Illuminating Life Choices: A Multiple Case Study of Female Corporate Executives Regarding Their Feelings Toward Work and Personal Life

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Introduction

Decades after the dawn of the Feminist Revolution, many women still feel torn between professional ambition and family life. In 2001, when *Catalyst* asked 3,000 women in their mid-20s and 30s what they thought the biggest barrier was to career advance-ment, 68% cited personal and family responsibilities (Morris, 2002). However, while women may share similar dilemmas when faced with the intense pressures of work versus personal life, the

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solutions they devise in order to cope are entirely unique. Some adapt to the upheavals in their lives with grace and flexibility, while others suffer great emotional turmoil. Some abandon luminous careers for traditional family roles, while others remain in the workplace. Some work part time and arrive home before their children get out of school; others spend long hours at the office to achieve challenging professional goals.

This latter group of women will be the focus of the current study. In 2002 women held only 6% of the Fortune 500's top jobs - senior vice president and above (Morris, 2002).   How and why do women in the upper echelons of the corporate world choose the lives that they do? Why do some of them remain single and/or childless while others raise families? What distinguishes women who rise to the top of the business world from peers who choose less demanding jobs or forego paid work altogether? Do their decisions have to do with similar personality types, shared value systems, and/or the environments and families in which they grew up? What commonalities bind these women together and what distinctions set them apart?

The work/life balance literature indicates several variables that contribute to the average woman's decision to remain in the workforce, ranging from a need for financial stability to spousal approval/disapproval to personal satisfaction and the internal drive to succeed (Werbel, 1998). Because female executives are still quite rare, the literature may overlook the choices made by this particular cross-section of the working population. However, the percentage of women in high-powered positions is likely to grow in the next few years, as more and more women enter corporations with the intention of breaking the glass ceiling. Illuminating the reasons for the decisions of women who came before can only serve to benefit those who follow.

Multiple-Case Research

To understand the individual experiences of women in high-level corporate executive positions, I am conducting an exploratory, descriptive study in the tradition of multiple-case research. Rosenwald (1988) has observed that one particularly powerful outcome of multiple-case research is that readers encounter experiences similar to their own - an especially compelling result when one considers the pervasive disagreement regarding motherhood and work currently dividing women (Rosenwald, 1988; Schoen, 2001). This study will also give readers an opportunity to envision the work/life issue from alternative points of view. Another benefit to multiple-case research is that it brings to light certain perspectives outside of established frameworks, which have yet to be investigated in depth by researchers or theorists -- in this case, the perspectives of a previously disregarded sample of the female working population (Schoen, 2001). Finally, the small sample will provide a rare opportunity to examine respondents' lives in close detail. In the end, it should be possible to identify shared life themes, as well as nuances that distinguish each individual.

Methods

This study combines questionnaire and interview methods to explore the psychological experience of female executives between the ages of 30 and 50, with titles of Senior Vice President or higher, and whose individual earnings comprise at least 50% of their household income.

Both the questionnaire and the clinical interview approach were developed in 2002 by Stuart, Manning and colleagues, for a study on the psychological experience of work and family life. Our work is supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Workplace, Workforce, and Working Families Program. The questionnaire is

designed to elicit emotionally meaningful narratives, along with quantitative and categorical data that help to contextualize the qualitative data. Clinical interviews further extend and deepen our understanding of questionnaire responses.

Thirteen women meeting study criteria were e-mailed to request their participation. Each of the seven women who responded was e-mailed instructions, a questionnaire, and a consent form. Subjects returned the completed questionnaire and consent form via electronic and/or U.S. mail, or indicated their preference for an interview. Interviews were conducted in person or by phone, according to subject preference. Questions posed during the interview were based upon questionnaire items.

In addition to the seven newly recruited respondents, 15 women who met study criteria were selected from a larger, more diverse sample collected by Stuart, bringing the total sample size to 22.

Preliminary Observations and Emerging Themes

Nearly all respondents are Caucasian, with the exception of one African-American, two Asian Americans, and one who identifies herself as Jewish. Nineteen of the respondents describe them-selves as heterosexual, two as bisexual, and one as lesbian. Seventy-seven percent of respondents have children, none of whom are over the age of 12. Of those who identify with a spe-cific religion, seven are Catholic, three are Jewish, one is Presbyterian, one is Unitarian, and one is a convert to Greek Orthodoxy. Sixteen of the women are married, three have divorced, two are in a domestic partnership with another woman, and one is single. Three of the married women fear the possibil-ity of divorce, with two attributing some of their marital difficul-ties to the discrepancy between their salaries and their husbands'. Two of the married respondents credit their stable relationships to

similarities they share with their spouses, specifically regarding religion, race and ethnicity, and socio-economic background.

Nine respondents employ nannies whom they describe as their children's primary caretakers. One respondent's husband stays home with their children, and another is raising her children herself after recently resigning from her job as a banking executive. Several of the respondents' mothers worked at some point during their lives, which seems to have contributed to their own concepts of women's role in the workplace. Two respondents' mothers worked before having children, then gave up paid work to raise them. Three have mothers who worked their entire adult lives, and five respondents' mothers returned to work after their children finished elementary or high school.

A majority of the women report that they enjoy their careers and could not imagine quitting or cutting back. Although many want to spend more time with their families, they feel they cannot afford sacrificing time at work to do so. Moreover, 36% strongly disagree with the statement, "The joys of professional success are overrated," adding, "Only for those who haven't achieved them," and, "[The] joys of professional success are underrated for women."

Although their questionnaire responses clearly indicate that these women struggle with their decisions to work, some of their strongest negative emotions are directed not toward the current competitive climate of the American workplace, but toward other women - those who forego paid work and remain at home to care for their children. At least five respondents report feeling hostility toward mothers who have chosen not to participate in the paid workforce. Said one: "I have to do a lot of extra work as a working mom to be on the same level as the moms who stay at home. The tricks of the trade are hidden from me on purpose [because] other snippy women don't like to make it easy for women who

work."

Ultimately, we (EAM) will compare the responses of this sample to those from Stuart's complete sample of 160 women. Though all work long hours at demanding jobs, women in this sample report varying degrees of conflict about their arrangements. We expect that the same will be true of women who forego paid work to raise their children, part time workers, as well as women who work full time, but at less demanding jobs. We do not expect that the nature of a woman's paid work will predict the degree of conflict she experiences between paid work and family life. Rather, more personal, idiographic factors, revealed by the multiple-case study method, will explain why some women combine paid work and motherhood with relative ease, while others struggle painfully with conflicts arising at the interface of work and family life.

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