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Journal of Organizational Behavior

Volume 36, Issue 1

January 2015

Pages 75–93

Research Article

Care and career: A family identity-based typology of dual-earner couples

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First published:

10 July 2014 [Full publication history](#)

DOI:

10.1002/job.1945 [View/save citation](#)

Cited by:

1 article [Refresh](#) [Citing literature](#)



Summary

The rise of dual-earner couples challenges traditional gender stereotypes of women as “caregivers” and men as “breadwinners” and significantly impacts the ways in which partners define their roles as family members. The way in which individuals construe their family identities has implications not only for the decisions they make at home but also decisions in the workplace. In this paper, we propose an updated understanding of the different ways in which men and women can construe their family identity—specifically, in terms of care and/or career. Based upon this nuanced understanding of family identity, we outline five dual-earner couple types— *traditional* , *non-traditional* , *family first* , *outsourced* , and *egalitarian* —that stem from distinct combinations of partners' family identities. We also outline an agenda for theory and research that challenges scholars to further explore our proposed construals of family identity, work–family decisions at the

couple level of analysis, and the interplay between family identity and social context. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Today, the movement of women into the labor force is not just enduring but certifiably revolutionary—perhaps the greatest social transformation of our time. Women are more likely to work outside the home and their earnings are more important to family well-being than ever before in our nation's history. This transformation changes everything. At the most profound level, it changes the rules of what it means to be a woman—and what it means to be a man.

(Boushey, [2009](#))

Employers need to see fatherhood as a more serious and time consuming role and stop assuming that being a good father simply equates to being a good breadwinner.

(Harrington, VanDeusen, & Ladge, [2010](#) , p. 28)

The phenomenon of dual-earner couples is a growing worldwide trend. Gone are the days of the “stay-at-home” wife who exclusively focused her attention on cooking, cleaning, and carpools. Instead, women now comprise a significant proportion of the labor force in the U.S.A. and beyond (Bureau of Labor Statistics, [2011](#) ; Catalyst, [2012a](#) ; Scullion & Collings, [2004](#)). As an example, dual-earner couples account for the majority of all couples with dependent children in the U.S.A., Canada, and the U.K. (Catalyst, [2012b](#) ; Marshall, [2009](#) ; Plunkett, [2012](#)). Moreover, in certain demographic segments, for example, among American black women and post-colonial African women, women have always worked outside of the household, as one income has traditionally been insufficient to economically support the family (Hooks, [2000](#) ; Newman, [1984](#)). As access to education increases and economic demands rise, dual-earner couples will likely remain the norm (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, [2003](#) ; King et al., [2012](#)). Ultimately, women's movement into the workforce calls into question the meanings women and men ascribe to their work and family roles and how they, as a couple, manage their time, energy, and other resources at the intersection of work and family (Challiol & Mignonac, [2005](#) ; Greenhaus & Powell, [2012](#) ; Helms, Walls, Crouter, & McHale, [2010](#)).

While participation of both partners in the workforce can allow for economic mobility and, often, gender equity (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, [1998](#) ; Schwartz, [1994a](#)), dual-earner couples face many challenges in managing work and home responsibilities (Coontz, [2013](#)). Most recently, attention has been brought to the “100-hour couple” where both partners endure work hours totaling more than 100 hours a week as a household (Moe & Shandy, [2010](#) , p. 4). As such, both men and women in dual-earner couples can confront significant constraints in trying to meet their work and nonwork

commitments (Byron, 2005 ; Mauno & Kinnunen, 1999). Additionally, the rise of dual-earner couples challenges traditional gender role stereotypes (man as the “breadwinner” and woman as the “caregiver”), as women are now more likely to be contributing economically, but also men are more likely to be contributing emotionally, to the family (Harrington, VanDeusen, & Humberd, 2011). Attitudes, practices, and policies in the workplace, however, often lag behind these shifts in family roles (Williams, 1999). Accordingly, the work and family decisions individuals make independently, as well as together with their partners, are increasingly complex (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010).

When examining the work and family decisions that individuals, in particular within dual-earner couples, make, it is critical to take into account the context within which decisions are made—including factors traditionally limited to studies of the family domain. To this point, Greenhaus and Powell (2012) recently called attention to the family-relatedness of work decisions (FRWD), defined as “the extent to which an individual's decision-making process and choice of a course of action in the work domain are influenced by a family situation in order to foster a positive outcome for the family” (p. 247). Their work reveals that the more salient an employee's family identity is, the greater the likelihood that he or she will take family factors into account when making decisions at work (Powell & Greenhaus, 2012). Furthermore, the authors outline two important points about such decisions. First, the family-related decisions that men and women make at work are highly dependent upon the way in which they *construe* their family identities (Greenhaus, Peng, & Allen, 2012 ; Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). Second, such decisions are likely not made in isolation but rather in coordination between partners within dual-earner couples (Challiol & Mignonac, 2005 ; Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). In light of this emerging research, scholars and practitioners must acknowledge the new ways in which *both* women and men, in particular as dual-earner couples, understand and derive meaning from their family roles and the impact this has on their work-related decisions.

Drawing upon identity (Stryker, 1968 ; Stryker & Burke, 2000), self-verification (Swann, 1983), and the FRWD (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012 ; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012) theories, we propose a new dual-earner couple¹ typology that is rooted in a nuanced, contemporary understanding of the different ways in which men and women can *construe* their family identity. In doing so, we hope to challenge traditional conceptualizations of dual-earner couples (i.e., men as breadwinners models) and, ultimately, help advance our understanding of both women's and men's needs and decisions in the workplace. Specifically, we seek to contribute to the work–family literature in the following ways: to (i) develop an identity-based dual-earner couple typology that goes beyond human capital and economic resource constraints and reflects societal shifts in the meanings women and men attach to their family roles; (ii) expand our understanding of the different ways in which both men and women can *construe* their family identities—with special attention to care- and career-based *construals*; (iii) answer the call for greater attention to the couple level of analysis in work and family research, particularly as it relates to our understanding of the FRWD (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012 ; Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002 ; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012); and (iv) offer an agenda for future research that builds on this proposed identity-based couple typology.

Re-Examining Family Identity

Greenhaus and Powell (2012), in their work on the FRWD, argued that context is key to

understanding work-domain decisions. Their framework acknowledges the tripartite role of societal, organizational, and individual (employee-level) contexts in FRWD. Here, we provide a brief summary of this literature. First, the work–family literature has identified *societal*-level drivers of FRWD such as national cultural values (Spector et al., 2005) and institutional support (Lyness & Kropf, 2005). Powell, Francesco, and Ling (2009) argued that the degree to which nations are collectivistic (vs. individualistic) and have a humane orientation (whereby others are encouraged to be giving and kind; Kabasakal & Bodur, 2004) should encourage workers to bring family concerns into work decisions. Many researchers (e.g., Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010; Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2001) have documented the differences between nation states in providing institutional supports such as paid leave, publicly funded childcare, and sustainable part-time work to assist citizens with work–family imbalance. Greenhaus and Powell (2012) also theorized that workers in nations with greater institutional supports are not only more likely to take advantage of these more affordable policies and programs, but also feel more free to bring family concerns into workplace decision-making. Second, the work–family literature has done a more thorough job of documenting *organizational*-level drivers of FRWD. Greenhaus and Powell (2012) summarized the organizational context literature as research (i) categorizing workplaces as stronger or weaker situations (Bell & Staw, 1989; Mischel, 1977) or (ii) calling on theories of social support (Greenhaus & Parasuraman, 1994). In organizational contexts characterized by stronger situations, work rules are closely enforced, with little space for individuality and personalization of work products and processes, and high pressure for social conformity. In such demanding work situations, little opportunity for family considerations to influence work-related decisions is present. On the other hand, in weaker situations where employees have voice and discretion in how work gets done, this may be perceived as permission to let individual differences such as family situations enter into workplace choices. The other area of research falling under the umbrella of organizational drivers of FRWD is that which relies on theories of social support. This is a vigorous area of scholarship ranging from the influence of family-supportive supervisors (e.g., Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009) to family-supportive cultures (e.g., Allen, 2001). The degree of supportiveness of the organizational context generally enhances employees' level of FRWD (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012).

In this paper, we emphasize the centrality of the third context—the *individual* level. To date, household demographics, such as marital status, economic earnings, the presence, number, and age of children, and having responsibility for aging or ill family members, have informed the bulk of the contemporary literature on individual-level influences on work and family-related decisions (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). Such demographic factors are most often positioned as “constraints” in this literature, where decisions are thrust upon us when, for example, employees are faced with the daunting task of raising an infant or solely caring for a home when a spouse is engaged in extended business travel. Beyond constraints, Greenhaus and Powell (2012) called attention to a less-studied individual-level difference—family identity—that likely plays a critical role in shaping FRWD. Accordingly, the context of employees' unique family identities, particularly within dual-career couples, provides the foundation to our theorizing.

Family identity

Identity answers the question “Who am I?” and provides meaning to the social roles one enacts (Bagger, Li, & Gutek, 2008; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). It is a powerful predictor of behavior, as

individuals shift their behavior according to perceived role-based expectations (Burke, 1991). In this paper, we adopt a role-based perspective whereby identity refers to “parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 284). Individuals possess multiple identities at any given time, and it is the salience of a particular identity that motivates one to engage in behaviors that further reinforce that particular identity (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Lobel, 1991; Stryker, 1968; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). From this perspective, family identity answers the question, “Who am I as a family member?” and is associated with the multiple roles one can enact as a family member (e.g., spouse, parent, sister, and child). Ultimately, one's family identity can be a source of positive self-evaluation when one believes that he or she is appropriately fulfilling a family member role (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

Within dual-earner couples, both partners maintain personal family identities that are associated with a set of perceived expected behaviors that allow them to fulfill their roles as family members (Hogg et al., 1995; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012). Furthermore, family identities vary not only as a function of the different roles partners play (e.g., parent and spouse) but also as a function of the distinct ways in which they *construe* these roles. Notably, the decisions that both men and women make and the behaviors they engage in to fulfill their family roles, at both home and work, will vary greatly as a function of how they define that role (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012). For example, if an employee with an aging parent defines her family member role in terms of being a physical caregiver, she may be hesitant to take a promotion that requires moving across the country. However, if she defines this role in terms of being an economic provider to her aging parent, she may see that same promotion and move as an opportunity to generate greater financial resources for her family's needs.

Examinations of family identity are particularly relevant within the context of dual-earner couples, as individuals' understandings of who they are as a family member are likely shaped by and acquire meaning through their interactions with their partner (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). As an example, one's role as a wife takes on meaning in connection with her partner's role as a husband (Cast & Burke, 2002). Existing research even suggests that verification of one's family identity can generate greater commitment to one's partner (Burke & Stets, 1999; Cast & Burke, 2002). The remainder of the paper challenges traditional thinking around family identities and opens the door to theoretical work on how the *content* of one's family identity can predict distinct behaviors and attitudes at work.

Family identity: Care and career

In an effort to delve deeper into the different meanings individuals can attach to their family roles, we offer two primary construals of family identity: care and career. Discussed in more detail later, we suggest that care-based roles reflect relational values, while career-based roles encompass achievement-oriented values. To this point, it is important to note that both women and men can construe their family identity in terms of care and/or career, reflecting shifts in societal understandings of gender roles.

Care

One of the primary ways in which an individual may construe his or her family identity is in terms of

care-based roles. In this sense, one's self-definition of being a good family member means being a caregiver or nurturer and is accompanied by the desire to emotionally and/or physically tend to family members' needs. When one's family identity is construed in this way, he or she, for example, may prepare meals for a spouse, attend children's sporting events, or provide medical care to sick family members—all of which reinforce perceived family role expectations. Care-based family identities in dual-earner couples, importantly, do not equate to being a stay-at-home spouse or parent, nor are they exclusive to women.

While caregiving behaviors are most often associated with relational values and femininity (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005), recent work shows that many men also derive a sense of self-meaning from care-based family roles (Harrington, VanDeusen, & Mazar, 2012; Harrington et al., 2011). Emerging research reveals that men aspire to provide not only financial but also emotional support to their household and associate words such as “listening,” “understanding,” and “compassion” with what it means to be a good father (Harrington et al., 2010, p. 12) and spouse. There is also growing evidence of fathers' desires to be physically and psychologically present in the home and engage in activities more traditionally positioned as women's duties such as making dinner, picking up the children from school, and housecleaning (Harrington et al., 2011).

Career

We also offer that a second, less traditional, way that both men and women may construe their family identity is in terms of *career*-based roles. In this sense, being a good family member could mean being a financial provider (i.e., a “breadwinner”) and be accompanied by the desire to enhance the security and well-being of one's family through adequate economic resources. A focus on one's work or career may be a means to own a safe and secure home for the family, receive health insurance for family members, establish children's college funds, or provide eldercare assistance for an aging parent. Individuals who identify with career-based family roles, however, may see themselves as more than just economic providers—they can also attach meaning to being a role model for other family members, for example, role modeling professional achievement, self-determination, or career success (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006). Of note, construals of career are not limited to high-skill individuals or those seeking upward mobility.

Conceptualizing one's family identity in terms of career challenges traditional thinking around the separation of work and family roles and behaviors. Traditionally, behaviors such as working extra hours, taking on additional paying clients, or accepting an international assignment have been solely associated with a commitment to one's work roles (Brett, Stroh, & Reilly, 1993; Ng & Feldman, 2008). These same behaviors, however, may actually reflect a commitment to one's family. For example, time spent at and commitment to work is valued as benefitting the welfare of the whole family in more collectivistic cultures (Yang, Chen, Choi, & Zou, 2000). Additionally, despite a hypothesized negative relationship, Rothbard and Edwards (2003) found a direct positive relationship between family identity salience and time invested at work. When faced with the decision of whether to work overtime, an employee might take this opportunity to accrue greater financial resources for the family or even to demonstrate a strong work ethic to his children. Or, an employee might take an international assignment to provide her children with unique opportunities for education or language immersion, or to enable a spouse to enjoy a cultural experience. Accordingly, we offer that scholars must expand

conceptualizations of family identities for both men and women to, in a more realistic, contemporary fashion, capture behaviors previously exclusively associated with one's work identity.

Dual-Earner Couples: A New Typology

In the 1980s, when women began to occupy a significant proportion of the full-time labor force, scholars became more focused on theorizing the behaviors and functioning of dual-earner couples. As early pioneers of such research, Yogev and Brett (1985) developed a typology of dual-earner couples based on involvement in work and family roles concluding that “the work and family attitudes and behaviors of one spouse are systematically related to the work and family attitudes and behaviors of the other spouse...” (p. 755). Building on this stream of work, Crouter and Manke (1997) identified three types of dual-earner families: *high-status* , *low-stress* , and *main-secondary provider families* — with each type associated with different demographic characteristics, marital quality, and division of family responsibilities. More recently, in an effort to investigate sources of work–family conflict, Cullen, Hammer, Neal, and Sinclair (2009) offered a person-centered approach to identify three distinct profiles of dual-earner couples: *high child care* , *high parent care* , and *high work demands* . In yet another typology, Hall and MacDermid (2009) utilized data from the National Survey of the Changing Workforce to identify four couple types— *parallel* , *second shift-career* , *counterbalanced* , and *second shift-nurture* —to explore the division of work and family responsibilities. Lastly, Helms and colleagues (2010) used four couple types (i.e., *main-secondary* , *coprovider* , *ambivalent coprovider* , and *mismatched couples*) to examine discrepancies in spouses' attitudes as well as within and between differences in marital satisfaction and division of household labor. This summary illustrates the breadth of work in this area to date.

Taken together, these existing typologies make it clear that not all dual-earner couples are the same and help to advance our understanding of within and between dual-earner couple differences in terms of managing work and family responsibilities. At the same time, these typologies are primarily based on surface-level constraints such as demographic or economic factors. Therefore, such typologies do not address deeper-level variables, such as identity, which are quite central to human needs and play an important role in couples' work and family decisions (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012 ; Kossek et al., 2012 ; Shockley & Allen, 2010). As well, existing work on dual-earner couples largely ignores scenarios in which women are the primary economic providers (as an exception, see Drago, Black, & Wooden, 2005).

Taking into account both care- and career-based family roles, we offer an updated, identity-based perspective of dual-earner couples. Typologies are a valuable theoretical tool when examining complex and interdependent causal relationships (Delbridge & Fiss, 2013). We outline five couple types that are associated with a unique combination of both partners' family identities, respectively: *traditional* , *non-traditional* , *outsourced* , *family first* , and *egalitarian* . Our proposed typology initially emerged through an inductive review of the family identity, work–family decision-making, and dual-earner couples literatures across the fields of Organizational Behavior, Human Resource Management, Social Psychology, Sociology, Gender Studies, Family Studies, and Economics. This resulted in a more nuanced understanding of both men's and women's family identities and brought to light the need to incorporate this understanding of family identity into our studies of dual-earner

couples. Next, a more deductive approach was taken to generate greater theoretical and empirical support for our proposed couple types.

These five couple types do not include all possible partner identity combinations; instead, we present two asymmetrical or “supplementary” couple types (*traditional* , *non-traditional*) and three symmetrical or “matching” couple types (*outsourced* , *family first* , and *egalitarian*). We believe these five couple types offer the most parsimonious and theoretically grounded guidance (Doty & Glick, 1994 ; Whetten, 1989) in predicting couples' decisions at the heart of work and family. Additionally, this framework is static in nature, meaning it describes possible combinations of couples' family identities at a single point in time. We do not intend, however, to imply that couples will not shift between couple types as their family situations change, for example, as children age and/or ill family members heal (cf. Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Lastly, this framework is specific to heterosexual dual-earner couples²; however, it is not limited to married couples nor parents.

In the following sections, we detail the unique combination of family identities within each couple type as well as draw upon self-verification theory (Swann, 1983) to provide insight into decisions and actions in the home and workplace that may enable partners within each couple type to confirm (verify) their values and beliefs about themselves.

The “traditional” couple

The term “traditional family” historically refers to families in which the female partner stays at home, acting as the primary caregiver, and the male partner maintains full-time employment, acting as the exclusive “breadwinner” (Yogev & Brett, 1985 ; Zuo, 2004). However, with the rise of dual-earner couples, we argue there is a need to update the traditional version of the family. Specifically, we propose that a dual-earner couple structure has emerged whereby the female partner strongly incorporates care into her family identity (significantly more so than career) and the male partner strongly incorporates career into his family identity (significantly more so than care). This type of couple structure aligns with conservative gender ideologies of what male and female partners' roles should be inside and outside the home (Craig & Mullan, 2011 ; Zuo & Tang, 2000). Additionally, traditional couples likely prioritize conformity-based values that reinforce the importance of complying with social norms (Schwartz, 1994b ; Schwartz et al., 2012). Of note, while the male partner is more likely to construe his family identity in terms of career as compared with his partner, and to construe his family identity more in terms of career than care, this identity does not necessarily equate to being the primary economic provider. There may be a scenario in which the female partner actually earns higher wages than her partner, yet defines her family role predominantly in terms of emotionally and/or physically tending to her family members' needs.

The distinct way in which each partner construes his or her family identity has substantial implications for their behaviors inside and outside the home, as both partners will seek to act in ways that fulfill and reaffirm their family identity. Self-verification theory states that individuals desire consistency in their social worlds and “want others to see them as they see themselves” (Swann, 1983 ; Swann & Bosson, 2010). Because female partners in traditional couples emphasize care in their definition of who they are as a family member, they will engage in behaviors such as taking children to school, tending to elderly parents, and/or preparing meals for the family. Of note, such activities will occur in addition to work responsibilities, as both partners in dual-earner couples are employed. In order to

accommodate such desires, the female partner in traditional couples will likely seek out organizations that offer caregiving leaves and flexible work arrangements as well as those that foster a family-supportive environment (Allen, 2001 ; Hammer et al., 2009). In comparison, the male partner will be significantly less engaged in home-centric activities and, instead, fulfill his perceived role expectations by focusing his attention on work activities. In this vein, he may seek out extra hours or promotion opportunities that help him economically provide for and/or serve as a professional role model for his family members. Overall, in traditional couples, when the female partner focuses her attention on emotionally and physically tending to her family members' needs and the male partner on career-based opportunities that benefit his family, each partner will verify his or her own family identity as well as reinforce his or her partner's sense of self.

When identities of care and career are asymmetric in this manner, there is clearer delineation of each partner's roles and responsibilities (Yogev & Brett, 1985)—which may be accompanied by lower levels of conflict between the work and family domains (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). At the same time, scholars have cautioned that such arrangements may perpetuate gender stereotypes and reduce women's status in the workplace (Hoobler, 2007). On the other hand, for women who define their family identity in terms of care, nurturing and tending to the family's needs may help them derive meaning and meet perceived role expectations (Burke, 1991) while pursuing a career.

The “non-traditional” couple

In comparison to traditional dual-earner couples, “non-traditional” dual-earner couples are just the opposite: We propose that a non-traditional couple consists of a man who strongly incorporates care into his family identity (significantly more so than career) and a woman whose family identity is derived from career-based roles (significantly more so than care). This type of couple structure has captured the attention of mainstream media in a more extreme form where men assume the role of stay-at-home dad (Williams, 2012). However, in reality, stay-at-home dads represent just 3.4 percent of households with children under age 18 years in the U.S.A. (Harrington et al., 2012). This couple type reflects more post-traditional views on the roles that partners can play in a relationship and is likely associated with values of self-direction (i.e., freedom to develop one's own ideas and path of action) (Schwartz et al., 2012).

In considering each partner's self-view and desire for verification and appraisal, male partners in non-traditional couples will serve as the family's primary caregiver and take the lead on unpaid labor in the home (e.g., cleaning, cooking, and caring for ill family members)—in addition to his work responsibilities. In this case, it is the male partner who will likely seek out employers with more progressive attitudes toward work–life balance and work–family policies (e.g., paternity leave) that support his desire to spend more time with his family members. In comparison, the female partner will play a secondary role in home-centric activities and prioritize her attention on work activities. As an example, she may seek out career opportunities (e.g., promotions that require more time at work) or employment benefits (e.g., childcare subsidies) that enable her to fulfill her perceived role expectations. Ultimately, when the male partner takes the lead on caregiving and the female partner on career-based opportunities that benefit her family, each partner will verify his or her own family identity as well as reinforce his or her partner's sense of self.

Similar to traditional couples, “non-traditional” couples possess asymmetric construals of family identity

that enable each partner to focus on his or her preferred family roles (Yogev & Brett, 1985). In doing so, this structure may help to alleviate conflict between the work and family domains as neither partner is trying to “do it all” (Hewlett, 2002). However, while engagement in care-related activities will help men in non-traditional dual-earner couples fulfill their understood family roles, some suggest that sustainability of such couple structures may rest on whether the man perceives his partner's career as a benefit or threat to his masculinity (Zuo & Tang, 2000). Depending on the social and cultural contexts, a male partner who adjusts his work schedule to spend time with his children or tend to household activities such as cooking or cleaning during the day may be perceived by others as not living up to his breadwinning/economic duties and could be stigmatized as lacking ambition (Goffman, 1963; Harrington et al., 2010).

The “outsourced” couple

Beyond couples with asymmetric identity construal (Yogev & Brett, 1985), we suggest there are couple types in which each partner's incorporation of care and career into their family identity is symmetric. Specifically, we propose that “outsourced” couples are those where both the female and male partners construe their family roles in terms of career, significantly more so than care. Accordingly, both partners associate being a good family member with working to financially provide for their family's needs (e.g., paying for childcare, education, and medical bills) or serving as a professional role model for their children and other family members (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006). One explanation for why couples may espouse symmetrical understandings of their family identity is that people tend to seek out similar partners in terms of values and upbringing (Yogev & Brett, 1985). In the case of couples where both partners define their family roles in terms of career, both partners may be more power oriented or may have been raised in dual-earner households that placed a strong emphasis on family financial success and security (Schwartz et al., 2012).

Given that both partners' family identities are defined primarily in terms of career, they will seek to fulfill their perceived role expectations by focusing their attention on work-related activities and demonstrating greater time and psychological commitment to professional activities that help to verify how they see themselves and want to be viewed as family members. They may regard their career-focused behaviors as a sacrifice for the long-term well-being of the family (Yang et al., 2000). As an example, these partners may stay late at work as a means to generate greater income for their family. Or, they may enroll in educational courses that require them to spend time away from the family in the evenings with the understanding that such actions will reinforce perceptions of them as economic providers and/or role models. On the other hand, given the lack of incorporation of care into their family identities, domestic labor and care of family members is likely to be outsourced to paid employees like nannies or home health nurses, or to relatives such as grandparents.

In this symmetrical couple type, the male and female partners' role expectations are not counterbalanced, as in the traditional and non-traditional asymmetrical couple structures. Rather, role expectations are aligned and heavily tilted toward career. In considering this type of couple structure, scholars such as Hochschild (2012) have questioned whether such an arrangement in regard to family care puts society at risk of “commoditizing” the most personal aspects of individuals' lives. Yet, from an identity perspective, by outsourcing the majority of the family's needs to others, both partners can remain committed to fulfilling their perceived family role expectations.

The “family first” couple

In comparison to “outsourced” couples where both partners primarily define their family roles in terms of career, we offer a counter couple type—“family first.” In this symmetrical couple structure, both the male and female partners construe their family roles in terms of care, significantly more so than career. Here, being a good family member means supporting family members emotionally and physically spending time together. In contrast to the achievement-oriented values maintained in “outsourced” couples, partners in “family first” couples likely possess strong relational values including benevolence and care (Schwartz et al., [2012](#)).

Because both partners' family identities are defined primarily in terms of care, they will seek to fulfill their perceived role expectations by engaging in activities such as caring for aging parents, grocery shopping, helping their children with their homework, or hosting family holidays. Participation in such care-oriented activities will help both partners reaffirm who they are as family members. Outside of the home, given that neither partner construes his or her family identity in terms of career-based roles, work may be viewed as a means to earn a living but not as a means to self-fulfillment in the family realm (Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, [1998](#)). Accordingly, neither partner will desire to engage in work activities that interfere with spending time with family members (e.g., assignments or duties that require extra time at the workplace). Rather, they will likely seek out family-supportive organizations that accommodate predictable work schedules, flexible work arrangements, or caregiving leaves. Furthermore, as a couple, they may try to create work schedules that maximize the time they can dedicate to their family or home. “Split-shift parenting” can be a common method of supporting a “family first” lifestyle, whereby the female partner may choose to work evening shifts and the male partner more traditional day-time hours so at least one partner is available to other family members at all times.

The family first couple reflects changes in society's understanding of what it means to be a “good father”—one who instills values and morals in his children and provides emotional support (Pew, [2013](#)). Across genders, recent work on generational values reveals that Millennials are more likely than previous generations to reject the lure of career achievement and desire a greater focus on personal life (Pew, [2012](#) ; Smola & Sutton, [2002](#)). Such shifts in beliefs may be perceived as a positive societal turn, in that the acquisition of material goods is deemphasized and “getting back to the basics” of family togetherness is valued (Howe & Strauss, [2009](#)). On the other hand, this couple structure may result in behaviors such as over-parenting (i.e., “helicopter parents”) (Ginott, [1967](#))—a topic of much contemporary debate (Dell-Antonia, [2013](#) ; Levine, [2012](#)).

The “egalitarian” couple

The fifth couple type, and another in which both partners' construals of their family identities are symmetrical, is “egalitarian³” couples. Specifically, we propose that both partners in egalitarian couples will strongly incorporate *both* care- and career-based roles into their family identities. Couples structured in this way enable care and career in both partners' family identities simultaneously. Supporting this idea, work–family research has recently begun acknowledging dual-centric identities—the possibility that employees can highly identify with more than one role simultaneously, for example, work *and* family (Kossek, Baltes, & Matthews, [2011](#) ; Kossek et al., [2012](#)). Here, we suggest

individuals may also define specifically their family role in a dualistic way. Overall, this couple type encompasses men's societal shift toward greater involvement in day-to-day family care as well as women's shift toward greater involvement in the financial security of the family (Haas & O'Brien, 2010 ; Zuo & Tang, 2000).

This couple structure supports the idea that men who define their family roles in terms of care do not necessarily let go of their career-based family role and, similarly, women who are beginning to conceptualize their family roles as more career based may hold onto their care-based roles as well (Harrington et al., 2010 ; Harrington et al., 2011). In considering the shared and strong emphasis on care- and career-based roles, both partners will engage in a range of activities inside and outside the home to help verify the ways in which they construe their family identities. In the home, both partners will embrace family roles in terms of care and career, which presents the possibility of a more equal division of unpaid labor in the household (e.g., cooking, cleaning, and caring for dependents) (Zuo, 2004). In the workplace, both partners will likely seek out organizations and supervisors that can accommodate their desire to spend time with their families (Hammer et al., 2009). At the same time, both partners will desire activities and opportunities that will help them fulfill career-based role expectations. As an example, they may be open to promotions, training opportunities, or employment benefits (e.g., eldercare subsidies) that enable family members to perceive them as economic providers or role models.

Egalitarian couple structures reflect societal shifts in gender equality—as family identities defined in terms of care and career are perceived to be gender neutral. At the same time, in considering the strong incorporation of both care and career into both partners' family identities, there is likely less clarity regarding role responsibilities (as compared with “traditional” and “non-traditional” couple types). Both partners may struggle to balance the demands of work and family as they strive to “have it all” (Hewlett, 2002). As a result, both partners may be more susceptible to work–family and family–work conflict as a result of time, strain, or behavior-based role pressures (Byron, 2005 ; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

An Agenda for Theory and Research

Theoretically, we have attempted to challenge the work–family literature's existing conceptualization of family identity, by considering how care and career may both be encapsulated in individuals' view of their family roles. Care and career both influence the sense of meaning individual employees derive from being a family member and, ultimately, impact couple-level family-related decisions regarding family and work circumstances (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). Furthermore, we proposed a framework of dual-earner couples that goes beyond constraint-based factors to account for meaningful individual differences, namely family identity (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012 ; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012). In the following sub-sections, we present ideas for a research agenda to more fully define care- and career-based family identities and to understand their societal-level implications. We also consider ways in which work and family research at the couple level of analysis, particularly using our updated dual-earner couple typology, could be expanded.

Family identity

We believe our work follows suit with recent calls to discontinue the examination of work and family as separate spheres, particularly when many work decisions are realistically impacted by family factors (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012 ; Kossek et al., 2011). In this vein, family and work should not be viewed as a zero-sum game. Rather, the salience of one's family identity may actually drive behavior and motivation in the workplace. We as scholars must challenge our thinking about the different ways in which family identities are construed and how we capture these meanings in our research. Rather than simply assume that an employee who is involved in caregiving behavior identifies more with family than an employee who spends more time at the office, we should consider that career-focused activities might actually be helping the latter employee fulfill his or her role as an involved family member. Behaviors such as working long hours, taking new geographic assignments, and working toward promotions may all be ways in which men and women fulfill their perceived obligations to their families (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012).

To begin, future research should address construct domain development. In this paper, we suggest that care-based family identities are likely defined in terms of emotionally and physically tending to family members' needs and that career-based family identities are defined in terms of breadwinning and professional role modeling. Yet, the content domain of both construals of family identity is likely larger. For example, care-based family identity may be construed in ways such as being a protector, a leader, and/or a spiritual guide. Ultimately, such construct domain development should be addressed in scale development work.

Additionally, future research should more richly explore the multiple ways and processes by which individuals construe their family identity. In particular, insights into how different construals of family identity emerge (Aryee & Luk, 1996) and the impact of such identities on decision-making, at work and at home, are needed. Specifically, research should explore its formation and effects on work–family decisions from an emergent, quasi state-trait-based approach (Bielby, 1992). As we have acknowledged earlier, the work and family literature is robust in constraints-based explanations of work–family decisions, acknowledging that today's economic pressures and family demographics combine to explain an employee's work decisions—in a rather momentary, state-like fashion. From a trait-based perspective, however, it may be likely that care- and career-based family identities are formed in our earlier years, based upon parents' modeling of career achievement or perhaps parents' economic necessity. Cultural values and beliefs including differences in individualism/collectivism also likely play a critical role in the construction and maintenance of self-definitions of what it means to be a good family member (Yang et al., 2000). This early socialization could inform the care- and/or career-based family identities individuals develop upon adulthood and the decisions we negotiate with our partners. Hence, studies designed to uncover the additional incremental variance explained in family identity by rather stable values of care and/or career, beyond constraints-based behavior, would be helpful in mapping the emergence and development of individual family identity construals.

From the opposite causal direction, future research could also consider how engagement in particular behaviors and actions impacts shifts in partners' construals of their family identities. Drawing upon theories of symbolic structural interactionism (e.g., Stryker, 1980), action can inform identity. For example, do family-related work decisions such as taking caregiving leave foment care-based family identities? At the organizational context level, does working in a company that offers paid caregiving leave mean that employees, through taking leave, will actually strengthen the degree to which they

define family identity in terms of care? Conversely, when care-based work–family policies like paid family leave are not available from an employer, employees may be motivated to make career-based decisions such as working overtime to pay for nannies or in-home nursing. Such decisions may amplify a career-based family identity. This is likely an emergent, multivariate decision involving individual-level (“How do I define who I am as a family member?”), couple-level (“What is my partner's construal of his or her family identity?”), organizational-level (“What policies are available?”), and even societal-level (“Will I be judged harshly by others if I work longer hours?”) contextual factors. Because of these various contributing factors and the need for employees to reflect back on when and why decisions were made, interviews may be the most appropriate research methodology to employ to untangle the strength and potential interactions of various contextual factors. In particular, qualitative in-depth interviews and possibly observations of employees (including those with and without children and at all life stages) could reveal the process by which family identities emerge in individuals and across couples, the different meanings and behaviors that are attached to such identities, and the process of negotiating work-based choices at the couple level.

Expanding on earlier discussions about contextual influences on FRWD (Greenhaus & Powell, [2012](#)), societal-level values likely impact construals of one's family identity in terms of career, especially for women. Future research could examine lingering social sanctions of women, for example, by members of the previous generation or those with more conservative social values, for behavior enacted to reinforce career-based family identity construals. As an example, research might test whether women who primarily construe their family identity in terms of career (e.g., women in non-traditional or outsourced couple types) are viewed as less responsible or moral, as compared with women who enact care-based roles. Research by Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick ([2004](#)) found that women who were perceived to engage less in homemaking roles were seen by others as competent but also cold. Career-wise, perceptions of their competence were a boon, but being viewed as cold meant they were less likeable interpersonally. Furthermore, the overarching cultural values that are present within the society in which the couple type resides should not be ignored, as it likely determines the social sanctions that one or both partners may face. For example, are “outsourced” couples viewed more harshly in cultures high in femininity, where care is of the utmost concern (Hofstede, [1998](#); Hofstede & Bond, [1984](#))?

While such punitive judgments of career women have likely decreased over time, we suggest two specific research questions in this regard. First, we suggest context matters. It may be that when others who would judge harshly a woman with a strong career-based family identity know that, at the couple level, the male partner is attending to care-based family needs, social sanctions for these women may be less. That is, others' knowledge that someone is indeed “minding the ship” home-wise may mean that negative judgments are suppressed. Second, the just-world hypothesis (e.g., Lerner & Miller, [1978](#)) tells us that people want to believe things are “getting better” for career women, and research has done a good job of documenting women's increased representation in certain formerly male-dominated jobs and industries, like insurance and banking (Bureau of Labor Statistics, [2013](#); Statistics Canada, [2010](#)). But where systematic research is sorely needed is in how biases against career women have become subtle and perhaps more insidious (Meyerson & Fletcher, [2000](#)). Do women experience a catch-22 when it comes to care and career? That is, when a male partner in a dual-earner couple takes primary responsibility for minding the home care-wise, as in the non-traditional couple type, are women sanctioned for their career focus at the expense of care? As for the

other situation, where women's primary family identity involves care, research has illustrated that caregiving roles are a mismatch with women's perceived suitability for leadership roles ("think leader, think male"; Shein, 1973, 1975) (Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009). For women, there may be social and career sanctions for actions related to both care- and career-based family identities.

Couple-level decision-making

While we are not the first to call for a couple level of analysis in work–family research as a way of more realistically modeling family demographic contextual factors that in part determine employees' attitudes, stress and well-being, and work and nonwork decisions (*cf.* Cullen et al., 2009; Greenhaus & Powell, 2012), a main contribution of this manuscript is to understand family-related work decisions from a couple level of analysis in a way that moves scholars beyond traditional, gendered conceptualizations of family identities. In our framework, both men and women within dual-earner couples are acknowledged to (i) have family identities but also (ii) construe their family identities in ways that encompass behaviors related to career, care, or both. Our approach acknowledges the greater extent to which contemporary males espouse family roles as compared with males of previous generations. This should contribute to the breakdown of stereotypes for men who wish to use work–family policies that may have previously been socially sanctioned, such as caregiving leaves (Kroggel, 2004). For women, this typology may lessen the extent to which they are assumed to be primarily focused on caregiving roles. Because humans are cognitive misers, we often rely on shortcuts in processing information about one another, and traditional, gendered assumptions related to employees' ordering of work and family identities still situate women as more strongly committed to family versus work (*cf.* Hoobler et al., 2009). Our framework cautions managers not to default to gendered assumptions about who will provide family care but instead to look toward individual-level identities within dual-earner couples.

Returning to our research agenda, a critical extension of our couple-level framework is to test the link between care- and/or career-based family identity construals, in the various couple combinations, and actual family-related work decisions. Quantitative studies may use cluster analysis to group dual-earner couples into the five couple types we have specified here, to explore the predictive value of these types in explaining women's and men's within-couple FRWD. We also suggest that since our framework is static in nature, there is merit in exploring a more dynamic evolution of this typology. That is, returning to our earlier ideas on identity emergence, as couples' family constraints (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) and perhaps identities change over time, do their emphases on career and care shift? Moreover, do couples move between couple types? For example, when children leave the nest, does less time spent in domestic helping mean one or both partners' care-based family identities will shift to career-based family identities, for example, saving a nest egg for retirement income? Or, as another example, do situations in which a family member becomes terminally ill enhance care-based family identities?

Our couples-based framework could also be used in future research as a contextual qualifier of what we as scholars think we know about women's career choices. One example lies in testing the rather sensational, popular press idea that women's values and identities do not match with those of the contemporary business world—the idea that there is an “opt-out revolution” afoot, where women are eschewing the business world and top management jobs (Belkin, 2003). Instead of testing whether

this phenomenon is happening by simply measuring women's values and competing priorities, couple-level family identities may be a better predictor of, for example, women's and men's managerial aspirations, organizational turnover, job and industry vocational choices, and other career-focused, family-related work decisions.

It should be noted that in delineating our couple types, we earlier referred to couples' identities as either (i) symmetrical, where both partners share the same care and/or career-based construal of their family identities, or (ii) asymmetrical, where one partner's primary family identity construal stands in contrast to the other's primary family identity construal. This discussion of symmetry versus asymmetry in couple types bears mentioning in regard to the work–family balancing act, harmony in the relationship, and individual well-being. As far as asymmetry, early work–family research acknowledged that the traditional perspective on making dual-earner households work was that one partner's role needed to fit with the other's in a compensatory fashion. This “divide and conquer” approach to dual-earner couplehood meant one partner was primarily devoted to career in order to provide the monetary and other resources necessary to run the home, while the other partner was working but making choices with a central focus on caring for the home and its occupants, such as downshifting to work part-time or reduced hours. Yogev and Brett (1985) highlighted that the “divide and conquer,” that is, asymmetric couple, would experience marital harmony because the clear division between partners' roles and responsibilities served as a guiding beacon for decision- and sense-making. As far as symmetrical couples (e.g., both high in care or both high in career), we offer that the key component to navigating the work–family balancing act is that partners must know their own and their partner's family identity. While in both symmetrical and asymmetrical couple types, FRWD should be made with individual partners' identity construals in mind, rather than, for example, based on gender expectations or earning potential, this is especially true for symmetrical couples. In “family first” couples, successful partnerships may result when partners consciously alternate between who takes family leave or who works part-time. In sum, our framework of couples-level identity construals should be considered alongside earlier research on the division of labor in dual-earner couples: It is not only who shoulders the behavioral burden of care and/or career that makes for successful partnerships and individual well-being, as earlier work may suggest, but whether these behaviors fit with both partners' family identity needs that is important.

Another relevant direction for future research is to test “identity versus constraint” considerations. In the front end of the manuscript, we documented the more commonly offered influences for work–family decisions, for example, family demographic, economic, and social value factors—that is, constraints (Greenhaus & Powell, 2012). To these constraining factors, this manuscript has argued for the influence of care- and career-based family identities on family-related work decisions. As our anonymous reviewers suggested, these constraining factors undoubtedly shape family-related decisions and also identity formation, for example, via the symbolic structural interactionism arguments advanced earlier. Research is needed to model the host of constraining influences on work–family decisions, while also including family identity to examine the incremental variance in decisions explained by this individual-level variable. In this way, the relative predictive power of family identity can be tested alongside the more commonly proffered, broader, contextual constraints. The idea is that some family-related work decisions must be made to satisfy, for example, immediate, economic necessity, yet others are driven by deeper, individual-level values and needs.

Returning to our self-verification theory predictions, future research studies should also investigate how men and women behaviorally and psychologically cope when they are not able to meet the perceived self-expectations of a salient family role. Such research may warrant special attention focused on the unique needs of low-wage workers and the barriers they face in terms of gaining access to benefits and managing the work–family interface (Glass & Finley, [2002](#) ; Lambert, [1999](#)). For example, low-income women in family-first or traditional couple structures may strongly construe their family identity in terms of care but may have to spend greater time at work (vs. home) because of financial constraints and, as such, may not be able to fulfill perceived role expectations (Crompton & Lyonette, [2008](#)). Or, when employees who construe their family role in terms of care do not have access to paid caregiving leaves, they may shift identities (i.e., to a more career-based focus), advocate for change, or switch employers in pursuit of the work–family policies they desire.

Practical Implications

From a practical point of view, by advancing our understanding of how employees perceive and enact their roles as family members at the couples level, managers and organizations should be able to better predict and meet their employees' expectations for work–family balance and overall psychological well-being (Powell & Greenhaus, [2012](#)). Organizations can no longer operate under the assumption that women are their families' exclusive caregivers and that they will continue to be the ones to take primary interest in the work–family climate and policies employers provide. Nor can managers continue to assume that men are only interested in career opportunities that are accompanied by financial rewards or do not have interest in work–family programs. Considering shifts in women's economic contributions to the home and men's desires to be more active caregivers (Harrington et al., [2011](#)), these are antiquated beliefs. Furthermore, our analysis should allow managers and organizations to better predict and accommodate employees' work–life needs (Powell & Greenhaus, [2012](#)). As an example, in non-traditional or egalitarian couples, managers need to be prepared to meet the demands of fathers who desire to use paternity leave to care for their children. For couples of these same types, managers must not make assumptions about women's desire for the “mommy track,” that is, part-time and other types of work arrangements that signal a downshifting in women's desire for promotions and challenging work. Rather, managers should understand that women in non-traditional and egalitarian dual-earner couples are likely interested in what have been called more objective measures of career success—that is, climbing the ladder and therefore the pay scale in order to secure their family's financial future.

Organizations' failure to accommodate men's and women's specific desires for work–family balance has been found to relate to higher perceptions of work–family conflict, perceptions of injustice, and ultimately turnover—a costly proposition for organizations today (Butts, Casper, & Yang, [2013](#)). The work–family literature shows a quite consistent correlation between work–family conflict and employees' turnover intentions (e.g., Butts et al., [2013](#) ; Grandey & Cropanzano, [1999](#)). The estimated costs of turnover to organizations vary greatly, ranging anywhere from 50 percent to 200 percent of an employee's yearly salary (Kelly et al., [2008](#)). By extension from our theoretical work, we offer that employers must meet employees' family identity-based needs when it comes to work–family decisions or employees may respond by finding an employer who can.

Furthermore, practical implications for employed individuals flow from our ideas about self-verification of care- and career-based family identities. Being able to self-verify valued identities through identity-consistent behavior is beneficial to self-esteem (Cast & Burke, 2002) and also beneficial for employee organizational identification, that is, the degree to which employees feel like their values and goals are aligned with their organization's (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). For example, when a working parent holds a career-based family identity and works for an organization that offers policies or opportunities that allow the verification of that identity, this enhances that employee's self-concept and provides a positive feedback loop that should promote attachment to that organization.

For couples, the implications of our framework speak to both marital or partnership happiness and career satisfaction. Yogev's early work (e.g., Yogev, 1982) called attention to how partners in dual-earner families are happier than spouses in single-earner families because they report greater enjoyment from time spent together, the restorative effects of time away from caregiving, and higher rates of participative family decision-making. Beginning in the 1970s, research by Yogev (1982; Yogev & Brett, 1985) and others (e.g., Bahr & Day, 1978; Stiehm, 1976) first observed that congruence between partners' attitudes, for example, about appropriate gender roles, is a necessary component for happy dual-earner partnerships. This early research also specified that congruence between individual partners' attitudes ("I want to work") and behavior ("I have a job") is crucial to partnership satisfaction. Our framework takes these ideas into the present day to suggest two things to dual-earner couples: (i) Knowing deep-level self-identities regarding career and care is important, but, more so, the combination of self-identity and a partner's identity is integral to understanding the negotiation of family-related work decisions within the partnership. Questions such as "why is my partner encouraging me to use my company's family leave policy when she also has these benefits?" can better be understood through knowledge of care and career identities, en route to smoothing these family decisions and promoting harmony. (ii) Our nuanced definition of family identity, incorporating what has previously been considered career-based behavior, may also be beneficial for partners to understand. While "breadwinner" has traditionally been a socially acceptable family identity for men, our career-based family identity perspective acknowledges that this role is a legitimate one for women as well. We suggest that if male partners now view their female partner's career dedication through the lens of career-based family identities, perhaps this deeper, identity-level understanding will help male partners understand the root of their female partners' work-related family decisions and help women be seen more as individuals with desires not necessarily conforming to traditional roles and stereotypes, and family conflict may be lessened or averted.

- 1 For the purposes of this paper, we use Karambayya and Reilly's (1992) definition of dual-earner couples as "a more general term used to describe couples who both work outside of the home, with no assumption of psychological attachment to work or upward mobility" (p. 586).
- 2 Our framework is specific to heterosexual couples (married or unmarried) in that we employ gender role theories to underpin our analysis. We acknowledge, however, that understanding work-family decisions in same-sex couples is important and an area in which we are unaware of research studies.
- 3 Egalitarian here refers specifically to identity construals and not to the equal division of labor

within the couple.

Biographies

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