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Kerri Cissna-Heath  
*Pepperdine University*

Margaret J. Weber  
*Pepperdine University*

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# The Digital Women's Project at Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Kerri Cissna-Heath and Margaret J. Weber  
Pepperdine University

## Abstract

In 2009, a research group was formed at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology, to explore the competing narratives of women's lives as they balance their work activities with the demands of marriage and motherhood. The ultimate goal of this project was to understand the work life balance issues of women in the workforce. This work is now known as the Digital Women's Project (Weber, 2011) and has collected over 180 interviews of women to explore themes around work-life balance. This phenomenological analysis utilizes a narrative life-course framework created by Giele (2008) to explore identity, relational style, drive and motivation, and adaptive style in order to understand the work-life balance of women. An additional section was added to this framework by the Digital Women's Project to explore strategies that women implement to succeed at work-life balance (Weber, 2011).

This article describes the research project and findings for the analyses of the data by four in-depth studies. One study focused on the competing priorities of African American women to achieve work-life balance. The second was a study on the role of faith in the lives of women. The third study centered on work-life balance issues and the role of mentoring in a male dominated field, contract management - aerospace industry. The final study analyzed the strategies women in leadership use for work-life balance.



## Introduction

At Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology, a research team assembled to unveil the issues surrounding work-life balance of women in the workplace. Women constitute the majority of university students in the U.S. and around the world (Economist, 2006). With the increase in education of women, employment has increased and has influenced the work-life balance of families. Beginning with World War II, there has been an amplified presence of women seeking opportunities for a career which has led to tensions at home and in women's lives as they try to balance the roles of family with a career. Many women have joined men in the provider role and the dual earner family has become the norm (Gornick and Myers 2003). Traditional roles have shifted as women and men are both parents and workers.

The picture of the career women and mother is divided and multi-faceted in research findings and opinions. Some commonly assessed issues are the social implications of the dual roles of females, cultural norms, workplace policies with attention to female-specific hurdles, marital satisfaction in gender roles, social support such as religion, family, and mentoring relationships, and the short and long-term impact on children when a mother chooses the dual work-mother role. Research suggests that marital relationships have become more egalitarian (Bielenski and Wagner, 2004). Other research evidence suggests a large number of well-educated women have left careers for full-time motherhood (Belkin, 2003; Warner, 2005). Cohen and Sok (2007) found a decline in the number of married women with preschoolers who are employed.

In 2009, a research group was formed at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Education and Psychology, to explore the competing narratives of women's lives as they balance their work activities with the demands of marriage and motherhood. The ultimate goal of this project was to understand the work life balance issues of women in the workforce. This work is now known as the Digital Women's Project (Weber, 2011) and has collected over 180 interviews of women to explore themes around work-life balance. This phenomenological analysis utilizes a narrative life-course framework created by Giele (2008) to explore identity, relational style, drive and motivation, and adaptive style in order to understand the work-life balance of women. An additional section was added to this framework by the Digital Women's Project to explore strategies that women implement to succeed at work-life balance (Weber, 2011).



## Review of Literature

### Gender Equality or Inequality

Perceptions of paid work and reproductive work in the family are changing through a new division of labor. Women's life experiences (greater education, fewer children, and participation in the paid labor force) are changing the balance between husbands and wives. Giele (2008) suggests that the traditional marriage norm, where the husband is provider and the authority figure, is challenged by a new ethic of gender equality. This structural change in the economy is creating a more egalitarian life style in marriages.

According to a World Values Survey of 74 societies the postindustrial states are more likely to favor equality in their gender beliefs (Inglehart & Norris, 2003). Giele (2008) explains that the economic explanation for a highly functioning society requires mutual respect and trust. In an advanced economic system, women and/or men can use labor-

saving devices that replace labor in the home, reducing their time for homemaking work thus allowing more time for careers. Giele (2008) states, “Greater interdependence and trust between men and women are thus more likely to develop in modern marriage when they are fostered by similar obligations of the two sexes in both workplace and home” (p. 395).

#### Work-home Issues

Blair-Loy (2003) and Stone (2007) document patterns of successful women who abandon their careers to return home to motherhood. Women may feel forced to choose between devotion to career and to family because the workplace is hostile to compromise. Business and professional women feel rebuffed at every turn and although the media portrays them as leaving their careers by choice, they view themselves as being forced out of the workplace. These political and social failings are represented in the work place as well, creating a disappointingly faulty structure for women to make a decision that benefits both their career and their family. Stone (2007) states that,

Even among women who worked for “family-friendly” companies, it was difficult to request and use the benefits without being marginalized... reluctant bosses who were sympathetic but afraid that using flexibility would “open the floodgates” for everyone, missed opportunities for promotions and plum assignments, and myriad subtle ways that the choice to use family-friendly programs undermined their future career progression. (p. 186)



These difficulties create a dichotomous world for women in their decision-making and the perpetual cultural definition of work-life policies as “accommodations” creates a problematic incompatibility perspective rather than a social issue (2007, p.186). In Blair-Loy’s book, *Competing Devotions: Career and Family among Women Executives*, her criticism of social policies further argues that the dilemma remains with the cultural definitions and models of how women make these decisions. She asserts that the solution cannot be found in the implementation of work-family policies, but must be imbedded in the cultural belief that such policies for corporations and institutions have value beyond their current status (2006).

This complex picture of gender inequality seems to be in contrast with the concept of a growing equality. Goldin (2006) suggests that the opt-out women are a small minority. In a longitudinal study of female college alumnae conducted 15 years after graduation, she found that 79% of the women were still married and that 69% with at least one child had spent only 2.1 years on average out of the workforce. Over 50% of those with children had never had a non-employment time lasting more than six months. Schneider and Waite (2005) studied 500 families with two working parents. Men found time with family to be very satisfying and women were more engaged and happy at work.

Giele studied 48 white and African American college educated women (2008) to understand which women are staying at home and why, and which women continue to combine family and career. Her findings indicate the women who chose to stay at home saw their identity in motherhood. They see their role as dedicated to their family, fulfilling this function of mother in a unique way, which only they can provide. They are weary of any outside help. The career mothers have a contrasting identity. They see themselves

first as workers and are thankful for how their families have rounded out their lives. They welcome support from their husbands and caregivers in raising the children. They were innovative and flexible in finding ways to pursue both work and family life.

West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest that male and female roles are the result of cultural expectations rather than innate propensities. Receiving family encouragement and having positive contacts with the majority group allows for an atypical man or woman to explore their own gifts (Giele, in press). Men and women who rebel against the typical stereotypes usually are supported by like-minded individuals in their church, community or family.

### Theoretical Framework

Various studies regarding work-life balance utilize the narrative and life story approaches, such as Elder and Giele, which stand as the models for this particular study. Giele also refers to the foundation of systems theory (Parsons, 1955). Systems theory encapsulates the concept of all parts working together, embedded in human behaviors. This psychosocial framework suggests an emphasis on the social implications as well as unique psychological differences. This perspective, contributed by Parsons, offers insight to the sociology of personality, creating a fusion for a framework that can adequately explore the reasons some women choose to stay at home. Some argue that feminist thought and systems theory are incompatible. It can be argued that systems theory can be part of the feminist analysis because marginalizing it from intellectual feminism is internally contradictory, and it offers purposeful thoughts toward feminism.

A life course perspective suggests that women who may be similar in age, education, economic position and race may have different values, attitudes, or personal characteristics that might contribute to their decision to seek a career and/or become a homemaker (Elder, 1994; Giele, 2002). Giele (2008) suggests that the life story method provides a way to consider issues of gender role from the combined perspective of systems theory and the life course framework. The life course method enables a framework to question what enables a “minority” individual with inferior, ascribed status to enter a higher “majority” status that has been achieved. Giele (2002) expanded on the life course theoretical framework to develop a set of factors related to life stories and gender roles which she has framed as the life story method. The factors that are critical in shaping individuals’ adult gender roles are sense of identity, relational style, personal drive and motivation, and adaptive style.

### Methodology

The life story method is employed for this study and is qualitative through an interview process. Qualitative methods allow for the collection of a lot of data that can then be themed across the subjects. In this study, questions of four periods in the subject’s lives probe: childhood and adolescence, early adulthood, their current life and future plans. The individual interviews last approximately one hour and are conducted in person or by telephone.

From the breadth of the questions, a variety of themes emerge that provide many possibilities for analysis. The analysis for this study utilizes the theoretical framework from the four life course dimensions: identity, relational style, level and type of motivation, and adaptive style. Following the transcription of all of the data and the coding of

the data using Nvivo software, a composite profile of the themes that characterize the women developed. The findings consider the similarities and differences by age, race, family background, current family, and emphasis on homemaker and career. Nvivo helps connect the socio-demographic data with the qualitative data. From this process, the analysis allowed a comparison with Giele's themes for similarities and differences.

## Results

After the interviews were transcribed and coded, a variety of analysis can occur. In fact, the data has already been analyzed and used for four separate dissertations on varying subject matters. One study focused on the competing priorities of African American women to achieve work-life balance. The second was a study on the role of faith in the lives of women. Another study centered on work-life balance issues and the role of mentoring in a male dominated field, contract management - aerospace industry. Finally, there was a study done on the strategies women in leadership use for work-life balance.

Barge (2011) used data from the Digital Women's Project and published a dissertation titled "A Phenomenological Study of Competing Priorities and African American Women Striving to Achieve Work-Life Balance." Findings from this study confirm that relationships, discrimination, ageism, workplace dynamics, and wellness are among the competing priorities impacting a woman's ability to achieve sustainable balance at home and work. This study challenged previously accepted discourse of scholarship, incorporated new thinking, and facilitated understanding of the historical and socio-economic impact from African American viewpoints (Barge, 2011).

Krymis (2011) focused her dissertation on the "Qualitative analysis of identity, relational style, adaptive style, and drive and motivation, and the role of faith from the narrative life-story framework." The findings indicate that faith is connected to work for women who value faith as a foundational element in their lives, viewing it as part of God's purpose for their lives and derive meaning from that work (Krymis, 2011). The women in this study also valued professional and personal relationships that reflected their own faith and values as part of their coping strategies.

Almestica (2012) wrote her dissertation on "Work-Life Balance Issues and Mentoring Strategies for Women in the Contract Management Profession." The results of the study indicate that even though these professional women may have experienced challenges in their career paths, many, if not all, have accomplished a certain degree of success through learning, perseverance, work and family related coping strategies, motivation, willingness to take risks, and having a mentor (Almestica, 2012). This study revealed that even though women have made progress in the contract management profession, few women hold the highest leadership positions in this male-dominated field.

Heath (2012) focused on "Women in Leadership: Strategies for Work-Life Balance." Findings from this study indicate that women are more likely to be successful at juggling multiple roles if their career is meaningful and fulfilling (Heath, 2012). Another strategy women use is learning from mentors how to balance the competing demands of dual roles. A strong work ethic is another strategy that surfaced as a theme for integrating work and home life. There were 15 other strategies for work-life balance that emerged from study.

In summary, the data suggest that women continue to struggle with the issues of balance in their lives. However, meaningful and fulfilling work provide women with the opportunity to reach their goals for both family and work. As our younger men and women are graduating from universities and planning for their futures, lessons from these successful women at work and home will provide strategies for setting and achieving important goals for families and work life. 

Kerri Cissna-Heath is Director of Residence Life at Pepperdine University and holds an Ed.D., from Pepperdine University.

Margaret J. Weber is Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Psychology at Pepperdine University, Professor of Education, and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri.

**For more information or to participate in this study, please contact [Kheath@pepperdine.edu](mailto:Kheath@pepperdine.edu).**

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