, it wasn't fair anymore but it's like, okay, the deal has been struck now, and we're not going to change it (P no. 14).

Others reported they learned to appreciate the support that is provided and accept the fact that partners may never be able to provide other kinds of support:

> He washes all the dishes all of the time, does his own laundry, and he does the ironing. He does all of that, so I need to have that on record because I think the pet peeve for me over the years has been the house things, so I have to appreciate the things that he does do (P no. 10).

Other women brought a "strengths and weaknesses" rationalization to how they worked around their husband's support. So while helping around the house may not be something that the man "is good at", women, on the other hand, are "better" at asking: "What's the context here? And how can I sort of make it the best for everybody, myself included, given this context?" (P no. 11). Finally, there were references not only to generational differences but also to men's ability to evolve with the times. Participant no. 9 explained how her career could not take hold while her husband worked because she frequently relocated with him. Her traditional marriage also held her primarily responsible for parenting. When he retired and the children had grown, her career success soared. After years of living a traditional marriage, her husband went from being resentful to showing respect for her achievements and taking over some of the household chores.

Though many of our participants had already been married at the time their managerial careers took off, a few were solid into their positions when they met their future partners. They were able to comment on having deliberately chosen the right man:

> He's on top of stuff, he's very hard working, and very family-oriented also, which I really wanted to find someone that was very family-oriented. I knew I wouldn't be the kind of person who could work and run everything. I needed someone that would be able to split the workload with me (P no. 5).

The spouse's importance is such that for some, he is described as a key element ("the most important decision you make" – P no. 12) in a woman's quest to combine career and family:

> Think about that stuff early. It might change what you do in your education and your career and even who you pick as a husband. And I chose well, and I'm lucky, but a lot of other people are just screwed. They are married to some sleeping with the enemy guy (P no. 11).

A few women had separated from their spouses when unsupportive behaviors such as insufficient household help and limiting of career pursuits reached levels the woman could no longer accept, rationalize, or negotiate. Those who remarried had done so with these earlier experiences in mind:

> With my first husband, I had to ask him to do everything. You know, things that were obvious like the clothes piling and he wouldn't do it unless you asked him and then he would say, "Well I did it for you" like it was my responsibility. Where my second husband, he just does things (P no. 1).

*Reflecting on motherhood.* In light of these variations in spousal support, our inclusion of childless women allowed us to examine the thought process underlying the decision to have children or not. One woman who had decided not to have children believed her career advancement would not have been possible had she had any (P no. 2). The women were aware that the arrival of children changes family dynamics:

> I think it's not the husband – it's the child. I had zero, zero, zero issues before becoming a mother. I needed no support before, and then a child comes along and you're like, he's ours, he's both of ours. And I come from a very fortunate first few years of marriage where we did whatever whenever, and we both focused very heavily on our careers. And now it's, you know [...] how we are going to compromise equally? (P no. 25).

This scenario was feared by Participant no. 23, who explained how motherhood might change the now-flexible gender norms inside her marriage:

> He doesn't like the fact that I work so late and had said it on numerous occasions and we've had, you know, sort of family meetings about it. And I suspect he's going to be even more vigilant about it when we have kids, and that actually kind of scares me. So if he starts coming home later than me, that's okay because he makes much more money than I do. And he's got kids to provide for, so he can say, "I've got kids to feed" (P no. 23).

*Ordering career and family.* For other women, the question was which to do before the other. For some, children came first under the notion that family, after all, is the "most important thing." Practically speaking, women argued that "there's plenty of time when [children] are older [to get back to work] without worrying about who's picking them up or feeding them dinner" (P no. 19). Some women chose a deliberately

"slower road to the top" to remain employed while parenting. Participant no. 15 accepted advancement slowly and in conjunction with the birth of four children and the on-call nature of her husband's work at the time. By the time her children grew up, she had become CFO at a large public company. For others, career came first. One woman who had recently given birth to her first child explains being overwhelmed by the experience and glad she had already developed firm career grounding:

> Establish yourself in your career first and really take the time to look around and observe how others might be juggling [career and parenting]. You know you could read a million books and I just don't think it ever prepares you for the magnitude of what you're going to be taking on (P no. 21).

Others believe this approach is more challenging:

> They're struggling big time and they're in an entirely different situation than I was. When my kids were younger, I was a rank-and-file employee or a first level supervisor. I wasn't trying to raise the kids and meet the demands of an executive-level job. I feel bad because it's almost a struggle you can't win. You can't be really good at work and be supermom at home. Something does suffer, which is why some of the women then just bag it (P no. 15).

This ordering of career and family partly explains why many chose an intentionally slow career path or one punctuated by childrearing absences, part-time work, and career shifts. Participant no. 11, for example, had been chief operating officer for two years when she realized that running her own business provided more optimal family fit. Participant no. 23 reported observing executive women in the finance industry while working at a Wall Street firm. She describes them as single, childless, and "miserable", or married with children whom they never saw "because they were trying to keep up with the guys." She subsequently moved to the entertainment business. There were also women who had left executive work altogether at the time of the study. Participant no. 1 retired from a high-ranking military position to self-employed consulting to be closer to home. Participant no. 22 was on maternity leave from a corporate position at a *Fortune* 500 company and consulting independently. Not all career moves were driven by family responsibilities, however. The desire to do something different rather than family motivated Participants no. 2 and 24 to leave their executive jobs. Our sample also included women who had pursued a linear and continuous career progression, similar to the paths of men. In their case, there were factors enabling parenting and aggressive career advancement at the same time including a partner at home, either temporarily or permanently, supportive work environments, and intensive outsourcing.

*Outsourcing.* Outsourcing included hiring live-in nannies, babysitters, and pet sitters; outsourcing cleaning; hiring cooks; and eating out. It helped increase a woman's amount of free time, despite acknowledgments of the cost involved. Outsourcing was also a means for the women to avoid spousal conflicts over home chores:

> Well, he just refuses to do things. He'll just say, "I can't do it. I can't get to it." I pay the concierge service now where you pay them $40 an hour and they'll sit and wait for anybody [she laughs]. So I have all kinds of life saving techniques when he's not available or when he just doesn't want to be bothered (P no. 7).

> I can deal with lack of action because I can always get someone to help, the way I view it. I choose not to and luckily we can afford to if we wanted to. It's more the emotional [support] that I need and I'm happy to have that (P no. 25).

Outsourcing seems to be another way that women navigate spousal support but affordability did not automatically imply use. Some women and their partners refused to outsource childcare and never hired nannies, relying on each other and family members instead.

## Discussion

If adaptive strategies involve actively designing and modifying one's roles, resources, and relationships (Becker and Moen, 1999), then what are the adaptive strategies devised by executive women to advance in their careers and enjoy a family? The emerging framework shows that women espoused a certain value system, nurtured a complex support network in the professional and personal realms, and devised life course strategies to balance career and family.

One significant outcome of this study was the notion that achieving satisfaction in career and family requires embracing a certain belief system regarding the place of each in one's life. Significant among these beliefs is the "fallacy of choice" whereby women can "have it all" and their recognition of the social sanctions that accompany deviance from gender norms. Our participants were no strangers to stress and family conflict. Like any executive, they experienced the usual strains of executive work and the hectic pace of its lifestyle. Their values which can be summarized as "preparedness meets opportunity" and a sense of right to enjoy career and family helped them cope with these demands. Research has indeed suggested that character may be central to the health and effectiveness of executives (Gavin *et al.*, 2003). Thus, while stressful at times, combining career and family enhanced women's sense of independence, wholeness, and health. There was mention of how they became better parents as a result. This is consistent with research indicating that work enhances women's self-esteem and parenting abilities, in contrast to men for whom work involvement translates into greater distance from family members (Brett and Stroh, 2003; Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000).

Also significant in our findings was the dominance of social support as a resource-enhancing mechanism. Our participants were cognizant of the importance of social relationships to their advancement and well-being in general. Where professional support was concerned, they mentioned peers and support networks within the organization and in the industry or profession in general. Mentoring was cited as especially important for women, consistent with the evidence (Burke and McKeen, 1990; Eby *et al.*, 2008). Women also compensated for lack of support in one domain with support from another. For example, women who married later in life had elaborate circles of friends while women in difficult marriages sought support in their community and profession. Nevertheless, key individuals were cited more frequently than formal organizational policies among women's coping strategies. This could be explained by their executive positions where flexibility is limited and the demands of work are less negotiable. Women may also fear family concerns will undermine their chances of advancement. This seeming ineffectiveness of so-called family-friendly policies is in line with observations that employing organizations cannot possibly solve the very problems they created – namely, barriers to women's advancement and denial of family life (Shorthose, 2004).

Just as there was rare discussion of what companies did to help women advance and balance career and family, there was little discussion of barriers to advancement and rare mention of the "glass ceiling," which clearly some had shattered. Others, however,

seemed to have circumvented it altogether through career moves to other sectors, employers, industries, or other forms of employment such as entrepreneurship. These moves enabled a more seamless advancement, one not necessarily guided by a "climbing up the ladder" ethos. Our participants' career patterns seem "boundaryless" in some cases in that they spanned multiple employment settings (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994) and "kaleidoscopic" in that many women eschewed rigid, upward progress, instead shaping their careers around their lives and authentic selves (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Other women followed a career track similar to men's with rare interruptions, upward advancement parallel to parenting, and access to full-time help at home.

Support in the personal domain included parents, husbands/partners, and children. The model of a mother who "balanced" work and career was emphasized by one of our participants, which echoes Kestenbaum's (2004) observation that the development of a "dual identity" of motherhood and assertiveness is greatly aided by a mother role model (Kestenbaum, 2004, p. 118). Spouses were critical to the women's quest for balance, consistent with evidence (Brett and Stroh, 2003; Rao *et al.*, 2003). Children were also cited as supportive of career and potentially aiding in women's career family balance. Because of how intimately mothers tend to experience work-family conflict, some of our participants felt "guilty" leaving their kids to go to work. Their children's pride and encouragement alleviated that guilt. However, research also suggests children magnify gender stereotypes in the couple (Fels, 2004; Hertz, 1997) and several women pondered the motherhood question: If their having it all meant career and intimacy, then it seems that having even more (i.e. children) may mean having it all no longer.

Though these findings apply to a specific sample, they suggest that a complex and diversified network of social support, a village indeed, is necessary for women to advance in their chosen fields and to have a fulfilling family life. This "it takes a village" metaphor counters the masculine ideal of rugged individualism whereby "it is ideal to act alone, without the help of others, and with little or no emotion" (Milliken and Dunn-Jensen, 2005, p. 6). These social networks also reflect the female gender's tendency to "tend-and-befriend," meaning nurturing activities that promote safety and reduce distress and creating and maintaining social networks that aid in the process (Taylor *et al.*, 2000). The women recognized social support's mutual nature:

> Some people get too focused on trying to get ahead that they forget about the people around them and the most successful people that have climbed up the ladder the fastest have been the most supportive of their team members (P no. 3).

It appears that social support was not only a coping mechanism but also a creator of context and a determinant of the life course strategies devised by women, these being "pragmatic choices in the face of the structural imperatives of the organization of work and the situational imperatives of personal and family relations" (Becker and Moen, 1999, p. 1004). While some experienced circumstances enabling a more "masculine" career path, others found it necessary to "order" career and family, echoing popular press calls that balance is about leading life in "chapters" (Hammonds, 2004).

Additionally, most women had to cope with the coexistence of social support and undermining in their relationships. Even where differentials within the couple were insignificant, the fact that most husbands were employed full-time indicates that some

negotiation of career and family roles was called for. Perlow (1998) indeed found that "resister" spouses set limits on what they are prepared to accept in terms of their partners' work demands, potentially leading to conflict. Work-non-work relations, Perlow concludes, are "underpinned by an interpersonal, rather than merely intra-psychic process" (p. 498). Women sometimes modified their expectations towards their resister spouses and rationalized their limiting behaviors. Women also needed to negotiate these expectations, sometimes "upfront," which supports the notion that decisions made early in life have consequences for women's ability to strike a favorable division of paid and unpaid labor in the home (Mahoney, 1995). When the balance between support and undermining tipped the scale, some women separated from their spouses, in line with earlier evidence indicating that ambitious women will choose their careers over an unsupportive spouse (Gerson, 1986).

There was also an emphasis on outsourcing domestic responsibilities and rejecting mythical notions of the "superwoman" that "does it all." The emphasis on outsourcing corresponds well to Blair-Loy's (2001, p.707) model of "new motherhood" where career and mothering roles are maintained but domestic responsibility is subcontracted. Though convenient to women for obvious reasons, outsourcing as a social phenomenon has been the object of criticism on grounds that, by making housework a non-issue, it does little to alter gender norms in the home (Hertz, 1997; Jennings and McDougald, 2007).

## Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover how a sample of executive women managed to advance while maintaining a family life. Indeed, it seems that executive women having a career and a family is shrouded in mystery. Consider the statement of one of Brett and Stroh's (2003, p. 76) subjects, a female banker: "I am filled with admiration for my women partners who are successful and have children. I am mystified to how they do it". To begin demystifying this balancing act was our aim, and we unearthed broad and complex components including relational coping through social support, deliberate career/family decisions over the life course, and specific values and beliefs *vis-à-vis* career and family.

### *Implications and research avenues*

We believe that this inductive study opens doors for the interdisciplinary study of careers in relation to work-nonwork dynamics, especially where executive women are concerned. It lays the groundwork for future conceptual and empirical research on career advancement and family balance in difficult gender environments such as those experienced by executive women in family relationships. We also believe that the increased attention to the synergistic connections between work and other life domains is a positive development in our field. Executive women represent a particular concern in that their ambitious pursuits are met with challenges on both family and career fronts, prompting many to choose one over the other. It behooves researchers to better understand how these women might experience both a career of leadership and an intimate family life by validating the model developed here.

Our findings also hint at the complexity of career success and family balance for women. This complexity has been recognized (Heraty *et al.*, 2008) but hitherto insufficiently explored. Qualitative designs will be particularly suited to such investigations. Our particular exploration unearthed a constellation of elements,

including supportive social relationships, specific belief systems, and planned life course strategies. The prominence of social support lends credence to its importance in buffering the stressor-strain relationship, confirms its importance to women, and agrees with observations that the work-non-work interface involves personal and interpersonal dimensions (Carlson and Perrewé, 1999; Perlow, 1998). The emergence of specific belief systems is an important finding and one that deserves systematic investigation relative to society's encouragement of a "having it all" ambition among women. The finding that career and family balance are negotiated over the course of a lifetime points to the influence of context on adaptive strategies, namely, extent to which personal and professional support enables or hinders women's advancement and family balance, and the nature of the adaptive strategies espoused in response. It also indicates that work-life balance is an overall assessment of one's life rather than a daily state of affairs and suggests the importance of the temporal sequencing of career and family events (Pittman and Blanchard, 1996). Temporal phenomena such as the growth of children into adulthood, the retirement of a spouse, the relocation away or closer to family of origin, and promotions over time altered women's contexts and thus their adaptation to career and family concerns. Future research should continue exploring work and non-work dynamics as they unfold over time.

*Practical implications*
The results shed some light on how women actually cope with career advancement and family balance and will allow organizations committed to the retention and advancement of women to make more informed decisions regarding their family policies. The findings indicate that social support is critical to women, rendering initiatives such as mentoring and creating networking opportunities particularly important. The finding that family support and belief system shape women's ability to enjoy career and family also confirms earlier suggestions that organizational glass ceilings merely reflect values of the broader social context (Duncker, 2008; Fagenson, 1990), and that there are factors beyond the employer's scope that hinder and sustain women's ambitions. At the same time, organizations can certainly choose to be at the forefront of social change.

For ambitious women reflecting on career and family, our findings lead us to revisit the idea that they need to choose. We propose reframing the debate away from whether "having it all" is possible to a better understanding of how some women experience it. Our study preliminarily suggests that women must embrace certain beliefs about their life roles and revisit what society considers appropriate. Women can reasonably expect to live with some disapproval when they bend social norms; however, our participants also indicated that times were changing and gender roles were in flux. Women must also nurture social support in the workplace, at home, and in the community and be strategic about these relationships. On the home front, individuals cannot choose their parents, but our study suggests that women find ways to offset lack of support in one area by developing support systems elsewhere. The study also indicated the importance of the spouse, and women may need to carefully think about the kind of partner they need relative to their career and family goals. Finally, women need to ponder life course decisions on whether they can reconcile executive work and motherhood and whether career and family should take turns or whether they can be pursued in tandem. In sum, underlying any strategy is an effort to think about one's life. This study encourages up

and coming women to understand the barriers they face and to think early about the strategies they must devise to achieve their career and family goals.

*Limitations*
Our findings must be evaluated in light of limitations stemming from the inductive design and the use of self-report data. First, the outcomes of qualitative studies are not meant to be broadly generalized. Qualitative studies are often conducted on small non-representative samples such as ours given that analytical depth rather than generalizability is what is sought (Ely, 1995). The study's rigor provides unexpected insights and rich descriptions of significant theoretical utility, but a small sample of predominantly Caucasian and affluent North American women does not permit valid speculations about other settings. Second, there is always a concern with the use of self-report data (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986). Our analysis of intensely personal experiences means these accounts could have been biased by a range of factors including selectivity with past recollections, trust in the interviewer, and egocentric or credit-giving biases (Fincham and Bradbury, 1989; Huddy *et al.*, 1997). Third, interviews could have encouraged respondents to reflect on situations they might otherwise have not thought about, and in so doing so, they shaped them as well. This, however, is not a problem limited to interviews (e.g. diaries, see Poppleton *et al.*, 2008). Finally, there is evidence of a gender bias operating in interviews such that women respondents tend to provide women interviewers more honest responses (Hutchinson and Wegge, 1991; Lueptow *et al.*, 1990). Our participants were women interviewed by women which we hope, encouraged candid responses.

In closing, this study was guided by the belief that:

> [...] solving a 'problem' (i.e. difficulties managing family and work) is often best accomplished, not by further exploring the problem itself, but by learning about those circumstances in which the problem is less present (Haddock *et al.*, 2006, p. 208).

Here, we hoped to invite researchers to explore the adaptive strategies at the nexus of career advancement and family balance. We also hoped to provide career-oriented women with a measure of optimism, admittedly from a small sample and from one study, in the form of practical recommendations on how they might experience managerial and personal success. We believe this is a worthy endeavor and hope that other researchers will join us in continuing on the path of exploring women's adaptation to challenging gender environments in career and family.

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