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Work and Life Strategies of Executive Women

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Abstract

Women's pursuit of an executive career is fraught with obstacles and work-family challenges. We examined the work and life strategies of executive women in intimate relationships and inductively derived four career advancement and four life balance categories. We observed that our subjects successfully combined career and family and consequently argue that the power of one woman to have an executive career and a fulfilling family life is really the power of many, including her family, employer, and attitudes about balancing work and life. These findings call for greater optimism in the study of the career-family dynamics of high achieving women.

Keywords: *Careers, Executive Women, Qualitative Research, Social Support, Work/Life Balance*

Introduction

That women should hold about 40% of all managerial jobs but only 6% of executive level positions among the *Fortune* 500 has provoked much research into why hardly any make it to the top (Eagly & Carli, 2007). However, few studies have examined ambitious women's career advancement strategies in conjunction with those that they practice to maintain a personal life outside of work. This is unfortunate given evidence that the pursuit of an executive career threatens the very possibility of a family life for women, while it almost automatically engenders one among men (Hewlett, 2002). It seems that career and family roles are mutually reinforcing for career-oriented men, while conflicting for women (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Rothbard, 2001). To the best of our knowledge, existing studies on women's work-life balance efforts have generally excluded women in senior positions. Whelan-Berry and Gordon's (2000) study of professional women showed that they set limits on either work or family, developed individual definitions of success, and changed their work setting, among others. Another study found that professional women adopted certain "rules"

for combining career and family including choosing partners carefully, compartmentalizing, and compromising (Kestenbaum, 2004).

These findings, however, should be carefully extended to executive women because their work demands are usually not negotiable. Generally, these women cannot use flexible employer policies because they *are* the employers and their economic means allow them to outsource many of their home and family responsibilities. Thus, we sought to discover how a group of executive women pursued ambitious careers and family lives, which included marriage and children for most of them. In doing so, we may be able to revisit the prevailing assumptions about women "having it all," meaning "a fulfilling, demanding, and time-consuming job and a fulfilling and demanding family life" (Brett & Stroh, 2003, p. 76).

Review of the Literature

Barriers to Women's Advancement

Managerial work involves a pace that exerts considerable physical and mental demands on all individuals regardless of sex (Ganster, 2005). It has also gained in complexity and ambiguity as a result of technology-driven change, globalization, and a greater emphasis on corporate social responsibility and executive accountability (Harrison & Freeman, 1999; Milliken & Dunn-Jensen, 2005).

Added to these managerial stressors are those experienced only by women on their path to the top, in particular the glass ceiling, an invisible barrier separating them from the most senior ranks (for a review, see Fielden & Cooper, 2001). This glass ceiling manifests itself in the exclusion of women from "old boys' networks," tokenism, overt as well as subtle discrimination, denial of advancement opportunities, and exposure to social-sexual behavior (Nelson & Burke, 2000; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002). The term "glass ceiling" has been questioned, however, because it suggests that women's advancement is only thwarted at the most senior positions when in fact they encounter obstacles at each stage of their educational and professional development (see Fels, 2004). Moreover, the glass ceiling

metaphor ignores the complexity and persistence of prejudice, the resistance to women's leadership despite their generally more appropriate leadership styles, and their family demands (Eagly & Carli, 2007). What compounds the problem is that male organizational leaders do not always recognize that these problems exist (Nelson & Burke, 2000). They view the scarcity of women in senior positions as simply resulting from lack of line experience and believe that more women will reach the top as they populate the pipeline (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998).

Advancing to the Senior Ranks

It seems that women generally advance through a combination of critical social relationships and particular performance strategies. For example, social networks and mentors are critical (Burke & McKeen, 1990; Combs, 2003; Ibarra, 1993). Women must also pursue their advancement aggressively by outperforming men for the same rewards (Brett & Stroh, 2003; Nelson & Burke, 2000). To do so, they must seek out challenging assignments and develop a managerial style with which their male counterparts are comfortable, a need that these male peers do not incur (Ragins et al., 1998). Nevertheless, no career advancement strategy can bear fruit if it is embedded in an organization not genuinely dedicated to gender equity. While organizations can do a lot to promote women's advancement (see) (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Whelan-Berry & Gordon, 2000), evidence indicates that the presence of progressive family benefits does not necessarily reduce the career penalties associated with caring for a family (Reitman & Schneer, 2005). One study found that taking advantage of leave policies reduces promotions, regardless of sex or reasons why the leave was taken (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999).

On the Home Front

Essentially, should women choose to pursue executive careers and start families, they run the risk of having neither. To the obstacles to career advancement documented earlier, we add a host of factors that suppress ambitious women's ability to marry and have children, including the

demands of ambitious careers, which leave little time to nurture intimate relationships, the fact that most successful men are not interested in acquiring an ambitious peer as a partner, and the difficulties of bearing children later in life despite media sensations (Hewlett, 2002). By the same process, family pressures and lack of spousal support at home undermine women's ability to devote themselves to career advancement (Galinsky et al., 2003; Nelson & Burke, 2000).

Research indeed recognizes that spouses are a particularly important support source in working women's quest for balance (Brett & Stroh, 2003; Rao, Apte, & Subbakrishna, 2003). Studies also uphold, however, a "support-gap hypothesis" whereby women report lower levels of spousal support than men do (Xu & Burleson, 2001) and research on dual-career couples, where both husbands and wives hold full-time jobs, provides significant support for this hypothesis. These couples find themselves having to renegotiate family roles (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005) but without much success in achieving marital equality (Tichenor, 2005), even in marriages perceived as egalitarian (Bartley et al., 2005), in marriages where she earns more (Pyke, 1994; Tichenor, 2005), or in marriages involving a career-oriented woman (Beatty, 1996; Hochschild & Machung, 1997; Nelson & Burke, 2000).

What these findings suggest is that women are presented with a set of mutually exclusive choices between work and motherhood because performance of either role requires complete devotion and is generally accomplished with sparse support. Escalating pressures for intensive parenting and the increasing demands of most high-level careers further solidify these ideologies (Blair-Loy, 2001). As a result, women in elite occupations are less likely to be married or have children than their male colleagues or other women (Blair-Loy, 2001; Hewlett, 2002; Nelson & Burke, 2000) which paints a rather problematic picture. We now outline the methods we used to discover how a sample of women deviated from this depiction.

Research Method

A Phenomenological Approach

What is generally termed qualitative research is a series of techniques emphasizing inductive reasoning and aimed at describing, interpreting, and explaining the human experience (Patton, 1990). Qualitative research generally seeks to elaborate on existing theories rather than testing them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to Lee, Mitchell, and Sablynski (1999), it embodies four defining characteristics. First, it occurs in natural settings. Second, the data originates from the participants' subjective experiences. Third, it does not involve standard instrumentation or analysis methods. Finally, and perhaps in sharpest contrast with traditional quantitative approaches, data collection methods are flexible and dynamic, and subject to a process of mutual adjustment with data analysis procedures.

In this qualitative study, our goal was to discover how professionally successful women combined work and family. We gathered interview data on the ways that they advanced in their career while maintaining a sense of balance between their public and personal lives. Our method was phenomenological in that it emphasized the highly personal "lifeworlds" of our subjects, the richness of their experiences, and the idiosyncratic nature of work-family balance (Goldstein, 2006; Suddaby, 2006).

Data Collection

Our study targeted senior-level women in intimate relationships, whether or not these involved marriage or children, although they did for most of our subjects. We defined senior status as one of the top five organizational echelons (Gersick & Kram, 2002). Because the qualitative nature of the study dictated theoretical, as opposed to random, sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we used referral to collect our data (Welch, 1975). We first identified eligible personal and professional contacts and sent them invitations to participate. Then, and consistent with the snowball technique, each interviewee was asked to recommend other individuals, a process that we concluded at theoretical

saturation (Lee et al., 1999). The data started showing signs of redundancy around the 19th interview, particularly in terms of the emergence of organizational support, family support, and common attitudinal characteristics as distinct categories. We nevertheless continued recruitment and concluded referral at 25 subjects.

Subjects

Regarding professional responsibilities, 9 of our subjects held titles with the term "Director," 8 with the term "Vice President," and 5 with the terms "President" or "CEO" across a range of organizations (mostly businesses, five governmental organizations, and three nonprofits) and a variety of industries including consulting, education, and technology. Companies ranged from small entrepreneurial outfits to large corporations. Most subjects (14) were promoted from within their organizations to their current position; 7 were hired externally, and the remaining founded the business. The women in our sample worked long hours, 48.84 hours at the office ($SD = 9.68$), 10 at home ($SD = 10.03$), and another 9.20 on housework ($SD = 9.31$) each week on average. They are seasoned executives with 11.60 years of executive experience ($SD = 6.12$) and 6.18 years on average in their current position ($SD = 4.42$). They are also highly educated. All but one have at least a bachelor's degree; 8 have a master's and 6 a doctoral degree. The majority (18) earned over \$100,000 annually, with 6 earning over \$250,000.

Our subjects, whose ages ranged from 30 to 67 years, were also engaged in demanding family lives. Twenty-three of the 25 women are in enduring marriages; one divorced for lack of support and was remarried, and another was divorced (also for lack of spousal career support) and currently in a stable intimate relationship. Subjects were married for 19.18 years on average at the time of the study, and 20 of the 25 couples had children. Finally, most of the women's partners were employed full-time whether in their own business, a full-time profession, or in an executive position. Only two spouses were retired and at home.

Interview Procedures

Our phenomenological interviews probed the women's subjective experiences of career advancement and balancing work and nonwork demands (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). We tried to maximize subject-researcher trust by beginning the interview with neutral questions (e.g., "Can you describe for us a typical workweek?") before moving to the subjects' career histories (e.g., "How would you describe your rise to your current position?"), the stresses encountered in their present positions (e.g., "What would you say are the most stressful aspects of your job?"), and the work and nonwork ways of dealing with these stressors (e.g., "Which resources were most helpful in helping you cope with the demands of your job?"). Towards the end of the interview, we asked our subjects to reflect on lessons learned along the way on managing the demands of an ambitious career with the pursuit of intimate family relationships. The semi-structured interview format ensured that certain themes were addressed while allowing the subjects to describe their experiences at length and to bring up incidents and feelings they felt were relevant. The interview protocol was pretested with a research assistant with minor changes resulting. Consistent with inductive approaches, we maintained the flexibility to explore additional questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We conducted 22 interviews by telephone and 3 in person, each averaging about an hour. The respondents formally agreed to have the interview audiotaped, and assurances of confidentiality were reiterated. The subjects also completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

Thematic Analysis

Qualitative data analysis generally involves a process of data reduction that seeks to enhance the data's meaning. The data is evaluated, simplified, and then reconstituted (Lee et al., 1999). More specific to phenomenological studies, data analysis begins with a holistic interpretation of the subjects' experiences through scrutiny of the raw data (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, the audiotapes were transcribed while preserving subjects' anonymity. The first

author carefully read each transcript to identify the women's career advancement and life balance strategies and recorded each distinct idea on an index card. The cards were then organized into categories such that cards in one category referred to similar themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). This process resulted in five career advancement categories and four life balance categories. Then, the lead author counted the ideas and categories across the corpus of transcripts.

To ensure the reliability of the categorization process, the index cards were randomly transcribed into an Excel sheet and emailed via attachment to the second author, who sorted them into the five emerging career advancement categories and the four life balance categories. This allowed us to compute a percentage of agreement using the p statistic (number of correctly sorted cards / total number of cards) (Light, 1971). Overall, the two authors agreed on 44 of the 54 ideas (82%), and then examined each of the 10 ideas on which there had been disagreement and reached a consensus on its most appropriate placement. Then, we collectively examined the content and label of each category to determine internal consistency and revised the labeling and categorization as needed, resulting in the four career advancement and four life balance categories that we describe next.

Findings

Career Advancement

In order of frequency, the four emerging categories for career advancement were Organizational Support, Family Support, Attitude, and Social/Vocational Support (see Table 1 for categories, frequencies, and exemplary statements).

Organizational support. Support from the organization and its members was the most frequently alluded to career advancement category. Eighteen women referred to their employer's role in their advancement. An organization's recognition of achievement, awareness of employees' needs for balance and empowerment, and sponsorship of educational endeavors

were cited as manifestations of a supportive workplace. Moreover, the networks of supportive individuals produced by such workplace cultures were very much a source of social support for our subjects. Several stressed the importance of professional relationships, whether in the organization or in the industry in general, as critical to their advancement and to the quality of their work experiences. The women recognized that time and efforts were needed to nurture these relationships and that they needed to resist the occasional temptation to “burn bridges.” The gradual isolation of upward advancement also required vigilance as to whom they associated with:

You have to surround yourself with people who are willing to be critical... as opposed to just having people who will tell you everything is fine because I think you can become increasingly more 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. (# 13)

Lastly, support from senior organizational members emerged vigorously from the thematic analysis. Our subjects referred to having “excellent bosses” who recognized talent irrespective of gender and who set examples as to what to do (and sometimes what not to do):

I had a wonderful boss. I mean he taught me so so much.... There was no difference between a man and a woman working for him, I mean he treated us all with dignity and respect.... He said his goal was to have us know more than he did.... I went along to other male bosses, who were not quite that understanding. (#18)

When these senior colleagues were mentors, they were often described by our subjects as their “champions.” One executive consultant was particularly thrilled to have a female mentor in one of her first corporate positions:

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. (# 22)

Family support. The women in our study cited several manifestations of family support that permitted their advancement. Most prevalent was the presence of a supportive husband or intimate partner. The subjects frequently described their intimate partners as “supportive” or “very supportive,” and that support came in many forms, including financial, professional, or emotional. What makes these husbands take on the non-traditional role of supporter? Some women alluded to the man’s generation and the era of social change in which he was raised, the role of his working mother in shaping his views on gender, or simply his “enlightened” mind. One described the ideal man for a career-oriented woman:

Be with a strong man, with a strong sense of values, a respect for other individuals, [who] will treat you like a lady and a queen, has that whole chivalry thing down, is not insecure. Everybody has some insecurities, but if you’re basic thing is insecure, that’s not going to work. Someone that sees the two of you as a win-win scenario. (# 6)

Another subject, senior vice president of a large telecommunications company, described rather dramatically how the choice of the husband was probably “the most important decision” to make in trying to combine work and family:

I think it’s easy to not realize that the most important decision you make is who you marry.... If you’re in a relationship that is not a... not a good relationship, it is just.... I think things can really start to crumble, no matter who you are. (# 12)

The support of the women’s parents was also mentioned as a significant source of career support. The subjects talked about how they were raised, the examples set by their parents, their invaluable advice, and their inculcation of the belief that their children could do anything they set out to do:

Without a doubt, the way I was raised. I was raised not, "Are you going to college?", but "What college are you going to?" It was always very, "follow your dreams and aspire to do your best and what you are is God's gift to you and what you make of yourself is your gift to God."
(# 6)

Regarding children, a few women mentioned that their career advancement would not have been possible had they had any. One of our subjects, executive director of a large nonprofit educational organization, said, "I don't have children, and I think at some level, I don't know how I would manage the same life having children in it. I think that's had a big impact" (# 2). Conversely, one executive vice president of a consulting firm mentioned that her children were actually very supportive of her professional dedication:

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, and I don't think you can separate them. (# 9)

Attitude. A variety of personal attitudes, outlooks on life, and learning styles underlying career advancement emerged from our analyses as well, which we collectively labeled "Attitude." The following gathered some frequency: Working hard ("hustling"), a passion for one's work and an ethical sense ("a core of integrity"), and learning from others. Others explained their professional success as stemming from luck, opportunities along the way, or innate leadership qualities:

I think part of it is a mindset. Nothing seems to me insurmountable. Things can be overwhelming at times, things can be huge, but it's always like, you buckle down and work through it. So I think that mindset is very important. (# 6).

Nevertheless, the road to the top could indeed be a lonely one:

I don't think anyone helped me. I think I went after people that I admired and learned from them. I learned as much from people that weren't very good... learned what not to do. But... no one ever said to me, "We're going to take you to the next level." (# 13)

Social/vocational support. Outside of the employing organization and family, the women referred to other social and institutional factors that helped their advancement, citing, for example, gaining valuable experience and furthering their education which one described as "paper credentials" that "sound good to people" while another stated that they provided "stamps of authentication" (#23). Finally, other social and vocational support came from friends, leadership institutes, and executive coaches.

Life Balance

In the area of life balance, the four inductive categories that emerged in order of frequency were Life Balance Tactics, Family Support, Attitude, and Organizational Support (see Table 2 for categories, frequencies, and exemplary statements).

Life balance tactics. The majority of our subjects alluded to a variety of tactics they followed in positioning their working life relative to their private roles as wife, partner, or mother. If there was any agreement at all, it was on the notion that one should craft the kind of “balance” that reflects one’s values and aspirations. There were simply “no rules to success”:

Trust your gut and throw the rules out the window.... We have all these rules and they just don’t exist, not really. I mean obviously you can’t operate unless you graduate from medical school and you’re a certified surgeon. But beyond that, we confine ourselves too much to these invisible bars around us. We create our own obstacles. (# 24)

Whether expressed as work-life balance, life balance, or having it all, the subjects stressed that this state of affairs is individually defined. For some, it meant that career had to come before family; for others, it was family before work, as was the case for one senior vice president:

I think it’s important to take time when your children are young to step back and spend time with them. There’s plenty of time when they are older that you can get back to investing more time in work. I’ll never regret the fact that I took the time to be with my children when they were younger. (# 19)

Others recognized that intimate relationships “tempered” one’s commitment to work, which ultimately was “healthy”:

Well, I think that the personal sacrifices you make in terms of having an ongoing relationship, either marriage or some sort of other ongoing relationship, is important because it does give you... I was going to say it gives you more balance. Balance is overstating it, but it does require you to temper your commitment to work, which I think is healthy.... I

have a number of friends who have, for whatever reason, never married. And you know, some of these folks are really, really happy and some of these folks are really disappointed.... I recommend being in a marriage and trying to have it all. (# 7)

For others, however, balancing career and family was essential for that woman to be a "whole" person: "you have to be a whole person and I don't think you become a whole person by not balancing both professional and personal lives" (# 9). The potentially symbiotic relationships between career and family were clearly experienced by some of our subjects. Finally, more practical suggestions for combining work and family emerged from our thematic analyses including outsourcing home chores, being organized in the quest to having it all, recognizing that having it all is hard work, being educated about women's options today, and asking questions appropriate to one's life goals.

Family support. The family's role was again mentioned with regards to life balance, specifically the support roles of the parents and of the husband. The importance of the spouse, the need to choose "the right husband," and to communicate with him – "If you can communicate with your spouse, you can get through just about anything" (#19) – were prevalent findings here as well. The spouse's importance for women's life balance *and* career advancement is such that for some, he is described as a key element in a woman's quest to have it all:

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. (# 11)

You've heard the story of the big rocks in the jar, right? You put the big rocks in first, then you put the sand and the little ones so you can fit it all in. So, my experience is, first, have a husband, or spouse that you love and is supportive of you, [and] that you can support as well.

And then have a job you enjoy and do a lot to get organized. And I think that's the way you have to do it to balance it. (# 17)

For other women in our study, life balance involved the children and their support of her quest:

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. (#16)

Attitude. Various attitudes also emerged in the life balance area, this time including beliefs regarding whether women could and should have it all rather than the concrete tactics employed in this pursuit (which were captured earlier; see the Life Balance Tactics category). Predominant among these is the belief that choosing to pursue a career was simply not antithetical to having a partner and raising a family:

I think a lot of women have given up romance and given up femininity and given up being mothers so they can be career women. But that's one-dimensional and that's not true to who they are. 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. (# 6)

With wanting to have it all, however, comes a need to be focused on the end goals, occasionally stepping back to regain some perspective, taking risks in redesigning one's life, and rejecting common notions that having it all means doing it all or doing it all perfectly well: "We used to hear the phrase "superwoman" back in the seventies... and I've noticed over the years, especially interviewing women for positions, that a lot of women are not wanting to be the superwoman anymore" (# 10).

The need to navigate through the judgments, expectations, and occasional criticisms of other people, in particular other parents with presumably less demanding careers and/or more intense parenting styles, and to sometimes rationalize a different approach to mothering, was described rather poignantly by one of our subjects, a corporate vice president:

You also can't be worried about people judging you. I can't tell you how many times I've had people say things that aren't pleasant based on their judgments.... But there was this one awful woman who saw me... and she had done this great job with this play.... And I said, "You did an amazing job with this play, you should be so proud of yourself. It was almost like a professional production." She said, "Oh, thank you. You know it's funny," she said, "You don't do anything at all, do you?" And I was like "Oh." And she said "Because the other parents, the other moms that I've met, they don't even know who you are. You do nothing with your kid at the school." [She laughs] And I looked at her and I said, "You know, aren't I blessed that there are people like you in [her son's name] life to be able to do that for him, so thank you." ... It was just really horrible and then afterwards I realized, you know what, I'm there for my kids, but in different ways. (# 12)

Organizational support. This last category was mentioned by four subjects who alluded to the company's flexibility and the staff's support as helpful in allowing them to achieve life balance. We now move to a discussion of these results.

Discussion

While professional success for men almost systematically implies a family life, the opposite often holds true for women. Given lopsided gender norms in the workplace and in the home, women's professional success can mean singlehood, childlessness, and regret (Hewlett, 2002). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover how a group of executive women diverged from this scenario and managed to advance to the most

senior organizational levels while creating and maintaining a family life. An aura of mystery and magic seems to surround this balancing act. Consider the statement of one of Brett and Stroh's (2003) 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" (p. 76). Our findings, though restricted to a small, nonrandom sample, offer a measure of optimism that given the right support system from home, work, and society and a can-do attitude, women can indeed combine executive status and family.

An exploration such as this one is important for several reasons. First, despite much progress with gender equity, few women make it to the top organizational levels, and family reasons are frequently the reason why. When women have families, they have a much harder time than men meeting the long work hours, face time, and travel required to advance. Conversely, women on the road to the executive suite also need to struggle with a host of gender norms that make it difficult for them to marry and mother. And yet there are women for whom career did not unfold at the expense of family. In this study, we sought to discover how these women went about it, and we found three critical components, specifically organizational support, family support, and attitude.

Organizational support emerged as the critical category for career advancement. Eighteen women mentioned that the organization's policies and culture and the support of its members were critical to their advancement. The importance of mentoring emerged here, consistent with research. In contrast, only four women mentioned the role of the organization in promoting their sense of life balance. Maybe the more an individual progresses through the ranks, the less he or she relies on the organization for work-life concerns.

Conversely, family support, particularly from husbands and parents, made comparable contributions to career advancement and women's sense of balance. The emphasis that women placed on carefully choosing the

spouse and continuously communicating and negotiating family roles with him attests to his importance in the quest to balance career and family. The foundational role played by the parents also appeared in the data. Parental support helped these women achieve educationally and professionally, and when their own family needs arose, these parents provided instrumental help around the house and with the children.

In addition to organizational and family support, our subjects mentioned support from educational institutions, friends, coaches, and colleagues in the business and in professional organizations. Though these findings apply to a specific sample, they clearly signify that a diversified network of social support, a village indeed, is necessary for women's ability to buffer the stressful demands of an executive career and to have a fulfilling family life. This "village" concept runs counter to 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 & Dunn-Jensen, 2005, p. 6). Indeed, if coping "is a general way of addressing everyday life challenges" (Monnier, Stone, Hobfoll, & Johnson, 1998, p. 1), then women's approach is marked by a pattern of "tend-and-befriend," meaning nurturing activities that reduce distress (tend) and create social networks that aid in the process (befriending) (Taylor et al., 2000), a pattern clearly evidenced here.

Moreover, a series of tactics that our subjects used to balance the often-competing demands of work and of family emerged in our analyses. The recognition that "having it all" is a personally designed vision of one's life did not escape our subjects; however, it seemed that career or family had to come before the other. Some mentioned that delaying marriage or motherhood was necessary for their advancement. For others, career could wait until the children grew up. They define success differently from men (Fielden & Cooper, 2001) and clearly eschewed the linear career model, adopting "kaleidoscope" careers to respond to their family responsibilities (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). Their absences from the workforce, despite

incurring financial and career setbacks, do not seem to bother them (Reitman & Schneer, 2005).

There is also evidence that family may be particularly more important than career for women on the rise (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Vere, 2007). The question remains, though: is that a reaction to having been told repeatedly that “having it all” is a “myth” or a true shift in values? It is understandable that women would not even try having it all given that the popular press and scientific research both “caution that career women will fail to get married, or, if they do get married, will be unable to have children, will be bad mothers. They will somehow fail to fulfill the feminine role” (Fels, 2004, p. 56). Thus, one critical component to having it all is simply women’s belief that they are entitled to seeking it. Finally, and regardless which is given temporal priority, there remain certain practices that women seeking to combine career and family must espouse including being educated about their work-family options, being extremely organized about having it all, and outsourcing as much of the housework as possible.

Limitations

Although our encouraging findings seem intuitively valid, we must caution against generalizing them without reservation. Qualitative results often unearth unexpected insights, but they do not permit researchers to make valid speculations about other samples and settings. For example, because many executive women are single and childless (Hewlett, 2002), the work-life strategies of our subjects – women in relationships, most of them mothers – should be carefully generalized. Additionally, our sample included mainly White, heterosexual women, preventing our outcomes from being generalizable to other demographic groups.

Second, our sample was small and nonrandom but composed of individuals who are understudied in the literature and somewhat inaccessible. Qualitative studies are often conducted on such groups given that analytical depth rather than generalizability is what is sought.

Finally, a concern with any study relying intensively on self-reports is that of biased responding. Our subjects' reports may have overestimated their contributions to their own success, which occurs because it is easier for individuals to remember theirs than those of others (Ross & Sicoly, 1979). However, the fact that our subjects mentioned social support alongside their own attitudes and behaviors lead us to believe that this probably did not occur.

Conclusion

With these limitations in mind, what do these findings mean? The experiences of our subjects indeed lead us to question the conventional wisdom regarding women's career success and their relinquishing of intimacy and motherhood. In our opinion, they invite us to revisit the assumption that a career comes at a heavy price in the home domain and to reframe the debate away from whether combining career and family is possible to a better understanding of how some women manage to do it. Research has already demonstrated that work experiences are an important component of women's lives and contribute to their self-esteem and well-being in ways that family experiences cannot (Brett & Stroh, 2003; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Multiple roles enhance the well-being of both men and women by providing access to alternative sources of support, gratification, and social interaction (Fielden & Cooper, 2001; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002). Our understanding of how women combine these roles in a manner that causes them to be mutually reinforcing is comparably less understood. In this study, the supportive role of the organization and the family coupled with certain behaviors and attitudes adopted by women seem to promise a much better understanding of how they can go about seeking personal and professional fulfillment. The power of one woman to have an executive career and a family is really the power of many, including her family, her employer, her significant other, her social network, and her own attitudes about combining executive work with a family life. We hope this study begins a process of renewed optimism in women's ability to have it all.

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