Explaining the Persistence of Gender Inequality: The Work-Family Narrative as a Social Defense against the 24/7 Work Culture

Irene Padavic   Robin J. Ely
Erin M. Reid

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Irene Padavic
Florida State University

Robin J. Ely
Harvard Business School

Erin M. Reid
McMaster University

Working Paper 17-038

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August 18, 2016

ABSTRACT

It is widely accepted that the conflict women experience between family obligations and professional jobs' long hours lies at the heart of their stalled advancement. Yet research suggests that this "work-family narrative" is partial at best: men, too, experience work-family conflict and nevertheless advance; moreover, mitigating the conflict through flexible work policies has done little to improve women's advancement prospects and often hurts them. Drawing on an in-depth case study of a professional service firm, we offer two connected explanations for the work-family narrative's persistence. We first present data suggesting that this belief has become a "hegemonic narrative"—a pervasive, status-quo-preserving story that is uncontested, even in the face of countervailing evidence. We then take a systems psychodynamic perspective to show how organizations use this narrative and attendant policies and practices as an unconscious "social defense" to help employees fend off anxieties raised by a 24/7 work culture. Due to the social defense, two beliefs remain unchallenged—the necessity of long work hours and the inescapability of women's stalled advancement. The result is that women's thin representation at senior levels remains in place.

KEYWORDS: 24/7 Work Culture, Hegemonic Narrative, Social Defense, Work-Family Conflict, Systems Psychodynamic Theory

The progress women made in the 1970s and 1980s in accessing positions of power and authority slowed considerably in the 1990s and has stalled in this century (Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). In 2013, 14.6 percent of Executive Officers in Fortune 500 companies were women, down from their 15.7 percent share in 2002 (Catalyst, 2006; 2014). In professional service firms, as well, women remain dramatically underrepresented in the partnership ranks, where they are 18 percent of equity partners in U.S. law firms (Rikleen, 2015) and 23 percent of partners and principals in U.S. accounting firms (Wilson-Taylor Associates, 2016), despite having reached parity with men at the associate level long ago. "Stagnation" is the word many use to describe women's stalled movement into high-level positions that offer opportunities to wield power and influence (e.g., Catalyst 2014).

A widely-accepted explanation for this stagnation is that women's family obligations conflict with these jobs' long hours (Ramarajan, McGinn, and Kolb, 2012; Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, 2014), and the widely-championed solution has been policies offering flexible work arrangements designed to mitigate such conflict (Galinsky et al., 2010). Yet work-family scholars call this explanation into account by showing that while work-family accommodations have been shown to reduce women's conflict (Ezra and Deckman, 1996; Madsen, 2003; Hill et al., 2004), they have done little to help women's advancement prospects and often have hurt them by offering off-ramps that can stigmatize users and derail their careers (Kossek, Lewis, and Hammer, 2010; Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl, 2013; Perlow and Kelly, 2014). Moreover, men also experience work-family conflict and nevertheless advance (Reid, 2015). Hence the work-family explanation for women's stalled advancement is, at the very least, an oversimplification.

We observed a similar oversimplification while conducting research in a global professional service firm that had asked us to help it understand how its norms and practices might have been inadvertently hampering women's success. Our study found that virtually all employees recited essentially the same narrative to explain this lack of success: the job requires extremely long hours, and women's family commitments (but not men's) conflict with these time demands; hence, women quit or fail to make partner. We call this explanation the work-family narrative, and we noticed that it mirrors the dominant cultural discourse. We found, in addition, a series of disconnects between this narrative and the study's findings. For example, whereas firm members attributed distress over work-family conflict primarily to women, we found high levels of distress among men as well; whereas the firm instituted accommodation policies to help women, we found that women who used them failed to advance; and whereas firm leaders' rationale for requesting our help included higher turnover for women, we found equivalent rates. This counter-evidence, much of which is reminiscent of work-family scholars' findings, casts doubt on the firm's work-family explanation.

Leaders' reactions to this feedback were intriguing and prompted us to probe the data—including their reactions—more deeply. When we proposed that their long work-hours culture was detrimental to both women and men—although more so to women—firm leaders rejected the data and the analysis out of hand, persisting in the belief that work-family-conflict was primarily a women's problem, that it explained their lack of success, and that any solution must therefore target women. These observations suggested the following research question: why does work-family conflict persist as the dominant and ostensibly sufficient explanation for women's stalled advancement, despite people's lived experience that suggests a more complex story?

We approached the research question by turning to a psychological theory of unconscious dynamics in organizations—systems psychodynamic theory (see Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2015)—to help us make sense of leaders' resistance to engaging with the study's findings. Firm leaders' careers had always rested on data-driven analysis, yet they reflexively refused to engage with the data they had asked us to gather and instead clung to an empirically dubious belief, raising for us questions about the possible presence of an unacknowledged, hidden investment in maintaining this belief. Systems psychodynamic theory enabled us to explore this possibility. Moreover, this theory offers a multi-level perspective (Pratt and Crosina, 2016) that is well-suited to an analysis of why a shared narrative at the organizational level persisted in the face of individual experiences that called it into question.

Drawing on this theory, we propose that organizations may rely on the work-family narrative as an unconscious social defense. A social defense is a set of organizational arrangements, including structures, work routines, and narratives, that function to protect members from having to confront disturbing emotions stemming from internal psychological conflicts produced by the nature of the work (Petriglieri and Petriglieri 2010:47; see also Jacques, 1955; Long, 2006; and Menzies, 1960). The readily-available work-family narrative (and its attendant policies and practices) is a social defense that mobilizes unconscious emotion-regulation strategies, diverting attention from a broader problem: a work culture that demands 24/7 availability. By identifying the long work-hours problem as exclusively women's, this social defense system relegates men seeking to be "good" workers to the unremitting hours as if they were immune to the costs, while providing a ready off-ramp for women seeking to be "good" mothers. Firm members are left with an internal psychological conflict: having to choose either devotion to work or devotion to family. This system supplies a steady stream of

seemingly-amenable (male) workers, while protecting firm members from disturbing emotions and allowing the long-hours culture to remain intact.

With the work-hours problem obscured, the firm focuses on a substitute problem: its inability to retain and promote women. In this analysis, the firm's preoccupation with women's stalled advancement is a red herring. A tell-tale sign is that the narrative's attendant policies and practices—most notably, work-family accommodations—perpetuate the problem firm leaders seek to redress, giving them an unresolvable (and therefore always-available) problem on which to focus as well as an airtight alibi against any accusation that women's failure to advance might be their fault. Meanwhile, two orthodoxies remain unchallenged: the necessity of long work hours and the inescapability of women's stalled advancement.

We propose further that the work-family explanation is a particularly effective diversion from the long-hours problem because it is a hegemonic narrative—a pervasive, status-quo-preserving story that is uncontested, even in the face of countervailing evidence (Ewick and Silbey, 1995). In our case, the work-family narrative preserves the gender status quo, requires no upheaval of existing organizational practices, and has staying power. In sum, the social defense system and the hegemonic narrative work hand-in-hand, and ultimately women's thin representation at senior levels remains in place.

Our analysis was both inductive and deductive. We did not enter our research site with a hypothesis about the organization's social defenses. Rather, we arrived at it over time, inductively, as data collection and analysis unfolded, revealing a series of disconnects between the facts and crucial elements of the firm's work-family narrative, and as we observed the firm's reactions to our feedback. These observations led us to suspect that a social defense might have been operating. We then proceeded deductively, drawing on existing theory—hegemonic

narrative and systems-psychodynamic theories—to help explain these disconnects and firm reactions. The upshot of our analysis is a new understanding of women's stalled progress; at the same time, we extend systems-psychodynamic theory by applying it to gender relations in organizations.

THE WORK-FAMILY EXPLANATION FOR WOMEN'S STALLED ADVANCEMENT

The work-family explanation for women's underrepresentation in senior positions is that their family allegiances conflict with the long hours required in professional jobs, and thus many women leave for home or for less time-intensive jobs. Although sociologists have critiqued this simplistic explanation (Stone, 2007; Damaske, 2011; Cha, 2013), it is culturally endorsed in many arenas, including in the national press and among business leaders and many progressive companies (Galinsky et al., 2010).

An analysis that tracked gender and work themes in the national and business press from 1991-2009 documented the rise of the work-family explanation over the period (Ramarajan, McGinn, and Kolb, 2012). An initial focus on stereotypes, harassment, and conscious exclusion gave way in the mid-1990s to articles about less overt biases, such as a lack of opportunities and the "old boy's network." Starting in 2001, however, these story lines were eclipsed by work-family conflict—a focus on women's childrearing and commitments at home as hampering their career success—which remained the dominant discourse until the end of the study's timeline in 2009. An example is Lisa Belkin's (2003) *New York Times Magazine* article, which argued that women fail to reach the top because they "find other parts of life more fulfilling," and which added "opting out" to the popular lexicon.

The work-family explanation resonates with many managers and executives, as well. A 2013 study of over 6,500 Harvard Business School alumni from virtually every industry found

that more than three-quarters overall—73 percent of men and 85 percent of women—attributed women's blocked advancement to their having prioritized family over work (Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, 2014). In fact, it was the top-cited barrier among 14 alternatives (e.g., "lacking influential mentors/sponsors," "lacking senior women role models," "lacking significant general or line management experience"). The next most commonly-cited barrier was "taking leaves or working reduced hours," which is a component of the work-family explanation. In short, the work-family explanation is ubiquitous.

Work-Family Accommodations as Intervention Strategy and Source of Stigma

Companies understand the problem similarly, and many have offered policies that feature flexible work arrangements designed to mitigate work-family conflict (Galinsky et al., 2010; Kossek, Kalliath, and Kalliath, 2012). Part-time work and a wide variety of "flex" options— including periodic and daily flextime, time-off, leaves, and sabbaticals, among others (Galinsky et al., 2010)—are common among companies concerned about retaining and promoting highly-qualified women professionals.

Research shows, however, that taking accommodations often creates a "flexibility stigma" that results in negative career outcomes (Glass, 2004; Stone and Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy and Berdahl, 2013). Flexibility stigma is a bias against policy users that "causes the target to fall into social disgrace" (Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl, 2013: 214). Taking an accommodation indicates an unwillingness to work long hours, and in a professional-work culture that valorizes virtually unceasing labor, seeking time away is stigmatized. Costs can be steep, negatively affecting wages (Coltrane, et al., 2013; Goldin, 2014), performance ratings (Wharton, Chivers, and Blair-Loy, 2008), and promotion chances (Judiesch and Lyness, 1999; Cohen and Single, 2001). While research shows that costs can be mitigated by such factors as

supervisors' support (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002), attributions about users (Leslie et al., 2012), the regulatory environment (Blair-Loy and Wharton, 2002; Kalev, Dobin, and Kelly, 2006), and having an organizationally-powerful supervisor (Briscoe and Kellogg, 2011), the general pattern is that people who take advantage of these policies are likely to find their careers derailed.

Theoretically, the "work-devotion schema" (Blair-Loy, 2003) is the bedrock that undergirds flexibility stigma. This schema is the cultural assumption that work "demands and deserves single-minded focus and allegiance" (Blair-Loy, 2003: 6; see also Moen and Roehling, 2005). The use of the word "devotion" is not accidental. Weeks (2011), drawing on Marx and Weber, also describes a moral component: Western society endorses an ideology that considers work "the highest calling," a "moral duty," and an "ethical practice." In professional settings, workers with part-time schedules face the possibility of dishonor. Part-timers in law firms, for example, were considered "time deviants" for having broken the rule that lies "at the heart of what it means to be a true professional" (Epstein, 1999: 133). Among women financial professionals, Blair-Loy (2003: 184) noted that part-timers "are viewed as apostates, unworthy of advancement into the firm's celestial ranks." The real-world manifestation of the work-devotion schema is that employed Americans worked an average of 1,868 hours annually in 2007, an increase of 181 hours—more than one month—since 1979 (Mischel, 2013), and work hours for professionals are often longer (Jacobs and Gerson, 2005; Briscoe, 2007). Both women and men are subject to the work-devotion schema, but women face an additional constraint: the expectation that they comply with a "family-devotion schema" (Blair-Loy, 2003), to which we now turn.

Gendered Impact of the Work-Devotion and Family-Devotion Schemas

The family-devotion schema assigns women, not men, the primary responsibility of childrearing and housework and holds them accountable. Women are to find fulfillment in the intimacy of "intensive motherhood"—a child-centered, emotionally-absorbing, and labor-intensive form of parenting (Hays, 1996)—and their devotion to family is expected to override all other commitments (Roth, 2006; Turco, 2010). Failure to do so may bring the sanction of being considered a bad mother (Blair-Loy, 2003). This prescription is at complete odds with the work-devotion schema, of course: in fulfilling the family devotion imperative, professional women with children take more responsibility for childcare and thus are more likely to take accommodations (Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, 2014), become victims of flexibility stigma (Stone and Hernandez, 2013), and experience career derailment (Judiesch and Lyness, 1999; Cohen and Single, 2001). As a result, many women feel torn by the demands of these competing schemas (Stone, 2007).

For their part, professional men tend to follow the work-devotion schema. They thus typically do not face flexibility stigma nor are they judged on the family-devotion schema (except insofar as showing too much family devotion evokes penalties; Berdahl and Moon, 2013; Coltrane et al., 2013). Even today, being a good worker is culturally compatible with being a good husband and father. In fact, the breadwinner ideal confers manly status on men who leave caregiving behind and put in long hours at work (Cooper, 2000; Berdahl and Moon, 2013; Kellogg, 2011).

Nevertheless, men do experience the pull of family life. While the breadwinner contribution to family is still culturally honored, it is no longer the sole template, and many men today feel a pull toward greater involvement in home life and the frustration that can accompany

that desire when work impinges on it (Winslow, 2005; Glavin, Schieman, and Reid, 2011; Humberd, Ladge, and Harrington, 2015; Reid, 2015).

In sum, the work-family-conflict explanation is problematic. Thanks to deep-seated ideologies about work and family, organizations seeking to advance women face a conundrum: the dominant explanation for women's stalled advancement points to an intervention strategy that, if taken, often derails their careers. In addition, the work-family explanation oversimplifies the problem by neglecting the fact that men also experience work-family conflict yet nevertheless advance. These considerations gave rise to our research question: why does work-family conflict persist as the dominant and ostensibly sufficient explanation for women's stalled advancement, despite people's lived experience that suggests a more complex story? We addressed this question by gathering and analyzing data from a professional service firm that struggled to address women's stalled advancement and, like many such firms, relied upon the oversimplified work-family explanation of the problem.

METHOD

Research Setting

We were invited by a mid-sized global consulting firm to investigate how aspects of the firm's culture might have been inadvertently limiting women's success and to design initiatives to stem the loss of women in pre-partner ranks, an industry-wide problem. We accepted this invitation in exchange for permission to use data from this investigation for research purposes and to collect data for additional research projects.

The firm, with offices located primarily in the U.S., provides advisory services in such areas as strategy, marketing, and finance. It draws its consultants from elite colleges and MBA programs, prides itself on its analytical rigor, and typically places high on lists of prestigious

consulting firms. As is increasingly common among professional service firms, this firm had a clearly-defined promotion path but did not adhere to a strict "up or out" system, and employees could remain despite not having been promoted. Employees could move from client- to internal-facing roles, although promotion to partner from the latter ranks was rare. Years to promotion into the partnership averaged nine for men and 11 for women. Like other professional service firms, it was male-dominated, particularly at senior levels, with men constituting 63 percent of junior associates, 70 percent of associates, 77 percent of senior associates, and 90 percent of partners. Formal work-family accommodations were available to women and men but were individually negotiated and consisted of reduced-hours schedules, internal-facing assignments, and leaves of absence.

Participants

This paper draws on data collected in this firm over 18 months (between 2009 and 2011) for three separate interview-based studies centering on gender-related research questions: the requested culture study, a study of men's professional identity, and a study of women's and men's leadership identity. We refer to these latter two studies as tandem studies. Two senior leaders served as our liaisons to the firm and provided the contact information for potential participants. Samples for each study were randomly drawn from the same sampling domain—the four largest U.S. offices—except where noted. We relied on random sampling in order to capture a representative set of views, which was an appropriate strategy for our initial research questions.

Our total sample included 107 consultants (including partners and associates) and five human resource (HR) personnel. Of the 33 women consultants interviewed, eight were partners (5 married and 7 with children) and 25 were associates (16 married and 14 with children); of the 74 men consultants, 21 were partners (20 married and 20 with children) and 53 were associates

(32 married and 18 with children). Most participants were white. We also interviewed the head of HR and four other senior HR personnel. For quotations in the findings section, we number each respondent and indicate sex using the designation "F" or "M" for female or male; we indicate consultants' rank using "P" or "A" for partner or associate; and we use "HR" to designate human resource personnel.

Potential participants received an email from our liaisons introducing the research projects, alerting them that they might be contacted, and assuring them that their participation was voluntary and confidential. Everyone who responded to our emailed invitation (only a handful did not) and who anticipated being available agreed to participate. Because of work schedules or unexpected travel, most interviews were rescheduled at least once and some as many as five times. The response rate (the number interviewed relative to the number solicited) for associates was about 70 percent, with nonparticipation largely due to insurmountable scheduling conflicts or leaves. The response rate for men partners was close to 100 percent. We invited all 11 client-facing women partners in the four largest U.S. offices to participate and interviewed 8 (73 percent). Of the three client-facing women partners we did not interview, one was on leave and two were unavailable during our visits.

Data

Data come largely from employee interviews. Interviews with consultants involved a series of open-ended questions covering, at a minimum, the following topics: perceptions of what it takes to be successful at the firm and particular challenges women may face; explanations for women's slower advancement rate than men's; and, for those participating in the tandem studies, personal accounts of how they experience themselves in their roles as professionals or leaders, including challenges they have faced.

Interviews with human resource personnel centered on the firm's professional development system and on employees' use of work-family accommodation policies. These HR personnel also supplied data on men's and women's turnover rates.

Interviews were mainly face-to-face on the premises, although some were in nearby venues, and interviews with overseas employees and with a few in distant U.S. offices were conducted via telephone. Most interviews lasted a minimum of an hour, and several lasted for two. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

We also considered as data the firm's reaction to study findings that failed to confirm the work-family explanation for women's mobility problems. In an experience not uncommon for field researchers (Berg and Smith, 1985), we became players in the organizational drama, caught up in the firm's on-going process of legitimating women's stalled advancement as its primary problem and the work-family narrative as the primary explanation. In this case, upon learning that our proposed interventions were not targeted to women but instead would address the long work-hours problem both women and men faced, the firm's CEO lost interest in the project and ultimately terminated it (see also Bain, 1998: 419, on termination of the research relationship). Tandem studies continued without disruption.

This parting of ways on the culture study after a cordial and productive relationship was puzzling, and its timing on the heels of our feedback gave us pause: our analysis had upended the firm's preferred explanation, and we were expelled. This sequence led us to a deeper level of analysis. Following Berg and Smith (1985), we analyzed firm leaders' reaction as clinical data pointing to the possibility that a defensive operation was underway, specifically, that the firm was enacting a social defense in our midst.

Overview of Analyses

The analysis for this paper unfolded over time. It began with the culture study the firm had requested, which revealed disconnects between members' lived experiences in the firm, on the one hand, and their widely-shared beliefs, on the other: the firm believed that accommodations would help women advance, but we found the opposite; the firm believed that only women were distressed by work-family imbalance, but we found that men, too, suffered; and the firm believed that women's turnover was higher than men's, but we found equivalent rates. These disconnects, together with firm leaders' unwillingness to engage with findings that challenged their beliefs, led us to two theories—hegemonic narrative theory (Ewick and Silbey, 1995) and systems-psychodynamic theory (Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010). The concept of a hegemonic narrative gave us insight into how a narrative could be so pervasive and resilient; systems psychodynamic theory gave us a framework for bringing the concept into the organization and investigating the possibility that the firm had an unacknowledged, hidden investment in maintaining its beliefs. We then moved iteratively between concepts in these literatures and the data, gaining insights into our question as the analysis progressed.

Because these two theories demand different types of data and different types of analysis, we present the theory, method, and findings separately for each. Below, we describe the hegemonic-narrative concept, how we analyzed the firm's work-family narrative in relation to it, and how it helped to explain the narrative's persistence in this firm. We then turn to an explanation of psychodynamic-systems theory, how we operationalized its key constructs, and how it furthered our understanding of the narrative's persistence by helping us analyze the deeper, emotional functions it served.

THE WORK-FAMILY EXPLANATION AS A HEGEMONIC NARRATIVE:

ONE FIRM'S STORY

The work-family explanation for women's stalled advancement has staying power partly because it is a hegemonic narrative (Ewick and Silbey, 1995), an idea prompted by the account's ubiquity: virtually all interviewees pointed to work-family conflict as the reason women quit or failed to make partner. According to Ewick and Silbey (1995: 200), a "hegemonic narrative" is a pervasive, uncontested, seemingly natural, and resilient account that makes singular sense of an array of personal experiences. It is an overarching strategic story that preserves dominant cultural meanings and power relations and reproduces them. In the case of the hegemonic narrative about work-family, the story preserves meanings and relations surrounding gender; the plot centers on the work-devotion and family-devotion schemas; and dominant meanings and power relations are reproduced by the career-derailing work-family accommodations that organizations take up as the ostensibly best resolution of this plot dilemma. We offer evidence of the narrative's ubiquity, its implications for women's advancement, and its resilience by recounting what we heard from interviewees and what we experienced while working with this firm.

Analysis

We distilled the main plot elements of the work-family narrative at this firm and compared them to the characteristics that render a narrative hegemonic. Data for this analysis came from interviewees' explanations for women's lack of advancement and from their references to work-family conflict (including their personal feelings about and responses to work-family conflict and their perceptions of gender differences in experiences of such conflict), work practices and norms regarding employees' use of time (including hours worked and work efficiencies and inefficiencies), and work-family accommodations (including who has taken them and with what consequences).

Findings

      Plot elements of the work-family narrative. The work-family narrative as articulated in this firm contained two "plot elements," told and retold by members across the firm: 1) the job requires extremely long hours, and 2) these hours are impossible for women—but not men—who have family responsibilities; hence, women do not advance.

      The story begins with tales of a job that demands long work-hours and frequent travel. As is the case in professional service firms generally (Briscoe, 2007), hours at this firm were grueling. Echoing many, one consultant described his work habit: "[S]hoot me something on Saturday by 10 p.m., and I'll work on it from 10 to midnight. Because I don't have a life." (A51 M) An HR manager confirmed the long hours: "It's a tough job. . . . People work 12-hour days and weekends and are on the road Monday through Friday." (HR1 M) Weekly hours averaged 60 to 65, although quite a few claimed to regularly work 70 hours or more. Such hours made it difficult to meet basic physical needs. According to one interviewee, "People here are probably doing 14, 15 hours of work a day. Pretty much just working and sleeping during the week. They sleep 6 hours a night or less. . . . Your ability to get by on little sleep is a necessary skill set." (A12 M)

      The conflict between work and sleep was a recurring theme that points to the sheer raw demands of long work-hours. Interviews revealed no disagreements about the firm's demand that employees put in long hours. One woman reported her coworker's admonition on this point: "'You can't make all these plans at night. You have to be there. You have to be on call. You have to respond to emails.' [The team leader] said about me, when they were working late into the night, 'It's 3:00 a.m., how come she isn't working?'" (A66 F) Another man echoed this notion of work absorbing every waking moment:

We're on our Blackberries. We're thinking about our work 24/7. I mean, maybe you tune out for a little while here and there, but people [at this firm] work all the time. All the time. I mean, you wake up at night, you're dreaming about it. The first thing you do [when you wake up] is you pick up your Blackberry. (A06 M)

The second plot element is that women's commitment to family conflicts with the time demands of the job, thus hindering women's career advancement. When asked why the partnership had so few women, partners indicted work-family issues, and this account filtered down the ranks. According to one male partner, conflict is built in for women, making it hard for them to be seen as leaders:

We have great intentions and I think pure intentions, genuine intentions, about getting the best involved regardless of gender, race, creed, religion, what have you. I frame it in the following way. What do I want people to worry about when they wake up first thing in the morning? So business development people, I want them to worry about business development. For project managers, I want them to worry about the project. . . . Women are . . . the project manager in the home, [so] it is hard for them to spend the necessary time, energy, and effort to be viewed here as a senior leader. (P19 M)

Another reiterated the narrative with a matter-of-fact observation about how women's dedication to family impinges on their career: "[I]in most families, even two-career families, women tend to take on disproportionately more responsibilities for kids . . . So I think in those situations it's particularly difficult for women to do any professional work." (P11 M) Some wove this narrative into their personal stories, as did a partner who described how his professionally-successful wife "gave up work. . . . In the end, she decided—very difficult choices—that she wanted to have more time with the children." (P21 M)

Associates concurred with this analysis. One male associate opined: "I just think mothers have a different type of bond with their children . . . and it makes it that much more stressful and frustrating to be away . . . overnight." (A42 M) According to another, the conflicting requirements of motherhood and the job meant women reject the fast track:

It's just basic math, right? So you take 100 people. Fifty are women and 50 are men. Twenty-five of the women are going to have kids and not want to work. Twenty-five of the women are going to have kids and might want to work, but won't want to travel every week and live the lifestyle that consulting requires of 60 or 70 hour weeks. (A01 M)

This unrealistic picture is the extreme version of the pervasive storyline: motherhood renders women inadequate to the task and explains their relative lack of success. Note how after being introduced ("50 are men"), men never reappear in his narrative. It is a work-family-problem, and it is women's problem, not men's. Note also that in his calculation all women are mothers, a conflation that was common in our interviews. Logically, the work-family narrative would acknowledge that childless women can succeed (since they can avoid the care-giving impediment the narrative highlights), yet this demographic group figured nowhere in the discussions of women's advancement prospects and rarely in the stories we heard. It was as if all women were tarred with the brush of motherhood or incipient motherhood.

By and large, women associates agreed with the work-family narrative. According to one mother:

There's no overt sexism. Once you've proved yourself, people work with you. No one would hold me back from being on a hard-core partner track if I were willing to work 70-hour weeks and get on a plane every week. The issue is that women are choosing to have kids and be their primary caregiver. (A73 F)

And from another: "How can I do this job with a child? My husband's also in a similar job, and so I don't know if it's feasible." (A60 F)

In sum, the analysis is the same firm-wide: women's devotion to family impedes their ability to perform the requisite long hours, and their careers suffer as a result. The problem focus was firmly on women, who were seen as less able or willing than men to compromise their family commitments. We note two word usages endemic to the narrative at the firm: "mother" acted as a stand-in for all women, and "family" acted as a stand-in for all personal (non-work)

commitments. These word choices represent archetypes that capture the power of the narrative to subsume all characters and settings into its storyline, even when they patently failed to fit.

The work-family narrative as hegemonic. These elements of the official work-family story cohere into a tale that constitutes a hegemonic narrative. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of a hegemonic narrative and shows how features of the work-family narrative in this firm corresponded to each. First, our findings clearly indicate that the tale is *pervasive*—we heard the story of the demand for long work hours and the conflict it presents for women in virtually all accounts of women's slow progress. Another characteristic is that it is *polyvocal*: the same plot appears in many individuals' ostensibly unique, distinct, personal narratives (e.g., "[my wife] decided . . . that she wanted to have more time with the children"; "How can I do this job with a child?"). The fact that the plot finds expression in the personal idiom "inoculates and protects the master narrative from critique" (Ewick and Silbey, 1995: 212). The narrative is also *uncontested*. Complaints about long work-hours never rose to the level of serious, collective consideration that the job could be done in fewer hours: long work hours were de rigueur, according to everyone, and the resultant time strain was largely experienced as a personal problem to be solved on one's own. References to barriers other than women's family responsibilities were scant and fleeting, coming nowhere close to displacing the work-family narrative, and many interviewees, both women and men, went out of their way to give assurances that women's lack of advancement was not the result of discrimination (e.g., references to the firm's "pure intentions, genuine intentions" and to "no overt sexism" at the firm"). The narrative also is *seemingly natural* (e.g., "I just I think mothers have a different type of bond with their children") and taken as given—a link that further renders it uncontestable. And the narrative *justifies dominant cultural meanings and power relations* surrounding gender. It corroborates the

notion of men as better situated to maximize careers, thus justifying men's continued dominance in positions of power, and it corroborates the notion of women, but not men, as responsible for the smooth functioning of family and home life, thus justifying women's underrepresentation in positions of power.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

As for *reproducing dominant cultural meanings and power relations*, the organizational practice arising from the hegemonic narrative—instituting work-family accommodations—was key to derailing women's careers and thereby reproducing women's lower-status position. According to the HR personnel we interviewed, the two most popular accommodations were switching from client- to internal-facing roles and working reduced hours, and women were more likely to do both. Although HR did not keep records of associates' policy uptake, of the associates with children we interviewed, nearly half the women were taking one or both of these accommodations at the time of the interview, compared to only one of the men.

Women's family demands were cited as the primary reason for their move to internal roles, a move that typically took one out of consideration for positions of real power. Because client-facing work is "travel intensive and time intensive [and] unpredictable, it's harder for those with primary caregiver responsibility," explained the head of HR. As a result, he continued, internal-facing roles are "disproportionately women because the hours are a little more predictable" (HR4 M). Almost 20 percent of women partners in the firm compared to 10 percent of men had completely transitioned to these non-revenue-generating roles. And while both men and women associates periodically took short-term staff assignments as part of their portfolio of responsibilities, it was different for women, who, many noted, bear the main responsibility for raising children and thus are more likely to remain in such roles. In describing

women's career obstacles, a partner noted, "[T]here is this exodus or transition at mid-career where many women move into staff functions. They move into finance, they move into human resources, they move into training or recruiting, into functions with more predictable hours and a lot less travel." (P20 M)

Working reduced hours also damaged one's prospects at the firm, according to HR personnel and many consultants. As one associate observed, "There's a pretty high attrition rate after you've had a kid. [The women] will come back, they'll work half time, and they'll try to get back to full time. . . . That to me is the type of person that doesn't make it." (A28 M) "It's about believability," a partner explained. "If I'm a leader and folks know that I'm not there for them— that I'm offline for significant periods of time—they don't believe I'm their leader." (P19 M) Likewise, an associate noted that reducing availability—for example, by limiting travel—is "not necessarily held against you, but I think it's just tougher to sort of prove your worth at a client." (A26 M). Yet a partner felt it could, in fact, be "held against you," offering the following account of how flexibility stigma attaches to those who receive "special treatment":

> You work as a team, so if you get any special treatment, your team members are going to feel you are not doing your share. No one wants to be working til midnight every night, so if you let women negotiate something special, it would be tough on the team. And the women will not want to be seen as not contributing, so it is a dilemma. (P08 M)

He went on to describe another consequence of taking accommodations:

> The special issue it presents for women is that sometimes senior leaders will know a woman has 3 kids and say, "I know this project is going to be a killer; I'd better not take a chance on her because she might ask for special accommodation or need to leave at 5 or something to go get her kids."

The upshot for women as individuals was sacrifices of power, status, and income, and for women as a group was the continuation of a pattern in which powerful positions remained the purview of men, while women's progress stagnated. Hence, work-family policies flowing from

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the narrative helped reproduce the gender status quo, which meant that women constituted only 10% of partners and, among those who made it to partner, women's track was two years longer than men's.

The final feature of a hegemonic narrative is *resilience*—its ability to withstand a challenge—which was evident in events surrounding our feedback to the firm in which we pointed out disconnects between our findings and the work-family narrative, particularly that men (and not just women) experienced distress over long work hours. We found, however, that firm leaders were unable or unwilling to consider the possibility that their work-family analysis was incomplete or that an alternative explanation for women's stalled advancement might be valid, and we offer their resistance as evidence of the work-family narrative's resilience. The sequence of events unfolded as follows.

In the feedback to firm leaders, we provided detailed data showing that men were at least as likely as women to say work interfered with their family lives. Among associates we interviewed who were parents, two-thirds of men reported work-family conflict compared to slightly more than half of women (nearly all of the remaining mothers were taking accommodations to ease the conflict). Men's dissatisfaction with schedules that pulled them away from their families came through strongly in numerous statements such as this one: "I was traveling 3 days a week and seeing my children once or twice a week for 45 minutes before they went to bed. Saturday came, and I couldn't go to my son's soccer game. He burst into tears. I wanted to quit then and there." (A45 M) According to another, "Last year was hard with my 105 flights. I was feeling pretty fried. I've missed too much of my kids' lives." (P09 M)

Thus, contrary to the work-family narrative's exclusive focus on women, men, too, were troubled by the strain that long work-hours placed on their families—some of whom left the firm

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as a result. According to one father, "I wouldn't characterize myself as unhappy. It's more overworked, and under-familied. If I were a betting man, I'd bet that a year from now I'm working somewhere else." (A34 M) And a year later, he was.

We pointed out this disconnect to the firm's leadership, challenging the work-family narrative as oversimplified, and offered a broader, more nuanced analysis implicating unnecessarily long work-hours and their disproportionately negative effect on women's careers. Specifically, we presented interview data revealing a culture of overwork stemming from the firm's practices of over-selling and over-delivery. Regarding over-selling, the sentiments of this interviewee were echoed by many: "[Some partners will] promise the client the moon. . . and not even think about what that means for their team. . . . 'We'll do X, Y and Z, and we're going to do it all in half the time that you think it should take.' And the client's going to say, 'Wow, that's great! Why don't we sign up?!'" (A26 M) And from another: "With no controls on how to scope a project [a person] can sell anything whether it's reasonable or not. If you kill your people, there is no cost to you." (A08 M)

The culture also valorized over-delivery, priding itself on delivering "110 percent" to clients and offering "smart" solutions to clients' problems. Commenting on over-delivery, an associated complained:

> The . . . account managers are very cerebral, and they're all about the answer. And so they would always be like, "Oh, we should do this" and "Can we do this analysis? And can we do this?" Just because it would be interesting. . . . So [my team] worked all these weekends. . . . And I've been in the [same] spot as my team so many times where I just worked really, really hard and sacrificed family stuff, sacrificed my health for it, and at the end of the day, I look back on it, "Well, did we really have to do that? Probably not." (A62 F)

Associates went along with over-delivery and overwork partly to stand out as stars in a pool of highly-qualified people: "We do these crazy slide decks that take hours and hours of work. It's

this attitude of, 'I'm going to kill the client with a 100-slide deck.' But the client can't use all that! People do it so others on the team will see they're smart." (A70 F)

While everyone suffers from the long-hours problem, we explained, it disproportionately penalizes women because, unlike men, they take accommodations, which come with a career price. Men, for their part, we noted, suffered in silence or otherwise made do, thereby leaving the woman-centric focus of the work-family narrative intact.

When we provided this feedback to the firm's leaders, the CEO reacted negatively. The firm had requested an analysis of the firm's organizational culture, but upon hearing that the gender problem was only a piece of a larger work-management problem and that the solution would involve a change in work practices that transcended work-family accommodations, he balked. Although we had interviewed over 70 men across all levels, many of whom had been there for decades, the firm head suggested we had not spoken to the "right" men but instead must have interviewed only new associates or especially uncommitted ones. He also questioned the intervention strategy that flowed from our analysis, which targeted overselling and over-delivery, on the grounds that it did not explicitly focus on women.

A few months later, our partner-liaisons presented the study findings to the rest of the partnership and, in an email to us, reported that the partners and CEO remained "stuck on [understanding] how [the proposed interventions] were going to help women." They shared with us the slides they had created, which were ostensibly based on our analysis and recommendations. We were struck by the absence of our data pointing to the dubiousness of their cultural assumptions about time (i.e., the necessity of 24/7 availability) and excellence (i.e., the necessity of over-delivery). Their presentation concluded by proposing such interventions as "Conduct joint research with the Center for Work-Life Policy's Hidden Brain Drain Task Force,"

"Actively engage with the Council for Women World Leaders," and "Establish a head of Diversity & Inclusion who reports to the CEO," none of which had any discernable relationship to the study's findings. Without buy-in from the top, interest in the project flagged, and over the course of a year, emails about the project stopped, and the engagement effectively ended.

If not for the work-family blinders, the firm might have seen and addressed work problems that hurt all employees. Instead, firm leaders maintained their original assessment—that the problem was women's difficulty balancing work and family and that men were largely immune to such difficulties. Leaders' unwillingness to engage with our evidence illustrates the resilient, Teflon-quality of the work-family narrative, further highlighting its hegemonic nature, which in turn helps explain its stranglehold on the problem definition.

Yet, this unwillingness on the part of evidence-driven analysts to engage the evidence begged further examination of the data. Upon revisiting company records, we learned that although one of the firm's key concerns was "women's higher turnover rate," in fact, women's and men's turnover rates did not significantly differ in any of the preceding three years. (The gender discrepancy at the partner level persisted despite comparable turnover because lateral partner hires were more likely to be men and because derailed associates, who remained with the firm in internal-facing roles, were more likely to be women.) We wanted to understand at a deeper level why data-oriented and clearly well-meaning firm leaders had failed to read the turnover data accurately and, in the face of feedback about the widespread problem of work hours, clung to their belief in the work-family narrative.

While the notion of resilience in a hegemonic narrative gave us some insight into why the work-family narrative was so tenacious, tracking the implicit emotional content in our interviews, guided by constructs from systems psychodynamic theory gave us further traction.

We drew on this theory, specifically, the idea of a social defense, to consider the basis for participants' unwavering conviction that women's family lives were the ultimate obstacle to women's advancement—a conviction that ultimately preserves the gender status quo.

THE WORK-FAMILY NARRATIVE AS A SOCIAL DEFENSE

To examine the persistence of the firm's commitment to the work-family narrative, we turned our attention to unconscious dynamics, an area of renewed interest in the social sciences (Kahn, 1990; Barsade, Ramarajan, and Westen, 2009; Pratt and Crosina, 2016). The fields of social psychology, decision sciences, and behavioral economics are now replete with studies showing how individuals habitually, unwittingly, and without conscious awareness stray from rationality (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995; Newman, Duff, and Baumeister, 1997; Schimel, Greenberg, and Martens, 2003; Zhong and Liljenquist, 2006), and neuro-scientific evidence for the existence of unconscious processes bolsters claims about people's possible motives for doing so (Westen, et al., 2006; Schacter, Addis, and Buckner, 2007). As Barsade, Ramarajan, and Westen (2006: 144) conclude from their review of the literature on implicit affect in organizations, "the notion that much of what we do is influenced by processes outside our conscious awareness is no longer a theoretical claim or the province of clinical observation."

The systems psychodynamic perspective (see Bion, 1955; Jaques, 1955; Menzies, 1960) moves the analysis of unconscious dynamics from the individual to the meso level (see House, Rousseau, and Thomas-Hunt, 1995, on the importance of meso-level analyses), drawing attention to the interplay between organizational arrangements and individuals' emotions. A central concept in this perspective is the social defense. This concept captures how the emotional needs of individuals shape structures, narratives, and practices in organizations and how these

structures, narratives, and practices, in turn, shape the experiences of those individuals (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010).

Social defenses are defined as "collective arrangements—such as an organizational structure, a work method, or a prevalent discourse—created or used by an organization's members as a protection against disturbing affect derived from external threats, internal conflicts, or the nature of their work" (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 47). They function as "a collective psychopathology—a necessary evil—allowing the institution to hold together and pursue its task while at the same time limiting its flexibility and its members' awareness" (Petriglieri, 2013). We show how the work-family narrative, in addition to being hegemonic, is a social defense that, together with reinforcing narratives, policies, and practices, protects employees from the disturbing emotions that arise from the demand for long work hours.

A classic example of a social defense analysis is Menzies' (1960) investigation of a hospital whose presenting problem was burnout and turnover among student nurses. According to Menzies' analysis, this problem was the result of a social defense—practices the hospital had instituted for the unconscious purpose of helping nurses fend off the more deeply disturbing emotions that arose daily when caring for sick and dying people. Such defensive practices included, for example, nurses' use of bed numbers, diseases, or diseased organs in lieu of patients' names (e.g., "the liver in bed 10"). These practices allowed depersonalization, an unconscious emotion-regulation strategy that kept at bay the primary anxiety—angst raised by repeated confrontations with illness and mortality. Yet they also kept nurses from developing meaningful caregiving relationships, depriving them of the very gratification that inspired many to join the profession in the first place. This deprivation gave rise to another problem—the presenting one: nurses' burnout and turnover. While troublesome and anxiety-provoking,

confronting the burnout-and-turnover problem was less threatening than confronting illness and

mortality, and for this reason it served as a useful substitute focus for the organization.

The result of such dynamics is a system in which the social defense diverts attention

away from deeply disturbing emotions arising from the organization's work and, at the same

time, creates or perpetuates a substitute (or, in Menzies words, "presenting") problem.

Importantly, the substitute problem is unresolvable precisely because its sustaining mechanism—

the social defense—must remain intact (and its functioning invisible) if it is to serve its

protective purpose. The operation of the social defense is thus circular and self-reinforcing.

Using these concepts, we turn now to an overview of how we used social defense theory

to inform our analysis. (Bold-faced entries in Figure 1 highlight the theoretical constructs.) The

primary anxiety is internal conflict arising from a 24/7 work culture that daily forces a choice

between love (family[1]) and work, undermining individuals' sense of human wholeness. The

unconscious emotion-regulation strategies that keep this anxiety at bay are splitting, projection,

and projective identification (see Barsade, Ramarajan, and Westen, 2009, on implicit emotion-

regulation strategies; see Hirschhorn and Gilmore, 1980; Kernberg, 1985; Smith and Berg, 1987;

Smith, 1989; and Ashforth and Reingen, 2014, on splitting, projection and projective

identification strategies). These unconscious strategies are activated at the intergroup level as a

tacit arrangement between women and men, and they are sustained at the organizational level by

the work-family narrative.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]

To the extent that people experience emotional conflict stemming from internal pulls

toward both work and family domains, while nevertheless describing the work domain as

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[1] We use "love" and "family" as shorthand for the larger domain that encompasses all elements of personal, non-work life.

primarily men's and the family domain as primarily women's, we can say that they have engaged

in splitting and projection at the intergroup level. Each gender takes the key parts of being a

whole person and "splits" them in two—a committed parent and a committed worker. The

committed parent role is attributed to—"projected" onto—women, and the role of committed

worker is projected onto men.

To the extent that women and men accept their assigned roles as natural and appropriate,

we can say that each gender has "introjected" the projection (although not necessarily

completely), which enables each gender to experience the other as having the characteristics

associated with their assigned role, thus setting the stage for "projective identification."

Individuals engage in projective identification when they unconsciously identify with those who

enact the disowned—split off—parts of themselves. In other words, they experience those

enactments as emotionally gratifying (Klein, 1946), as, for example, when men project their

emotional need for family onto women and women introject that need as their own, allowing

men to experience their disowned need vicariously. (As Petriglieri and Stein [2012] pointed out,

projections need not be negative—desired aspects of the self can also be projected, leading to

positive identification with the recipient.)

At the organizational level, projective identification creates a collective experience of

wholeness as each group internalizes one role while receiving vicarious gratification from the

other group's enactment of the role it has projected out (Menzies, 1960). But this resolution of

the overwork problem occurs only at the collective level. At the individual, psychological level,

wholeness is illusory (Menzies, 1960: 115-6). A person must continually re-subscribe to the

work-family narrative—and to the illusion of wholeness it provides—in order to block from

awareness any realization of being personally denied the fundamental human gratifications of a life infused with both work and love.

All the while, the organization is focused on a different problem: its inability to retain and promote women. While disconcerting, this "presenting," or substitute, problem is less threatening than losing one's sense of human wholeness. The organization's worry about its inability to retain and promote women thus serves as a useful substitute anxiety (or, in Menzies' words, "secondary anxiety") on which it can focus. At the same time, the organization's deep commitment to the work-family explanation for women's stalled advancement and to accommodations as the solution ensures that the problem does not go away. The social defense and the substitute problem together create an invisible, self-reinforcing, protective system that diverts attention away from the primary anxiety raised by the 24/7 work culture.

In sum, the social defense protects individuals from the primary anxiety (loss of wholeness) by mobilizing unconscious emotion-regulation strategies (splitting, projection, and projective identification) that keep the primary anxiety at bay, while at the same time creating or perpetuating a problem (women's stalled advancement) that serves as a substitute focus for the organization. This system leaves individuals constantly grappling with internal, simultaneous pulls toward two conflicting life domains, work and love, that can be reconciled only at the collective (organizational) level. In other words, the work-family narrative is a collective psychopathological response to the loss of substrates of one's humanity. We describe below how we analyzed the data for evidence of these psychodynamic processes and then present the findings.

Analysis

Drawing on data about unconscious meanings and motives is necessary for analyzing psychodynamic processes such as social defenses. Capturing psychodynamic processes empirically, however, is not straight-forward because they are driven by emotional conflicts sufficiently disturbing that people tend to experience and regulate them outside of conscious awareness and therefore cannot easily access or discuss them. Hence, conventional content analysis of interview data, in which the meaning and significance of what people say are taken at face value is, by itself, insufficient for this analysis.

To identify unconscious emotional dynamics in the interview data, we developed a more interpretive coding scheme, paying attention to both *what* interviewees said (or did not say) and *how* they said it. According to Shedler (2006: 228):

> [P]aying attention to . . . the experiences a person chooses to relate, his way of depicting self and others, his manner of telling the story (e.g., Are the stories narratively coherent or do they contain inner contradictions? Is the affect congruent with the content?), and the recurrence of patterns at the thematic (not surface) level, all reveal something about the person's implicit or unconscious organization of experience.

We flagged interview segments containing signals, such as hesitations, stumbling, abrupt shifts, setting up stark contrasts, equivocation, deflections, incoherence, and contradictions, and we speculated about the emotional dynamics underlying them (Peebles-Kleiger, 2002; Shedler, 2006, 2010). Signals derive from noticing elements in interviews and transcripts that are typically ignored in ordinary social discourse, such as attempts to avoid distressing feelings, which can appear, for example, in "subtle shifts of topic when certain ideas arise" and other maneuvers (Shedler, 2010).

These signals are visible, almost tangible manifestations of internal contradictions or feelings of distress, and they serve as "tells" indicating that the content is potentially conflicted and warrants attention. Identifying these verbal behaviors requires no deep knowledge of a

person's intrapsychic life, and the researcher need not have an ongoing therapeutic relationship to recognize them; they are simply "markers" similar to the "repetition, sequence, emotion, discontinuities, spontaneous communications, and idiosyncratic communications" of interest to therapists (Peebles-Kleiger, 2002: 69). We were especially attentive to these occurrences in accounts of work-family issues, including interviewees' references to their own and others' circumstances, decisions, views, or feelings, as well as comparisons they made between women and men.

Table 2 presents examples of unconscious emotional conflict in men's interviews, conflict that tended to revolve around feelings of guilt about time away from their families; Table 3 presents examples in women's interviews, where unconscious emotional conflict centered on ambivalence (examples 1-3) and a sense of personal competence (examples 4 and 5). We did not expect different signals for women and men, but simply noted what we observed. The signals possibly differ because the emotional content—and the necessary defensive operation—differed for the two groups. Men, whose dilemma appeared most prominently as guilt, would be less likely to display either the "back-and-forthing" and "stark contrasts" that women evidenced in describing their ambivalence or the "foreclosure of options" and "equivocating" they evidenced in describing their sense of competence. For their part, women, whose guilt is quite conscious, would face less need than men to engage in "deflecting feelings onto others" or other unconscious maneuvers that minimize feelings of guilt.

[Insert Tables 2 and 3 about here]

Interpretation was an iterative process, whereby one author or another would propose a code or an interpretation and the others would comment by agreeing, raising questions, or suggesting revisions. Sometimes the discussion led to multiple iterations, either face-to-face or in

writing. The key decision criterion in disagreements was how close or far the interpretation was to the data, with the solution always being to choose the interpretation that was closest. So, for example, one author proposed an interview segment below about serving Pop Tarts for breakfast as an example of projective identification onto the children. Another author noted that while that was a possibility, the full quotation reveals a bigger picture that points most directly to the wife as the target of projective identification. In this case, as in others, we opted for the interpretation that was best supported by the data.

We used this interpretive approach to identify people's unconscious emotion-regulation strategies. We turned to splitting, projection, and projective identification because we saw evidence of them in interviews and transcripts, which is unsurprising given that these strategies readily lend themselves to intergroup dynamics that map onto gender (Smith and Berg, 1987). Men and women demonstrated splitting and projection when they described both work and family domains as personally compelling while nevertheless making repeated references to family as women's domain and work as men's. The more firmly and consistently they located themselves and others in the gender-appropriate domain, the more wholly they were engaging in splitting and projection; the more widespread this dynamic across the firm, the more evidence we have that it operates at the intergroup level. Interviewees evidenced projective identification when their convictions about this gendered arrangement appeared to be an attempt to resolve the underlying conflict. Such expressions were variable, with some people seeming to experience more relief and others expressing more ambivalence, suggesting more or less complete identification with the projection and, concomitantly, a more or less complete resolution of the underlying conflict.

To identify the primary anxiety—what it was about the nature of the work that might have given rise to this unconscious social defense system—we drew on our broader understanding of how organization members experienced work at the firm. The aspect of work that raised the greatest angst was the firm's relentless demand for 24/7 availability, a demand that was widely regarded as problematic.

Finally, to identify any further elements of the social defense, we reviewed the data for evidence of additional firm-wide narratives, policies, and practices that reinforced the work-family narrative or that supported organization members' unconscious emotion-regulation strategies.

Findings

We present findings about men and women separately because the parental pull manifests itself differently for each group and demands a different psychological resolution.

The problem for men. The psychic tension men face is the demand that they have no identity other than as a labor commodity, which creates an internal conflict that must be resolved (Cooper, 2000). Capitalism's system of competition among firms compels overwork for many professionals (see Sharone, 2004, on management strategies that lead to long work hours; see Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Briscoe, 2007; and Goldin, 2014, on overwork for professionals). This imperative sets up an on-going demand that other, non-work identities (and the needs generated within them, such as being a good parent) be contingent. With non-work identities in the backseat, the identity that remains is that of the ideal worker: fully-committed to work and fully-available (Acker 1990). Those striving to be the ideal worker must adopt the psychological stance of "my job is all-important." But always chipping away at this stance is the raw reality of the requirement to stifle the demands of other identities.

These other identities—being a good parent, life-partner, citizen—are contingent and expendable for the *ideal w*orker. Yet for real people, these identities—particularly the parent one—are compelling. According to one man, "I definitely want my daughter relying on me. But, she's asking her mama, 'Put me to bed,' asking her mama 'Give me a bath.' It's because she knows that *she* can be relied on." His sense of guilt is palpable, a feeling many other men shared. (A25 M)

We show how projective identification keeps such feelings at bay by examining the psychological jujitsu one man demonstrated as he drew on the work-family narrative to explain women's lack of advancement in the firm.

> I believe deeply in my heart and soul that women encounter different challenges. There's the collusion of society that it's the woman who takes the extended maternity leave, and there are some biological imperatives, too. When my first child was born, I got to carry her from the delivery room to the nursery. It's almost like I could feel the chemicals releasing in my brain. I fell so chemically, deeply in love with my daughter. I couldn't imagine a world without her. I mean here it was in [just] the first eight minutes of her life. So I can understand, "How can I possibly give this up and go back to work?" (P20 M)

But back to work he went, and his take-away understanding was that *women* face problems with work-family. He could be said, from the standpoint of a defense analysis, to be splitting off his deep connection to his daughter, projecting it onto women in the firm, and projectively identifying with what he imagines to be the women's emotional gratification. If he relinquishes that intense feeling of connection to his daughter, he has no need to feel sad and guilty about returning to work.

Unpacking the components of the last quotation helps clarify the defensive process. The narrative flow that seems smooth when he tells his story, is, in fact, revealed as illusory when we track what happens to the intensity of his feelings of attachment to his daughter. The first two sentences make a distinction between women and men and link biology to motherhood. It is

women and not men who have the parenting experience. He then says almost the exact opposite by abruptly shifting to his own biologically-framed, intense emotional experience of parenting. In so doing, he is momentarily taking back the projection he just placed on mothers. His act of "understanding" women's experience via his own, however, signals that projective identification has occurred. He is in effect saying, "I was having this experience, but it was transient, and now that I've sampled it, now that I've been a tourist in this emotional land, I have a way to understand what is happening to women in the firm." The powerful emotional experience—with all the psycho-biochemical force he described—is no longer his. It is now theirs. He now knows it but is not governed by it.

In fact, he immediately shifts in his next statement to aligning himself, not with women, but with men, explaining how men are different from women. He continues, "I can't think of a single instance where the fella took a six-month paternity leave to care for the baby while mom went back to work." Speculating vaguely about how the firm works, he then says, "I think that we have a way of problem solving and a way of engaging with clients that doesn't necessarily give a greater advantage to cowboy style or, kind of, the certainty that seems to be a social aspect of masculinity in North America. But . . . it's clear to me there are clients who like that certainty." He concludes by situating himself squarely in the male-dominated world of work: "You know, kind of like the—the work I do in the beer world. It's dominated by men, and I mean men slapping each other on the back and talking about golf and shit like that." Thus, he ends by placing himself where he began, in a different world from women's, in the world of work (the "beer world"), where men and masculinity dominate. In this world, there is no room for the emotional experience of parenting. Here, he is able to exist, however unhappily, unencumbered by the "different challenges" he ascribed to women in his opening statement.

While this account was the most vivid and complete illustration of the dynamic of men projectively identifying with women in the firm, we argue that he is describing a work-family resolution that is not idiosyncratic but rather shared by other men.

This man drew directly on his understanding of women in the firm to achieve this resolution; more typically, men drew upon their understandings of their wives, blurring the distinction among women and ultimately consigning them all to the private sphere. For psychodynamic purposes, the firm's women become privatized and thus made indistinguishable from wives. Here is a man engaging in this process as he draws on the work-family narrative to explain women's lack of advancement in the firm.

> Consulting can be a bit more difficult for women. There's a lot more traveling. It's my personal—what I've seen—sometimes women are more attached to kids. They feel guilty. With my wife—. Sometimes they feel guilty if they're taking time away from home, in a way that men don't. You do travel a lot, you do work longer hours. So men don't feel certain things that women do. (A08 M)

We note how in trying to talk about the difficulties the firm's women face ("consulting can be a bit more difficult for women"), he feels the need to invoke his "personal"—shortly revealed to be his wife, a representative of the private sphere. We then see him moving back and forth in a fragmentary way between women in the private and public spheres of his life—his women coworkers and his wife: after invoking his "personal," he returns to women coworkers (they're more attached to kids and they feel guilty), goes back momentarily to his wife ("with my wife"), and then reverts again to women coworkers' guilt, a guilt men do not feel. In psychologically consigning the firm's women to the private sphere, he paves the way for the splitting and projection appearing at the end of the passage: women carry the guilt associated with work; men do not.

In light of this apparent interchangeability between the firm's women and men's wives, it is unsurprising that men often invoked their wives as the recipients of their projective identifications. An example of such a projective identification comes from a father of two as he was discussing how he managed work and family and clearly communicating how—in accord with the work-family script—he is exempt from the emotional pull of home. He said:

> So you tell the older kid, "Hey, get ready for school" and he basically does. Not a hundred percent, but certainly ninety percent. And you even tell the little one—I mean he's 7—he can get dressed. He can actually open his drawers and get the right clothes and get dressed. He can't make his breakfast, but in a pinch, he can. The older one can definitely open up a thing of Pop-Tarts and pop them in the toaster. It's not what you call healthy eating, but for this week, it's fine. So, it's—I mean—they don't cry when I leave. Sometimes the younger one does. But—
> **Interviewer:** Oh, really?
> **Interviewee:** Before they would kind of *both* cry. And yes. I mean it's—so, it's a lot easier [now that they are older]. (P05 M)

We note that he breaks off very suddenly after mentioning the crying with the comforting thought that "it's a lot easier" now that they no longer "*both* cry." This move appears to be a deflection of guilty feelings about his children's self-serve breakfasts and tears. In the next segment, he jumps to talk about sympathy with his wife having suffered from the boredom of being with children: "And the other thing is, she [his wife] wasn't working, which is brutal. I mean it's just boring. We love the kids—but it's just not that interesting [to stay home with them]." His jump to his wife and his use of the word "brutal," coming on the heels of the description of his interactions with his children, is suggestive. Does witnessing his children's tears when he departs brutalize *him*? Perhaps. He may be eliding the emotions he feels about the morning routine—probably a bundle of guilt, shame, and sadness—by splitting them off and projecting them onto his wife: he conjectures that she is the one who feels brutalized, and he empathizes with that experience, thereby circumventing his own feelings and completing the projective identification. This interpretation raised for us the question: could they each feel

brutalized by the loss of one domain—he the domestic, she the employment? Finally, he raises

the idea of a shared boredom, perhaps numbing himself to his emotions. The problem of sadness

and guilt vis-à-vis the children is gone. In all these men's accounts, we see the invocation of the

work-family narrative, which relieves them, to at least some degree, from the conflict.

We now return to the larger picture. Splitting off personal needs and feelings about

family and projecting them onto women enables men to show up at work every day and fulfill

both the cultural dictates about male breadwinning and the organization's desire for the

committed, ambitious workers it believes it needs to remain competitive. These arrangements

provide men the illusion of a fulfilled life. The work-family narrative is crucial in supporting the

psychological defenses that help men assuage the pain of the loss of the domestic. The splitting,

projection, and projective identification keep the collective whole, but at the individual level, the

wholeness is illusory and leaves men in a state of constantly grasping for what is called "psychic

integration" (Menzies, 1960). Those unable to sustain this pursuit quit. In sum, these defenses

work as band aids, but for most men, the reality of the on-the-ground, relentless demands of

family continually poke through the defense.

The problem for women. The capitalist imperative for overwork creates a different

psychic tension for women. While men construct at least the appearance of being ideal workers,

fulfilling the demand for overwork and relegating nonwork identities to the backseat, women are

asked to be ideal mothers fulfilling the demands of intensive parenting and relegating the work

identity to the backseat (see also Blair-Loy, 2003). In other words, whereas nonwork identities

are contingent and expendable for the ideal worker, the work identity is contingent and

expendable for the ideal mother. Women striving to be the ideal mother must adopt the

psychological stance of "my family is all-important," yet jettisoning opportunities to contribute

meaningfully beyond the domestic realm exacts costs (see also Stone, 2007). At a macro level, this splitting apart of work and family domains and assigning work to men and family to women allows the system of overwork to remain in place, however unsatisfyingly at the personal level.

For professional women like the ones in our firm, who have tasted success and reaped some of the rewards of their years of schooling, this psychic tension is especially acute. Men struggle internally, often unconsciously, with the requirement to give up intimate connections, but they are at least conforming to cultural norms. For men, the parental role as breadwinner, as cut off from intimate connections as it may be, nevertheless goes hand in hand with their work commitment; indeed, for ideal workers, family devotion takes the form of breadwinning and is entirely compatible with overwork (see also Townsend, 2002). For women, however, the parental role as caregiver flies in the face of work commitment; for ideal mothers, family devotion takes the form of intensive parenting and is not only incompatible with overwork, it often compels reduced work (see also Ridgeway, 2011: 130). But for many ambitious women, both caregiver and worker identities are compelling (see also Stone, 2007).

Thus, it is unsurprising that the professional women in our firm struggled openly with the push to split off the work component of their identity, even as they willingly complied with the family-devotion schema. Regarding women's tendency to willingly accede to the family-devotion schema, one mother talked about her inability to shirk the home front, despite having a stay-at home husband:

> I think there's just a difference between the way a mother and a father look at their kids and the sense of responsibility that they feel. I don't know, but I feel my male counterparts can more easily disconnect from what's happening at home. . . . If I did sort of disconnect [from home], things wouldn't fall apart. But I wouldn't feel good about it, so it's just not going to happen. (A57 F)

At the same time, however, her work commitment was strong: "If I make a commitment to this company, and to this organization, which I've made, I'm going to do it. I don't doubt myself." Yet she did have doubts about whether her family commitment would allow her to do what it would take to develop professionally:

> I know I'll fall down from time to time. I know I need to learn, and there are going to be things that—I don't doubt myself . . . from a place of doubting myself—it's more from a place of needing to learn and needing to grow. I doubt myself generally in being able to honor that, while also honoring the commitments I've made [to my family]. That is a constant worry.

The emotional conflict she feels is evident in her flip-flopping around the notion of self-doubt: "I don't doubt myself . . . I doubt myself." Whether she can handle it is, as she notes, "a constant worry." Her unambivalent claiming of her mother identity, conveyed in the first part of the quotation, is not matched by an unambivalent repudiation of her work identity. Rather, she describes herself as both committed and doubtful when it comes to work.

Thus, women who embrace commitments to both family and work do not fully comply with the work-family narrative, and as a result, they are unable to reap all of its psychological benefits as a social defense. Specifically, although many women did seem to take in the family-caregiver projection handed them by the firm, thereby enabling men to identify vicariously with that split-off aspect of themselves, they did not seem to fully reciprocate by splitting off and projecting onto men their worker identity. Thus, the psychological resolution many men found in projective identification was not fully available to these women, leaving them holding identities organizationally and socially constructed as contradictory. While men mourned the loss of the family caregiver role, they had, in fact, given it up (more or less); women had not (yet) given up the worker role. The social defense could ease women's dilemma only to the extent that they abdicated their worker identity—the way many men abdicated the intimate connections involved

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in caregiving. Unwilling to quit or substantially ratchet back on their career aspirations, many

women remained on the horns of this dilemma. By reifying the work-family narrative, the

organization facilitated men's resolution, while remaining a thorn in women's side, constantly

reminding them that they were in the wrong place by being at work instead of at home.

These reminders appeared as three push factors women had to withstand in order to hold

onto their work identity as ambitious professionals, all of which reinforced the work-family

narrative as a social defense (see Figure 1): first, the firm's work-family accommodation

policies, together with the flexibility stigma that attaches to users and the firm-wide practice of

users being primarily women; second, a shared narrative about the mismatch between women's

selling style and the style the firm valued; and third, a shared narrative derogating women

partners' mothering. Research has documented these factors (see, Williams, Blair-Loy, and

Berdahl, 2013, on work-family accommodation policies; Kellogg, 2011, and Ibarra and

Petriglieri, 2016, on mismatches between feminine stereotypes and valued work attributes; and

Blair-Loy, 2003, on women professionals as bad mothers), but the idea that they function

together as solidifying elements of a social defense is new.

The first push factor was the firm's policies and practices that created the strong

expectation that mothers take work-family accommodations. Thus, women had available a ready

off-ramp from the path of overwork, which also meant, for women associates, an off-ramp from

the fast track to partner and, for women partners, an off-ramp from the path to real power.

The second push factor was the firm's narrative about the purported mismatch between

women's relational style of selling and the hard-charging style the firm venerates, qualities a

number of women had difficulty embracing personally but easily attributed to men. Whereas the

first push factor reinforced the work-family narrative by emphasizing women's fitness for

family, this push factor emphasized the flipside: their unfitness for work. This selling-style narrative loosened women's identification with work and affirmed men's, further easing the way toward women's stepping back at work.

This push factor arose from the firm's construction of the job of selling, the most valued skill in the firm. The biggest accolades and biggest sales come from selling to CEOs, and virtually without exception, people named men as the star rainmakers, whose style they described as hard-charging and unequivocal. Here's how one of the firm's most powerful women partners imitated the selling style of the person named by everyone as the firm's most shining star.

> He'll walk into an executive meeting and say. . . "Okay, you want to achieve this. . . . It's going to take an organizational intervention, an innovation . . . a broader corporate strategy. It's going to be a multi-year program, let's just be very clear. That will be . . . about $15 million over two years. Are you tracking, are you with me?" (P26 F)

In contrast, here is how she described her default style: "I walk into a client, I check in. I like to be friends with them. . . . I tend to say, "Here's what I heard you saying, your agenda." . . . And I start to build, and then I hope that they get to this *delightful* conclusion that this is going to be a $15 million program." Clearly she sees a mismatch between her reflexive relational style and the style the firm venerates and demands, a perception reinforced early in her career by a partner who warned her that relying on relationship-building when making cold calls on prospective clients would communicate that "you don't have a lot going on between your ears."

Other women reported the same mismatch. Developing the selling skill as the firm defines it was especially hard for people who saw their chief strengths as the ability to be responsive to clients and to build relationships with them. According to one woman just below the partner rank:

It's hard for me. So much of it is based on this relationship that I develop. . . I tend to form these extraordinarily close relationships with my clients, and I was going to meet with the person the next level up [whom I didn't know]. I didn't know how to create that impression with that person, because what my strong suit is, is making people feel listened to and trusted and cared for. (A59 F)

Thus, this narrative about women's relationality disqualifies them from sales super-stardom, pushing them away from work (and possibly toward home).

Compounding women's presumed disadvantage in selling to CEOs was an unwillingness to exude a certainty they did not feel, an unwillingness they believed men did not share. As one woman explained:

I think that in general men need to have this much knowledge to talk with authority [holds up thumb and index finger close together], and women need to have this much [opens them]. Right? And I think that my goal is to try to get away with this much [halfway between the two]. Not that I want to turn into a bullshitter, but giving myself slack on my internal burden of proof [would help]. (A67 F)

A woman associate told us how she, too, tended to equivocate:

The characteristics most critical in the selling moment entail kind of boldly describing how you can help the client, or what you think their problem is, and what the solution is. So much of it is just about sounding confident, even if you have no idea what you're talking about and are making it up. For me, it's a hard transition. If I don't know something I caveat it. But watching good meetings with a client I see that a lot of it is just about sounding very authoritative and definitive. (A77 F)

Another woman suspected that this unwillingness to make unfounded claims may be a problem for many women: "You also have to be a certain kind of woman to do well in [sales]. You need to be able to give advice about things you don't know much about and be really confident, and maybe a lot of women don't have those skills. I don't see a lot of role models." (A58 F)

So the message is that the selling job is best done by men enacting a conventionally masculine style—hard-charging and unequivocal—and that enacting a conventionally feminine style—like being a "relationship-builder"—risks the label of lacking something between the ears. Not on the radar screen was the notion that other selling styles—perhaps ones that maximize the

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trust that comes from cautiousness in claims-making—might be effective in sales; also missing was any shared narrative that women could learn the venerated style. The firm had constructed effective selling in one, and only one, way, and women fell short. In sum, the message that women are ill-equipped for sales bolsters the work-family narrative by giving further momentum to any inclination to scale back.

The third and final push factor was the firm's negative message about women partners with children who had held fast to their identity as ambitious professionals and had achieved recognized career success. These women had resisted ratcheting back via accommodations and had successfully overcome their supposed selling deficits. Although few in number, such women did exist, and we heard positive references to their professional success. The very existence of these successful women partners suggests the possibility of integrating both worker and mother roles, and yet women partners with children were roundly condemned as bad mothers, undermining that possibility. To more junior women witnessing such condemnation—both those who were mothers and those contemplating motherhood—career commitment would seem to exact a terrible cost.

We heard not one positive comment about women partners as mothers, but many negative comments from both men and women. Women partners' family lives were scrutinized and found lacking in a way that we did not hear about men, an observation noted by a woman associate: "When I look at a female partner, it does leak into my thinking: how do I think she is as a mother in addition to how do I think she is as a partner? When I look at men, I don't think about what kind of father they are." (A63 F)

Another junior woman who was married and planned to be a mother told us the following about a woman partner: "She tells a story she thinks is funny about how her kid was surprised

when she picked him up from school. He said, 'I'm so honored that you came to get me.' But I'm appalled by that story! That is not who I want to be!" (A55 F) Both the woman partner, in telling this story, and the junior woman in recounting it and repudiating the behavior, reveal women's struggle combining (or anticipating combining) the maternal role with professional ambition. What impels the partner to tell her junior colleague this potentially incriminating story? We speculate it is an unconscious attempt to exonerate herself of guilt. In making a public statement, she may be seeking to normalize her behavior, while at the same time implicitly giving the opportunity for condemnation. A response of silence or approval—the only two viable responses from a junior colleague—would allow her to feel exonerated, at least for a while. As for the junior woman, why is she impelled to relate this story to us? We suggest she may be making a public declaration of what she is not (but fears she could become if she were to live out her career ambition). In making this declaration, she paints herself into a corner: she either has to leave the firm or contemplate the possibility of being a bad mother. By declaring "that is not who I want to be," she affirms her devotion to motherhood and guarantees a moment of emotional surcease.

Thus, the leitmotif around motherhood is that a woman cannot excel in this job and be the ideal mother. We speculate that when women fully take in the work-family narrative's belief that motherhood and career commitment are incompatible, they ratchet back either by cutting down on work hours or by taking an internal-facing role, or else they leave, offering "family" as the reason. Either way, women's careers are derailed, and the work-family narrative gains even further support.

In sum, women found themselves between a rock and hard place. Responding to the pull of family and taking accommodations meant undermining their status at work. But retaining their

ambition rendered them subpar performers (given the definition of superior performance as masculine) or alternatively—for the successful women partners—subpar mothers. These push factors are part of the firm's social defense, reinforcing the work-family narrative and further pressuring women to split off their worker identity.

DISCUSSION

Findings from a study of a professional service firm seeking to retain and promote women showed that the firm-wide explanation for women's stalled advancement—that women's work-family conflict keeps them from being able to work the requisite long hours—was dubious. Evidence casting doubt on the work-family narrative was that men and women alike suffered from long work-hours, and—contrary to the firm's belief—women were no more likely to quit than men. Moreover, the firm's solution to the problem—accommodation policies—contributed to women's derailment. Yet pointing out to otherwise data-driven senior leaders these disconnects between the facts on the ground and the beliefs in the air had no effect on the tenacity of the belief. We reasoned that this tenacity stemmed partly from the hegemonic nature of the narrative: its seeming naturalness rendered it pervasive, difficult to contest, and therefore resilient in the face of competing evidence. To further understand the resilience of the work-family narrative we tracked the implicit emotional content of our interviews, guided by the systems psychodynamic literature. This analysis suggested that the work-family explanation for women's stalled advancement persisted because it was a social defense that helped divert firm members' attention away from the wrenching anxiety of having to sacrifice either work or personal life, an anxiety raised by the long-hours work culture that profit-maximization frequently demands (see Figure 1).

Through in-depth analysis of interview material, we found that the work-family narrative encouraged men to displace family-life concerns onto the firm's women via processes of splitting, projection, and projective identification. These unconscious emotion-regulation strategies provided men some relief from their internal struggle with the emotional pull of home, while allowing them to maintain long work-hours.

The psychic tension women faced was harder to resolve. Playing counterpart to men, they embraced the emotional pull of home, but these ambitious women also felt strongly committed to work. Their ambivalence kept them from fully reciprocating in the splitting-and-projection dynamic and from fully conforming to the narrative's precept that women find family more fulfilling than work. Three push factors bolstered the work-family narrative's message, pressuring women toward greater conformity. One push factor was the firm's work-family accommodation policies and practices, which gave women a ready off-ramp from the track to partnership. Another was the firm's veneration of a selling style that many women associated with men and felt that they, as women, could not or did not want to emulate, diminishing their sense of competence and greasing the skids of the off-ramp. The final push factor was the message that being a good mother is incompatible with professional success, which forces women to choose either being considered a bad mother or lowering their ambitions. Each factor was poised to loosen women's identification with work and thus further reinforced the idea of work as men's domain and family as women's. Even with the impetus from these push factors, however, the work-family narrative was a less effective social defense for women than for men, affording women less relief from the anxiety raised by the forced trade-off between work and family.

In this analysis, women's stalled advancement is a substitute problem that gave rise to a substitute, or "secondary," anxiety: it directed firm members' focus, laser-like, on women's worrisome retention and promotion rates, leaving the primary anxiety of losing their sense of human wholeness more or less languishing in the neglected, out-of-focus periphery. Meanwhile, the work-family narrative and associated policies and practices, together with the unconscious strategies of splitting, projection, and projective identification, ensured that the primary anxiety raised by long work-hours remained in the periphery, leaving two orthodoxies in place: the inescapability of women's stalled advancement and the immutability of the long-hours culture.

This analysis invites speculation about what other functions the work-family narrative might play in this organization. We suggest that, in addition to deflecting attention away from the culture of overwork, the narrative also allowed the firm to deflect responsibility for women's stalled advancement, while justifying the gender imbalance at senior levels. If women themselves prefer to be with their families, as the work-family narrative has it, leaders cannot be accountable for the glaring gender inequality in their senior ranks. Nor do they need to confront the disturbing possibility that they themselves might be biased or might have discriminated against women, nor need women confront the possibility that they might have been in any way ill-treated or victims of discrimination. Indeed, in the course of detailing the work-family account, many participants of all ranks and both sexes went to great lengths to assure interviewers that women's lack of advancement could not be the result of discrimination, suggesting that this unpleasant possibility existed, at some level, in their consciousness. The defense system, however, ensured that it was never seriously broached.

More fundamentally, leaders promulgated a work culture that pitted two fundamental social institutions—work and family—against each other, a culture at odds with the progressive

and caring image the organization sought to cultivate. The solution to this contradiction again lay in the commitment to the work-family narrative, which protected the leadership from being seen as the source of the 24/7 requirements by instead deflecting blame to clients' demands and industry norms. Indeed, by showing concern for women's problems, the narrative placed leaders on the side of "the people" rather than on the side of profits, rendering them innocent.

This research makes four theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to gender scholarship. We offer a new way of understanding the persistence of gender inequality by providing a model that explains how key discourses, policies, and practices work as an unconscious defense mechanism operating at multiple levels of analysis. The ubiquity of the work-family explanation for women's stalled advancement (Ramarajan, McGinn, and Kolb, 2012; Ely, Stone, and Ammerman, 2014) suggests that this model may pertain to any firm or any industry that venerates long work-hours, and thus it may help explain gender inequality beyond this one firm. Specifically, we show how the work-family narrative animates a set of psychodynamic processes that perpetuate an ideal-worker mentality dependent on men's willingness to tolerate 24/7 work demands, while also reifying the notion of a home front dependent on women's caregiving and men's breadwinning. The operation of the social defense thus sustains and legitimates women's lower-power status: the organizational belief that motherhood and career are unassimilable makes finding a viable path to success difficult for many women, and the ready organizational solution—to cut back once they have children—leads to their being professionally sidelined. This attention to the psychodynamic interplay between power and emotion in organizations augments existing scholarship on how organizational cultures (i.e., organizations' discourses, policies, and practices) erect powerful yet often invisible barriers to women's advancement (Ely & Meyerson, 2000b; Sturm, 2001; Rapoport et al., 2002;

Bailyn, 2006). It also helps explain why culture change—these scholars' proposed solution to gender inequality—has been so hard to implement and sustain (Ely and Meyerson, 2000a; Rapoport et al., 2002; Kelly, et al., 2010).

Second, we deepen work-family scholarship by revealing the psychodynamic underpinnings of some of the problems and constructs it examines. Work family scholars have long recognized the flexibility stigma that attaches to taking accommodations (Stone and Hernandez, 2013; Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl, 2013). This problem lies at the heart of a conundrum: the work-family explanation for women's stalled advancement points to an intervention strategy—accommodations—that, when taken, derails women's careers. We offer a theoretical account for why this conundrum exists. In our analysis, women's stalled advancement is a substitute problem that must be preserved because it deflects attention away from the long work-hours problem. We also reveal how the wider culture's work-devotion and family-devotion schemas (Blair-Loy, 2003) are implicated in the organization's psychodynamic processes. These cultural schemas motivate and reinforce the gendered splitting of work and family. Our systems psychodynamic analysis in turn helps explain the deeply-entrenched nature of these cultural schemas.

The third theoretical contribution is bringing a power-based perspective to the systems psychodynamic literature. We demonstrate how social defenses, like much else in collectivities, may work better for powerful groups, bringing greater nuance to scholars' understanding of how social defenses operate. This insight is new, as previous research has assumed that an organization's social defense works equally well for all members of the system. (In our case, it worked better for men than for women.) We propose that social defense analyses would be enriched to the extent that they are sensitive to how intergroup power disparities may produce

varying levels of protection for different groups. In addition, by bringing hegemonic narrative theory together with systems psychodynamic theory, we reveal how social defenses can be implicated in another power-related asymmetry: they can maintain existing power relations (the hegemonic insight) while enabling those in power to appear as if they were invested in precisely the opposite (the systems psychodynamic insight). Thus, when social defenses comprise work features that include a hegemonic narrative, as in our case, their impact extends beyond their diversionary role in organizations to include preserving and reproducing dominant power relations at both the organizational and societal levels. These insights offer novel ways of linking social defense systems to systems of power.

More generally, each of these three contributions involves linking the micro and macro realms. By elaborating how organizational features mediate between individual- and societal-level processes, our model of the unconscious social-defense system responds to the call for organizational scholars—especially those studying gender (Ely and Padavic, 2007)—to develop "meso"-level theory (House, Rousseau, and Thomas-Hunt, 1995).

The final theoretical contribution is demonstrating the usefulness of the social defense concept for understanding organizational problems, particularly the intransigent ones. Problems may be intransigent precisely because they are fueled by hidden, unconscious processes (Jaques, 1955). Organizational scholars have lacked the theory and methods to understand these processes, and organization members, for their part, are emotionally invested in keeping such understanding at bay. By adding a detailed empirical example to the growing body of knowledge about systems psychodynamic processes, we hope to inform research into other obdurate organizational problems.

We also make a methodological contribution. Scholars have recently called for greater attention to unconscious emotions in organizational settings (Barsade, Ramarajan, and Westen, 2009). Yet, while experimentalists have developed tools for identifying and studying these emotions in the lab (e.g., Schimel, Greenberg and Martens 2003), field researchers have thus far lacked such a methodological toolkit. In this paper, we begin to lay out a method for how field researchers might notice, surface, and interpret unconscious emotions in interview data. In reporting our methods, we paid particular attention to showing the moments in people's interviews that we took to be signals of unconscious emotions (e.g., hesitations, contradictions, deflections), and we aimed for transparency in spelling out how we interpreted them. While we examined our data through a systems psychodynamic lens, we believe our approach might also be useful to scholars interested in studying unconscious emotions from other, non-psychodynamic, perspectives.

We note that our analysis is generalizable only to a particular stratum of the workforce—professionals in 24/7 work cultures—and to a particular manifestation of gender inequality—women's lower representation in firms' upper ranks. Hence, the processes we uncovered may not apply to other groups of workers or to other sites of gender inequality. Workers at the bottom of the labor force, for example, are far more likely to face a shortage than a proliferation of work hours (Jacobs and Gerson, 2005; Lambert, 2008; Jacobs and Padavic, 2015) and are less likely to have access to work-family accommodations (Kelly and Kalev, 2006); these workers would therefore not suffer from overwork or its attendant anxieties, rendering the social defense we identified moot for this group.

Black women may be another exception. Firms' upper ranks are overwhelmingly white, and the cultural expectation that (white) women enact the family devotion schema might not

extend to black women (Hurtado, 1989; Kennelly, 1999; Collins, 2004). Cultural prescriptions for Black women dictate that working take precedence over family care-giving (Cuddy and Wolf, 2013). Moreover, Black women are accorded more latitude than their white counterparts to enact at least some of the masculine behaviors normatively associated with leadership (Livingston, Rosette, and Washington, 2012). Accordingly, black women might be immune to organizational social defenses predicated on beliefs about women's family-primacy and lack-of-fit for leadership roles. Other social defenses, however, may help explain the persistence of Black women's underrepresentation in top ranks, and future research might examine this possibility.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We conclude with two thoughts. The first is what our findings mean for the larger project of gender equality in society. In her consideration of the cultural forces deployed to resist movement towards gender equality, Ridgeway (2011) noted that both women and men have a "deep sociocognitive interest in maintaining . . . cultural beliefs . . . differentiating them" and thus "an interest in resisting a real erasure of gender difference." We agree that the culture's deep investment in cultural beliefs about gender differences is a key impediment on the road to equality (see also, Ely and Padavic, 2007). Indeed, it is the wider culture that is responsible for the creation of the work-family narrative. But we question the idea that people's motivation is purely "sociocognitive," with all the rational capacities implied by "cognitive." Our findings imply that psychodynamic desires and conflicts are also at play, making the path towards equality even more difficult to traverse. Thus, if our analysis is correct, women's advancement is slowed because of social defenses at the organizational level, along with the equally-resistant-to-change wider-cultural beliefs Ridgeway discusses.

There is hope, however, which brings us to our second point: the work-family narrative-based social defense suffers from weaknesses. First, hegemonic narratives may have staying power—that is what it means to be hegemonic—but that does not mean they are impossible to dislodge (Ewick and Silbey, 1995). As women and men employees continue to feel frustrated and as researchers point to productivity losses from long work-hours, other accounts may displace it, making it less available for social defense purposes and creating space for other, less-entrenched formulations of the problem.

The other weakness of the work-family narrative as a social defense is that, like all social defenses, it is not completely effective. It fails to fully alleviate either the pain men feel over disconnection from family or the pain women feel over the stark choice they are handed between work and family. As Menzies (1960:116) noted in her classic study of social defenses, the social defense system inhibited "self-knowledge and understanding" and thus "fail[ed] . . . its individual members desperately." This was also the case with the employees in our firm. While the social defense was more effective for men than for women, it was not fool-proof or thorough-going for them, either, and discontents were ever-present for both sexes.

In closing, we note that our findings square with recent observations that progress toward gender equality will be slowed to the extent that efforts are focused exclusively on women (Coontz, 2011; Ridgeway, 2011; Joshi et al., 2015), but our findings also suggest that, to be effective, expanding efforts to include men requires a broad vision. For example, a popular recommendation is to encourage men to use accommodation policies at a rate similar to women so as to level the playing field. We would argue, however, that accommodation policies alone—regardless of who uses them—will not dismantle the culture of overwork (see also Perlow and Kelly, 2014) nor will they dislodge the deep-rooted, multi-level, psychodynamically-motivated

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association of women with family (and men with work). They thus are unlikely to significantly advance the project of gender equality.

Instead, solutions require a thorough-going reconsideration of gender at work and at home, one that begins with exploring people's "psychological investments in cherished identities" (Williams, Berdahl, and Vandello, 2016: 526). While this challenge may seem daunting, invoking Ridgeway and Correll's (2000) metaphor of ocean waves moving a sandbar makes realizing a broader vision seem more possible (see also Butterfield and Padavic, 2014): one set of families embracing egalitarianism—one wave—has little effect; one company's action to humanize work demands—another wave—similarly has little effect. But as the waves continue—as other families and companies follow—the old gender system will be eroded to the point of irrelevance. Only when women and men can pursue lives where the demands and gratifications of one domain—whether work or home—need not take precedence over the other will women achieve workplace parity with men.

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Table 1. Characteristics of a Hegemonic Narrative and Evidence from One Firm

Characteristic	Description	Evidence
1. Pervasive	The work-family narrative (WFN) is known and is recounted frequently and easily by members of a social setting (e.g., group, organization, society).	The WFN was consistently the top explanation for women's underrepresentation in high-level ranks,.
2. Uncontested	The narrative is typically not challenged in any structured, collective way: it is accepted by members of the social setting.	Alternative narratives were rarely offered, and usually by way of claiming they were invalid (e.g., "it's not discrimination").
3. Polyvocal	People's unique, personal, stories are spun into the same narrative, even when the stories are contradictory, thus inoculating the narrative from criticism.	Interviews included personal experiences made consonant with the narrative and impossible to gainsay.
4. Seemingly natural	The narrative is consistent with other shared cultural beliefs and is taken for granted as a truthful account of how things are.	Interviewees buttressed the WFN by references to women's and men's natural proclivities and to the cultural assumption that women are responsible for the home.
5. Justifies and reproduces dominant cultural meanings and power relations	The narrative legitimizes existing roles as well as inequalities in status, power, and resources, and it informs formal arrangements and practices that hold these existing inequalities and power disparities in place.	The WFN explains women's underrepresentation and men's overrepresentation in the top jobs and encourages women to prioritize family and men to prioritize work; it also institutionalizes these prescriptions by encouraging women and not men to take family accommodations, which come with career costs that reproduce the status quo.
6. Resilient	When presented with facts at odds with the narrative, members of the social setting resist this challenge, ignoring and questioning the validity of the facts.	Firm leaders rejected the culture-study results, which had contradicted the WFN. They challenged the factual basis for the claim that work hours also perturbed men. Future plans for testing interventions were scuttled upon leaders' learning that these would not be targeted to women but instead would address problems both women and men face.

Source: Adapted from Ewick & Silbey (1995)

Table 2. Examples of Unconscious Emotional Dynamics Relating to Guilt in Men's Interview Data: Signals, Interview Excerpts, and Interpretations

Signals	Interview Excerpts	Interpretations
Example 1 Using strong words Stumbling Abruptly shifting from emotionally-charged to emotionally-neutral language/topic	I am taking a road of putting clients first in a lot of situations. I'm trying to actively work against that. . . . But, I – I can get myself in danger [that] family time will always come second. Now, all that said, I mean I – I don't – I don't think I'm a terrible father, because you know I – I – my typical routine in the day is to get up at seven. The boys have already piled into our bed at 6:30 and kicked and rolled around and talked. Get out of bed at around 7:00. Help Lorrie do breakfast for the kids. Help them get dressed. I leave at about 8:00 or 8:10. They're leaving for school around the same time. [He continues with the day's routine for several sentences.] And then the weekends are – you know they're overwhelmingly family oriented with the exception of a call here or a call there. So, they've got a lot of sports. We'll go to a friend's place for dinner with the kids. Or, so at least I'm not one of those you know – you know Hollywood bad dads.	He admits to prioritizing family second and being troubled by it, and the rest of the excerpt is about warding off the fear that he is a bad father. His anxiety is conveyed by strong word choices ("danger," "terrible father," "overwhelmingly," "bad Hollywood dad"), by stumbling ("I mean I—I don't—I don't think"), and by his abrupt shift-in-topic away from the emotionally-charged possibility that his parenting is "terrible" to instead focus on the emotionally-neutral daily routine he engages in with the children that shows he is there for them--"overwhelmingly" so on weekends. His summary statement affirms only the absence of a negative (rather than a claim that he is a good father), implying that some element of doubt remains.
Example 2 Equivocating Self-justifying Hesitating Stumbling Minimizing	Q: So, are you pretty happy . . . with your home life at this point? A: Yes. I think so. The Middle East thing was a little rough. [He had spent 6 months away from his wife and 2 children for work.] But [my wife] was part of the decision to go do that in the first place. It wasn't like I sprung it on her. . . . And she actually was advocating for it at one point when I didn't want to do it. . . .. Another guy that I worked with who was in a similar boat -- whose wife didn't want him to do it -- but he did it anyway and that was a much different experience for him, so. Q: Oh, really? A: Yes, so. He had to talk her into it, so. . . . He stayed for about five months and then came back -- and refused to go back again. . . . But yes, I mean, that was tough -- but actually -- I think we look back on it -- and say it was tough -- but it was -- I think -- I mean it didn't	His response begins with equivocation (an initial "yes" is modified to "I think so," and concludes with "a little rough"), implying some difficulty with the question about his happiness with home life. He follows up only on the "bit rough" element, not on the positive element, possibly indicating guilty feelings about his absence. He justifies his actions by pinning the decision to go on his wife ("she actually was advocating for it") and by pointing to a colleague who had failed to get his wife's buy-in, thus positioning himself as the more considerate husband.

cause any damage or anything, so. The hardest part was when I came back. I think she had gotten used to making all the decisions by herself -- so (laughter) -- so.

Q: She didn't appreciate your contribution?

A: Well, it took her a while to get used to having a coalition -- not a monarchy

Yet it appears that he nevertheless has worries about how his absence affected the family: his initial impulse is to characterize the experience in negative terms ("rough," "tough"), but then, after hesitating and stumbling (in a sentence with three "but" phrases), he revises his assessment by minimizing the potential impact ("it didn't cause any damage or anything"). His concluding comment—that his reentry to the family was difficult because he had been made effectively irrelevant—implies that his absence was hard on his relationship with his wife, at least for a time.

Example 3

Suppressing

Deflecting feeling onto others

Q: Do you feel your experience at the firm is different from men who have stay-at-home wives?

A: . . . I worry about my kids. You know, I -- especially when they were young. I just think of them kind of like sitting in their rooms with – Some of the nannies we hired were like pretty surly. And I just feel sad about it. I go like, my poor [child's name] is like sitting there with his train set, and grouchy Debby, the nanny, like won't take him out today! So it's more like the impact on the kids that I -- that I worry about. And are these childcare things good for them? And -- but it's not really me so much, it's more I guess the kids.

His answer goes back and forth between his children's sadness and his own, and the latter is apparent in the poignancy of the account of the child sitting in his room with a train set and a grouchy nanny. He suppresses his sadness partly by putting it in the past ("especially when they were young"), partly by ending with a denial that his pain matters, and more generally by deflecting his sadness onto his children.

Example 4

Using strong words

Avoiding and minimizing emotions

Q: How does having children affect how you manage work?

A: First off, there's a big difference in that they're not adults, obviously. But if you have a significant other. . . they take care of themselves. . . . It's like -- if I got to go on a trip -- well -- you know -- whatever -- or if I have to work late tonight -- whatever. But if they're kids, then they're kids. And they don't understand that. And [they think] "Why are you going?" So, that, in my mind, ups the consequences.

Q: Ups the consequences in what way?

In considering the effect of his absence, he explains that it will not "scar" (strong word choice) his wife, implying that it may scar his children, and this concern repeatedly appears (upped consequences, the children's formative experiences). He says that small children can't understand a parent's absence, and in using "understand," he stresses the cognitive rather than the emotional. Moving away from the idea of damaging his children,

A: Well, their just kind of emotional well-being. "Why is Daddy choosing the trip over me?" So, there's that. And then there's -- your spouse can get pissed off at you -- but it's not like -- and she can say – "Why is he choosing work over me?" But it's not going to scar her kind of emotionally (chuckles). She may say, "I'm divorcing you, you asshole,". . . which would be bad, obviously. But it's not a formative experience. So, there's that.

And then the other thing is -- how kids are affected depends so much on the spouse and kind of what their attitude is about it. And I don't think it depends too much on the kids' personalities, because the kids' personalities, I think, unless they're just -- what's the word? -- Alzheimer's? -- not Alzheimer's -- but –

Q: Like ADD?

A: No, not ADD. It will come to me. Autistic -- right. Unless they're just [autistic], they want you to be there all the time. It's like completely unreasonable, right, because they're unreasonable. They're kids. So, they're kind of a given. They want you there all the time.

he shifts to an imagined scene of his wife name-calling and divorcing him, suggesting that it would be easier to receive her wrath than his children's. Again, the implication is that he worries that his children are hurt by his absence—by "daddy choosing the trip over me"—but he minimizes the worry by instead focusing on and making light of how his wife might react.

In his next move, he launches into an analysis of his children's reactions to his long work hours that effectively nullifies their potential for inducing guilt: his characterization of his children's wish for him to "be there" as both utterly normal (a "given"; all children feel this way unless they have a serious disorder, like autism) and as "completely unreasonable" ("they want you to be there *all the time"*) enables him to dismiss their reactions and avoid feeling guilty. It is notable that he does not characterize his children as having emotional needs in this regard, simply unreasonable desires.

Example 5

Minimizing emotional ties

Abruptly shifting from emotionally-charged to emotionally-neutral language/topic

Transforming one emotion into a less painful one

[Before the baby], I could be gone for three days at a time. I could talk to my wife for an hour on the phone every day. . . . Emotionally, it's not too different from when you're at home. . . . My wife would always hate it when I'd say I actually missed the cats more than her when I travel, because I can't actually interact with the cats, because an interaction with the cat is all physical.

With our baby, it's actually the same thing [as with the cats]: You can't interact with the baby [on the phone]. It's all physical. It's been much harder to go for three days at a time. . . . It's even difficult to do an overnight. There's a week where I came back [after 3 days away] and [the 8-month old] just hit a growth spurt. I came back and it was like, God! She's grown up! relatively speaking. There was a week I was away and she started crawling! In addition to [the fact that] even when

He first sets himself up as missing the cats (phone calls are all he needs from his wife), whereas his wife misses him (her objection to the cat quip implies he realizes she wants more). With the baby, however, his glibness disappears. He begins to develop his feelings of loss, but ceases just as they were starting to come out strongly (missing the baby's growth spurt and first crawling attempt). He switches gears and uses the term "burden" – the baby is suddenly something to be managed – and continues by expressing sincere sympathy for how the burden has

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I'm home, I'm working crazy hours. It's pushed more of the managing the whole burden onto my wife. She was always the one that made dinner before. The dishes would sit in the sink until I got around to them. Now, she's doing the dishes. She is basically taking care of the baby all the time, except for the usually 45 minutes that I get in the morning and the ½ hour that I get over the weekends if I'm working one day. She's basically taking care of the baby by herself. There's ways around that. We try to get her household help and have somebody that comes in once a week and we've been thinking about doing it more often than that. But, it still doesn't make up for the fact that the other person now that's getting time with my kid is not me. So even if my wife is getting the relief-- [breaks off].

fallen on his wife, perhaps transforming intolerable pangs about missing his child's key developmental moments into less intolerable guilty feelings about her burden. After some talk about dealing with the practical need for assistance, his sense of loss powerfully reasserts itself: it is "household help," not he, who will get time with his child; he has been displaced. He abruptly breaks off without expressing sadness at this thought.

Table 3. Examples of Unconscious Emotional Dynamics Relating to Ambivalence and Sense of Competence in Women's Interview Data: Signals, Interview Excerpts, and Interpretations

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Signals	Interview Excerpts	Interpretations
Example 1		
Going back and forth	Q: What's on your mind now? What worries you? What keeps you up nights? A: The biggest question is what comes next for me in terms of trying to figure out what is my career path. When I joined the firm I always said I will stay here as long as I feel like I'm learning at a pretty good pace. And that's pretty much been true for my entire career here. But now that I'm doing the family/baby balance work thing, I have more questions. I can't and I don't want to just throw myself into the job anymore. I like reserving my evenings and my weekends to spend with my baby. And at the same time, I still have this discomfort with sort of seeing my peers be on this trajectory if I'm on this [other] trajectory. So there's a little bit of discomfort I have about that. At some level, I'm sort of willing to trade off, because I know I'm getting the time with my daughter and I'm not getting on a plane and flying across the country. On the flip side, I want to know that there is a path [to promotion] that makes sense.	As a junior person and new mother working an 80% schedule and hoping to advance, her career path is her chief worry. She notes that her career with the firm has largely been rewarding, but having a child has forced a reconsideration ("I have more questions") and – more strongly – a rejection ("I can't and I don't want to just throw myself into the job anymore"). That rejection, however, is quickly second-guessed, as she raises the cost of maintaining such a stance: her position compared to peers will suffer, and she twice mentions "discomfort" on this score. It is clearly difficult to renounce ambition unequivocally. The quotation concludes with a final back-and-forth: She returns temporarily to her family-first stance, although far more tentatively ("At some level," "I'm sort of willing") and counterposes it to her desire for promotion. Thus, ambivalence appears in the sequencing of affirmations (in order: work, family, work, family, work) in the space of a few sentences.
Example 2		
Going back and forth Setting up stark contrasts	Q: So do you ever think about leaving? A: Yeah. . . . So, I like [the firm] a lot, I should say. It has been my home for my whole professional career. I think about it sometimes for work – life balance reasons. . . . Sometimes I think about—I mean I definitely think about it given that I'm about to have a [second] baby. . . . I feel like recently I've barely – I'm managing to have some time with my toddler and get my work done. But it feels very precarious. . . . I haven't put him to bed any night [this week]. He gets mad at me if I'm not there.	She is clearly ambivalent, and this excerpt is replete with back-and-forth-ing about the importance of career versus being with her child – and about staying or quitting. She starts by referring to her commitment to the job ("So, I like [the firm] lot," "It has been my home for my whole professional career"). She then tells a story about how her job hours wreaked

Last week was pretty busy, too. I came home one day, early actually, relatively early. . . . He actually ran away from me because he was mad at me. . . . At first he actually ran back to his nanny, which was the first time that has ever happened. . . . I came in, he looked at me and ran the other way and sort of made a terrible face at me. I was like, "Oh, my gosh!" . . . . It was very painful. It was shocking. . . . [Regarding travel], frankly, I would be scared to say that [I don't want to travel out of town]. I would be scared that it would be the beginning of the end of my career here. . . . If I had to go abroad all the time that would absolutely be unworkable for me, right now. I don't know. I'm not actually sure. That is why I don't think about it lightly because I don't have illusions that there are so many other positions at the level of remuneration that I'm getting and the level of professional challenge that I would want. I don't want a boring job, either. . . . My career is a big part of my identity. I don't want to be a stay-home mother. But I feel I have to deal with my kids. That is so hard a balance. . . .

You know how people say "You will not know how you feel as a mother until your child is born"? And some women will say, "All I want to do is stay home with the baby," and other women can't wait to go back to work, and you just can't tell who you would be. And I think everyone who knows me thought I might be more of a can't-wait-to-go-back-to-work kind of people. But I actually find that I didn't actually want to come back to work.

I mean if my husband had an income I probably would have stayed longer. Or maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I would have eventually gotten bored. But I like to be with my little guy. I mean I really do, and when I'm with him I want to be totally focused on him. . . . My husband, who is an incredibly involved father and takes care of my son a lot . . . . You know, he loves our son dearly but he still will sit there and hold him on his lap and read the paper online or try to work while holding him. Whereas when I'm with him, I don't try to do anything except totally focus on him.

So I do think that—and I don't know if this is just me as an individual versus my husband--if there is a gender component or not. I don't know.

havoc on her relationship with her toddler ("he looked at me and ran the other way"). But she returns to a statement of her career commitment, first at the rational level, speaking of the high pay, and then with a declaration of its personal importance ("my career is a big part of my identity. I don't want to be a stay-home mother"). The two sentences immediately following, however, summarize her ambivalence: "But I feel I have to deal with my kids. That is so hard a balance."

She then she sets up a dichotomy (the classic "want to stay home" versus "want to return to work") and barely refrains from inserting herself in the "stay-home" group; instead, she creates a new, ambivalent, category ("didn't want to come back to work"), which stops just short of declaring herself as all about child-rearing.

The "pro-work" stance reappears as she worries about boredom if she were to stay home. She then performs another about-face to return to the side of motherhood ("But I like to be with my little guy. I mean I really do, and when I'm with him I want to be totally focused on him.") In the final segment, she compares her focused mothering to her husband's distracted fathering and conjectures the possibility of a gender difference in explaining her greater care-taking skill and devotion.

The emotional intensity of the examples, the fast speed of declarations and reversals, and the length of her response all indicate ambivalence. Noticeable is the tension she seems to feel between the potential loss of her relationship with her child, on the one hand, and the potential loss of her job, on the other, heightening the emotional intensity of the

challenge she faces: after the painful story of her toddler avoiding her, she reports being "scared" about "the beginning of the end" of her career.

In sum, this narrative contains a series of work-family tensions framed as stark contrasts that are seemingly irreconcilable: quitting versus staying; family as "home" versus the firm as "home"; "me as an individual [attentive to family] versus my husband [attentive to work]"; losing her relationship with her child versus losing her job.

Example 3

Contradicting herself

Being incoherent

I've had a baby and I was told--I kept being reassured--"There are different career paths for women that become moms." And I kept thinking to myself, "Well, I actually really love working with clients. That's why I'm here!" So what are my models or opportunities in the context of client-facing roles? So there was a feeling [my way] forward that I had to do there. But there are a lot of great examples of leaders, both men and women, I think, at the firm for having the confidence to think about your role more broadly and think about your role as an owner and as a leader, from my perspective. So I don't like to think too – in the context of my job – like my job title. I like to think about, again, how I can truly advise clients, how I can help them be successful, how I can help my teams, how I can help ensure that they're as successful as they can be, as well.

The "reassurance" she received about the possibility of accommodations is anything but reassuring. Foregoing client contact (a typical accommodation for mothers) would mean renouncing the part of the job she most "loves." Her response to the rhetorical question, "What are my models or opportunities?" suggests a sense of having to find her own way forward in the face of both the discouraging communication and the lack of models or opportunities. She seems to contradict herself, however, by jumping to think of counterexamples of leaders, both men and women, who show that it is possible "to think about the role more broadly." The arc of her response suggests that she does not have this conundrum fully worked out and remains vulnerable to cross-pressures and discouragement. Having had a child, she seems unable to articulate a consultant identity – or pathway to such an identity – that would allow her to pursue the parts of the role she loves (advising clients, helping her teams). It is notable that after the first three sentences, the remainder of the excerpt is not fully

coherent, which may indicate anxiety about the issue.

Example 4

Equivocating

Q: [What does it take to succeed?]

A: I think you have to be ambitious, and you have to be hungry and thirsty, and you have to be willing to get on the planes and go your own when you can't find . . . help. You do have to be thirsty, I guess, hungry, whatever the expression is. I think if you don't have ambition, you're not going to break through. People have to be able to see that in you and recognize it, or you're never going to be able to break into "I'm a commercial leader!" . . . I think it's a great thing. . . If you're not going to kind of say, "I'm in it, I'm fully in, and I'm hungry for this, and I recognize all the drawbacks, but I still want it," people are going to be, "Then go find another line of work."

Q: Do you think you face any particular challenges here as a woman?

A: I don't know. I don't know. It's less known. I think there might be, and I'm not sure. And that feels bad, in a way.

Q: When does it occur to you?

A: When I think about becoming a group leader, for example. I've had times in my career, again, where I feel like people have discounted me a little bit, and they've said, "Well, she's going on maternity leave, so we're not sure if she's coming back, so we'll affect her comp, or we'll kind of adjust our view of her trajectory." I've had people sort of say that to me.

Her statement about the importance of drive is unequivocal and reiterated ("hunger" or "thirst" appear five times), and such drive is endorsed as "a great thing." The definitiveness – even bluster – of that answer stands in stark contrast to the deflation that appears in her answer to the question about whether women face challenges: she equivocates five times in a row ("I don't know. I don't know. It's less known. I think there might be, and I'm not sure.") This collapse may indicate uneasiness about women's ability to comply with the hunger-and-thirst script for success, an uneasiness that turns personal in the next set of sentences as she reflects on the negative impact of having taken maternity leave. Her description of how she might be perceived because of the leave bears no resemblance to her success script. In sum, in her mind there appears to be uncertainty about women's likelihood (or at least her own likelihood) of meeting the requirements for success.

Example 5

Setting up stark contrasts

Reflexively foreclosing options

Q: Have you had role models for leadership?

A: . . . So, for example, [male partner]. He is impressive with clients. And I've watched him with clients before and thought, "That is amazing!" What he does is amazing! But that, even if I could do—even if I had the skill to do what he is doing at the moment with the client, it is such a kind of aggressive in a way, or kind of very "alpha male," very kind of masculine, whatever that means, you know, mode of being. I couldn't—I just couldn't. That would be silly. People would laugh if I said the things he says!

She almost immediately dismisses the notion of emulating a male partner whose approach she admires, labelling his "impressive" and "amazing" qualities as fundamentally grounded in his maleness. Relative to him, she comes up short by virtue of being a woman. By assuming an unbridgeable distinction between women and men, she quickly banishes any internal conflict that might arise if she were to seriously consider modeling his leadership

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style. She then invokes the possibility of ridicule ("silly" and "people would laugh"), making the banishment even more necessary. It is notable that she imagines the scene of humiliation rather than simply thinking about what it would be like to emulate his style. This visceral, in-the-moment quality of being publicly humiliated underscores the wrongness, in her mind, of women (or at least herself) attempting such tactics.

Figure 1. Model of an Unconscious Social Defense System Applied to the Problem of Women's Stalled Advancement