

CO-CONSTRUCTING WORK-LIFE CONCERNS:  
AN EXAMINATION OF COUPLES' DISCOURSE

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the Faculty of the Graduate School  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the  
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CO-CONSTRUCTING WORK-LIFE CONCERNS:  
AN EXAMINATION OF COUPLES' DISCOURSE

presented by Katherine J. Denker,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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## Dedications

“I am because we are”

Reading through the pages of one of the many books during my time at Mizzou, I came across this African proverb. I am so much more today because all of you around me. This achievement has been crafted through those who supported me and through their will, thoughts, and encouragement. I am so very blessed to have all of you to share my life's journey.

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## CHAPTER 1- RATIONALE

### *Work-Life Concerns as a Social Problem*

In 1989, Hochschild articulated what she called a “stalled revolution” (p.12). Changes for women were happening in paid labor contexts, but home life persisted with the same roles and expectations that had been apparent for decades. In a field that was to become work family research or work-life research<sup>1</sup>, scholars had started to note a common problem in the increased tensions felt in negotiating individuals’ lives. The working world had started to see a shift. Within the past forty years, we have seen the “problem that has no name” (Friedan, 1963), the feeling of loss that when identified spurred middle and upper middle class women into the workforce. From this movement of middle and upper middle class women into the workforce, there were the consequences of noting a problem in a society not ready for change and the repercussions of the ever-increasing entrance of middle and upper-class women into the workforce. For many working class couples the issue related to balancing<sup>2</sup> dual working partners and running a household has been a constant concern for decades. While working class women have long attempted to balance work and family, the entrance of middle class women into the paid labor force has made the work-life concerns more visible. Starrells (1994) states that, “Due to the increasing rates of women’s labor force participation, the traditional, single earner family has become the exception, rather than the norm,” (p. 473). According to the US Department of Labor (2007b), in 2005 there was a higher percentage than ever before of families with women as the primary wage earners, with 26% of dual income houses with women as the primary earner. With this steady stream

of women entering the workforce, complications in home environments have become more pronounced as the new working woman was also uniquely positioned to open dialogue on this issue. The new working woman was earning more than the past working women and was therefore more powerful than ever. Additionally, the new woman worker was typically more affluent, educated, and Caucasian than women in the work force before this point. Work-life conflict emerged further as a concern and individuals spoke of the need to balance work-life issues (Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003). Researchers have responded to this need with interest across disciplines, yet this research remains incomplete with gaps in knowledge that have yet to be filled. Before examining the gaps that exist in the research, attention is first turned to why this issue is important by looking at how work-life concerns impact relationships and how they exist as feminist concerns.

#### *Work-life Concerns as Impacting Relationships*

Increasing demands on household members' time can point to significant issues. Frisco and Williams (2003) noted that women who perceive that they are doing more than their fair share of house work are more than twice as likely to divorce as those who perceive a more equitable division. Hochschild (1989) noted that even when women are sharing in more of the paid labor, that same division is not apparent in household labor. Society has yet to respond to the shifting dynamics of households in a way that offers couples all the support needed, thus leading to new tensions in the household as couples cope with increasing paid and unpaid work hours. Increasing overall families' paid work hours and the need to maintain similar hours in unpaid or family work creates a difficult balancing act that couples are left to manage on their own.

Superwoman syndrome (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hochschild, 1989), the second shift inequity (Drago, 2007; Hochschild, 1989), and pressures of the third shift (Bolton, 2000) all continue to haunt and harm families and individuals, but specifically have caused more negative implications for women (or at least research currently appears this way since men's voices are not captured at the same frequency). Marital happiness is shown to be lower in spouses who perceive they complete more than their share of the unpaid household work (Frisco & Williams, 2003), which research shows is typically the women (Bird, 1999; Erickson, 2005; Friedman & Greenhouse, 2000; Heymann, 2000; Starrells, 1994). Those who perceive this imbalance also report more conflict (Mederer, 1993), and this conflict has been shown to be associated with anxiety and depression (Schieman, McBrier, & VanGundy, 2003). With the significant negative outcomes associated with imbalanced work in families, it is important to look at how individuals discuss the issues associated with work-life so that new ways of co-constructing more equitable relationships and then in turn more successful relationships can be found.

Although problems exist in heterosexual couples' co-construction of work family issues, the same concerns fail to appear in same sex relationships. In the past, research has failed to include homosexual relationships in developing an understanding of issues couples face. However, recent research has started to examine same-sex couples, both in and out of civil unions, and has pointed to interesting conclusions. Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam (2005) noted that same-sex couples engage in more equitable relational maintenance behaviors and division of housework. Even accounting for financial differences in the earning of relational partners, these results still appeared. These findings suggest that it is not economic conditions that lead to differences in work-life



negotiations, but instead it might be a result of gender roles and expectations. Additional research from the same team, Balsam, Beuchaine, Rothblum, and Solomon (2008) found that same sex couples reported higher intimacy scores, more positive relational quality and less conflict than heterosexual married couples. It appears that many of the negative consequences that couples face in co-constructing work-life concerns, such as problems with division of labor, maintenance behaviors, intimacy, and conflict, are primarily a heterosexual concern. If these consequences are felt primarily by those individuals in heteronormative relationships, then those are the couples that need to be examined more in-depth to locate how specifically couples co-construct their work-life concerns in a way that (re)creates a space for those concerns. Consequently, this study will focus on heterosexual couples. To further explore how these work-life negotiations are gendered, research needs to delve further into the discourse of heterosexual couples and also explore the feminist issues around the topic of work-life negotiation. Not only are work-life co-constructions a concern based on the relational impact, but also because work-life is central to feminist concerns.

#### *Work-life Concerns as a Feminist Concern*

Central to feminist concerns are work-life issues. As Hochschild (1989) noted, couples today are searching for work-life balance in what appears to be a stalled feminist revolution. Because the consequences of the stalled revolution impact everyone in the household, from the split shift couple, to the children providing self-care, and the elders who may not receive the help they need, it is an issue that is central to feminists. Currently, women may be choosing to stop careers for more balance and perceive this as their choice (Stone, 2007). However as Buzzanell (1997) noted, they might not recognize

the influence of cultural norms and discourse in shaping this decision. And these decisions are not without consequence, as Bennetts (2007) noted, many women only too late realize the punitive effects of early choices as earning potential is slashed and opting back in is impossible. Gilbert (1993) argued that marriages do not exist in a vacuum, but instead “within a larger world of gender inequality” (p. 101). Similarly, Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, and Pruitt (2002) argued that gendered assumptions influence organizations in powerful and invisible ways. This inequality can be seen in the roles, behaviors, and communication that individuals adopt and perform. Take for example the ideal worker norm, based on the assumption that the worker’s sense of identity and self-value should be closely tied to their job performance (Drago, 2007). This norm is gendered and masculine, functioning under the assumptions of male privilege and minimizing outside concerns. Because gender inequalities exist and shape the construct of marriage, it also needs to be further illuminated through research so that greater chances for equality exist and in turn more successful relationships can be created.

Closely tied to issues of gender equity are issues of power. Feminist researchers have frequently argued gender is intricately tied to power (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005; Hartmann, 1987), and although work-life literature offers a variety of feminist analyses (e.g., Buzzanell, 1997; DeVault, 1991; Medved & Kirby, 2005), it does not offer a clear understanding of power and gender because both phenomena operate within couples’ co-constructions of work-life balance which has been previously unexplored. Feminist research is needed to examine issues of work-life because there is a clear need to revitalize this revolution. Clearly work-life issues have profound implications for the individuals in relationships and for those who are further marginalized. To answer this

call, I turn next to communication because work-life concerns can easily be established as a communication problem.

### *Work-Life Concerns as a Communication Problem*

#### *Discourse as Central to Work-Life Concerns*

It is through our discourse that we understand, interpret, and construct our reality, ideals, and expectations. Watson (2002) defined discourse as a “connected set of concepts, expressions and statements which constitutes a way of talking or writing about an aspect of the world, thus framing and influencing the way people understand and act with regard to that aspect of the world” (p. 99). These discourses are both drawn upon by actors to fulfill their goals, and are (re)made and (re)designed as they are utilized.

Gherardi, Marshall, and Mills (2003) echoed these ideas, explaining that we are at once the products of discourse and the producers of discourse. In this discourse, what we know is played out and reshaped to conform to our reality. Individual discourse is reality to the extent that these messages participate in the development, enactment, and reproduction of material practices (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996).

Through discourse, gender is constructed. Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2005) defined gender as a linguistic artifact, a theoretical concept, and a quasi-object whose meaning is enacted. Martin (2003) explained gender as “a dynamic process, as practice, as what people say and do, in addition to such static properties as an identity, social status, what is learned via socialization, a system of stratification, and so on,” (p. 342). In identity research, Almack (2005) argued that family practices can be best seen as a “series of practical and emotional everyday activities” (p. 250). Given the relationship between gender and discourse, it is important to understand how couples co-construct

their relationship through the discourse that is both created in and creates their daily interactions. This view of the constructive nature of discourse offers unique insight into how relationships are co-constructed and into how individuals enact their and their partner's identity in the relationship.

### *Co-Construction of Work-Life as Communication Processes*

Through discourse, individuals construct the realities of work-life. Central to concerns of work-life balance are couples' negotiations of the division of household and paid labor. Attempts at work-life balance occur through the communication that individuals engage in throughout the course of their relationships. For couples to engage in more shared household labor, they have to first engage in a discussion about options and negotiate possible solutions. For example, even in the definition of their husband's engagement in unpaid household work, as uninvolved, helpmate, coordinator, and egalitarian (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2005), the women's definition is based on the interactions that they engage in with their partners. It is in these interactions that different levels of collaboration are enacted and (re)constructed. Rees-Edwards (2006) argued that communication is essential in the construction of more egalitarian relationships, and therefore also in negotiating work-life. Because co-constructions of work-life concerns are clearly a communication process, communication scholars are uniquely positioned to offer the best insight into work-life negotiations.

Not only do individuals discursively construct the realities of work-life, but also the boundaries for and interactions between different aspects of their lives. Through discourse, individuals allow work into the household and home into the workplace. The boundaries between work-life are not always directly observable, but can only be

observed by proxy in behavioral and discursive practices. Kirby et al. (2003) argue that “families are symbolically and physically present in the workplace” (p. 8). This presence is partially based on the linguistic construction of the worker as also the parent or sibling or child. These constructions communicate norms and assumptions through which others will perform in relation to them. It is through communication research that a clearer understanding of co-construction of couples’ work-life negotiations can be developed.

#### *Role (Re)Construction as Communicative Process*

An individual’s daily life is influenced through larger social norms and roles, and it is through communication that these norms and roles are co-constructed. These larger roles are discursively (re)constructed in the couple’s interactions in ways that shape their reality. Golden (2001) argues that a person’s actual roles “that individuals construct and enact are most strongly influenced, in both facilitating and constraining ways by the individual’s relationship partner,” (p. 251). Through interacting with our relational partners, we are offered the possibility and shown the constraints of our own reality. In co-constructing work-life, couples co-construct and (re)create relational norms. Stamp (1994) argued that “roles may be a realm for intersubjective validation of shared social realities because they are both apprehended by the other and appropriated by the self” (p. 91). A more fluid and negotiated view of roles as couples co-construct them offers a better understanding of roles as we look to the impact that they have on identity.

Discursively both the other and self are (re)constructed in the relationship and shaped in part by the (re)creation of traditional norms and roles. It is in conversations between relational partners that they co-construct not only their realities but also themselves as individuals. Deutsch (2002) noted that even when it might appear that men

and women are engaging in the same behaviors, they often perform it differently. For example the working wife is not described as a breadwinner, but a proxy of the husband (Deutsch, 2002). Conversely, the husband caring for the children and house is not a homemaker, but rather is just helping (Deutsch, 1999; Mederer, 1993). These constructions privilege and (re)create the larger social norms of the husband as the main provider/breadwinner and the wife as the appropriate homemaker and primary parent. These different performances are impacted by the discursive constructions as individuals (re)negotiated roles and norms in the relationship. Because these roles are (re)constructed in our social interactions through communication, communication scholars are uniquely located to understand these role negotiations that take place within a couple's communication about work-life issues.

Roles are negotiated in all relationships through discourse and interactions, but some relationships hold stronger consequence for our individual identities. Stafford and Kline (1996) stated that "definition of self in terms of the relationship is based upon the degree to which one's self-concept is defined by the relationship and to which one's self-esteem is dependent upon the partner" (p. 86). This argument suggests that in relationships with high enmeshment and involvement, such as many marital relationships, individuals' self concepts will be impacted more than most relationships they engage in. The roles that are co-constructed in marriages might have stronger implications for individuals than those in other environments. Therefore, researchers should give more priority to investigating those relationships that hold highest consequences for individuals.

Additionally, communication in individuals' relationships shape roles through the specific linguistic choices relational partners use to construct themselves and their partners. There are times in which individuals make specific choices in their role enactments that aid in the discursive construction of identity. Bucholtz and Hall (2005) discussed the term "identity positioning," in which language used in constructing an individual's identity has been selected by that individual and is utilized by them as a tool for the construction of their selected identity. For some, the ideal worker role might be self selected or discursively co-constructed, and then utilized in discourse to justify elevated work commitment and self absolution from additional family responsibilities. Choices in terminology, such as 'babysitter,' 'inexperienced,' 'breadwinner,' 'supermom,' or 'man of the house,' shape individuals' identities as well as work-life negotiations in relationships. As couples co-construct and (re)construct roles through their interactions, they also co-construct (dis)empowerment in their relationships. Framing of roles in relationships needs to be studied so that scholars have better understanding of how couples negotiate work-life in their relationships.

#### *Power and Communication in Work-Life Co-Construction*

Power is often understood as a process and product of communication. Conrad (1983) argued that there is a need to look at human actors when examining power because power in relationships is a changing process. It is in the interactions of individuals and relational partners that power is both a process and product. Other researchers have argued that power is best understood as the ability to frame events, be it in the organization or in the justification of unequal labor (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). It is in the discursive construction of reality between individuals that power exists in an

individual's ability to shape the norm of inequity in the relationship as actually normal. Strong social elements influence power in relationships, as Clegg (1989) notes in the circuits of power. Mumby (1988) argued that discourse is a product of (and reproduces) the dominant power and is the principle means by which dominant ideological meaning structures perpetuate themselves. Through communication, power is (re)created, maintained, and modified. Because power is constructed through discourse, work-life negotiations can be seen as a site of power negotiations.

From a feminist perspective, work-life negotiations are best viewed as a discourse about power. Feminists argue that gender is always about power (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005; Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992; Clair, 1998). As MacKinnon puts it, "women/men is a distinction not just of difference, but of power and powerlessness...Power/powerlessness is the sex difference" (MacKinnon, 1987, p.123). In couples' negotiations of work-life concerns, couples are negotiating power and gender in the reality of their relationship. Complaints about unequal labor in the second shift (Hochschild, 1989) are cries to remove individuals' marginalization through traditional gender assumptions. The professionalization of the stay at home mother (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Medved & Kirby, 2005) can be seen as social levels of gender discourse and power which serve to marginalize women. Social comparisons to other men or women instead of to the labor of their spouse, as noted by Deutsch (1999), works to both empower and marginalize individuals in the division of labor through maintained inequality.

Clearly work-life issues have profound implications for the individuals in relationships and for those who are further marginalized. At the same time work-life concerns can clearly be established as a communication problem. Research has started to



address these topics, but gaps exist in this body of literature in two key regards, which I will review next. First, men's voices in work-life research have been almost silenced. Additionally, research on work-life concerns has had problems in giving voice to the entire couple.

### *Gaps in the Research*

#### *Work-Life Research as Silencing Men*

A concern with voice is an issue that can be seen in work-life research. Traditional research on work-life issues has focused primarily on women and their concerns because this issue of work-life balance was originally constructed as a women's issue or concern (Barnett, 1999). This narrow definition of work-life as a woman's concern helps to recreate the assumption that men in relationships do not need to work towards balance and/or men do not need to be involved in home life. This woman centered and normative discourse serves to push men farther away from the home and further into the workforce and limits them to the role of ideal worker (Drago, 2007).

Looking at past research, we see that work-life research has primarily examined women's concerns and the imbalanced impact women feel within this context (e.g., Bolton, 2000; Douglas & Michaels, 2004). This focus on women helped to construct work-life negotiations as a women's issue, and then, through the continued focus, it is reified as a concern just for women. This narrow gendered construction of work-life issues has been central to much of the research examining all aspects of work-life negotiations. Not only is this harmful to women by recreating them as the primary keeper of the home, but it also hurts men as well. Medved et al. (2006) states that "if we continue to study and define work-family as only a women's issue, we devalue men's

experiences and also constrain possibilities for change” (p. 166). Beyond devaluing men’s experiences, this narrow research focus also silences men and their feelings, ideas, and identities within the realm of work-life concerns. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) also pointed to the problem of examining only one half of the relational dyad and argued that by examining only women or men, we fail to see them in relation to each other.

It is only recently that men’s voices have been added to the discussion (e.g., Buzzanell & Duckworth, 2007; Buzzanell & Turner, 2003; Duckworth & Buzzanell, 2007; Medved & Rawlins, 2007), and these are just a start for what is possible. Future research in work-life needs to incorporate men’s voices in concert with women’s voices so that a fuller picture of the issues can be constructed. Men’s voices are limited not only in the brief research focus, but are further limited in research examining couples negotiating work-life concerns, which will be discussed in the next section. However, the answer to limited masculine voice is not to reverse the poles and privilege the men’s voices, but rather to turn to study these concerns with couples. Just as there are clearly limits in not creating space for men, work-life research is also limited in not speaking for the couple.

#### *Work-Life Research not Speaking for the Couple*

With the vast research in work-life there is still limited research that gives voice to the couple. Turning to the perspective of the couple, an array of articles appears to address how couples negotiate work-life concerns. However on closer inspection, much of this research is limited in a variety of ways. Research on couples’ emotion work and household labor has been examined through self report surveys with one adult (Erickson, 2005) or by just surveying married women (Erickson, 1993). Perceived work, family,

and marital role quality was also examined through individual surveys (Gomez, 2006). Even the impact of husband contributions was measured by interviewing one member of the couple—the wife (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2005). Similarly, both the perception of labor among couples and the division of labor among couples have been measured by examining the wife (Mederer, 1993). Because of subjective perceptions and self-report bias, it is problematic to make claims about the couple by examining only half of the relationship. This can be seen in Fitzpatrick and Indvik's (1983) results that noted that individuals in relationships often have different perceptions and interpretations of the same events. Again, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) point to the problem of examining only one half of the relational dyad and argue that by examining only women or men, we fail to see them in relation to each other.

Just as examining one partner can be problematic, it can also be problematic to take an additive approach to understanding the couple. Some emerging research takes into account the couple (e.g., Deutch, 1999; Deutch & Saxon, 1998; Golden, 2001), but for many of these studies, understanding the relationship is created by taking responses from partner one plus the responses from partner two to equal the relationship. However, if examined through a systems perspective, “argued by some as most dominant of all family communication perspectives” (Sabourin, 2006, p.50), it is clear that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The systems perspective suggests “a system cannot be fully comprehended by a study of its individual parts in isolation from one another” (Turner & West, 2002, p. 53). Couples are shaped in relationships. Deutsch and Saxon (1998) examined how couples who had less traditional career structures held traditional ideologies about work-life concerns; however, participants in this study were interviewed

as individuals rather than allowing them to speak together on the topic. This could be problematic because the co-construction of work-life concerns that takes place in the relationship is not visible.

Among the studies looking at couples, few have chosen to focus on how couples together co-construct their realities. There are a few exceptions. Blaisure and Allen (1995) examined feminist marriages giving participants a chance to co-construct the story of their relationship and noted five processes used in achieving equity. Golden (2001) examined role negotiation as couples prepared for parenthood, however only a limited number of couples were able to be interviewed together. Earlier work by Golden (2000) looked at parents' discourse about work and family, noting that a framework of messages points to both the self and the others in the relationship. Hochschild's (1989) classic study examined couples' attempts to balance work life concerns, looking at the real time co-construction of work-life concerns through ethnography. However Hochschild's approach centers the understanding of work-life on social forces rather than looking through a lens of communication. Possibilities for expanding the understanding of couples' work-life concerns exist in expanding the focus on how couples co-construct these concerns by looking at the couple together so interactions between partners can be seen rather than just reported.

Other work looking at couples as they talk about work-life concerns also use dyads, but the focus of this work is on the products of communication, such as satisfaction or stress, rather than the process (e.g., Barnett, & Rivers, 1996; Zvonkovic, Schmeiege, & Hall, 1994). This product focus has been a common continual concern in work-life communication research (Heacock & Spicer, 1986). Although research on the

outcomes of work-life concerns are important, until there is a better understanding of the process of couples' co-constructions, couples cannot hope to change the outcomes.

Golden (2002) started to address this limitation by focusing her study on the voices of couples with children and in addressing gender. To further this area of research, attention needs to be given to all heterosexual couples, both with and without children as these two types of relationships may be very different. Furthermore, conceptions of gender need to be expanded to include and acknowledge the ways that power works within gender.

### *The Theory of Feminist Communicology*

To begin filling the work-life co-construction gap in work-life research, I turn to a theoretical foundation that can offer insight into the ways that power, gender, and organizations are understood. Feminist communicology provides a strong lens through which couple's co-construction of work-life balance can be better understood. Feminist communicology was developed by Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) as a way to understand gender, communication, and power. Because work-life research and concerns straddle the areas of organizational and interpersonal communication, utilizing feminist communicology is particularly appropriate.

The theory of feminist communicology exists as a much broader theory than past theories of gender. Feminist communicology can be seen as a broader theory of communication and gender as it accounts for both critical/modern and postmodern perspectives while centering the work on the issue of gender. In taking from the critical perspective, feminist scholars tend to adopt the concept of stable social structures and existence of material consequences (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). However, although in feminist communicology concepts are taken from the critical/modern perspective, other

constructs central to critical perspectives are less central to feminist research. Feminist researchers have rejected “modernist propensities for correspondence theories of truth, value-neutral epistemologies, and objectivist ontologies” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 170). Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) also argue that from the postmodern perspective, feminist scholars take the idea of shifting, fragmented, local, and performative nature of identity and social relationships. While they take concepts from the postmodern perspective, feminists also reject postmodernism’s lack of political bent and the relativism present in ethical views. Feminist theorists reject both the objectivist ontologies and apolitical research because those constructs exist in opposition to the work of feminism. In taking concepts from both modern and postmodern frames, feminist communicology is able to develop a more unique understanding of a) how issues of gender, power, and relationships work and b) how those issues impact individuals’ lives. To further explore feminist communicology, I first turn to the understanding of gender that feminist communicology offers and then to the premises of the theory put forth by Ashcraft and Mumby (2004).

#### *Gender and Feminist Communicology*

Feminist communicology illustrates the multiplicity of gender. Remke (2007) argued “Within a feminist communicology, gender is not just an optional lens of analysis, but a fundamental, in fact, ontological element of communication” (p. 5). Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) emphasized the point that gender is also raced, classed, and that the meaning of gender is further understood through sexuality. This understanding requires the researcher to speak to the multiple shades of gender that are possible by working to

build in more inclusivity into their research both in the explanations, analysis, and in the focus of the research.

In examining gender, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) offer four frames for understanding gender (For an illustration of the frames see the chart in Ashcraft, 2004). These four frames are offered as “moments of ‘truth’ about gendered organizations” and should serve as reminders to not cling blindly to one single understanding of how gender works in organizations (Ashcraft, 2004, p. 289). First, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that gender organizes discourse. In this frame “identity connotes a relatively stable self, distinguished by core, group based similarities and differences that largely transcend time and context” (p. 3). In this view of gender, the focus centers on the ways that gender influences our discourse, with studies in this perspective focused on issues such as Tannen’s work (1990, 1994). Research in this perspective often frames studies around such things as feminine models of talk (Gilligan, 1982) or gendered communication differences (Kramarae, 1981). In this frame we see an individual’s gender impacting and shaping their communication, with discourse functioning mainly as an outcome. Within this frame, research on work-life would examine how men and women might talk about concerns differently and have different approaches to work-life communication. Gender in this frame is more closely tied with biological sex than social construction. In examining employment interviews through this frame, Buzzanell and Meisenbach (2006) noted that researchers need to look for sex difference and ideal speech situations that cause bias. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) noted that power is relevant in this frame based on how the differences in gendered communication are evaluated or ranked.

The second frame offered is that discourse (dis)organizes gender. Ashcraft (2004) noted that in this frame, attention is given to how discourse produces and undermines the traditional order. In this frame we see both a micro level application—the discourse of mundane interaction or the constant performance of our gender in specific interactions (e.g.—the individual performances of gender in interaction), and the macro level—a relatively conflicted yet coherent context-specific narrative or abstraction of gender (e.g.—the gender portrayals of the ideal worker). Within the second frame, discourse becomes more constitutive of reality and gender identity shifts into a (re)created product. At a larger level we see social scripts of gender in this framework, and in the micro level research turns to how individuals negotiate these different scripts. Buzzanell and Meisenbach (2006) noted that in examining employment interviews through this frame, researchers need to examine how discourse constructs certain gendered performances. Work-life research from this frame might examine the larger norms of the breadwinner or supermom, or turn and focus on how individuals construct their own identity as they negotiate through life as a supermom.

The third frame of research on gender is the idea that organizing (en)genders discourse. This frame of gender views organizations as gendering agencies, with the dynamic interactions within organization actively (en)gendering individuals. Ashcraft (2004) argued that organizations, like gender identity, are constantly in process. Not only do organizations emerge through discursive activity, but they also exist as a prerequisite for communication and collective action (Ashcraft, 2004). Couples negotiating work-life issues are being gendered by their organizations as well as other organizing features in their life, such as the larger family system. Within this frame, it is understood that gender



is tied to forms of organizations and these organizational forms then impact the interactions of the members and their range of options in the organization. In examining employment interviews through this frame, Buzzanell and Meisenbach (2006) noted that researchers need to look at how structures and ideal applicant profiles produce gendered differences. In work-life research, if we look to the household as a sub-unit of the normalized family organization, the gendered assumptions tied to it can be seen to have an impact on how individuals operate in household labor and what latitude individuals are given.

Finally, frame four looks at gender through the lens that discourse (en)genders organizations. Ashcraft (2004) argued that in this frame we see more societal level discourses as they (en)gender organizations. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) stated that “gender identities, their liaison with labor, and resulting implications for being and action are a discursive product or effect” (p. 18). Through this frame we see that the gendered identities that one holds, how these gendered identities interact with work, and the implications of this are all products of the larger macro-level discourse. Buzzanell and Meisenbach (2006) stated that in examining employment interviews in this frame, researcher’s turn to popular depictions of employment interviewing. In this view of gender, we turn our attention to broader social narratives as text, as we see how conceptions like the communication about work, or the ideal worker norm (Drago, 2007) play into gendering individuals. From this frame, researchers look at how these narratives play into shaping the lives of individuals as well as larger historical perspectives.

In examining the different ways in which gender is conceptualized, researchers can develop a broader understanding of gender research. In presenting the four frames of

gender, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) noted that each of the frames has different pragmatic approaches, insights, and vulnerabilities. However, even with these differences the frames all have some similarities, including a concern for gender identity, a view of power as central, and centering discourse in the research. Further research should continue to keep these frames in mind in order to build on the understanding of these frames.

### *Key Premises of Feminist Communicology*

Beyond the gender frames, feminist communicology also builds understanding of how gender works in organizations by bridging the gaps between modern and postmodern approaches to research through the main premises of the theory. Although critical scholarship is not solely identified as the product of modernity, critical scholarship is the focus of the modern approach in feminist communicology. From the combination of modern and postmodern research perspective, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) offered six premises.

The first premise of feminist communicology is that “communication constitutes subjectivity but does not work alone” because material structures also create an impact on individuals (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p.171). Subjectivity can be understood through the conception of subject identities, which “can be discursively positioned and agentic, beset by contradiction and coherence” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 108). For the purposes of this study subjectivity should be understood as individual realities. From this premise of the theory, communication is understood as the basic process of discursive struggle. It is through communication that individuals (dis)organize reality. Discourse about work-life works to both organize reality around central norms as well as allow

couples to engage in work-life constructions that run counter to the norms. For example, in the linguistic construction of the supermom, a social role is created that legitimizes the extended work hours and individual management of the household. Additionally, naming of things such as sexual harassment or work-life concerns creates the reality of these constructs. Finally, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) note that communication is constitutive, but it is also important to note that not all communication is constitutive in the same way and with the same lasting implications. There are things that exist beyond communication, such as the material structures that confine individuals, which impact the ways in which we interact. That is why we turn to the second premise, noting the dialectic of discourse/materiality.

Building from the first premise, the second premise of feminist communicology suggests that the dialectic of discourse/materiality lends communication its constitutive force. With this premise, we see the need to account for both the discourse and the materiality of a situation. At times the reality of the material world prompts communication, such as the reality of working mothers and limited social support prompted the linguistic creation of “the supermom”, with the smiling image of she who could do it all (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). In other situations the discourse works to structure materiality. “Communication is deeply entangled with the emotional lives and concrete circumstances of real people, who come to experience in their own bodies the ‘authenticity’ of particular discourses with a power to which most of us can attest” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p. 176). In the discourse of the Opt-Out mother, we are offered a label from those not wanting or able to cope with tensions related to the demands of both the workplace and children which are both very real, constraining, and

also constructed as the mother's responsibility. At the same time, the socio-economic status of individuals also creates a material restriction that limits some individuals from opting out.

Premise three articulates that the historical context and political economy of communication is central to understanding the discourse/materiality dialectic. Both gender and communication respond to historical and political events. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that "in addition to conceptualizing the identity of social actors as agentic and rooted in everyday communicative practices, it is also important to view larger historical, institutional discourse as the work of particular agents" (pp. 121-122). Work-life negotiations today can best be understood by looking back to the historical context that shaped and framed norms about couples' labor. This premise offers a way to highlight the history and power that shaped what is now normal. Through this premise, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) explained the construction of the legitimacy of the pilot's labor and status as the professional male by tracing the communication and actions that allowed this construction to happen. Additionally, by looking at the historical and political interests that have impacted work-life negotiations, clearly there are decisive constructions such as the role of the "new consumer" that pulled women back to the household and out of the workforce after World War II (Douglas, 1995).

The fourth premise argues that the understanding of power and resistance can be best viewed as the power/resistance dialectic. It is in the ironic and ambiguous and conflicted nature of communication that we see language that is both empowering and constraining. With this, it is articulated that there is both a dialectical relationship between power/resistance and that interpretive limits are better understood through the

material and discursive limits noted above. Discourse could be seen as a site of empowerment in selling the working mother the image of a superhero, yet at the same time the irony exists in that the constraints of the hero's cape require these women to continue to assume the majority of the household labor because material constraints limit their other options. To a great extent, research tends to privilege either power or resistance instead of looking at it as power/resistance. If we look instead at the situations in which discourse is not completely powerful or resistant but instead is located in a larger struggle that offers the possibility of both agency and objectification, we can develop a better understanding of how power works. By looking at the small drop in hours of housework performed by working women compared to the stay at home wife, resistance to the imbalance of the second shift can be seen. However, the material conditions and gendered expectations that require household labor to occur limit the resistance that can take place.

The key premise to this current study is premise five, which articulates that the discourses of gender differences emerge (and are best understood) in relation to each other. Just as a need to focus on power/resistance exists, so does a similar need to examine masculinity/femininity. In this we can see that gender exists in relation to other constructions of gender and plays off opposing constructions, just as Flax (1990) noted that masculinities and femininities are created together in a complex power relationship. Although, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) also note that gender works with other discourses of difference to create unique intersections of identity, gender is central to this theoretical construction. To understand the concerns and discourse of women discussing work-life, attention also needs to be given to the men in the relationships. At the same time,

examining the traditional masculine construction of breadwinner cannot be fully understood without also turning to the feminine construction of the homemaker. Clearly, just to speak to both individuals is not enough. Research needs to examine the co-construction of these meanings by examining couples interactions because the reproduction of gender works in unique and interesting ways.

Finally, the sixth premise notes the need to pursue temporary praxis by taking an ethical stand at a shifting location. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that feminist communicology is “concerned with dereifying and critiquing the discursive and material mechanisms that create stable structures and hierarchies of value” (p. 185). This premise creates the strong tie to feminist research with the call to make an application of the theory. When examining work-life constructions, research must move beyond offering critiques, but also offer suggestions for ways that couples can improve the negotiations of work-life concerns and hopefully also their relationships. This resistance needs to go beyond the micro level calls that extend only to that of the individual but also make arguments for the possibility for collective action.

#### *Feminist Communicology as a Unique Lens*

Feminist Communicology offers a unique way to view how gender and power work in relationships. Eicher-Catt (2005) argued for the use of feminist communicology in family communication research to reflect a human science perspective. Mumby and Ashcraft (2006) argue that feminist communicology “examines how work and gender become entwined, how this relationship is effectively sustained and altered over time and across arenas of human symbolic activity, and how communication functions as the medium and outcome of institutionalized power” (p. 83). I contend that a similar

argument can be made for the entwined nature of family and gender. Berk (1985) argued that the family was the gender factory, the originally socialize institution for gendering. Similarly, Medved (2004) argued that “doing” work and family is “doing gender.” DeVault (1991) noted that feeding the family is organized through systems of gender inequality. Clearly a variety of research has pointed to the link between gender and the family in work-life concerns. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) provide a complex but comprehensible framework from which the different tracts of research on gender can be better understood. The four frames of gender and discourse can be easily applied to work-life research. All of the frames can be applied from examining gender in the language difference of women and men, gender in interactions, and the organizational form to the social narratives. From this conception of four frames of gender, the theory builds on initial assumptions through the development of six premises to offer an understanding of gender. These premises rest on the understanding that: subjectivity is ever shifting and dynamic, the relationship between material world and discourse is dialectical, as is the relationship between power and resistance, and masculinity and femininity. Additionally, knowledge of the historical context is crucial, and research requires a normative ethical movement.

Conceiving that two phenomena exist together in the same space was noted before in other researchers’ work. Bakhtin (1981) argued for the dialogic perspective, one of the bases of Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) work on relational dialectics, and Taoist philosophers positioned the yin and the yang (Tzu, 1989). In the field of organizational communication, Clair (1998) argued for the framing of the phenomena of language and silence as “language/silence or silence/language are ways of demoting that the two

phenomena exist simultaneously in a shared space, influencing each other” (p. 10). In these relationships, in order to say what something is, we also need to be able to illustrate what it is not (Clair, 1998). In this way, understanding the dialectical relationships proposed by Ashcraft and Mumby can be constructed as material/discourse, masculine/feminine and power/resistance. In these constructions, individuals are able to visualize more clearly the constructions that Ashcraft and Mumby intended for us.

Feminist communicology research has started to point to new and interesting ways to build understanding. Remke (2007) utilized the theory to develop a fuller understanding of class, gender, and non-profit educational environments. Buzzanell and Meisenbach (2006) noted the avenues for new research in employment interviews. Eicher-Catt (2005) argued for the use of feminist communicology and communicology in general to study family communication. It is through the examination of work-life concerns that research can take the six premises of the theory and work to build a more involved understanding of how couple’s co-construct work-life concerns. The purpose of this study is to understand how couples co-construct work-life concerns and how both issues of gender and power are apparent in these constructions.

#### *Advancing Work-Life Understanding*

Through this research, scholars understanding of work-life concerns may be further developed. Interpersonal communication scholarship is advanced by looking at how individuals negotiate issues and the tensions that are experienced in this process of daily negotiations with their relational partner. Kirby et al. (2003) argued that work-life issues have been primarily understood in terms of domain, roles, and outcomes, but new directions of inquiry should explore how individuals “negotiate contextual shifts and



reconstruct boundaries” (p.7). It is important to develop an understanding of how couples co-construct work-life concerns because these negotiations both allow individuals to create their own realities and constrain their realities. Additionally, Kirby et al. (2003) offered a challenge for scholars to “critically examine daily, micro level discourses that communicatively construct work and family” (p. 34). This has been started in a variety of work on work-life concerns (e.g. Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Golden, 2002, 2000). Yet the possibility exists for expanding these constructions of work and family through expanding men’s and couples’ voices. This study helps to answer that challenge through the examination of discourse about work-life balance in couples.

Beyond interpersonal scholarship, this research offers insight into organizational communication by extending the research that has been done in the area of work-life. As both Kirby (2006) and Martin (2000) argued, the areas of organizational and interpersonal life are intertwined for individuals and cannot be studied as separate spheres. Golden (2009) described the relationship between families and organizations as a “causal loop” with each sphere impacting the other (p. 412). By learning more about the discourse about work-life issues that exists between couples, research also is more informed about the roles, identities, and expectations individuals take into their work environments. At the same time, looking at couples’ interpersonal negotiation of work-life, unique insight into organizational issues might be raised, presenting possibilities for future research for organizational scholars to continue the integration of these areas.

Beyond the traditional areas of research in interpersonal communication and organizational communication, the present study also contributes to the area of feminist communication research. Feminist researchers understand the personal as political, and as

Fenstermaker (1997) argued, the intellectual as political. Giving voice to couples' work-life discussions offers insight into the marginalization of individuals through norms and roles, as well as provides a foundation to correct these inequities and foster change.

Through feminist research, academia is understood as the public forum for activism and change (Richardson, 1997). Mohanty (2004) argued that research is the site for the dream that things can be better, and change can occur. Through research on couples' communication about work-life balance, I hope to add to the dream that women can achieve social equity.

Beyond academic insight, further research into work-life co-constructions offers potential practical application, hope, and help for couples who are at greatest risk for the consequences of problematic work-life negotiation. Researchers have argued that with challenges faced by dual-earner couples, scholarship is important in understanding how the stress of work-life can be reduced (Orrange, Firebaugh, & Heck, 2003). Drago (2007) argued that we need to give individuals the tools to help them author their own avenues of success in life, and this could be done by "involving those affected in the search for solutions, asking individuals and families what they need at particular times, and figuring out how those needs can be meshed" (p. 147). Qualitative research that looks at couples' discourses offers them a site to give voice to their unique concerns which adds to the search for solutions and ultimately a way for individuals to enjoy a more fulfilling life. Through the analysis of couples' communication, I hope to offer themes and suggestions that can be incorporated by individuals to offer them a greater possibility for success.

Just as work-life concerns have developed over the years, so has the research on work-life. Work-life research points to the substantial impact that these concerns have in

individuals' lives. It is clear how work-life is both a concern for relational scholars as well as feminist researchers. Despite all of the scholarship on the topic, current limitations in understanding still exist in both couples' and men's limited of voice in work-life research. Using a lens of feminist communicology researchers can better address and understand how couples co-construct work-life concerns. Finally, there are clear benefits to this research because outcomes can be seen that advance interpersonal, organizational and feminist scholarship along with practical applications. In the next chapter, research in the area of work-life will be reviewed in more depth.

## CHAPTER 2- LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Introduction and Review of Past Chapter*

The issue of work-life balance is a concept that has been haunting individuals for decades. Couples are haunted not only by the pressures that are felt in paid work contexts, such as the office, but also in the expectations tied to unpaid work contexts, such as family responsibilities and in idealized gender norms functioning in society. In reviewing the work that has been done in studying work-life, current limitations in understanding still exist in the couple's voice and the masculine voice.

Gender is as much of a central concern to work-life as ever, yet many scholars fail to see its centrality. Golden et al. (2006) noted that in work-life concerns gender remains an intensely meaningful category, making feminist approaches exceedingly relevant. In turning to feminist communicology, research can start to build a stronger understanding of how couple's co-construct their work-life concerns, the impact of gender and power in this co-construction, as well as establish a clear framework for exploring this issue more in depth. This chapter will start with an examination of the research on work-life concerns and where the gaps in this research exist.

In looking at the past research on work-life concerns, issues of gender, power, and norms/roles are visible in findings. However, as clear as these concepts are in the research, it is also clear that these areas do not exist as silos of research, but rather flows together, frequently involving more than one of these areas. An exemplar of this can be seen in the early work-life roles that were constructed by society, as the breadwinner and homemaker. These roles are historic constructions, influencing individual's work-life

constructions today, alive in the discourse, and structured and normalized through work. These roles also exist as material constraints written into place with assumptions about power, offering a source of (dis)empowerment, and are closely tied to the masculine/feminine co-construction of identity. Feminist communicology allows us to understand work-life concerns through the premises that it offers. It is important to examine different aspects of work-life in each area of the premises offered by feminist communicology. In order to build an understanding of where research needs to expand, work-life literature will be first examined through the six premises of feminist communicology. After arriving at the summary of this body of literature, I will conclude with a justification for research in this area and research questions that will frame my investigation.

#### *Historical Context and Political Nature of Work-Life Concerns*

The historical and political nature of work-life roles and individual enactments of work-life are significantly impacted by the ways that couples co-construct work-life concerns. Past scholars have noted that class, gender, and other individual characteristics are not as stable as some assume, but rather are shaped through larger historical and political influences. For example, Mumby (1998) argued that masculinity is not a stable and singular construct, but rather interacts with class in a variety of ways, depending on the social and political consequences. Furthermore, Parr (1990) noted that class and gender identities are a matter of history, not as universals but operating in specific ways. Clearly gender both interacts with and is impacted by political and historical constructs. Attention is now turned to this area to further explore work-life constructions.

The field of work-life research emerged based on historical shifts in the way labor was performed. Although the phenomenon of women working outside of the household is not a recent development, it is an issue that has forced more consideration of work-life concerns because who is working outside of the household has changed (Johnson, 2001). From the social movements of the 60's on and the rallying cry from the *Feminist Mystique*, a further questioning of women's roles was reinvigorated and provided the motivation to inspire middle class women to return to or even maintain paid employment after the birth of a child. The return to work of these middle class women offered a voice for women's concerns as these new female workers found employment in areas that started to offer more agency to them. Gilbert (1993) argued that "women employed in low-paying jobs is neither a new nor a radical concept and thus does not necessarily challenge traditional assumptions about a women's place," (p. xi-xii). However, it was with the addition of women to higher status positions that more agency, voice, and discussion were given to issues that are of concern to working parents, and working women especially. With this growing voice came the growth of research, as Barnett (1999) noted "work-family" first appeared in the 1980's, with married women in the labor force experiencing a steep increase and when the spheres of work and family were much more distinct. It appears that with the addition of women of status into the workforce came the ability to speak out more about concerns that working women held, which led to the development of research in this area.

#### *Roles as Historically Constructed and Gendered*

Much of what happens with work-life concerns centers on how individuals shape (and are shaped by) the roles that they participate in. Although this research does not

focus on roles explicitly, but rather how couples co-construct work-life concerns, it seems likely that roles influence these constructions. Stamp (1994) noted that “roles do not exist as an objective reality...rather, roles are created through an individual’s interaction with others, thereby structuring their reality and providing meaning to their lives” (p. 91).

Individual discourse constructs roles.

Roles provide a strong link between historical and current constructions of work-life. Early construction of work roles, including household roles for couples emerged with the shift to a new way to labor (DeVault, 1999a). The re-division of labor started with the industrial revolution, moving work outside the home, off the farm, and shifting the definition of work to those labors that occurred outside the home for financial gain. The “family wage bargain” meant that the best paid industrial workers (men) would earn enough to support a family fiscally, which would then allow the women to support the husband through the household (DeVault, 1999a). Though this construction was not formalized until the development of the working family wage with Ford and other manufacturing plants (May, 1987), the emergence of the dichotomy in gender roles that the labor shift created started to take hold. The language around the role of the breadwinner started to be heard, and in parallel the homemaker was also created.

*The breadwinner role.* One of the first roles established with the industrial revolution and the obtainment of the single worker family wage was the role of the breadwinner (Bernard, 1981; Ferree, 1990). The role of breadwinner has also been described as the Husband-as-Economic-Provider (HEP) by researchers (Hood, 1986). Deutsch and Saxon (1998) argued that the “role of breadwinner is not simply a function of earning money for the family, but it is tied to notions of gender” (p. 348). Similarly,

Thompson and Walker (1995) argued that “breadwinning is not just an activity, but a contested, negotiated, and renegotiated meaning system that defines the boundaries of gender” (p. 851). This historic construction of gender still is apparent today. Researchers noted that regardless of outside conditions and individual enactments of roles, the role of the breadwinner is still typically reserved for the man of the household (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998). However, recent research has started to examine the impact of women in the role of the female breadwinner (Meisenbach, 2007).

While the breadwinner role was constructed as a norm, it was constructed in parallel to the homemaker role. These role constructions parallel gender construction, because the norms of masculinity are constructed in tandem with feminine norm constructions. These two historic roles remained oppositional and complementary enactments. Williams (2000) noted this phenomenon and argued that when wives stay home either full or part time, husband’s household labor decreases, and resulting from this, husbands of homemakers earn higher raises than men whose wives do market labor. However this clear distinction between roles may only exist as an ideal. Hood (1986) argued that “for most of the growing urban working class, the ideal of the male provider complemented by a submissive, pious, and economically dependent wife was an unrealistic upper-middle-class standard” (p. 349-350). For many families and workers who were unable to achieve the status of a stay at home/homemaker wife due to financial constraints, this norm existed instead as a source of judgment and evaluation. These individuals were seen as deviant to the standards and ideal expectations. Although these clear distinctions in roles might have been difficult for some individuals to achieve, it



was still proscribed as the norm that should be sought after. The norm of the masculine breadwinner has been ingrained in our culture for over the past 150 years (Hood, 1986).

*The homemaker/bread-baker role.* When husbands started to leave the family to take part in the new urban workforce, women in turn started to see a shift in their roles. In balance with the breadwinner, the homemaker or Housewife/Mother Role came to exist as the normative behavior for adult American women (Hood, 1986). Douglas and Michaels (2004) defined homemaker as “a woman who had actively chosen the task [of household maintenance] and considered it on a par with other specialized professions” (p. 108). The homemaker was the one who was responsible for everything domestic; they built the home life that the family participated in. This responsibility was an expectation that women continue to be socialized into. Barash (2004) argued that “from girlhood onward, women believe not only that being a wife is their future, but also that they will be deficient without the experience” (p.28). The public acknowledgement of the position of women as workers outside the home was nonexistent; instead, women were expected to marry and take care of their own households. Along with caring for the household was a second and equally important expectation, caring for children. Drago (2007) noted the existence of this role with the common conception of what he called the “Motherhood norm.” With this norm, individuals are led to “anticipate that women will become biological mothers and care for their children, and also implies that girls and women themselves hold these expectations” (p.7). This role of homemaker was portrayed as the caregiver to those in need, whether that was the child with the scraped knee, the husband with a wrinkled shirt, or the school or community needs with the bake sales.

The homemaker role developed and along with it, an expanding list of the responsibilities for the role. These responsibilities have been constructed as the obligations of the homemaker. Coltrane (2000) argued that women have felt obligated to perform the household/care work, whereas men have then been able to assume that this domestic work was the responsibility of women in the household. Housework as labor can be seen as differentiated types: the routine labor, such as cooking, cleaning, and caring; and also as the occasional labor, such as bills, maintenance, and yard care (Coltrane, 2000). The primary responsibilities of the homemaker were the all consuming routine tasks of cooking, cleaning, and care work that are required to make a household function. Along with the two types of labor and the social construction of women's role responsibilities came the gender labeling of the tasks (Coltrane, 2000). Routine labor is then constructed as women's work. If the husband is to "help out" the wife the tasks that are assigned to him typically include the occasional labor such as car maintenance, yard care, and fixing things in the house.

### *Emerging Work-Life Roles*

Economic changes have impacted the roles that individuals can embrace in their enactments of daily life. Hood (1986) argued that with the developments in the 1970's, including rising costs and dropping wages, that the dream of the breadwinner became less of a reality for more people in America. Similarly, Drago (2007) noted that the minimum wage faced a significant drop between 1980 and 1985. Beyond economic realities, political realities also worked to shape roles. Feminist calls continued to emerge questioning the norms of current roles and suggesting women expand their roles (e.g., Friedan, 1963). With the changing needs in society, there was also some shift in work-life

roles. Included in the shifting conceptions of roles was the morphing of the breadwinner into the ideal worker norm. Just as the roles changed, more recent years saw the development of new norms for household behavior. Comprising the new roles for men and women in the household were the supermom, and also the new momism.

*The ideal worker role.* Recent years have seen the morphing of some of the values of the breadwinner into the newer role and expectations of the ideal worker. In the past, the role of the breadwinner constructed work as central and offered a permission slip to those enacting this performance removing them from the obligations and expectations of routine labor in the household. With the evolution of the ideal worker, this automatic release from home duties is not as present. It is not that the role of ideal worker is less gendered in a masculine performance, but it is instead gendered in a way that masculine behaviors are more covert and underlying the actions in the work environment.

Central to the construct of the ideal worker is the notion that work is in fact central to individuals' lives. For the ideal worker, the worker's sense of identity and self-value are closely tied to their job performance (Drago, 2007). This aspect of the ideal worker is a continuation of the breadwinner role. This commitment to work is constructed at the expense of all else, under the assumption that the individual has a help mate at home who provides for all of the care needs. LaRossa (1988) noted that it is that commitment to the workplace that keeps individuals from performing other roles with the same level of involvement. Displays of this commitment level can be seen by a variety of workers in a variety of contexts. Hylmo (2004) argued that women who wanted to maintain high evaluations and promotable status tended to display traditional masculine values in their work patterns and in boundary management. These traditional values

reflect back the image of the ideal worker that individuals enact in order to move ahead in work contexts.

One unique adaptation to roles associated with the development of the ideal worker norm/role was the development of the super mom role. The super mom role featured the commitment of the ideal worker to their job development and career while balancing the demanding responsibilities of the house and family. This mythical superwoman was often displayed balancing a toddler, a briefcase and a lacquered smile all while dashing in stiletto heels (Hochschild, 1989). This construction of the professional woman was displayed through a body in control, a fit body, and a monitored body that does not display any cues of being gendered, such as crying (Tretheway, 2000). Despite the balanced life and meticulous appearance, there are aspects of this idealized role that remain hidden from reality. Hochschild (1989) noted that what appears to be missing in the portrayal of the supermom is her army of helpers: the maid, day care worker, and babysitter.

Within the role of the supermom is a blend of the ideal worker norm and strong expectations for the home-maker role. This role is constructed out of the expectations of women who want it all, can do it all, and will perform all of their roles without fail. The “do it all” expectation of the supermom role obscures a deeper reality: that wives’ paid work is constructed as something that husbands let their wives do rather than something that wives do for the couple (Thompson & Walker, 1989). Women’s choice to work is then constructed as the wife’s addition to her list of duties rather than a reason for renegotiation of household duties and much less a reason to discuss work-life concerns.

This permissible crossing of roles is then acceptable as long as negative implications are not felt by the husband.

*The new momism role.* One of the cultural phenomena that recently has been holding families hostage is the rise of the new momism. Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue that this new momism is based on the assumptions that women are not either complete or fulfilled without children, women are the best primary caretakers, and that decent mothers devote all of their time and energy to their children, as the decent mother of course does not work. These assumptions are hurtful to families because they reinforce historical assumptions about appropriate life roles that influence the options available to individuals. Not only do these assumptions impact how couples make choices about their life balance issues, but it also impacts how others talk to and about these families and their private choices.

Along with the anxiety of the new momism (Douglas & Williams, 2004), this role comes with an additional concern about doing what is best for the children. Williams (2000) stated that “the commodification anxiety derived from domesticity forms an unspoken, and often unconscious, cultural background for many mothers’ sense that they should not have their children raised by ‘strangers,’ but instead should frame their own lives around caregiving” (p.32). This additional paranoia is fueled both by individuals around them and media’s presentation of motherhood and family. The good mother is depicted as having unlimited face time with her children. This expectation limits the diversity of women who can fit into this depiction, with women who economically have to work alienated from this construct (Medved & Kirby, 2005). The stress and ideology of the perfect mother appears to also have a relationship with workforce participation.

Although the Department of Labor (2007a) reported a growth in dual-earner households, the number of dual-earner parents showed a seven percent decrease for those who have children under six years of age. It is possible that the political and historically bound messages of parenting are gaining strength in creating an impact on labor choices. Clearly political and historic roles have had strong impacts on how individuals co-construct work-life concerns, but in examining the impact of history, it can also be noted that the discourse itself lies imbedded with the historical norm and structures of work-life. This discourse will be examined next.

### *Communication and Gender Subjectivity in Work-Life*

It is in the discussions over the dinner table, messages left at work, and reminders before their partner falls asleep that work-life is negotiated. Central to feminist communicology are the ways in which discourse shapes reality. Discourse both throughout and about the relationship serves to create the subject, the couple, the couple's work-life norms. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) noted that "subjectivity is unstable, fragmented, and constructed in an ongoing and dynamic manner through various communicative practices" (p.117). Similarly, Gherardi, Marshall, and Mills (2003) argued that individuals are at once the products of discourse and the producers of discourse. In these discourses, what individuals know is played out and reshaped to conform to their reality. Heacock and Spicer (1986) noted that "in the case of the dual-career couple, the communication process is central to the creation of the self and to one's understanding of one's partner, of the coupleship, of his/her own career and partner's career and of the employing organization or organizations" (p. 261). Researchers noted that each discourse is reality to the degree that it participates in the

construction of material practices (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). It is through the arguments about child care that the norm of mother centered care is (re)created, becomes reality, and serves to bind individuals in daily practices.

One of the key aspects in the work of feminist communicology is the presentation of the four frames of discourse in order to build an understanding of the construction of discourse, gender, and organizations. These four frames, discussed in the first chapter in more detail, include: gender organizes discourse, discourse (dis)organizes gender, organizations (en)genders discourse, and discourse (en)genders organizations (Ashcraft, 2004; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). It is the last three frames that are of most relevance to this research and will be used to explore how discourse works in work-life co-constructions.

#### *Discourse (Dis)Organizes Gender*

In the second frame offered by Ashcraft and Mumby (2004), an understanding of how discourse constitutes gender was built, it is through discourse that gender is constructed. Within this frame, research looks to explore both how narratives are invoked by individuals and how these performances preserve and/or alter the appearance of a binary gender order. Discourse helps define and shape social reality through these narratives, and individuals are part of that reality by acting out their gender according to norms and expectations, resulting in the construction of identity (Simpson and Lewis, 2007). Bruni, Gherardi, and Poggio (2005) defined gender as a linguistic artifact, a theoretical concept, and a quasi-object whose meaning is enacted. This enactment of gender echoes in “the ‘doing’ of gender ... undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production” (West & Zimmerman,

1987, p.126). Similarly, Ferree (1990) noted that “being a man or women socially is not a natural or inevitable outgrowth of biological features but an achievement of situated conduct” (p.869). In the conversations that couples have around the concept of work-life negotiation, they solidify norms and gender as well as the expectations for the relationship. Similarly, Kirby et al. (2003) noted that the “meaning of gender is constantly negotiated within everyday family and organizational interactions” (p. 4). Through discourse, clearly gender is constructed.

As noted earlier, the second question asked in this frame of gender and discourse seeks to examine how individual’s performances preserve or alter the current gender structures. Individuals’ views and expectations of gender are impacted by their perceived performance of their roles, which researchers have argued are fundamentally gendered (Kirby et al., 2002). Deutsch and Saxon (1998) noted that regardless of the performance of individual’s roles and behaviors, it is in the perceptions and couple’s discursive construction of reality that the meaning is really created. Further, it is in the contradiction between what is done and what the behavior means that the struggle over the construction of gender is seen (Thompson, 1993). In other words, gender does not exist in behaviors alone, but in the meaning assigned to it. For example, in working to maintain traditional gender norms through discourse, women were able to construct their paid labor as “helping” and thus allow their husbands to identify as the provider by minimizing the impact of their behavior (Simon, 1995). Thompson and Walker (1989) also noted that most men and women resist constructing the image of wives as co-providers. Although some women started to embrace the ideal worker norms, research makes it clear that the gendered expectations of caregiver are still prevalent in the perceptions of performance of



the women (Deutsch, 1999; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Hochschild, 1989). Further, couples who engage in nontraditional divisions of labor and childcare based on shift work still (re)created notions of gender based on the assumptions that the father was the breadwinner and the mother was the primary parent who does not develop a sense of identity based on work (Deutsch and Saxon, 1998). These results support the idea that despite individuals' behaviors, it was in the discourse, rather than the actions, where the meaning resided. Deutsch and Saxon (1998) further argued that “the doing of childcare was no longer gendered, but the meaning of it was” (p. 359). Beyond discourse shaping reality to reflect traditional norms, couples use discursive constructions to reconceptualize roles.

The reframing of roles illustrates how couples discursively preserve or alter norms. Balancing the tensions that are sometimes felt between role expectations and individual's identity at times forces a reconceptualization of individual roles. In creating the ideal role of super mom, shifts are made by those looking to enact this role because the super mom is the ultimate balancing act (Hochschild, 1989). Other women continue to create their sense of balance by offering a different frame for what it is to be a good mother (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Working women frame a good mother as: arranging for the childcare, an (un)equal partner, and finding pleasure in her working mother role (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Through reframing, working women were able to add in more components of their identity by constructing themselves as both good mothers and workers. The discourse of these women's lives constructs the frames from which they will be evaluated. Some of the evaluative frames that were selected reflect back on larger social constructions, such as family first (Buzzanell et al., 2005).

In situations where individuals might not feel as powerful they often discursively construct different versions of the reality of the situation. DeVault (1991) noted descriptions of how wives discursively constructed choices for preparing meals as their choice when it might have actually reflected more the preference of their husbands. One wife noted that she likes to plan meals just day by day and yet also commented that her husband would not tell her in advance what he would prefer. Similarly, another woman spoke of the freedom of no longer making elaborate meals, but was still responsible for the cooking in the household. In these descriptions, there are discursive claims to power and control as individuals attempt to reconceptualize roles in situations that might actually be very constraining or controlled. Ashcraft and Mumby argued that “on the stage of daily life, social actors are always ‘positioning’ self and other in terms of available gender narratives” (p. 9). Household labor is also reframed in ways to maintain roles. Hochschild (1989) noted that conflicts based on different expectations of household labor lead to negotiations and reconstruction of understanding in a variety of ways, from balance being constructed as upstairs/downstairs responsibilities, to comparing an inequitable situation with a worse situation, to individuals giving up in an attempt at a peaceful relationship. Beyond household labor, in maintaining the images associated with disappearing roles, Buzzanell and Turner (2003) noted that individuals discursively framed job loss to account for the shift of responsibilities in a way that traditional roles were still maintained. Similarly, Deutsch (1999) noted men presented a variety of justifications as a means to legitimize their behavior for less involvement in the household labor where the division was clearly unequal. In these reconceptualizations, there are both discursive constructions of different ways to view roles as well as

reinforced discourses and meta structures of gender. Through discourse, there are clear claims made by individual's negotiating work-life constructions as to how reality does exist.

Just as discourse is utilized to legitimate choices in work-life constructions, discourse is also used to legitimize gendered labor. These discursive constructions in which discourse (dis)organizes gender allows for the establishment and recreation of gender in the relationship. Researchers noted that even though women perform two thirds of the total household labor, only one third rate this situation as unfair (Coltrane, 2000) with marital quality more closely tied to perceptions of fairness (Frisco & Williams, 2003) and love and support (Bird, 1999) than the actual labor performed. Similarly, in relationships where the wives hold more egalitarian views, perceptions of fairness in household labor are more tied to perceptions of marital quality (Greenstein, 1996). In these problematic situations, it is through the discursive construction of love, fairness, equity, and support that individuals are willing to take on problematic division of labors as these inequitable divisions can then be further constructed as appropriate or love based labor. In legitimizing paid labor, some of the other performances of labor were also delegitimized. Scholars have noted what happens in the household is often not constructed as labor including much of what is incorporated in planning and executing meals (DeVault, 1991). This idea is echoed by Bolton (2000) who argued that the labor of the third shift, the mental planning and worry about the work performed during the other two shifts, is often contested and ignored. Through this (de)legitimization of work and especially household labor, it is clear that what is framed as legitimate labor is tied to

gender and its construction. Just as discourse was seen in shaping gender, the next section explores how organizations (en)gender discourse.

### *Organizations (En)Gender Discourse*

With the third frame of gender and discourse, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) point to the organization as a precarious social construct, which is more of an unfinished situation than a fixed stage. This broader understanding of organizations can be applied to families. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that individual identities become an organization process and outcome with the self constructed through membership in the organization, which exists as both a discursive product and producer. Similarly, individual identity is constructed through the discourse in the family.

Discourse exists as one of the large producers of meaning systems in the family. Family can also be seen as a discursive product and producer. The framing of family can be understood as product. Hood (1986) defined family roles as “mutual expectations negotiated by the actors that define each actor’s responsibility to other family members in a given situation” (p. 354). In this definition, it is clear that although the construct of roles is binding and solid, they are not concrete, frozen, or inflexible. Researchers noted that partners can assist each other discursively reconstruct the normal divided roles of worker and spouse (Kirby, Wieland, & McBride, 2006). Golden (2002) argued that marriage partners’ communicative practices (re)create role-identities and lifestyle choices. Further research notes that the successful negotiation of work-life is truly a function of developing shared meaning (Golden, 2002). Following in a similar view, Medved and Rawlins (2007) argued that “gendered breadwinning and care giving roles are socially constructed” with the family as a key location for these constructions (p. 10). Family

roles are recreated and recreate gender roles. Stamp (1994) argued that “enacting the role of parent is a learned accomplishment with each partner both facilitating and inhibiting the appropriation of each other’s parental role” (p. 98). In the home, families (re)produce the communication that shapes who they are and who they become.

As individuals receive messages from their families about how they should be performing both work and family roles, this shapes the way that they choose to interact with their families, and families then become discursive producers of meaning. These messages are received both in larger social systems and the home, or what has been dubbed “the gender factory” (Berk, 1985). For working women, there is often guilt associated with the feeling that they are not living up to the standard expectations of a good mother. These claims then ‘require’ individuals to engage in labor in a way that matches the larger norms (Perry-Jenkins, Pierce, & Goldberg, 2004). Based on the good-mother discourse, women at times choose to lay claim to the labor at home in an attempt to (re)create the good mother image at home (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). This enactment then translates into the marginalization of men from household duties because often the men are told that they are just not doing things as a mom should (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). Coltrane (2000) noted that patterns of household labor can be better understood by “attending to the symbolic significance of household labor in the social construction of gender” (p. 1208). Based on these communicative constructions of gender, women have felt compelled to perform the majority of the household labor, for example the cooking (DeVault, 1991) or child care (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), just as men have learned that this labor is the responsibility of their wives or other females. However, this discursive construction is apparent in more than just the micro discourses within the family, but also

in the macro discourses around the gendered choices and labor of the family. Discourse is clearly constructed and constructs both individuals in their familial interactions and individuals within the larger construction of the family, but it also is shaped and shapes the larger social constructions.

### *Discourse (En)gendering Organizations*

Beyond the more micro levels in which gender is constructed, turning to examine a macro level view of gender provides additional insights into how gender and family are constructed together. In this frame, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) focused on the larger level discourse or social narratives of gender. With the shifting experiences of individuals in work-life co-constructions, macro-level discourse arises to help (re)create norms.

Barnett and Rivers (1996) noted that the image of the working mother presented by the macro level media claims that work is bad for the women, family, and the organizations and further hides the positive implications of work for women. Exiting paid employment has created a new avenue for macro-level discursively formalized roles in society, such as the professional mother (Medved & Kirby, 2005) and the new momism (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). This professionalization of the stay at home mother has been developed through the construction of an explosion of texts focusing on parenting and the shifting language that helped to solidify the role of the stay at home parent as a true and meaningful job and also professionalized into an all encompassing role (Medved & Kirby, 2005; Quindlen, 2005). Medved and Kirby (2005) found additional facets to the larger construction of the new definition of the stay at home mother including the ideas of the productive citizen contributing to society through children, and also the irreplaceable

worker who is better at this task than anyone else—especially those “strangers” who typically care for children.

Other meta discourse about the functioning of the household is aimed at both families with stay at home parents and dual-earner families. Medved and Graham (2006) noted that in the family messages that individuals received, prominent was the suggestion and legitimization of the idea of “family first”. Family first narratives can also be expanded to language focused on the family before career and best care sources for children. This was a message that was often directed at women because they were told to think carefully about their career planning decisions. Medved et al. (2006) found a sex bias in the nature of messages that individuals remember hearing about work family balance. Only females perceived these messages about stopping work for families as addressed to them as advice for the future (Medved et al., 2006). At the same time, women were significantly more likely to hear messages about looking for jobs that allow for balance (Medved et al., 2006). Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) found that in the discourse of women who left the workforce or even in women’s career planning the concept of family first often appeared in their stories. This macro level discourse translates into the language at the individual level, as can be seen in both discourse constructed expectations in the family and organization. Clearly, gender and work-life concerns have been discursively constructed through the organizing nature of discourse, family as a discursive process, and product and macro levels of discourse. But it is important to remember that discourse is not the only influencing feature in shaping individual reality, as the focus turns next to examine choice and the ways in which it is constructed.

### *Discourse not Alone in Constituting Reality*

In looking at the research on work-life constructions and working mothers, the language of choice is prominent. This language of choice reflects the perceived agency of the individuals in shaping their own actions. Buzzanell (1997) argued that the language of choice implies many things including: a belief in alternatives, that those choices are viable, and that the person acts as a free agent. In the discursive construction of choice, the focus is removed from other constraining material factors that might impact individual's lives and creates the individual as agent instead of also acknowledging their subjectivity. From this construction of choice comes the devaluation of other cultural and social factors such as norms that reified structures in individuals' lives (Buzzanell, 1997). However, constructing material realities as actual choices impacts the way that decisions are made. From those who opted out (Stone, 2007) to dual-earners, women feel more constraints in what they can choose to do than men, both in terms of careers and family (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). Although discourse does frame choices, clearly it does not work alone in impacting relationships. Feeling exhausted by limited options is often not a social construction. From the reality of these constraints, attention is next turned to the tension of discourse/materiality.

### *A Dialectic of Discourse and Materiality*

Clearly discourse impacts work-life, however, when examining the reality of work-life concerns, it is clear these concerns are not created by discourse alone but instead discourses work in complex ways with materiality to shape gender, power, and the interactions that individuals have. Within the premises of feminist communicology



the dialectical nature between discourse and the material world is presented as central.

Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that:

We do not have to choose between a rather essentialist focus on the enduring, material conditions of oppression and a discursive, textual interest in unstable systems of meaning. Adopting a communicative frame means exploring the dialectical relationship between those possibilities. (p. 115)

Similarly, research examining work-life concerns is not limited to either material constraints or discourse but instead is richer for focusing on both. Some concepts, such as “egalitarian view” (discussed in Greenstein, 1996) may appear in the discourse of individuals; however it also works as a structure in shaping our understanding of marital relationships. These ideological choices made in the relationship can work to create real frameworks that structure our environment, through performances that reinforce the norm and are reified over time. Discursive constructions have strong implications for individual’s work-life co-constructions, but so do material realities. Several studies illustrate the link between discourse and material conditions. Medved and Graham (2006) argued that the messages that individuals receive about work-life are not trivial or tangential to the material circumstances of work-life. For example, this can be seen in the organizational communication realm, in the constructions of employee assistance programs. These programs co-opt some of the interpersonal roles through both the linguistic constructions of “helping” the employee and also by creating real systems that bleed into individuals’ lives and impact the ways that they interact (Kirby, 2006). Not only is work-life constructed by the individuals in situ, but also by the larger social forces that shape their lives because these forces create constraints and shape what things are possible. In studying feminist couples, Blaisure and Allan (1995) noted that the practice of marital equity in terms of outcomes, (e.g., shared labor, child care, and leisure hours)

does not automatically flow from stated ideologies and beliefs. One example of the outcomes of materiality can be seen in incidences of opting out, which has been configured in a language of choice (Stone, 2007). However it is important to look beyond the construct of choice and see what the reality of “options” really look like for individuals when they are constrained by structural factors. Golden (2001) noted that work-life roles are primarily constructed by those in the relationship, yet structural factors outside the relationship can also present major constraints for individuals. For example, a lack of support and increased demands both at work and with extended family, can lead to women opting out. These are very real conditions that impact individuals' lives and the discourse that they engage in. Creating a false distinction between discourse and materiality blocks a fuller understanding of the entwined nature of the constructs.

#### *Work-Life Research and Materiality*

Although discourse does not work alone in shaping outcomes for couples, past research on work-life has privileged discourse at the expense of building understanding based on materiality as well. Research on work-life concerns previously focused on the concept of work-life balance. Originally, both scholars and the public argued for the need to balance work-life concerns and some researchers still point to this goal (Drago, 2007). Both Kirby et al. (2003) and Golden, Kirby, and Jorgenson (2006) acknowledge the problem inherent in the original conceptions of balance, which was in the past argued to be central to those negotiating work-life concerns. Balance was conceptualized as something that could just happen, and this view ignored the very real concerns of individuals, such as a lack of transportation or volume of bills the household faces. The

belief that balance was something that should be privileged, as well as creating the assumption that balance was and could be a natural end state have both been critiqued by scholars (Kirby et al., 2003). Recent work has turned to the idea of negotiation of work-life concerns as a new frame that acknowledges the complexities that exist in the constant adjustments that a multifaceted life requires (Golden et al., 2006). In recognizing the fluid requirements of work-life as a negotiation impacted by larger material forces, researchers can build understanding of the daily reevaluations that occur in individuals' lives as they manage all of the structures of their lives.

### *Labor as Material*

“Communication takes the material world as its [*sic*] material” (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004, p.175), and in looking at work-life discussions, much of the material centers on the problematic divisions of household labor. Household labor is a material reality that all couples face. Individuals in a household need to be fed, clothed, and sheltered. Although these tasks could be performed in a range of ways, there is still labor attached to these tasks. Inequitable labor and responsibilities are a reality that many individuals face and shape the way in which individuals construct work-life concerns. Early work-life research noted that the reduction in household labor by the working wife was not commensurable with the increased paid labor hours (Pleck, 1977). In more recent research, Bird (1999) noted that women report doing twice as many hours of household labor per week, with 35.5 hours compared to men's 16.4 hours. These dramatically different hours have profound consequences for individuals, as Hochschild (1989) estimated that this difference in labor performance equates to an extra month of 24 hour work shifts each year for women. This added labor has very real consequences for

individuals' schedules and options, just as having help in labor has consequences.

Erickson (1993) noted that the amount of housework and emotional work performed by husbands is positively associated with wives marital well-being and negatively associated with feelings of burnout. Gender differences in the materiality of labor are real for many couples and there are real consequences to these performances.

However, this material reality may be changing as alternative recent research argues that there is a shift towards equity in household roles and that the balance is not as unbalanced as it has been (Coltrane, 2000; Shelton & John, 1996). Shelton and John (1996) argued that "taken together, the studies usually indicate that women's paid work time is negatively associated with their housework time, resulting in a more equal division of household labor, even in the absence of any increase in men's housework time" (p. 207-308). At the surface level, claims can then be made that equity is being reached as the ratio of work hours performed by both individuals looks like it is getting better. For instance, in the comparison of housework hours performed by women compared to men, the ratio might move from a five to one, to that of four to one. Coltrane (2000) argued however, that the sharing of household labor is in fact driven more by women's time adjustment than men's adjustments, with women doing less housework rather than men doing more. The only thing that has changed is that the wife, no longer having the time to do as much around the house, has dropped her housework hours due to increased paid work hours. A drop in women's housework hours compared to an increase in hours by the partner are two different changes that speak to unique issues. In one case, when both work similar hours on household tasks it appears to be a move toward equity,

but if it is only a drop in women's home work hours, then what is shown might just be exhaustion.

For families that need care work provided for dependents, be it children or ageing relatives, this is a reality that impacts, shapes, and constrains their daily lives. Within this material need, the social construction of mother as the best caretaker has reified and shaped family structures that impact the performance of labor. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) argued that motherhood becomes a career liability for most women. There are many consequences to the social construction of the mother as the best caretaker: women's paid work is often more interrupted, placed in lower priority to men's work (DeVault, 1991), cut back (Heymann, 2000), and they are prone to less advancement at work (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). From these known constraints, many career oriented females are either "forced into ...bias avoiding behavior" or into behaviors that would lead them to be labeled as less career focused (Drago, 2007, p. 4). Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) noted that 12.5% of dual-earner husbands felt that being a parent limits their career success, versus 48.4% of mothers. In terms of feeling trapped and deciding which was more important, work or family, 38.3% of dual-earner husbands felt this conflict compared to 69.5% of dual-earner women. In addition, only 42.9% of dual-earner women felt like they have it all, rewarding career, satisfying family, and fulfilling personal life, compared with 55.5% of dual-earner husbands. Clearly there are constraints in place that makes labor experiences for dual-earner women dramatically different than dual-earner men. Beyond the labor that the couple performs, the ideal performances that individuals are socialized to follow shape their lives through material structures.

### *Ideal performances and Materiality*

Ideal performances have material consequences for those with multiple responsibilities. At times, labor might be done in ways that are inequitable or problematic in order to construct a performance that fits better with the material conditions of the meta-narratives of ideal gender. Erickson (2005) argued that women may perform more of the household labor because these performances enable them to behave more consistently with feminine and expressive identities. Similarly, Golden (2001) noted the experience of one of her participants who felt that he could not cut back on paid labor after the birth of a child due to the constraints posed by the evaluations of his clients if he chose to enact anything less than that of the ideal worker performance. LaRossa (1988) noted that the model of the ideal breadwinner creates structural barriers to individuals' relationships with children and possibly other relationships in life. Along with the structural barriers created by the ideal worker, the hours worked by these ideal workers are expanding. Schor (1991) noted that the average hours of work for all paid employees are steadily rising. The expectations that are held in the (re)creating of roles, such as the ideal worker or the nurturer, have standards of evaluation tied to them that then can feel like ties that constrain individuals into set performances.

Both the partners' performances and the work negotiated between them provide material constraints for individuals in relationships. One source of material constraints is apparent in looking at identity. Scholars have noted the centrality of the issue of identity in the study of work-life negotiation as it is shaped in the relationship. Golden (2001) argued that identity is the issue of central concern in how couples attempt to balance work-life, more than time management or anything else. Golden (2001) states that

“identity as it relates to work and parenting is not static, but rather it responds to developments in the family life cycle” (p. 236). In working to construct our identity, individuals enact roles in ways that structure the relationship and also provide constraints for their partner’s performances. For example, Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2005) noted that regardless of the amount of household labor performed by the husband, the labor that they engage in is more *doing* than *managing* of the household, which then recreates the need for the wife to act as the manager of labor and fails to offer much of a reduction in her burden. This allows for a normalized performance of wife as homemaker even when the labor is not completely unequal. Just as ideal performances are impacted by materiality, it is also important to examine the impact of roles, how they are confined by, and are shaped by materiality.

### *Materiality and Roles*

Individuals enact and co-construct roles in a variety of ways in their relationships. These enactments are shaped by material constraints. The management of multiple roles has been a continual area of scholarly interest (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, & Crouter, 2000). Menaghan (1989) argued that it is not just the volume of roles that leads to psychological consequences, but also the gender appropriateness of that role with deviation from expectations causing more consequences. Although it appears to be detrimental for individuals to take on too much, it might be the incongruence of gender expectations that lead to more significant problems. Due to time and societal constraints, when individuals incorporate a diversity of roles into their lives many are left in situations that can be less than ideal. In these situations, individuals may experience role conflict and role overload. Voydanoff (2002) noted that the reality of multiple roles has been shown to have effects

on psychological well-being. Perry-Jenkins et al. (2000) noted that extensive arguments have been made that point to chronic job stressors impacting families when a buildup of roles causes feelings of overload or conflict between family and work roles. General role strain theory argues that with an individual's increased volume of roles, for example wife, daughter, coworker and volunteer, the greater the demand and incompatibility of those roles, which often results in conflict and strain (Goode, 1960). Coverman (1989) defines role overload as fulfilling too many roles simultaneously. Role overload is likely to happen to the partner who is listening to their spouse while cooking dinner for the family and then receives an important email from work that needs to be dealt with. Conversely, role conflict can be better understood as too many role demands and with too little time (Coverman, 1989). In this situation, the partner might be too wrapped up in work emails to even start to attend to dinner or their spouse. This incompatibility between the different roles can be of greater consequence for the individuals involved because they are likely to feel that the tension that normally exists turns into a paradox. For example, the role of father might conflict with that of worker when the individual receives incongruent messages about the importance of the completion of a project and the family first message. Research shows that role conflict decreases job satisfaction for couples and marital satisfaction for men (Coverman, 1989). Coverman (1989) noted that the decrease in marital satisfaction might not be as apparent in women, because they have come to expect increased household demands placed on them regardless of work place concerns and are better able to multitask through these periods, maybe partially due to the limited options that they have. Moreover, Schieman, McBrier and VanGundy (2003)



noted that home-to-work conflict, or spillover effects are associated with anxiety and depression, which are lived consequences for individuals, shaping their daily lives.

Material realities for couples have also been examined based on the impact of roles using a more additive approach or compensation model (Kirby et al., 2003). Within this conception it is argued that the more diversity of roles that one has, the less impact each will have, and as a result there will be a decrease in negative implications (Barnett, 1994). Barnett (1994) found that for women in dual-earner marriages those with children reported lower psychological distress than their counterparts without children. Additional research by Barnett, Marshall, and Pleck (1992) pointed to the idea that the quality of men's marital and parental roles buffer men from the negative mental-health effects associated with poor job experiences. For some individuals, it might be the reality of holding multiple roles that allows individuals to balance out the stress of other roles.

Consequences of the feelings of being trapped or spread too thin can sometimes lead to renegotiations or rejections of multiple roles. Mainiero and Sullivan (2006) noted that the structure of corporations force men and women to make impossible choices between work and family. Although the rising rates of dual-earner families has been seen over the past decades, closer examination illustrates a dip in this growth. According to the US Department of Labor (2007b) the highest rates for dual-earner families was over 60 percent in 1996 and 1997, however, that same category dropped to 57 percent in 2005.<sup>3</sup> These changes in women's employment rates in dual career households might be reflective of a middle class and above phenomena known as the opt-out revolution (Belkin, 2003; Stone, 2007), the rejection of work roles in order to engage in better performances of the family first. Medved and Kirby (2005) stated that "formerly

professional women may experience challenges to their sense of self as they are caught between society's demands to be a patient, ever-present, and always joyful mother while concomitantly conquering the glass ceiling" (p. 440).

When individuals feel trapped, often there are limited alternatives for them to pursue. Even when material structures exist to support families, they often are not utilized or appropriate. Hochschild (1997) noted that fewer than three percent of workers took such options as part-time work, "flexplace"- the option of working from home, or parental leave. At the same time, Heymann (2000) noted that when individuals did need to take time off, most of those instances did not qualify for FMLA (Family and Medical Leave Act, unpaid and protected medical) leave. Stone (2007) argued that for many women leaving paid work was not a question of loving their jobs, but opting out was rather a function of having limited options. In her book, Stone (2007) shared the story of Kate, in a relationship with two high powered careers, asking her husband for a way to reconfigure things, realizing he was not going to change his career hours, dealing with a young daughter with behavioral problems at school, and work that kept bleeding into the home. These ballooning forces and all encompassing demands on women are taxing on individuals. For some women who come from families of higher socio-economic means, they are simply bowing out of the balancing act and negotiations with spouses over whose turn it is to leave work when the child is ill, and opting out of the world of paid work. When the support structures are not there that prevent exiting and the tensions from the multiple pulls are dragging a person down, leaving work may not feel like as much of a choice as a reaction to forces beyond one's control.

With the joy and importance that has been reinforced in the role of mothering with the opt-out revolution, it is important to remember the marginalization that exists within the construction of opt-out parenting. For women who step away from paid work there can be a variety of consequence for them including: loss of earnings, which can be further complicated if a partner exits the relationship; wage penalties on re-entry; denial of reentry; and retirement penalties (Bennetts, 2007; England & Folbre, 1999). Beyond the real constraints that women face after opting out, there are important class based assumptions of opting out that prevent many women from even seeing this as a choice (Bennetts, 2007). For many women, the possibility of exiting a role to reduce the tension is blocked by the basic need for their income in the household. Women from lower socioeconomic statuses frequently are required to work in order to maintain standards of living. Consequently, the norms of what a “good mother” looks like based on the face time assumptions of opting out and professionalization of motherhood create unobtainable standards for working class individuals (Medved & Kirby, 2005). The role of the good mother is bound much more by material constructions than any else in an attempt to perform the role of the best parent. Having started examining the impact of economic factors in the material constructions of work-life concerns, the next section will look further at this impact.

#### *The materiality of socio-economic statuses*

The issue of class is an exemplar of material conditions, with individuals across classes having different resources and options available to them. The material reality of class and socio-economic status has a profound impact on the ways that individuals perform the roles and norms that society establishes. Early constraints of class were seen

in the inability of working class individuals to even take part in the “husband as economic provider” family structure (Hood, 1986), as working class men often did not earn enough to provide sole economic support for a family. The impact of class has been noted in current research on gender and individual ability to enact norms. Buzzanell et al. (2005) argued that work-life strategies and images of the good working mother impacts individual performance based on class. Some women do not have the choice to work due to economic constraints and this impacts their daily reality as they are constructed as less than the stay at home mother (who the media depicts as doing what is best for their child) (Buzzanell et al., 2005).

With the changes in the image of motherhood that have appeared in culture, it is important to note how cultural changes also affect performances of fatherhood and are tied to the material reality of class. When media depictions illustrated the growing involvement of fathers in child rearing, expectations started to shift, and the shift caused individuals to perform their gender and identity in new ways. However, differences that exist between the norms/roles of an ideal and the actual performance of this identity can be significant because the culture of fatherhood has changed more rapidly than the conduct (LaRossa, 1988). Within the culture is a shift in expectation that many men cannot meet due to time or financial constraints. Examples of the unequal shift include books written by and for upper-middle class professionals that fail to account for differences in class and socioeconomic standing that can impact the way that one fathers (LaRossa, 1988). Although this new expectation of the role of daddy is present in the upper-middle class discourse, research needs to be attentive to the other roles that an individual may perform because it could both interact with and limit the performance of

“daddy”. The primary implication for socio-economic status is that low socio-economic status inhibits a man’s ability to perform culturally mandated fatherhood roles, meaning that ultimately low socio-economic status people will be judged as failures in these situations. This same failure is constructed for low socio-economic status mothers, as noted earlier, who as they work are away from their children.

The historical changes and impacts of women joining the workforce were traced in the “historical nature of work-life” section of this dissertation. It is important to also note the clear material implications that allowed for many of the changes in work-life construction. Middle class women offered a voice for women’s concerns in the workplace as the new female workers found employment in areas that started to offer more agency to them. Gilbert (1993) argues that “women employed in low-paying jobs is neither a new nor a radical concept, and thus does not necessarily challenge traditional assumptions about a woman’s place,” (p. xi-xii). However, it was with the addition of women to higher status positions that more attention was given to issues that are of concern to working parents, and working women especially, and individuals searched for answers to work-life concerns. Barnett (1999) stated that the phrase “work-family” first appeared in the 1980’s, with married women’s labor force experiencing a steep increase and when the spheres of work and family were much more distinct.

### *Privilege as Material*

Just as lower socio-economic status has strong material implications for individuals as they negotiate work-life concerns, so does the benefit of privilege. Economic privilege allows individuals to pay for services and goods that can reduce some of the burden created by dual-earner families. Drago (2007) noted that care work is

often farmed out by those who can afford it, from childcare to nursing homes for elderly to cleaning services and precooked meals. The benefit of additional income provides agency for individuals to enact labor differently. Furthermore, educational attainment can function as a source of privilege. Blaisure and Allen (1995) noted that women in their study started with structural advantage: higher educational attainment, income, and age at the time of marriage, all of which offered them more power in their household. These three factors all help remove the possibility of women's economic dependence on men, which can have dramatic implications for women. Often women who stay in relationships that could be constructed as problematic do so out of economic necessity. Bennetts (2004) noted that once women leave the workforce, they not only have a harder time returning when they need to, but also often do not come back at the same level and suffer other economic consequences. Materiality of work-life impacts individuals in a variety of ways including offering them power or sources of resistance. The next section will review the importance of looking at the constructions of power and resistance together.

#### *A Dialectic of Gender Relations-Masculine/Feminine of Work-Life Construction*

In learning to perform the roles that an individual plays, that individual also learns the steps that one takes to perform gender. Goffman (1959) stated "there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer, by which they endeavor to persuade their clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor" (p. 76). Similarly, in the dances that individuals perform, they learn to dance the role of the women or move to the steps of a man. These learned steps often are taught through the partnered dance of masculinity and femininity. Coltrane (2000) noted that gender construction theories

emerged as one of the most popular views for understanding how “women and men perform different tasks because such practices affirm and reproduce gendered selves, thus reproducing a gendered interaction order” (p. 1213). The role of homemaker infused with the requirement and display of caring reproduces femininity, just as the tunnel-vision focus of the ideal worker is masculine. Mederer (1993) argued that managing family life is tied to the feminine gender identity, and for men to retain their identity they can engage in household labor just as long as they are not the managers. Past researchers who have argued for gender construction have noted such concepts as gender “displays” (Brines, 1994), gender perspective (Thompson, 1993), or gender theory (Ferree, 1990). Other researchers noted that gender is continuously constructed and reified in the doing of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; West & Fenstermaker, 1995a, 1995b, 2002a, 2002b). Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) offer a perspective of gender construction that allows for better understanding of masculinity and femininity through the dual lens of the combined perspective.

It is important to note that Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argue that “certain forms of masculinity played against certain forms of femininity to engender particular outcomes. And the ‘certain forms’ clause here is crucial” (p. xi). Although Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) referenced certain forms to note the complexity of multiple strands of difference, this note is important because it guides researchers to ask what forms of femininity and masculinity are most likely to play off of each other. For example, as previously noted work-life labor inequity is primarily a heterosexual phenomenon (Balsam et al., 2008; Solomon et al., 2004). In building an understanding of the ways in which masculinity and femininity are co-constructed, I first turn to the research focused

on the feminine, followed by the more recent attention placed on masculinity in work-life, and then look at how these are co-constructed.

### *The Focus on the Feminine*

When more middle class women started to enter the workforce, concerns noting the time constraints faced by women and problem affecting the family were brought to the forefront and continued in research (Hochschild, 1997). As noted earlier, work-life concerns were first constructed as women's concerns (Barnett, 1999), both in discussion of household concerns (Hochschild, 1989) and in workforce policy (Kirby & Krone, 2002) bringing central the construct of gender. This focus was later argued to be problematic because it removes men from this discussion by keeping the focus on women and masking it as a women's problem.

Research on work-life topics started with the important work of identifying the women's unique experiences, so that the limitations of this marginalized group could be better understood. Much of the research that has been presented thus far in this study has been done with the focus on women as they construct work-life concerns. Jorgenson (2002) looked at experiences of women engineers as they negotiated expectations as they built their identities as workers and family members. Stone (2007) examined the women's revolution of opting out. DeVault (1991) focused on the almost entirely feminine labor of cooking. These studies are just a few of the myriad of examples of the attention that has been given to women even in recent years. This research explores working women (Medved, 2004) and women executives (Blair-Loy, 2003) balancing concerns to the media's construction of motherhood and its impact on women (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Medved & Kirby, 2005) to women's perceptions



of their husbands' contributions (Gordon & Whelan-Berry, 2005). It is apparent that what is known about work life has often been constructed through the examination of women, yet co-constructions of work-life concerns cannot be done without the consideration of the husbands as well, which I turn to next.

### *The Turn to Masculinity*

In the early research on work-life and gender, one thing was apparent, and that was the relative invisibility of men from this research. As Barnett (1999) noted originally, work-life concerns were conceptualized as women's concerns. Mumby (1998) argued that too often the construct of gender is conflated with women. Men are gendered, but often it is either ignored in gender research or masculinity is associated with normal, and the gender of masculinity is washed away. Buzzanell and Duckworth (2007) argued that what work-life research does "not display is how fathers situate themselves discursively within work and family contexts and what the material consequences of their work-family discourses are" (pp. 20-21). Similarly, Duckworth and Buzzanell (2007) argued that their research "challenges the popular notion that women are the ones most reflective and concerned about work-life issues" (p. 21).

In working to fill in the gaps in understanding, research on men's experiences with work-life concerns has started to answer some important questions. Research on men has started to look at the construction of masculine identities in work-life negotiations. Coltrane (1996) examined husband's participation in household labor and caretaking. Masculine identity has been shown to be created in reaction to past constructions, with individuals focusing on how they were not like others and how they did not directly buy into the ideal worker norm (Buzzanell & Duckworth, 2007).

Duckworth and Buzzanell (2007) noted that masculine identity is shaped in co-construction with the identity of the wife, and done in ways to construct the image of the good father. Buzzanell and Duckworth (2007) argued that the “discursive work of fathering may lie in the construction and practice of contradictory, ironic, ambivalent, resistant, and complicit identities that acknowledge the real material conditions of their lives” (p. 23).

Beyond just identity work, research on men has also looked at larger level images and norms. Social images of fatherhood project assumptions as to how masculinity should work within the realm of work-life. Williams (2000) argued that in our society where masculinity is tied to the size of a paycheck, this assumption often leaves working-class men in a precarious position. Faludi (1999) also noted that as the ability to perform the breadwinner role is more and more threatened, so is masculinity for many men. The research on masculinities in work-life concerns has started to grow, but in general still exists as only a weak voice among the women’s yells for equality. However, it is not through the reversal of focus that research on work-life concerns will build the best understanding, but rather through a focus that looks at both partners in the construction of the relationship.

### *Combining Focus*

To work to understand masculinity in work-life concerns is also to work to understand femininity within the same structure. Thompson and Walker (1995) argued that “we cannot consider the scholarship on women’s experiences as mothers without commenting on men as fathers” (p. 857). Similarly, the construction of wives is incomplete without the similar investigation of husbands. Often the construction of

masculinity is made in opposition to the construction of femininity, just as feminine is frequently defined as that which is not masculine (Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992). Messages that individuals receive about work family balance not only offer expectations, but as Medved et al. (2006) stated, individuals are “simultaneously and unobtrusively advised about appropriate ways of enacting femininity” (p. 175). Just as women are educated about society’s norms and shown how to perform appropriate gender roles, so are men equally educated in enacting oppositional performances. Deutsch (2002) noted that even when it might appear that men and women are engaging in the same behaviors, they often perform it differently. For example the working wife is not described as a breadwinner, but a proxy of the husband. Conversely, the husband caring for the children and house is not a homemaker, but rather is just helping. The research suggests that people’s education in gender performances take place in both their interactions and in learning roles that have been constructed around the issue of work-life.

Through the convergence of masculinity and femininity, research can develop a better understanding of both. Early constructions of labor roles, such as the husband as economic provider/breadwinner, only can be understood when the complementary roles of housewife-mother/homemaker are examined in tandem. Analogously, the rhetorical construction of the workplace as opposite the home can be seen in the understanding of work/public/masculine and home/private/feminine (Thorne, 1992). Again, these constructions can also best be understood by viewing both frameworks together. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) argued that both men and women are experiencing changes in the workplace; however it is only when examining both the enactments of

masculinity and femininity in tandem that the differences in these rates of change are apparent.

Even when the research fails to invoke both men and women's voices negotiating work-life together, it is apparent that couples still face these gendered dualisms and the impact of gender difference in their constructions of households, organizations, and identity. Jorgenson (2002) noted that individuals operate within organizational contexts that are marked by "associated (largely unstated) distinctions between 'men's work' and 'women's work'" (p. 13). These often unspoken markings are apparent in the organizations that individuals operate within as well as within the households that they live in (Ahlander & Bahr, 1995; Ferree, 1990). Bergen, Kirby, and McBride (2007) noted that even in relationships that were less than typical, such as commuter marriages, the social networks that couples interact with still applied typical gender constructions of household labor in conversation with the participants. These conversations often constructed the wife as the homemaker and the husband as complementary to that construction, as needing help in household labor.

The duality of gender can be seen in the enactments of the couples. Shifts in the economy and women's labor participation have lead to changes in the workforce and in the number of dual-earner couples. Despite these changes many individuals still hold on to the roles that were ascribed to them based on their gender. In one study, over a third of the men who had wives working for primarily economic reasons, reported that their wives' employment made them feel inadequate as fathers and husbands (Simon, 1995). Other research pointed to the shame felt by men in this situation (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998). For many men who were in marriages where both partners held to more

traditional expectations and roles, the feeling of not meeting the standard as the provider was a source of shame. Even in economic conditions that fail to offer the possibility of the single breadwinner, individuals still hold tightly to roles that they have ascribed as part of their gender identity through the reframing of labor. Deutsch and Saxon (1998) argued that “because of the link between masculinity and providing, both men and women are reluctant to see wives as providers” (p. 348). Researchers have also noted the apparent conformation to roles by women. Women who may enjoy their jobs were reframed in the family as having to work because they needed the money (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998). The threat to the traditional role structure that women’s work presented was subverted by the reframing of the behavior into more traditional expectations. This myth helped support and sustain the traditional family (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998).

Research that examines how couples deal with their work-life concerns is less prominent and often does not give voice to the couple together. At times when research examines both men and women, often gender is not framed as a central focus. Golden (2000) examined how couples manage work and family obligations. This research offered space for both partners’ voices to be heard, but what appears to be missing from this analysis is a clear understanding of how gender creates an impact as attention is turned instead to a generic self versus other. Other research has expanded the lenses of couples in looking at couples and gender. Research has started to look at equally shared parenting and noted the often traditional gender enactments that reinforce the household as the wife’s domain are utilized to avoid labor (Deutsch, 1999). Buzzanell and Turner (2003) noted that when men were dealing with a situation in which there was a potential loss to their masculinity, such as losing their role as breadwinner, wives responded in ways that

unconsciously enacted feminine approaches, like supporting the husband's version of the story and subordinating their career to his. In this enactment, we see the wives play feminine in a way that allows the husband to still play masculine, even if he might have been emasculated in the job loss. Medved and Rawlins (2007) argued that "while women and men in SAHFCs [stay-at-home fathering couples] exchange homemaking and breadwinning activities, perhaps unintentionally they may re-inscribe aspects of traditionally gendered assumptions about work and family" (p. 33).

Research on couple's co-constructions of work-life concerns has started to note the impact of gender. Blaisure and Allen (1995) looked at how feminist couples negotiate work-life concerns, the distinction between ideology and enactments, and ways in which couples worked to create equity. Specifically, research noted that feminist ideals do not automatically translate into equitable behavior. This discrepancy between beliefs and behaviors was noted earlier by Hochschild (1989) in her early ethnography examining couple negotiations of work-life concerns. Furthermore, Hochschild (1989) noted the dramatic differences in gendered based divisions of household labor that is similar to the findings of current research. Golden (2002) noted that in some cases individuals explicitly linked their complementary difference in behaviors associated with work and parenting to gender. In one quote provided in her text, one wife presented a clear distinction between her interaction with the children and her husband's interactions. This illustration makes apparent the construction of what it means to be a wife who is active and involved with the children, created in tandem with the meaning of husband, who puts the child on the sidelines. These differences are then attributed to what the wife sees as "essential differences" (p. 137). Yet researchers' understanding of these co-

constructions are limited because the focus has been only on dual-earner parents, disregarding the voice of those without children, and also failing to account for racial diversity in marital relationships. Consequently, research exploring the co-constructed nature of work-life concerns is limited. To move forward in understanding how couples co-construct work-life concerns, this dyadic research needs to be expanded.

*A Dialectic of Power/Resistance Working in Work-Life Constructions*

Researchers have started to note the duality of power and resistance (Clair, 1998). This duality of power/resistance offers a way to see how situations, structures and constructions can concurrently exist as (dis)empowering. Past simplistic views of power impact research on work-life, with post-positivistic constructions that focused on power through resources alone (Ahlander & Bahr, 1995, p 65). If research continues in this vein alone, it will reproduce more work that examines simple notions of ‘power over’ or ‘power as domination’ or focus on resistance alone. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that viewing power and resistance as different is problematic because it doesn’t allow for an understanding of the complex situations that exist. Researchers have noted that gender is closely tied to power (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005) and at times that power also works to marginalize and constrain individuals. Gender, discourse, and structure all work together in reinforcing expectations, even when these expectations are often problematic, e.g., supermom. These expectations then become reified in what is constructed as normal (DeVault, 1991). DeVault (1991) argued that “women are drawn into participating in prevailing systems of inequity” (p. 11). For example, returning to supermom, women are told that they can do it all (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Often they feel responsible for the majority of household labor, thus women reproduce the norm of the supermom. The

control of the household labor situation offers women power, even when the workload that goes with it marginalizes them. Researchers have argued that gender boundaries are not constructed through the labeling of skill sets, or the materiality of those skill sets, but as a need to produce gender as located with a specific power and difference in a specific relationships or institutional context (Twiggs, McQuillan, & Ferree, 1999). Flax (1990) argued that “men and women are both prisoners of gender, although in highly differentiated but interrelated ways” (p. 139). Power/resistance is not constrained to gender in interactions but also exists in the beliefs that impact expectations. Rigdeway and Correll (2000) argued that gendered beliefs are most powerful in “shaping people’s sense of what others expect of them” (p. 113). In looking at power/resistance of work-life, a better understanding of how micro and macro systems impact individuals can be created.

### *Roles and Power*

Maintaining and reinforcing historic gender roles offers a site of power/resistance in couples’ households. Gomez (2006) argued that regardless of changes in performances by individuals, traditional roles still have important influences on gender evaluations. For some dual-earner couples, historic norms such as the breadwinner and homemaker work to (dis)empower individuals. In dual-earner couples, allowing one partner to shoulder all of the responsibility for the household leads to stress and problems in the relationship. For wives who feel that household labor is their primary concern and that their paid labor job only adds to their workload this can lead to feelings of role conflict (Simon, 1995). These women experienced multiple roles as being “pulled in different directions,” “confused,” and often also guilt, a response noted by 85% of the women (Simon, 1995, p.



186). These conflicts, often coupled with self-blame for marital problems, add stress and may erode self esteem and lead to negative self evaluations (Simon, 1995). Further, women fail to understand these concerns as part of a larger problem of the division of family labor or cultural expectations of women, as these expectations are not part of men's reality. Instead women blame their own shortcomings for the problems they face (Simon, 1995). These results might point back to the centrality of the provider role to masculinity and to men's identity as the good husband/father in the family. In these situations the continuation of historic structures disempowers women since they do more of the household labor. Yet women are also able to use these norms as a way to resist equity in the household because directing household labor offers individuals power and legitimacy in this context. At the same time we see historic norms as a source of power and legitimacy in men's avoidance of labor, as well as a source of resistance to equity in divisions of labor.

Through the establishment and performance of roles, there is also often a ranking in terms of the privileged and subordinate roles. In the establishment and performance of roles there is also the establishment and performance of gender and power as they are created in social interactions (e.g. - Medved, 2004). Both the role of the breadwinner and the homemaker are highly gendered roles and offer their own base of power/resistance. Although the breadwinner/ homemaker appeared as idealized family roles, they were not roles that everyone could embrace. First these roles assumed the presence of two adults living in a nuclear family unit. Though these roles were constructed as exemplars that should be the model and goal, individuals in lower socioeconomic classes and frequently minorities found themselves in situations that deviated from this construction (Hood,

1986). Thompson and Walker (1989) noted that working class families normally find themselves dividing both paid work and recognition associated with it more equitably due to financial constraints. However, “more equitably” should be tempered as it was also noted by Thompson and Walker (1989) that men are still constructed as primary providers, suggesting that in situations where there is a clear need for both workers, that recognition is fairer. Yet for those who could afford to have just one adult in the work force, these roles served as a directive.

This enactment then works as a source of privilege or marker of passing, as one paid worker in the household allowed for an enactment of class that closely resembled that of middle class. At the same time that class status held privilege so did family type. Kirby et al. (2002) noted that the assumption of the nuclear family is also privileged in the constructions of work-life. This assumption then works to marginalize all those individuals who exist in families that look somewhat different. Mothers are mandated to be available for their children and fathers are expected to provide for their family in a financial way. These roles that are held by individuals then become defining beliefs for our culture. Ridgeway and Correll (2000) argued that “to sustain these defining beliefs, the terms on which men and women interact with one another must, on balance, confirm for them [individuals] that men and women are sufficiently different in ways that justify men’s greater power and privilege” (p. 110). These gendered roles can be done differently and can be performed in new ways that work to change the existing power structures.

Individual’s rejection of or reverence for traditional gender roles can exist as both empowering and subjugating at the same time. Both the breadwinner and the ideal worker

norms exist as very masculine constructions. In both of these cases, it is assumed that the main focus of individuals in these roles is that of dedication to the workplace, making money, and providing for others financially. In instances where women enact ideal worker or breadwinner roles, they are then evaluated by masculine assumptions (McKinney, 1991). Jorgenson (2000) noted that individuals do evaluate themselves by this ideal worker performance, and this evaluation shapes the way that women feel that they can perform other roles, such as the role of the mother. McKinney (1991) found that individuals perceived women with successful work careers to be both less interested and competent in terms of their family and also less likely to have children. For the outside evaluators, success in one area of work-life is often equated with failure in other areas-- or at least less than competent performances. And in fact, succeeding in the role of ideal worker often removes possibilities for success in other roles because work hours consume individuals' days as the workday of the average worker continues to increase (Schor, 1991). Finally, LaRossa (1988) noted that in terms of parental roles, "both men and women can be victims as well as benefactors of society's ideals" (p. 456). From these ideals then individuals are impacted in the ways that they can enact ideal performances.

#### *Ideal Performances and Power/Resistance*

Beyond just roles, society's standard images for what the family should look like has profound effects on both the behaviors of those in families as they interact and enact roles as well as how families interact with the rest of society. These meta-level discourses inform couples how they should negotiate work-life concerns are present, and these constructions offer power by privileging certain constructions as well as a source of resistance for those couples who work against the normative constructions. In looking at

the effects of standard family assumptions on individual families, a variety of implications can be seen. DeVault (1999a) argues that “nearly every other family that differs from the SNAF (standard North American family) ideal probably feels some pressure and at least occasional moments of desire to pass as ‘normal’” (p. 60). Passing for a couple might require the performance of the breadwinner by the husband who is desperate for the wife to return to the workforce after having children, or the working mother to make cupcakes for the child’s class late into the night so she still appears to be a good mommy.

Ideal performances also create impact through the recreation of norms. Norms such as “family first”, prominent in the language of couples, legitimizes an ideal way of prioritizing and operating within a family (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Golden, 2000). This powerful image of the “correct” way to do family can be seen in the (re)creation of such beliefs as no one else is as good of a care-taker and the problem with “strangers” caring for children (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Medved & Kirby, 2005). These beliefs then shape the ways that couples can engage in work-life. These beliefs can be seen in the language of even non-traditional families, such as those with stay at home fathers (Medved & Rawlins, 2007). Because of this belief at times, labor might be done in ways that are inequitable or problematic in order to construct a performance that fits better with the meta-narratives of gender. In subscribing to larger gendered norms individuals are able to experience power when enacting and reinforcing what is deemed to be appropriate roles, concurrently, resistance can be enacted by individuals as they labor against these norms. Both in rejecting or subscribing to family norms, individuals continue to be

marginalized, both from the evaluations that often flow from the deviation from behaviors or in the control of time and resources through complying with expectations.

Power, marginalization, and options for change are not just located in the ways that individuals perform work, but also in the gendered assumptions for how work ideally should be done and who should perform that labor. Gendered assumptions of labor are often viewed by individuals as masculine paid work and feminine household labor (Ahlander & Bahr, 1995). Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, and Pruitt (2002) argued that work practices are often based on the gendered assumptions of the ideal worker, who is willing and able to devote as much time to work as is demanded of him. Because women in the household are traditionally saddled with the responsibilities of the family in the ideal performance of the homemaker, their involvement in work is seen as taking away from their primary responsibility. Thompson and Walker (1989) noted that wives' paid work is typically viewed as something husbands do for their wives, rather than something that the wives do for their family. Constructing paid labor as something wives choose to do or take on as extra legitimizes the assumption that because wives are working for selfish reasons they then should not have their real family labor (the housework) reduced or shared with their partners. This gendering of ideal performances then impacts performances in the workplace as well as the equity in individuals' homes.

Norms about the workplace and how work should be evaluated serve to both constrain individuals as well as offer them other options in the ways that they engage in work-life concerns. In these enactments, power is given to the norms. Barnett (1999) pointed out these gender enactments and argued "to be taken seriously on the job, women would have to conform to the traditional one-dimensional view of men as worker drones"

(p. 147). Ahlander and Bahr (1995) argued that for American society, paid work is the most highly valued and rewarded and the source of dominant identity. Because of this frame, individuals are empowered through the legitimacy of labor and this same power source can exist as a way to resist household labor. However, the focus on paid work could also then be viewed as constraining because individuals can be held to the high standard of performance in the ideal worker role which limits individuals' other actions, such as the father who cannot cut back on his labor due to perceived judgments against the standard of the ideal worker (Golden, 2001). Those who are then working to enact ideal performances in the workplace are constrained in their interactions in the household.

Along with paid labor, household labor exists as a contentious and interesting source of power. Hochschild (1989) pointed out the inequitable division of labor that exists for many couples. This inequitable division was then dealt with by individuals through a variety of discursive constructions, such as the upstairs and downstairs division, as discussed earlier in the section describing the premise of discourse about work-life. By reaffirming traditional divisions of household labor, power continues to be held in masculine hands. Furthermore, through the re-definitions of equity in household labor, wives form their own unique constructions that further reify traditional power constructions. The (dis)empowering nature of household labor is apparent in Hochschild's descriptions just as it is in other research. Women have traditionally held greater claim to the household, which then they may then resist or act as gatekeepers to men's participation in the household labor (Hawkins & Roberts, 1992). Other studies noted fathers' information about their children is based on what the wives tell them,

suggesting the wife acts as controller or gatekeeper (Lareau, 2002). Conversely, this area of women's control might be controlling the choices that they are allowed to make with their time as leisure time is reduced if not eliminated (Hochschild, 1989). Similarly, Thompson and Walker (1989) noted the "ambivalent struggle" of the household, in which women are reluctant to give up family work and men are resistant to take this labor on (p. 859). Even when men are picking up more slack in housework, it is done in a way that still allows for the original roles and power structures to exist. Gordon and Whelan-Berry (2005) found in dual career households the largest number of men classified as helpmates. This suggests that husbands are willing to do household chores and activities to assist their wives, but they need direction as to what they should be doing, thus reasserting the wife's primary control over the domain. LaRossa (1988) also noted that individuals perpetuated the idea of the husband covering for or filling in with regards to household responsibilities, which reifies the wife's responsibility. Taken as a whole, these studies suggest that not only do the current behaviors by many men reflect traditional roles of the house as women's domain, but it appears that women also continue to believe that it is their central responsibility to care for the household, thus conforming to ideal performances of antiquated roles.

The stereotypical roles that surround household labor exist as a source of power as individuals enact them. Riggs (1997) explained that society offers up normal mandates for both fathers and mothers, and through these mandates individuals find power. Bergen, Kirby, and McBride (2007) noted that these traditional gender assumptions as to who engaged in what labor is apparent even in the discursive constructions of household labor for non-traditional couples by their social networks. These traditional constructions of

household labor are tied to constructions of power and are privileged, at the same time that housework and the performance of it have often been marginalized. Ahlander and Bahr (1995) argued that research often frames housework itself as both a waste of time and demeaning for those with other options. These scholars provide along a contrasting image of housework as a source of developing positive characteristics in individuals such as moral and gendered care assumptions for women. Depending on the lens used to focus on the task, researchers show individuals who are worse off from the household labor or are benefited greatly. However examining household labor as both empowering and disempowering offers a better understanding of the intertwined nature of power and resistance as labor could be viewed through the lens of inclusivity rather than limited to a singular focus.

Establishing and constructing equity in relationships is often done in a way that offers both a site of resistance in past historical roles and a site of power for the relationship. Thompson and Walker (1995) noted that in constructions about how equity and fairness is judged in relationships, research points to women who create a sense of fairness through social comparisons. Rather than examining the ways in which their relationships with their spouses are not equitable, women compare their portion of the labor with other women and ignore their labor as compared with their spouse. In this way the relationship is constructed as positive and perceived equity is established. Both positivity and equity exist as possible sources of power, but at the same time these women are furthering their own marginalization by buying into and (re)creating the hegemonic power structures which offer husbands the option of doing less.



Even when couples engage in non-traditional roles, there are times that the traditional gender roles are reinforced which reinforces inequitable power in the relationship. Medved and Rawlins (2007) argued that when women and men “exchange homemaking and breadwinning activities, perhaps unintentionally they may re-inscribe aspects of traditionally gendered assumptions about work and family” (p. 33). This is done by at times recreating the norms and the power and just flipping them, with the wife enacting the masculine performances, or reinforcing norms when individuals are not in the paid labor contexts, with a return to traditional norms and power discrepancies after work hours. Clearly power/resistance is inextricably intertwined, just as masculinity/femininity in work-life are constructed with the two phenomena existing as a larger intertwined construct.

*Communicology as a Feminist Ethic: Praxis of Work-Life Research*

Feminist researchers are called to engage in research in ethical ways that can work to create change (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). In dual income couples when all things are equal in paid labor, both spouses work similar paid work hours or have similar paid work responsibilities, equity is still not apparent in household labor. Research needs to continue to examine work-life concerns as important not only because men’s voices and the couple’s voices have been limited but also because of the continued implications for the household. Orrange, Firebaugh, and Heck (2003) argued that given the challenges that dual-earner couples face, scholars’ work is important in understanding how the stress of managing both work and family can be reduced. At the same time the importance of the gendered nature of this labor cannot be forgotten. “Because most housework continues to be performed by women, wives, and daughters,

and because most women buy out of onerous domestic tasks when they can afford to, we ought not lose sight of the fact that domestic labor allocation is embedded in social arrangements that perpetuate class, race, and gender inequalities” (Coltrane, 2000, pp. 1226-1227). Coltrane (2000) argued that despite the continued gender segregation that is seen in household tasks, many American households are renegotiating norms and behaviors for the performance of the different roles in their lives. However, even with the start of this discussion taking place and some movement happening, it is still not clear how these individuals make these changes. Barnett (1999) noted that more and more men and women are entering into marriage with a new commitment to honor the importance of both of their careers. However, what has not been shown is how these couples negotiate this commitment. If individuals are to work to honor and respect both partners careers, then research should look further into how couples co-construct work-life concerns so that an understanding can be developed that is helpful to all individuals.

Research on work-life also exists as a way to rethink the current understandings of power. Beyond just a gendered framework, power lies central to work-life concerns. Golden, Kirby, and Jorgenson (2006) noted that issues such as “power and control in marital and family relationships and how they are communicatively expressed and managed have enormous relevance to the management of work-life interrelationships” (p. 153). Kirby et al. (2002) argued that one way of interrogating power imbalances is by critiquing current work-life models and practices. Also women may not recognize the material structures that support current systems of work-life, so that when they fail to create a sense of balance or cannot be superwomen, they then turn and blame themselves (Kirby et al., 2002, p.23). Beyond the problematic models, there are also problems in

what is constructed as normal. Martin (2000) noted that universalizing conceptions need to be rethought, as feminist theorists have noted that what is universal or “normal” is often problematic.

Finally, it is important to remember the strong impact that families have on individuals. Coltrane (2000) noted that human existence depends on the work that is conducted within the household. Ahlander and Blair (1995) argued that “family work is the essential labor of life, the activity of nurturing and caring for that makes social life possible” (p. 55). Both children and adults alike require routine care work that allows individuals to be fed, clothed, sheltered and cared for, regardless of outside concerns. Conversely, paid work is necessary for the monetary sustainment that allows for the care work. When conflicts brew between these constructs, often individuals feel shortchanged or stretched, and relationships start to dissolve. Despite all that is known about the importance of addressing the concerns about work-life as central to the praxis of feminist scholarship, limits in our knowledge still exist in understanding how these concerns are negotiated.

#### *Justification for My Study/Goals*

Medved (2004) states “Doing work and family must also be explained as doing relationships, not just taken-for-granted as a function of time management or organizational policies” (p. 140). To fully understand couples’ work-life co-constructions, effort must be directed at examining how couples talk about work-life concerns. Just as Rosenfeld and Welsh (1985) argued that “self-disclosure needs to be studied at the level of the *relationship*, for the essence of self-disclosure in marriage lies in the interaction of the husband and wife as they define their relationship” (p. 261,

emphasis in original), work-family issues need to be understood in the same way. When co-constructing work-life negotiations, couples construct their relationships and establish the norms and expectations of the relationship. Therefore, by focusing on how couples understand and discuss these topics, the possibility for greater understanding of how these issues affect the relationship emerges.

Work-life negotiations do not occur in a silo, but rather are constructed based on influences from the family and the workplace. Golden et al. (2006) argued that researchers could create a more productive understanding of work-life concerns by blurring the lines between work and family. Those lines and the negotiation between the boundaries most likely happen in the couples' conversations about the issue of work-life concerns. Gilbert (1993) noted that marriages do not exist in a vacuum, but rather "within a larger world of gender inequality" (p. 101). In looking at the larger world where these relationships are situated, the impact of work-life concerns is also created with time. Friedman and Greenhaus (2000) argued that individuals need choices to balance our competing work-life roles, and that these choices are based in our values and life stage. The impact of both discourse and materiality in work-life concerns can be seen in these choices and the larger impact. I argue, however, that these choices are also constructed based on the interactions individuals have with their partners. These interactions are imbedded within the dialectics of masculinity/femininity and power/resistance and based on historical and political constraints. These negotiations that couples take part in are influenced by a variety of factors. Therefore to develop this deeper understanding of how couples co-construct their gender, power, and their relationship, research needs to see how couples co-construct their work-life concerns.

Although research has provided volumes of insight in work-life, several limitations still exist. First, Heacock and Spicer (1986) noted that much of what is known about dual-earner couples is based on the outcomes of the relationships rather than the communicative processes. Secondly, research has started to turn attention to look at how couples co-construct work-life concerns, but have failed to closely examine the impact of power and gender in these relationships or diverse couple types. Kirby et al. (2003) concluded their article by challenging researchers “to critically examine daily, microlevel discourses that communicatively construct work and family as a step toward enacting positive and empowering changes in the macro-discourses of organizations and families” (p. 34). Through examining couples, research can then work to create a broader understanding, but research needs to be careful to examine a diverse group of couples. Medved (2004) noted one of the weaknesses in her study in equating family with children. This narrow focus marginalizes the voices of those who may not have additional responsibilities in the shape of children, but those responsibilities may exist in other forms. Finally, I have noted the limited voices of men in the discussion of work-life, as well as the need to turn attention on to the couples as they co-construct their concerns. For that reason, I purposely worked to include the voices of both couples who have children and those who are childless. Based on what is known about work-life negotiation and what is still not understood, the following research questions are offered to develop an understanding of the missing conversation about work-life negotiations.

*Research Questions:*

RQ1: How do couples discursively co-construct and understand their work-life issues?

This research question endeavors to build a larger understanding of how couples' interactions together shape the ways in which they verbally discursively co-construct work-life concerns as well as how they understand these concerns. From this question, I hope to build a better understanding of work-life concerns through the construction of couples' realities as they are shaped in their interactions.

RQ2: How are couples' discursive co-constructions of work-life concerns enacted by and enacting gender?

The second research question continues to focus on the verbal discursive co-constructions that occur as couples negotiate work-life concerns, but in this question the focus is turned to gender. Research notes that masculinity and femininity are best understood together, this view through the lens of the couple allows for the opportunity to examine gender as couples' interactions both shape gender and are shaped by the (en)gendering of work-life.

RQ3: How are couples' discursive co-constructions of work-life concerns enacted by and enacting power?

Similar to the second research question, research question three continues to focus on the verbal discursive co-constructions that occur as couples negotiate work-life concerns and also focuses on power in the relationship. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) note the immediate tie between power and resistance, and in examining couples' interactions about work-life concerns, space is created to look at both power and resistance as couples co-create both in constructing their realities of work-life.

### CHAPTER THREE- METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In this study I examined the discourse of couples in order to develop a better understanding of how couples negotiate work-life concerns. Given this concern, this study was approached through the lens of the interpretative paradigm, using phenomenological methodology, and employed interviewing as the method of choice. Additionally, as a feminist researcher, I worked to employ methods and methodologies that work within the concerns of feminist research. Further explanation of each of these decisions is offered below.

#### *The Interpretive Paradigm*

The interpretive paradigm offers a way for individuals to develop a clear understanding of the co-constructed nature of our reality. Schwandt (2000) noted that within the interpretivist paradigm it is possible to understand the subjective nature of actions without sacrificing the objectivity of knowledge. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) also argued that within this view realities are plural and simultaneous as well as socially constructed, with researchers privileging deep understanding as the goal of the research (p. 11).

Giving voice to the participants is central to both the interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 1997) and feminist research (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). In this study, it was critical that not only does the text reflect the voice of the participants, but that it also offered a variety of unique voices in the creation of the themes and analysis. Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) define voice as “the means and ability to speak and to have one’s voice heard and to be taken into account in social and political life” (p. 95). Thus it was through

the use of techniques, such as the thick rich descriptions in the themes presented, that I was able to speak with their participants or co-researchers in a way that individuals' voices are presented and their experiences made clear.

Finally, the position of the researcher is another foundational element of the interpretive paradigm. Unlike positivist or post positivist research, interpretive research acknowledges the location of the researcher as central. Bryman (1999) noted that it is through the researcher that one explores the phenomena at hand. Because of this, it is not possible to remove the researchers from the research, but instead one must understand the researchers and the insight that they bring to the research. My unique position will be discussed further later on.

### *Phenomenological Methodology*

It is important to understand the purpose of phenomenological methodologies. Kvale (1996) argued that phenomenological methodology, prevalent in qualitative research, is focused on understanding themes of the lived daily world from the subject's perspective. Similarly, Schwandt (2000) argued that phenomenological analysis is "principally concerned with understanding how the everyday, intersubjective world is constituted" (p. 192). Nelson (1989) articulated phenomenology as "a philosophy of human beings in the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) and a qualitative methodology for describing, thematizing, and interpreting the meaning of this largely taken-for-granted world in a rigorous manner" (p. 224). Orbe (1998) noted that the field of phenomenology has been described using a variety of terms, including human science, hermeneutic, existential, and semiotic, but the assumptions that lay central to the methodology remain the same.



It is imperative to note that with the variety of conceptions of phenomenology also comes a variety of assumptions and ways of understanding both research and the text that is produced through the research. Hermeneutic phenomenology is explicated by VanManen (1990), which views phenomenology as interpretive and allows for multiple structures or understandings. VanManen (1990) explains hermeneutic phenomenology as “interested in the human world *as we find it* in all its variegated aspects” (p. 18, emphasis in original). In phenomenology, it is important to note and understand the researcher’s experience, hermeneutic phenomenology acknowledges the researcher’s experiences and also the divergent understandings that are created as a result of the interpretations. This unique conception of phenomenology fits closest with the interpretive paradigm and feminist scholarship. Consequently, hermeneutic phenomenology will serve to guide the goals of this study.

Central to the methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology are key assumptions that guided this research. These philosophical ideas about hermeneutic phenomenology serve as a guide to our understanding of the methodology and help to direct our research. First, is the idea that phenomenology is centered on lived experiences. This central assumption is noted by many researchers, including Langellier and Hall (1989), Nelson (1989), Orbe (1998), and VanManen (1990). This assumption centers the focus of research on human’s lived experiences. In the instance of this study, the lived experiences are apparent in those stories that the participants told about their negotiations of work-life concerns as well as the ways that they co-constructed their realities in the interactions that they engage in around the topic.

Further, VanManen (1990) noted that phenomenological research is the explication of phenomena as they present themselves to consciousness (p. 9). As we talk we become aware or conscious of our experiences. Within this, it is understood that whatever falls out of what can consciously be perceived also falls outside of the realm of lived experiences. This idea notes the requirements of awareness in order for something to be part of the lived experience. Additionally, VanManen (1990) noted that one needs to be removed from a situation to be able to reflect on it. Although participants are most likely still in the processes of co-constructing their work-life concerns both in the interviews and later in their life, the interview space serves as a site for awareness of their concerns. The individual in the middle of a work-life conflict may not be able to fully describe the event or talk about the meanings surrounding it, but when we talk to individuals later, they can create a better description and understanding of the negotiations in their lives. Also, the interview process may help some participants create an awareness of these issues, as we help to create an environment that helps participants achieve a level of awareness as they reflect on work-life concerns.

The third key assumption of phenomenology is the study of essences (VanManen, 1990). In hermeneutic phenomenology, essences are the underlying structures that make a phenomenon what it is. It is important to note that these structures are conceptualized as plural, not like the view held in other constructions of phenomenology that views phenomena as having a central essence. From a hermeneutic phenomenological stance, it is important to understand the meanings of the lived experiences and this meaning can only be discovered through the focus on lived experiences. These essences can only be grasped by focusing on the particulars or instances that arise in the lived experiences of

the individuals involved. Therefore, to fully understand the essence of work-life negotiations as a site of gender and identity construction, I turned to the details of the lives of my participants. It is in these details, discussions, and disagreements that realities are constructed and the essences of the work-life negotiation are best understood.

Fourth, it is understood that “phenomenological research is the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them” (VanManen, 1990, p. 11). This assumption helps to create an understanding of how research in this vein is different from quantitative work and how instead hermeneutic phenomenological researchers look to understand the deep rich meanings which can be developed from interpretive research. Researchers shape their studies to reflect the search for meanings from the worlds that we live in. In researching work-life co-constructions through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus was on the meaning that the couples create for themselves as they co-construct their relationship, identity, and gender in the interactions. To get to this understanding, I have taken a close look at what is behind the comments that participants made and the concerns that were raised at multiple points. This focused look was used both in returning to issues that were raised in the dyadic interview in the individual stimulated recall interviews and in creating themes that best speak to and closely represent the stories of the participants.

The idea that hermeneutic phenomenological research is human scientific research in a broad sense with the goal of creating knowledge is another key component of hermeneutic phenomenology (VanManen, 1990). Research in the hermeneutic tradition requires systematic attention, it is explicit in articulating the meanings that are present in the text, it is intersubjective because the work depends on both the researcher

and the participant if it is to develop, and it is importantly human research with a focus on the human world. In looking at couple's constructions of their work-life negotiations, I systematically examined the interview texts of the respondents and worked to explicitly articulate the meanings that arose from the lived experiences of the participants.

Additionally, meanings were constructed based on the interactions with my participants, with the research centered on the very human world of couples' negotiations of work-life concerns. Through these choices, I worked to engage fully in human scientific research.

Thoughtfulness is as another assumption of phenomenology, a "heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, and what it means" (VanManen, 1990, p.12). Engaging in hermeneutic phenomenology requires thoughtfulness from when you are planning the research, to engaging with the participants so that you can focus on what is being said in their comments, and extends into the thematic analysis and interpretation of the text. For me, hermeneutic phenomenology was an all-consuming process of thinking hard about the phenomena at the expense of all else, be it other projects or other drivers on the road or even what I was supposed to be doing at that moment in the shower. Additionally, the process of writing and rewriting the text of a hermeneutic piece required thoughtfulness so that researchers can meet the other philosophical ideals noted, including poetizing the text, engaging in scientific research, and focusing on the meanings that are present.

Next, the assumption that phenomenological research is a search for what it means to be human is noted by VanManen (1990). To this end, research is focused on giving meaning to what it means to be in the world, or, in the present study, what it means for couples to negotiate issues of work-life concerns. These human structures or

meaning structures are the language structures that we (re)create to define what it means to be human. Meaning structures are key to hermeneutic phenomenology. VanManen (1990) noted that to understand what it means to be a woman in our society, means that one examines and understands the meaning structures that “have come to restrict, widen, or question the nature and ground for womanhood” (p. 12). Similarly, this means that in order to fully understand what it means to co-construct work-life concerns, the meaning structures that exist around the conception including meanings based in power, roles, gender, and identity need to be fully examined.

Finally, it is argued that phenomenological research is a poetizing activity (VanManen, 1990). Language used by researchers should authentically speak of the experience and realities of the world rather than create abstract descriptions that are removed from experiences. Therefore, in selecting the words that I used in the text, they needed to be the most effective and most powerful. Poetizing the writing is writing with impact, creating the lived world in a way that it appears vivid. To this end, when presenting the themes that are located within the transcripts, it was important to utilize the words and descriptions that echo the voices and language of the participants. In this case, this meant that I continued to repeatedly return to the themes and explanations in search of the best descriptors and labels to recreate the images for the readers by presenting work-life experiences in the language and meanings that the participants construct, I add to the authenticity through mindful and excellent writing.

Beyond the philosophical requirements of hermeneutic phenomenology is the general phenomenological research requirement of bracketing (e.g., Kvale, 1996; Orbe, 1998). Bracketing has been improperly perceived as the removal of the researcher from

the data and a creation of artificial separation; however it can best be understood as an acknowledgement of the individual's location and placing that in the foreground for the readers. Orbe (1998) argued one of the benefits of phenomenological research is that it "allows researchers to acknowledge and subsequently bracket their preconceived subjective bias while inductively arriving at thematic interpretations" (p. 46-47). Kvale (1996) noted that bracketing or a phenomenological reduction "does not involve an absolute absence of presuppositions, but rather a critical analysis of one's own presuppositions" (p. 54). In this, it is clear that the standpoint of the researcher is both real and acknowledged, that research does not claim to be value free, but rather looks first at the accessible assumptions of the researcher and outlines them as they may impact the research. Additionally, feminist researchers such as Sprague (2005) noted that "researchers' attending to their own emotions as data and/or analytic guides is innovative and interesting" (p. 136), but "being explicitly aware of this dynamic... is much better than letting it steer research implicitly" (p. 137). Bracketing is necessary not only for the audience but also for the researcher, including the feminist researcher, as a way to strengthen their writing. Bracketing myself as a researcher will be discussed further in this chapter under the section of researcher's standpoint.

### *Feminism and Phenomenology*

Feminist research methodologies offer a strong history and source of guidance in constructing research. Sprague (2005) argues that in total feminism holds a base rejection of research traditions that limit. First, feminist scholars argue for rejecting disengaged "value free" research, and instead see research as a starting point to action (Sprague, 2005). Feminist scholars acknowledge that the concept of single truth, value free research

is problematic. Feminist scholars also argue for more socially constructed knowledge and for the understanding of the researcher as they impact the research. Additionally, feminist scholars reject differentiating the public and private realms (Sprague, 2005). Feminist scholars argue that the personal is not just social but is also political and that research needs to show this. Finally, feminist scholars often present a rejection of the ways that traditional questions are constructed (Sprague, 2005). It is argued that researchers talk differently about privileged and marginalized positions. Sprague offers an example of this privileging of positions in Tavris (1992, in Sprague, 2005) when research questions why women value work outside the home, and yet there is little on why men place high priority on it. Similarly, we see little work on whiteness. Finally, feminist scholars argue that studying down, or researching those who are less powerful, make these participants even less powerful through the focus on them and also more marked/visible.

Blending phenomenology with feminism is possible based on the links that can be seen between the two frameworks and in the research done by past scholars. Looking to the writings of other researchers, the connections between feminism and phenomenology are clear. Langellier and Hall (1989) argued that phenomenology and feminism share two assumptions: a criticism of positivism, and the centrality of the lived experience. In both phenomenology and feminism, there has been a critique that argued against the positivist idea that a clear distinction can be made between the knower and the known. Within phenomenology, it is understood that the researcher is the primary tool by which understanding is developed, and likewise feminist research points to the androcentric nature of objective knowledge (Langellier & Hall, 1989). In the same way that feminist research is true to women's experiences or experiences of the marginalized,

phenomenological research is focused on articulating the lived experience of all participants. Finally, Nelson (1989) noted that “both feminism and phenomenology call for recognition of the ways in which I as a person (in this case a female feminist researcher) am positioned within the discourse I am seeking to understand” (p. 223).

Past research has used the lens of phenomenology from a feminist perspective in order to explore a variety of issues. Orbe (1998) used multiple feminist theories, including standpoint and muted group theory with phenomenological methods to create his work on co-cultural theory. Additionally, Orbe (1998) argued that “the tenants of a phenomenological methodology approach seem especially productive for research grounded in muted-group and standpoint theory” (p. 46). Dougherty (2001a; 2001b) utilized a phenomenological approach to understand the process of sexual harassment in a health care organization from a feminist standpoint analysis and in understanding a sexual harassment paradox that takes place. Following in the pattern of past research, this feminist study is grounded in phenomenological research.

Based on the assumptions and expectations of the interpretive paradigm, and specifically phenomenological methodology, I moved forward in my study to look at couples’ negotiations of work-life concerns and focused on giving voice to the participants as they described their fluid, shifting, and complex realities.

### *Methods*

To address the three main research questions in the study, I utilized two types of qualitative interviews, dyadic interviews and stimulated recall interviews. The following sections will first offer a justification for this choice, tell more about the participants (including sampling and phenomenological saturation), interview protocol, the



interviews, note the researcher's stance, coverage of ethical issues, and data analysis (including thematic analysis and verification).

### *Qualitative Interviews: Justification*

In order to create the strongest understanding of how couples discuss the issue of work family balance in marriage, hermeneutic phenomenology was utilized for this study in conjunction with qualitative interviews. Utilizing qualitative interviews allowed the researcher to access the deep understandings and co-constructions that couples engage in as they co-construct their work-life negotiations, identity, and gender. Although different types of interviews differ in approach, the central goal of qualitative interviews is to focus on the themes of the lived daily world from the subjective perspectives of the participants. Kvale (1996) described an interview as a conversation, the basic mode of human interaction. In this interaction, we see the co-constructed nature of the conversational event. Although assumptions are held that interviews create a dialogue between equals, there are still differences in power between the interviewer and participants at times (Smith, 2005). Yet it is through interviews that we come closest to engaging in dialogue with and understanding of our participants, as well as allowing them to approach the status of co-researchers. I approached interviews with the guidance of Kvale (1996) as I engaged in a conversation with my participants. Conversational interviews allowed participants to talk more openly about their experiences in an environment that attempted to diminish any power differentials in the research.

To assess the co-constructed nature of romantic relationships, interview methods, specifically dyadic and individual stimulated recall interviews (See Appendices D & E), were used to gain an understanding of the ways that individuals negotiate relationships

and individual identity. First, participants took part in dyadic interviews followed by stimulated recall interviews that were conducted individually and prompted by the responses and topics that were covered in the dyadic interview. Both dyadic and individual stimulated recall interviews will be discussed more in depth below.

### *Participants*

In order to gain a clear understanding of how couples negotiate work-life concerns, interviews were conducted with participants who meet the qualifications for the study: currently married, heterosexual, dual career couples, and willing to participate in an interview with their spouse and in an additional individual stimulated recall interview. For the purposes of this study, dual career was defined as both spouses engaging in paid employment. Past research on dual career couples defined dual career as individuals who work in a area that demands “a high degree of commitment and personal investment with promise of continuous development and rise in occupational status” (Spicer, 1986, p.257); however, this construction is limiting as it assumes that only individuals in highly committed or professional roles are legitimate for research. This construction is problematic as it fails to allow for the voice of a wider range of individuals. The construction also suggests that individuals outside of this range are not also dealing with work-life concerns. Additionally, if the focus is constrained just to those who are full time workers, we delegitimize the impact of work on the lives of those who might work a few hours less than others.

Participants for this study included 19 married, heterosexual, dual career couples. For this sample, I attempted to locate individuals from a broad range of backgrounds so that different voices could emerge. In this study, participants were an average of 34 years

old for the wives, with a range of 23 to 56 years old, and an average of 36 years old for the husbands, with a range of 24 to 57 years old. At the time of marriage, participants were an average of 25 years old for the wives, with a range of 20 to 32 years old, and an average of 28 years old for the husbands, with a range of 21 to 37 years old. Participants for this study included 14 European-American couples, 1 African-American couple, 1 Asian Couple, and 3 bi-racial couples (2 Asian-American and European-American couples and 1 European-American and African couple). Educational attainment ranged from high school degrees to PhD's for both the husbands and wives with college degrees being the most common. More details about the jobs of each individual can be found on Table 1. Wives reported high school education five times, one with tech school, seven with college degrees, four with master's degrees, and two with doctoral degrees. Similarly, husbands reported high school education four times, eight with college degrees, four with master's degrees, and three with doctoral degrees/ABD. In terms of the length of the marriage, the average length reported was about 9 years (8.8 years, with a range of .5 to 33 years) with an additional 2.5 years of dating reported before marriage (range of 4 months to 6 years). Ten of the couples interviewed had children (between one to three children) and nine of them did not. When asked about their socioeconomic status, the majority of the respondents reported middle class status (15 noted middle class, 1 noted upper middle, 3 noted lower middle and 1 noted lower). When asked about their combined income, the most frequent response was \$80,000-99,999 given by ten couples. One couple reported \$0-19,999, three reported 40,000-59,999, and four reported 60,000 to 79,999. All of the couples were recruited based on multiple start snowball sampling. Further details about recruiting and phenomenological saturation will be reviewed below.

*Recruiting.* There are a variety of ways the interpretive paradigm allows one to recruit individuals for the participants in a phenomenological study. In discussing the issue of sampling, Lindlof and Taylor (2002) offered an assortment of ways that sampling can be done in research including: sampling with maximum variation, snowball sampling, theoretical construct sampling, and also typical or extreme instance sampling.

In order to examine the ways that couples negotiate work-life concerns, specific sampling techniques were utilized to find participants for the study. All individuals were recruited based on a purposive, network sample, as utilized by past researchers (Medved, 2004). This sampling style can also be defined as snowball sampling (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). First, I started to establish a list of the initial couples to interview with some personal contacts, some contacts I received through emails and an online posting to a list serve for a large Midwestern university. From early initial couples' interviews, the participants were asked if they had any suggestions for other couples who might be willing to discuss issues related to work-life negotiation and participate in this study. I also attempted to purposely select a sample that reflects a diversity of respondents across age, relational length, racial, educational attainment and socio-economic categories by utilizing a multiple start snowball sample, with each start located in a unique position. Babbie (2007) defines snowball sampling as a non-probability sample in which individuals are asked to provide referrals to other individuals who might also participate. This type of sampling was modified in this study to have different starts (or attempts to find diverse individuals) who could then provide referrals to other similar individuals. Some of these individuals who were selected as starts for the snowballs were selected as they were contacts who had previously agreed to help recruit individuals for me that were

members of diverse groups. Membership in these categories was confirmed by completing a demographic questionnaire at the first interview. Completion of this survey helped to allow for maximum variation in the participants as I used the responses on the survey to provide focus in selecting further participants (See Appendix C for the survey questionnaire). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) warned about the concerns that can arise with snowball sampling as the sample can unexpectedly “freeze” or “melt” leaving you with a dead end and no contacts. From these concerns, I worked to carefully monitor the snowball as it grew from one participant to their contacts, so that any problems that might arise from the sample could be noted and corrected in advance. For example, the early heterogeneity of the sample with all Caucasian participants was noted, and then I attempted to correct for this.

*Phenomenological saturation.* Based on the interpretive nature of the study, there was no set expectation for the number of participants; rather saturation was utilized to determine when interviews should cease. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argued that:

We sample persons, settings, activities, and so on until a critical threshold of interpretive competence has been reached-when, for example, we cease to be surprised by what we observe or we notice that our concepts and propositions are not disconfirmed as we continue to add new data. (p. 129)

It is at the point when the responses of the participants start to sound repetitive, and new information is no longer emerging, that phenomenological saturation is reached. Patton (1990) argued that “the validity, meaningfulness, and insight generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the research than with the sample size” (p.185). For qualitative researchers, it is the information that we seek that guides the size of our sample, rather than statistics and probabilities. Once it was clear that saturation of the

data had been reached, the interviews ceased, and analysis of the data started to take place.

In this study I felt that some amount of saturation was apparent after the first dozen couples; however, in order to help with the diversity of the sample and make sure that saturation was not a function of the heterogeneity of the sample, the sample was expanded to 19 couples. These 19 couples were interviewed first together about their concerns and negotiations of work-life issues, and then I returned and interviewed each spouse separately using a stimulated recall interview. This stimulated recall interview allowed participants to further explore what was or was not discussed in the dyadic interview. This resulted in 57 interviews that lasted on average just over an hour (62 minutes). The dyadic interviews averaged 84 minutes (with a range from 49 minutes to two hours and five minutes) and both the individual interview with the wife and husband averaged 51 minutes (with ranges respectively of 23 minutes to 83 minutes for the wives and 32 to 73 minutes for the husbands). Total interview time for the couples averaged just over three hours (186 minutes) and ranged from an hour and 49 minutes (109 minutes) to four hours and 41 minutes (281 minutes).

#### *Interview Protocol*

Interview methods can be constructed in a variety of forms. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) noted the variety of interview techniques that can be utilized from in-depth, unstructured, semi-structured, intensive, to collaborative and ethnographic. For this study, I utilized semi-structured dyadic and individual stimulated recall interviews, which I will discuss below.

Additionally, prior to the start of the actual data collection, both the dyadic and the individual stimulated recall interviews were pre-tested with two couples as a way to look for problems in the questions and the interview design. Both pretest interviews were recorded and the section of the dyadic interview in which the couples talked by themselves was transcribed and used as stimulus, as in the remainder of the interviews. What was different in these interviews from the rest of the interviews was that questions that appeared to be problematic in the interview, either that the couple had difficulties answering or understanding, were discussed later with the couple and they offered feedback as to how the question might be clearer or what other questions I might want to try. These interviews allowed for a clarification of interview questions, which then helped in the facilitation of later interviews.

In order to examine the issue related to discussions of work-life balance in marriage, semi-structured dyadic interviews, discussed further below, were conducted with the participants. After the original interview with the couples was conducted, each partner in the couple was interviewed separately using stimulated recall interviews, discussed further below, to further develop an understanding of how the couple negotiates work-life concerns as well as how they perceived the first interview. More importantly, the second interview also allowed participants to add comments and thoughts that they might not have felt comfortable sharing during the couples' interview. An interview guide was used to frame both the couple and individual interviews with an initial set of questions (See Appendix D and E- Interview Protocols) as well as questions developed specifically from their couple interview for the individual interview, and prompts and additional questions to further explore issues in both interviews. Interviews

took place in a location comfortable to both interviewer and interviewees and lasted between 23 minutes to 2 hours and 5 minutes depending on how much the participants had to say. These interviews were all tape recorded and then transcribed for the analysis, both by the researcher as well as trained and confidential transcriptionists (See Appendix F- Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement). The interviews will be discussed in more depth below.

### *Interviews*

To understand couples negotiations of work-life concerns, two different types of interviews were conducted with the participants during their involvement with the study. First, participating couples took part in a dyadic interview that was then followed with individual stimulated recall interviews with each spouse. Both interviews followed a semi-structured approach to the interview and utilized an interview guide (See Appendix D & E). Kvale (1996) describes semi-structured interviews as having a “sequence to the themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions” (p. 124). This format allowed me to create a plan to guide the interview while still offering the flexibility to further explore responses as needed with additional questions and probes. Further details about both the dyadic and stimulated recall interviews will be discussed below.

*Dyadic interviews.* The first interview that the participants took part in is the dyadic interview. With this interview type, couples were interviewed together so that the actual negotiation and construction of work-life balance is apparent through their collaborative discussions, sense making, and co-construction of their identity and gender. Thompson and Walker (1982) noted that dyadic research is focused on the “patterned mutual action or attributes of two people--the interpersonal relationship” (p.890). In this



style of research, the relationship is the unit of analysis, or specifically in this study how couples in the relationship co-construct of work-life negotiation, identity, and gender. Further, Allan (1980) stated that in the dyadic interview the interactions of spouses can provide insight into the relationship that is inaccessible elsewhere. The need for dyadic research has been argued by scholars. Duck (1987) stated that dyadic level of analysis is essential because of complex and dynamic variables. Further, Thompson and Walker (1982) argued that:

Many researchers have interpreted the need to study more than one partner simply as a call to sample and get reports from both members of a relationship. This response alone does not address the real issue-- understanding the relationship between two people. (p. 889)

Clearly, in many instances it is not enough to examine both partners alone, but rather it is through the discussions with both individuals that researchers can get the direct insight into the relationship itself. Research that is focused only on one individual's construction of the relationship is limited by the same concerns that can be seen in self report data.

In order to overcome the limitations of individual interviews and to gain access to the co-constructed nature of the dyadic relationship, participants in this study first completed dyadic interviews. In these interviews, participants first started with more general questions to build comfort with the topic and with me. Then participants were asked to pick a concern that they have about work-life balance that they have been thinking about and talk about it for 10 to 15 minutes by themselves. For this portion of the interview, I left the room/house and/or went out to my car, to allow for more privacy and encourage more openness in conversations. Participants then came and got me when they were finished. Finally, on my return to the interview, participants were asked to discuss the conversation that they just had, as well as questions like: "explain an example

of a work-life concern that you feel was handled well,” “explain a concern that has yet to be handled adequately,” and “discuss how the interactions around work-life concerns typically occur.” An interview protocol was utilized to guide these discussions (See Appendix D) as well as additional prompts and questions to further explore the issues.

Although the spouses already fully discussed the topic of work-life negotiations in the dyadic interview and had been given a chance to clarify their responses, it was important to interview the participants again. Primarily, a second interview allowed the participant to discuss concerns that they might not have been able to voice in the dyadic interview. This inability to voice concerns in the dyadic interview can be traced to concerns that exist with dyadic interviews. Some of the concerns of the dyadic interviews include what Allen (1980) referred to as difficulties in assessing intimate data, those things that are tied to the core of the relationship such as fear of disclosing information to the spouse that might damage the individual’s identity or the relationship as well as concerns centered on the power dynamics in the relationship. Additionally, Allan (1980) noted that problems can arise in the dyadic interview based on the quality of the participants’ relationships and fear of disclosure of the information to the spouse. Because of these concerns, it was important to return to the participants and engage with them in individual interviews. Research has also offered other reasons for multiple interviews, as Stamp (1994) noted that by interviewing both the individuals and couples in a relationship, the individual interviews serve as a point of comparison for the different comments and concerns that the partners raise and a site to talk about their individual experiences. Because of both the limitations of the dyadic interviews and the additional

opportunities provided by the individual interviews, participants in this study engaged in stimulated recall interviews after the dyadic interviews.

*Stimulated recall interviews.* After the initial dyadic interviews, the interviews were reviewed, notes were taken, and the private couple conversation portion of the interviews was transcribed. Individual interviews were also set up with each of the spouses to look further at the issue of work-life negotiation. In this study, individual stimulated recall interviews were utilized as a second source of data to better understand couple's negotiations of work-life concerns, as well as providing a site for individuals to speak without the silencing effects of power relationships or fear of repercussions. Frey, Botan, Friedman, and Kreps (1991) defined stimulated recall as when a conversation is recorded and then played back to help participants remember the interaction. In this study, transcripts were used to stimulate the participant's memories. First, participants were given a copy of a select section of the transcript to review before we started our conversation; specifically they were given the transcript for the conversation that took place when I was out of the room. In these interviews participants were asked to reflect back on the comments that were made during the dyadic interview and to elaborate further on the comments, as well as provide their interpretation of the work-life negotiations that were discussed. For example, Cheri and Chris noted that managing the children was one of their largest concerns in terms of work-life balance, so this topic was returned to in the individual interviews. Fraya and Frank commented frequently about the impact of Frank's schedule in the dyadic interview, so for their follow up interview issues around this concern were further discussed. Additionally, I asked questions that explored what concerns were not talked about during the dyadic interview. These questions were

included because they allowed the participants to express issues that they might not have felt comfortable raising in front of their partner. Questions for the stimulated recall interviews came from three sources. First, a semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to guide these discussions (See Appendix E). Additional questions generated from the dyadic interview were added to each interview based on my review of the tapes and notes. Issues that first appeared during the dyadic interviews were revisited, including topics of divisions of labor, time management, and conflicts that have occurred. Finally, during the interview additional prompts and questions to further explore topics were incorporated.

### *Researcher's Standpoint*

As a feminist scholar exploring an issue of concern for couples that has been framed as a women's issue in the past (Hochschild, 1989), it was imperative to acknowledge the impact of my individual stance and how it interacts with the research that I engage in. As a white, educated, single, childless female, I entered the research situation from a point of privilege and from this I recognize the impact this standpoint has on the way that I view data. I am single, a feminist, and a researcher; therefore I will discuss the impact of these positions below. McGuire (2007) noted that the position of the researcher is important to hermeneutic phenomenology and the interpretive paradigm itself. Additionally, to the extent that the researcher is the instrument in interpretive research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002), it is important to understand fully where that instrument is located.

First, my beliefs can be constructed as either a source of strength and insight or a limitation and source of "bias". As a feminist researcher, the ability to bring a critical lens

to the ways that work-life concerns are understood can be seen as an advantage. The critical feminist lenses allows for an understanding of the marginalized perspective that some of the participants bring to the interviews. However, my understanding as a feminist researcher can also be constructed as a source of “bias” or limitation. My stance is inherently a pro-women stance, which can also be seen as problematic in possibly viewing with disdain hegemonic comments and/or men’s comments. Though, by acknowledging this possible complication, I was mindful of this concern and worked to find a way to hear all of what each participant said.

Along with my beliefs, my status can be constructed as either a source of strength and insight or a limitation and source of “bias”. As a researcher removed from dyadic work-life concerns on a personal level, this status as a single woman allows me clarity from the additional clouding that can happen when researching one’s own concerns. Removed from personal dyadic negotiations, I do not have the impact of personal experience interacting with my view. Yet beyond this benefit of my status, in other ways in this research my status can be constructed as a limitation or source of “bias”. As a single woman, I cannot personally relate to some of the concerns that participants might divulge when discussing work-life negotiations. This status could have limited the interactions with my participants, as the participants may have felt less able to relate to me. However, with this concern in mind, I worked to build rapport with the participants and consciously worked to make sure that their voices could be heard at all times in this text.

In keeping the participants’ voice in mind, I was also mindful of my own location as a researcher. By acknowledging our own locations and the awareness of the impact

that these experiences have on us, researchers can use these locations as a starting point. In this awareness we create a bracket that notes where we exist as researchers. This does not mean that by bracketing my life, my experiences were removed, but rather put to the foreground so that the readers understand my positionality and can use it as a point to start moving forward. In addition to thinking about my stance as a researcher, I was also mindful of the ethical concerns of this research.

### *Ethical Concerns*

Interviewing participants about how they negotiate work-life concerns with their spouses required consideration of the ethical impact that I can have on the participants. Schwandt (2000) noted that "understanding what others are doing or saying and transforming that knowledge into public form involves moral-political commitments" (p. 203). These issues that arise in interpretive research point to the need for careful examination of the assumptions of the research.

Because the first interviews were done with both partners, it is important to carefully frame the issues so that individuals did not feel any negative repercussions based on their disclosures in the interviews. In addition to the careful construction and selection of questions, I had a list of additional resources, including counseling services and information about help available with work-life balance, to offer the participants should the interviews bring up any concerns that they might want to explore further (See Appendix A). For some of the couples, this list was sent to them as a source for them to find more information after the interview.

In an attempt to minimize individuals' concerns or issues with the topics that were discussed in the interviews, participants were offered and given both a clear consent form

(See Appendix B) that outlined the study in detail, as well as a copy of the planned interview protocols (See Appendix D and E) well in advance so that they clearly understood their participation and also could fully act as collaborators in the process. Also, with the presentation of the consent form, participants were reminded of all of the consent information before the start of the interviews. I also reminded the participants that they could choose to not answer any of the questions that they were not comfortable with, and/or end the interview at any time.

Participation in this study was held in confidence at all times. Although I recruited based on multiple start snowball sampling (Lindlof & Talyor, 2002), I worked to remove any possibility of naming past participants to those that I might be interviewing in the future. Along with this, participants are only identified by transcript numbers in the coded files or by selected pseudonyms in the text. Original demographic information and original recordings will be stored in both secure and locked locations for three years and then destroyed.

Finally, there is a concern that in presenting the findings of the study that the participants will not be visible in the text and heard in their own words. Allowing for the participant's voice in the text is important because it offers a better understanding of what they are actually saying. In order to guard against the possibility of losing the participant's voice, I took several steps to safeguard against this risk. First, in transcribing the interview tapes, both the transcriptionists and I worked to keep participants' original ideas and words in place by noting all of the utterances that took place. Additionally, thick rich descriptions in the text allowed me to focus on the concerns and words of the participants rather than speaking for them.

### *Data Analysis*

Before both the analysis of the data and the verification of the data files, the files were transcribed, both by the interviewer and paid confidential transcriptionists. The transcription of these files took place in a multi-staged process that allowed for the best accuracy and accessibility of interviewing participants. After completing the initial dyadic interview with the couple, I promptly listened to both the total interview and ensured that I completed a precise transcription of the conversation that the couple had when I was not in the room. The transcription of the total dyadic interview prior to the completion of the individuals' interviews was often unable to be finished due to time constraints. However, in order to facilitate the second interview, the first interview was reviewed in full at least once with note taking and memos done so that questions could be written for the next interview with each partner in the couple. For many of the interviews, it was not until all of the interviews with a couple were completed that all of first interview was fully transcribed.

After all of the interviews were conducted and then transcribed, the interviews were then verified. Verification of the transcripts involved the reviewing of all transcripts as a means to insure quality. Total length of the transcripts exceeded 900 single spaced pages. In verifying the transcripts, the word files of the transcripts were reviewed while listening to the audio files and corrections were noted. Finally, both while verifying and after, the interview transcripts were analyzed and interpreted. In the analysis, a variety of themes emerged, yet only those that tie closest to the research questions will be included in the next few chapters. Details of the analysis appear below.



*Thematic analysis.* Once the data was transcribed, the formal thematic analysis was conducted. VanManen (1990) argues that themes are best understood not as objects or generalizations, but rather as “knots in the web of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes” (p. 90). First, before any formal analysis, the entire data set was read to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences. This was done while the interviews were verified for accuracy. In the thematic analysis process, the text is closely read for concepts, and then the concepts are grouped together as the themes start to emerge (McGuire, Dougherty, & Atkinson, 2006). In this first stage of thematic analysis, the text was read with interesting information noted, both through early labels assigned and then also through the use of note taking and memo writing to document early ideas. In the second stage of thematic analysis, what Lindloff and Taylor (2002) call categorizing, the text was reviewed, and large codes were assigned that helped to organize the data into major concepts such as the themes present in this paper. This process of the current analysis most closely matches VanManen’s (1990) description of the selective or highlighting approach, which focuses on key aspects of the text that stand out.

*Interpreting the text.* First, there was a close reading of the text. And then both during and after, going through what Lindlof and Taylor (2002) call thematic analysis and VanManen (1990) refers to as the descriptive or highlighting approach to looking for themes, interpretation of the themes were developed. While memoing and during initial coding some interpretation was developed, it was not until after the coding that the interpretations were fully developed. At this point, VanManen (1990) argues that it is critical to separate the essential themes from the themes that may be more incidentally

related to the phenomenon being examined. The spurious themes that are not closely related serve only to distract from the interpretation and understanding. These themes are not false themes, but instead might exist as constructs that exist in the text but do not tie in with the research questions of the current analysis, whereas essential themes are those themes that speak to the central characteristics of the phenomenon. VanManen (1990) states that “in determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (p. 107). This does not mean that researchers are limited in the themes that they present or silence different experiences but rather present themes that are those tied the most to the research. In clarifying the themes down to essential themes the researcher questions if the phenomenon would be the same if you removed this element. VanManen (1990) argues that for the example of the parent central to the notion of parenting is the idea of a child or children. Similarly, the same process of questioning themes was utilized in this study to make sure that the text is focused on the essential themes. In work-life co-construction, in examining the themes for things such as gender, the construction of the feminine cannot be understood without the historical construction of the housewife. Additionally, after the construction of the essential themes, member checks will be conducted to verify the themes along with other forms of validation.

Additionally, within the analysis I worked to employ a feminist lens. What makes an approach feminist is the commitment to finding women and their concerns (DeVault, 1999b). However, in building from the work of Ashcraft and Mumby (2004), an understanding of women cannot be developed without similarly researching men.

Sprague (2005) suggested several feminist techniques for compensating for the researcher's standpoint. This includes emphasizing the perspective of the researched which means that the project should be interviewee dominated. In this text, I worked to give voice by offering large chunks of the comments of the participants. Feminist researchers also work to include participatory strategies with involve individuals beyond the interview (Naples, 2003). Similarly, Sprague (2005) suggests involving the research participants in the analysis, but in this study participants were involved with member checks of the themes. Although this might not directly reflect the suggestion of Sprague, this was done because coordinating such a large effort with multiple individuals coding would have removed some of the confidentiality of the responses as well as been an arduous task if all participants were given access to the data. Feminist research also works to minimize harm (DeVault, 1999b), and because I used a snowball sample, if individuals were all given access to the transcripts, even with removing identifiers, there might have been a threat to the confidentiality of the data. Sprague (2005) offers four key guidelines for critical feminist research methodology: work from the standpoint of the disadvantaged (done by focusing on the stories of the couples, where men's and couple's voices were previously marginalized), ground interpretations in interest and experiences of the participants (done by basing themes in the language of the individuals), maintain a strategically diverse discourse (done by working to adding marginal voices, e.g. couples without children, and engaging participants) and finally creating knowledge that empowers (this was done by trying to create an alternative to the current viewpoint). DeVault's (1999b) final argument for feminist methodology is that it supports research of value to women, in leading to change and benefits for women.

Finally, in order to help facilitate the coding and analysis of the data, I utilized qualitative computer software, specifically Nvivo. The use of the software allowed for more organized and detailed notes along with the use of more advanced planning and analysis techniques. Transcripts of the interviews were verified in Microsoft word documents and then imported into the software where the more advanced coding and organization of the themes took place. Nvivo allowed for the memos that were started previously be further developed as well as more organized by linking them to specific sections of text and themes in the software. These links allowed for an early representation of what I felt was going on in the interviews with the couples and individuals. Additionally, these links also helped in the compilation and writing of the themes as compiled pages of quotes were available to be reflected on and utilized in the write up.

*Validation.* Validation has been defined as a process that the researcher engages in during all stages of the research and “the way in which a judgment of the trustworthiness or goodness of a piece of research is a continuous process occurring within a community of researchers” (Angen, 2000, p. 387). Creswell (2007) offers a variety of possibilities for validation in research including: prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarification of researcher bias, member checks, rich thick descriptions and external audits. Validation for this study was conducted in a variety of ways. Acknowledging the researcher’s interest was detailed earlier as one of the criteria of both interpretive and phenomenological research and adds to the validation of the study. Creswell (1997) argued that clarifying research “bias” is something that should be explicated at the start

so that individuals understand the perspective the researcher comes from. Additionally, validation in this study was assessed by triangulation, member checks, and thick rich descriptions.

Being able to strengthen claims and support the information gathered adds credibility to the research. This credibility is important to establish in research and can be done through the use of triangulation. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) define triangulation as the “comparison of two or more forms of evidence with respect to an object of research interest” (p. 240). In order to add depth and understanding to the information that is shared during the interviews, I conducted two interviews with each of the participants. From these repeated contacts with participants, there were multiple opportunities for information to be shared as well as further discussed and clarity provided. By interviewing each couple together first, and then returning to interview each spouse separately, there were multiple sources of data for each couple regarding their experiences negotiating work-life concerns. Having access to multiple sources of data allowed for validation of the material that was presented in the interviews, and also allowed for clarification of any information that came up in the dyadic interviews.

By using thick rich descriptions, this allowed for the assessment of the quality of the themes which provide a more balanced understanding of how the couple’s co-constructions are negotiated and how these discussions impact other areas of the relationship. VanManen (1990) defined thick rich descriptions as “concrete, exploring a phenomenon in all its experiential ramifications” (p. 152). Also, as Creswell (1997) argued, thick rich description allows readers to evaluate the quality of the themes and transfer these themes into new contexts. Within the text of the analysis section, the

themes and subthemes that are presented are all supported with thick rich descriptions in order to add to the clarity and understanding throughout the text.

Finally, member checks served as another valuable source for validation. Creswell (1997) defined member check as a process involving “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the accounts” (p. 203). Lindlof and Taylor (2002) argued that the member check offers participants a chance to confirm that the themes that were constructed match with their understanding of the situation. A member check was attempted with at least one of the participants in each category of husband and wife, as well as based on each different demographic group, to verify the themes that emerged. For this study, this means that member checks were conducted with both wives and husbands so that each can offer support to the themes that are presented. Member checks were done by four of the wives and two husbands and conducted with both minority and non-minority members in terms of age, educational attainment, and socio-economic status. Participants across these four groups and two sexes were chosen with maximum variation to allow for the most diverse perspectives. Individuals were given a copy of the themes developed and asked for their feedback as suggested by Creswell (2007). Comments and suggestions were taken into consideration and used to clean up any issues of clarity; however, all of the participants who took part in the member check process agreed with the themes that were presented. Additionally, when spouses were interviewed for the second time, they also provided a member check of the first interview that they did as a couple, because they were asked to reflect on the responses and

comment about the understanding that was developed based on the original interview and transcript.

### *Summary of the Chapter*

After giving consideration to the interpretive paradigm, as well as the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, the research methods of qualitative interviews serve to address the main research questions that I hope to answer in this study:

RQ1: How do couples discursively co-construct and understand their work-life issues?

RQ2: How are couples' discursive co-constructions of work-life concerns enacted by and enacting gender?

RQ3: How are couples' discursive co-constructions of work-life concerns enacted by and enacting power?

In the next chapters I will present the results of the analysis of the interviews in the themes and then the discussion of how these themes work to answer the research questions that I have proposed.

## CHAPTER FOUR- RESULTS

### *Web of Work-Life*

Couples co-construct the realities of their relationships together through their communication and interactions. In examining the language and stories that they tell, we can better understand the realities that they help to create and are also created for them through the historical structures that are already in place. In this study I found that these stories help create a web of reality in which constructs such as power, gender, positivity, norms, and communication are all inextricably entwined. In discussing work-life concerns, one of my participants, Sipho mentioned that it really is a "web of issues" that are interconnected and require prioritizing.

In order to better understand what was happening in these relationships, I offered three central themes with the sub-themes that are tied to them. However, it should be noted that clear lines cannot be drawn between the themes because of the ties that bound each of these themes together to create the web that was reinforced at every link between phenomena. From these individual threads of themes and sub-themes, linked and overlapping, a larger web composed of the experiences of couples discursively co-constructing work-life concerns emerged. This web formed the sticky strands that can catch, hold, and paralyze individuals in this problematic framework.

In examining the different issues in couple's lives as intersections of the individual strands of the web, clearly individuals were often limited in their ability to negotiate these junctions based on the strength of these interconnected strands. It was at these junctions that further understanding of the structure of these interconnected themes



became possible. If an individual is dealing with the issue of childcare and feeling trapped by gendered expectations intersecting with the performance of happiness, they may have a different perspective on the web than someone who is instead dealing with a spouse not sharing labor.

Although the larger web of work-life concerns does not have to be the glue that binds individuals and relationships into patterns or ways of interacting that limit their possibilities, there are many reasons as to why these constraints exist. As Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued, historical and political structures impact individuals' interactions. This was visible both in the recreation of some of the couple's roles that will be discussed in the later themes as well as the socialization that these individuals attributed shaping their norms. For many, learned behaviors offered the justifications for inadequate divisions of labor, such as Derek who could not do laundry, Adam who could not cook, or Trevor who rejected most kitchen chores. Individuals and couples do have agency and choice to argue against these situations and create change in their own lives if they see them as problematic. The web can be twisted to the point of developing fractures and fissures from inequitable and problematic constructions. However, most of these individuals did not share stories that reflected choices that were made removed from social constraints, or their ability to make changes, or that placed them in active roles shaping the interactions. These views might have been held by some of the participants but if so they were not revealed during the interviews. Instead many individuals noted material constraints that impacted the performance of work-life negotiations, such as children, jobs, schedules at their jobs, and partners' willingness and competence.

In examining the sticky strands of the web of reality for couples as they co-constructed work-life concerns, three key themes emerged as major anchor points in the web. Beyond these central points, sub-themes also existed under each of the major themes providing the strands that link together these constructs and helped reinforce the strength of the framework. Central to the issues of how couples co-construct work-life concerns were the key themes of the *centrality of communication*, the *The Reeds' Smile*, and the *permeations of power*. A better understanding of what it means to co-construct work-life concerns for these couples was built by turning to each of these themes. In the following sections, each theme and the related sub-themes will be explored in depth.

### *Centrality of Communication*

Like taking their vitamins, or trying to get some sleep, participants were able to identify the importance of communication about work-life concerns to their relationships. Although at times this communication was brief, these couples held to the idea that communicating about these issues was important. This guiding framework for how communication should occur permeated the transcripts of the interviews. Couples were able to articulate how communication should happen even in instances where it might not have happened that way. In constructing communication as central, these individuals talked about the *Conversations as Positive*, the *Importance of Communication*, the positive impact of *Communication as Realignment and Understanding*, and the simplicity of communication in *Just Sit Down and Talk*.

The theme of the centrality of communication helped to answer both the first and the third research question. The first research question examined how couples discursively co-constructed work-life concerns, and this was partially revealed in the

manner in which the couples talked about the communication that occurred as they engaged in meta-talk about work-life concerns. At the same time, these sub-themes reflected the understanding that the couples possessed regarding work-life as they built their stories of work-life balance. The third research question explored how power impacted—and was impacted—by work-life co-constructions. This was clearly influenced by the couples' framing of their communication, and this framing then concurrently shaped the power and resistance in the relationship.

#### *Conversations as Positive*

In talking about the conversation that they had surrounding the issues related to work-life, one of the most common things noted was the general happiness with the conversations that the couples had around this topic. *Conversations as positives* consisted of comments made in which the participants noted that most of the time the conversations that covered work-life were good conversations. This did not mean that frustrations were not noted in the participants' language, but in describing their interactions overall or in total, many individuals were able to construct these interactions in a positive light. Brad (see Table 1 for more individual descriptors) noted his enjoyment with these conversations:

Good! I mean I think they're insightful and they're helpful and I know, for me personally, they've put me at ease to knowing what's going on and. Uh, again, like I said, there's no surprises. I don't... never get blindsided with any, you know, decisions or anything like that.

Brad's framing of work-life conversations was done through the language of descriptions such as "helpful," "insightful," and "putting me at ease." These positive constructions allowed for a framing and understanding of these conversations as something that could be dealt with and probably allowed for easier interactions between him and his wife. In

these descriptions, if there was any stress or concerns related to work-life negotiations, they were hidden in the positivity. Similarly, Danica and Derek described their conversations as such:

Danica: I think they make us uh a closer couple and um make our relationship stronger actually. I think.

Derek: Yeah. You know, the the more and more stuff that we discuss, the, I mean, there's less conflict. I mean, there's still some conflict but there's less conflict.

Danica: Yeah.

Derek: 'Cause we, 'cause we kinda, we kinda know how the other person will react.

Danica: [chuckle]

Derek and Danica noted how conversations strengthened the relationship, made them closer, allowed them to know each other better, and helped them to have less conflict.

Note how this understanding is built off each other in conversation, as Danica first offers the idea that the conversations made them closer, then Derek offered the how to that outcome, and it ended with agreement and laughter. In order for these conversations to have been productive, these conversations needed to already be a safe space for those changes that the couple discussed to take place. If couples in conversations did not feel that they could communicate, be it based on stonewalling or hostile communication environments, then to inhibit this communication might have possibly hindered their ability to discuss issues that arose in the relationships. Similarly, Olivia evaluated her conversations with her spouse in this way: “I think overall, good. Because you have a better understanding of the person. You don’t assume. We learned that at a very early age, is not to assume.” Again, the chance for understanding was constructed as a benefit to the conversations. Finally, Mei stated:

This conversation actually is very helpful for our relationship. Although sometimes, it may seem kind of difficult. Because we need to find someone to

take care of kids and we need. Yeah. It's kind of sometimes difficult and we-- We spend time on discussion. And, But I think it's good that we can have this type of a discussion and we can get-- Yeah, we can-- You know, some couple don't discuss things. They're just, "Hey, you do this then." But we-- We can discuss it and we can try to like put yourself in other people's shoes and we can try to understand. Yeah. I think it's good.

Conversations about work-life concerns allowed Mei and her husband to solve concerns that they had about child care. Echoing Olivia, Mei noted that the conversations offered a site of understanding which allowed for the positive. As shown in these quotes, the positivity about discussions was clear. Individuals did recognize the difficulties that they faced but they framed it as a positive construction which allowed them to build more understanding into their relationships. Reflecting more of who the participants were in this study, this theme, might partially be based on the idea that individuals willing to talk about work-life concerns with a researcher were often those who saw their relationship as successful. I discuss this possibility in the next chapter.

### *Importance of Communication*

Whether it was for the benefit of me or it was a view that individuals that I interviewed really held central, common in the conversations was the construct that the communication in the relationship was truly important. Individuals appeared to recognize the impact that communication had on their relationships as well as the need for continued communication to keep their relationship functional. This theme appeared in both the conversations with the couples and also the individual interviews. This view of the importance of communication could be seen in the interaction between Danica and Derek's quote in the last sub-theme as they created their communication as positive, but it was also seen in the discussion that I had with Olivia:

Well, I mean we all have disagreements, but I don't ever have a problem talking with him or feeling like I can't talk to him. Um, we've always been that way since we've been together. We are like friends first, well I don't know about that, we are always like friends along with being a married couple and having a relationship. And I just think it is real important to have that line of communication open and to be able to talk to him about anything, which I am. Except for surprises and birthday presents and that kind of stuff

In this quote, Olivia noted explicitly in her interview the centrality of communication to her relationship because it allows for more open dialogue. She conceptualized her relationship as being able to talk about anything and not having problems talking to her spouse, which goes back to her comment about importance. In some instances individuals were able to frame the importance of conversations as existing beyond an association with positive experiences, such as in the words of George. On reflecting back on the final question, if he could think of anything else that is important that we did not talk about George said "Hmm. [talking to self] Any other issues that's important. No. Uh, other, you know, other than . . . you need to work at it and be conscious of the communication, to get better at it. I think there's always room for improvement." George noted the importance of communication through placing it as something that is worth couples working on. Jenna offered a fuller explanation for the importance of communication in her marital relationship by describing how she gets her partner to talk:

Ahhh, (Laughing). Usually me throwing out possible interpretations of his behavior until he tells me which one it was. "No no that's not, no, well maybe that's it". It is usually kind of (laughing), but then, then it was early on in our relationship, it was that way, because he was very just 'not talk about it'. I'm like uh, uh, I am not going to be in a relationship like that because that is when we see people have huge fights and the fights over stupid things. Right, so that, That is not the problem. The dishes are not breaking up the marriage, there is other stuff that is breaking up the marriage. But if you talk about the dishes you often talk about the other stuff. So if the dishes are ticking you off then let's talk about the dishes and see what else is bugging you. And is it really just the dishes or is it that you don't feel valued, you don't feel appreciated. That you are stressed? What is the reason that you are upset?

Jenna offered a clear implication as to what happens when couples fail to communicate. From this she explained the impact that communication has on the relationship. This impact was then traced to breaking up marriages, because couples who communicated had a chance to talk about some of the issues that might have caused the deterioration of the relationship. In these interactions it was clear that individuals saw the importance of communication; they were able to articulate the importance, link it to positive communication, and even speak to the implications for what happens when communication does not happen. Continuing within the centrality of communication, along with describing the importance of communication, couples often noted the use of communication about work-life concerns as a venue that offers them the possibility to build understanding with their partners, as described next.

#### *Conversations as Realignment and Understanding*

Many of the couples and individuals recognized the sense-making function of their conversations. Many talked about the conversations that they have had about work-life concerns as a source of building understanding about the other's ideas, as well as a way for them to realign with each other. In some instances, this understanding was even extended to planned "syncing up" with the partner, as described by Peyton:

We worked our schedule out where at least we have Friday mornings together. Now, we don't always use that time to synch up. Sometimes we use it just to do nothing. But at least we know we have that time to do that. And we also are willing to communicate and say, you know, "Hey, if you can, once we put the boys to bed, we need to pull out some calendars and we've got to look at some scheduled stuff." You know? You know, we, we are able to communicate and be able to make that time for each other.

For Peyton and his wife, discussions included realignment with each other to the point that schedules were compared. Although his wife was primarily in charge of much of the

transportation of the children, the couple still worked to make sure that they had an understanding of what their spouse had to deal with in the upcoming week.

Even when the conversation was not described as a way to build a common understanding, they viewed the conversations as a way to at least better understand the interest and point of view of the other individual. In discussing the conversations, Trina and Trevor described them as:

Trina: Yeah. He thinks it's rattling, when we talk about everything that's going on with us, the events at our house.

Trevor: It's just getting each other on the same page about upcoming stuff. It's short-term upcoming stuff.

Trina: And, you know, just because what we say on Monday, doesn't mean it's the same thing on Friday. [LAUGHS]

Additionally, when those conversations do not happen, they mention missing them, such as in Trina's statement:

Yeah. It just happened that way. And when he started taking his class and I was taking a separate vehicle, I missed our conversations. That was two long months of no conversations. I didn't have someone to rattle off to. [LAUGHS]

Trina first offered a minimization of their communication as Trevor might have described it in the past as just "rattling," and Trevor further minimized the importance by saying that it is "just" getting each other on the same page. Additionally, after Trina presented a less than positive image of the interaction, in the next turn Trevor adjusted this presentation through the reframing of these interactions in more rational, process oriented language. Trevor's definition of the situation was then left to stand and define the situation, as Trina's subsequent comments moved the discussion in a different direction. In constructing work-life conversations as just getting on the same page, the simplification of the purpose and interaction may have also detracted from the value of



these conversations, which might have been why Trina sounded hesitant in revealing that she missed these conversations.

In all of these statements, it was clear that individuals understood the process of talking about their work-life concerns as a way to get in line with their partner as well as a way to build understanding. These quotes again highlighted the importance of having these conversations and building an understanding of the reality of the work-life situation. Through these themes it was clear that couples understood the centrality of communication to dealing with work-life concerns, but what was interesting was that in discussing how they then moved to deal with concerns through communication, there appeared to be some level of disfluency, which could be seen in the next theme.

#### *Just Sit Down and Talk*

In the conversations with the couples and individuals, it was clear that the discussion about communication between the two of them and about this topic was presented in a way that stressed the simplicity of it. For many involved in these interviews, communication was just something that was done and it was also something that was “just communication.” *Just sit down and talk* represents the, at times, oversimplification of the processes of communication. This theme could be seen in Otto’s comments as he said, “We kind of always try to be on the same page when it comes to stuff. And we’ll discuss it, present each other’s points or whatever so. I just think communication is the key there.” Similarly, Emily described these interactions by saying:

Um. You know, we usually just talk about it. We don’t um. We just, you know, we usually just, you know, one person brings up the concern and then, you know, we usually discuss what the, what the solu-, you know, what some solutions might be, and and then and then go from there.

From Otto's quote we got the sense that communication resulted in individuals' greater mutual understanding and was constructed through discussions made up of presenting each other's points. This description removed any variability from the conversation and narrowed the process of communication down to a few simple components. In Emily's discussion, there was a clear goal-based approach to the communication, as communication appeared to be the search and execution of solutions. Also, there was a logical frame to these discussions as described in the next theme. In talking with Rachel about how she and her husband solve work-life concerns, she noted:

Oh, we usually just, at the time that it concerns one of us or something-- one of them is sick or something comes up, we just kind of discuss what probably the best way to handle it is. List off the things that have to be done, which one of us is going to take the time to do it.

Again, the presence of the "just" statement showed the simplicity of the interaction or the minimalization of these interactions to the point in which they could be seen as simple. There was a possibility that in conversations between Rachel and her husband that they did just create a list, or it might have also been possible that individuals complained, argued, and then created a list of what needed to be done. However, in constructing the conversation as just talking, we saw an intersection of minimizing concerns with the descriptions of the centrality of communication.

It is clear from these quotes that the communication between the individuals was presented in a way that might have illustrated that couples accept the way communication was, through the minimalization of the construct as "just" talk, or something that happened. This construction may have occurred as couples have never critically thought about the communication that occurred in the relationship. Couples may not have a

developed understanding about the communication in their relationship. VanManen (1990) argued that “thus all we can ever know must present itself to consciousness” (p. 9). If couples are not conscious of the ways in which they are communicating, they might not really know what their communication looks like. If couples do not critically reflect on the communication about work-life issues or they do not reflect on these conversations, they might not have a full understanding of what is happening in these situations. The ability or time to be reflexive in their communication might be missing in the daily interactions of couple. This blind acceptance or ignorance of the communication that is occurring in the relationship removes the possibility for an individual to see what is discussed as really possibilities constrained in a larger system of discourse and materiality that influences what is discussed and what remains unsaid or unquestioned. Couples might not have the chance to explore this issue more in their daily interactions. This limited depth in explaining communication also might point to a more limited experience in talking about the topic. Allan (1980) noted that “the information people can provide is limited by their own knowledge and understanding of the topic about which they are being questioned” (p. 205). If the person does not have the labels available to assign to the situation they cannot develop a more advanced answer to this topic.

The centrality of communication to dealing with work-life concerns was a theme that many of the participants spoke to in both their dyadic interview and the follow up individual interviews. Couples and individuals were able to articulate the importance of communication, the positive view that they held of their communication as well as the positive outcomes of this communication. This theme was important to note first because

it offered a larger frame in which the other themes could be viewed with more clarity. If participants were saying that communication was important to them, this then impacted the way that other comments and themes were understood. These comments helped to answer the question about how couples experienced their work-life concerns, as discussed more in the next chapter.

### *The Reeds' Smile: The Social Construction of Happiness*

In my early practice interviews, before I had gotten into the interviews with others, I was reminded of an early television show, *The Donna Reed Show*, which I had never seen but was described to me as having the “typical” happy 1950’s couple. I can imagine the type: 2.5 kids, dog, husband that works outside the house, and a wife at home, cleaning and in heels waiting by the door with a martini. By the nature of this study, the couples that I talked to are different from this image. They both work every day and likely return home to something other than a sparkling house and a great way to relax. But what shines through from *The Donna Reed Show* until today was Donna’s cheerful toothy grin as she hands off a martini to her equally smiling partner. Couples that I talked with did not have the same hours as the Reeds and the same benefit of most of the household labor being done before the paid work day ends, but what stood out to me that continued from one conversation to the next was the positive presentation and construction of their relationships.

The theme of the Reed’s Smile helped to also answer both the first and the third research question. The first research question examined how couples discursively co-construct work-life concerns, and this could be seen partially in the ways in which the couples framed the communication that took place as they engaged in discursively co-

constructing work-life concerns through the social construction of the positive relationship. Answers to the second research question were also apparent in this theme, as the couples presented the rationality of work-life discourses speaking to a privileging of masculine communication styles. At the same time, the third research question was also answered through this theme. The third research question explored how power impacted—and was impacted—by work-life co-constructions of the couple, which is clearly influenced by the framing the couple does about their communication, conflict and concerns as positive, the use of humor, and the focus on the rational. This framing then also shapes the power and resistance in the relationship as individuals are bound within certain enactments of the relationship.

It is important to note that in this study there was something very common that could be found in the participants beyond the smile. Overall, the participants in this study tended to view their communication as successful and positive. The study design, as I requested interviews with the couple's first together and individual interviews, might have had some impact on who was willing to meet with me because those who have less positive conceptions of their relationship and their communication might be less willing to share their stories for fear of vocalizing these ideas. Instead those that chose to participate in research with me were those individuals who might instead construct the communication that they have as successful and see themselves as exemplars for research. Regardless of the exact reason, it was clear that these participants viewed their relationships as positive.

Maybe these individuals were genuinely happy. That would be great if this was the case. And I am by no means suggesting that these people are not happy. But what I

am suggesting is that with whatever problems that do exist in their relationships, they are still able to construct their reality of these interactions as positive and through this construction deal with (or hide, or ignore) the concerns that exist under the surface of their lives. The interactions within this theme all employed some type of minimization of concerns, whether it was a minimization of conflict patterns or the concerns that the couple had. Within the idea of the The Reeds' Smile were issues such as *Positive Framing of Relational Situations*, *Conversations as Logical*, *Humor used to Reduce Tension*, *It Could Be Worse*, *Viewing The Couple as Better than Average*, and *Contrasting Conflict*. All of these enactments of the Donna Reed smile returned to the underlying idea that these couples attempted to create an overwhelmingly positive construction of their relationships.

#### *Positive Framing of Relational Situations*

Regardless of how bad a situation might have been or what obstacle the couple faced, one of the common reactions was to positively frame their relational situations. Positive framing of a relational situation can be defined as the communicative constructions of the couple as happy, a problem as minor, or the relationship as good in the face of opposition. At a time when others might choose to become negative or devalue their partner or the relationship, these individuals instead elected to construct their situation in a positive light. One instance where this occurred happened in how couples chose to deal with the fact that their communication when I left the room often did not meet the expectations or request of 10 to 15 minutes. Recall, that during the dyadic interview, I asked the couples to talk about one of their concerns for about 10 to

15 minutes (See Appendix D for the question). At after a few minutes of talk, Bianca and Brad's conversation went like this:

Bianca: Are we done?

Brad: Uh.

Bianca: I think this is stuff you, we all, we've talked about a lot. [laugh]

Brad: Yeah. 'Cause really, we can't talk 15 [chuckling] minutes on anything 'cause this is stuff we've already hashed out over and over.

Bianca: OK. I think we're done! [chuckle]

Denker: OK.

Brad: I think we've got too good of communication.

Bianca: We talk about this stuff all the time, so there really isn't anything

Brad: [chuckle]

Bianca: [laughing] left for us to say.

Brad: Yeah. There's, there's not a whole lot. There's not 15 minutes worth that we haven't already hit on in 15 hour car rides, back and forth from uh [state].

Here Bianca created justifications for why their conversation might be shorter than I requested, where as Brad framed the length as a natural outcome of their skill set. For Bianca and Brad, the lack of depth in the conversation was not due to any deficit on their part or in their relationship, but rather occurred because they were talking about things that they had already talked about (Bianca's explanation) and they were better or above average communicators (Brad's explanation). Also, it was clear that this positive framing was the product of the combined couple interaction, as Brad's last comment built off of Bianca's argument.

Similarly, this positive construction could be seen in the individual's framing of their relational partners, as Keri described her and her husband's division of labor:

So I I really do think I'm in the process of redefining what equity means and realizing that, you know, having a a vacuumed home isn't important to him. It's important to me. And I can't make that be important for him. You know, I can ask him on certain occasions if, you know, we're having company and I'm busy doing stuff, "Would you have a minute to just vacuum the living room?" And you know what? He'll usually say, "Sure," you know, but he'll say, "I can't do it until this time." And I'm like, "OK." Um. It, I think it's also just stopping and realizing all of the stuff that he does for us as a family that I don't know about or

that I don't even give a second thought to. Like he does take care of all of our finances, and our finances are in really good shape, you know. A lot of people are really struggling with debt and worried about the recession. And, I mean, we're certainly not wealthy, but we're doing, we have no debt. We're doing, as far as like credit cards and stuff. So we're doing well. And that is largely due to him. 'Cause he spends time researching on the internet, you know, interest rates at banks and, you know, what would it cost to refinance our home. And um, he is amazing when it comes to like fixing vehicles. He his, he just has kind, he just kinda taught himself. He can, you know, fix just anything. He puts new brakes on my car. Uh, he changed the timing belt on my car, you know. He changed the tra- uh put in a new something or I don't remember what it was--water pump or something. He saves us tons of money by being able to do that. And so, granted, you know, it's not like he has to do it every day, like I cook a meal every day, but he still is doing things to um make my life easier.

In this quote, we saw Keri make a point to talk about all of the good things that her husband does in order to benefit the couple, possibly even rationalizing the division of labor. Instead of creating a situation in which Keri compared her labor to her husband, she framed his work in terms of what is important to him versus important to her. Through this construction of the individual labor as both positive, Keri was able to create a comparison of them as a successful couple who were not struggling financially, like “a lot of people.” Similarly, when Ken talked more about vacuuming, he stated:

But uh, for a while, we uh, uh had my chore as one, you you know, we split the chores, but one of them was vacuuming. And I was like, "I I think I could be agreeable to vacuum once a week." And uh, I just never did. I I did, but not on the schedule of once a week, even though I agreed to it. And uh, and, you know, the things that did work were me picking up clutter. Uh, and I don't like a lot of clutter, so it it occurs to me to pick up clutter. But it it just never occurs to me to to vacuum. And so now, we outsource. We [laughing] hire somebody to do it, so, I think that's a lot better way to do it in my mind. Although, you know, I vacuum from time to time when I see that that it needs it, but I just don't have this deep down desire to vacuum once a week.

Again, the minimalization of the labor was done through the construction of importance. Ken was also able to engage in a positive construction of a situation in which he rejected shared labor or the split of the chores, but because they have now come to another



solution, outsourcing, the vacuuming becomes a non-issue. If the legitimacy of the labor could be reduced- e.g. - not important to him- then it was more appropriate that he did not perform this labor. Through the majority of the quote, Keri talked about all of the good that was done by her husband, but in the last sentence we saw some glimmer of recognition that she knew that their hours were not equal. Additionally, this quote illustrated how “good” the couple was based on the work of her husband as compared to other couples. Keri’s comments reflected the work of researchers, such as Thompson and Walker (1995), who noted that in judging labor, women created fairness in their relationships through social comparisons. Rather than examining the ways in which their relationships with their spouse were not equitable, women compared their portion of the labor with other women and ignored their labor as compared with their spouse. This might be why Keri was able to construct her husband as positive because she looked at the work that she saw other men do in other relationships, rather than creating a direct comparison to her own labor.

In both of these quotes, it was clear that individuals were actively constructing their relationships and partners in a way that was positive. The positive frames could also be seen as an obscuring frame, as individuals did not talk as much about the labor balance that might have been off or what else might have been going on that kept them from talking more. If individuals were able to construct their total relationship as good, then the little things, like cooking every night, became less likely to get discussed. The choice to create positive frames might also then have impacted the quality of the relationship, as well as satisfaction and individual’s willingness to discuss work-life issues. This positive lens might have created more comfortable relationships, but this could have also been

creating a more silent relationship where individuals removed the opportunity to talk about their concerns by the construction of the positive frames. These possible relationships should be considered more and will be further discussed in the next chapter. Beyond the general positive construction, *The Reeds' Smile* was also recreated in the social comparison that the couples engaged in that will be discussed next.

#### *Viewing the Couple as Better than Average*

Similar to the positive framing of relational issues, in viewing the couple as better than average, the couples took a similar positive lens and applied it to the relationship. This can be defined as the construction of the relationship in a positive light through the comparison to alternative relationships. In these constructions of “better than [insert other couple’s name]” we saw couples justify their relationship as good, or strong, or the better way through the juxtaposition against another relationship. In talking about how they solved concerns about work-life in their relationship, Adam stated:

You know, I think we're fairly honest with each other. Um. And I, you know, that's always going to be a benefit when you're trying to solve problems, because if the other person's holding something back that you're not aware of, you know, then you start to feel resented and and, you know, when it finally comes out, it ends up being an argument rather than a rational discussion. And so, um, yeah. It's been pretty scientific. [chuckle] Kind of boring, you know? In the sense that, you know, you always have that awkward moment when you go over to a friend's place and they're bickering about something: money or something. And you're like, "Ugh. Damn. I'm glad we don't do that because I couldn't stand to do that with somebody all the time." And so, no, I think our our kind of plan ahead and kind of scientific kind of approach to things really works. 'Cause we don't always have to be like that, but when it comes down to, you know, work related things and and how that's going to affect our home life, I mean, you have to. If you don't have that rational conversation, then somebody's feelings are going to get hurt.

In this we saw Adam and his wife’s relationship constructed as good, through the comparison to an example of the relationship of a friend, who appeared to be embarrassing to be around. Good also appeared to be constructed in opposition of

emotionality, which will be discussed later. Adam described the approach that he and his wife use as honest and scientific, whereas the other couple was engaging in bickering, or other couples had to deal with the impact of unplanned conversation that then lead to, in Adams words, “resentment,” “arguments,” and “someone’s’ feelings are going to get hurt.” That same type of justification of the couple as better than average was also offered by Abby:

I know that [husband] and I communicate more and better than about any other couple that we know. So that makes it easier for us to deal with these issues and and not have them turn into explosions or bigger issues or those sorts of things. And I do think that we have found a good balance. Uh, we're really busy, especially at certain times of the year, but we make sure that we talk every day and communicate. And when we're home, we don't hide behind books or a television or, you know. And so, the time we spend together is good time. And I think that's something that we do better than some of the couples that we know who might be in the house together, but not spending time together. 'Cause you know there's a difference, of course. Um. Yeah, and like, you know, I see uh, one couple comes to mind. Um, having conflict over spending time together much more often that we do, and, you know, they both work one job and they're not the kind of job where you take stuff home with you. And so, I'm like, "Clearly, the two of you aren't communicating or dealing with something, because if we can live our schedule and still feel like we're hanging out and happy," you know. So, I think that, I th-. That makes me sound like, "We're so much better than other people." But I think we do a better job at at making time count and communicating than other couples do.

In this text, Abby noted the planning and skill that existed in her relationship with her husband. Not only was the other couple framed as more deficient than Abby and her husband, but it was also noted that they were dealing with less because Abby worked a part time job along with her hectic schedule at her primary job. It is as if Abby believes she and her husband started the race at a disadvantage, but through the skill and effort on their part have finished ahead of the other couples.

Of course the attempt to justify their relationships as better than average was not something that was always reserved for communication skills, but could also be seen in the justification of better than average based on household labor, such as noted by Ross:

I think part of it is because of the, the, me being more feminine and doing more of the housework and her doing more of manly type work. You know that's reversed from traditional society and I mean there is a lot of people think that its just silly. I mean, honestly, most everybody I know thinks it is silly. But I don't really care. It works really well for us. We are happier than most of our friends. Honestly ever our..we work things out. We very seldom ever have an argument over anything, at all. And we are happy as can be. I mean there is no worries day to day that other people, like I hear guys will show up at work and they are mad cus "My wife did this" or "I did this and now I'm going to have to go home and bite the bullet and apologize." Well, was it really, I mean, would it really kill you to wash the dishes? You know seriously what is the harm in that? "Well, I wasn't brought up that way." Well, maybe that's why it didn't work for them either. You know, so..

Ross noted the evaluation of his labor by his friends as different or silly because he engaged in more typical feminine labor, but this labor was justified because Ross argued that he and his wife were better off than many of their friends. Additionally, in comparing his behavior to that of his coworkers, Ross was able to construct his individual behavior as better than the average husband. This success then served as a source of legitimacy for the choices that were made in his relationship.

In all of these quotes there was a creation of a positive relational story. In the language that the individuals used and the exemplars that they selected as illustrations, it was clear that couples both created the story of their relationship as positive and better than what others experienced, but at the same time these constructive narratives also have had an impact on the ways that these individuals chose to interact with each other. If couples saw their relationship as better than average, this increased the possibility of relational success because the couples saw their alternatives as less ideal than their current relationship (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Thus this positivity added to the

relationship in terms of the derogation of the alternative. Similarly, Canary and Stafford (1993) argued that positivity was a form of relationship maintenance behaviors. It was interesting to note that the participants never shared stories of couples who were really doing better than they were. Although it can be reasoned that most couples might know both those who are doing better than them and also those couples who are struggling, those superior couple types did not enter into the dialogue because they do not offer the same framing benefits that the inferior couples do. Wills (1981) noted this behavior when looking at individual's use of social comparison, where individuals look to those who are less successful in downward social comparisons to enhance their well-being. Through the construction of the couple's relationship as better than average, we see both the positive outcomes that are associated with this frame and the social construction of happiness in the relationship just as it exists in all of the themes that are part of *The Reeds' Smile*. Just like the contrast that portrays the relationship as good, the contrast of different conflict styles in the next theme also helps to construct the relationship as positive.

### *Contrasting Conflict*

In the same way that couples build their understanding of their relationships as positive through the comparison to others, they also appear to frame their conflict in a similar manner. Contrasting conflict can be defined as the times in which individuals talk about the conflict in their relationship and construct it as either better than that of others that they know or better than other options or types of conflict. Once again this framing of conflict works to create a more positive illustration of the relationship both for the couples creating their relational history and for the benefit of those they tell their story to.

One of the most common comparisons was between the couple's conversation and "fighting." These comparisons were clear in Nalia's words:

I don't think it's [quick conversations] bad or good. I would say like, I think there are times we can take more time and discuss something. But for the most part, I would say that it's a pretty good feeling. Because I feel like it doesn't require-- We don't have to get in a fight about something. We discuss it. We can have a conversation, like we did a week ago. You know? And just say, "This is what I'm thinking. This is where my thoughts are directed. And what are your thoughts?" and that kind of thing.

In Nalia's comments, the construction between the conversations that she had with her spouse was polarized against the larger ominous construction of "fighting." In framing what she was involved in as "just a conversation," this frame allowed for a minimization of the possible negative impact of the conversation as well as the severity of the situation. At the same time, the couple was able to maintain their image as the rational couple who really did not have fights. There were times in which the arguments were minimized through comparisons, such as in Olivia's words:

Somewhat. I guess it depends on what you consider arguing. Um, we don't have name calling, you know, screaming matches with each other. Uh, we have disagreements and we have arguing back and forth. A lot of times it is play arguing amongst my husband and my son, but, um, sometimes we may argue on a disciplinary issue or, um good grief, I think that is what most of them are. Uh, the disciplinary issues, but we work it out or whatever, you know. We try not to argue. We keep it ...civil.

In Olivia's description, she noted the difference between her "disagreements" that she had with her husband and the name calling screaming matches. In this, Olivia framed negative conflict as "name calling screaming matches." If the conflict that she had with her spouse existed at a lower level, then it was okay. Again, downward social comparisons (Wills, 1981) were used to enhance Olivia's evaluation of her relationship. This type of comparative framing could be dangerous depending on the level of negative

conflict which marked bad conflict. For example, if the line for negative comments is drawn at name calling, then what might pass as not problematic, such as stonewalling, could actually have detrimental impacts on the relationship. Similar to Olivia's construction, Trina created another comparison between her and her husband's type of arguments as compared to what the argument could be:

We don't punch or slap or even, you know-- Ours aren't physical. They're just-- And they're not really arguments. They're just-- He has his opinion and I have mine and then, um Bickering back and forth wouldn't accomplish anything. And so he just pretty much shuts down and I do too. I don't talk anymore. I don't talk to him. And he'll-- What he'll do is he'll-- He'll start doing something. He'll start helping me with dinner or something, without asking. And it's nice. I've never told him that, you know, "Oh, now you're helping me," after, after, um, an hour ago, he was whatever-- But if that's what it takes for him to help me, I don't care. I'm not going to tell him that. He already knows that. He knows that he's helping me just because I'm mad at him.

In Olivia's construction of her conflicts, there was clearly the possibility of dangerous implications through her framing, but it was in Trina's words that the real possibility of danger was present due to minimizing the conflict that she experienced as not as bad due to the fact that there was not physical violence. In constructing conflict or concerns as positive due to the lack of violence this left a wide range of behaviors that then could be acceptable for interaction that might be anything but healthy, including her and her husband's use of stonewalling. This then set up a situation in which verbally abusive or other equally negative conflict patterns could be justified as acceptable because they did not hit each other. Trina also noted that it was "nice" that her husband helped out, after she explained that she also used stonewalling to get these results, but because it was not physical violence, it was okay. It was also important to note that what the couples considered to be real conflict might not be noted if couples always minimize the conflict.

In all of these examples there was a clear dichotomy set up and utilized in the way that the couples framed their relationships. In this dichotomy, the couples placed their conflict style in direct comparison to what they saw as worse conflict styles. Through this set up of “theirs” versus “worse,” again there was the creation of a space in which the couples could construct their relationship as better than what could be or what was for others. Through this framing of conflict styles couples were able to count themselves as lucky to be in the relationships that they were because it could be so much worse no matter how bad conflict in their relationship was. Just as couples minimized the conflict in their relationships, participants also minimized the level of concerns that they had, which will be discussed next.

*“It Could Be Worse”*

Comparisons were also used by the couple in minimizing the severity of the issues that they were facing. The frame of *it could be worse* occurred when individuals or couples described the issues that they currently were facing as smaller than past issues or as smaller than issues that they could be having. These constructions of issues worked to minimize concerns through social comparisons to either past states of their relationship or to others’ concerns. This can be seen in Rachel’s comments:

I think it’s because we don’t really care about the little things, is the main thing. “Oh, we burnt dinner. Okay. Now we have to eat something else.” Or, You know, the kids didn’t get a bath on time or they put on pajamas on before they got in the tub. You know, just little things, it really doesn’t matter. Is it really going to make that big a difference in the whole picture? And that’s why we really don’t have that many concerns.

Rachel used the idea of the whole picture or the larger view of life to establish the level in which concerns were more important and carry real weight. As these incidences of a bad dinner or a missed bath are minimized through a larger scope to see the “whole picture,”



this construction then removes the legitimacy of these concerns in terms of being a worry or fuel for arguments. If couples together work to decrease the importance of the incidence, then one can also decrease the likelihood that individuals might have conflict later.

At other times the diametric poles of real or larger concerns versus daily concerns were created through the comparison with specific events in an individual's lives, as seen in Trevor's words:

Trevor: Everything is short-term. I mean, unless you've got a specific example. Like a 30-year mortgage on the house. I pay the bills. 30 years from now isn't really an issue, as long as it's getting paid each month. Then it's still short-term.

Denker: What would have to happen to make something be a long-term issue?

Trevor: Permanent disability would be the only thing that would come to mind. Like when I had my stroke, there was some concern as to how long it was going to take for me to recover from it. We pursued full disability and Social Security and all the other avenues of help that was offered by the government and none of them were doable. There wasn't a short-term option there. Just for future reference, if you ever have a physical disability, you have to be out of work for a year before you're eligible for anything.

This discussion took place after Trevor's explanation that as a couple they did not have any major concerns. For Trevor and his family, who faced the possibility of long term financial and medical concerns based on a stroke, looking at other concerns was always done with a sense of perspective that they developed after dealing with that major crisis. Any household concerns that happened to occur for Trevor and his family were automatically small when looked at next to Trevor's past health concerns. This theme of "it could be worse" and the minimalization of problems was also done by creating comparisons with events occurring in their families of origin and contrasting them with their current situations, as Fraya did:

Denker: A lot of research in the past, looking at two-earner couples, has pointed to the home life as a problem area. Why do you think that's not?

Fraya: I don't know. I guess, maybe I'm just still in a newlywed phase. I, I'm just having a good time, still getting to know each other, and and being young. Um. I, and it, I think I take a lot of things as a blessing. My family growing up, there were a lot of challenges and struggles and just trying to make ends meet. And I feel very fortunate that we have uh, we have what we have. Uh. So it's not as much of a concern. I mean, every now and then, [chuckle] it'll frustrate me if I made something the night before for dinner and I can't wait for that leftover for lunch the next day and I open the fridge and, you know, somebody had a midnight snack.

Denker: [chuckle]

Fraya: But it's not anything that, you know, it's not a big issue for me. It's just kind of like, "Oh, dang. I've got to think for something quick to bring." Uh. And that's pretty much as stressful as as it really gets for us, between... There's not um... I don't know. There's not a whole lot of things that that are annoying right now.

In contrasting her relationship to that of her family of origin, Fraya was quick to point out the economic comfort that existed in her current relationship that was not present when she was younger. Through this frame, Fraya was able to assign a marker of success to the relationship, because what is conceptualized to her as a big issue was not present in the relationship. If in the individual's perspective larger issues were not present, then constructing other concerns as minor becomes more realistic. In all of these examples, the daily events that include work-life concerns created as "less than" through the juxtaposition with more major events that the couple or the individual has or could experience. As Rachel saw it, when looking to the larger picture the minor daily issues could be dismissed. Trevor presented the argument that compared to a challenging time for the family, everything else was minor. For Fraya, because she and her husband were not facing the financial concerns of her family of origin, any concerns that existed paled in comparison.

In the minimization of concerns through social comparison the couples were able to discursively construct a situation where it looked like the couple was in a better

position than either they could be or they have been. It was through this construction that the social construction of happiness in the relationship occurred. However, it was important to be mindful that as individuals were creating these larger markers of an issue, such as happiness, this construction might allow them to marginalize other issues or stop the discussion about what things could be constructed as less important. This construction could also work to silence individuals because the claim of “it could be worse” offers a form of admonishment that removes the ability and legitimacy of complaints. This construction is done in a variety of ways beyond just comparisons, as can be seen in the next theme with the use of humor.

#### *Humor used to Reduce Tension*

In other attempts to create a more positive construction of the relationship there was the appearance of humor used to reduce tension. Humor used to reduce tension can be defined as interactions in which couples or individuals frame their concerns with jokes, laughter, or sarcasm as a way to reduce the severity of the concern or to lighten the interaction. These interactions were used to avoid conflict, change the course of the relationship, or help create the desired presentation of self. Danica and Derek described how humor works as a way to deal with some of the concerns that they have in their relationship:

Derek: Yeah, I would agree that that's uh... kinda how how it goes for us, so.

Danica: And [chuckling] sometimes when we're arguing, like I'll just be in my mood and like I'll argue, and and I think I, I get sensitive, overly sensitive or whatever and he'll say something. He'll joke, like he'll tease me about something. And then I just realize how silly I'm being for being like upset. I mean, 'cause sometimes it's just trivial stuff. And like I said, I'm just hormonal or something. And then he'll just like say something and it just cracks me up. And so he he likes to like try to to try to, you know, ease the tension. Especially if he knows. I think he he'll know when I'm kind of overreacting, but instead of telling me I'm overreacting and getting belligerent with me back, he'll just like say something to

make me laugh. And then it, sometimes it'll just end the argument right there. Esp- I mean especially, like I said. If it's something that we, that's like a serious issue, we, it's it doesn't [chuckling] necessarily happen that way. But,

Derek: Mm hmm.

Danica: when it's something that's just me maybe being overly reactive about something or maybe he's moody, whatever. It's just, it's, he'll ease the tension and make a joke and yeah. It's funny. [chuckle]

In this quote, Danica described how rather than continuing to escalate the situation Derek used humor as an indirect strategy to deal with the points in which they were experiencing more stress in their interactions. It appeared that in adapting to each other's communication style, rather than also "overreacting" Derek has recognized a more effective way to deal with the stressors.

Not all of the exemplars of humor were incidences where individuals talked about the impact of humor, rather some of the humor could actually be seen in the interactions of the couples, such as in my couple interview with Hillary and Heath:

Denker: However you divide it. How did you decide on this division?

Heath: Never really was decided. I, we just kinda...

Hillary: It was kinda just assumed. [laugh] No, actually, it really wasn't. Um. But I think

Heath: I just started cooking because

Hillary: 'cause I didn't. [laugh]

Heath: we'd never eat. [chuckle]

Hillary: [laugh]

Heath: And I, you know, I get home earlier from work,

Hillary: [simultaneously with above] I would get us something to eat.

Heath: because I start earlier, so sometimes I'll mow the yard and do that when I get home and. You know, as far as the vehicle, she doesn't know what she's doing there, so... take care of that every

Hillary: [simultaneously with above] Thanks for the vote of confidence. [chuckle]

Heath: And the financial stuff, as far as... when we got together, she never really paid much attention to her checkbook or anything and I do, so. I just took that over.

Hillary: [simultaneously with above] I can manage my account fine. If I needed to. [chuckle]

Heath: I'm sure you could.

Hillary: I did fine before you. [chuckle]

Heath: I just like doing it.

Hillary: I just don't balance my checkbook on a daily basis. And not many people do. I worked at a bank and I know this. [laugh]

Heath: And then

Hillary: But I'm very proud of you for doing that. [chuckle]

Heath: and most of the housework, it kind of gets, slips through the cracks.

Hillary: Well, the bare minimum gets done at least [laugh] on a fairly regular basis. The laundry and the kitchen and

Heath: Well, I do my own laundry and [W] usually does [son]'s and hers.

Hillary: [simultaneously with above] I do mine and [son]'s. Just because your clothes are dirty on a daily basis, so it's a lot more regular that he needs to do laundry.

Heath: And she doesn't like the way I do laundry, so.

Hillary: And I don't like the way he does laundry. So I do all of his good clothes and my clothes and [son]'s clothes. But um, so that's how we decided on the laundry, is because I don't like the way he does it. [laugh] And

Heath: We decided I do yard and you do toilets.

Hillary: [laugh]

Heath: And I I, since I do the cooking, I usually

Hillary: [simultaneously with above] Just because he's a grass [man].

Heath: take pretty good care of the kitchen and straighten it up and clean it up.

Hillary: I do too. I think we have a pretty equal role in the kitchen. As far as cleaning it goes.

Heath: Maybe.

Hillary: [chuckle] Are we gonna have a disagreement here? [laugh]

Heath: [chuckle] No.

Hillary: OK. Then let's start tracking it.

Heath: Well,

[Denker and Hillary chuckle]

Heath: Sounds good to me.

Throughout this longer portion of the interview, the laughter was intermixed in a difficult conversation as the couple attempted to come to an understanding about how they divide up the responsibilities in the house. In this interaction the points of tension were punctuated with laughter as the couple worked to discuss a concern. When Heath noted less than positive frames of Hillary in her ability with cars, her checking account and equity in cleaning the kitchen, Hillary responded back each time with tense laughter. Instead of choosing to directly respond and counter the claims of her husband, Hillary laughed almost as a way to minimize the conflict. As the negotiation of their work-life

reality continued, even when Heath presented a less than positive image of his wife in depicting her banking skills, Hillary politely disagreed with his idea and then followed up the disagreement with a complement for him. After what little disagreement was present on Hillary's part, she followed up those comments with language that then restored the image of the happy couple. The humor continued in the interaction not just as a way to mask dissenting views, but then to bracket a silencing request. Even in the end of the text Hillary joked asking if they were going to have a disagreement, and effectively used humor to terminate the discussion of the topic and to remove the possibility of conflict. In these instances Heath's voice remained the dominate voice of the interaction, as Hillary minimized her stance and disagreement through humor which allowed for a more ideal performance. Just like Danica described her interactions, we saw in both of these exemplars the use of humor to minimize the concerns of the couple and keep the interactions below a certain threshold.

In these interactions, humor was selected by individuals rather than conflict or continuing the conversation which could be empowering for the relationship. And at the same time, these choices in interactions could also have been disempowering as couples did not voice frustrations that could lie under the laughter. Some of the choices in both Hillary and Heath and Danica and Derek's presentations could be tied to issues of power in the construction and minimalization of defining issues. For example in Hillary and Heath's exchange, Hillary questioned Heath asking him if they were going to have a disagreement. This comment might have served as a reminder to the proper way that they should present themselves or question the legitimacy of the issue. Regardless, this comment worked as a way for Hillary to silence the topic as it was quickly ended.

Through humor, the couple's interactions could also be clearly seen as a way in which couples minimize their concerns and create a space for their reality of happiness to exist. Just as humor was used in this social construction, in the next two sub-themes, two other options for constructing conversations as positive used by couples for framing the conversations about work-life concerns will be presented.

### *Conversations as Logical*

Within the positive self-presentation that existed in most of these relationships, one of the main ways that these participants defined their relationships was through the construction of their conversations as logical. In this theme, conversations were defined as rational, logical, interactive, and focused on the direct and concise movement to solving concerns. Through this framework, the couples created a positive image of their process of problem solving, minimize the emotions involved in the interactions, and privilege the rational. For many couples this process was presented as calm and logical, as described by Olivia when comparing typical conversations to the one that she had with her spouse when I was out of the room:

It's [the conversation] pretty much the same usually. Um, it's basically the same thing, how are we going to choose something, here's my idea, here's your idea. Um, Usually they are pretty close to being the same thing so there is not a whole lot of change that has to happen and if there is it may go a little different. And we find a compromise between the two, but, or whichever is going to work out the best, you know.

In this quote, Olivia discussed the larger construct of the conversations as a relaxed exchange of ideas. From this conversation, ideas appear in the format of points and counter points, with an evaluation for best ideas, and missing was any hint of emotionality. Other individuals extended the framework of logical and rational to their descriptions of themselves, such as Bianca did:

Um. Well, as we told you, you know, we're pretty logical and rational people. So, um, when we have our discussions, they tend to be that way. So for us to just keep rehashing a problem would just be wasted time for us if we weren't coming up with any new ideas or new solutions.

Bianca's words showed a lot of similarity to Olivia's language, but Bianca labeled her conversations as logical due to her description of her and her husband as logical and rational people. This quality led to logical conversations. Again we saw emotions hidden as logic and rationality were privileged in the relationship. Similar constructions could be seen in Fraya's description of how she and her husband solve concerns:

Uh, you know, typically, one of us'll throw something out there and the other one responds. It may not seem as as logical at that, at the time, and I'll bring up, you know, something something going on, or [husband] will say, "You know, I just don't like these hours." You know, or how we started talking about that is, "I just, we just really don't like, I don't like this this hour, this time of working." And I, you know, will agree, "Yup, but, you know, what are our options?" "Well, we could, I could quit and pay back, you know, the student aid, or I could stick it out through August, or." You know, so we just, we just talk about, and it doesn't sound so serious when we discuss it. But it does pretty, it goes in a pretty logical fashion.

Again, Fraya offered the turn-taking, options based approach that spotlights the rationality of their conversations. Although she did acknowledge that at times it might not feel "logical at that, at the time," her description gave the impression of a logical progression. In the description of their conversations, individuals framed the interactions as logical, calm, and almost nonpartisan. Similar to Fraya, Ross noted the rational approach that he and his wife took in their decision making:

Yep. There is always a column of pros and cons. No matter what the conversations is. I mean, uh, I get, well like earlier I get two full weeks of vacation with my daughter uninterrupted in the summertime and we sat down and discussed well if we take this week this is how it will work out. We are doing this and this is the plan. So, that would be a plus. But if I don't take this week here then one of us is going to have to take off more time because of summer break with no summer school going on. So, it would be an extra week of vacation one



of us would have to take and not necessarily have any plans whereas if we just plan something that week maybe we can utilize our time more effectively. And that is the reasoning we've come up with and the decision we've made. It was based all upon pros and cons. And that is the best way that we've found to make decisions is put out there why we both have concerns and, and both feel strong that this would work out better. And weigh it, because nobody in this world is ever 100% right, not even the president, That's for sure, but, you know, if you take and weigh most everything you can make the wrong decision and even if you do weigh it and sometimes it's wrong but at least you tried your best. And run with that knowledge the next time.

Again, the language of logic was placed central to the ways in which work-life concerns were handled. Ross noted the plan that the couple devised regarding the couple's time with his daughter based on pros and cons, suggesting the rational mapping of their options and not acknowledging the feeling that might go with these considerations. In this privileging of the rational, there was a movement away from the acknowledgement or inclusion of any emotion in the couple's descriptions. This construction ignored the intertwined nature of emotions and rationality and instead frames them as separate (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). In framing the conversations as logical, it was as if the participants were rejecting the emotional or irrational way that conversations could be handled, and in aligning themselves with these more positive constructions they created a way in which they could be seen as better than those who engage in a more emotional response. This framing reflected the finding of Dougherty and Drumheller (2006), in which participants argued that emotionality was the equivalent of wasting time.

This theme illustrated the patriarchal dichotomies and hierarchies in our language that offer privilege, e.g., rationality verse emotionality, mind verses body and as the earlier two dichotomies reflect, masculinity verse femininity (Cirksema, & Cuklanz, 1992; Jandt & Hundley, 2007; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Privileging rationality is reflexive of

the privileging of masculinity and the masculine ways of being. This same privileging has been identified and critiqued by scholars (e.g., Cirksena & Cuklanz, 1992; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Putnam & Mumby, 1993). Because these dichotomous frames are constructed and ideas are privileged, it is important to think about how the construction of conversations as logical offers a way to privilege certain reactions and mute others, such as the emotional responses to inequity. Rationality has long been privileged in the workplace (Gayle, 1994; Mumby & Putnam, 1992; Putnam & Mumby, 1993), but these results suggest a bleed over of this construction into the home. Through this framing the construction of the legitimacy and positivity of masculinity and marginalization and negativity of the feminine through the denial of emotions is apparent.

Looking back on the themes present in *The Reeds' Smile*, researchers are left to question many of the presentations that were constructed. *The Reeds' Smile* offers a better understanding of both the way in which couples construct and offer a space for happiness as well as use techniques to obscure the unhappiness that might occur in the relationship. It is in these powerful normalizations of the relationship that the couples paint their relationships with larger generalizations that display the couple as happy. At the same time, in using such techniques as downward social comparison the couples are able to create their relationship as better than average. This construction is dependent on what marker the couple uses as "average." It is important to note that in constructing all of these comparisons through the lens of how the relationship, the conflict that they experience, and their problems are better than how bad the problems could be, the couple limits the possibility of being their own personal best by disregarding concerns they could fix. If inequitable, dysfunctional, and conflicted marriages are seen as average then

the couple can never expect to enjoy the benefits of the equitable household, such as noted by Canary and Stafford (1993). If the couple never examines, for example, what equally shared parenting is and fails to question the possibility for more equity or less conflict in their relationship, then their issues with childcare might seem minor. This, of course, allows them to maintain the construction of happiness, but at the same time these current comparisons limit the possibility for equity and reinforce traditional gender assumptions. Constructions of *The Reeds' Smile* both offer the possibility for and constrain the attainment of happiness, equity, and satisfaction. These comments help to answer the question about how couples experience their work-life concerns, and this will be discussed more in the next chapter. After looking closer at how couples talk about their relationship and the communication that they have in the relationship, the next theme looks more at how the co-constructions of work-life concerns are impacted by and impact the larger structures in interactions.

### *Permeations of Power*

Central to the comments that individuals made in the discussion about work-life was the idea of power in its many permeations. Much of what was discussed by individuals centered on the ways that power played out in their relationships. Interestingly, it was in these conversations that the same phenomena that were illustrated as a source of power also offer a way to limit the power of individuals as well. Permeations of power exist as both/and constructions throughout the conversations that I had with both the couples and the individuals. It was in the conversations with both couples and individuals that different permeations of power were apparent, existing simultaneously as a source of empowerment and then also as a marginalization and

reification of structures and traditional gender norms. On one hand, claims, behaviors, and norms that individuals take part in offer a source of empowerment for those individuals, whether that is carving out a safe space or a source of legitimacy for them. Yet, on the other hand, those same claims, behaviors, and norms that offer a source of power can then be turned into a barrier that works to constrain and limit the same individuals.

The theme of the permeations of power speaks to both the second and the third research question. The second research question looks at how couples discursively co-construct work-life concerns as they are influenced by and influence gender, and this can be seen in all of the sub-themes of this theme, from the gendering of labor, to the influence of the norms, and to couples negotiation of work-life concerns through their families labor. At the same time, the third research question explored how power impacted and was impacted by work-life co-constructions of the couple and is clearly documented through all aspects of this theme, with norms of labor, work, family and the ways that couples negotiate these concerns all tied to power/resistance.

Permeations of power start with an understanding of the gendered nature of labor in work-life concerns, then turn to examine the larger norms that couples note impacting their co-construction, and end with an examination of the implications of gender, norms, and power in looking at the couples' negotiations. In order to build an understanding of how these couples' co-construct work-life concerns as permeations of power, the themes of *Labor as gendered*, the *Competing Value Systems*, and the *Negotiations of Family Labor* will be reviewed in depth below.

### *Labor as Gendered*

In looking at the comments made both by the couples as well as their statements in the follow up interviews, it was clear that individuals see labor as gendered. For many individuals, the work that they do or that others do reflects traditional gender assumptions about the division of labor. When individuals tie expectations of labor to gender this then both provides opportunities and limits the choices for people as they co-construct work-life concerns. In returning to the larger concept of the web in work-life, labor as gendered is clearly located as central to the framework of the web. This theme makes it clear that many of the constraints that are placed on individuals and their relationships are stuck in the intersections with the central strand of labor as gendered. This strand of the web also provides much of the support for other strands in the web because it links with many of the other themes to offer a variety of intersections that ensnare individuals and couples. Looking further into the construct of labor as gendered, there are three sub-themes apparent in the larger theme including *embracing traditional divisions of labor*, *justifying gendered labor*, and *evaluating femininity*. In each of these themes, there is a clear engendering of labor that is tied to the gendered assumptions as to who should control, delegate, and perform the household labor.

*Embracing traditional divisions of labor.* The frequent comments about household labor as traditionally gendered were central to the idea of labor as gendered. In the larger theme of labor as gendered, there was discourse for how the couple's household labor should be handled. From this expectation, we saw the idea of household labor as traditional/gendered emerge. Household labor as traditional/gendered can be defined as the comments that portray the division of responsibilities as structured based

on what many participants defined as “natural” or more clearly traditionally and historically gendered. Discourse within this sub-theme reflects the gendered claims of labor, in which individuals’ reify traditional divisions of labor through those gendered claims. Much of this can be seen in the past quotes with the laundry, cooking, and child care constructed by couples as the primary responsibility of the wife. Talking with individuals there are still clear traditional gender division of labor that are present. When asked about primary responsibilities Lauren noted:

Denker: What tasks um are the primary, are your primary responsibilities?

Lauren: Um. I'd say laundry is the big one. Dusting and vacuuming. General cleaning, like taking care of the bathrooms, that kind of thing. Um. Like dishes and trash and that kind of thing is shared between the two of us.

Denker: What are your husband's primary responsibilities?

Lauren: Um, yardwork in the summer and um like shoveling snow during the winter and that kind of thing. Um. Anything to do like with the cars, I let him deal with that. I'm trying to think what else. Yeah, as far as like help like um... fixing things, that kind of thing, that's his job. [chuckle] I don't do that, so. Whether it's like hanging pictures or repairing whatever is broken, I let him try and deal with that.

In Lauren’s comment the traditional division of labor was present, even though the couple worked similar hours and the primary household responsibilities did not appear like they would take similar amounts of time. Lauren discursively laid claim to what was hers in terms of household responsibilities. Lauren stated that she did much of what could be seen as the weekly labor, including dusting, vacuuming and general cleaning, whereas her husband was responsible for the labor that occurred in much less regular intervals, like yard work or dealing with the cars. Lauren also admitted that she let her husband deal with extra tasks, like hanging pictures and fixing things, but even with this added burden, it was likely that her household responsibilities were more time consuming, as the tasks that Lauren listed were frequently performed more often than Levi's tasks. It is

clear that traditional gender expectations for the household permeate the lives of those couples that defy traditional gender expectations in terms of paid labor. Even when talking with the husbands about who does what around the house, they painted a picture of a more traditional division of household labor. Derek provided an example of this in his description of his responsibility:

Well, my responsibility is to basically um, is, I feel the responsibility to, like if it snows, to, I, it's my responsibility to clean up uh the the snow, to make sure that we can get our cars in and out of the driveway, that, you know, if we have guests over, that they can get in and out of the house uh without slipping and falling. I, you know, feel it's my responsibility that if we have like a major problem in our house, um, you know, whe- whether it's like electrical or um, you know, plumbing or something of that nature, where I feel a responsibility to uh to fix it or to locate somebody who can fix it. And when it comes to like uh, you know, our cars, when it's uh, if it's time for for maintenance or time to fix it, staying on top of that. I feel the the responsibility of that.

Again, it was clear that the labor that Derek felt responsibility for was what was traditionally understood as the masculine household labor. It was interesting to see that in total the labor that fell into his responsibility was not the labor that needed to be completed daily, such as meal preparation, or even weekly labor, such as laundry, but rather the work that fell to him allowed for long breaks between work. These couples all divided up the responsibilities for earning with dual incomes, yet it was clear that a similar division did not exist in the household labor. These expectations could be seen as a both/and form of power, as the expectations were (dis)empowering, through both legitimizing household authority and also adding responsibility for women, as well as removing household authority for men but also reducing labor responsibilities. Although these (re)enactments of traditional gender division of labor were clear, understanding why these differences exist was not as clear. Turning to the next theme of *justifying gendered labor* research can start to shed some light onto why this division might exist.

*Justifying gendered labor.* One possible explanation for the gendering of household labor apparent in the couples' conversations might be better understood in examining another concurrent sub-theme, *justifying gendered labor*. Justifying gendered labor can be defined as the gender-based explanations and rationalizations for household labor that exist as an outgrowth of traditional assumptions held about the wives and the husbands. This sub-theme does not consist of the discourses of performance, such as the sub-theme of *embracing traditional divisions of labor*, but rather centers on the justifications for the traditional division of labor as it exists in households. Within the larger umbrella of labor as gendered, there are differences in performance and differences in evaluations of these performances, but there are also differences apparent when individuals justify these traditional labor performances, which will be further discussed in this theme. These justifications might arise as different standards for household labor or different views on priorities associated with household labor. Ken discussed coming to the realization that he and his wife had different expectations about shared parenting:

Because before we had [child], we both, and, you know, in in an abstract, in an abstraction, I agree with it that, you know, "You should do half and I should do half." But there are certain things that [Keri] just likes to do better uh with [child]. And and our, we talked about this yesterday. Um, or when it, not yesterday, the day before yesterday. Her idea of what, you know, the 100% is different than my idea of the 100%. And um, you know, I'm just gonna have to realize that what she does as a mother, does what a mother does. And she's gonna have to realize that I do what a dad does, you know. And there are things like feeding him and, you know, more objective things--making sure he's changed and, you know, does his homework and all that kind of stuff, that that yeah, there's not a lot of subjectivity to. But um, we talked about the other day other day of, um, [Keri]'s idea of me doing 50% is is taking half of what her idea is. And I may do things with [child] that she never thinks of and she does things with [child] that I don't think of.

In this quote, it was clear that different expectations not only exist between the spouses, but also some of the wife's perspective as privileged played into this, as Keri's



expectations appeared to have more influence. There was also a struggle to not ignore what it was that the husband also did in parenting, stuff that Ken argued may have been things that she had never thought of. It appears that in coming to the performance of equal shared parenting that a problem arose in the construction of the work list, with each individual having a different idea of what is 100%. For other individuals these differences, although apparent, were at times attributed to different gendered reasoning. In talking with Trevor, he presented his reasoning for why these gendered differences exist:

Denker: Another thing that was mentioned was your wife commented that in the beginning, she would be frustrated along the lines that, "Can't you see what needs to get done?" That you would ask her what needs to get done.

Trevor: Along the lines of what is obvious to one person isn't necessarily obvious to another. Like the way she was raised. We discussed doing dishes, at our previous interview. The way she was raised, doing dishes involved cleaning the kitchen. Well, that wasn't obvious to me. Because the way I was raised, doing dishes meant doing the dishes. The rest of the kitchen was another chore entirely. It has to deal with perspective and the way she was raised and the way I was raised.

Trevor argued that it was in the socialization of the individual that people develop different expectations as to what one should be doing in different aspects of household labor and thus these different performance of labor are rational. Additionally, in listening to Olivia talk about the differences in her perception of cooking in the household, with her husband who claimed doing 90% of the cooking, it was clear that both her and her husband had different expectations as she talked about the division of labor in cooking:

As much as I would like to say that it is 90%, I don't think it is quite 90%. I think he was exaggerating a little. Um, Again I guess it goes to what you classify as cooking. If you classify cooking as getting cereal and a bowl for the kids then yes. Um, if you consider, you know, turning on the oven and stove and preparing a meal and putting it together and cleaning up then no... I can't believe we see it so different. (Laughing).

Additionally, differences can be seen in Olivia's description of the cleaning standards:

His might be a little bit different than mine. Um, I think he can put up with a lot more than I can. Which is strange since he used to be in the military and they used to have to be so pristine. Um, but I don't know if that has to do with maybe he just doesn't notice it or because, you know, most men in general...I've known some very clean ones but the majority of them are not.

In these quotes, Olivia presented both different understandings of what it means to cook, as well as what it means for the house to be clean. Apparently, her husband had a more lax definition both for cooking and what it meant to be clean. The existence of these differences then could create an impact in the understanding of labor. For example, Olivia's husband might argue that he cooks as much as she does, yet if his definition of cooking is pouring cereal, the labor spent might not be as equal as it sounds. In these quotes, these differences are acknowledged but then also normalized and justified for the way that they exist. For Olivia, it was because "most men in general" just are not very clean. These differences in expectations were attributed to things such as sex-based differences, failure to understand the other, and/or socialization. Yet looking at these differences overall, it was clear that they reflected the larger idea that household labor is gendered and create a safe space for these traditional performances through the rationalization of this division of labor. Although differences in household labor are present along gendered lines, it was clear that there is also justification being created for them that help normalize the gender differences that exist and may also aid in recreating these differences. In normalizing gendered differences, individuals reify labor as gendered in ways that both empower and marginalizes individuals. Individuals might be empowered in a situation where they are given more control over the distribution of labor, but at the same time be marginalized in the responsibility to continue to monitor

this labor which consumes their schedule. These attempts to normalize differences will be explored in later themes.

*Evaluating femininity: The good wife as the gold standard.* The theme of evaluating femininity can be understood as the claims of women's superior ability in household labor that leads to an overburden on women as well as a source of evaluation of household labor performance. If women can be established as the knowledge source or the best performers of household labor, it then becomes easier and easier for others to avoid the labor that they are told that they are not good at. At the same time, while women's labor in the household is reified as the norm, this reification also works to create a space in which everyone is evaluated. This evaluation is created as either individual is judged in comparison to the standard of labor, the wife, or the wife is evaluated for the overall appearance of the household as compared to the larger expectations of the good wife. In these interviews, husbands have noted similar stories that illustrate claims that have been made by their wives as to the wives' legitimacy and superiority in household labor, such as in Elliot's comments:

Elliot: Maternal instinct. I don't know. I, you know. It is what is is. She's um. You know, she can't uh... She just always wants to have one or both of them with her, it seems like at all times. And even when we are off doing something, like if we are doing dinner, before we're even driving back to the house, she's wanting to call and make sure that the boys are OK and, you know. Nobody can do a better job watching the boys than she can.

Denker: Does that extend to you?

Elliot: Oh, sure. [chuckling] Absolutely that extends to me. She's not shy about that.

Denker: Did, have you heard that?

Elliot: Oh yeah. From her?

Denker: Mm hmm.

Elliot: Oh yeah. To an extent, I, in a way, I guess, I wouldn't argue it. Um. You know, she spends Monday through Friday, all day, all that time with them, knows their habits, knows their routines, knows their quirks. Um. I don't get the one on one time to practice and learn that stuff, and and uh. And so, you know, I I don't

know all those, you know, the the time management of two children is is a practiced task. And I haven't gotten to practice it enough to be as good at is as she is.

In Elliot's comment, there was a learned view that "nobody can do a better job watching the boys." This claim of superiority worked to (re)enforce the wife's control of how to perform household labor, including child care, at the expense of Elliot's control and legitimacy as a parent. Not only was this a view that was held by Elliot's wife but it appears that Elliot also supported this construction when he offered a justification for why this difference in skill was learned, because his wife worked from home, thus had more time with the children. This sub-theme communicated the expectations; it also carried with it a source of evaluation. In Elliot's words we saw the evaluation that pointed to his performance as less than what his wife does. This evaluation was (re)created in the conversations of the couple and normalized in their interactions.

Beyond the learned and socialized ideals that discursively function in the relationship and in the couples' conversations in reifying women's better ability and thus responsibility, these expectations were also reinforced through larger social evaluations.

Chris described conversations with his wife that echoed these same concerns:

We're gonna have, even if her uh uh brothers and sisters are coming over, or even if some of our close friends are coming over, [wife] goes just completely wiggly on the cleaning. And so I always joke around with her, "Hey, you know, [sister] and [sister] aren't coming over. You know, we're not entertaining the Clintons." And but she, and she'd always make that comment, "Well, you know when our friends are here, the house is dirty, it reflects on me. If the house and the kids aren't [perfect], it reflects on me." And there's been times when they went to soccer pictures. And between the time that she left in the morning, worked, by the time we got to soccer pictures, got those taken, their hair got messed up a little bit. ... And she's like, then she, "Oh no! Look at that!" Then she'll make the same comment. [wife] you know, their hair is just a little messed up, "Oh, yeah, but that reflects on me, not you."

In the first quote, Elliot talked about his wife's apparent superiority in childcare which he

in turn started to normalize and support in his own construction of his skill set by framing this difference as a function of the time that his wife and children spent together.

However, in the second quote, Chris noted and understood his wife's perceptions of responsibility yet at the same time actively rejected some of her framing of concerns.

Clearly there was the appearance of the sub-theme of *embracing traditional divisions of labor* in this, but what made this an exemplar of *evaluating femininity* was in the evaluative component of Chris's description. Chris noted the clear concern that his wife had with the others' surveillance in reinforcing the norm and responsibility of the household as his wife's liability. According to Chris, his wife argued that this was her labor based on the social judgment that follows the gendered expectations and labor of the household as the wife's responsibility. Based on the different gender expectations, it was possible that Chris could not perceive others' judgment to the same degree as his wife. Returning to the norm at the level of the couple, in the conversation with Keri and Ken, early divisions of household labor in their marriage were discussed:

Keri: Yeah. Right. I think earlier in our marriage, like um we did, when we were first married, the first couple years, we did kinda struggle to figure out um who did what as far as, you know, division of labor in the home and that kind of thing. 'Cause I was working full-time and going to school. You know, working on my Bachelor's and my Master's. And and [M] was working too but I was kind of raised in a very traditional home as far as gender roles go. So I was doing absolutely everything too. So I was doing all the cooking, all the cleaning. Um.

Ken: She was doing everything her mom does as a homemaker.

Keri: And

Ken: plus doing the school.

Keri: Master's degree and working. And I was not a pleasant person to live with, I don't think.

Ken: No.

Keri: [chuckling] for a while. And then, finally, I think, again, it's just taken time and, for me, I've just let go of a lot of things because I can't, I realized I can't be my mother. Because I do work full-time.

Ken: Yeah.

Keri: And I

Ken: Like we have somebody that comes in and cleans the house once a month.

Keri: Right.

Ken: You know, kind of the heavy duty cleaning. And that took forever for [Keri] to be OK with,

Keri: Yeah.

Ken: because that's her identity.

Keri: Right. And my house

Ken: I'm like, "Pay somebody! Who cares?"

Keri: And my house by and large is, it's not like ever filthy but it's not spotless like what my mom's is, you know. And I I still do the cooking but now that I cook, [Ken], you know, does the um cleanup. He does his own laundry now.

Those kinds of things. So it just took us some time to get to get there.

In this quote, Keri and Ken discussed the gendered expectations for household labor that Keri used to evaluate her own situation. In these comments, it was clear that Keri held herself to the standard that the woman should be in charge of all of the household labor, even in a situation where it was not feasible, such as when she was both pursuing a graduate degree and working. Keri's image of her own mother was tied to the idea of the good wife who keeps a "spotless" house, and uses this image to evaluate her own performance as she discusses how her house is not as clean as her mothers. Although in this situation, Ken appeared as the helpful husband in his language as he noted that she should just "pay somebody." However, these comments still reinforced the norm of the wife as the gold standard. Clearly, Keri could not manage this labor, but the solution of "pay somebody" did lessen her labor in cleaning, but maybe not in finding cleaning help. At the same time, this idea of outsourcing allowed this labor to still be constructed as women's work, because if Keri did not have time to perform this work, others can, yet it did not seem that Ken is included in this group of others. Through Ken's statements he was able to construct himself as the helper without really helping with the task. In other quotes, such as in Chris's words we saw the fear of the outsiders' evaluation of the wife's performance, but it was clear in this quote that the expectations and evaluations were also

done by the wives as they compared themselves to more ideal expectations. The image of the good wife appeared to be a powerful construction in shaping the evaluations of how household labor should be performed and also is evaluated as Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that discourse (en)genders organizations.

In these quotes, the sense of the wife's sole responsibility in household labor that these couples internalize and reify was the idea that this labor was something that women should manage. This labor performance was then also established as a means for evaluating the women in the relationship, whether that is through societal level evaluations or if that evaluation was occurring in the dyadic interactions. What could have functioned before as simply a shared division of labor was through this norm established as a combination of typical gender socialization and a "skill" based division of labor that leads to the wife's increased labor. Thus, through this historical norm created as a claim to labor, individuals helped to reify a situation in which wives were more burdened and labor continued to be divided inequitably offering power differently to each spouse. This system was recreated each time that wives made claims to doing something "best" or the "right way" or others in the household justify performing less labor because in the evaluations the wife does this labor better. Not only could this then encourage women to take back labor at this point, but they are evaluated based on how this labor is performed.

There were many factors that led to the creation of labor as gendered. It was not just in the evaluation of labor as gendered, such as in the construction of *evaluating femininity*, that we saw this theme emerge. Nor was it in the individual role expectations of gender differences, such as in the construction of *embracing traditional division of*

*labor*. Nor was it alone in the justification of the household differences, as seen in *justifying gendered labor*. To understand labor as gendered, it is important to look at the performances, justifications, and the evaluations for the household labor as they all work together in (re)constructing what it means for labor to be gendered. After exploring labor as gendered, next attention is turned to the value systems that impact how individuals enact their labor and are constrained by larger expectations that shape and negotiate the viability of their labor choices. In the next set of themes, the *Competing Value System*, attention is focused on the values that help to shape the choices and enactments in couple's co-constructions of work-life concerns.

### *Competing Value Systems*

Just like the larger understanding of gendered labor was present in the couples' and individuals' discussions, so was the appearance of larger norms that influence and shape the way that couples co-construct their work-life concerns. These *competing value systems* can be understood as the ways that the larger norms about work and family interact and impact couples' lives as they work to co-construct their work-life concerns. Comprising the construct of competing value systems are norms of the *ideal worker*, *family first*, and the tensions that are felt as a result of these two constructs. Looking further at the tensions that exist as couples try to work within the bounds of both constraints, two clear tensions emerge. First, the larger tension of the *ideal worker versus the family norm* comes into play for many individuals. Additionally, there is another pull felt by many of the women, which exists as the tension between *gender expectations and the ideal worker norm*. In order to build a full understanding of the competing value systems, the four themes comprising this larger theme will be explored next.



*Ideal worker norm.* Larger social constructions and expectations play into the expectations that individuals carry with them into their relationships. The ideal worker norm can be defined as the evolution of the breadwinner norm into its more current form in which the individual is able to set work as the main priority and then enact a life in which everything else is subordinated to this primary role (LaRossa, 1988). Whereas in the past, the breadwinner norm might only create a direct impact in the work performances of men, the newer construct of the Ideal worker is applied to all working individuals regardless of sex. In discussing the “shoulds” or the expectations that he thought that he should fall into, Ken noted:

Um. I uh should take care of my family, you know. I uh, I uh, I have a lot of shoulds about uh, uh... uh, about work, about that I should uh, you know, have a, I don't know, like a high caliber of of what I bring to work and and do it well. And um... Mine are more about, not about family life as much as about uh work and uh providing for the family, I guess.

In this quote, Ken discussed what concerns were more central to him, making sure that his performance as a worker was “high caliber” which then allowed for him to provide for the family, reflecting back to the norm of the breadwinner. Ken was struggling with the expectations of the workforce which also could be viewed through a lens of gender. In this quote, the ideal worker/breadwinner norm extends to the family through gender, and works as the proper role of the fathers, illustrating the interwoven nature of work and home life. This characterization of the ideal worker can also be seen as the breadwinner, which extends that norm of the masculine behaviors of the ideal worker into the family (Simon, 1995). In these norms, the care work of the husband is focused through the masculine labor of providing. Similarly, Keri noted her concerns with negotiating work-life concerns as she worked and cared for a new child:

Keri: That's a good question. Um. I am, I'm definitely what you call type A personality. Um. I don't know that I'd say I'm a perfectionist, but work is really important to me, doing well, how others perceive me in the workplace is important. Um, and so that has really um kind of influenced how I work in the sense of, you know, uh, since having, having my baby, I have kind of worried about, "Well, what does the workplace perceive me now? Do they think that I'm less committed to the job 'cause I'm a mom now?" Um, which is probably kind of silly in a sense because so many people around here are so excited about the baby and they're always asking about him, and in fact, you know, when I'm here sometimes, they're like, "Well, where's the baby?"

Denker: [chuckle]

Keri: And I'm like, "Well, I, I'm teaching today! I I [laugh] I can't bring him, really," you know. Um. So that, you know, I I I guess there's a kind of worry on my part, uh, you know, am I going to receive some negative backlash for having a child. Um, and I think that's largely unfounded, but. So, yeah. That personality definitely um plays a role.

In this section Keri struggled in trying to construct herself as an ideal worker, who was constructed in early research depictions as relatively genderless or as the invisibility of gender, masculine (Acker, 1990). Keri talked about worries that she had as to what backlash she might experience from having a child or if she was going to be seen as a less serious worker. These concerns might be grounded in the masculinization of the ideal worker. Deviation from these enactments of masculinity can cause a person to be evaluated as less committed. Similarly, Heath described the impact of his wife bringing work home in the individual interview:

Denker: What surprised you in the comments that your spouse made?

Heath: Um, it kind of surprised me that she knows that she brings her work home and that she gets kind of wound up about it. And sometimes takes it out on the family a little bit. Um. And I suppose that still kind of surprised me that she uh still finds my job to be difficult. Um. I thought she had kind of gotten used to it and had just kind of learned that that's the way things are and. 'Cause to me, I thought it'd gotten a little bit easier, but I guess it hasn't.

Denker: What made the comments surprising about taking work home?

Heath: Um. Just the fact that she knows that she does it. [chuckle] And she's just willing to admit that, you know, she lets a lot of stuff build up at work and then kinda lets it rip at home.

Denker: Why does that surprise you? That she does it or that she admitted it?

Heath: That she admitted it.

Denker: Mm.

Heath: I guess because we've never really talked about it before. And I don't know if she ever realized that she was doing it.

In the conversation with Heath, he talked about how his wife brought home her work in both a physical and emotional sense. Heath noted how his wife frequently is emotional at home based on job stress, a clear case of role spillover. In relegating her emotions to the home, Hillary was enacting part of the masculine assumptions of the logical ideal worker. Further, allowing for work to expand into personal time, the ideal worker offers an enactment and understanding of putting the workplace first. In these quotes, it was clear that for many individuals it was the evaluation of their performance against some standard that served to provide the guiding principles for how they choose to behave as well as in constructing their understanding of what behavioral choices existed.

From these quotes researchers are left to question how the portrayal of the ideal worker, or in some cases supermom, work to add to or decrease the power of the individuals. Both power and marginalization exist for individuals as they portray the ideal worker norm, as enacting the norm allows power in the workplace, possible resistance from performing other roles, and marginalization of other aspects of their life. Although all individuals are impacted by ideal worker norms, and its variations, for example the supermom, for some individuals they might experience more negative repercussions when the ideal worker norm is viewed in concert with the next sub-theme, the family first norm. Looking at the couples and the portrayal of these norms, opportunities for both empowerment and marginalization exist as individuals are shaped by the ideal worker norm, the *family first* norm, and the ways that these norms interact.

*Family first.* Just as there are standard expectations that the couples note for interacting in the workplace, there are also expectations that impact couples' performance in the household. In looking at the communication of the participants, there is a clear co-construction and reification of a "god-term" in the construct of the family (Burke, 1969). Similar to the construction of "family-values" by politicians, claims of "family" or "family focus" or "doing it for the family" work in ways to both empower individuals in the relationship as well as marginalize them at the same time. *Family first* can be defined as the linguistic constructions of the hierarchy of higher value and importance in the unifying terminology of family. The theme of *family first* can be seen in any conversation that references the higher value or priority in the family unit. At times this construction works as a source of power for the unit or the individuals because they can legitimize behavior and focus that serves the family unit. This construction can also work to marginalize individuals who choose to place value in other areas or cannot follow all of the prescriptions of this norm.

Focusing on the family or couple before the individual is a common justification given for the behavior and the choices of individuals in these relationships. Although the comments about "family" seems most prominent in the language of the participants there was also legitimacy created through the language of "team." *Family first* exists in the instances in which individuals utilize these god terms to justify and control the behavior and norms of the relationship. Both family and team language worked together to rank family above individuals. Talking with couples, like Keri and Ken, the language of *family first* could be heard in their interactions as they discussed the upcoming event of taking their child to childcare:

Ken: I mean, like the childcare thing. She feels, you feel guilty about taking him to childcare.

Keri: I do. Yeah.

Ken: And so, internally, you have that dialogue, and then when I say something along the lines of, "I can't wait. I'm gonna be camped out at the door 15 minutes before." [The childcare opens]

Keri: [laugh] don't say that

Ken: And I'll probably do it on my day off! So that I have some good time. But I'd make sure he's taken care of. Well, when I say that kind of stuff, I get anger from [Keri]!

Keri: Well, not as much anymore, but yeah.

Ken: Well, but, yeah.

Keri: At first.

Ken: Let's minimize it. But it still is. [both chuckle]

Keri: Well, I think a lot of it is just the shoulds, you know, that that I have interpreted

Ken: [to baby] We're shoulding all over ourselves [baby]!

Keri: You're getting a lot of psychology tonight, aren't you? But um, just kind of like the I should, I should want to spend every minute with my child. I should be a good mother and stay home. Even though I went and got a PhD. And I have student loans I have to pay for [chuckle], you know.

In this quote, it was clear that Keri feels the guilt associated with dropping her child off in daycare because she was not enacting the traditional feminine role that put family first by exiting paid employment. As a woman who was earning money for her family, Keri felt the pressure and evaluation of falling outside the norm of family first. At the same time, in this quote it was clear that this norm was at times projected from one spouse on to the other in terms of evaluations, for example when Keri tells Ken not to say that he was looking forward to dropping off their child. This evaluation done by one spouse and projected on the other works to reinforce the norm of family first and reifies the power associated with the norm as those who violate it, such as Keri, feel guilt and worry about their choices. After Keri presented the image that she no longer got as angry when Ken said things, she was corrected in the next comment by Ken. In this interaction, Ken's understanding of the situation was given privilege as the conversation was redirected to

their baby and the interviewer, and he constructed the final pieces of the situational understanding.

For some individuals, the family first themes operates as prioritizing the greater good of the family as all important regardless of the costs of this ranking for individuals, like we saw in Mei's comments:

Sometimes, we sacrifice ourselves for each other's needs. But, yeah. You know, because some friends who are not Christians, talk to me that it's unfair. You are studying. You are working. And in this house, you do the most, not the most, but actually I have, I take care of my children mostly. So it's not fair because. [chuckle] But, you know, for me, I even don't think, I even don't think "is it fair or not". I don't think. If I can do it then I'll do it. I don't want, I don't care whether it's fair or not. I think if you have children, you have to take [care] of them. You don't need to think it is fair or not. So. Fairness is not so, is not an issue for me.

In this situation, Mei understood that the differences in household labor performed by her and her husband are not seen as equal by others, but at the same time she was able to justify this inequity through the discourse of the larger good of the family. In this quote we saw not only the tendency to privilege the family first, but also the impact of this privilege. Clearly this norm can be discursively constructed in ways that have negative implications for the individuals and still be viewed as okay because this construction is done for the good of the family.

The language of team performed a similar function in talking with individuals, such as Derek:

Derek: Well, it's, it's gonna, it's gonna play out uh, you know, I think it'll be just fine. Um, it's, it's gonna have to be a team thing. Or uh not, well, "I did this," uh, "I've been doing this for the past 2 weeks, do you think you could maybe do it?" Or, "You never do this." It's gonna be like, "Well, this is something that needs to get done. Just go ahead and do it." Um. Whereas, you know, like now, [wife] pretty much, she exclusively does the laundry. And, well, if she's gotta take, you know, [loud noise- cell phone rings] Sorry.  
Denker: [chuckle] That's OK.

Derek: She's gotta, you know, take some time to, you know, go go over to grandma and grandpa's or something, with the the baby. It's like, "Hey. Could you get started on laundry?" Or, you know, "Could you do that?" And I'd be like, "Well, I don't feel like laundry. I did that last week." Well, you know, that's that's not a proper attitude. It's just something that needs to get done. And, you know, we'll we'll, I'll be willing to help her with that. Um, you know, she'll be willing to help me with whatever, that I, you know, that, any slack that needs to be picked up, and it's gonna. But uh. You know, it'll uh, it'll definitely have to work out. Um. But, it's gonna be have to be um a focus of us together, getting things done rather than uh a definite separation of duties. Making sure things get done. Otherwise we'll have, end up with either a pig sty or uh we'll be angry at each other all the time. And both of those are not cool.

Derek talked about the family unit in this quote as a team. The metaphor of team works in much of the same way as does the language of family first. Both discursive constructions reify the family as the higher goal and purpose. In conforming to this view, Derek noted that there was a "proper attitude" that one should have in approaching family issues, and that attitude was seen as the privileging of the family over concerns for one's self. However, it was interesting to note that as Derek argued that "I'll be willing to help with that [laundry]" it was recreated as his wife primary responsibility. Through this construction of family first as the proper thing to do, those who deviate from this behavior can then be constructed as improper. Other participants were also able to articulate behaviors that were not appropriate because they had a negative impact on other members of the family. In talking with Gina about her new goal to talk less about her work problems, she stated:

Denker: Why, why do you wanna talk about that more, or why does that come to mind?

Gina: I think it's um, I think it bothers him. I think it, I mean, it's a... I feel bad after I've done it, I guess. That's why I feel like I need to make a change... Is that too loud, Kathy?

Denker: No, you're fine. So you mentioned feeling bad. Can you tell me more about that or?

Gina: OK. Maybe feeling a little bit guilty that I'm um putting my problems or concerns of work on top of his, when I know he has concerns, he just doesn't vent

his.

Gina noted that she felt guilty for sharing her work concerns with her husband because he did not vent his concerns like she did and she is just “putting her concerns on top of his,” or adding to the burden that her husband may feel. Instead of framing her relationship with her spouse as one in which she can talk about her problems, she is silenced through placing the good of her husband, who was in this case the whole of her family, before that of her own interests, as her husband had noted his dislike in talking about work concerns both in the dyadic interview and the individual interview. This behavior echoed the larger construct of family first, as the relationship/her husband is placed before Gina’s individual needs. This silencing removed the opportunity to share concerns in the relationship. In other situations, an individual might feel legitimized to share work place concerns with their spouse, but instead because Gina knew that she was burdening her husband, she chose not to talk about her problems.

In all of these quotes, the legitimating of family first was (re)created through the linguistic constructions of the good terms of family and team. These terms create both a privilege for all things done in the name of the family as well as a way to remove these actions from others’ judgments. Doing what is best for the family creates an almost inescapable argument for the individuals involved. Although this ranking serves as a strong force in privileging the family or team above other concerns and thus creates a safe space for the family, it is also concerning because it creates a problem site for the individual who hopes to operate with both their goals in mind and that of the relationship. The conception of the family first phenomena can operate as a way to marginalize individuals, just as it empowers the family. For some, instances in which they might



chose to focus on individual goals are then seen as negative because they fail to conform to the norm of family focus. This norm alone can work to check individuals and keep them from challenging the family focus for fear of negative evaluation. In these situations we see the norm of the ideal worker clashing with the discursive construction of the family first. From these clashes of norms, there are clearly tensions that arise. These tensions arise based on competing interests between the individuals and either the gendered norms or the family. These tensions are explored in the two following themes.

*Tensions between the individual worker vs. the family first.* One of the concerns raised in regard to the construct of power and family focus is the tension between the individual's wants and that of the family. This can be defined as the tug and pull between the at times competing wants of the individual and the larger family unit. In this not only is there a ranking of relationship over self in some cases, but also, at times, a construction of the others in the relationship prioritized over self. Keri talked about the worries that she had when thinking about the possibility of her child getting ill:

Yeah. You know, I have kind of wondered about that [what happens when child gets sick]. Because, you know, you can't take him to childcare when they're sick. And I don't think you should. I mean, you don't want to take a sick baby in. And I, just, I think I feel like I'd want to stay home and take care of him anyway. But, like for me, I also don't want to cancel classes, because I know that students don't like that. And I, again, I worry about what my department will think, you know, if I cancel a class 'cause I have a sick kid.

In this quote, Keri clearly had concerns about what she would do when put in a situation where there was a conflict between needing to care for her family and also requirements for her job. Although, she stated that she felt like she should stay home, thus placing the family first, she also noted her fear of violating the expectations of the ideal worker when she wondered what her department members will think if she does not meet every

expectation. In another interview, Adam talked about the tension that his wife was facing between a very demanding job and the guilt of not being at home:

[sigh] I think it was probably her, I don't know, her, did this, kind of torn feeling that she has professionally right now, because she realizes that she's getting um to the point where she's overextended, you know. And... there were moments, a couple of weeks ago, where we didn't really have a serious conversation about it, but I know that the guy that does a lot of the plays, is is playing all these games. He, one day, he doesn't want to do 'em any more. One day, he wants to add plays and all this stuff. And so, one of the days he was like, "Well, I think I'm finished with all this. I'm not gonna do anything anymore." And she was like, "So who's going to carry on this drama program that that [old employee] started, you know?" [laughing] And then, you're like, "Well, you can, right?" "No".

In this quote, we see again the self-imposed stress based on Abby's urge to do it all at work and be the best teacher for her department and also the need to both protect and save time for her family. Abby struggles to be the ideal worker in taking on programs at her job at the same time she tries to enact the norm of family first, as she knows that she is "overextended" and has limited time at home. With the at times irreconcilable pulls of both norms, Abby is left negotiating the tension that individuals experience when these two norms conflict. Similar to the tension felt by Abby, Peyton described the way that he had to adjust his past process-oriented attitude in the morning that focused on getting to his tasks to a new focus centered on the family:

At the moment that I make this attitude shift, then I can be more connected. I'm not in such a hurry, because getting the amount of things done and done on schedule takes a back seat to caring for the people that are in front of you. The other thing though is when I'm on a clip and I'm rushing, one of the strategies I guess is good, but it has it's bad side. I can really just shut down emotion, just so I can get everything done that needs to get done. Because emotions and, and connectedness gets in the way. It makes things a little bit more difficult [LAUGHS] because then I have to really communicate and I have to really talk and I have register emotion and I have to navigate through a relationship and all those other things. But if shut down, I, I get into work mode and knocking things off the "to do" list, then I can get a whole lot more done. But I've sacrificed the opportunity of a deeper and deeper relationship for getting stuff done.

In this quote, Peyton noted the simultaneous tugs of wanting to meet his own goals and trying to meet the needs of the family. Peyton recognized that in order to meet the task objectives he was at times cutting himself off from the family, and when he chose to connect with his boys in the morning less is accomplished. For Peyton, like many others, the call of the productive ideal worker pulls individuals away from their families, but they are also pulled back from work and work-place mentalities and into the realm of the home.

For other couples, this tension between work and home was (re)created based on the feedback that individuals got from their partners. Sipho described the encouragement that he gave his wife, Samantha, to cut back at work:

Um, well, once again. It goes back to the same thing, stress. [wife] going-- You know, in her work, in her work and our kind of life, she's going full speed. She's like a driving, you know, when in the maximum limit on a highway. She's but-- You know? But she cannot go on forever like that. So she works really hard. She's pushing the engine too much in her work. I'm not saying that she should not work, but at the same times, you know, if the work just requires 8-5 and that's what she's paid off, and the rest of the employees leave, she needs to leave too. I mean, and do the work the next day. But unfortunately, [wife], she's not like that. I mean, she would not have a peace of mind until she gets all the work done. but the problem, she has also academic responsibilities. And when she comes home, she cannot go to bed straight. She has to do her home[work] and dive into her books and stuff. And frankly, when summer arrive, you can see, on her face, the stress. And I keep telling her, "You know, you should look at the long-term." You know, I fortunately, right now, people are seeing the good stuff about her at work. Her boss and stuff, he's satisfied with her work performance because she's working extremely hard. But we know from the experience of other people, when you collapse and when you get sick, they will not forgive you for not coming. So that's why I keep reminding her. This is one of the issues we have. I keep reminding her, "You should look at the long-term. You need to have time for yourself. You need to take it easy. You need to relax." Sometimes when I call, she thinks it's selfish things, or it's just me. You know? But in fact, I look at the long term.

In Sipho's quote, it was clear that Samantha enacted an impeccable version of the ideal worker by staying late at work and staying focused on finishing projects. However, this performance was not without consequences as Sipho and Samantha frequently had discussions about how much time was appropriate to spend on work and when she should be leaving to take care of herself. In this instance, it appeared that this push and pull of work was experienced in Samantha's drive to stay late and Sipho's pull back to try and get her to focus on other things.

In these situations, it was clear that there was a tension that individuals felt in trying to meet both their individual interests and still fulfilling their responsibilities to the family. Keri later mentioned that she was lucky because her husband had a flexible job and could usually negotiate his schedule. Abby, a teacher and coach, noted in her interview that Adam was very supportive so the stress of the tension did not impact her:

So, I always, I guess, what the the short story there of what I'm trying to say is I often feel like I'm making these choices, when if you really step back and look at it, the team is dictating these choices to a certain extent. Um. And and [Adam]'s just really understanding though about it, and that I travel and this is what I do. And I'm a busy person. I'm not going to be sitting at home on the couch with him every Friday and Saturday. And he's fine with that. You know, and I am too, it's just you look up, when you're two or three months in, and you just start to feel guilty and lonely about it all, you know. Um, but it's just been a lot better since he's started travelling with the team some too. Um. That helps take some of the burden off of me in the sense that I feel like we see each other, and he really understand what I'm doing better too, so.

In this quote, Abby noted that Adam was in fact helping out with her coaching in order to cut down on the tension that she felt. Abby justified her behavior through the construction of self as a busy person. Additionally, Adam was shown to be emotionally supportive of Abby's choices. However, it was clear that for many of the participants there were times in which their own individual interests/work interests stood in

opposition to that of the family. When this theme was combined with the previous construction of the family/team privilege we saw results that pointed to the likely end of the individual sacrificing their own self interest for the larger good of the family. This construction of the ideal worker norm versus the family first norm became problematic when either end of this tension became the focus and the other area of the individual's life was ignored. In some situations, this tension of self versus family was played out with just individual/workplace constraints against family interest. However, there were also times when family interests were compounded with gender expectations to create an even stronger force in minimizing individual concerns, as can be seen in the next theme.

*Tension between gender expectations vs. ideal workers.* Similar to the construction of the individual vs. the family, another tension of gender expectations vs. ideal workers was apparent. Though similar, this unique tension existed and was more specific with its focus on the pull of normative gendered expectations on the one hand and the goals and interests of the individual as a worker on the other. In this tension, individuals attempted to create their own story among the normative expectations of traditional behavior which were justified as appropriate and correct in serving the larger family goals. One version of the conversations that fit under these themes was the common comments about the pull of work verses the feeling that as a mother you should be home with your children, as Cheri discussed:

Well, to me that's another just natural instinct a woman has it. Once you have kids, you just, I never cared about working before. Never. But once you have kids, and you have to take them to day care, and you have to go to work because, to keep the house you're in and a car and all those things, you're very torn because what you want to do is just be at home with your children, taking care of them yourself, not wondering what's happening with them while you're off making money to hopefully give them a better life, but who knows what's happening to them. So, I think you're torn about that, but at the [chuckling] same time, I

always enjoy work. I mean, I would run out of day care crying now and then, because they would be crying, and didn't want me to leave them there. And I'd get to work and I'd be upset and I'd call day care and, "Oh, they're fine and playing now." And that's usually how it would go. Usually kids settle down af-, once they see, "Well, mom's gone." And then I would enjoy the rest of my day. I was fine. So, it's just very conflicting when you have children, as the mother, because the dad's going to work full-time and probably, I guess I don't know how many percentage of the cases, but the majority for sure. And I don't know that even [husband] ever, I know [husband] never dropped off the kids at day care and ran out of there crying, wishing he didn't work. [laugh] So, that is just a, I think, naturally a mother's thing. She's supposed to be taking care of the kids. But when you have to work too, then I think that's where the torn part comes in.

In Cheri's words, we see how she understands the conflict between working and wanting to stay home with her children. Specifically, Cheri noted the assumption that "because the dad's going to work full-time" as the norm and expectation that the husband will work, and then as an extension of this should not experience this same tension. In the assumption that the husband will work, this created a "have to" situation for the husband, whereas the same "have to" might not have been present for the wife. Thus in constructing the wife's employment as a choice, the wife was then held responsible for the impact and tension that the wife was experiencing. In Patrice's comments there was a clear tug and pull between the wife's personal life and goals and trying to best meet the needs of the family:

But I don't know that I would be satisfied not working either. You know? Because I am very driven. So I debate back and forth about getting the full-time job and just going for it career-wise. But then I think about all the disadvantages of that, as it relates to family life, and it's really hard for me to wrap my mind around it. And so that's a dilemma for me, and has been for many years. My feelings and attitudes about it change pretty much with the seasons. So I recognized I'm a moving target. I admitted that to [husband] and recognized his patience and support, despite how it felt. I think that it was pretty much it.

Both of these quotes reflect the additional tensions and concerns that women face in attempting to negotiate ideal worker goals with the goals of the family. The impact of this

tension might be greater for women because they are further bound by the construction of the household labor as feminine. For Cheri it was in dropping off her children at daycare that she faced the tension, and in the case of Patrice it comes out as she talks about how her work goals shift while dealing with this tension. In this there are the norms of altruistic behavior of placing the family first, which most often influence the wives' enactments work-life negotiations.

These norms of ideal worker and family first could also play out for husbands. Yet these norms may be combined in different ways, such as the ideal worker as the best way to provide for family, thus illustrating the complementary nature of traditional masculine work and family roles. In listening to Samantha, she described her husband's work habits as:

I think as we had talked about during our couple interview, that he sometimes, one, doesn't realize when he works too much. He takes on more, I think of a traditional role of a, of a man, thinking that he needs to do that. He needs to succeed and success is defined by working hard and by responding when, when your supervisor calls and asks you to do something. I think he sees that as just part of his role. Whereas, for me, he understands that this is something that's important in my life, but it's not the only thing in my life that should be driving me and making my life. So I think he defines himself more by his job. And he might not think my job should define me. I always say, "But you do it as well. You always are answering calls on weekends and going to fix computers and things like that on the weekend."

With his identity tied closely to his work, Samantha constructed her husband's behavior as "he sees that as just a part of his role." In this the overworking, or increased burden of the workplace, did not come into conflict for the husband, but rather functioned as a way for him to strengthen his identity as the ideal worker providing for the family. Again it was clear that these family first constructions and issues of power were also very intricately tied to issues of gender. First, women have been continually socialized into the

ideas of what it means to be a wife and mother, and then in the recent decades the professional middle class ideal of the ideal worker was transferred to more women. From these two competing goals, the call to perform within the gendered expectations and the expectations of the ideal worker, the result is this tension. In working to negotiate the tension between gender expectations and ideal workers many women find themselves trapped in constraints that leave them feeling less than successful in both arenas. These constraints work to bind the choices that women have in these situations and normalize the inequities of the second shift.

Work-life concerns exist in a space of competing values. These competing values that individuals experience when co-constructing work-life concerns are apparent in the participants' discourse and help to reify material constraints that shape the choice and actions of couples. These competing norms help solidify enactments of the supermom and legitimize structures that individuals force women to do it all from being the ideal worker like Samantha to still taking time for sick kids as Keri worried about. These norms can exist as a source of power and a source of resistance to other norms, legitimizing the behaviors of individuals such as the workaholic spouse who evades equitable divisions of household labor. The norms can also exist as a point of marginalization when couples find themselves trapped in the sticky intersections of the web of work-life concerns unable to meet the demands of either of the pulls in the tensions. Often, this tension is felt by the women in the relationships, as their enactments of ideal worker appear to be the most incompatible with placing the family first. In the next theme, *negotiating family labor*, the focus shifts from looking at the larger norms and impact of tensions to looking at the ways that the couple's co-construct work-life



concerns as they deal with both the norms and the impact of gendered labor.

### *Negotiating family labor*

Couples work within these larger frames of gendered labor and the tension between the ideal worker and family first norms, as they negotiate work-life concerns. In negotiating family labor couples use the framework of gendered labor and the norms that they have been socialized in to create their own reality. In the process of co-constructing their work-life concerns couples (re)create both norms and power/resistance to these norms. Within the larger constructions of negotiating family labor, the themes of valid contributions, husband as incompetent, power in strategic incompetence, wife as planner/director/supervisor, wife as skilled/supermom, and finally husband as helper. By exploring each of these themes below, a clearer understanding of how couples negotiate work-life concerns is developed.

*Valid contributions.* Beyond the norms of the ideal worker and family first constructions that add to and help establish what is seen as good or privileged labor in relationships, individuals also work to create their own norms and justifications for what is acceptable in the relationship based on the larger social influences. Valid contributions can be defined as the construction of labor norms in the relationship that legitimize or delegitimize the contributions of relational partners. In these comments, the expectations for labor participation were being negotiated and reified. In talking with one wife about how the household labor was divided between her and her husband, Trina noted:

Denker: We also talked about, or one of you mentioned the neighbor that does it all. He cleans inside and he does the landscaping.

Trina: Ah-hum.

Denker: And you described him as a little bit OCD.

Trina: Right.

Denker: And you also mentioned that you do most of the cleaning inside and you do the landscaping yourself too.

Trina: I do, do the landscaping. Um, I don't mow the yard, but I probably-- No. I don't like mowing the yard. I get too hot. And I so I would pay someone to do it. But [oldest son], he does the yard and—um, I don't know, I do a lot of stuff. But he likes to fix-- [Husband] fixes stuff. So like anything that's broken in the house, he'll fix it. Or, you know, he takes the jars off the lids, if I can't get the jar off a lid. I don't know. Just the manly stuff. That's what he does, the manly stuff. But he does-- He does remember like anniversaries and stuff, and he'll tell me "Happy Anniversary" and I'll forget [LAUGHS] that it's our anniversary. So on that way, our roles are reversed, because I don't-- I don't remember anniversaries as much as he does.

In this Trina created the norm that what little the husband did was a major contribution so that it created more of an appearance of equity that allowed for inequitable household labor conditions. At the same time, this labor enactment supported the notion of the family first, as Trina just did the majority of the labor, all without any note of concern in her description and thus silences individual interests. Interestingly, when a neighbor engaged in the same labor that Trina did, he is constructed as "OCD." However, this same descriptor or even anything similar did not appear in Trina's description of herself. This might be due to the gendered expectations, as for Trina to engage in this behavior it was normal, but when the male neighbor engaged in the same behaviors he was clearly "OCD." Note the unequal distribution of labor that Trina mentioned. Trina did all the inside and outside work, while her husband opened lids on jars and fixes stuff. Yet, somehow this imbalance was okay because he remembered their anniversary. It was through this construction of reality that we saw individuals stay happy and satisfied in their relationships. Again these results echo the work of Thompson and Walker (1995) who noted that couples utilize the social comparisons in creating equity rather than similar labor. If Trina conceptualizes Trevor's household labor as better than the average husband's contributions, because he does special things like remembers anniversaries,

then she is able to construct her relationship as satisfactory. Clearly, Trina does not compare her labor to her husband's labor in terms of actual amount, as she is able to positively note his ability to fix things. This construct can also be linked to the second major theme, The Reeds' Smile, as it is through the positive constructions that legitimizing of individuals' labor that power is given to individuals. By constructing individuals' contributions as valid, even if their responsibility is fixing stuff and noting holidays, this justifies their performances so that equity or a non-problematic situation is constructed.

Whereas Trina created a more positive construction and evaluation of her husband's labor, Hillary commented on at times feeling like what she did was undervalued:

Well, maybe that he feels that I uh [laughing] pretty much don't do anything! [laugh] Um. I don't know. I guess I didn't really know he felt that way. But it's hard, which kind of goes back to the division of labor. It's like how do you really divide it all up perfectly and, I mean, how do you really know that, you know what, if I am out and about, buying a birthday gift for his mother, or um, one of our parents or one of our siblings, you know, that takes time, but it doesn't sound like a job to him. Like, yeah, I enjoy shopping, but sometimes when you know you have to do it, it's not as enjoyable. [laugh] And so, it's, I don't know. It's kind of like that stuff is completely taken for granted. It's like I leave out, I leave for the day to go get some errands run and it's like I didn't do anything. When that's kind of draining, in my opinion. [laugh] I mean, I like running errands sometimes, but it's still tiring. I think just what's surprising is just knowing that he maybe doesn't think I do that much, or as much as he does, I should say.

In constructing what was seen as a valid contribution to the household labor, Hillary noted that some of what she does for the family is not counted by her husband in evaluating who does more around the house. By devaluing some of the planning and care work that Hillary was doing, she mentioned that it is hard and surprising to know that the couple doesn't share similar viewpoints on what counts as household labor. In evaluating

household labor and establishing ones' view as the norm, individuals enact power.

Deviations from the norm of valid labor place the individual who is then judged as doing less in a position where they then feels the impact of this power, as their labor is delegitimized in the relationship. In Hillary's relationship, it is in the construction of the care work as less than other labor that places her in a location of judgment.

What is marked as valid contribution is often done through the language of the partner, but at times it is also done in the comments of individuals about their own labor. Just as some individual's language constructions added to the legitimacy of their contributions, other individuals worked to minimize their individual contributions to the household through their language. This was seen in how Emily talked about how she described her job to others during the individual interview:

Emily: You know, I, now I really just um, just say I, you know, I stay at home now, you know. But I I will say, I normally say "now". [laughing] you know, as if to say that, you know, "This is a choice!" You know, but um. ... You know, I, and I I don't really, I don't ever really call myself like a babysitter. I usually, which is an odd thing too. I just kind of, or a day care provider or anything like that. I usually just say, "Oh, and I watch another kid in my house," you know.

Denker: Mm hmm.

Emily: I don't know why. 'Cause I don't want to be a daycare provider. [laugh] You know, so I'm, like I don't want to say that for some [chuckling] reason, you know.

Denker: What do you think of when you think of daycare provider?

Emily: Um. ... You know, for, I guess I, maybe I've just had bad experience from like day-, you know, some of the people that I've seen that work, you know, that do that, and um. You know, if somebody that's just like just watching kids for, you know, to make the ends meet and, you know. Usually, I don't know. I don't know wh, what I think of specifically, but sometimes it's negative

Emily minimized the paid work by talking about it as an afterthought to her original and temporary identity construction as a stay at home mom. Emily notes that "now" she stays at home, as an attempt to claim her past self defined legitimate status as a paid worker, while not having to use her current job as a way to establish this claim. This description

marginalizes the legitimacy of the labor that she currently performs, which allows her to be constructed as less than a working parent. By removing the taint of undesirable paid labor, especially labor that Emily sees as negative, this choice in construction might add to the legitimacy of her role as a mother, something the post-feminist movement told women was very central to their lives (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Stone, 2007). This framing of her labor might add into her power based on the construction of the *family first* as well as the gendered nature of labor, but at the same time it creates an opportunity for marginalization by stripping the importance from Emily's engagement in paid labor.

Just as the constructions of valid labor as shaping individuals gender enactments within work-life concerns, the construction of the husband as incompetent, which will be discussed next, also allows for both privileging and marginalizing individuals concurrently but instead of a focus on labor, it finds its direction to power through the gender constructions of the husband as incompetent.

*Husband as incompetent.* Within the construct of negotiating family labor, themes will illustrate power being given to women through the privileging of their knowledge and skills as well as this same privilege being used to marginalize them in later themes. Similarly, men or masculine partners are also empowered and marginalized through the construction of the household as a feminine space. The theme of husbands as incompetent can be understood as conversation and commentary that constructs the masculine performance of some household behavior as substandard to the performance of the feminine. In constructing the *husband as incompetent*, there are times in which the husband is created as similar to the kids, in that they both have to be supervised by the wife. In this theme, there is an appeal to the wife as an authority source through the

framing of *husband as incompetent*, yet at the same time this (re)creation of power requires the wife to take on more, by both managing more and also doing the labor for the household so that it is done "right." In talking with Rachel, she told the story about problems with her husband's parenting:

I just, you know, pretty much have to explain to him that he's not a kid. That he's supposed to be a parent and not doing the things he's doing, that always seem to get them in trouble, let alone himself. Or get one of them hurt, is usually the situation.

In this quote, Rachel talked about her husband's behavior as childlike and inappropriate in terms of parenting ability. Rachel was the one who not only had to direct her children, but it also appeared that she was directing her husband in a similar manner. By (re)creating her husband as less competent, this construction then both allowed and forced her to take on the role of the disciplinarian for the family. This construction of the husband as less than competent could be seen in areas beyond parenting, such as in Irene's language as she described responsibilities around the house:

Um. Well, a lot of time, [husband] just walks in the house and he takes his shoes off and leaves them there. Um. Then I have to go back later and put 'em off to the side so somebody doesn't come in and trip over 'em. Um. After meals, 'cause because sometimes we eat at different times. He's gotten better but he's hasn't always, when he got to where he can put his dishes in the dishwasher. He hasn't always done that. So he does, he does do that more now. Um. Taking his ties off and just leaving 'em lay around, where I have to pick 'em up and take 'em up to the room. Keys. Always losing his keys 'cause he doesn't put his keys, his wallet, and his glasses in the same spot. [chuckle] So, we have a basket over by the door now so we're training him. [chuckle] So just little things like that.

In this quote, Ireen discussed the many ways in which she had to clean up after her husband. Though she noted that he had in fact gotten better over time, it appeared that she was still doing a lot of clean up for him. It was in the framing of trying to get her husband to change that the clearest image of her husband as less than competent appeared. Irene

noted that “we’re [her and her children] trying to train him”. The framing of her husband as someone in need of training not only created the idea that he was less competent than the children, but also in the use of the word training Ireen’s husband was equated with a toddler who needs to learn to use the toilet or a dog that needs to learn to sit.

Similarly, husbands also recreated this construction as the less than competent individual. Chris talked about the time that he spent with his children after school while his wife worked and stated:

Well, the girls, God, the girls, you know, love having mom around. Um, I think, I feel bad for the girls. They had to deal with me. [laugh] But for me, no. The, you know, once once we got the schedule arranged, it was kind of nice getting home, you know, get home at 3:30 instead of 5:30. Sit down and watch Spongebob with the kids, are you kidding me?

Chris talked about how the children “had to deal with him” and because of that he felt bad for the girls, as he sees himself as less than in the realm of parenting. By constructing afterschool time as a time that the girls “love having mom around,” Chris was then a low quality substitute for his wife. In these quotes we see the husband as not as good of a parent, that at times just has to be dealt with, both by the children and the wife. Although being seen as “less than” could be seen as a way to achieve power through decreased responsibility, it is also marginalizing in creating the husband as less competent. At the same time the construction of his wife’s job as easy was apparent in this language. When Cheri talked about the labor that she performed in the home, she did not mention watching SpongeBob.

For some couples, feelings of stress or guilt expressed are tied to the fact that the husband is not as able to participate fully in the household labor production. Looking at Abby and Adam we can see this stress played out in Adam’s comments about his

participation in cooking:

Yeah. Something about, I'm a microwave, basically. Because I'm capable of, you know, heating up things and chopping vegetables and all that, but I can't, you know, put together an entire. I can't put together an entire dinner myself. I don't have that skill. And that's one thing that bothers me, because I could take a lot of pressure off of her, you know, since I get home generally earlier than she does. I could take a lot of pressure off of her if I was able to do that. And so [chuckle], yeah. The proper meals that, she thinks it's funny that I consider what she cooks proper meals, 'cause she doesn't really fancy herself a wonderful cook or anything. But um. You know, that's one thing that I know that I could probably stand to participate more in, because it's just another thing around the house that, you know, the responsibility falls on her, on her shoulders every time because I'm not really, you know, capable of doing it. 'Cause I can cook for me. You know, I can cook a bratwurst and and, you know, some potatoes or something. But it's not really [laugh] her style, you know? [chuckle]

In this the husband discussed directly his shortcoming in the kitchen and the ways that it impacted the relationship and the stress his wife faced, as her job required that she be out of the home later in the day than he. In constructing the concept of cooking an entire dinner as a special skill, Adam created himself as less skilled than his wife. Although, Adam could cook for himself, things like bratwurst and potatoes; this was not seen as an entire dinner for some reason. In (re)creating the norm of what Abby did as entire dinners and minimizing his labor as just cooking for him, Adam was created as less than competent and definitely less than Abby in this situation. Not only did Adam admit that this construction was harmful for Abby in extending her labor, but it could also be seen as harmful to Adam in reducing his agency in the household.

If we continue to construct wives' behavior as the starting point from which household labor norms are measured, then husbands are forever going to be constructed as "less than." As two individuals often engage in labor differently, the husband's behavior might often appear as different from the wives, and then by default also appear as less than the wife. This construction of individuals continues to marginalize and



empower both men and women. Interestingly, this ability to self-derogate their skills is apparent in the communication with the men, suggesting that there is a possibility this derogation is beneficial to them or is a norm that they have also internalized. Beyond the general construction of the husband as incompetent, it appears that some level of this incompetence is enacted in a strategic way in order to achieve some sort of benefit for the individual, usually through a reduction in responsibility towards household labor. This construction of incompetence in a strategic manner will be discussed further in the next theme.

*Power in strategic incompetence.* Just as feminine power and marginalization can be seen in the broader construct of the labor as gendered, masculine power and marginalization can be seen in the construct of deviation through strategic incompetence. Strategic incompetence can be defined as those behaviors that show a deliberate lack of competence in completing tasks in order to resist household labor. Deutsch (1999) noted that for men trying to avoid equally shared parenting, incompetence has its rewards. Often in relationships, the standards for household labor are created and reinforced, often by the wife, because household labor as gendered traditionally exists in the realm of the feminine and therefore women are then allowed the power to establish these norms (DeVault, 1991). In strategic incompetence, there is a marginalization of the masculine by associating it with incompetence in household performance as well as a source of empowerment in the exemption from additional labor. Levi discussed the disconnect that happened when his wife was cleaning:

Denker: So you mentioned feeling like you should be doing more, but it doesn't happen?

Levi: Yeah.

Denker: Can you tell me about that disconnect?

Levi: Yeah. I think the disconnect for me, a lot of the times, is again, is just thinking about it first. You know? I think, very often, she'll be doing something. It's not that I'm ignoring her or ignoring what she's doing and it's not that I don't see what she does. But being aware, to think to get something done initially just isn't the first thing that crosses my mind. You know, when I come home, I want to sit for just a bit or I want to relax a little bit. And very often, you know, when I'm getting home, she's been home for a little bit and so she's cleaning something or she's doing the laundry or putting dishes away. Or, You know, kind of a whole menagerie of those tasks that you think of day-to-day. And so I, I definitely-- Um, you know, I definitely at times, think I could do more. I should be doing more but I don't always follow through.

In this Levi did not engage in activities around the household in the same way that his wife did. He mentioned that he "should" be doing more yet continued to perform less labor around the household by simply noting both that it was not something that he thought of and that he did not "always follow through." In this, it was almost a clear dismissal of his behaviors through these justifications. Similarly, it was in the rejection or refusal to take on labor that we saw strategic incompetence as a thinly veiled performance of inability. In talking about her labor around the house, Rachel noted why she took on scheduling:

Denker: So, in general, it seems like you run the schedule. You run the budget. What are the positives and maybe the drawbacks to this?

Rachel: Um, the positives are that I always know what's going on and our bills get paid on time.

Denker: Are there any consequences to this?

Rachel: No, not usually.

Denker: You mentioned, "not usually." Has there ever been a time in which there's been a drawback from this setup?

Rachel: It's just whenever he like-- So one time, he had to call me because he was at work and talking to some guy and he's like, "Do we have anything going on?" I'm like, "Not that I know of. If you really want to go do it, it's not like it's not something that you have to be there for anyway, if you don't already know about it." He's like, "Well, I wasn't sure, because I couldn't remember." So I just, you know, want to handle him a calendar, and be like, "Here you go. Here's your calendar. You can look at it just as well as I can." [CHUCKLE]

Denker: Why is that something that you guys haven't done, where he has a separate calendar?

Rachel: Because he wouldn't take it with him.

Although, Rachel noted that at times it was bothersome that her husband always called her to ask if they were doing anything, for the most part it appeared that she was agreeable to this set up. Yet it did not appear that the decisions of this labor was up to her as she noted that her husband would just not take the calendar with him. In the choice to not carry a calendar with him, Rachel's husband engaged in planned behavior that forced Rachel to take calls at work about the family's plans. In this refusal of labor, Rachel was constrained into being the scheduler for the family regardless of her interest in it. Additionally, strategic incompetence appeared in the interactions between couples, where one individual refused to follow the norm set forth by the other. This refusal to follow could be seen in the conversation between Olivia and Otto:

Olivia: Well, you're supposed to take them [towels] long ways, and you fold it in half, then you fold it half, and then you try fold it.

Otto: I've tried to do it her way and it may be off. Like one of the folds and...

Olivia: No. He folds it in half, then half, then half. You don't do it that way.

Otto: See. It's not necessarily wrong. It's just different.

Olivia: But after 24 years, you'd think you'd know how to fold the towels.

Denker: So you still fold them different?

Olivia: He still doesn't do it right. That is why...

Otto: I fold the towels.

Olivia: ... I do the laundry. [LAUGHING]

Otto: [LAUGHS] I have learned how to do them right.

Olivia: Yeah. You just choose not to do them.

Otto: That's right.

Olivia: See, I think you enjoy the arguing.

Otto: No, I don't enjoy arguing at all. Especially in social times. [LAUGHING]

Olivia: [LAUGHING]

Otto: They're just towels. I mean...

In this quote it was clear that Otto was not choosing to follow the Olivia's lead in the way that she constructed as the correct way to fold the towels. However, it was not apparent that Otto refused to help with the towels, but rather rejected Olivia's method. It is in that rejection that Olivia takes back the labor of the laundry as her own. Clearly, the couple

had established a right way to do this labor through Olivia's claim. But instead discussing the labor and coming to a new standard for how the towels should be done, Otto refused to follow the "right way" and he strategically was able to avoid this labor. Subversion of labor through strategic incompetence is not something that is entirely owned by the husbands or the more masculine partners. In talking with Olivia, she mentioned her own strategic incompetence:

Denker: So if you guys have different ways of doing things, like you don't mow the lawn like he likes why don't you just switch to his way of lawn mowing?

Olivia: Because that way I don't have to do it. (Laughing), It's the same way with folding the towels. (Laughing).

Denker: So it is a subversive thing?

Olivia: (laughs), I think is, yea, make him feel um, I really don't know. I couldn't tell you why. It's like that way I don't have to do it. I don't think I really enjoy mowing. Even though I will do it occasionally, but..

In this Olivia deviated from her husband's expectations for lawn care in order to avoid performing more traditional masculine labor. Olivia acknowledged that there was a settled on right way to do the lawn care, but it was through her rejection of this norm of lawn care that she was able to escape some of the household labor. Although much of the performance of strategic incompetence exists as avoiding feminine constructions of labor, some labor is more traditionally defined as masculine and thus feminine individuals also find some source of deviation as well.

Power in strategic incompetence and constructing the husband as incompetent work hand in hand in with gendered nature of labor to claim and norm what is "correct" and "right" in the household. Also, strategic incompetence acts as site of struggle for power/resistance. In the claim of the "correct way to load the dishwasher" done by couples Olivia and Otto and Trina and Trevor, we see the establishment of feminine power in the rules created for this act. At the same time, this rule is disempowering to the

feminine as they then create more labor for themselves as others exert their own power in claims of incompetence. Claiming an inability to labor, these individuals then free themselves from labor and at the same time force the labor back on to the normers if they want it done correctly. Power through strategic incompetence creates a claim to power through the rejection of labor, but at the same time works to marginalize/disempower those individuals as they are created as "less than" in these situations. In the claim that they "cannot" perform a given task, individuals free themselves from other labor and force the responsibility back on their partners.

However to truly understand the husbands' constructions of household labor, attention is turned next to the norms and expectations that are (re)created about the performances of labor by the wives. The next two themes, wife as planner/director/supervisor and wife as skilled/supermom, will be explored as the ways that couples co-create the labor of the wife in constructing work-life negotiations.

*Wife as planner/director/supervisor.* Also supporting larger construction of the negotiations of family labor and closely linked to the construct of labor as gendered is the idea of the wife as the planner/director/supervisor. Traditional social constructions of household norms legitimize feminine authority in the home; these traditional constructions are powerful and resistant to change (DeVault, 1991). As a natural extension of this construction, the wife or feminine individual in the household takes on additional responsibilities that places her as the planner/director/supervisor. Wife as planner/director/supervisor can be defined as the image and construction of the feminine partner as controlling all aspects of the household, from monitoring and planning the days, directing the activities of the family to setting and controlling the expectations for

behavior and interactions. In conversations, we see this in individuals' talk about how the events in the house happen and who is directing these events. In the comments from both the husbands and wives I heard stories that pointed to the wife as the director of the household, such as in Ken's comments:

I mean, [Keri] has talked about that she feels like she's the default parent. Um. A good for instance is, um, last night was my night to watch him. And she uh, 'cause she's works all day today. And so if, you know, someone's gotta be up it's it's me, tonight, or last night. And so at 4:00, or no, it was like 3:00, she woke up. Kn- knowing that it's my role, she went up and went and checked on him. I wouldn't check on him if it was her responsibility. And at 4:30, when he got up, she got up too, uh, in addition to me. And then she went back to bed but, you know, she was in her in her parenting role. And, and then at 9:30, or 9:15 after I dropped [child] off, she was just joking, but I mean, there's more to it than than that. .... If it's her responsibility, it's it's [chuckling] none of my business. I couldn't imagine myself calling her after she dropped uh, [child] off at someone's called me to make sure he got there 'right.

Almost as if the labor that Ken was engaging in was difficult, he was checked up on to make sure that his performance met the expectations that Keri held. In this it was clear that Keri was engaging in monitoring behaviors that are disempowering for her as she took on more labor and also empowers as she took control in this context. These behaviors also disempower Ken and empower him to do less in the household.

Beyond being just the director of activities, for many participants, the idea that the wife was the planner was apparent in the conversations, like in Rachel and Ross's interview:

Rachel: Usually me. I have a calendar and write stuff on there and he never checks it though. He's like...

Ross: [LAUGHS] It hangs in there.

Rachel: "Something's on the calendar. But what's today's date again? Do we have something planned?"

Ross: [LAUGHS] I now have a watch that tells me what day of the week it is, and the date, so I can check that, so I can look at the calendar. Because the other day, I went to work and it was Wednesday and I could have swore it was still Tuesday. I'm like, "Where did Tuesday go?"

Rachel: [LAUGHS]

Ross: That was yesterday. Remember? No, I thought that was Monday. Seriously, I missed a day. I don't know where it went.

Denker: Do you ever catch events being forgotten about? Do they, do events ever get passed up or...?

Rachel: Oh, some things do get passed up. That's usually because we have something I'll start on it. It's on the calendar, but it's not set in stone. Like some-  
- One of the girls have a kid's birthday party. Well, if we don't go to it, it's not the end of the world if something else came up. But it's not like we miss school functions or going over to a family member's house. We don't forget those kind of things. It's more...

Ross: Nothing ever really gets forgotten. It just gets put on the back burner. Some things can always wait and other things, it just really isn't that important (wife- important) in the day-to-day life, where it has to be done. If it was me, I'd probably forget it, but she reminds me. I get emails all the time at work, or text messages, or all kinds of things. You never know how it'll get remembered, but...  
[LAUGHS]

Rachel: I try to keep him on track.

In the first comments, Rachel identified herself as the planner, because she noted that she was the one who took care of the calendar and planned the events that they as a family took part in. It was also noted that Ross never checked this calendar and Rachel stated that she tried to "keep him on track." In this construction of Ross as guided by Rachel and her calendar we see Rachel take the role of the director of the family, guiding Ross to school functions, as well as the supervisor of the family as she works to keep him on track. In this interaction, Rachel first presented the reasoning for why Ross needed help in these situations, to which Ross responded in affirmative ways. Clearly, this definition of Ross as forgetful or unorganized was one that he supported, as his statements agree with the construction that Rachel establishes. When pressed further about whether events were ever forgotten, Rachel was the first to respond and noted that those missed events were just the minor things, which was further supported by Ross's response. Although it appeared that Rachel got to frame these situations, these frames must have also been serving Ross's interests as he was willing to agree with her constructions. In addition to

the three children that they have and directing their lives, Rachel took on the labor of also directing the life of her husband. This additional labor existed as an outcome of constructing the husband as less competent. Similarly, in interviewing Trevor, it came out that Trina is keeper of the calendar. This meant that she planned for and coordinated everyone's schedule in the family, and that included her spouse. Trevor described the situation as:

If I have something I need to schedule, I call her and she puts it on the schedule. If it conflicts with something, then it gets dealt with at that time. Most of the time, my schedule involves me being at work or here. So my schedule's pretty easy. She's the one with the hectic schedule.

Additionally this same control of the schedule can be seen when Trina and Trevor were talking when I was not in the room.

Trevor: break out the calendar. What is on the calendar for the week?

Trina: Well, nothing. Because I'm on Spring break.

Trevor: Well, of course. You're still going to take the kids skating though, aren't you?

Trina: Yeah. The children want to go skating tomorrow and I have Weight Watchers. I don't know how I'm going to that.

Trevor: All right. Well, then let's break out a little more volatile subject.

Trina: Okay.

Even in this interaction it was clear that Trina was the one who held onto the schedule for the family and Trevor had to ask Trina for an update. Not only did we see Trina constructed as the planner for the family in these two quotes, but also in the second quote we saw Trina as the director. When Trina noted that there was going to be a conflict in the schedule tomorrow, Trevor merely acknowledged it and then moves on changing the subject as if the conflict with the schedules was either not his concern or not a concern that he knew he has to deal with. Trina was left to figure out how she, and clearly it is she alone, is going to deal with this conflict. It was as if Trevor had absconded all



responsibility in directing family activities, leaving that responsibility to Trina. However, this did not seem to be an abnormal experience, as Trina just agreed with Trevor and was willing to move on when he moved to change the subject. In responding with okay, after the dismissal of her concern, Trina appeared to accept the fact that she would be negotiating this concern on her own. In reinforcing Trina's control and authority, Trevor is able to avoid some labor but he also loses some control and authority in his relationship.

It is clear in these examples that not only does the wife establish the norms for the relationship, but then also controls to some extent the events that occur for those in the household. Scheduling could be a source of power for the wives in that they are given the control over this aspect of the lives of those around them, but scheduling could also exist as a source of marginalization because the responsibility to monitor and maintain the schedule takes time that others are not forced to give. Similarly, directing the activities of the family or supervising the family can exist as both a source of power, marginalization, and resistance for all of the individuals involved. Constructions of the wife as able to handle more household labor are created not only through the images of women in control of the household like in the last theme, but also in the images of the wife as more competent, as constructed in the next theme. Similar to the construct of wife as director/planner/scheduler is the construct of the wife as skilled/super mom.

*Wife as skilled/super mom.* Existing in parallel with the concept of the wife as the director/planner/scheduler is the image of the wife as skilled/super mom. Wife as skilled/super mom can be best understood as the construction of the feminine partner in the relationship as able to perform a variety of functions as well as do all of these

functions at all times. In constructing the wife as the individual in the relationship with the ability to “do it all”, we see the re-emergence of the supermom norm that was historically created as a way to legitimize the multiple labor shifts of women as being overworked in every aspect of their lives (Deutsch, 1999; Douglas & Michaels, 2004). This construction of women as skilled in labor legitimizes the idea that they should take on more in every aspect. This juggling of the labor continues in every aspect of household labor, as seen in Elliot’s words when he describes his wife taking a break:

Elliot: [laugh] All right. Uh. I, you know, downtime is time uh without the kids. Uh. Sometimes with her, sometimes without her. Um. Sometimes even with just one of the boys you can still do downtime. You can't do downtime with both the boys. Um. I would prefer when she does downtime, that she does it without either of the boys, but she's reluctant to do that. I, you know. She says there's a price to pay for doing that, but I I don't think that, I think that's exaggerated. I think it's a perception.

Denker: Can you tell me more about that?

Elliot: The perception of it?

Denker: Mm hmm.

Elliot: Uh. Well, you know, I, I would say there was a time where if she had left me with both the boys, especially when [youngest] was very colicky and and that sort of thing, that when she came home, yeah! I was, you know, not in the routine of having both the boys. You know, not uh, and then with [youngest] being colicky on top of it, and uh. And I would be maxed out. Now, not at the boys, and not at her, but just ma-, you know, just maxed out. And and so, when she would come home and be like, "OK. Here's one, here's the other, and, you know, I am going to go outside. I am going to take 5 minutes." Um, you know? And uh. There are times when I come home that I wish she would do that. You know, whether it's, you know, go for a walk or go outside or, you know. I don't I don't care. Sometimes in the evening, I can get her to take, like go take a bath or something. But even then, generally, she'll take one or both of the boys.

In this conversation, Elliot argues that he encourages his wife to take a break from her day to day activities. However, it appears that his wife, Emily, rejects the idea that a break is something that she can do, in her arguments that “there’s a price to pay for doing that.” Emily’s comments of the price that she had to pay in taking a break also came up in

the individual stimulated recall interview, where she described what happened when she would take a break:

Then I'd get home and it would be like, you know, [husband is] really kinda tapped out from the kids, and they'd be, you know, [child] would be, you know, park in front of the television, you know. And um, and the baby would like refuse to eat for a while 'cause he, he was just crazy like that. And um. And some, and I felt like the price was too high for that break, you know?

In this quote, again the language of the price that the family had to pay is apparent as is Emily's construction of Elliot's less than satisfactory parenting, with one child in front of the TV and the other not eating. In constructing Elliot as less than capable in childcare, she reinforces the norm that she should be doing it all and moreover that she is in fact the capable one who can do it all. This image of the wife as the superwoman is apparent in the image of Emily relaxing and enjoying taking a bath while also providing child care for at least one of the boys. For Elliot, down time is time without the children, but for Emily the supermom down time is done with children in tow. This image of the multitasking working mother helps to reify the idea that women should be doing it all, as they are clearly skilled enough to handle everything, even childcare mixed with relaxing. Even when women feel that they are not balancing well or doing everything, the assumption that they in fact should be doing it all finds its root in the supermom norm. This norm can be seen in Patrice's comments. In the dyadic interview, Patrice first noted an early concern about being able to balance everything and then commented on this more in the individual interview:

I don't know that I am over it [need for perfect balance]. [LAUGHS] You know, I just figure-- It is what it is. You know? I think this is just where I am right now. I think I've accepted it. This is just a part of where I am in the journey with, you know, having children in school and trying to balance home life and trying to work. Some days are better than others. Sometimes I feel like I'm doing a good job. Other times, I'm frustrated. I feel like, in a lot of ways, I've become

like this chronic multitasker. You know? Where I'm just always-- I don't feel like I'm being productive unless I'm doing at least 2 or 3 things at once.

In this we see the assumptions of the ability to “do it all” play out, and in this situation, a woman who accepts her second shift labor and what she is capable of doing. Patrice calls herself a chronic multitasker, and for many women who are working, accepting primary responsibility for much of the household labor, and trying to plan for everything that needs to happen in the household this might be a very real situation. Deutsch (1999) noted the image of the supermom as the woman who does it all, but even in the construction of the supermom there is a woman who is holding on to too much. However, for others, this situation might not end with such a reluctant and reconciled view of the situation. Patrice's previous feelings of frustration are probably parallel to many women who are forced to negotiate a volume of concerns and have primary responsibility for the household. For other women, like Mei the construction of the super mom is one that they embrace. In the second interview with her she stated:

The way my parents teach me to live our life uh so is really different from theirs. And that makes kind of a difference for us too. Like uh... yeah. And I'm pretty outgoing and I'm, I'm active. But my husband is a nice and quiet, and he likes animals. He he he's a, he very, he's very slow. But I, I'm very quick. [chuckle] I does everything just [snap]. And I also come to the conclusion like very fast. And but he, it takes him a long time to think even one small thing. So he's slow. He's just like a, my pace is so fast. Sometimes too fast for [him] to keep up. So that makes a lot of difference. And it sometimes brings some difficulty for us to, to um understand each other and to talk with each other.

From this quote you can see that Mei constructs this work as more natural for her as well as the idea that she is able to take on more. Mei gets “everything just [snap]”, whereas she understands that her husband is slow. This construction then allows her to take on more labor because her husband would not be able to get to the work. By normalizing the different “paces” of the partners, it then becomes “natural” that Mei should be doing

more, even when her and her husband work similar hours. In this section of the interview, Mei reifies the norm of the supermom as she constructs herself as the skilled individual in her ability to handle much more than her husband.

Through this construction of the wife as skilled and as supermom, we see a closely tied tendril in the theme of the household labor as gendered as well as complementary ties to the construction of husbands as less than capable. If husbands were seen as more capable, wives may in turn be allowed to or allow themselves to share some portion of the labor. However, this same argument could also be constructed as if women stopped trying to portray themselves as the only skilled individual or a the person who does it all, husbands might feel more agency in the relationship and try to take on more. Clearly in co-constructing work-life concerns the labor and enactments of the wife cannot be understood without a similar look at the husbands, and conversely the husbands' negotiations of work-life concerns can truly not be separated from that of their wives. After looking at how couples negotiate family labor through the lens of valid constructions, issues of incompetence and portrayals of both skilled/supermom and planner/director/supervisor, the last clear conception used by individuals is the construction of *husband as helper*, which will be explored in the next theme.

*Husband as helper.* If individuals co-construct and reify the image of the feminine or wife as controlling the household, then even when the husband is involved he is limited to the role of the helper. *Husband as helper* can be defined as the portrayal of husband as the sidekick or backup for the wife. This construction differs from the husband as strategically incompetent, as there is no purposeful avoidance, and is also different that incompetence, as this deficiency is not evaluated negatively and instead

constructed as a way that the husband is helping. In constructing the husband as the helper, couples also reify the notion that the household labor is in fact the wife's responsibility and falls within her domain in the household. This forces the wife's extra labor to continue, as well gives husbands some sort of pass that allows them to skip out on labor or not engage in household labor to the same extent that the wives do. Turning back to the conversation about food between Abby and Adam, in the individual interview with Abby after constructing Adam as incompetent she takes time to speak to the ways that Adam helps:

And so, we do cook a lot, you know. I cook dinner almost every night. And and like, you know, give him some credit, he does help. He stands and talks to me and he cuts onions and he cuts carrots and whatever, you know. Um. But, yeah, for some reason, I think he feels bad that he can't like cook a dinner, and it always has to be my responsibility. Though, I guess then, it's not something that... I don't, that I dislike doing, and he usually hangs out and helps anyway, so.

Abby notes that Adam's skills in the kitchen are not as strong as hers. However, this construction is not shaped in the same way as the husband as incompetent. In framing Adam as a helper, Adam's role is discursively constructed by Abby in a positive light, both in his work that he takes responsibility for, even if it is just carrots, and the evaluation of this work, constructing these inadequacies as not problematic. In this there is the acknowledgement that the husband is less able, and therefore does less, but with this also is the added justification that this "less" is ok because of the ways that he helps the wife perform what has been mainly regulated as her labor.

Additionally, the husband is constructed as a helper within the idea that he takes on more labor whenever the wife starts to get too much to do. For one couple who is expecting a child, Danica and Derek talked about the ways that her husband might be helping more when they have a baby:

Danica: But I think when the baby comes, we're going to have to modify a little bit. Like I'm gonna, I don't know. I'd like to get a little more help with like the laundry and stuff, just like things here and there. Just because we're going to have the baby and that added thing, which is a daily thing, obviously. But, you know, I guess the the way I kind of look at it is laundry is a weekly thing and like yard work is, especially when there's winter 3 months out of the year, uh yard work is not a yearly thing. And yard work can actually not even necessarily be a weekly thing. [chuckling] So it's kinda, it's just kinda different. It's almost, in some ways, and I I know doing the laundry can be kind of easy. I mean, you just throw it in and you go. But but if I could even get some help with that, especially when we have added clothes to be washing and things like that, then that'll, that would be nice. So, I guess that's, that's like the only thing that that I could see that I'd like to maybe have changed a little bit. But, um. Otherwise, I c- I can see when, you know, we have a child, we probably divide that um responsibility up, share that, I suppose. And, I guess we'll see how that goes. Be something we'll have to talk about. [chuckle] I see him giving me a look, so. [laugh]

Denker: Did I miss the look?

Danica: [laugh]

Derek: [chuckle] Yeah.

Denker: What was the look?

Derek: [chuckle]

Danica: He's like, "Really. I didn't notice." I think I'm just kind of bringing this up now, but [laugh] I'm... Oh, I was just going to say. I'm just talking like, you know, helping me fold clothes and like

Derek: Well, that's fine.

Danica:: bringing the laundry upstairs. [laugh] If I ask you to get it from the dryer.

Derek: That's fine. If you if you give me written out instructions how to do something, I can do it.

Danica:: That's kind of what I think of.

Derek: I don't care.

Danica: [chuckle] Your sister has an idea for a laminated laundry instruction list. [laugh]

Derek: I don't care. Yeah, but I can do it.

Danica: [laugh]

Denker: Is the instructions or lack of knowledge what is impeding participation in laundry right now or?

Danica: [laugh]

Derek: What?

Danica: [laughing] Yes. You don't know how to do laundry! You have no idea.

Derek: Not really. I've never done, I've never done laundry.

Danica: He didn't have to do laundry 'cause he lived at home until [laughing] we got married. Or until we bought our house, I should say.

Derek: My mom would do my laundry now if I asked [chuckling] her to.

Danica: [laughing] Exactly!

Denker: So it's not an unwillingness to do laundry. It's you really don't know

how.

Derek: I, yeah. I have,

Danica: Right.

Derek: Yeah. I, I always asked, "Well, how do I do this? How do I wash? How do I work this thing?"

Danica: Yeah.

Derek: So.

Danica: And you know? Honestly, like you look on the lid on the washer. I mean, yeah, there's instructions, but I I know how to do laundry 'cause my mom showed me.

Denker: Yeah.

Danica: You know, it's kind of like, "I don't know". So.

Derek: Yeah. I I'm not opposed

Danica: And I started doing laundry when I was like 14, so I I've known for a while, you know?

Derek: I'm not opposed to doing laundry or opposed to

Danica: [simultaneously] helping

Derek: cooking an extra meal here and there, but it's uh

Danica: Right.

Derek: it's, it's just like the whole laundry thing. I

Danica: don't really know.

Derek: never did it.

Danica appeared to be doing much of the household labor in their relationship. She acknowledged primary responsibility for the groceries, cooking, and laundry, but this labor was not constructed as problematic because, as they discussed, her husband was willing to help out more when the baby arrives. In the first longer statement of Danica, not only was it clear that she did more of the repetitive work, but it was also clear that she acknowledged a difference in her and her husband's labor. What was interesting was that when Danica talked about these differences she did not use direct language to say that she was doing more, but rather hinted at the months that her husband had off from yard work, and she also worked to minimize the labor that she engaged in. After this indirect request for help, Derek appeared to be agreeable to this request but also appeared to relish in the construction of incompetence in this skill set. Danica also assisted in this construction by offering an explanation about the difficulty of laundry and her extended experience. The



couple joked back and forth about the laundry card, and it was agreed that he would try to learn and help. Yet in constructing his labor as helping, the couple reified this labor as Danica's primary responsibility. Again, much of the household labor appeared to be delegated to the wife as part of the construct of wife as planner, and then the husband was viewed as reacting to this and helping when it is needed. In reacting to her needs, Derek noted that he can do anything if he is given instructions. Although this comment helped to create him as less able in this enactment, he was still going to be given some responsibility for this labor, even if it happened with instructions. In this discourse, it appeared that Derek would help out with those tasks that were still constructed as Danica's primary responsibility. In helping out, Derek is constructed as less capable, but he is seen as capable enough to be given some responsibility.

In other quotes, like in Trevor and Trina's conversation, we saw helping out on the part of the husbands as behavior that was positively evaluated by all parties:

Trevor: I think she means by that, that she just wishes I'd get off my computer and do something, like clean house.

Trina: Yeah. He doesn't have to clean it. I mean, my mom used to get mad at me because it wasn't cleaned the way she would clean the house. Well, it doesn't matter how it got done, as long as it got done. I don't care about that part. Just do it. I don't want to tell you to do it.

Trevor: That chore jar has helped there though.

Trina: Yeah. And it's helped a lot.

Trevor: You'll get the kids to do the chore jar. And then They yell because I'm playing my computer game, and then [wife] yells, and then I get off my computer game.

Trina: He doesn't even have to do the chore jar, just something. If there's something that he wants to do that hasn't been done, but...

Trevor: The children are more receptive to doing chores out of the chore jar though, if I do chores out of the chore jar too.

Trina: Yeah.

Trevor: I don't think I've ever heard any of them complain that you weren't doing chores out of the chore jar.

Trina: No. I never do chores out of the chore jar. I just do whatever I'm doing. And then sometimes they say, "Mom, you already did this." "Yeah, I know."  
[LAUGHS] "Get another card." [LAUGHS]

Trevor: I think it's commonly accepted, at our household, that she does most of the cleaning. The kids...

Trina: They know.

In this quote it was clear that Trevor was not constructed as "less than" based on the fact that he did not engage in as much household labor. In Trina's first comments, it was clear that she was frustrated with the situation around housework and having to ask for help. Yet in Trevor's next statement, he was able to construct a more positive image of the situation as he noted the benefits of the chore jar. Reacting to this statement, Trina agreed and legitimizes the construction that Trevor established. In Trevor's next statement it appeared that it might not be the chore jar that was motivating, but rather the frustration of both the children and his wife. It appeared like it was an accepted fact that Trevor was not going to do as much around the house. His effort was portrayed positively whenever he puts as much effort into the household labor as their children do. When Trina got out the Chore Jar, a jar that she kept that was filled with index cards with chores written on the cards, it was understood that the children would be helping out their mother in cleaning the household, and this progressed better if Trevor was also pulling out cards and working. Trevor noted that the children never complain that Trina was not doing chore jar chores, which might be because the children know that she is the one doing most of the labor and Trevor is her helper. In constructing Trevor as a helper, it was apparent that he is evaluated positively when helping out, picking chores from the chore jar just like the kids, and not constructed as incompetent in his production of household work. Through this interaction, the descriptions that Trevor sets forth allowed him to be constructed as the good helper, and diminished the fact that Trina seemed frustrated in

the situation and often had to yell in order for this help to occur. The norms of gendered labor have allowed Trevor to be discursively constructed as a helper rather than be seen as responsible for the labor.

At times it was clear that wives also engaged in behavior that was helping, but there is a clear difference between husband as helper and looking at general household labor as performed through helping. In constructing the husband as helper, the husband is helping to reify a situation that constructs the wife as the primary laborer at home and reinforces the wife as controller/responsible for the household norms. Whereas in situations where we see other household labor as helping it is clear that both parties are just helping the other out and sharing labor for the good of the household. Although the notion of helping out can be seen in husband as helper, it is the discursive constructions of the traditional gender norms reinforced in the sub-theme of husband as helper that lead to the marginalization of individuals.

In Negotiating Family Labor, *labor as gendered*, the norms of *family first*, and *ideal workers* interact in ways that both offer opportunities for individuals as well as constrain the possibilities that they have. Much of what is present in negotiating family labor speaks to the traditional assumptions of gendered labor. Women are (re)created as controlling, capable, and accustomed to the labor in the household, thus serving to empower them in the household, offering a site of resistance from the ideal worker norm, and marginalizing them through increased labor and responsibility. Men are similarly trapped in constructions of incompetence, unable, and uninterested in the labor of the household, which serves to empower them in hegemonic labor assumptions and allow them to enact the ideal worker norms. These constructions also offer men a site of

resistance in avoiding household labor and marginalizes them as they are (re)created as the “less than” parent, or the “less than” competent spouse. It is important to look at how couples negotiate family labor in tandem with the presentations of positivity found in *The Reeds’ Smile*. This interaction will be further explored in the next chapter.

In looking at the themes of negotiating family labor, there were two couples that stood out amongst the rest and did not fit into the same themes as other couples. Both Bianca and Brad and also Jenna and Jake did not interact in ways that recreated the historic gender norms that were represented by the other couples. Both of these couples were similar in age, ethnicity and socio-economic status. What was more interesting was that these couples were the ones who defied the more traditional gendered labor norms that are enacted with household labor, and even almost reversed this labor performance. This could be seen in Jenna’s comments about her husband’s tendency to take responsibility for the household labor:

So, yea that is probably, probably, we were talking about stuff and he would rather “whatever, I’ll just do it” and then he gets angry and he gets little nitpicky stuff and then he gets clearly there is a problem, What is the problem. Well, this needed to be done and why didn’t you do that? So why didn’t you say you needed help with that or that you felt that it needed to get done? So usually it is the case of me saying, “So did you need me to do this?” “Well, I don’t know”. And I am like, “No the question was did you need me to do this or do you need me to do this?” It is even like, um, oh just any little thing he occasionally will just do it instead of just asking someone else.

In this statement, there was a clear reversal of traditional gendered norms, with Jake trying to perform the role of the super mom and Jenna being regulated to the role of helper. Jenna noted later in the interview that Jake was recreating the behaviors of his mother, suggesting socialization, but in Bianca and Brad’s relationship Brad’s repeated justification for this reversal was care/emotionally based “So the more I did made it

easier on her.” However with this very limited group, it is not clear why these differences exist, as they only appeared in these two couples.

In looking at the permeations of power, the three clusters of power create part of the web of work-life concerns that shape the way that individuals co-construct their concerns. Power in the gendered nature of labor, the competing values, and the ways the couples negotiate family labor all work individually and together in both empowering and disempowering individuals in their relationships. Through their interconnections research gains a better understanding of the interactions and intersections of these components and how they impact individuals’ lives as they co-construct work-life concerns with their partner. The implications for this main theme and these sub-themes will be discuss in the next chapter as I look further into how the themes answer the research questions about gender and power in work-life co-constructions.

#### *Summary of the Chapter*

In looking at the ways that couples co-construct work-life concerns, the various factors that impact their lives can best be understood as a web of issues. First, none of the issues that create an impact on these individuals’ lives works independently. In the quotes that were selected to illustrate the themes, there are clear examples of both the theme I am illustrating as well as other themes in this chapter. Additionally, through the interconnection of these various constructs the strength that they each have increases as the multiplicity of the links help to create a stronger web in which individuals struggle more to create change. For example, the norm of the wife as skilled is strong, but it is through other constructs, such as creating the husband as incompetent, the framing of the family first and the downward social comparison of viewing the couple as better than

average that these concerns are then not addressed at the same length that they might be otherwise. Similarly, not only are these couples then not talking about concerns because they might be minimalized, but they also view the communication that they do have as positive and important because many of the issues that might be lead to conflict are hidden from view. If individuals note concerns about inequity, they are again reminded through the larger norms not to question the system, because that behavior would just be selfish, and instead pushed further into framing the family as first.

These themes and sub-themes of the *centrality of communication*, *The Reeds' Smile*, and the *permeations of power* all weave together to create an almost impervious web, with strands branching out and overlapping in a complex and intricate pattern. Taken as a whole the web appears too large and individuals are easily entangled. However, pulling apart the individual strands, as done in this chapter, allows a better look at the construction and components of the web. In the next chapter, after stepping back and letting the strands fall into place again, the interactions are clearer as understanding of the components was first established. Chapter five will also explore answers to the research questions that were proposed in Chapter three, discuss the three main themes and offer a site for recommendations on how work-life co-constructions can be done differently.

## CHAPTER FIVE- DISCUSSION

### *Summary of Purpose and Findings*

Although a variety of research in the field of communication speaks to the concerns of work-life issues faced by couples, gaps still exist in the research. Research has started to explore feminist concerns within the construct of work-life (e.g., Deutsch, 1999; Hochschild, 1989; Medved, 2004), how couples co-construct these concerns (e.g., Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Golden, 2000, 2002; Hochschild, 1989) and how gender and power play into these interactions (e.g., Berk, 1985; Medved, 2004). Yet, there remains space to further explore and expand both couples' and men's voices in these conversations and allow for an extended view of how co-construction of work-life concerns occur for both couples with and without children. In order to expand the scope of understanding that past research offers, this study examined how couples co-construct work-life concerns. After speaking with 19 couples, both in dyadic interviews and in individual stimulated recall interviews, three central themes were apparent that link together and form a web of work-life that can trip-up and inhibit some individuals.

First, through the interviews with both the couples and in the individual interviews, the *centrality of communication* emerged. In this theme, individuals discuss how communication should occur in couple's interactions. The theme was composed of four sub themes: conversations as positive, the importance of communication, communication as realignment, and just sit down and talk. In the first three of the sub-themes, couples talked about the communication they had about work-life concerns as important, good, and a way for them to build a common understanding. Through this

language it was clear that the couples recognized the importance of communication in dealing with work-life concerns. The final sub-theme framed the couples' communication about work-life concerns in very simplistic terms, suggesting either the unexamined nature of their communication or the limited vocabulary to describe these interactions.

*The Reeds' Smile*, or the social construction of happiness, was the second theme.

Within this theme were six sub-themes that all spoke to the larger construction of the relationship as positive. The first of the sub-themes, positive framing of the relational situation showcased all of the ways that individuals worked to display their relationship in the best light. Sub-themes two through four illustrated the use of downward social comparison to create a positive image in the construction of their relationship, the conflict that they experienced, and the work-life concerns that they handled. The use of humor to reduce tension was sub-theme five and included the instances in which couples utilized humor to frame their concerns to reduce the negative consequences of their concerns or interaction. Finally, conversations as logical illustrated the ways in which couples worked to construct their work-life conversations as logical to the point in which there is a privileging of rationality over emotionality. The larger theme of *The Reeds' Smile* offers a way in which couples discursively construct their happiness through the positive framing of their relationships. Additionally, through this construction there is an obscuring of unhappiness, a silencing of concerns and even inequity as concerns might be ignored. In the paring of the centrality of communication with *The Reeds' Smile*, the couples understand the importance to their communication but might be talking about just the positive aspects of their relationship.



Permeations of power was the last central theme that arose from talking with couples about how they negotiate work-life concerns. These permeations exist as ways in which power plays out in couples' relationships through constructs that exist as concurrently as source of power as well as sites of marginalization. Within the larger umbrella of permeations of power there were three subordinate themes. The first of these themes was the theme of labor as gendered. When both couples talked and individuals shared more, it was clear that these individuals experienced a clear understanding of the gendered nature of labor in creating the evaluations for household labor, performing the labor, as well as in the justifications of the gendered labor performance. This theme of labor as gendered offers multiple possibilities for power, resistance, and marginalization. The second theme that was present in the permeations of power is the framing of competing value systems that dual-earner couples face when negotiating work-life concerns. Individuals spoke of competing values systems when they talked about both the idealized expectations of home and work and the concerns that result from negotiating both arenas. In the theme of the competing value systems, individuals talked about the expectations of the ideal worker, the norm of family first, and the tension they experienced as a result of these competing expectations. The tensions arose from the ideal worker set against the frame of placing the family first and also in a tension noted by the wives where the tug of gendered expectation competed with the ideal worker norm. Finally, within the larger frame of permeations of power, the impact of labor and values is apparent in the sub-theme of negotiating family labor. In discussing the ways that labor was performed in the household and how couples dealt with work-life concerns,

individuals noted negotiations of labor that were influenced by the larger constructions of gender and power that are present in the images of work-life.

### *Discussion of Research Questions*

*RQ1: How do couples discursively co-construct and understand their work-life issues?*

Couples' co-constructed work-life issues in a variety of ways. Through their conversations, participants discursively (re)constructed strands of the web of work-life that would stick together and shape future interactions. Couple's co-constructions of work-life appeared to be shaped through the discursive construction of happiness, positively framing their own communication, the historical (re)constructions of norms, and in the concerns that were not talked about.

The most notable feature of the conversations that the couples had about work-life concerns was the construction of their relationships and interactions as positive. Although part of this construction might have been impacted by the fact that couples first described their relationship in front of their spouse, these positive constructions continued into the individual interviews. This positivity in the interviews could be construed as relational maintenance strategies (Stafford & Canary, 1991) or the attempts for a positive presentation. Other researchers have noted the tendency for individuals to censor the realities of their family's situations in front of researchers (Sillars, 1995). However, after assuring individuals of the confidence of their interviews and working to build rapport, I cannot see what benefit the couples would have received in working to create this positive image outside the dyadic interview beyond the habit of positive presentations of self. It appeared that these individuals were engaging in a presentation and enactment of their relationship as happy.

Looking further at the social construction of happiness in *The Reeds' Smile*, it is clear that both the social comparisons and the minimization of issues are prominent in individuals' interactions. First, downward social comparisons (Wills, 1981) were used in constructing the couple as better than average in dealing with work-life concerns. This furthers a portrayal of the couple as more competent and better communicators, which adds to the image of the couple as successful. Downward social comparisons were also noted in how the couples talked about their conflict and their concerns which also added to these constructions of work-life concerns as minimized and overall positive. In creating the arguments as less than serious, regardless of the reality, the positive image of the couple is reinforced, because clearly their conflict patterns are not as bad as other individuals. Images of the couple as better off than others were furthered by constructing the concerns that they held as less than what they could be.

Beyond social comparisons, happiness was also co-constructed by couples through other techniques. Happiness in the relationship was also monitored through the strategic use of humor. Humor served to reduce tensions in interactions, as well as avoid conflict, and from its use the couple minimized work-life concerns. Both humor and positivity have been noted to be ways in which relationships are maintained (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Clearly these interactions and negotiations of work-life were constructed as an opportunity to maintain their relationships. Within the frame of positivity, rationality was also noted and privileged by the couples in their discussions of how concerns are handled. It was almost as if characteristics of lesser competent couples include the portrayals of emotionality in the interactions. This privileging of rationality can also be seen as aspects of gender and power, both which will be discussed later.

Building on the larger positive frame, these constructions reinforce the idea that all is well within the relationship, which could serve to remove the possibility of presenting anything that is contrary to this construction. This possibility of couple's co-constructing silence as they co-construct images of positivity will be discussed below.

As couples talked about the conversations that they have surrounding work-life concerns, they first added into these conversations the impact and importance of communication. For many individuals, the impact and importance of the work-life communication was almost delegitimized through the frequent oversimplification of these conversations as "just talk." This framing of work-life conversation was even more interesting when individuals talked about the importance of communication, the positive nature of these conversations, and the ways that it helped couples realign themselves. Is it possible that although the work-life conversations that couples have are seen as important and positive, these responses are impacted by the routine nature of some of these concerns or the minimization of issues so that concerns that one might have would not be discussed? If conversations about work-life concerns were more volatile, or there were more concerns would individuals be able to co-construct conversations in this way? If the discourse about work-life was not perceived to go as well for the individuals involved, might the comments on the importance of communication still be present? I argue that there might be a relationship between positivity and perceptions of communication that allow both to be constructed in tandem. After constructing discourse as positive, this frame can become a real constraint for individuals that then forces couples to stay within the boundaries of happiness in their discourse, which then can shape their view of communication as positive and important.

Another way in which couples co-constructed their work-life concerns was done through the utilization of historical constructions of gendered norms. Just as past research has noted norms apparent in the couples' stories (e.g., Deutsch, 1999; Hochschild, 1989), these similar norms were discursively (re)created by couples. Falling back on the norms of gendered labor, the constructions of women as more capable in the household and men as more incompetent were (re)created in a variety of ways in the couples' discussions. As couples discursively (re)created these norms, they also co-constructed work-life along traditional gender lines. The co-constructions of work-life around these normative recreations offers possibilities and constraints for individuals in terms of both gender and power which will be discussed in the next research question.

Just as it is important to examine what was discussed in the conversations about work-life concerns, it is also important to note what was not discussed. Clair (1998) argued that communication cannot be understood without also looking at the silence that is also present. The discourse of happiness silences the possibility for unhappiness. Similarly, the framing of rationality in conversations mutes the possibility for emotionality. And the simplification of conversations as "just talk" removes the possibilities for voicing the messy and possibly emotional nature of communication. Although couples co-constructions of work-life did include references to power and gender, both of which will be discussed in the next research questions, what was not given as much focus was the issue of equity. There were only a few couples that noted attention paid to who is doing what and trying to perform labor in a way that is equitable, but it was not something that was in the majority of interactions. Instead, what was more clearly present in the majority of these interactions was justification for why the couple's

labor was performed inequitably. In offering both the justifications imbedded with power and gender combined with the construction of happiness, individuals may be held hostage in their own relationships as they co-construct and reify norms in ways that prevent them from co-constructing work-life in more equitable ways.

*RQ2: How are couples' discursive co-constructions of work-life concerns enacted by and enacting gender?*

Turning to the theme of permeations of power, the saturation and centrality of gender is apparent in every aspect of this theme. It is clear that gender is fundamentally intertwined in the labor of work-life. Participants noted that in the performance, evaluations, and expectations of labor that gender held a central role. If gender is clearly present in the assumptions for household labor and these assumptions are recreated in individual's discourse, then these gender-based delegations of labor are going to be done in ways that reify these divisions. In the reification of these gendered assumptions of labor, material conditions are then structured in ways that impact the opportunities for performance. This (re)creation of the assumptions for gendered labor is present in the ways that couples negotiate their family labor. Instances in which the husband claims ignorance and rejects the sharing of labor in the household reflect binds that are put on the wife as more household labor is then left to her. Even in situations where the husband is merely constructed as a helper and not ignorant, the labor that the husband engages in is still less than the labor that the wife is left with. In working as a helper the masculine is still subordinate to the feminine in terms of knowledge and expectations, which allows for a continued dependency on the feminine as a guide to the correct or best way that this

labor is completed. This enactment reflects Gordon and Wielen-Berry's (2005) research, in which wives' noted that the husbands performed labor but did not manage the labor.

Inextricably tied to the husband's negotiations of household labor, the framing of the wife's labor is also done in ways that recreates the assumption of gendered labor in the couple's interactions. First, in offering feminine authority in the scheduling and as the director and supervisor, women are constructed as the logical extension to not only take on much of the labor, but also to monitor and evaluate all that falls into the realm of the household. This helps construct the material reality of wife as holding up more of the second shift (Hochschild, 1989). The reality of the wife's extended hours creates real gendered consequences of exhaustion, unhappiness (Frisco & Williams, 2003) and for those in higher socio-economic status, opting-out (Stone, 2007). Secondly, as the framing of women as skilled and supermoms is perpetuated, it legitimizes their clear skill in household work and the ability to handle more than their husbands. This then (re)creates the acceptability of the inequitable balance of labor and also legitimizes it as a good idea because women are the individuals who can do it, as well as know the best way to do it. These results reflect Deustch's (1999) finding suggesting that in order to resist equal sharing of labor husbands frame their wives' task performances as skilled and as better than theirs.

Just as assumptions of labor and the (re)creation of these assumptions shape and are shaped by gender, so are the (re)creation of the norms of ideal work and family first in individuals' discourse. Family first assumptions work with the ideal worker norm to create different expectations for men and women. Also for women, the gendered expectations about the responsibilities of placing family first interact in ways that conflict

with traditional masculine assumptions about the ideal worker in ways that do not exist for men. The masculine constructions of the ideal worker are closely tied to the provider role for men so that both are allowed to be constructed congruently (Simon, 1995). Yet for women, the image of family first helps reinforce feelings of inadequacy (e.g., Deutsch, 1999; Hochschild, 1989) as they are left rushing around feeling like they should be able to do it all, as the norms suggest. As couples discuss labor tied to both the ideal worker and family first norms, gender is apparent as either allowing or constraining individuals. The impact of gender allows men to perform both of these norms congruently, and also create situations in which women note experiencing tensions and superwomen tendencies that create an exhaustion and continuous work as a material reality of for them.

Gender is clearly heard in the language around work-life through the framing of the many levels of power that impact couple's co-constructions of work-life. But it is also important to understand how gender is silenced through the framing of positivity and the framing of happiness in couples' co-constructions of their relationships and interactions. When couples work to construct their own happiness in the language that they use, they also silence the ability to give voice to their concerns, as these concerns are already being minimized in their discussions through the frames of positivity. Minimizing the concerns that couples have impacts the material differences that are apparent in gender. If concerns cannot be constructed as real, then these issues of inadequacy can be constructed as normal. Though individuals noted the gendered nature of labor and talked about their negotiations in ways that made the gendered nature of these aspects of their lives clear, the communication was based on the positive constructions of the relationships. From



this positive construction, it seems likely that more individuals are not talking about these topics, but instead use some form of downward social comparison (Wills, 1981) to create the legitimacy and story of their relationship. Through these constructions, opportunities to discuss ways in which problems might be arising in the relationship are eliminated.

*RQ3: How are couples' discursive co-constructions of work-life concerns enacted by and enacting power?*

In the larger frame of permeations of power, the construction of power is apparent in a variety of levels. Through this theme, the gendering of labor, power, resistance, and marginalization all interplay in different ways for men and women. As women are pulled into household labor through the permeations of power and use this construction as a source of power, they also are marginalized because more work falls to them, limiting their schedule and leisure time. Retaining control of the household also offers women a form of resistance to the traditional masculine privileging of the realm of paid labor as women are given the voice of authority in the household. For men, this construction of the gendered household labor offers power in avoiding labor, resistance from labor in the recreation of women's control and skill, and also marginalization in removing their agency in the household.

Just as gendered assumptions impact power in work-life negotiations, so does the discursive recreations of larger social norms. Couples' discursive (re)creations of the norms of family first and the ideal worker also impact power in the relationship, because dual-earners and especially women often experience tensions between the ideal worker versus family first, and also between the gendered constructions versus the ideal worker. At the same time, power lies in the norms as the frame of the family first delegitimizes

the individual's ability to discuss their personal concerns because individuals are granted less importance than the larger relationship. Similarly, the ideal worker norm offers power to those who follow its prescriptions and justifies their behaviors. Individuals negotiating work-life concerns can enact power through the use of these larger norms as a shield to justify their behaviors and block criticism or to keep others in line when they fail to enact the larger norms.

Couples' discursively reproduce assumptions about gendered labor and norms in ways that impact both partners. Many of these normative reproductions closely mirrored the assumptions of gendered labor in the implications of power. The constructions of husbands as incompetent and as helpers coincides with the constructions of wives as planner/director/supervisors and skilled/supermoms. The construction of masculinity in work-life cannot be done without femininity (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004), and from this necessary dialectic there is also the construction of power/resistance for both constructed simultaneously. Through these gendered constructions of labor, men are empowered through decreased responsibilities, resist shared labor through their incompetence, and also are marginalized because men lose agency in the relationship. Women in the household are co-constructed as powerful in their control and their skill in this realm. However, in (re)creating this dominance, women also resist sharing control with their partners and are marginalized by their own increased labor and decreased leisure time. Just as Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) note the premise of power and resistance as intimately tied together, this intimate weave of power/resistance is seen as couple's co-construct work-life concerns. It is important to note how behavior and enactment of norms works to grant power to individuals in some situations and concurrently

marginalizes them. In co-constructing work-life, couples are both agentic and constrained.

Beyond the blatant manifestations of power apparent in the discourse and materiality of the permeations of power, power is also manifested in the constructions of communication and positivity of the couples. As noted before in the couple's co-constructions of work-life concerns, the framing of the relationship as positive and better than average works to create a larger narrative for the relationship that then builds and reifies an understanding of the relationship. It is then around this narrative for the relationships that individuals are constrained into these frames. After continually constructing the relationship as happy and successful, it might be more difficult to present an image that deviates from that. The need to have the relationship appear successful might also work as a powerful framework for keeping individual's descriptions of their relationship within these positive depictions. When the participants socially construct happiness through these descriptions, they are also constructing both the idea of the successful relationship as well as a norm that holds power for the relationship. These discursively (re)created norms are powerful because they hold the ability to frame reality, and from this different perspectives are marginalized and silenced. If the couple is working together to create an understanding of the relationship as successful, they might later be unwilling or unable to construct their relationship in a way that strays from this conception. As a result, concerns are silenced.

Beyond power in silencing and framing the relationship, these positive evaluations also hold power as they work to maintain relationships. Both positivity in the constructions and the use of humor that are apparent in The Reeds' Smile function as

relational maintenance behaviors as noted by Stafford and Canary (1991). Relational maintenance behaviors are those strategic and routine behaviors that individuals engage in to maintain their relationship at a desired level. If by focusing on the relationship, individuals grant power to relationships and privilege the relationship over themselves, this might be another way in which the individuals choose to enact the norm of the family first or do whatever it takes for their family's success at the expense of the individual. Through framing the relationship as more important than individual goals, ignoring one's own needs becomes not only easier but also at times the right thing to do. If individuals work with the central focus of maintaining the relationship or privileging the family first, this might be part of the reasons why labor equity is not discussed in the couple's conversations.

#### *Implications for the Topic*

*Work-life as continually impacted by the historical context of norms and (en)gendering families.* The first important implication for the work-life researcher is in highlighting the need to note the power of historical construction because individuals continually discursively (re)create these norms and ideal roles. Those individuals who were able to most clearly articulate these historic norms also appeared to be dependent on these norms as the source of information for how their relationships function. The norms that are still being utilized by these couples suggest that work-life concerns are still in a location referred to as the "stalled revolution" (Hochschild, 1989). In this study individuals discursively reconstructed norms in ways that have been noted in past works because gendered norms of both men and women were noted by participants. In 1999, Deutsch pointed to the implications of incompetence, and even back in 1989 Hochschild

showed exemplars of the husbands who would just slowly forget to do their portion of the cooking until the wife returned to take over the labor. Past researchers also noted other behaviors, such as wives failing to relinquish control (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 1996). However, in looking further at the historical context of these norms, this research brings into focus both the couples (re)creation and use of the norms and larger historical institutional discourses, which can be missed if research just notes the norms. Through the continued focus on the larger discourses, a clearer understanding of Ashcraft and Mumby's (2004) fourth frame of discourse (en)gendering organizations is apparent in the social messages that work to (en)gender families and the ways in which they negotiate work life. Research needs to continue to build on this focus by looking at how these messages permeate all aspects of social discourse and individuals lives and then reappear in the discursive creations in both the family organization and in the dyadic relationship.

*Work-life as silencing individuals in order to maintain relationships.* The second implication for work-life scholarship is the need to build on relational maintenance research as it intersects with individual concerns in creating privilege and power. It was noted in this research that positivity was clearly used in a way to minimize the concerns of the couple and make the couple appear better than average, their conflict as less than others, and their concerns as smaller than others. In the social construction of happiness, individuals also used humor to minimize concerns and shape how their interactions were to occur. Because the construction of happiness worked to silence the possibility of apparent unhappiness, individual's concerns could also be silenced. This positivity and humor could also be seen as ways in which individuals discursively constructed norms for the presentation of the relationship. Both humor and positivity function as relationship

maintenance strategies (Safford & Canary, 1991) and are generally seen through this lens as positive constructions for the relationship. Yet if these same concepts work to silence individuals and individual concerns, then research needs to continue to examine the ways in which relational maintenance can be used to oppress individuals. In the silencing of individual concern through the social construction of happiness, the relationship was in turned maintained. However, research should be careful to not dichotomize the concerns as either for the family or detrimentally impacting the individual, but rather use this as another opportunity to extend the complex understanding of language and materiality that is both empowering and disempowering.

*Work-life as both interpersonal and organizational.* The third implication in looking at future work-life scholarship is the need to continue to remove the artificial barrier between interpersonal and organizational. This study suggests that work-life co-constructions are not a concepts that exists in separate spheres of home and workplace but instead bleed together in to complex constructions. This argument has been posited by past researchers (e.g., Golden, 2009; Kirby, 2006; Martin, 2000). As couples discursively construct work-life, they also (re)create norms of both the household and workplace in their interactions. Norms of labor, gender, ideal worker norms, and norms of family first shape the ways and couples' interactions and translate into their discourse. Apparent in discourse, these norms extend from the workplace and the household, working together to create an impact in the way that couples negotiate work-life concerns. The ways in which the expectations of the ideal worker impact individuals' lives cannot be fully seen without looking at the competing notions of the family first because it is through the illustration of the competing norms that the tensions are clearest.

Likewise, the construction of the masculine workplace is best understood in tandem with the feminine household. Therefore, constructing artificial divisions between the home and workplace could only limit further the understanding that we build about work-life.

Rather, if attention is continuously focused on the larger norms that permeate all realms of work-life, a larger perspective can be developed on how the areas of the workplace and the household blend together and exist as a dialectic.

*Implications for Research (Interpersonal and Feminist)*

Work-life research is an important area of research for both interpersonal scholars and feminist scholars alike. This research extends the understanding of work-life concerns in both the area of interpersonal communication research and feminist research through the application of a feminist theory in focusing on the dyad. First, I will explore the implications for this research in the area of feminist scholarship, which will be proceeded by an analysis of the implications of this research in the area of interpersonal communication.

*Recognition of the complex entanglement of power/resistance.* The first implication of this study in feminist research is noting and furthering the complex understanding of resistance/power suggested by Ashcraft and Mumby (2004). In this study, individuals engaged in behavior and discursively creating ways in which they were agentic as well as subjugated. For example, women claimed understandings and enactments that offer power in the control of the household but also marginalize them through the increased hours of labor. These results reflect Deutsch's (1999) past work and offer the possibility for developing understanding in examining work-life through a communication focus on power/resistance. When researchers question why individuals

engage in behaviors that offer constraints, consideration should also be made in turning to see how these same behaviors might also serve to liberate individuals. Understanding might be further developed as to how behaviors that might be seen as just problematic are also empowering for individuals if more attention is paid to the ways in which the same behaviors not only offer a sources of power, but also resistance and marginalization. This call has started to be answered with work on (dis)empowerment of fundraisers (Meisenbach, 2008), and it should be continued and expanded. This work serves to extend Ashcraft and Mumby's (2004) framework to the household and offer an understanding of why women and men engage in behaviors that lead to their marginalization. With the both/and nature of power/resistance, research is able to offer the complex understanding missed through other lenses.

*Centering work-life on gender and power.* The second implication from this study for feminist research is the need to continue to center work-life research on issues of power and gender. Many feminist researchers have argued that gender is intricately tied to power (e.g., Ashcraft, 2005; Hartmann, 1987). It is only through centering work-life research on the areas of gender and power that researchers can develop a clearer understanding of the crux of the issue. When work-life fails to be seen as a feminist issue, it limits the ability to examine the variables most central to work-life. In this study, it was clear that gender lies at the center of work-life and interacts with power. This perspective has also been argued by past researchers (e.g., Deutsch 1999; Medved, 2004). In centering this understanding on both power and gender, gender needs to continue to be constructed as masculinity/femininity. This study noted that the artificial separation between the two limits the understanding of each because they are constructed in tandem,



as both Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) and Flax (1990) suggested. By continuing a dual focus on both categories at the same time, there is a greater possibility to include a multitude of voices. At the same time, power should continually be examined as power/resistance because in this study a deeper understanding of the impact of both gender and discursively created norms can be seen if we look at a variety of different sources of power concurrently. In examining both gender and power as central, this leads to the first implication of this study for interpersonal research, examining norms.

*Importance of examining norms reproduced through discourse.* The first implication for this study in interpersonal communication is the importance of examining historic norms that are discursively (re)produced. This study noted the ways in which individuals (re)produced norms of gender and power in their communication, and how these reproductions impacted the lives of the couples who were working to co-construct their work-life realities. Clearly, these larger norms had a strong impact on the lives of these individuals because they were prominent in the discursive construction of experiences and shaped the material constraints by establishing and reinforcing social structures that limit possibilities for action. These productions were then utilized to maintain certain norms in their relationships, as also noted by Deutsch (1999) and Hochschild (1989). Past interpersonal research has noted the ways that relational satisfaction is tied to existing norms, especially in women's performances (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001). In focusing more interpersonal research on the impact of discursive (re)creations of norms on individuals, attention in research could expand the ways in which these norms not only help maintain relationships through increased satisfaction, but at the same time also constrain the possibilities for the relationship by

reinforcing harmful norms. Creating more of a dialectic understanding of both growth and constraint through norms would allow for continual growth in interpersonal research.

*Social comparison and relational maintenance.* The second implication for interpersonal communication is the furthered understanding of relational maintenance within couples' negotiations of work-life, through positivity and humor. At the same time, this research further develops growth in the social comparison literature. In working to construct their relationships as positive, couples used social comparisons, humor, and rationalizations in a way that benefits their relationships. When couples discursively create their relationships, conflicts, and concerns as better than average these co-constructions work to the benefit of the relationship through placing the couple in a positive light. These positive constructions can then aid in the relational satisfaction, as Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) noted that positive illusions are tied to satisfaction, and a certain degree of self deception appears to be an integral component of relational satisfaction. Foundational research on relationship maintenance behaviors noted positivity as a way to support the relationship (Safford & Canary, 1991). Similarly, humor has been noted to be an effective relational maintenance strategy (Stafford & Canary, 1991). Although the positive framing and humor appear to be helpful to the relationship, they might also be harmful to the individual. In working to do what was best for the relationship, individuals are creating norms that might prevent them from framing the relationship in a way that contradicts these norms. For example, if humor is used to minimize a concern and construct it as less legitimate, then through the continued reification of this norm of the happy couple, individuals might hesitate to speak out about

this concern. Future research needs to look further at how relational maintenance behaviors might be harmful to individuals while serving the needs of the relationship.

In addition to offering support to the idea of downward social comparisons (Wills, 1981), this research also expands the possibilities for work on social comparisons. The construction of social comparisons also works to support the research that points to idealization as critical in relationships (Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In this study couples constructed an idealized version of their relationship through the use of social comparisons as they continuously viewed themselves as better than average. Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) also noted that these projected illusions lead to great satisfaction. If individuals are able to construct relationships, conflict, and concerns as better than average they might then be able to hold more satisfactory relationships. Through the constructions of The Reeds' Smile, this study notes ways in which couples build satisfaction in their relationships in the context of work-life negotiations. Future research could continue to expand the understanding of how work-life negotiations are done in ways that work to maintain the relationships and combine this perspective with the inherent ties to power and gender. Beyond implications for just interpersonal and feminist research, this study also offers implications for the theory of feminist communicology.

#### *Implications for Theory*

*Extension of organizational communication research.* This research offers justification for the transferability of feminist communicology to the interpersonal realm. Eicher-Catt (2005) called for the need to extend communicology into family communication, and this study starts to answer that call and provides a model for creating

this transition in looking at work-life through the dialectic of masculinity/femininity. This research offers the possibility of the extension of theory into new areas of scholarship. Furthermore, this study also serves as a way to continue examining feminist communicology and offers support for the premises of the theory within another realm of communication. Examining interpersonal phenomena through the lens of feminist communicology offers a unique way to engage in a more complex framing of discourse/materiality, power, and gender in research. Expanding this theory to interpersonal communication offers possibilities for a more in-depth look at power/resistance in a variety of areas including surname change at the time of marriage and continued research on relationship maintenance.

*Reinvisioning framework.* The second main implication from this research for the theory of feminist communicology is a new way to look at the frames of discourse and gender offered by Ashcraft (2004) and Ashcraft and Mumby (2004). Work-life research applies to many of the frames that Ashcraft has established as noted in the review of literature. However, it is through the work on work-life research that these frames can be further developed. Originally, these four frames were constructed as common ways to understand the relationship among discourse, gender, and organizations (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). However, the two first frames, gender organizes discourse and discourse (dis)organizes gender, can both be translated across areas with minimal effort, as the first examines the gendered communication styles and the second looks at gender as (dis)organized in interpersonal interactions.

The possibility for expanding Ashcraft and Mumby's (2004) work lies instead in looking at frames three and four through an interpersonal focus. It is in frames three and

four that the greatest attention is given to organizations as they interact with gender and discourse, but with the current research focusing on organizations, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) present a limited view of the power of these constructs. Although this view might be limited by the newness of the theory, it does not appear that Ashcraft and Mumby intended this theory to be limited to the current sites of application. Kirby et al. (2003) argued that families are gendered institutions. From the earlier arguments of researchers and the focus of this research, understanding these frames through an interpersonal lens appears appropriate. The third frame originally is set up as organizing (en)genders discourse looking at the social construction of gender at the institutional level. However, if we understand that families are institutions, then making this transition makes sense. Similarly, frame four looks at how discourse (en)genders organization through the broader social narrative. In looking at work-life research through this frame there are many clear examples of larger narratives that impact families, from the supermom to the breadwinner, and then provide support for the application of this frame into the interpersonal realm. Continuing interpersonal research through Ashcraft and Mumby's (2004) frames offers more possibilities for expanding the impact of this theory.

*Discourses/Materiality shaped by historical context and political economy.* The third main implication of this research for the theory of feminist communicology is in extending the frame of the historical context. The political economy at the time of the industrial revolution worked to construct the ideal of the breadwinner and homemaker (Bernard, 1981; Ferree, 1990). The dominance of capitalistic ideals added in the construction of the ideal worker (Hartmann, 1987). Through the prevalence of the historical construction of norms about the ideal ways in which both paid and household

labor should occur, couples discursively (re)create these norms in their interactions and reify the assumptions of gendered labor and norms in ways that constrain individual options. Not only do we see how these norms impact individuals, but clearly individuals shape these norms to fit their needs. This study offers a unique look at how these historic work-life norms are discursively (re)created through couples' conversations. Examining further the ways in which historical context extends into the daily interactions of individuals work-life co-constructions might offer a way to expand feminist communicology by looking not only at the past political/historical impacts but also by starting research in the conversations of the couples in the interpersonal realm about these concerns and then tracing backwards the impact and interaction with historical and political contexts.

### *Application*

Central to the theory of feminist communicology is the call for praxis, not only in taking an ethical stand but also as the responsibility of the feminist researcher to extend the scholarship back to the lives of individuals. The findings of this study suggest many practical applications that could be useful in helping couples negotiate work-life concerns. Specifically, working with couples and offering training in communication, identifying problems with common conceptions, working with men and women to create opportunity for equity, and providing voice for feminist concerns will be discussed.

### *Working with couples on communication training*

In talking with couples about the ways that they deal with work-life concerns, common was the response of "just talk." In this framing of work-life communication as just talking, there is a probable minimization of both the conversations and the impact of

these conversations. However, this minimization might be a result of limited vocabulary in which individuals can describe how they engage in communication about concerns with their partners. Meeting with couples and exploring communication styles, conflict styles and listening skills might not only broaden their understanding of the communication that they use in the interactions with their spouse, but it might also be helpful in providing alternatives to some problematic communication styles.

*Working with couples identifying problems with common norms*

The roles that individuals hold impact the discourse that they engage in and then are (re)created through these discourses, therefore it is important for couples to understand and examine these problematic common conceptions. Participants have noted in their conversations the gendered nature of labor, the norms of the ideal worker, and the family first norms. If individuals have the opportunity to examine these conceptions they might be better able to understand how these constructions impact their relationship. Through further education couples could be offered a chance to identify the norms that they are discursively reproducing in their relationships, how those (re)productions impact the ways in which they structure their relationships, and maybe learn new ways in which they can construct their relationships.

*Changes for the wife that offer equity and empowerment for all individuals*

Beyond offering programs for couples, programs focused on women might allow for more open communication and a safe space to start conversations about work-life concerns. In the attempt for power and agency in the relationship while resisting masculine power, many women appear to be reengaging with traditional roles and norms that marginalize them just as women also create power from them. In creating this power

through control of household labor, women are authoring with their partners a relational story in which they then are forced to take on more labor to ensure that it is done, and done correctly. Relinquishing control in the household has been noted to be a problem for many women (Deustch, 1999). However if women continue to hoard control, they continue to co-construct their own marginalization in their relationships. Barnett and Rivers (1996) argued that “women don’t have any genes that tell them how to fix breakfast or what’s the best way to give a kid a shampoo. Men can learn to do it perfectly well” (p. 227). Programs need to be constructed that focus on helping women understand the interpersonal communication they use, the historical constructions that they have adopted, and the interactions that they engage in that are harmful in developing equity in the relationship. Through these programs women could start to identify what norms that they are discursively (re)creating in their relationships and work on ways to foster awareness of these norms so that their co-constructions of work-life can be done differently.

*Changes for the husband that offer equity and empowerment for all individuals*

Just as creating a safe space for women to discuss concerns might facilitate better discussion, creating that space for men could also open discussions. Men also engage in discursive (re)construction of norms that impact their relationships in less than beneficial ways. In an act of resistance against the work of the household, men claim power in doing less through the performance of incompetence. Although incompetence serves to protect individuals from engaging in a more equitable division of labor, it also serves to marginalize men in the household as they are then constructed as less than women. Deustch (1999) argued that incompetence is not based as much on ability but rather



motivation. It might be that the masculine performance of incompetence is really the result of motivation, in which case programs geared at examining men's performances in the household might be able to address this cause. If programs for men explore the problems associated with inequity in the household, such as increased chance of divorce (Frisco & Williams, 2003) as well as the benefits that can be seen from increased equity in task sharing, such as happier and more committed couples (Canary & Stafford, 1993), real change might start to happen with more equity apparent in household labor.

#### *Changes in the attention to feminist concerns*

Feminism exists as the movement in search of creating equity for women, and the realm of work-life is one area that could further benefit from feminist efforts. In the household, couples co-construct work-life concerns in a way that recreates norms tied to gender and power in discourse and echo similar stories across relationships. Yet the household is often constructed as personal, and private. By privatizing these concerns, individuals are not offered a space in which to speak about them in larger settings. In 1987, Hartmann argued that equity and the "prospects for change in housework time . . . probably hinge most directly on the strength of the women's movement, for the amount and quality of housework services rendered, like the amount and pay from wage work, result from historical processes of struggle" (p. 125). If Hartmann is right in this claim, then the backlash against feminism and the outmoded identifier of "feminist," with fewer and fewer individuals claiming this marker, (Gardyn, 2001) has helped in maintaining this inequality. A new feminist awareness that pulls in women from all areas of life could provide the opportunity for women to work together to create change.

This awareness could be started in the education of individuals as to how problematic discursive constructions of work-life issues are inhibiting further equity. One possibility for change for feminists exists in educating individuals about the tie between relational maintenance and silencing the individual. Education is not the only answer, but it appears to be the best answer at this time. Policy changes cannot fully reach the private lives of individuals in the home, so instead feminism must work to change the ways that couples interact in the household. So I return to the call for education. Education in all of the areas that I have previously discussed, from education on norms, communication, and men's and women's classes, are feminist pursuits, as adding equity to the marital relationship offers more equity for women. This possibility for education could be offered in the form of premarital courses that are available to all individuals, instead of those that currently are normally organized through religious institutions. Through offering feminist focused courses and exposing individuals to these ideas before marriage, individuals might then enter in their marriage with a different perspective. Change may have been slow in the past in work-life concerns, and change may appear to be slow by focusing on education to make change in work-life concerns. But the norms that constrain couples did not develop in a few years, so it should be expected that creating change might also take more than a few years.

### *Strengths and Future Research*

In working to add to the discussion on work-life research, there were a few notable strengths of the research. These will be reviewed below.

### *Strength in Adding to Couples' Voices*

The first strength of this study is in intensifying the voices of couples co-constructing work-life concerns. Research examining work life concerns started to attend to the couple, either by talking to each individual (Deutsch, 1999) or in talking to the couple (Blaiser & Allen, 1995; Golden, 2000, 2002). Most of this research has come a long way in building an understanding of work-life concerns for parents. However, there is an important segment of the population that is not included to the same extent in this research, which is the married childless couple. In including both couples with children and those that do not have children, research opens the conversation to be more inclusive of the different ways in which different couples' co-construct work-life concerns.

### *Dyadic lens to look at couple*

Beyond adding to work-life research by expanding the view of couple types, this research moves work-life research forward as it includes couples' dialoging together. Work-life research has begun constructing a wide base of understanding and has started to incorporate research that looks to the couple as they co-construct their concerns. Hochschild (1989) offered an in-depth look at couples' constructions, framed from the lens of sociology. Golden (2000, 2002) built an understanding of how couples negotiate work-life in transitioning to parenting. In examining the couples as a unit first, I was able to get a better understanding of the relationship and also see them in relation to each other. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued that masculinity/femininity as well as power/resistance cannot be clearly seen apart from each other; separating the spouses from each other creates a false understanding of what is really happening in the relationship. By using the dyadic interview, the understanding of the couple is expanded

in a way that cannot be seen in just individual interviews of each participant. This extension offers a different way to see both gender and power and works to expand the understanding of work-life co-constructions.

*Discourse (re)created norms in the couple's co-construction*

Communication studies are uniquely positioned to examine the way that norms are (re)created in the couples' discourse. Buzzanell (1997) noted the impact of larger norms on women who choose to opt out of the workforce. Deutsch (1999) interviewed parents about how they negotiated parenting and noted norms in linguistic constructions. Yet the present study was unique in the focus on the interpersonal interactions of couples together co-constructing concerns. In couples' discourse that larger norms are clearly (re)created in their interactions, which shaped both the possibilities and limitations of the couple. In recognizing the way in which these norms are evoked in relationships, research can start to offer more possibilities for how to create change.

*Offering a site for communication and understanding*

The final strength of this research was noted by the participants. In speaking with the couples, a few of the participants thanked me at the end of the interview or interviews because they felt that they had benefited from participation. Although researchers often tell participants that one of the benefits to their study is the chance for the participants to learn more through this conversation, I had never experienced a situation where this benefit was clear. In interviewing the couples together I offered participants a chance to build understanding about their partners and their views about work-life concerns. For some individuals, this opportunity to discuss work-life concerns offered space to reflect

on this topic. During the individual interview, when reflecting on both the individual conversation time and the dyadic interview Heath noted:

It was actually kind of nice to sit down and lay it all out on the table. Sometimes it kinda, we open each other's eyes when we actually sit down and talk about it when it's not in the heat of the moment.

For some couples who might not have frequent conversations about the concerns that they have to negotiate, providing space for that interaction was a welcome opportunity.

#### *Future Research and Limitations*

Although the area of work-life has had the attention of researchers over the past decades, it is still an area that warrants continued focus because shifting material constructions and continuous discourse impacts the reality for couples as they work to negotiate work-life concerns. At the same time, even with the breadth of work that is available on this topic, there are still areas within work-life calling out for more attention. This study attempted to answer some of those calls by offering a space for voice for both partners as well as expanding the work on how these concerns are co-constructed. Yet with the limitations of the study and the vast area within work-life concerns, there are still a variety of possible directions for this research still to go. I will review a few of those most central to this study.

One of the first possibilities that exist for research includes broadening conceptions of gender by diversifying the women and men examined. One of the limitations of this study can be seen in the reductionist language of this study in terms of discussing gender by simplifying gender down to husbands and wives. This language and the language of my study works to support the normative view that feminine can only be

equated with wife and masculine can only be equated with husband. Although I would argue that this construction is in fact too simplistic and fails to note the intricacies of human relationships, it does reflect the experiences of the majority of my participants who fell into more traditional gender constructions. Although a clearer understanding of gender might have been achieved in this paper through the labeling of gender in terms of the feminine individuals in the relationship as well as the masculine individual in the relationship, for the simplicity of the argument, I chose to continue with the labels of wife and husband. Although reflective of my participants, this choice might serve as a limitation to the understanding of individuals. It is possible that it was a function of my sample that individuals conformed to more traditional gender enactments, which begs the question for how researchers can continue this line of inquiry while opening research to more diverse participants. Future research should work to expand analysis to a more diverse subset of participants, including cohabitating and committed couples, so that a chance for more diversity in gender enactments is possible and this frame can be extended.

In talking with couples there were two other things that occurred that were interesting and might have had an impact on the study. The first one of these was the relatively short amount of time that individuals spent in conversation when I left the room. Although I instructed them to take about 10 to 15 minutes and discuss concerns (See Appendix D for more details), couples frequently took about half that time for the conversations that they had. Although I worked to start the interview with open questions to get the conversation going, and to make participants as comfortable with me as possible, the reality of the tape recorder or the unnatural feeling of just coming up with a

topic might have impacted their ability to engage in an in-depth conversation. In talking with the participants later about this, a few noted that conversations about work-life concerns only happen when an issue arises. If this is not a topic that individuals regularly incorporate into their discussion, or if it is a conversation limited by the artificial nature of the interaction, then an alternative method of research might provide more access to these discussions. Other reasons for limited discussion might come from the couple already having a common understanding on the issue. Sillars (1995) noted “where roles and meanings are collectively understood, there is less need to articulate meanings explicitly, so messages may appear cryptic, relying heavily on nonverbal communication and taken-for-granted knowledge” (p.382). Future research should try to expand the possibility for including a better look at couples’ conversations by trying different methods, such as the extended Hochschild’s (1989) ethnography focused from a communication perspective, or possibly a long term audio taping of couples in their households.

In contacting individuals for participation in this research, one unexpected occurrence was noted in the recruitment of individuals and also in the results. Those who were interested in participating in this study conceptualized their communication and relationship as better than average, as noted in theme two, The Reeds’ Smile. This could partially be due to a censoring effect. Sillars (1995) noted “In all studies there are questions about the validity of observations owing to the tendency of families to censor and otherwise modify their behavior in the presence of outsiders” (p. 394). Yet even when accounting for the possibility of those censoring themselves, others opted out of this research suggesting the possibility of something else. In the recruiting process

multiple individuals turned down requests for interviews or noted that others would not be appropriate to interview because of problems that the other couples have in negotiating work-life concerns. If individuals are more reticent in talking about work-life concerns for fear of identifying their problems in the relationship in front of spouses, effort needs to be spent in conceptualizing an alternative way to build an understanding of how all couples co-construct work life concerns. Options for this research include talking to couples who are in counseling for marital concerns or interviewing spouses individually, in order to protect the participants.

Because my research looked at the interactions of dual-earner married couples, the findings are limited to offering understanding of married dual-earner individuals. Although this married dual-earner couples are still both a significant portion of the adult population with over 60 percent of adult women being married (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002), there is also a large population of adults that warrant attention in different relational forms. According to a 2002 report from the Center of Disease Control, about half of women who will eventually marry cohabite before marriage, suggesting the growing prominence of this living arrangement, and additionally 10% of adult women will cohabit and not marry (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002). Kim and Capaldi (2007) argue that cohabitating is also more prominent among lower socioeconomic status people as some individuals lack the financial stability for marriage. By excluding research on cohabitating couples, research might unnecessarily be promoting classist assumptions about work-life. Cohabitating couples might be a unique population that might then also co-construct work life concerns in unique ways. By failing to look at these other individuals, research is privileging the experiences and understanding of one group.



Future research and attention should also be given in examining both how cohabitating couples co-construct work-life concerns. In turning attention to these individuals, research can broaden our understanding of this topic.

Additionally, although this research worked to expand the base of work-life research and the understanding that scholars have of different married couple types as they co-construct work-life concerns, these differences were not parceled out. In many instances these different categories, be it educational attainment, race, or length of marriage did not have large enough numbers in each group to allow for a full analysis. However, these differences may have a profound impact on the lives of individuals. As one couple, Cheri and Chris, noted, most of their work-life concerns centered around children, and they had a hard time thinking about what concerns they had that were not related to children. Future research should look at the difference between couples with children and those that are childless, as well as career type, length of relationship, and other demographic factors.

Finally, in listening to the participants, many of the individuals mentioned the impact of their family as a source of information about negotiating work-life concerns. However, one source of information that I was not expecting but heard about in multiple interviews was pre-marital counseling. In describing this experience individuals noted that they had already talked about many of the work-life concerns that they experienced later. Participants also noted that experiences that they had in these sessions were positive and offered an opportunity to discuss these topics that were new to some of them. If pre-marital counseling is in fact a space in which individuals have their first conversations about work-life concerns, then it would be important not only to look at what they are

talking about in these sessions but also how these issues are discussed. At the same time, examining what information couples are receiving on dealing with work-life issues might allow researchers to build a better understanding of what resources couples have when entering marriage.

### *Conclusion*

This dissertation studied how couples' co-construct their work life concerns and how power and gender work within these co-constructions. After dyadic and individual stimulated recall interviews with 19 couples, it is clear that couples co-constructions of work-life reflects (re)creations of historic gender norms and images of positivity as they work within the discursive and material realities of their relationships. This study provides an extension of work-life literature by incorporating the couple and by focusing on gender and power as central to work-life. Work-life concerns are a reality for many couples, and through further research possibilities for change can continue to be explored.

## Notes

1. The research on work family conflict has been labeled both work family and work-life. Both terms have been noted to be problematic, yet each offer unique positives for utilization. Work family was the original term used by many researchers (e.g., Kirby et al., 2003; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Medved, 2004), and then therefore offers the benefit of historical relevance. However, work family also is problematic in that it privileges those individuals who have families, especially those with children, as well as other external commitments. Conversely, work-life as a label offers the benefit of a more inclusive to all individuals and does not limit balance issues to those with families and children (e.g., Golden, 2009; Kirby, Wieland, & McBride, 2006; Young, 1996). Yet, the term work-life can be seen as polarizing the constructs of work and an individual's external life. With the concerns related to each term, the researcher is aware of the problems in each term, and has selected work-life as the best possibility for this paper.
2. Past research have noted that the use of the term balance is in fact a value judgment that argues that balance is not only achievable but ideal (Kirby et al., 2003, p.34)
3. These numbers appear smaller than earlier reports of women working in dual income families at 62 percent according to the US Department of Labor (2007a); however this difference is due to the 2007b report accounting for total families and not just total working families as does the 2007a report.

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## Appendix A- List of Resources for the Participants

### The Work-Family News Group

Site moderated by Dr. Drago, work-family researcher with helpful links and research.  
<http://lser.la.psu.edu/workfam/>

### Sloan Work-Family Research Network

Part of Boston College, self proclaimed premiere work-family information destination.  
<http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/>

### NIH Work Life Center

Sponsored by the National Institute of Health to help employees better manage their lives.  
<http://hr.od.nih.gov/worklife/default.htm>

### US Dept. of Labor- Women's Bureau

“To improve the status of wage-earning women, improve their working conditions, increase their efficiency, and advance their opportunities for profitable employment”  
<http://www.dol.gov/wb/welcome.html>

### American Business Collaboration

“The American Business Collaboration (ABC) is a groundbreaking collaboration of leading U.S. companies (Champions) partnering to ensure that their employees have access to quality dependent care programs and services to help them manage their work and personal responsibilities.”  
<http://www.abcdpendentcare.com/docs/index.htm>

### Counseling Services

Omaha, NE

Associated Counseling Services -- (402)334-1122

<http://www.acpcounseling.com/serviceoverview.html>

Columbia, MO

MU Counseling Center -- (573)882-6601

<http://counseling.missouri.edu/>

Family Counseling Center of Missouri – (573) 449-2581

<http://www.fccmo.org/>

## Appendix B- Consent Form

Project Title: Work-life negotiation in Marriage  
Researchers: Katherine Denker is a graduate student in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri-Columbia.  
Purpose: We will be conducting a study using interviews to look at how you negotiate work-life concerns in marriage. You may also choose to read and respond to the results of the study. You must be a U.S. citizen and over the age of 18 years.  
Time: The study should take between ½ to 3 hours, depending on how much you choose to participate and on what you have to say. Interviews will be audio-taped.  
Voluntary: Your participation in voluntary. You may quit at any time and you may refuse to answer any question.  
Risk: There is minimal risk involved with the study. There is no more risk than you would experience in your daily interactions.  
Benefits: The results of this study may help researchers and couples understand work-life balance issues in marital relationships.  
Confidential: Your identity will not be revealed in either transcripts, written documents, or verbal presentations of the data. The following steps will be taken to protect your identity and confidentiality.  
    1. Consent forms will be separated from the data.  
    2. Personal identifying information will be eliminated from the transcripts and any reporting of the data.  
    3. You can refuse to answer any question asked.  
    4. Audio tapes will be kept in a locked cabinet.  
Contact: If you have questions, feel free to contact the primary investigator, Katherine Denker, (402) 210-7957. You may also email her at [kjdenker@mizzou.edu](mailto:kjdenker@mizzou.edu). You may also contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Debbie Dougherty, [doughertyd@missouri.edu](mailto:doughertyd@missouri.edu).  
Questions: If you have questions about your rights, contact Campus IRB:  
Office of Research  
483 McReynolds Hall  
Columbia, MO 65211  
(573) 882-9585  
Thank you for your participation!  
Katherine Denker, Dr. Debbie Dougherty

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signing this consent indicates that you understand and agree to the conditions mentioned above

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix C- Demographic Survey

Listed below are several demographic statements that will help me learn more about you.

1. What work-life concerns are topics of discussion for you and your spouse?

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2. What is your sex? Male Female

3. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_

4. Which of the following best represents your ethnic background (circle one):

(1) Asian or Pacific Islander (2) Caucasian (3) African-American/Black

(4) Spanish or Hispanic Origin (5) Multi-racial (6) Native American

(7) Other (name): \_\_\_\_\_

5. How long have you been married to your spouse? How long did you date?

6. What was your age at marriage? \_\_\_\_\_

7. What is your highest degree completed? \_\_\_\_\_

8. What is your current job title? \_\_\_\_\_

9. How would you describe your socio-economic status (ie- Middle class, lower middle class)? \_\_\_\_\_

10. What is your yearly income as a couple (circle one):

(a) \$0-19,999 (b) \$20,000-39,999 (c) \$40,000-59,999 (d) \$60,000-79,999

(e) \$80,000-99,999 (f) \$100,000-199,999 (g) \$120,000-139,999 (h) \$140,000+

10. Do you have children? If so, how many? How old are they? Do they currently live with you?

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11. Please explain any special circumstances that you see impacting your work-life concerns:

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**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION**

## Appendix D- Interview Protocol A

### **Combined couple Interview**

*(After consent form)-Thank you for sharing your time with me today, I was hoping to talk to you about work-life concerns, or How employment and life at home interact and the results of that interaction. For many, work-life concerns are those things that might be discussed or need working on based on an attempt to balance work-life.*

*I have a demographic form that I would like you to complete and I thought we would start off with a couple question that might get you thinking about work-life issues, have you discuss some on your own, and then I will ask you some more questions if that is ok with you*

Describe a typical day during the work week.

What is the hardest part of your day?

What is the best part of your day?

A lot of couples talk about concerns that happen because you both work, What are some of the common work-life concerns that you face as a couple? *(I will provide examples such as dinner preparation, shopping for groceries, home care, if it is needed)*

I would like you to pick a concern that you have about work-life balance that you have been thinking about and talk about it for 10 to 15 minutes by yourself- I will be in the other room, and you can get me when you are finished.

---

What did you two choose to talk about?

Why?

How long has this been a concern?

Why do you think this is still an issue?

Who first brought it up?

Tell me about the conversation?

Describe a typical day during the work week.

What is the hardest part of your day?

What is the best part of your day?

A lot of couples talk about concerns that happen because you both work, What are some of the common work-life concerns that you face as a couple? (*I will provide examples such as dinner preparation if it is needed*)

Tell me about one work-life concern that you have had in the past that you two have handled?

How do you think that it was handled?

What makes you say this?

What ways would you change how it was handled now?

Tell me about another one of your work-life concerns that you two are now facing. (*I will use this question if the first discussion is brief, and I think that I need to get them talking about concerns more*)

Why is this still being dealt with?

When does this come up in conversations?

When do you notice this concern?

Between the two of you, describe the top few work-life issues that you successfully negotiated?



What made this successful?

Tell me what issues have been the most concerning?

How do you as a couple work to solve concerns related to work-life issues?

How do you as a couple work to solve disagreements in general?

Describe a typical conversation you have regarding work-life concerns.

How do these conversations come up?

Who normally brings up the topics related to work-life concerns?

How do these conversations normally proceed?

How do you feel about these conversations?

How do you typically react to these conversations?

Describe how these conversations impact your relationship?

Temporary? Long-Term?

In what ways do you think that these conversations have impacted your relationship?

How would you describe yourself at work?

How would you describe yourself at home?

How do you think couples should divide housework and paid work?

How does your life as a couple match the ways that you thought your relationship would work before you got together?

Can you think of anything else about the issue of work-life negotiation that is important that we have not talked about?

Can you think of anyone else who would be a good individual to talk to about this issue?

## Appendix E- Interview Protocol B

### **Individual Partner Interview**

*(I will start this interview by showing them transcripts of the 10-15 minute conversations that they had with their spouse at the start of the first interview, and might add more questions that are relevant based on the previous interview.)*

When you think back to the interview with your spouse, what is one thing that you would have liked to talk about more? Why?

What was the hardest part of that conversation?

What made it difficult?

What stood out to you the most during the interview that you had with your spouse?

What surprised you in the comments that your spouse made?

If so, why were these comments surprising?

Are there any issues related to work-life that were not talked about in the interview?

What made you avoid these issues?

Do you think this was purposeful?

What work-life issues do you think do not get discussed between the two of you?

Who, if at all, do you discuss these concerns with?

How do you as a couple work to solve concerns related to work-life issues?

Can you think of anything else about the issue of work-life balance that is important that we have not talked about?

Can you think of anyone else who would be a good individual to talk to about this issue?

Would you be willing to be contacted later if I have any additional questions?

Would you be interested in serving as a member check for this paper?

## Appendix F- Transcriptionist Confidentiality Agreement

This research is being conducted by Katherine Denker, a doctoral student at the University of Missouri. The purpose of this research is to study communication in the process of negotiating work-life concerns. Participants have been assured that the interview data will remain confidential. All names and other identifying information will be removed from the transcripts after they are completed.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, the transcriber, agree to:

1. keep all information confidential by not discussing or sharing research information in any form or format (e.g., audio recordings, transcripts, names of participants) with anyone other than the researcher.
2. keep all research information secure while in my possession, including audio recordings, transcripts, disks, or any other research information.
3. return all research information in any form or format when the research tasks are completed, including audio recordings, transcripts, disks, or any other research information.
4. after consulting with the researcher, I will erase or destroy all research information I have remaining in any form or format regarding this project that is not returnable to the researcher. This includes information stored on a computer hard drive.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Table 1:

Table 1  
*Couple Demographics*

Couple	Ages	Race/Eth	Time		Positions	Education	Income	Children
			Together					
Abby and Adam	29 & 32	Euro-American	11 years total		Teachers	Both MA's	80,000-99,999	none
Bianca and Brad	28 & 37	Euro-American	10 months		Development Officer & Programmer	Both BA's	80,000-99,999	none
Cheri and Chris	44 & 46	Euro-American	13 years		Hair Stylist & City Worker	Tech & BA	80,000-99,999	3
Danica and Derek	28 & 28	Euro-American	5 years		Paralegal & Stock Broker	Post-BA & BA	60,000-79,999	none
Emily and Elliot	29 & 39	Euro-American	6 years		Day Care Provider & Administrator	Both BA's	80,000-99,999	3
Fraya and Frank	25 & 31	Euro-American	4.75 years		Management & Project Engineer	Both BA's	not reported	none
Gina and George	48 & 47	Euro-American	28 years		Sales & Sales Director	Both BA's	80,000-99,999	none
Hillary and Heath	28 & 29	Euro-American	6 years		Account Manager & Supervisor	Both BA's	80,000-99,999	1
Ireen and Ian	56 & 57	Euro-American	36 years		Sales & Engineer	HS & MS	80,000-99,999	2
Jenna and Jake	35 & 37	Euro-American	15 years 2 ms		Professor & Instructor	Both PhD's	80,000-99,999	none
Keri and Ken	31 & 33	Euro-American	11 yrs		Professor & Pastor	PhD & MA	80,000-99,999	1
Lauren and Levi	23 & 24	Eu-A. & Asia A.	3 years		Student Teacher & Recruiter	Some college	40,000-59,000	none
Mei and Ming	33 & 37	Asian	8 years		Graduate Teaching Assistants	Both MA's	0-19,999	2
Nalia and Nick	23 & 25	AsianA. & Eu-A.	3.25 years		Nurse & Warehouse	Both BA's	60,000-79,999	none
Olivia and Otto	46 & 46	Euro-American	23.5 years		Admin. Assit. & Accountant	Both HS	80,000-99,999	2
Patrice and Peyton	42 & 40	African Amer.	18 years		Instructor & Minister	MA & ABD	60,000-79,999	2
Rachel and Ross	26 & 29	Euro-American	3.5 years		Office support & Maintenance	Both HS	40,000-59,999	3
Samantha and Sipho	27 & 35	Eu-A. & African	6.5 years		Coordinator & Research Associate	MA & PhD	60,000-79,999	none
Trina and Trevor	39 & 41	Euro-American	10 years		Admin. Assit. & Mail Clerk	Both HS	40,000-59,999	3

## VITA

Katherine Denker found her path to the University of Missouri after much wandering. Entering the University of Nebraska at Omaha for her undergraduate studies, the original plan was to pursue a bachelor's degree in secondary education. After realizing high school was not a place she wanted to spend more time, multiple other majors were explored. Finally speech communication was selected after eliminating everything from the course catalogue that she did not want to do. From this choice, an interesting independent study, encouraging words from a faculty member, and fear of cubicles, Kathy found herself in graduate school. It was in her MA program in the same department that she fell in love with teaching at the college level and found her interest in instructional communication. After completing her time at UNO, Kathy found herself in a brief stint in administration and teaching at another school. However, realizing that she was a circle in a square peg, she decided to return to school. At Mizzou, Kathy returned to her early interests in interpersonal and gender communication, and her research included sibling communication, negotiations of surname change with marriage, along with this work. Additionally, she continued work in instructional communication, examining classroom climate, power, and silencing.