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Scaling Back: Dual-Earner Couples' Work-Family Strategies

Recent work has focused substantially on one subset of dual-earners, the high-powered two-career couple. We use in-depth interviews with more than 100 people in middle-class dual-earner couples in upstate New York to investigate the range of couples' work-family strategies. We find that the majority are not pursuing two high-powered careers but are typically engaged in what we call scaling back—strategies that reduce and restructure the couple's commitment to paid work over the life course, and thereby buffer the family from work encroachments. We identify three separate scaling-back strategies: placing limits; having a one-job, one-career marriage; and trading off. Our findings support and extend other research by documenting how gender and life-course factors shape work-family strategies. Wives disproportionately do the scaling back, although in some couples husbands and wives trade family and career responsibilities over the life course. Those in the early childrearing phase are most apt to scale back, but a significant proportion of couples at other life stages also use these work-family strategies.

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In a recent review of the literature on dual-earner couples, Spain and Bianchi (1996) note that the "problem" of the dual-earner couple typically has been framed as a woman's problem of balancing work and family. Some studies of dual-earner couples have focused on the second shift because women retain the primary responsibility for housework and child-care (Brines, 1994; Gerson, 1985; Hertz, 1986; Hochschild, 1989). Other studies emphasize the higher stress and reduced occupational advancement for women in dual-earner marriages or, conversely, examine the positive effects of employment for such women's emotional and physical health (Barnett, 1994; Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Wethington & Kessler, 1989; and see reviews by Moen, 1992; Spain & Bianchi, 1996).

Another body of theory and research has focused on adaptive strategies in managing the experiences of family life for both men and women. Building on Hill (1970), this work emphasizes the processes through which family members actively construct and modify their roles, resources, and relationships (cf. Goode, 1960; Moen & Wethington, 1992). Researchers in the 1980s and early 1990s identified a broad range of coping strategies and repertoires, including gender and life-stage differences in individual coping styles (e.g., Gilbert, 1988; Schnittger & Bird, 1990; Skinner & McCubbin, 1991). How do these insights apply to couple-level strategies used to manage the work-family interface?

Recent studies paint conflicting pictures of work-family strategies in dual-earner couples. *The Time Bind* (Hochschild, 1997) is an ethnographic account

of couples with one partner working at Amerco, a "greedy workplace" that demands long hours of work and "face time" (Coser, 1974; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Hochschild finds employees identifying home as a place of stress and unending demands, and identifying work as a pleasant place of friendships and support (cf. Nippert-Eng). Hochschild finds that, instead of resisting the time bind, some people use a couple-level strategy of overcommitment to work that reproduces it (cf. Robinson & Godbey, 1997; Schor, 1992). Hochschild examines the strategic choices of some dual-earner couples, but cannot identify the entire range of strategies that working couples employ.

Barnett and Rivers' (1996) work seems to indicate that the strategy of working more to avoid stress at home is not a typical one. In their study of Boston-area two-earner couples in which both spouses work full-time, they find that respondents have warm and loving relationships with their children, satisfaction in their marriage and parenting, and more stability in their incomes due to the buffering that two jobs provides in an uncertain economy (cf. Schwartz, 1994). They attribute much of society's concern over dual-earner couples to a thinly disguised discomfort with the rapid change in women's roles, and they urge the development of policies that help dual-earner couples find the flexibility they need to have successful careers and rewarding family lives.

High-profile books like *The Time Bind* and *She Works, He Works* (Barnett & Rivers, 1996) not only influence a generation of new academics but also generate a great deal of popular interest and carry weight with business and policy elites. They move beyond a focus on the strain model of work-family conflict to examine the strategies of action that dual-earner couples use to manage their work and family responsibilities (cf. Moen & Wethington, 1992; Swidler, 1986). Together they voice two sides of the contemporary social problem framing of research on dual-earner couples (cf. Furstenberg, 1998).

We draw on data from in-depth interviews with members of middle-class dual-earner couples in upstate New York to build on the idea of the family as a locus of strategic actions that may shift and change at different points during the life course. We focus on neither the problems nor the benefits of the dual-earner arrangement, but, rather, on understanding how couples describe their adaptations, and how this varies by gender and life stage (cf. Schnittger & Bird, 1990). We find that couples are using a variety of adaptive strategies to manage day-to-day aspects of their work and family lives, most de-

signed to achieve what we call scaling back, or buffering their family lives from the ever-increasing demands of work. These strategies vary by career stage and the presence or absence of young children in the home and are influenced by prevailing gender norms.

Our findings build on and extend an existing body of literature that documents how families actively construct their own environments through strategic action (Moen & Wethington, 1992.) Our evidence challenges the overgeneralizations about all dual-earner couples based on the experiences of a small group of privileged couples in which both spouses are pursuing high-powered careers.

STUDYING THE ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES OF MIDDLE-CLASS DUAL-EARNER COUPLES

The Cornell Couples and Careers Study draws on data from focus groups and in-depth interviews conducted in 1997 and 1998 with members of dual-earner couples in upstate New York. We focus on middle-class couples. Our goal is to understand how those with the most resources—middle-class managers and professionals and their spouses—think about and strategize their lives. Lamont (1992) notes that college-educated managers, professionals, and business persons are likely to be gatekeepers in organizations and professions, controlling valuable resources and setting a general style through the perpetuation of their values via the mass media. (See Lamont pp. 1-14 for discussion.) This is true not only for professionals and policy elites in places like New York City and Washington, DC but also for the middle-class professionals who comprise the elite in the majority of occupational and residential settings, including small towns and mid-sized, regional cities. The work-family strategies of the kinds of dual-earner couples whom we study may have a social impact beyond their own lives.

We use couples as the unit of analysis and we examine their combined strategies and subjective definitions regarding the meshing of work and family in their lives (cf. Hochschild, 1997). We attempt to understand how work-family strategies of couples differ or remain the same at various stages of the life course (Moen & Wethington, 1992; Moen & Yu, in press). Our goal is to conceptualize dual-earner couples as decision-making units, to understand couples' patterns of and plans for meshing work and family across the life course as they interweave work and family careers (cf. Han & Moen, 1997, 1999).

Respondents are employees from seven up-state New York companies that are participating in the Cornell Couples and Careers Study—two educational institutions, three private industry firms, two health-care organizations. At each company, exempt employees (salaried workers) received letters from their human resources vice-president and from the director of the Cornell study inviting their participation. Those willing to participate replied directly to the Cornell Careers Institute. This procedure, designed to respect the confidentiality of company employee lists, does not permit us to calculate a response rate. Our respondents, however, reflect the range of occupations in the companies polled and include both men and women from a wide range of life stages.

From this pool, respondents were randomly chosen for interviews. For over half the couples profiled (56%), both spouses were interviewed (each singly, not in a pair). In the rest of the couples, either the man or the woman was interviewed. Most interviews were conducted by telephone. The exception is that two couples were interviewed in person, together, due to their strong preference. Interviews were taped and transcribed; transcriptions included an initial summary and for each question a paraphrased answer, along with extended verbatim quotations for most questions.

The analysis reported here is based on 117 interviews with working men and women at various life-course stages who are members of dual-earner couples. Our interviewees range in age from 21 to

67 years of age. Most were in the 25-54 age range. (See Table 1.) About two thirds have children, and one third do not.

We used an open-ended semi-structured interview schedule. Interviews averaged around an hour in length. After ascertaining the respondent's age, marital status, number of children, and current job title, interviewers asked a series of questions about the respondent's employment background and characteristics and how the couple manages work and family responsibilities. The Appendix lists core interview questions. In each case follow-up questions that are not included here might have been asked for clarification, and interviewers were instructed to skip a question if the respondent had answered it in a previous response. In addition, some respondents were asked focus questions at the end of the core questions, if time permitted. These included questions about how they use free time, how they use technologies like cell phones and email to manage their work and family lives, and how they use support networks and other resources.

Answers to the core questions in the Appendix are the primary data used in this analysis. Answers were coded inductively to identify couple-level work-family strategies using Strauss' (1987) guidelines for developing codes that capture the relationship between structural conditions, actors' perceptions, and actors' interactions. The codes were inductive but also shaped by the structure of the interview questions, which asked specifically about both partners' work commitments and whether there

TABLE 1. IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS BY LIFE STAGE

	Anticipatory	Launching	Establishment	Shifting Gears	Total Sample
Age					
Age range (years)	21-30	27-39	35-54	50-62	21-67
Number of interviews	23	26	43	14	117 ^a
Average age (years)	27.6	34.5	43.7	54.1	38.9
Marital status					
Single	8 (34.8%)				14 (12%)
Married or living with partner	15 (65.2%)	26 (100%)	43 (100%)	14 (100%)	103 (88%)
Children					
No children	23 (100%)				40 (34.2%)
Expecting		4 (15.4%)			4 (3.4%)
Children		22 (84.6%)	43 (100%)	14 (100%)	73 (62.4%)
Gender					
Female	14 (60.9%)	16 (61.5%)	20 (46.5%)	10 (71.4%)	68 (58.6%)
Male	9 (39.1%)	10 (38.5%)	23 (53.5%)	4 (28.6%)	48 (41.4%) ^b

Note: *Anticipatory* includes married or single persons aged 21-30 year with no children. *Launching* includes married persons aged 27-39 years with children or expecting children. *Establishment* includes persons aged 35-49 years who are married and have children. *Shifting gears* includes married persons 50-62 years with older children. These life stages are meant to capture meaningful transitions in both career and family formation. For this study, long-term singles and long-term childless persons were not included. A few young singles were asked about their plans for family-formation and career. *N* = 117.

^aIncludes 10 interviews for which we do not have exact age information and one couple interview. ^bDoes not include couple interview.

had been any change in expectations about work and family over the life course. A small group of interviews (15) was used to develop an initial coding scheme. The three broad categories of strategies used here were developed based on this set of interviews, and then the rest of the interviews were coded with this initial scheme. This kind of stepwise coding increases internal validity (Bailey, 1994).

External validity was achieved by having one author code all interviews and the second author code a sample of interviews. Disagreements were adjudicated, and ultimately complete intercoder reliability was achieved. External validity was also achieved by comparing the themes that emerged in the interviews with the themes in the six focus groups (Bailey, 1994). Participants in focus groups were recruited from the same pool as interview respondents; no respondent participated in both an interview and a focus group. Gamson (1992) argues that focus groups reveal the polite social discourse in a given social group on a given issue. The fact that the same themes emerged in focus groups indicates that the work-family strategies that people were willing to talk to us about are the same ones they talk about with each other, and in the same terms. We view this as an indication that these are both articulate and institutionalized strategies.

Our research design is grounded in recent advances in the sociology of culture and in family studies that underscore the importance of subjective meanings in understanding how couples mesh the various aspects of their lives and the role of strategic adaptation to structural constraints. Do couples employ taken-for-granted responses in managing work and family, or do they engage in conscious,

reflexive action? Moen and Wethington (1992) argue that adaptive strategies of households play a creative role in shaping social change. Some of the working definitions of a good family life or a good career that emerge in couples' repertoires of work-family strategies in a period of social change become institutionalized and shape the subsequent repertoire of strategies available for future generations (cf. Swidler, 1986; Wuthnow, 1989). Employees, employers, policymakers and scholars both build on and revise this conventional wisdom about the problems and the appropriate solutions associated with dual-earner family life.

FINDINGS

Scaling Back

The conventional depiction of middle-class working couples, especially those in professional or managerial jobs, is of two people heavily invested in climbing their respective career ladders (Hochschild, 1997; Kanter, 1977; Pleck, 1985; Pleck & Staines, 1985; Schor, 1992). But only a few couples in our study fit this stereotypical picture, forging ahead with two demanding careers. They were almost all childless couples in their 20s and 30s or those in their 50s and 60s whose young adult children no longer lived at home. There were several couples with preschoolers who were aggressively pursuing two careers and who relied on full-time paid child-care and other paid household services. Their strategy of hiring a "wife" underscores the difficulty of managing two absorbing careers while simultaneously raising young children.

TABLE 2. SCALING BACK: THREE WORK-FAMILY STRATEGIES

Strategy	Behavioral Correlates	Status Correlates
Placing Limits	Limiting work encroachments on home time Limiting number of hours worked Refusing to put in "face time" or overtime Turning down jobs with more travel Turning down promotions requiring relocation	Both couple strategy and individual spouse's strategy (typically wives). For women, occurs in all life stages but especially associated with birth of first child; for men, triggered by parenting experiences and career establishment.
Job versus Career	One primary breadwinner (career), one job Person with job: is primary caregiver or primarily responsible for home often moves to follow spouse's career opportunities can reduce time worked or while children are small Often a traditionally gendered strategy (male career, female job), but there are exceptions	Individual strategy (66% wives)—but see trading off below. Life stage: launching and shifting gears. For men, career-to-job switch triggered by chance events.
Trading off	Job versus career Placing limits or who has the job and who has the career changes over time, due to career opportunities or life-course-related events; accompanied by a shift in childrearing and home responsibilities	Couple strategy Life stage: throughout the life course, couples trade off job and career statuses.

Most of the couples we interviewed, especially those raising children, were involved in scaling back one or both set of career expectations and activities. Our analysis reveals three specific couple-level strategies of scaling back designed to limit work involvement: placing limits, distinguishing between a job and a career, and trading off (see Table 2). Our data underscore the processes by which dual-earner couples strive to keep home bounded and protected from work encroachments (Nippert-Eng, 1996).

The decision to scale back appears to be reflexive and conscious. The couples we interviewed recognized the demanding nature of contemporary careers and were consciously trying to buffer family life from too many work demands, while at the same time maintaining two ties to the work-force. One woman in her 30s, without children and on the staff of a major university, gave a good summary of the tensions that most of the people we talked to expressed when she told us that her biggest challenge is:

balancing the commitment I feel to both [my husband and my work]. Successfully doing my job to the point I feel it can be done, without being a workaholic, spending enough time with my husband. Getting out of work at a reasonable hour so that we can sit down every night and have a meal together and talk, see where we both are for the day. That's important to me, . . . but it's hard . . . *The work drives my ability to get out of the office and spend time with family* [italics added].

It was this sense of resisting the demands of a greedy workplace that caused us to label these strategies as scaling back. Respondents were resisting the expectations of a 60—or more—hour work week inherent in many professional careers.

With varying degrees of success, the couples we interviewed were beginning to question—explicitly and in practice—the hierarchy of values that places the demands of work over those of family. The specific strategies they employed—placing limits, having a one-job-one-career marriage, and trading off—for the most part emerged as pragmatic responses to specific decision points that varied over the life course. If the decision to scale back was often a conscious one, the specific manner in which scaling back was achieved was pragmatic and often unremarked.

About 75% of the people that we interviewed reported using at least one of these three scaling-back strategies. Some employed more than one. Typically these strategies operated in tandem with

an egalitarian gender ideology and a companionate model of marriage, although in practice these strategies often led to traditionally gendered roles for men and women. Scaling back was also linked to life-course stages and transitions, particularly the bearing and raising of children. Although not everyone who was scaling back had children, virtually everyone raising children was engaged in at least one strategy to scale back the couple's combined commitment to work.

Moreover, these strategies for scaling back the couple's total work commitments tended to be deployed along with a bundle of other strategies for scaling back or lowering expectations in other areas of life. These included limiting the number of children, reducing social commitments and service work, having less leisure time, and reducing expectations for housework. As one woman said during the first focus group, "You can't eat off my floors, but that's not what they're for." This scaling-back of housework often is interpreted as a problem in popular media accounts, but a feminist analysis might applaud any indication of a reversal of the 20th-century trend in the expansion of women's household labor, despite the invention of labor-saving technologies (cf. Brines, 1994; Collins, 1992; Hoy, 1995).

Placing Limits

In general, people manage multiple and contradictory roles and obligations by placing what they see as reasonable limits on the demands that drive them (cf. Goode, 1960). Just over a third of those we spoke with told us about placing limits on the number of hours they work and reducing long-term expectations for career advancement in order to spend more time with family. Others, particularly those with young children, refused to take a new job or a promotion because it would involve too much travel or a relocation that would disrupt their children's lives or their spouse's career. Some talked about refusing to engage in the materialism that they associated with a fast-paced life where career comes first.

Some specifically relocated to (or remained in) upstate New York, deliberately foregoing the style of life they associated with larger cities like New York or Washington, DC. We interpret this to mean that scaling-back may be a regional or context-dependent set of work-family strategies. These forms of placing limits were, for the most part, couple strategies, not just individual strategies. Both partners placed limits on work over the course of

their lives, or both partners agreed that one spouse would limit his or her work-time investment.

For example, a few have dropped out of fast-track jobs to be more family centered, like this man who is a software engineer in a small start-up company:

I was a high-riser at RCA and gave it up to try an entrepreneurial thing that had lower pay, much higher risk. I wasn't thinking money, just career freedom, and a different lifestyle than living in central New Jersey. So I voted with my feet, I came here, chose a less-stressful lifestyle, work 45 hours a week at most, focus more on stuff outside of work than many of my friends.

Although this engineer did not yet have children, it was in part the anticipation of raising a family that drove his strategic choices. He described himself as more family centered than his wife, ready to start having children and to be an equal co-parent in raising them. For this man, both getting out of a large company and moving to a small town were key to his ability to actually live according to his values—with family and friends as important as work. His wife, quoted above on the importance of getting out of work “at a reasonable hour,” described herself as more career focused than her husband, in part because she had not reached the point in her career where she had the respect and autonomy she desired. Nevertheless, she agreed that living in a smaller town and spending their evenings and weekends with friends and family or working together to rehabilitate the old house they bought were more important than trying a fast-track, large-city-centered, career-oriented life, especially because they planned to have children in the next few years.

Others reported reducing their working hours due to family demands. Two women in their 40s, both managers in large companies, talked about strategies for cutting back hours. One told us that, despite the pressure to put in face time, she had refused to work weekends when her two children were younger, instead putting in more time only when her children entered high school. The other manager said, “I believe very strongly that you don't have to put [in] sixty hours to do a good job. I refuse to do this. I don't believe in staying if I don't have work to do.”

This woman said that she patterned her choices on those of a former boss, a man who “put his family ahead of his job and still continued to do well.” She tried for efficiency and would come in early or work during lunch if need be, but she would not “play the game of staying later than my boss.” She

felt that her performance spoke for itself and that resisting the overtime pressure in her department and living by her own values about working “reasonable, efficient hours” had not hurt her. She had received five promotions in five years.

Only a third of those who talked about placing limits were men. This was almost always associated with their experiences of fathering and a desire to spend more time with their children. Most of the men who were placing limits were in their 40s, and many contrasted their experiences of spending time with their children with their own experiences growing up. When a manager in a large company, who had two school-aged children, told us he really wanted to “be there for the special things” like recitals, school plays, and baseball games because his father never was for him, he echoed a common theme.

Two thirds of those placing limits were women. Not surprisingly, women were more likely to turn down a job that required a move or more travel or were more likely to reduce working hours while their children were at home (cf. Bielby & Bielby, 1992). For women, placing limits was most typically associated with having young children at home. However, unlike male respondents, a significant portion of the women we spoke with placed limits on paid employment across all ages and life-course stages, even when there were no children in the home.

Placing limits is similar to the work-family strategies that Hertz (1986) noted. Our study suggests that this strategy has become institutionalized among dual-earner professional and managerial couples. Despite being a common strategy, it is not an easy one to implement. It requires more flexibility and autonomy than even many managers and professionals have and years of concerted, coordinated effort. One of our respondents managed a child-care center at a large organization and was married to a man who worked for the federal government. In their late 40s, they had school-aged children. They both worked 40–45 hours a week, and both reported finding their jobs challenging and interesting. Between them they worked one weekend and three to four evenings a month. She described this as “a great life,” and she told us that it allowed her to meet her life-long goals to have both children and a “great job.”

But in her description of both her own and her husband's career trajectories, it is possible to see just how much effort went into achieving this great life, with enough time for all the important things. Along the way, she suffered serious depression after going back to work when her daughter was

born. They have had several career-related moves, have gone through periods of greatly reduced income and underemployment, and have experienced their own time-bind, like the year when both she and her husband were working full-time and had two preschoolers at home, and he was finishing the written work for his doctorate. She described their present life as the consequence of both "perseverance and luck" in finally finding jobs that are good for each of them yet compatible with their goal of having a rich and rewarding family life.

Job versus Career

The people we interviewed typically found it difficult to articulate an ideal family life. But if what it means to have an ideal family is variable or pluralistic (Skolnick, 1991), most of those we interviewed did have some sense that, in their working lives, what is ideal is more than just a job—it is a career. Not everyone saw themselves as having a career, and some said that they preferred not to pursue a career for family reasons. But virtually everyone in this sample of middle-class dual-earner couples seemed to understand the distinction between careers and jobs. Jobs were understood to be ad hoc and flexible, more about making money than intrinsic satisfaction. Careers progress in a straight line, and change less often, and are rewarding in themselves.

In almost 40% of the couples we interviewed, one person had what was perceived by both as a job and the other person had what was perceived by both parties as a career. One woman in her 20s who was planning to start a family soon said of her husband's work, "He has more heart into his career. Mine's just a job. I feel this is a job, just to pay the bills." She went on to say that "I like what I do, but I don't really consider it . . . what I was born to do." Her husband, however, did feel that he was born to do his work as a research scientist. One woman who had recently become a mother and was working part-time in a large private company said she "had had a career in the past but now had a job, but would have a career again" when her daughter was older. When asked what distinguished the job from the career, she said, "Nothing. I'm doing the same thing. It's my attitude." Her husband was involved in his own career. She was the one scaling back by negotiating to work part-time, but she saw this as a couple strategy, a choice they made together.

This strategy allowed for flexible timing in at least two important ways. First, it reduced the strain of a job search and relocation on a marriage

because it was generally understood that the person with the career would take advantage of career opportunities when they arose, but the person with the job would follow or accommodate (Bielby & Bielby, 1992). There were variations on this, of course. As one woman said, "I refuse to move without a job; I've seen too many women do that." Even though her husband's career determined where they moved, she would have veto power if she could not find at least a job of her own. The one-job, one-career strategy also allowed one person to drop in and out of work or to rearrange work for short periods in order to raise young children or to respond to specific family crises.

Like placing limits, the job versus career strategy tended to be gendered. In over two-thirds of the couples in our sample who used a one-job, one-career strategy, the woman had the job and the man the career. This strategy was especially prevalent among the older couples we interviewed, those in their 50s and 60s. Older women would tell us that having a job and not a career made it easier for them to fulfill a modified form of the traditional female caretaker role (Hays, 1996), taking time off when they had children, something they perceived as valuable for both their families and themselves.

Although more older couples followed this pattern, this does not simply reflect a cohort difference in women's commitment to paid work. Having a one-job, one-career strategy was common in all life-course stages. Younger women talked about starting out with an egalitarian ideology and major career expectations but confronting situations early in marriage that placed them on a job track, not a career trajectory, often without any planning of this shift in goals. Usually, this was the result of their accommodating the birth of a child. Sometimes, it was as a result of an early career opportunity for the husband, who was already better established or who had a firmer idea of what he wanted his career trajectory to be.

This strategy need not always mean that traditional gender roles are perpetuated. In one third of the cases in which couples adapted in this way, the husband had the job and the wife pursued a career. One woman told us:

We began to realize . . . that my job was going to be the primary job. He tried to work at other jobs during the year, but he wasn't at all happy. So I told him at that point that he had to try to make a go at a career in coaching. Fortunately, he found a part-time job at a college 40 miles away. He hardly earned anything. It was probably less than our babysitting costs. In the meantime, my job was going very well.

The flexibility associated with a job paid off in terms of childcare, as well, for this couple.

My husband spent a lot of time with our son, and that made it easier for me to pursue my work. Between our wonderful nanny and my husband, I felt very supported in my career. If my husband had had a job like mine, it would have bothered me terribly.

The men we interviewed who opted for a job had done so because of specific circumstances that were somewhat exceptional. For example, several in their 30s and 40s found that their own careers foundered when their wives had come across good career opportunities. This kind of chance occurrence, more than any commitment to reversing traditional gender roles, pushed men into the job role and its accompanying responsibilities. For a few older couples, the man's retirement from his primary management job coincided with his wife's spending more time on her own small business or restarting her career. In one or two young couples, this strategy was a response to the woman's opportunity to pursue graduate study in a top-quality program, while the man had not yet decided on his own career path.

In our sample, men who had jobs also took over many of the primary caretaking responsibilities for the children and the household, although they also got help from their wives and sometimes from paid house cleaners and providers of child-care services. This is in contrast to Brines' (1994) finding that, when men's employment is reduced or eliminated, they often do less housework in order to symbolically bolster their gender identity as males. The difference between our findings and Brines's could reflect the degree of control or choice experienced. The men and women pursuing a one-job, one-career strategy in our sample were doing so as a conscious choice, and they felt good about using this strategy to manage the complexities of his work, her work, and their family. Both men and women who had a job and not a career tended to speak of this as a conscious choice and to say that they were happy about having the flexibility to spend more time with their children. In addition, satisfaction with the job role for both men and women may be linked to the perception of this status as temporary. Most told us that they planned to resume a more typical career orientation later. The experiences of other couples in our sample suggest that these expectations are realistic. Many couples did trade who had the job and who had the career over the life course.

Trading Off

For some couples, trading off was part of a larger ideal of egalitarian sharing. It was also a life-course strategy. Couples traded other strategies (such as placing limits and one-job, one-career) over the course of their lives. Just over a third of the couples we spoke with used a strategy of trading off, either between who has the job and who has the career or between who placed limits on work hours to spend more time at home and who did not.

One woman, who followed her husband to graduate school and supported him early in his artistic career, found a challenging and exciting career for herself as assistant controller of a large corporation, just at the point when her husband began to run into career roadblocks. He began doing some freelance art work but focused on home and children while she had the primary career. Her recent promotion caused her to reflect:

He has picked up the slack at home. I don't know what I would have done if he continued with his career and I took on this greater responsibility. We would have figured something out. . . . He has cut back a lot. He is the one who picks up the children and takes them to all their events. He has become involved in the community. He is now a soccer coach for our son's team. He could not have done this. . . . He's cut back on his hours a lot. Right now, he has a few things in the works and eventually will take a new job. His career situation has eased this situation immensely.

This man planned to pick up his career again, not stay in a job as a permanent strategy.

Trading off was also a strategy that allowed couples to readjust from a one-job, one-career marriage to a two-career marriage. In effect, this allowed the couples to have it all, to scale back as needed and yet to manage over the life course to invest in two careers at different life stages. In many cases, a man in his late 40s, 50s, or early 60s had reached a stage in his own career when he had more discretion and was able to place limits on his own work hours without hurting his career. Tenured professors and upper-middle managers told us about coming home early to meet the kids after school or doing more child care and cooking while their wives put in longer hours again, emphasizing their own careers after a period when they had been invested more heavily in home and children.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Dual-earner couples are increasingly the focus of scholarly attention, and the emphasis, especially in

recent work, has been on the full-speed-ahead dual-career couple. Our findings point to a wider range of strategies, even in a sample of managers and professionals who could have been expected to follow a high-powered, two-career lifestyle. Our analysis highlights the importance of incorporating a life-course perspective and a critical analysis of gender into the study of the experiences and strategies of dual-earner couples and suggests a different way to think about the relationship between greedy work and home life for middle-class dual-earner couples.

Gender, the Life Course, and Scaling Back

Our research suggests that people employ specific scaling-back strategies at various life stages and that men and women do so differently. The initial impetus in adopting a one-job, one-career strategy is often the birth of a first child. This strategy is mostly enacted by women. Women's definition of their employment as a job or a career, particularly, is linked to the ages of their children. In contrast, a strategy of placing limits is used by our female respondents at all life-course stages.

For men, placing limits is often triggered by life-stage transitions, particularly parenting experiences or entering a more established phase of their careers. Most of the men using a strategy of placing limits began doing so after they had established themselves in their careers and had achieved an acceptable level of flexibility and autonomy. This reverses the pattern found in the 1970s (Scanzoni, 1980) in which men accrued and retained privileges in marriage as a result of their occupational prestige. But this reversal occurs only for some of the men in our study. In contrast, having a job, for men, seems less linked to a particular life-course stage and more to chance events and turning points in their working lives or their wives' careers (Abbott, 1997). Unlike Brines (1994), we found that men in jobs were willing to pick up the slack at home. The evolving links between life-course stage, gender, and work-family strategies appear to be both complicated and in flux.

Our data underscore the key role that early expectations and chance events—turning points—play in gendering the management of work and family responsibilities over the life course. For example, an important turning point seems to be the discovery by one person early in their career trajectory (roughly in their 20s to early 30s) of an exceptionally good career opportunity. The person whose career takes off first may be the one who subsequently has the

primary career during a significant proportion of the life course. Differential gender socialization shapes this process. A few of the women we interviewed reported always knowing that they would have a high-powered career and arranging their family lives accordingly, but most did not. By contrast, it was more common for men to be career-oriented and on a career track earlier in their lives. (One woman told us her husband knew what his career would be "since he was 3 years old.") More generally, men were less prone than women to a lengthy process of casting about to find the right job or a satisfying career. Despite the egalitarian gender ideology that underlies the strategy of scaling back (Schwartz, 1994), uneven gender outcomes often result.

Work Constraints and Spillover

We found in these interviews an unquestioned primacy of paid work. When we asked people about their ideal careers, they did not usually mention family. But when we asked about their ideal families, most people mentioned work spontaneously. The career that people in our sample envision is the consuming career of the high-powered manager or professional—long hours spent at something seen as demanding and rewarding with linear advancement and domestic life arranged around its demands for mobility. Even if people cannot always attain this, it is the goal for most, and usually at least one person in the couple achieves it.

We also found, as did Hochschild (1997), that a language of time management is being applied to the home. There is a professionalization of the discourse surrounding family life. The ideal family, respondents told us, is one of teamwork, partnership, and fairness where both partners can be challenged and fulfilled. This is remarkably similar to the way in which these managers and professionals talk about their work, emphasizing many of the same aspects that they value in their careers.

Sometimes, this way of managing home life in relationship to overarching occupational demands works out well for all concerned. One man told us laughingly of "Wegman's day," his strategy for making the weekly grocery shopping into fun time with his son, a strategy that arose out of his realization that otherwise there simply is not enough time in a given week for him and his wife to go to work, take care of household needs, and spend time with their children. Wegman's day is a fun and creative solution to time-consuming demands and need not be disparaged simply because it is different from past work-family strategies.

But other examples show the limits of managing the home in the same way that one would manage a problem at work. One woman told us despairingly of the sadness her young son felt when they moved to a new area where both she and her husband were working long hours. She was extremely frustrated because she could not justify taking time off to comfort her son—he was not ill, he was “just sad.” There is no policy for taking time off when children are sad. And her son was not just blue for a little while; he was sad for months. His parents were disturbed, but neither of them seriously felt that they could take a leave to spend time with him to help him adjust to the move. More generally, we found that other patterns, like dropping out of the labor force entirely for long periods while children are young, are either not envisioned or are seldom utilized by our respondents, as is evident in this woman’s remark:

I’d like to not work, to raise my kids, just up until they’re in school, then work part-time while they’re in school, but that’s not going to happen. That’s my dream, but that’s not going to happen.

We did not find in our sample the transfer of emotional allegiance from home to work that Hochschild (1997) found at Amerco. Our respondents are enjoying their work, but they are not spending time there at the expense of home, and they do not enjoy work more than home, nor have they transferred their emotional commitment from family relationships to work friendships. But they do feel that their family time and personal lives are being squeezed by the demands of long working hours. And although the strategies that couples use for the most part reduce the intrusion of work into the home, they also involve some of the time-management aspects of home life that Hochschild finds troubling.

Our evidence suggests the strategy of scaling back has two faces. While some respondents have made a conscious decision to put family first and make serious career sacrifices to accommodate a more holistic sense of their family’s needs, others are scaling back in order to carve out enough time from an encroaching workload to maintain any sense of family relationship at all. Both represent pragmatic choices (cf. Breiger, 1995) in the face of the structural imperatives of the organization of work and the situational imperatives of personal and family relations. Scaling back represents a private, family-level response to what is too often depicted as a private, family-level trouble, rather than a public issue (Mills, 1959).

Private Strategies versus Public Solutions

Scaling-back strategies are privatized in the sense that they take for granted that the solutions to work-family problems must be provided by individuals and families. As such, the dominant theme in talking about family life in these interviews was the value of flexibility. Rather than an ideal family being a specific bundle of roles, relationships, and decisions made by a pre-set routine, an ideal family for these respondents involves flexibility, mutual support, trading off, caring—a certain way of doing things and making decisions that is adaptable and can be applied across a complicated and changing set of conditions and situations. Some respondents said that an ideal family would include children. Others were less in accord even on this point.

Flexibility is what most of these managers and professionals want in the work-place, as well. On the whole, the managers and professionals we spoke with reject the idea that the government should mandate policies to help members of dual-earner couples care for their children or require companies to adopt such family-oriented programs as flex-time and job sharing. Although some younger respondents did call for such reforms, others were more likely to favor on-site day care and extended family leave instead of more radical kinds of changes in the structure of work or careers. These attitudes provide little impetus for policy change. A professional who works in a small office, voicing a typical theme, told us about why he did not like the Family Leave Act:

Everybody is different. The player is different, the workplace is different. If you are sick, you go home. If not, you go to work. . . . [In my group] it’s like 15 or 20 people who are very close and make decisions among themselves, nothing in writing, nothing in contract. If something goes wrong, we are here to back you up. I like that because it goes on faith, as opposed to some piece of paper.

This man has found a supportive environment. Flexibility works for him, with everyone in his office covering for each other when the children are sick or when there is some other home-related emergency.

Yet many of the people in our sample in lower-level managerial jobs told us that they do not have the kind of flexibility that this man had found. These respondents provide an important counter-theme in our interviews: instead of informal workplace understandings that give flexibility, this

group of respondents strongly prefer formal policies that guarantee them rights. Being able to approach one's manager for time off with a sick child puts one in the position of having to request (or even beg for) something that ought to be taken for granted.

Over 10 years ago Hertz (1986) found privatization of work-family strategies among the dual-earner couples she studied. Our study suggests that privatization has become widely institutionalized among middle-class dual-earner couples. Rather than challenging established social hierarchies, privatization is rooted in them. Women reduce their work commitment when they bear and raise children. Even if they resume a more career-oriented focus later, they often have damaged their long-term occupational attainment and have reproduced gender stratification. Privatization is rooted in other forms of social hierarchy, as well. It is a good fit with the interests of businesses because it places the costs of adapting to social change on families instead of employers. It is a good fit with the assumptions of independence and autonomy with which managers and professionals are comfortable, while leaving the needs and preferences lower-level employees unaddressed.

Context and Limitations

Small-scale studies are highly contextual, and one crucial context is the workplace environment. We draw our couples from a variety of company settings in upstate New York, and find a subsequently wider range of work-family strategies than does Hochschild (1997), who draws her sample from just one workplace.

Region is an important aspect of context, as well. Several of our respondents explicitly linked their scaling-back strategies to their decision to live in upstate New York, foregoing the fast-track lifestyle they associated with large metropolises. More people actually live and work in medium-sized cities and small towns like those in upstate New York than live in the large urban centers of Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington, DC. This may be a context that is systematically overlooked by the media and academicians who focus on large urban centers in their analysis of work and family life.

The dual-earner couple is an evolving social form that spans social class, regional, and ethnic boundaries. We have documented a diversity of work-family strategies in one sample of White, middle-class couples, but more study is needed to

document the diversity in work-family strategies across other lines of social division. Scaling back may presuppose a middle-class set of educational and work opportunities. It is common for managers and professionals to put in 60 hours a week or more, and it is this expectation from which our respondents are scaling back.

Small-scale qualitative studies like this one, based on in-depth interviews and observations, generate good accounts of couples' practices and their understandings of those practices. For example, we find couples who are quite conscious and articulate about resisting the demands of workplaces they perceive as greedy. But they are unable to articulate possibilities for a family life not organized around at least one career. They talk about their commitment to egalitarian marriage, but they remain unaware of or silent about the fact that women do more scaling back than men, or that this has long-term adverse consequences for women's careers. It is important to understand the perceptions and the silences of this group of couples because of their social location and the influence they have on myriad institutional and organizational settings. Even here, we found more diversity than expected based on the two-career stereotype, but this is only the beginning of understanding the complexities of the experiences of dual-earner couples.

NOTE

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Also see Appendix on following page.

APPENDIX

CORE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Think back to when you were in school—what were your career plans at that point, or did you have any?
- What happened after you left school—did you start working right away? [Follow-up for major points in job history—any periods of unemployment, etc.]
- Can you briefly describe your current job to me?
- How many hours a week do you typically work?
- What does the term “career” mean to you? Do you think of yourself as having a job or a career?
- Think for a minute about what your ideal job would be like? What is that job? Is it the job you have now? [Follow-up—is this what they envisioned before?]
- Again, thinking back to when you were younger, how did you imagine your family life? What did you think it would be like when you had a family of your own?
- And how did it work out in reality?
- Is your spouse or partner currently working? What does s/he do? How many hours does she or he work in a given week?
- Does your wife [husband] think of herself [himself] as having a job, or a career?
- On a daily basis, who makes sure the family functions?
- And how did you work that out? Was it something you talked about, or did it just work out that way?
- When you think about how you manage work and family right now, are there any persistent problems you don’t seem able to solve?
- All things considered, would you consider yourself more work-centered or family-centered?
- What about your spouse—is s/he more work-centered or more family centered?
- What are some of the things that really work for you, the “best practices” you and your spouse use to manage work and family, or that you see others using?
- Finally, let me ask you, are there any policies you would like to see implemented at your workplace or by the government that would help people like you and your [wife or husband] manage your work and family lives?

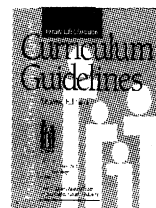
Note: Questions were always asked in the same order. Instructions to interviewers for follow-up questions appear in brackets.

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