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Challenging the Balancing Act:

Women, Postmodernism, and the Demand to “Have It All”

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ABSTRACT

Conflict over role formation has plagued women since they formally entered the workforce. Today, women are faced with a continued need to construct roles that make sense in light of the economic and cultural mandate to participate in both work and family domains. We examined how a particular group of women—a privileged set who are attempting to have it all in our current socio-political climate—are developing the capacity for systemic thinking and integration critical for meeting the postmodern challenge. Ninety-three women were asked to identify their four most significant life roles and determine how much time and energy they had devoted to these roles over the lifespan. In addition, these women were asked to complete a sentence stem and then explain their reasoning in an open-ended fashion. Significant differences were found in reasoning style between women who described their work and family roles as one of trying to balance these roles versus those who described their work and family role as one of integration. Surprisingly, only a small subset of the women in this study categorized their roles in an integrated and systemic way. Implications for women who are trying to participate in family and work are discussed.

Keywords: postmodern, women, roles, work, family

INTRODUCTION

Simone DeBeauvoir (1952) once asked, “What is a woman?” More than 50 years later, we find that we are still looking for the answer. It would be difficult to argue that we have not moved forward; we are far removed from the days when women were not allowed to hold property, entitled to their husband’s wealth or afforded the simple right to participate in democracy. However, we are still faced with competing demands for our time and the current climate suggests that to be successful in various roles women must somehow achieve “balance.” This conflict over role formation has plagued women since they formally entered the workforce. Historically, identity was constructed so that women were viewed as “defective men” (Firestone, 1970) and their role as members of the workforce developed in a context created by men and shaped by the patriarch (DeBeauvoir, 1952). Women were faced with the essential question, “who am I,” and resolving it was made difficult by traditional constructions of gender role. For example, upper-class women attending psychoanalysis in the 1920s described themselves as “half-way in and half-way out of their traditional roles” (Firestone, 1970, p. 61). Today, women are faced with a continued need to construct roles that make sense in light of the economic and cultural mandate to participate in both work and family domains. Marriage, childrearing, homemaking and career define today’s successful woman (Rimm, 1999). Yet, in spite of nearly a century of women publicly engaged in the workforce, we still ask if “having it all” is a myth or a reality (Hewlett, 2002).

These expectations are, in part, a product of postmodernism. Women (and men) are increasingly exposed to a plurality of voices and values to identify and guide their life choices (Gergen, 2000). Yet the task of sorting through the vast range of possibilities has become more challenging and more complex. Images of “successful” womanhood are simultaneously

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becoming increasingly polarized and conflicted. For example, Douglas and Michaels (2004) illustrate how working mothers have been pitted against stay-at-home moms and how these “camps” have grown increasingly antagonistic since the early 1980’s. We now have, whether reality or media creation, the “Mommy Wars.” Author Caitlin Flanagan (2006) suggests that working women that can afford to stay home but choose not to make a clear decision to put themselves before their children. Rather than joining together to construct new notions of womanhood, we are pitted against one another. Integrating contradictory societal expectations for work and family commitments is now a problem for individual women to solve; and the mandate to *balance* roles has become the unquestioned norm. One result of the postmodern context is that role commitments now come with a steeper “price.” Women are aware that paths close as a result of their choices (Gergen, 1991, 2000)—that is, identifying with one role or value often excludes commitment to other, often conflicting values. Women are resolving this conflict behaviorally through their decisions to balance roles (or not), and internally, through how they organize and construct role identifications.

We argue in this paper that the demand to “have it all” is *the* context in which women are currently attempting to construct identity and organize social roles. Additionally (and with others, e.g., Gergen, 1999; Kegan, 1994), we see postmodernism as having specific implications for the construction of self; in particular, the ability to continually integrate multiple identity concerns into a cohesive and resilient whole. We observe the current debate about how women “should be,” and posit that women’s attempts at identity construction are currently constrained by traditional, modernist and androcentric notions of what identity “achievement” looks like (Marcia, 2002). Most notably, we challenge the widely-accepted goal that women should *balance* work and family. Balance implies an equal distribution of roles—a system that

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describes a static state of separate and similarly weighted commitments. We argue that the metaphor of balance is, in fact, a modernist solution to a postmodern dilemma, that it is derived from patriarchal notions of identity formation, and that it is not useful in this increasingly complex, dynamic, pluralistic and relational world. Furthermore, we suggest that alternate, more integrative, dynamic and systemic means for constructing identity must emerge. This activity, we argue, is underway but a work in progress by an elite few. Women who are privileged enough to experience their role commitments as real choices (and for whom identity formation is descriptive of self rather than a cultural or institutional given) may have sufficient power and space to challenge the traditional notion of balance, reconstruct identity in historically novel ways and to re-frame the work-family debate.

What we aim to do in this paper is to consider women's identity within the specific context of the work-family dichotomy as experienced by upper-middle class women. First we discuss how identity construction is commingled with Power, and provide an argument for limiting our analysis to privileged and powerful women. We then review and critique the literature on women's role commitments and identity with a particular focus on re-examining these phenomena from the context of postmodernism and feminist theory. A rationale for the current research is presented along with empirical findings, which illustrate our position and explore women's experience of organizing their role commitments, and larger implications are discussed.

Identity and Power: Recapitulating the Patriarchy

It is our position that upper middle class women are living in and are faced with a crucial, essentially postmodern dilemma that has had (and will continue to have) a profound effect on the personal and public life of women. Trying to meet all the time and energy demands of domestic

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partnership, children, homemaking and a challenging career may require more integration of roles than expected. We agree with the postmodern critique that theories of identity are seeking universal “truths” for values that are based in and derived from socially and politically constructed practice (Schachter, 2005). Yet we seek to understand the adaptive responses in which individuals engage within particular socio-political contexts. In particular, we will describe how some women make sense of their multiple roles and how close or far women are from meeting the current postmodern demand. Like Kegan (1982, 1994), we see reconstructing a self that integrates the complexity and competing demands of connection and autonomy as central to the activity of postmodern identity construction. We also agree with Kegan that not all individuals are up to this task. However, we would argue that this has as much to do with the socio-political position of individuals as psychological consciousness.

Just like social position, the value-laden concept of identity is intimately and forever connected with Power. Traditional views of identity and self construction have been framed within Western, patriarchal culture and are thus inherently masculine and individualistic. For example, Erikson (1970) presents a trajectory that favors the early achievement of autonomy and defines identity formation as the absence of role confusion. The modernist ideal seems to be one where roles are clearly separated, confusion among roles is minimized, and where different aspects of self are highly differentiated (Linville, 1987). To be a stronger person, then, one must adhere to principles of separation and individuation. Relational and intra-psychic strategies emphasizing integration and connection are less valued; yet they often describe women’s experience (Gilligan, 1982). The social position and relative power of women is weakened by the suggestion that they may not be as capable of “ideal” identity formation as men. Feminist theorists (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan 1982) have suggested that women—and some men—may

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favor integration over autonomy, connection over individualism. However, despite the many advances of feminist theory, notions of self, identity and self-concept organization are still being constructed in modernist terms where individuation and separation are equated with psychological health. These notions maintain and perpetuate the patriarch by giving power to those who would construct identity according to modernist principles.

Power, according to Marx, Foucault and others is an inescapable social reality. That there are those with more power is a reality of living within a social structure and there will always be those that have less power, lacking the space to fully investigate their personal identity. However, we know that those with the power and privilege to socially construct will do so and we maintain that some women are doing just that within the current socio-political climate. We believe it is possible for those women with the power and privilege—primarily Caucasian, upper class, highly educated women—to resist, deconstruct and reconstruct their identity as women. These women have the space to consider their connection to society and to ask “who am I?” Perhaps, because they can not find themselves in the now stereotypical descriptions of women balancing (or even juggling) multiple roles, they use the space that privilege affords them to deconstruct the notion of balance and emerge with a more complete and integrated perspective. Johnson (1997) suggests that the patriarch is maintained because as individuals we do not seek to upend it. In many ways, women are rarely compelled to do so. Those that are dealing with the immense burdens of few financial and educational opportunities are not provided the space necessary to resist and deconstruct. For most women, then, it may be easier and more productive to simply capitulate.

We contend that women with power and privilege have the space and perhaps the responsibility to resist the patriarch and seek new ways of understanding the world. We

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recognize that by speaking of and addressing the social constructions of upper-middle class women, we are privileging their voices and acknowledge that these are the same voices as the three female authors of this study. Yet we believe it is women with this unearned privilege that can help make a difference for all women. We recognize that power is integrally involved in creating the norms of society and want to know where these women are and where they are headed. As they resist, deconstruct and construct new social norms, all women will benefit. When powerful women, particularly those in the public domain, stop talking about balance and start understanding themselves in terms of connection and integration, we begin to create new gender constructs. It should be noted that although we will suggest that certain organizations of social roles may be more adaptive than others, and will describe role construction solutions, we are speaking to and about women who hold as a goal (and who can choose to) have it all. However, the hope is that by addressing the concerns of privileged women, this may affect the landscape for everyone.

Multiple Role Involvement and the Postmodern Dilemma: A Critique

The current context. There can be little doubt as to the centrality of work and family roles in women's lives: The current overall employment rate for women was reported to be 59.3% in 2005 (US Department of Labor statistics, 2005) and "traditional" arrangements where the father is the breadwinner and the mother stays at home with children account for fewer than 3% of American families (US Department of Labor statistics, 2005). Additionally, women are not cutting back on family commitments to incorporate occupational demands (Graham, Sorell, & Montgomery, 2004)—they continue to devote more energy to home and family management tasks than do men (Cinamon & Rich, 2002) and they have not relaxed their role performance standards in either domain (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). It has been well documented that

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women, more than men, take on the dual responsibilities of combining family and occupational commitments (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986; Kiecolt, 2003), with work and family roles comprising central features in women's identity organization (Graham et al., 2004; Hornstein, 1986) and self-concept (Reitzes & Mutran, 2002). Yet inter-domain conflict persists for women in particular (Hecht, 2001), and there is contradictory evidence as to what psychological benefits are derived from multiple roles (e.g., Martire, Parris Stephens, & Townsend, 2000). Kiecolt (2003) has gone so far as to suggest that it is *men* and not women that are moving toward having it all.

While much research has focused on role involvement and women's psychological health, other work has explored the interplay among roles—how different roles relate to one another within an organized system (Kossek, Noe, & DeMarr, 1999; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2000). A myriad of role arrangements have been described as pathways to women's life satisfaction (e.g., Graham et al., 2004, identified at least four different patterns of role-related identity structures). According to symbolic interaction theory, self-concept is partly derived by how roles are actively negotiated (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1986; Reitzes & Mutran, 2002) and the way women organize and construct boundaries may have more to do with psychological outcomes than number of roles or their contents (Kossek et al., 1999; Vandewater, Ostrove, & Stewart, 1997). It has been suggested that women perceive roles as more interconnected when compared to men (Rothbard, 2001), that women use more integrative strategies for organizing roles (Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999), and that patterns of role integration and compartmentalization vary by individual (Schachter, 2004). While some have shown flexible boundaries to be related to women's well-being (Hecht, 2001), others have posited that too-permeable boundaries can create “spillover” effects (Kossek et al., 1999; Linville, 1987).

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We see two main critiques of the social role literature's treatment of women's identity. First, we see little weight being given to the systemic integration of multiple roles, which we would argue is critical for navigating the pluralistic nature of postmodern contextual demands (Gergen, 2000). Instead, role commitments are being understood as a "balancing" of roles with an implication that roles should be weighted equally and not necessarily interconnected. Maintaining multiple (possibly competing) role commitments is part of the postmodern stance, but by itself may lead to impossible ways of being when attempted through modernist strategies of balance. Postmodernism involves not only deconstructing work and family roles, but also reconstructing new ways of integrating and connecting roles (Burman, 2008; Holzman, 2000). Second, in spite of a vibrant and growing body of literature propounding postmodern and feminist methods for understanding individual experience within the context of specific cultures, the social role literature has been largely shaped without articulating these overarching political and social influences. Most explorations of women's multiple role involvement have not considered how the goal of balancing work and family is a cultural artifact, itself, produced by trying to construct an identity for women within an androcentric perspective. That is, the telos, particularly as suggested by the masculine notions put forth in an Eriksonian perspective, is one that favors an achieved identity status. The expectation is that an individual is firmly committed to a role. Men, in general, are not asked by society to stop working in order to be a good father. It is, in actuality, either seen as unusual when a man wishes to commit fully to the role of father and abandon his career or applauded as a remarkable choice. Therefore, to fully commit to the role of husband, partner, or father, it is not necessary to relinquish their occupation. Rather, it is expected in a patriarch, that being (for example) a good father is one in the same as being an upstanding member of the workforce. Despite a wide-spread need for women in the workforce

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and a lengthy history of being involved in it, the role (for example) of a good mother is not inextricably linked to that of being a good worker. The way in which gender has traditionally been constructed creates a need for women to find balance because they must attempt to achieve multiple identity statuses. When we speak integrating multiple aspects of self into a cohesive whole, as should be the ideal for women (and arguably for all), we not only challenge the notion of balance; we can begin to dismiss it as an artifact of developmental trajectories that may not make sense.

Women's connection. We believe that this country's privileged women are in the process of reconstructing notions of womanhood against great socio-political pressures, and that the current postmodern climate has provided some space for them to challenge traditional notions of womanhood and the current mandate for work-life balance. Unfortunately not all women have the social, political or economic resources necessary to engage in this process. Despite the many advances for women, the question raised by DeBeauvoir (1952) is still being asked today and the postmodern climate is providing multiple answers. This multiplicity will be reflected in women's notions of roles and identity; knowing how women are dealing with the multiple answers and complexity of postmodernism is critical for understanding the evolution of women in society.

Feminists have criticized Erikson (1970) for privileging individuation over connection and hence androcentrism (Sorell & Montgomery, 2001) in relation to how women construct their identity. Instead, Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982) have argued that women are more often relational beings and this needs to be integrated into theories about women (e.g., consider Gilligan's moral theory based on care/concern versus Kohlberg's moral theory based on justice). Equally relevant here is that living in a postmodern climate requires competency in navigating

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relationships. Identity theorists (e.g., Archer, 2002; Kroger, 2003; Marcia, 2002) have attempted to fit women's role formation, with an emphasis on caring and connection, into Erikson's identity formation, arguing that while there may be androcentric elements to Erikson, this should be considered a product of the context within which he was a part (Archer, 2002). That is, by reframing the questions posed by feminist and postmodern theory, Erikson can remain the "grand theory" by which we understand identity. We would not disagree that one can make sense of women's development within an Eriksonian framework. We do, however, ask why one would do that? Does this not simply repeat what the early feminists did? That is, attempting to fit women's identity within an existent patriarchal perspective. This suggests that the idea—that male behavior is the model behavior that women should be judged against—is still alive and well. Instead of attempting to describe women's role construction using models that fit male behavior, we need to create models that describe female behavior.

Feminists (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1991) have responded to traditional identity development theories by proposing a different understanding of women—one firmly based in connection, and one that argues for multiple methods of self-construction—and in so doing have begun to address the fundamental challenge of postmodernism. As with feminist theories of women's identity formation, postmodernism requires us to embrace connection within a pluralistic existence. As Gergen describes (1991), the world has evolved technologically to a frenetic pace and he argues that this proliferation of technology has created multiple selves, bringing the very concept of the singular, autonomous "self" into question. Like Gergen (2000) and Senge (1990; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004), we would argue that postmodernism demands awareness and understanding of the interrelationships amongst

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different populations, activities, and worlds, and that dynamic systemic thinking with its focus on interconnection is central to surviving the task of the currently saturated self.

Rationale for Current Research

The current research examines how a particular group of women—that privileged set who are attempting to have it all in our current socio-political climate—are developing the capacity for systemic thinking and integration critical for meeting the postmodern challenge. We would suggest that rather than attempt to fit postmodern and feminist concerns within modernist frameworks, it may be time to reconsider what is most adaptive for certain groups. The challenge to understanding identity is that we remain wedded to modernist perspectives. The demands placed on today's women facing the postmodern dilemma may not be met if we continue to interpret identity formation in a context that fails to meet the challenge. Kegan (1994) has argued that there is a complex “curriculum” facing individuals in the postmodern world and those that fail to meet the demands may find themselves “in over their heads.” The more we adhere to traditional approaches and try to fit feminist or postmodern ideologies into existing frameworks, the less progress we make. We are better served by moving towards understanding identity as a meaning-making process of integration *and* differentiation (Kegan, 1982), which is more adaptive for negotiating the connection and relatedness inherent in particular contexts.

The empirical study presented in the following section illustrates and lends support to the two major thrusts of our argument. We attempt to show (quantitatively and qualitatively) that women *are* struggling with navigating the specific postmodern dilemma of work-family integration. In particular we describe structural differences in women's reasoning about identity and role configuration, and interpret these differences as evidence of how postmodern contextual

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demands may be affecting complex self-organization. Additionally, we interpret these findings without generalizing them to *all* women, but remind the reader that we are introducing a way to understand how women with power and privilege make choices about whether to have it all.

METHOD

Participants

Participants consisted of 93 adult women between the ages of 23 and 72 ($N = 93$, $M = 40.16$, $SD = 13.89$) who were highly educated, primarily Caucasian, and the majority of which were in significant romantic relationships. The sample was gathered from New England business and academic communities, with researchers contacting participants through local women's organizations and academic associations. Women who were interested in participating in the research were mailed a questionnaire packet, which included a demographic survey, measures designed to explore role involvement, and a letter of informed consent. Approximately 250 survey packets were mailed out to interested parties and the response rate was 37%.

Measures

Role involvement. Participants were asked to identify their four most significant life roles and determine how much time and energy they had devoted to these roles over the lifespan looking at five year increments and using an ordinal scale (1 = very little time and energy, 5 = a great deal of time and energy). This approach was adopted from Hornstein (1986) and yielded four line graphs (one for each role selected) that showed relative involvement in a given role broken down into five-year blocks. Roles that participants charted as above a three on the five-point scale were coded as "substantial" investments of time and energy, and involvement in multiple roles was defined as concurrent substantial involvement in at least three roles within a five-year period. Responses were then weighted to account for cumulative effects of substantial

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multiple role involvement (i.e., number of five-year periods) and this weighted role involvement score was used for analysis.

Role integration. Integration of life role structure was assessed using a projective measure designed to capture the way in which participants perceived their four most significant life roles to be related to each other. Participants were asked to represent their four most significant life roles with a drawing of four circles. The directions asked participants to make their own drawing of how their roles currently related to each other, and two variables were generated from the circle drawings. First, drawings were coded for general structure, with greater instances of overlap theoretically representing greater degrees of integration (Werner & Kaplan, 1963). Second, drawings that included work roles (77% of the sample) were examined to determine how many other life roles were integrated with work. Reliability for the role structure coding system was 1.00.

Reasoning styles. Participants were asked to complete a sentence stem (e.g., “For a woman, a career is...”) and then explain their reasoning in an open-ended fashion using at least five sentences (to ensure responses could be scored). Reasoning statements were coded for integrative/systemic statements versus non-integrative. The scoring system was adapted from Commons, Danaher, Miller, Goodheart, and Dawson (2000), and women were sorted into two groups: Statements were coded as *integrative/systemic* if reasoning showed non-linear arguments, interconnection of concepts or multivariate causality (i.e., describing how groups of related variables relate to other groups of related variables in order to produce a given outcome); statements were coded as *non-integrative* (or *non-systemic*) when reasoning comprised generalized abstractions or additive “lists” of concepts. Inter-rater reliability of 0.89 was established for the current sample with disagreements discussed and resolved to achieve 100%

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consensus. All statements that raters could not code, or that were “in between” systemic and non-systemic reasoning, were excluded from the following analyses ($n = 43$).

It should be noted that the scoring of reasoning was purely structural and independent of response content. This means that even though responses reflected women’s feelings and choices about career, coding was based on *how* they presented their argument as opposed to *what* they said. In scoring women’s reasoning statements we attempted to map the structure of the statement to isolate variables and describe how they were organized.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Several analyses were conducted to explore how systemic and non-systemic women were involved in multiple roles. Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests revealed a trend (approaching statistical significance) that systemic women showed more substantial, concurrent involvement in multiple roles than did non-systemic women ($Z = 1.73, p = .08, n = 36$). This trend supports the supposition that women who were intensely and continuously involved in multiple roles would have more systemic reasoning styles. Analyses also revealed that systemic women integrated life roles more so than their non-systemic counterparts ($t = 2.24, p < .05, df = 39$), suggesting that women who organized their roles in ways that were interrelated and connected (i.e., integrated) also demonstrated more systemic reasoning styles. Additionally, integration of work with other roles was shown to characterize systemic reasoning ($t = 2.72, p < .01, df = 28$) more than non-systemic. And finally, we wanted to explore the extent to which substantial, concurrent involvement in multiple roles would be associated with integration of roles. Spearman correlations suggested, however, that there was no relationship between the two for the women in this sample ($r_s = -.08, p = .65, n = 34$).

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Taken together, these findings suggest a relationship between systemic and integrative reasoning and multiple role involvement. They also indicate that integrating work with other life roles may have significant effects on self-development for this group of women. It is noteworthy and surprising that while work-family role integration and multiple role involvement were shown to characterize women who demonstrated patterns of integrative thinking, these two variables were not significantly related to each other. This suggests that having multiple role identifications does not directly lead to role interrelation—some women, then, sustain multiple role commitments *without* employing strategies for integration.

If role integration is not related to role involvement, what do these data suggest about how women construct and organize their life roles? What can the process of constructing roles tell us about identity formation? To formally explore women's experience in this regard, participants' open-ended responses were analyzed for qualitative themes. In particular, non-systematic responses ($n = 26$) were compared with those scored as Systematic ($n = 17$) to describe how these two groups of women experienced the challenge of work and family commitments.

Qualitative Results for the non-systematic Group

The predominant theme for these women was their expressed concern about choosing between or deciding how to “balance” work and family roles (62%). Many recognized that all choices (e.g., staying at home, working outside the home, or combining both) were viable options for women, but more than half of these women (54%) were unclear in describing how these decisions would or could be made. In a typical response, one woman stated that, “Both ‘jobs’ [of career and family] are very important and most women need to balance both—a big challenge.” Nonsystematic thinkers saw *balance* as the goal for organizing work and family

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commitments, described the imperative to balance roles as challenging, and seldom offered specific solutions about how balance should be constructed. For example:

It is important to feel needed and respected and that you contribute important things to the family no matter what that career is. I don't think men's careers or roles should be "more important" or that they are the breadwinners. Couples' careers/interests should have equal importance in a relationship, as each person holds an equal position in the relationship/family.

Here the participant states that men and women should be *equal* in relationship (which implies a justice orientation, Gilligan, 1982), but does not articulate how this equality should be negotiated. Additionally, the notions of "career" and "interest," as well as those of "relationship" and "family," seem to be blended together—her conception is syncretic (more fused than integrated) and appears to reflect the "male" cultural values of equality, fairness, and justice. She recognizes the postmodern demand, but the androcentric framework she employs does not support her in generating a solution.

A minority of non-systematic thinkers in this sample did articulate strategies for prioritizing work and family (27%), and to a person, asserted that family must come before career (i.e., no abstract thinkers prioritized work over family in their responses). Additionally, women who had chosen to forgo pursuit of a career in order to raise children exhibited a preference for clearly separated roles in this regard (see Figure 1 for abstract drawings showing separated roles). As one woman put it, "For me [a career] is not important at this time. Maybe when my kids are grown I'll want that, but at this time I want to work around them." In this example, the participant describes her own choice to put her role as mother before her occupational aspirations or involvement—family and career are *not integrated* and her role

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boundaries are *not flexible*. Other participants were firmer in their position that family should (and must) come before career (e.g., “For a woman a career is staying home with the children.... It’s important for the mother to stay home full time”). A theme emerges, then, for the non-systematic thinkers in that they did not demonstrate integrated solutions for combining work and family. Their conceptions of work-family role involvement were characterized by rigid differentiation with the family roles of wife and mother protected by firm boundaries. These responses suggest that the postmodern demand of combining work and family may require flexibility and integration as opposed to balance and separation.

In general, women in the non-systematic thinking group described work and family as being in conflict, and the “work-family-or-both” choice was described as pressure or a burden. For example:

I think we’re shooting ourselves in the foot if we tell anyone they have to do career or mommy or both in order to be “whole.” I’m certainly not going to make that decision for anyone, though I may quarrel with the execution thereof.

In this response, the participant appears to be defending her option *not* to choose, rejecting the societal expectation that her and others’ “wholeness” should depend upon any one course of action. Frustration with societal expectations was explicitly voiced by these thinkers in this sample, and several responses reflected a negative tone. In particular, they expressed frustration with the notion that women do, in fact, need to be involved in career to be valued by “society.” As one woman stated, “Many women have careers and that should be accepted. However, they could also have families and should not be thought of as less competent in their job if they do choose to also have children.” In this response, it is not clear who or what authority, exactly, would deem her “less competent” if she chose to have children, and yet other similar thinkers

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agreed with her sentiment: “Very little worth is put on raising children,” “Women are short-changed the respect they deserve for being given that [care-taking] role,” and “For a woman a career is...the way to be noticed and counted as a something instead of a nothing in our society.”

Qualitative Results for the Systematic Group

Women in the systematic group did not focus on the necessity of choosing between work and family commitments. In fact, no systematic thinkers expressed frustration over how to balance career and family, nor did they voice resentment at externalized authorities. Frustration with the externalized pressure to have it all was absent from this group of women’s responses. Instead, the systematic thinkers in this sample discussed their involvement in career in positive terms and the work role was often viewed as central to their sense of self and its development.

Women in this group identified specific benefits associated with career and family involvement, with each domain offering discrete but important contributions. For many women, career afforded them a sense of “accomplishment,” helped to preserve their “individuality,” and was seen as “vital” for “sanity and self-esteem.” Systematic thinkers were similarly articulate in describing how both work *and* family roles were critical for personal growth. For example:

Although my career is very important to me and my personal development, there are other roles that I play (wife, friend, daughter, sister) and hope to play (mother) that are equally important to me. I think that my personal development is *affected by all* these roles.

This woman is specifically concerned with how involvement in career and family roles affects her development and avoids defining herself by career, alone. Rather, a more *integrated* approach is called for, wherein engagement in a wide array of social roles is seen as desirable and necessary for growth. Many systematic thinkers described their involvement in work and

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family as being interrelated, with activity in one area informing and enriching activity in others. It should be noted that “multiple-causality” was a criteria for coding reasoning statements as systematic, so the fact that systematic women generally described variables as interrelated is not a finding. We are emphasizing, however, that integrating work *with* family contents (as opposed to some other variable) was a particular quality observed in systematic responses (see Figure 1 for further illustration here).

Systematic thinkers did view the work role as especially critical for personal development: “For a woman a career is an opportunity for both personal and social growth,” “A career is something that grows and informs and transforms you,” “Career allows women to define themselves...and to develop a more complex, dynamic, flexible sense of self.” These women frequently credited their involvement in occupation as having facilitated the development of important psychosocial factors that, at least subjectively, appear to have contributed to the formation of their core sense of self or identity. As one woman put it:

My sense of self, as a visual artist and a singer, is inseparable from what I do...Much of my sense of self-worth derives from my efforts at creative activities (not their success as products, necessarily, but in the process of trying). Aside from my daughter and husband...everything is secondary to my commitment to a life in the arts.

For this woman, her career as an artist appears to be synonymous with her identity and to be critical for her sense of “self-worth,” and her emphasis on process over product suggests she has internalized her own standard for living a creative life. In general, the systematic thinkers described being mindful of their personal development. They depicted their involvement in multiple roles—and their careers, in particular—as related to a larger concept of self-development. This perspective was almost entirely absent for the non-systematic thinkers. It

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may be that those women that did demonstrate this type of reasoning have used their power and privilege to build careers that more easily facilitate the integration of work and family (such as “visual artist,” as in the example above).

A final theme that differentiated systematic and non-systematic thinkers was the prevalence of specific strategies for subordinating and integrating life roles. As one woman stated:

At least for me, the career that I chose (or perhaps chose me) has been so important that it at times arranged our priorities as a marriage partnership and a family. It is who I am—perhaps primarily, first a teacher, then wife and mother.

Career, for this participant, is as the activating force that lends structure to her other roles and responsibilities—it is integral to her self-concept and hierarchically organizes her involvement in family. Other women in this group reflected on their value systems to make principle-based decisions: “I believe strongly that at least one parent should be involved almost full time with very young children...Many women, unmarried or with type A working husbands, might be better off with careers instead of families.” This woman is explaining her own criteria for making these kinds of decisions. The “burden” of choice is lightened, in this example, with the assistance of guiding principles.

In general, systematic thinkers were not concerned with balancing roles, but tended to prioritize commitments based on internalized governing values or principles. Unlike the non-systematic thinkers in this study, this group emphasized work-family role integration over role equality, and the process of combining work and family appeared to facilitate the development of meaningful notions of self (e.g., autonomy, identity, creativity, etc.). And finally, while the non-systematic thinkers appeared to be “torn” between competing, externalized demands, the

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systematic thinkers were relatively unconcerned with this struggle—they did not question the feasibility of navigating competing commitments but focused, instead, on how to make it happen.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This paper set out to explore women's construction of role commitments within the context of the postmodern demand to have it all. Our particular focus was to examine and describe how a select group of women—the powerful and privileged—were organizing roles within the current work-family debate. In addition to grounding this work in the postmodern context, we also attempted to articulate our position on postmodernism as a theory. Rather than attempting to fit postmodernism into traditional ways of understanding women's development, we have chosen to emphasize what might be more adaptive for a particular group—those women with the social mobility to consider identity development as a choice and as potentially descriptive of self. And while we have shown how some women have more integrative role constructions given a particular social goal, we do not attempt to generalize these findings to other cultures or to less advantaged groups. We recognize that we have privileged some women's voices over others but, because we see this particular group as having power to influence social norms in the future, we wanted to know where these women were and where they are headed.

We see the major task of postmodernism as one of adapting to the dynamic complexity that characterizes the world today, and the women in this study showed clear differences in how they organized their role commitments in regard to the work-family aspect of this demand. Indeed, the non-systematic thinkers in this study did seem more “saturated” (Gergen, 1991) than those women with more complex role organizations; their responses revealed a preference for

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more rigid boundaries—and they seemed to express more frustration—than did systematic thinkers whose responses were characterized by greater flexibility, integration and overall satisfaction. Additionally, systematic thinkers were shown to combine career with other roles, and see work and family involvement as integral to self and identity. It may be that the systematic thinkers in this study do not feel the pressure to have it all because they already do. For women who demonstrated systematic reasoning and more integrative role construction, identity appears to be shaped—not by traditional notions of motherhood, marriage, or career—but by a larger description of self that can contain, organize (and potentially reorganize) role commitments. Indeed, systematic thinkers appear to be changing the traditional understanding of what it means to be a woman. By integrating their roles into holistic and dynamic systems (as opposed to organizing roles in a balanced way, with roles equally weighted and clearly separated), they are reconstructing identity to value systemic *integration* over *balanced* commitments. The move away from balance suggests a movement away from androcentric standards of equality (Gilligan, 1982) and fairness—where balance is the goal—to one of relational and systemic being. That is, these women are reconstructing new notions of Woman.

It is noteworthy, however, that *all* women in this study did not demonstrate integrative approaches to identity construction, suggesting that this reconstruction process may be difficult for even powerful and privileged women. Of all women in our society, these women have the power to entertain the conflicting societal demand of seamlessly combining work and family involvement, yet most women (82%) in this sample did not do so. It could be argued based on feminist theories of development (e.g., Miller, 1991) that, given women's relational competency, we should have observed integration as the norm in this study. Being in relation to the other should, theoretically, move women away from strategies of separation, yet only 17 women

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(18%) out of possible 93 demonstrated role integration. Why, in spite of the power and privilege characterizing this sample, did only a small sub-set of women organize roles in an integrated way?

We see two possible explanations for the observed differences between non-systematic and systematic thinkers. The constructive-developmental interpretation of these data suggests that as women navigate the postmodern environmental demands by involving themselves in multiple roles (i.e., as they pursue the goal of having it all), their capacity to actually integrate these roles in adaptive ways may not be adequately developed. Women may be struggling with and in the process of developing the internal capacities needed to meet complex environmental demands. If this were the case, then the goal in helping these women would be to support developmental movement toward greater integration of and less embeddedness in role commitments. This recommendation is very much in line with clinical applications of constructive-developmental theory (Kegan, 1994).

Alternatively, a social constructivist perspective would caution us against interpreting differences at the individual unit of analyses. Rather than attributing differences in role construction to the developmental success or failure of individual women, it might be possible to interpret the findings in terms of women's reactions to larger societal forces. The patriarchal nature of our society cannot be underestimated. Feminist psychologists have articulated how extensively the androcentric context influences how we understand development (Gilligan, 1982) and our ways of being in the world (Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1991). As Firestone argues (1970), all of us—men and women alike—live in a political world that has been shaped by men. The implications of this for women's identity are profound, yet hard to identify. Because patriarchy is *the* context in which all persons have evolved, it is not easy to find examples of (or a language

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to describe) alternative paradigms. Indeed, only a small proportion of women in this study—systematic thinkers—did *not* use the language of “balance” to describe their roles. Our data suggest that women today are finding it difficult to challenge traditional notions of womanhood and instead are struggling to find a way to construct identity within the current androcentric context. We observe a parallel process for those academicians attempting to fit feminism (or postmodernism) into theories that reflect patriarchal values. The problem is, of course, that almost all psychological theories were developed within androcentric contexts and are thus constrained by Western patriarchal language. Given the magnitude of this problem, it would be rare to find women diverging from these cultural norms to reconstruct novel role organizations. It may be, however, that the 17 systematic thinkers in this study were attempting to do just that. Our findings indicate that systemic thinkers integrated work with other roles and suggest that this group may be transforming how to be in connection with work and family, but it may be that integrative women had careers that did not require them to participate in traditional workplace organizations. To what extent will it be possible to translate these reconstructed notions of womanhood to occupational settings that reflect traditional demands of time and energy (e.g., 60-hour work weeks without flex-time or affordable daycare)?

We would argue that the reconstructive efforts exhibited by systematic thinkers require a measure of metaphorical and practical space (e.g., environments that support integrative approaches to work and family, such as the visual artist quoted in the qualitative analyses). One can not begin to deconstruct existing notions of womanhood when the demands of meeting economic challenges are paramount and, at present, the space for reconstructing is probably only available to the most privileged groups. These upper-middle class women may be able to create lasting change for other women who are struggling with role organization. The message is that it

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is possible to have it all—not by *balancing* roles but by *integrating* roles. The notion of *balancing* permeates the socio-cultural climate and we see this notion as constraining women's ability to organize roles and construct identity (see Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Smiley, 1998). There is a need to shift the language—a mind shift—in understanding the current postmodern dilemma of some women.

We have argued that efforts to include feminist (and postmodern) perspectives within more traditional theories of development are untenable and will not sufficiently resolve the current impossibility of development (which implies a telos) *and* multiple pathways and experiences. Additionally, we do think Kegan's argument (1994)—that life's curriculum is “over our heads” —is a valid one, at least for the group of women presented in this study. However, one of the challenges of postmodernism is that it demands we let go of our traditional notions of “self” and the security provided by an objective worldview. Indeed, the language of objective truth imbues even feminist discourse with a prescriptive and universal definition of Woman put forth as an ideal. Yet identity formation is strategically important for feminism. What gives us hope is that some women do feel free enough from political identities to question, reevaluate, and reinvent their personal identities.

As the authors of this paper, we struggled to find a language to present these ideas. We chose to use constructive-developmental theory because it describes re-organizational processes related to self, but we recognize that the language of the universal permeates these theories as well. What postmodernism offers is a way to *deconstruct* paradigms, but it does not tell us what the new construction should be—we believe that a small portion of the women in this study are beginning to engage in that reconstructive process. We see the field trying to reconcile feminist theory with traditional models of development and suggest that modernist approaches are still being used—meaning that we are still searching for “the answer.”

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