

**RETENTION AND ITS DISCONTENTS:
HOW IDEAL WORKERS WITH FAMILY ASPIRATIONS
NAVIGATE CAREER DECISION-MAKING**

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ABSTRACT

Every career decision invites an opportunity to realize – or repress – deeply held desires. Furthermore, modern careers provide recurrent possibilities to engage in these reflections. I examine career decision-making for people who are extremely devoted to work, embracing ideal worker norms, but who also desire a family, what I come to call *family aspirations*. Using interview and detailed career history data from 82 international aid workers, I analyze how respondents experienced and coped with a clash between their work devotion and their family aspirations. I find that people experience different degrees of turmoil during the decision-making process resulting from their different perceptions of the possibility to realize their family aspirations. This finding suggests that it is not only labor market outcomes that are beset with inequality, but that people differentially experience angst during career decision-making processes. Finally, even after a protracted process of deep reflection, many people nonetheless choose to double down and prioritize work, suggesting that people who fully embrace ideal worker norms tend to fear the loss of purpose it provides in their lives without a highly probable alternative. As such, organizations may paradoxically retain employees who are devoted to work, but personally discontented. The theory of family aspirations offers a novel call for scholars to re-think the concept of work-family conflict, offering contributions to research on work-family, labor market inequalities, and careers.

Keywords: ideal worker norms; career decision-making; family aspirations; work and family; employment; careers; work devotion

Modern organizations demand “ideal workers” who are devoted to work with near-constant availability, especially in professional and managerial occupations (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, and Moen 2010; Mazmanian, Orlikowski, and Yates 2013; Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015; Reid 2015). The request is not merely for the employee’s body, but also for their heart and soul, expecting emotional engagement and undivided attention (Schor 1991; Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013). People who embrace ideal worker norms have intensive allegiance to their work and, in return, the “work devotion schema” provides a sense of purpose and offers a place for identity expression (Blair-Loy 2001; Blair-Loy 2003). As a result, career decisions are not simply rational calculations of advancement, but are the fruit of protracted deliberation with high emotional stakes (Bennett and Hennekam forthcoming).

Simultaneously, workers have complex lives across public and private boundaries (Hochschild 1997; Rothbard, Phillips, and Dumas 2005; Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015). Many are devoted to their families, where it is important to them to be a good partner and parent (Blair-Loy 2003); however, the demands for total dedication to the workplace create stress for working caregivers that have responsibilities at home (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Acker 1990; Hochschild 1997; Han and Moen 1999). A significant body of research has detailed how established families experience and navigate these tensions (Damaske 2011; Darcy, McCarthy, Hill, and Grady 2012; Reid 2015; Musick, Meier, and Flood 2016; Hochschild and Machung [1989] 2012). Furthermore, researchers know a good deal about how single people believe they will experience work-family conflict in the future (e.g. Peake and Harris 2002; Friedman and Weissbrod 2005; Cinamon 2006; Gerson 2010; Basuil and Casper 2012; Coyle, Van Leer, Schroeder, and Fulcher 2015). However, what single people do with that knowledge is much more thinly understood. While we know that work decisions are intensely consequential as people navigate competing devotions to work and family (Blair-Loy 2003), we know very little about how, when, and why single people decide to constrain their careers in the present in order to accommodate desired family relationships, including either the desire for a partner or the desire to be a parent. This paper extends and enriches scholarship on work-family, careers, and labor markets by examining the following research

question: *How do desires for a family influence career decision-making for people who have embraced ideal worker norms?*

Three criteria are necessary to examine this question. The study requires, first, people who subscribe to ideal worker norms, with intensive allegiance and devotion to work. Second, the context must render work-family conflict visible to the researcher. Third, it requires significant longitudinal data or high degrees of interorganizational mobility, to enable the analysis of multiple career decisions across various contexts by the same individual. International development and humanitarian relief work, or “aid work,” fulfills these criteria.

This study draws on unique access to four nonprofit aid organizations where I conducted in-depth interviews with 82 workers. I combine these data with detailed career histories on participants and five years of original longitudinal survey data on their personal and professional experiences. From these data, I illustrate how people experience and navigate difficult career decisions, in which the desire for a family, which may only exist hypothetically in the future, often involves sacrificing current devotion to work. My findings suggest a new conceptualization of work-family decision-making. I show how work-family conflict emanates not only when people attempt to balance current family obligations, but also when people have hopes or ambitions of having a family in the future. To facilitate this shift, I introduce the concept of *family aspirations*. This finding encourages a broadening of work-family scholarship to include those seeking intimate relationships or wishing to become a parent. The theory of family aspirations offers a novel call for scholars to re-think the concept of work-family conflict.

I detail two mechanisms through which family aspirations influence career decision-making for people who have embraced ideal worker norms. First, I demonstrate that the clash between work devotion and family aspirations involves high emotional stakes. Career decisions are not simply occasions when current work and personal obligations need to be pragmatically balanced, but are speculative and intensely emotional. Given that modern, interorganizational careers involve ongoing career decisions (Kalleberg 2009; Bidwell and Briscoe 2010; Cappelli and Keller 2013), the recurrent nature of these choices results in a career decision-making process characterized by persistent turmoil. Furthermore, I

find that people experience different degrees of turmoil based upon their perceived possibility of realizing their family aspirations. I detail three considerations that inform these perceptions – 1) the uncertainty of realizing their family aspirations, given the extent to which they are living their desired relationship, 2) the time sensitivity around acting on their family aspirations, and, finally, 3) the necessity for work adaptations that would allow them to more fully realize their family aspirations, given their own social identities. While all the workers I studied held family aspirations at one stage in their lives, those perceiving more constrained possibilities for realizing their family aspirations experienced increased burden, suggesting that it is not only labor market outcomes that are beset with inequality (Fuwa 2004), but that the decision-making process itself involves disparate experiences of cognitive load and emotional strain.

Second, while some people utilize work adaptation strategies that sacrifice their work devotion in an attempt to fulfill their family aspirations, I find that even after protracted consideration of an alternative and despite strong desires for a family, many people double down and prioritize work. I suggest that people's aversion to scaling back on work devotion results from a fear of losing a concrete source of purpose and meaning in life, without a highly probable alternative. This finding suggests that organizations may retain committed ideal workers who are profoundly discontented with their personal life. Given research on the negative impacts of work-family conflict for individuals and organizations (Allen, Herst, Bruck, and Sutton 2000; Kelly, Kossek, Hammer, Durham, Bray, Chermack, Murphy, and Kaskubar 2008; Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, and Semmer 2011), this finding suggests cause for concern. This insight enables future scholarship to more accurately map the circumstances under which people who embrace ideal worker norms may opt out of work, as well as the condition of the workforce that remains.

The extreme context of international aid work illuminates the career decision-making process generally at play for those who subscribe to ideal worker norms. Overall, my findings and model suggest that a person's management of his or her career path is best understood as a dynamic, layered process, involving work and non-work desires alongside perceptions of the possibility for meaningfulness from

work or a relationship in the future and a general reluctance to abandon a solid source of purpose in life without a concrete alternative.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Increasingly, people are expected to be exclusively devoted to work, prioritizing it over everything else in their lives (Kelly et al. 2010; Kellogg 2011; Mazmanian et al. 2013). As a normative myth, the “ideal worker” is constantly available to their place of employment (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015; Reid 2015). When organizational involvement takes precedence over involvement in other social spheres, it puts tremendous strain on workers and their families for multiple reasons (Frone, Yardley, and Markel 1997; Cha 2010; Kelly, Moen, and Tranby 2011). The depletion perspective identifies an ongoing negotiation over the limited resources of time, attention, and energy which result in resource drain (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Perlow 1999; Edwards and Rothbard 2000; Rothbard 2001; Schieman, Milkie, and Glavin 2009; Trefalt 2013). Layered on top of these pragmatic concerns, people have multiple, often conflicting, social identities and roles that are negotiated across various domains and over time (Rothbard 2001; Rothbard et al. 2005; Ramarajan and Reid 2013). Furthermore, beyond pragmatic and identity-based considerations, work also demands “emotional labor” (Hochschild 1983). For knowledge workers, professionals, and managers, ideal worker norms involve not merely the sharing of one’s body and mind, but also one’s heart and soul (Blair-Loy 2003).

As a result of the multi-dimensional nature of ideal worker norms, work-family conflict arises from both external employer demands and also from internal competing devotions (Blair-Loy 2001; Blair-Loy 2003). For example, while some people experience a conflict between employer expectations of ideal worker norms and the sort of workers that they prefer themselves to be (Reid 2015), others find great purpose and fulfillment from embracing ideal worker norms (Blair-Loy 2001; Blair-Loy 2003; Lepisto and Pratt 2017; Weber [1905] 1958), in spite of deleterious personal consequences (Michel 2011). This complexity helps to explain why research has demonstrated both positive and enriching effects that emotional engagement at work can have on employees’ private lives (Rothbard 2001; Ten Brummelhuis,

Rothbard, and Urich 2017), while also suggesting that people who are devoted to work may remain despite personal harm, including negative subjective wellbeing (ie. depression, sleep problems) and poor physical health (ie. high blood pressure, elevated cholesterol), accepting reduced pay, and having negative consequences for personal relationships (Carr, Boyar, and Gregory 2008; Bunderson and Thompson 2009; Michel 2011; Oelberger 2017; Ten Brummelhuis et al. 2017).

The resulting behavior of total dedication to the modern workplace creates tremendous stress for working parents and caregivers (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Acker 1990; Hochschild 1997; Han and Moen 1999), and scholarship on workers with established families has advanced understandings of how they, and their employers, experience and navigate these tensions (Goodstein 1994; Frone et al. 1997; Kelly, Moen, Oakes, Fan, Okechukwu, Davis, Hammer, Kossek, King, and Hanson 2014). Through present, however, the field lacks a robust conceptual apparatus to explain how people make career decisions to accommodate a not-yet-existing or nascent relationship. Yet just as careers have changed over the last several decades, so too have intimate relationships. For professionals and knowledge workers, the understanding of a relationship as an economic and reproductive contract has been largely replaced by conceptions of relationships as emotional bonds (Giddens 1992). While this has not had radical consequences for the gender order (Jamieson 1999), intimate relationships are increasingly characterized by individual choice rather than a prescribed lock-step life course (Mortimer and Moen 2016), such that modern couples can be young or old, heterosexual or homosexual, never-married or divorced (Bauman 2003). The rate of single adults in the United States has increased from 37.4% of the population in 1976 to 50.2% of the population in 2014 (Department of Labor Statistics 2015) which means that at any given moment there are more single people. That does not mean that they will necessarily stay that way, however, with the average age of first marriage increasing by seven years between 1960 and 2014, from 20 to 27 for women and from 22 to 29 for men (Department of Labor Statistics 2015). These changes in intimate relationships result in people becoming more likely to spend significant time focused primarily on their professional careers, and then needing to decide whether, when, and how to shift their attention to family formation (see also, Cech 2016; Hall and Willoughby

2016; McDonald 2018). With rising age of first marriage, people are embarking upon critical stages of their professional careers at the same time they are considering launching a “family career” (Aldous 1996).

Given that work-family research has devoted much attention to the life course (Elder 1994; Han and Moen 1999; Mortimer and Moen 2016), we know a good deal about how single people anticipate they will experience work-family conflict in the future (Peake and Harris 2002; Friedman and Weissbrod 2005; Cinamon 2006; Gerson 2010; Basuil and Casper 2012; Coyle et al. 2015). Furthermore, an exploratory study of ten never-married women between the ages of 28-34 has emphasized the marked experience of uncertainty in the lives of some single professional women (Sharp and Ganong 2007). Yet although scholarship from other domains has demonstrated that people both hope for relationships and fear not attaining them (Allen and Pickett 1987; Cross and Markus 1991) and has identified that our anticipated futures have present consequences (Mead 1932; Abbott 2001; Jones, Flaherty, and Rubin forthcoming), the anticipation of future relationships has not been fully integrated into the conceptual apparatus of work-family research. As a result, we know significantly less about how single people navigate their careers in order to pursue the desire for a partner, or how those without children engage in career decision-making while feeling the pull to become a parent. To advance this agenda, I examine how people who are work-devoted navigate career decision-making with considerations of family aspirations, extending Blair-Loy’s (2003) study of ideal workers who are family-devoted with an examination of ideal workers who are family-aspiring. To advance this agenda, the paper is guided by the following research question: *How do desires for a family influence career decision-making for people who have embraced ideal worker norms?*

Work-Family Conflict and Career Decisions

Scholars have begun to acknowledge the “family-relatedness” of work decisions (Greenhaus and Powell 2012; Lyness and Erkovan 2016), and to propose frameworks by which to examine individuals’ decision-making processes when they take family considerations into account in their work decisions

(Powell and Greenhaus 2012). Powell and Greenhaus (2012) suggest a model of cognitive steps that individuals take when faced with a work-related decision, first framing the decision as having a potential effect on the family domain and then developing or recognizing a decision rule that is consistent with salient relational identities in the family and work domains, eventually resulting in selecting a course of action that is believed to be favorable to the family domain. While this framework has potential utility in examining the career decision-making process of those with high family role salience and current family obligations, it remains to be empirically evaluated. Furthermore, the framework has been designed to examine the demands of existing families, therefore, it doesn't include the necessary conceptual apparatus to examine variation in career decisions driven by the desire for a family in the future, a different empirical reality for the unmarried half of the adult workforce. Finally, it doesn't fully acknowledge that our most important decisions involve an intense emotional component (Oatley, Keltner, and Jenkins 2006; Lerner, Li, Valdesolo, and Kassam 2015).

In addition to conceptual limitations in examining the family-relatedness of the career decision-making *process*, existing empirical literature has also primarily focused on a limited array of family-related career *outcomes*. For example, we know a good deal about how the family demands of those with financial stability and professional choice reduce or adjust their participation in work (Greenhaus, Collins, Singh, and Parasuraman 1997; Boyar, Maertz Jr, Pearson, and Keough 2003; Briscoe and Kellogg 2011), including “scaling back” (Becker and Moen 1999; Pedulla 2016), “opting out” (Stone 2007), and getting “pushed out” (Rosin and Korabik 1990), as well as the use of flexibility practices (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Briscoe and Kellogg 2011; Kelly et al. 2014). We know far less about why people who have financial stability and professional choice may experience work-family conflict and choose to double down on work or decline to change their work-family balance at all. This paper fills that gap by studying a large sample of ideal workers as they experience family aspirations incompatible with their work devotion and attempt to alleviate that conflict, resulting in a wider range of career outcomes.

METHODS

The insights in this paper emerged from a grounded theoretical approach and research design (Glaser and Strauss 1967), informed by a broad interest in the work-family experience of people with strong work devotion. Iterating among in-depth coding, analysis of each participant, comparisons across participants, connections to the literature, and emergent model building (Ravasi 2017), I paid attention to “rich points” ranging from surprises to mere departures from my entering expectations (Agar 2004). These rich points revealed how participants experienced and navigated career decisions in which their attention to a nascent or non-existent relationship often involved sacrificing work to which they were devoted. My primary research question emerged over time from an iterative process of several rounds of data coding (e.g. Eisenhardt 1989; Langley 1999), interspersed with engagement to various conceptual literatures as themes emerged, which led me to further analysis and theorizing (Klag and Langley 2013; Barley 2015). The resulting study asks: *How do desires for a family influence career decision-making for people who have embraced ideal worker norms?*

Research Setting

International development and humanitarian relief work (henceforth “international aid”) is an ideal setting to examine how desires for a family inform career decision-making for people who have embraced ideal worker norms. As a normative myth, the “ideal worker” is constantly available to their place of employment, offering their mind, body, and soul. Most people engaged in international aid tend to be extremely devoted to their work and could be classified as ideal workers, dedicating long hours and near-constant availability to work (Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012; Krause 2014). In addition, frequent travel makes international aid work highly integrated, with more porous boundaries between home and work spheres, which have been demonstrated to exacerbate work-family conflict (Shaffer and Harrison 1998; Mazmanian et al. 2013; Reid 2015). Finally, the aid context involves significant interorganizational mobility (Bidwell and Briscoe 2010; Bidwell 2013), resulting from the grant-funded

and contract-based nature of the work (Roberts 2014). As a result, the highly transient nature of the industry presents recurrent choices, generating ample data for analysis and allowing the researcher to analyze career decision sequences without decades of longitudinal data.

Data Collection

This study draws on unique access to the full staff of four medium- to large-sized international aid organizations. I selected the organizations in order to generate a diverse population. Two of the organizations specialize in scientific-technical approaches to aid work: legal aid and conservation science, respectively. The other two are generalist organizations, providing both long-term development and short-term humanitarian relief work. In 2012, I conducted an in-depth online survey of 298 people working at the four organizations. The survey population includes individuals ranging in age from 28 to 74 with a mean age of 45, and is 56% female. (Though other gender options were offered, all respondents indicated male or female.) There was no significant variation in descriptive characteristics of participants across the organizations, including age or gender composition. Respondents completed shorter follow-up surveys annually between 2013 and 2017 to track career decisions, relationship status, relationship desires, and career satisfaction measures in real time. The longitudinal nature of the study enables me to capture people who came to adapt their work, including leaving the workforce, in order to prioritize family aspirations, though I find that few people actually do this over the five-year time period. From this survey population, 90 individuals were selected for and agreed to participate in in-depth interviews – intentionally over-sampling single individuals and those who desired children, given the aims of the research project. All participants had very busy work and travel schedules, and as a result of scheduling challenges I completed 82 interviews. Table 1 provides summary characteristics for the full survey population and for the interview sample. Within the findings, respondent gender is indicated with the first letter of their respondent code, “F” for females and “M” for males, followed by their age, relationship status, and parental status. In addition, Table A1 in the Appendix provides additional detail on the 82 interview respondents, including educational background, organizational turnover, and nationality.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

I collected all interview data myself, in person or via Skype. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and over two hours, with the average interview lasting around 80 minutes. To begin the interview, I worked with a personalized profile created from their survey responses to probe individuals on their general biography, as well as their survey responses on current work and family experiences. Following this conversation about their current experiences, and in line with a rich sociological tradition of studying careers with in-depth life history interviews (McAdams 1993; Elder, Johnson, and Crosnoe 2003), I asked respondents to narrate each transition in their career history, discussing what was going on for them professionally and personally at those transitions. To ease retrospective bias, I guided them through a copy of their CV that they had uploaded as part of the survey. I then asked them to tell me about jobs or periods of unemployment that they did not note in their CV. The final phase of the interview involved reflecting back to them their survey responses regarding desires for work and family situations in the future, and then asking them to describe a “dream job.” I concluded the interview by asking them if there was anything else they wanted to share about interactions between their work life and home life. Most participants expressed that they greatly enjoyed the interviews and the opportunity to reflect upon the questions I posed to them.

Data Analysis

Throughout the data collection I observed significant tension with respect to respondents’ work-family integration. While the work-family literature led me to expect work-family conflict from current family demands, instead my analysis indicated that at different moments within the same work context respondents experienced varying levels of work-family conflict because their desires for their family life had shifted. I came to call these unfulfilled desires, which fueled work-family conflict, *family aspirations*. The most commonly desired family relationships involved partnering (forming an intimate relationship with another) and parenting (raising children). Almost every respondent reflected on stages in their lives

when they were single and wanted an intimate relationship, and nearly two-thirds of the respondents had a similar stage when they held a strong desire to become a parent. Some respondents also talked about the desire for personal relationships with other family members (parents, siblings, etc.), as well as close platonic relationships with friends, but due to smaller sample sizes those data are not analyzed within this paper.

In a second round of coding, I utilized the emergent theme of family aspirations to inductively search for patterns in how international aid workers experienced and coped with the clash between their work devotion and their family aspirations, comparing within and then across participants. Featuring prominently in my data are illustrations of self-described “emotional crisis,” as people felt pulled between the devotion to work and the desire for a family and yearned for a rational process through which to make the “right” decision. This led me to further review the literature, seeking insight into how people experience and navigate the emotional dimensions of work-family conflict (e.g. Hochschild 1983; Rothbard 2001; Blair-Loy 2003; Reid 2015; O’Neill and Rothbard 2017). I returned to the data to examine how respondents experienced and coped with career decisions, identifying that peoples’ experiences of emotional crisis during the decision-making process were strongly connected to their perceptions of constrained possibilities for realizing their family aspirations. I identified three considerations that inform these perceptions – 1) the uncertainty of realizing their family aspirations, given the extent to which they are living their desired relationship, 2) the time sensitivity around acting on their family aspirations, and, finally, 3) the necessity for work adaptations that would allow them to more fully realize their family aspirations, given their own social identities. Furthermore, I identified that as they interpreted their possibility of realizing family aspirations, they did so through lenses of past and present experiences (Kaplan and Orlikowski 2013). These insights led me to seek literature on the temporal embeddedness of agency (Abbott 2001; Flaherty and Fine 2001; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Jung, Park, and Rie 2015; Jones et al. forthcoming), offering useful links between reflections on multiple pasts and presents and ideation about the future.

In the third pass through the data, I reviewed the decision-making process of each participant across each of their career transitions, creating links between the different stages to develop the full process model. For each decision-making spell, I examined family aspirations and perceptions of the possibility to realize family aspirations, and then coded the career decision that people ultimately made. While I identified a range of fine grained career adaptation strategies, I found that the majority of respondents did not end up adapting their work to accommodate family aspirations. As a result, I ultimately clustered decisions into two categories – work prioritization, when they prioritized their devotion to work, and work adaptation, when they attempted to adapt their work in order to help facilitate realization of their family aspirations. Uncovering the prevalence of work prioritization after processes of deep deliberation, my findings suggest that people fear the loss of work as a secure source of purpose in their lives amidst the great uncertainty of potentially realizing their family aspirations.

FINDINGS

Family Aspirations and Work-Family Conflict

Relationships are the ties that bind and create social meaning in life (House, Landis, and Umberson 1988), fulfilling an intense need to feel connected to others in an enduring manner (Baumeister and Leary 1995). In comparison to those that return home to a family each night, and can thus identify with the “family devotion schema” (Blair-Loy 2003), I call the framework that guides those who wish for a family, the “family aspirations schema.” The family aspirations schema is rooted in modern conceptualizations of family relationships as emotional support structures, above and beyond their facilitation of economic or reproductive stability (e.g. Giddens 1992), and illuminates the persistence of the family devotion schema, even when it is not realized. As a result, work-family conflict emanates not only when people attempt to balance current family obligations, but also when they hold the hope of having a family in the future.

Most participants had a phase, often earlier in their adult working life, without strong family aspirations. They were fully content aligning completely with the “work devotion schema” (Blair-Loy 2003) – they neither had, nor wanted, a partner or children. One respondent said:

For now, I’m tremendously happy doing this. It’s not family-friendly, but it’s the most fulfilling work I can imagine. [F04, age 36, single, no children]

For others, this phase persisted and work became their primary source of meaning in life.

I can’t really imagine wanting to do anything else. I’m married to my work. I was divorced twice, from marriages with really amazing women, if I’m honest. But now, in my fifties, I’ve just accepted that it’s because I’m married to my work. It is my rock and provides me with everything I need. [M08, age 50, divorced, no children]

At the time of the interview, seven (n=7) respondents fit this profile – subscribing to neither a family devotion nor a family aspirations schema, fully content with their work devotion.

Yet, while most participants expressed that at one point in their past they were fulfilled simply by devotion to their work, participants often also developed a profound craving for a rich life that included fulfilling relationships outside of work. While people felt deeply engaged in their professional careers they simultaneously considered how to launch “family careers” (Aldous 1996). Moreover, I find that the desire for a family is about more than “finding the right person”. Family aspirations often involve intentional efforts to create a personal support network that would persist throughout careers.

When I was in grad school I had a long-term, steady, very serious girlfriend for three years. We broke up when I moved here [for work]. I do get to meet a lot of really cool people when I travel. I’ve met lots of wonderful women in other countries, as well, so that’s exciting. But I’m at an age where I’m very much looking to find someone wonderful, and moving to the next stage of life. [M06, age 37, single, no children]

It is important to be able to be involved in other people’s lives, and to have something outside of work to balance you. Because work isn’t going to take care of you when you are old, or when you get a flat tire. [F28, age 42, committed relationship, 2 children]

Crucially, while holding strong family aspirations for a partner, both of these participants continued to stress that they still “love work” and maintained their work devotion, but they also identified the things that work couldn’t provide.

Family aspirations are also expressed by people who have growing desires to become a parent. Some respondents with aspirations to become a parent were in a stable intimate relationship, but had

postponed having children in order to focus on their careers. They acknowledged family aspirations growing stronger,

When I think forward about my life, I don't want to grow old just the two of us. I want to grow our family, and given the practicalities about the way that often works, that means we have started thinking about having a baby now. [M20, age 36, married, no children]

Respondents outside stable relationships also felt a strong family aspiration to become a parent. For some people, they sought a partner as well, while for others they embarked upon adoption or insemination in order to create their desired family.

I just crave babies. I see friends who are having babies and I don't like to get jealous, but I do. I'd love to have a baby. I mean I'm sure I wouldn't like getting up in the night and being sleep deprived and all of that, but it just seems...right. I decided that a few years ago and have been trying for a while now. I don't want to say I regret waiting this long, because I don't know what will happen, but, this is my greatest preoccupation right now. [F02, age 44, single, no children]

The conflation of desiring both a partner and to become a parent felt overwhelming for many people, especially as they continued to hold their deep attachment to their work. The mismatch between family aspirations and work devotion gives rise to a unique form of work-family conflict.

Whereas work-family conflict is typically considered in contexts when work crowds out family obligations, here I find that that work-family conflict also arises in contexts when work crowds out the pursuit of relationships that might create family obligations. Many participants expressed family aspirations and often blamed their work – specifically the consuming nature of their work – as a pragmatic impediment to realizing their family dreams.

Ever since I've been [in D.C.], I've just been sort of dating, you know, shorter-term things, nothing serious. And while love is a mystery to all of us, I have to think that a big part of that is just I was always gone, just in and out, and so it's hard for me to stay focused on here. I don't think it could have been that fun for the woman I was dating to not have me around and I knew that. [M06, age 37, single, no children]

Most participants, given their devotion to work, offer themselves fully to their workplaces, however, they acknowledge that the time, attention, and energy they spend at work comes at a cost of pursuing a more fulfilling personal life outside of work. "I'm ecstatic to be working for the organization, it's just the work-life balance thing is really hard." [F33, age 30, single, no children]

Beyond the pragmatic considerations, respondents also acknowledge that their devotion to work entails identity components and an emotional investment that have deleterious effects on their ability to realize family aspirations because of the “space” that their work takes up, not just in their calendar, but in their “mindset”. As two respondents commented,

I've had boyfriends, and they've all broken up. The relationships haven't worked out. Maybe I haven't given them adequate space in my life because of my career. [F31, age 28, single, no children]

[The work] definitely inhibits pretty much any thought of having a relationship. [...] In terms of meeting someone, it's hard. I feel like I've only ever been in one place for like four weeks at a time in the last few months, which I think is an over exaggeration, but it changes your mindset so that I never really feel like I'm looking for someone to date because I'm always preparing to go somewhere else. [F33, age 30, single, no children]

Acknowledging family aspirations suggests a re-thinking of the concept of work-family conflict, broadening what needs to be included. Work-family conflict is not just about balancing current demands between work and family life, but also emerges as people think about family aspirations for the future. The reality of work devotion taken alongside family aspirations makes it difficult for people to simultaneously dedicate themselves fully to work, and also carve out pragmatic, cognitive, and emotional space for meeting people and nurturing early-stage relationships that will enable them to realize their family aspirations.

While resolving any work-family conflict is difficult, I found that people with family aspirations who embrace ideal worker norms experienced greater stress in decision-making when compared to either their family-rooted counterparts or colleagues who do not embrace ideal worker norms. People with family aspirations and work devotion not only held the hope of something they deeply desired, but they also grappled with the tremendous uncertainty of their situation. I find that family aspirations often infuse the daily lives of participants, but that people move into more active reflection on those aspirations when faced with recurrent events.

Recurrent Events

Recurrent events – both professional and personal – prompt employees to strongly consider attempting to realize their family aspirations through a career move. Given the precarious nature of modern work, recurrent professional events arise quite frequently. Today, the typical worker has an interorganizational career, zigging and zagging between firms, instead of climbing an internal ladder (Bidwell and Briscoe 2010; Bidwell 2013). While interorganizational mobility increasingly defines the global labor market, aid work is an extreme case (Roberts 2014). Deciding to take up a new contract often requires changing organizations and locations with very little lead time.

Layered on top of recurrent professional events, recurrent personal events – such as the development of a new relationship or the birth of a friend’s baby – also invite potential action and spur reflection. Some recurrent personal events arise unexpectedly, as can happen in a chance meeting with someone who inspires family aspirations.

Being in a relationship has never been something that I was really seeking or even interested in until my late 30s. . . Then things happen, and you get into a relationship with someone that is absolutely fabulous and that really gets you changing yourself in a very interesting manner. [M10, age 49, committed relationship, no children]

Many other times, recurrent personal events arise as punctuated moments that clarify underlying family aspirations. One respondent recounted her long-standing desires to be a parent, but how holding her best friend’s new baby became a critical moment for her, crystalizing her desires and inspiring reflection around a career move that could better enable her to realize her family aspirations.

Respondents also grappled with both work-related and personal events that arose simultaneously – individuals were confronted with the necessity to make a career decision and navigate the potential to realize family aspirations during the same time period. For example, an attorney who specializes in Ethiopian land rights was living 2,000 miles away from his long-term partner. He was offered his dream job, the opportunity to teach for a year in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, but he was incredibly distraught because his partner refused to live in Africa.

I was just back in St. Louis for a couple weeks to visit my partner, and we had a very long and serious talk about where this is going, and what we are doing. We'd like to get married, very

much. On the other hand, I really care about my work, and it is really meaningful to me. [...] So, we're . . . it's just . . . it's kind of an impasse. I honestly don't know. If she said, "This is it, you have to choose, no more talk about Africa," I don't know what I would do. [M16, age 38, committed relationship, no children]

This individual was simultaneously considering a personal event – whether he and his partner would get married – while navigating whether to take his dream job. Fulfilling one of these desires would thwart the other.

Participants were exhausted by consistently having to make such personally and professionally consequential career decisions: Should I continue with international aid work? If so, where, with what organization, for how long? Should I leave or scale back? Spurred by these frequent recurrent events, people yearn for a rational process through which to decide whether to adapt work to make space for their family aspirations or, alternatively, to continue to prioritize work.

I end up sitting up and having things run through my mind. That's exhausting, personally. Then I just get anxious about wondering if I'm doing the right thing and staying so far from my family. [F02, age 44, single, no children]

I'm overwhelmed, again, with the opportunities and the choices that are in front of me. I'm like, okay, well, I can go anywhere in the world, but that is exhausting for me to consider, given the things I want for myself right now in my personal life. [F24, age 37, single, no children]

This turmoil is characteristic of the ongoing career decisions facing aid workers in modern, interorganizational careers, especially for those grappling with family aspirations.

Recurrent events trigger internal machinations and a decision-making process that ultimately results in a career decision. Though I find that participants utilize a wide range of different types of career decisions, I cluster them into *work adaptation* strategies that adjust, alter, or abandon work in order to prioritize the pursuit of family aspirations, and *work prioritization* strategies that prioritize the devotion to work despite deleterious consequences for home life. People who embrace ideal worker norms utilize different strategies in their efforts to experience meaningful personal and professional lives, renegotiating at each recurrent event. I find that people thoughtfully deploy these strategies in a dynamic manner, influenced by their experience of work-family conflict and their perceptions of the possibility for a different arrangement.

The Career Decision-Making Process: Perceptions of the Possibility to Realize Family Aspirations

Grappling with career decisions involves great uncertainty. I find aid workers navigate this process with significant internal machinations as they attempt to preserve their work devotion and also realize their family aspirations. While each participant had family aspirations at one stage in their lives, some experienced more cognitive drain and emotional torment figuring out what to do about those desires due to their perceptions of limited possibilities to realize their family aspirations. In contrast, the tirade of self-questioning was less persistent or torturous for people who perceived more expansive possibilities to realize their family aspirations. Furthermore, though the longing to be in a more committed relationship with another adult is clearly distinct from a yearning to become a parent or expand one's family, each of these family aspirations involves people or processes outside of one's control – initiating and nurturing an intimate relationship involves another person's interests and behaviors, while becoming a parent requires the complexity of getting pregnant or an often uncertain adoption process. I detail three considerations that inform these perceptions of the possibility to realize family aspirations – 1) the uncertainty of realizing their family aspirations, given the extent to which they are living their desired relationship, 2) the time sensitivity around acting on their family aspirations, and, finally, 3) the necessity for work adaptations that would allow them to more fully realize their family aspirations, given their own social identities. Depending on their perceptions, people experienced different levels of anxiety, stress, and turmoil during the decision-making process.

Relationship Uncertainty. The first consideration that informs the decision-making process is the perceived uncertainty of realizing family aspirations. Married participants talked with or saw their spouse on a semi-regular basis, which gave them ongoing feedback as to how meaningful the relationship was. Similarly, parents discussed having good days and frustrating days, and could relay learned knowledge about how much joy and purpose their children brought to their lives. However, more speculative and abstract relationships create greater uncertainty.

Among participants with family aspirations there is variation in this experience of uncertainty. For example, two unmarried female aid workers both want to be married and are both working in a remote location and reflecting upon whether, when, and how to adapt their career in pursuit of family aspirations. One woman has been in a stable long-term relationship, while the other is single. Given the varied extents to which each person is already living with their desired relationship generates different degrees of uncertainty around how likely it would be to fully realize their family aspirations. Participants who were dating wrestled with the unknown possibility of transitioning their family aspirations into realities, alongside the relatively indisputable possibility of losing interesting work that provided a solid source of purpose in life.

You meet people who are doing this line of work, who are in transition. They end up taking a job someplace else, or you take a job someplace else. You're constantly saying, is this relationship serious enough that I need to do something differently? I think that is a bit of a stress . . . you have to make this judgment call. Then, if the relationship doesn't end up working out, then you've lost an opportunity for a position or doing something you'd really like. [M24, age 48, single, no children]

Those who are not in relationships or have not had children must engage in decision-making under the greatest uncertainty.

Relationship are a big unknown. I mean I have no idea: if I invest in that will it come back to me? At least so far it's proven true for me that if I invest in my career, eventually I get what I want. [F27, age 40, single, no children]

This experience of uncertainty is not merely cognitive, but touches deep emotional centers, as the work devotion schema is a crucial part of participants' identities and lives. The threat of losing that devotion is highly salient, and pitted against the guessed improbabilities of realizing family aspirations.

Across all participants, increased uncertainty surrounding transitioning the family aspirations schema – something hypothetical in the future – to a family devotion schema – with concrete family responsibilities and rewards – generates tremendous anxiety for people. As people consider the uncertainty of realizing their family aspirations, women are far more likely to experience increased stress and strain due to the fact that female aid workers are more than twice as likely to be single than their male colleagues.

Time Sensitivity. The second consideration that informs the decision-making process is the perceived time sensitivity around realizing family aspirations. Drawing upon personal reflections on their own age, salient occupational archetypes, and explicit advice from mentors or colleagues, temporal considerations influenced respondents' perceptions of urgency around if, when, and how they should tailor career decisions. When personal options are perceived as more durable, temporarily prioritizing work can feel safe. However, when options to realize family aspirations are perceived as more time sensitive, even taking a one-year contract for a dream job can feel tremendously stressful and invoke consideration of the possibly irrevocable loss of a potentially meaningful family life. Across the respondents, I found that women generally perceived greater time sensitivity than their male colleagues.

People perceive their timeframe for living out family aspirations through perceptions of their own age, body, and fertility, as influenced by norms in the socio-cultural contexts they find relevant and internalize into their self-concepts (Valian 1999). Given the socially gendered nature of the body (Jones and Pugh 2005), considerations of physical attractiveness were more likely to be expressed by straight women and gay men. Furthermore, though the passage of time causes transcendental angst for many human beings, this reflection is particularly painful for people with unrealized family aspirations.

I am in my early thirties and I have just come out of a long-term relationship. I am a woman and I have a biological clock, which I don't want to think about, but I do. Some people say, "focus on what you love and it will all fall into place," but if it doesn't, I don't want to be coming home from the field at forty-five and have nothing – no roots, no family, no nothing. [F24, age 37, single, no children]

I think my perceptions of my options probably changes a lot with age. When I was, like 22, I reflected upon the boyfriends I had in high school and college, and compared them to the guy I was dating at the time. I'm only 27 now, but even now I can see it shifting a little bit in that I've had a real relationship since that time. I realize how hard it is to make things work, how much and how little I'm willing to compromise. That definitely influences how I think about what kinds of choices I want to make in terms of prioritizing my personal life and my career. [F25, age 27, single, no children]

The personal, embodied experience of deciding whether and how to prioritize family desires was made more urgent if people saw their own physical attractiveness to a partner waning or their window of opportunity to have children closing.

This anxiety was heightened by the prevalence of salient occupational archetypes. Distant, but seasoned, occupational members provide a repertoire of archetypes, illustrating industry patterns that are broadly present in the individual psyches of aid workers. In this way, occupational archetypes crucially influence perceptions of time sensitivity around attempting to realize family aspirations.

When you land in really big emergency responses, there are always these people who are fifty years old and chain smoking, and they've been doing emergencies for thirty years. They're always like, "You know that time I got shot up in Pakistan," and they're single, and they're these huge living warning signs for me. You don't want to do emergencies your whole life because that's how you end up. [F25, age 27, single, no children]

I don't think there are many elegant role models out there, especially for women, especially for working moms, which you can hold up and say 'Wow, you know what, she really did it. That's the way I want to go.' [F08, age 45, married, 2 children]

For individuals who do not wish to be single in their fifties, these "huge living warning signals" provide ongoing feedback as to the worst case scenario, cautioning them away from heavy reliance upon their work devotion schema.

In addition to distant occupational archetypes, aid workers drew upon more intimate and proximate role models (Gibson 2003) – personal colleagues who had made particular career decisions, often prioritizing the work devotion schema.

You're spending three months in Armenia or Indonesia with some guy who's been divorced four times and he just wants to spend the evening drinking in some hotel bar, it definitely influences you. "I do not want to spend time with you outside of work. During the work day, you're incredible, intelligent, and inspiring, and smart. After work, forget it." You see these people as cautionary examples. [M07, age 48, married, 2 children]

From these salient archetypes and role models, people get strong feedback signals that the ability to live out their family aspirations will not always be available. The uncertainty about precisely when to prioritize family, however, gives rise to tremendous angst.

Finally, and most proximally, personal mentors sometimes explicitly offer both solicited and unsolicited advice to follow or challenge these archetypal models. Mentors either encourage protégés to follow their path or warn them against decisions that the mentor personally regretted:

When I was at grad school I met the man who is now my husband. My intentions had been to go overseas and stay there for ten years and then to come back. What happened was I went overseas, I stayed there for a year and a half, and then I came back. My husband can't get work in the same

country. [...] I spoke to a number of women in leadership positions, in particular in the field, to ask them, “What do you think I should do? Should I stay here or should I go back?”. They all said, “go back,” which I found really interesting. These were women who had been very successful. They were now country directors. For the most part, most were not married. [...] If they had all said, “stay,” I probably would have stayed. [F20, age 44, married, 2 children]

My boss at that time was a woman who had never gotten married, had never started her own family, and was extremely powerful at that time in the field. And her model of how women should work in the industry was, you know, stay single and do your career. [...] We had a 7-hour layover in South Africa and I was just about to get engaged then and she cautioned me that if I got married I was going to sacrifice my career, “because women always give up their careers and their prospects if they get married.” [F30, age 42, married, 2 children]

While the first group of mentors encouraged work adaptation strategies, the latter supervisor encouraged work prioritization. In each case, the mentors conveyed the temporal considerations around the career decision-making process, influencing prioritization of family aspirations or work devotion.

Steeped in norms, archetypes, role models, and explicit advice, aid workers must navigate how urgently to act if they wish to live out their family aspirations. As participants fear of missing a time-sensitive window through which they could realize family aspirations increases it amplifies the stress of the career decision-making process. Across these considerations I find that, on average, straight men perceive their relationship options as less time-sensitive, resulting in less temporal pressure and stress than is experienced by their female and gay male colleagues.

Necessary Work Adaptations. The third consideration that informs the decision-making process is the perceived necessity for work adaptation to facilitate realization of family aspirations that would be satisfying to themselves, as well as to their partner or child. This reflection on possibility and satisfaction is viewed, simultaneously, through two lenses – the socio-cultural context of the work setting and one’s own social identities. When participants perceive more limited options to enable family aspirations, work adaptation strategies come at a higher cost with greater trade-offs with work devotion. As a result, participants perceiving more constrained possibilities for realizing their family aspirations experience the career decision as higher-stakes and it comes with greater personal stress.

The socio-cultural context where one lives and works conveys the probabilistic odds of being able to find or develop a desired intimate relationship, as it sets the “marriage market” (Becker 1973). With

respect to fulfilling family aspirations for partnering, nearly all participants commented that it would be easier to find a mate in urban areas and in particular countries.

It's like a numbers game. If you go to another country and there's less people within your age range in the area you're living in, it influences the pool of selection. [F03, age 34, single, no children]

More specifically, aid workers who aspired to be in a relationship often perceived more options in Washington, D.C. than abroad. Similarly, people who wanted to be parents discussed whether their work was in a geographic or political context that would be safe for children. For couples or individuals needing access to modern medical technology for assistance with fertility, the limited number of urban settings that offer these services pose a constraint on career options.

Furthermore, perceptions of a "selection pool" vary even within a single socio-cultural context, and influence perceptions of how satisfying the desired relationship would be. In particular, I find that perceptions of the possibility to realize family aspirations varies within a single socio-cultural context by gender and sexuality to influence how vast or limited one's options may be within that setting. For example, heterosexual women often described a more expansive range of possibilities in Western settings, where they perceived more cultural acceptance of dual-career couples. Likewise, people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer are "relationship minorities" in many socio-cultural contexts and have reduced options for finding a similarly identifying spouse. The experience of being a relationship minority often resulted in feelings of constraint regarding possibilities for partnering.

I don't want to live abroad, mainly because it's not comfortable for us to live together abroad, unless it's a big city like London, or, you know, we could probably get away with it in Nairobi or something like that, but not smaller places. I have known other gay couples who do live abroad, but I'd rather not have that complication. [M36, age 34, committed relationship, no children]

Rural locations and those in the Global South were perceived as the most professionally interesting and fulfilling, which made it all the more difficult that these same locations stymied the ability to fulfill family aspirations with basic levels of safety and comfort for straight women and relationship minorities.

Finally, people reflected on whether their spouse or child would be satisfied in the socio-cultural context where they found their work most fulfilling. Aid work occurs in socio-cultural contexts where

health risks are salient, transportation is unreliable and dangerous, and one is often a cultural minority without an extended social network of support. Finding a partner to sign up for that can be challenging. Participants sometimes found themselves in early-stage relationships with a person who didn't want to live in a difficult environment.

[My partner] has never wanted to come abroad with me. She's an architect and could get work abroad, but she just doesn't like living abroad. I've even tried to negotiate getting into 'nice' cushy urban postings, like Cairo, but she still refuses. It's really hard. [F37, age 40, single, no children]

While aid workers have a keen understanding and appreciation of this context when they enter the work, it is not often something their prospective spouse desires.

For other workers, the possibilities for spousal satisfaction are influenced by limited employment or the necessity for the spouse to care for children. Un- or under-employed partners are referred to as "trailing spouses," following their partner's career to a socio-cultural context where they are professionally constrained. The trailing spouse role is highly gendered, in that straight women perceive it would be particularly difficult to find men who would be willing to "trail." Moreover, among partnerships between aid workers, women most often took on the "trailing" role to enable a male spouse's satisfaction. A woman who spent a spell of her career "trailing" reflected on the mothers' group she was in, highlighting the gendered nature of career sacrifices that people make for partners and children.

I had a woman [in my mothers' group] who had spent 15 years working for DFID, which is the British USAID. Her husband was an ambassador. We had a former CNN reporter. We had another woman who had a 20-year-long career working in international development. They were all trailing spouses to support their husband's careers. [F05, age 43, married, 2 children]

While I interviewed men who spent spells of their career as the trailing spouse, women were far more likely to "trail" and single women perceived a lower likelihood of finding and maintaining a relationship with a man who would be willing to decelerate his career. This dynamic may help to explain the discrepancy between single women (25%) and single men (11%) in the broader survey population, a dynamic that results, not from a lack of family aspirations by women, but instead from women's increased perception of limited opportunities to combine a successful relationship with a strong devotion to work.

In summary, people who perceive more constrained and time sensitive possibilities to realize their family aspirations experienced more stress during the career decision-making process than their colleagues who perceived greater and more durable possibilities to realize their family aspirations. These perceptions are not correlated in a linear manner with career decisions, however. I next describe how workers holistically interpret their possibilities of translating family aspirations into reality and how that influences their career decisions.

Career Decisions: Work Adaptation or Work Prioritization?

While agentic and resulting from extraordinary reflection, career decisions are not the outcome of a rational risk-forecasting process, but rather illustrate attempts to manage uncertainty in which emotional stakes are felt to be particularly consequential. I present two clusters of strategies that people thoughtfully deploy in a dynamic manner, influenced by their experience of work-family conflict and their perceptions of possibility for a different arrangement. First, I present a variety of *work adaptation* strategies adjust, alter, or abandon work in order to pursue family aspirations. Next, I show how most people use *work prioritization* strategies that postpone the realization of family aspirations and prioritize the devotion to work instead.

Work Adaptation. Despite ongoing and in-depth processes of reflection, few people actually chose to adapt their work in order to pursue their family aspirations. Those that did, however, tended to fit a similar profile. People who utilized work adaptation strategies generally perceived that a change in their work context would broaden the breadth of options to realize their family aspirations, and they often had a time-sensitive career event. Most importantly, however, people that utilized this strategy almost always had limited uncertainty about the object of their family aspirations. Work adaptors were generally in concrete, if still tentative, family situations upon which they could imagine their future and which they were ready to pivot to the next level, such as the Ethiopian land rights lawyer, who was on the brink of proposing to his long-time girlfriend. As he was presented with a time sensitive choice to “shit or get off the pot,” he declined his dream job in Addis Ababa and instead began planning his wedding.

I find that people utilized a wide range of pragmatic adaptation tactics, from attempts to gain more flexibility to achieve work demands, to reducing their hours or switching occupations, to the most extreme adaptation of leaving the workforce. Flexibility strategies enable people to meet the demands of aid work while accommodating the timing of non-work demands. These tactics do not decrease overall work demands, but instead offer more individual-level control to manage existing demands. Common flexibility strategies include working non-traditional hours, telecommuting, or working a compressed week. These were often utilized by people who aspired for more time with their children.

I feel quite lucky that I do work that I am passionate about, it keeps me interested, it keeps my mind active, while still being able to spend afternoons with my kids. [...] Do I wish that I wasn't necessarily having to work at night, and on weekends, and have stress, and all of that to still get my work done, yes, but I know I'm lucky that I have this really amazing setup. [F36, age 43, married, 2 children]

Given ideal worker demands, employees own the pressure to make everything fit, and those who do "feel quite lucky." Some people desire reduced work demands and choose greater levels of adaptation to decrease their commitment to work and enable more significant family aspirations.

I continued working full time for a while after I had my first child. It's just, I didn't want to. I wanted to spend some time with my child. [...] I work four days a week from 9:00 until 3:00. [F20, age 44, married, 2 children]

Finally, some participants engaged in the most extreme adaptation of work abandonment. Over the 5-year period of this study, the only participants (n=2) who fully abandoned their work were those who had exhausted all other possibilities for more minor adjustments. Furthermore, in each case, the participants had an established family situation with sufficient financial stability and aspired for more time and energy for a family life than their work enabled. Finally, work abandoners had confidence that if they scaled back on work, the home domain would be a reliably meaningful place to spend their time and energy.

Work adaptations, by definition, require sacrifice to the work devotion schema, curtailing the importance of work in order to facilitate the realization of family aspirations. Complementing the range of pragmatic adaptations, however, people also underwent varying extents of emotional adaptation to their work devotion schema. For some, work adaptations involved the logistical strategies to save time and energy, particularly around caregiving periods they viewed as time sensitive, but they did not sever their

emotional commitment to work. These individuals often discussed returning to work prioritization in the future, and somewhat resented scaling back on work.

It impacts my career. And there's still frustrations in my voice. I think you can feel it but it's the realization of, you know, my mother did it for me, I do it for my kids. So there you go. [F01, age 44, married, 2 children]

Others more willingly gave up the work devotion schema when they adapted their work – reducing both their practical attention at work, as well as their emotional devotion to work.

I used to love this work, I really did. It kept me up at night. [...] But when I met my partner and we had our first kid, I just realized that I get so much more joy out of the proximal things now – of being together for dinner, of watching our daughter explore the world – and I really wanted to be there for that, so I made some changes. I feel kinda bad about it sometimes, but the work just isn't what drives me anymore. [M27, age 40, married, 2 children]

Though the tug of the work devotion schema still resulted in “feel[ing] kinda bad about [work adaptation],” people that more willingly gave up the work devotion schema, both pragmatically and emotionally, were more content with their work adaptation.

Work Prioritization. While some people utilize work adaptation strategies, I find that most participants double down and prioritize work, despite strong family aspirations. Work prioritization strategies enact ideal worker norms and reinforce the culturally encouraged work devotion schema. Each of the 82 aid workers I interviewed utilized this strategy at some point during their career.

Work prioritization is the intuitive choice for ideal workers without family aspirations. These individuals identified fully with the work devotion schema and continued to invest energy, spend time, and feel a sense of purpose through their devotion to work. What is counter-intuitive, perhaps, is that many others prioritized work even when they strongly desired an intimate relationship or children. I found that these individuals tended to fall into two contrasting groups – first, a niche group of people in a stable relationship who were not faced with a pressing career or personal decision, and second, a much broader group of people who were single or in early-stage, tentative relationships.

The first group of work prioritizers consists of people in longer-term relationships who had older children or no children, who were at a more advanced stage in their career, and who had an extremely

supportive spouse. Given the perception of vast and temporally durable possibilities to realize their family aspirations, these people often opted to prioritize their career, with the informed hope that they would have additional chances in the future to rearrange their work-family balance. One man, a citizen of the United States who lived and worked in the Congo, noted:

I've been doing this for over thirty-five years now. It's not an ideal scenario, because my wife lives in Kigali [Rwanda] to support our son, who goes to an international school there. The real drawback, and I hadn't calculated this as well as I should have, but the real drawback to the whole situation is that my wife was working for many years and she's really gnawing at the bits now, but to find work in Kigali, or even to integrate into the community, is not that easy. But we decided we didn't want to homeschool him, so this is what we're doing. Once my son completes secondary school, she'll come back here again. [M19, age 59, married, 2 children]

Those who were able to prioritize work with a stable home life were often men, given the gender composition of trailing spouses. These people perceive the most secure possibilities to realize their family aspirations and experience more limited stress and relative confidence in their decision-making process as a result.

The second group of people who prioritized their careers, despite the desire for an intimate relationship, had inverse perceptions of their possibility of realizing their family aspirations. These people were usually single, or in the early stages of dating. Furthermore, they often perceived that they had limited options to realize their family aspirations within the socio-cultural context of their current work environment.

I am torn between doing what excites me and interests me and traveling the world and meeting all these different people, and then being here, and finding a partner and starting a family. It's very stressful. At the same time, I can't force something to happen. So for the time being I think I am just going to stick with what I want to do and hope that things fall into place. [F24, age 37, single, no children]

This process of temporal negotiation was common. In contrast to the more stable work prioritizers, the broader group of work prioritizers tended to be straight Western women or relationship minorities, given the more constrained options they perceived for work adaptation.

Given their perceptions of constrained and uncertain possibilities to realize their family aspirations, these work prioritizers described the prospect of adjusting work for a distal, tentative, or unrealized relationship as “frightening,” “dangerous,” and “terrifying,” emphasizing how extraordinarily

precarious it would be to forgo work devotion in the hopes of realizing family aspirations. These adherents to the work devotion schema tend to be risk-averse to the prospect of losing work as a secure source of purpose and meaning in their lives. Despite their perceptions of constrained possibilities to realize their family aspirations, their deep desires for a family remain. Many work prioritizers “hope that things fall into place.” [F24, age 37, single, no children] As another respondent reflected, “I just hope that there’s an opportunity out there for me. You have to have faith sometimes I guess.” [F23, age 33, single, no children] Resulting from a fear of losing a reliable source of purpose without a secure alternative, these people prioritize work, but given their strong family aspirations, they experience significant anxiety and strain throughout their decision-making process.

These recurrent choices left individuals in a near constant state of turmoil. Prioritizing work, again and again, despite in-depth reflections on a deeply desired alternative, takes a tremendous toll on people. For some, they set a time-mark for the future, to re-evaluate their recurrent work prioritization, and assess if things have “fall[en] into place.” [F24, age 37, single, no children]

I don't know how long I can keep doing this. I do find my job very fulfilling, but I would also never want to look back and realize that I spent my whole life working really, really hard, and never really met anyone or had a family. I've kind of decided that I'm going to enjoy having my dream job while I have it. Then, reassess in about five years, and see if things are going smoother and it's more conducive to having a social life, or if I need to maybe go back to teaching and live in one place. This process of constantly re-evaluating is exhausting. [F33, age 30, single, no children]

Other work prioritizers with strong family aspirations acknowledged the undesirable, but potential, possibility that they may not ever realize their family aspirations given their recurring work prioritization. For example, the respondent above that discussed her hopes for “an opportunity out there” continued to reflect,

Or at least if there’s not someone out there for me, I hope that I’m able to get myself to a place where I can accept that and be happy with whatever that looks like. Oh, I’m getting a little teary. Ooh. It’s just really hard. [F23, age 33, single, no children]

This process, even in the recounting, is deeply painful for participants. Despite the empirical prevalence of work prioritization, work prioritization is not experienced as a default career strategy. Rather, the dynamic and mobile nature of modern careers presents an ongoing necessity to review and renew work

arrangements. Choosing to prioritize work, especially after a deliberative process, is often tremendously emotionally grueling.

CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The theory of family aspirations offers a call for scholars to re-think the concept of work-family conflict, broadening the conceptual apparatus by incorporating three novel components: attending to desired future family situations; clarifying how people perceive the possibility of realizing their desired future; and revealing how the fear of losing the work devotion schema enables the status quo, even after protracted consideration of an alternative. I illustrate these components in a conceptual process model in Figure 1 and detail the theoretical implications of the contributions here.

[Figure 1 about here.]

Implications for Work-Family Scholarship. Work-family conflict arises long before people have families. I introduce the concept of *family aspirations* and broaden the analytical lens beyond current demands between work and an established family, to also include things that may come in the future. This lens enables research to better predict how the match between workers and work might fluctuate intra-individually over time, not just in response to current family demands, but with respect to desires for the future. Furthermore, I extend Mary Blair-Loy's (2001; Blair-Loy 2003) work on competing devotions to work and family by demonstrating the persistent salience of the family devotion schema, even when it is not realized.

I find that desired family relationships are highly relevant for many individuals. However, the theory of family aspirations can and should be extended within alternative settings to test the analytic generalizability. For other people, different aspirations for the future may influence the work-life experience. Though outside the scope of this paper, respondents discussed the desire for personal relationships with other family members (parents, siblings, etc.), as well as close platonic relationships with friends. The framework developed herein could be tested and adapted with alternative relationship

desires. In addition, the framework will hopefully provide utility to an examination of peoples' aspirations that are non-relational in nature but from which people anticipate will enrich their personal lives, such as exercise, hobbies, or organized religion. Nearly every individual has unfulfilled desires outside of work that influence work experiences and decisions. Expanding the framework to study to these domains is a crucial step in the literature's efforts to more thoroughly analyze leisure time writ large (Orrange 2007).

Furthermore, given the socially-rewarded nature of aid work, participants in this study exhibited strong work devotion and were extraordinarily reluctant to scale back on work. These results would hypothesize that the decision-making process would be less tumultuous and work adaptation would be higher for individuals who are less attached to the work devotion schema. To investigate this hypothesis, it would be fruitful to test this framework in other settings with more variable work devotion. In addition, enacting work prioritization for financial reasons did not emerge as a strong rationale in this context. However, future research can and should tease apart the relative strength of an *internally-driven* embrace of ideal worker *norms* that results in work devotion, such as that demonstrated by participants in this study, in comparison to more *externally-mandated* requirements for ideal work *behaviors* in contexts where career decisions may be related more closely to material or financial needs. How family aspirations play out for people with more variable work devotion and with varying reasons for work devotion deserves attention.

Implications for Research on Labor Market Inequalities. I find that the career decision-making process involves a clash between family aspirations and work devotion, involving deeply held personal values in which the emotional stakes are particularly consequential. These findings enable a conceptual shift beyond merely *who* experiences work-family conflict, to *how* people experience this conflict and the resources they draw upon as they do so (for similar work in this direction, see Reid 2015). Given that the organizational contract is eroding, and modern, interorganizational careers are characterized by ongoing career decisions (O'Mahony and Bechky 2006; Dokko, Wilk, and Rothbard 2009; Kalleberg 2009; Bidwell and Briscoe 2010; Bidwell 2013; Cappelli and Keller 2013), this framework offers a more nuanced understanding of how people experience the career decision-making process, thus informing

more accurate predictions for their performance at work throughout these recurring decisions, as well as more precise knowledge of their experiences at home. Including consideration of how people perceive their possibility of realizing future aspirations is likely applicable more broadly to other domains, underscoring the social character of emotions and desires (Hochschild 1979).

While all the workers I studied held family aspirations at one stage in their lives, some experienced more emotional torment in the decision-making process as a result of different perceptions of the possibility to realize their family aspirations, especially by gender and sexuality. Straight women and people who identify as gay or lesbian perceive that realizing their family aspirations while maintaining their work devotion will be more difficult than their straight male colleagues, underscoring that the gendered nature of occupations and family life has impacts beyond career and family outcomes (Stone 2007; Ashcraft 2013), as it also influences different degrees of stress and angst in the ongoing work-family decision-making process. More broadly, these findings suggest that it is not only labor market *outcomes* that are beset with inequality (Fuwa 2004), but that people experience the work-family decision-making *process* with different levels of angst. Therefore, even if the inequalities we see in workforce participation may be tackled in terms of representation (Bidwell, Briscoe, Fernandez-Mateo, and Sterling 2013; Pugh 2015), they may remain divergent in terms of experience. Future scholarship should examine the experiences of others who are “relationship minorities” in the socio-cultural context where they are working, due to religion, ethnicity, race, or social class. For example, for a Muslim woman working in a predominantly Christian country, the possibility of finding a homophilous spouse would be significantly constrained. Finally, perceptions of the possibility to realize family aspirations are likely influenced by both organizational context (e.g. Glass and Estes 1997; Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Kelly et al. 2011; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Moen, Kelly, Fan, Lee, Almeida, Kossek, and Buxton 2016; Thébaud and Pedulla 2016) and federal policies (e.g. Burstein, Bricher, and Einwohner 1995; Kelly and Dobbin 1999; Saltzstein, Ting, and Saltzstein 2001), an investigation outside the scope of this study which suggests a rich area for future research.

Implications for Research on Careers. I illuminate that while many people have strong family aspirations, most try to suppress or postpone those aspirations and prioritize work. Why do so many people, after protracted processes of deep reflection, choose not to change anything? My findings suggest that ideal workers who desire a family fear abandoning the work devotion schema not only because it is so central, but because the competing family aspirations schema is so uncertain. The women that Blair-Loy (2003) studied were torn between work devotion and family devotion, two secure options as their families awaited their return from work every night. I identify that in situations of pronounced uncertainty regarding the family domain – those grappling with the family aspirations schema – ideal workers fear losing their tether to the world and personal purpose, without a reliable substitute. Furthermore, I find that these effects are colored by gender and sexuality, where straight women and their gay and lesbian colleagues experience differential abilities to realize their family aspirations while maintaining their work devotion, again underscoring how women face more severe choices between work and family (Rosin and Korabik 1990; Stone 2007). I would encourage future scholars to examine how these findings apply to occupational sex segregation and self-selection processes in the labor market that occur before labor market entry (i.e. Ashcraft 2013; Barbulescu and Bidwell 2013; Cech 2016). For example, perhaps family aspirations result in a group of people – who would be otherwise interested in embracing ideal worker norms – never considering that possibility because they fear never attaining the family they deeply desire.

Given that research has demonstrated that work-family conflict has significant negative implications for employers, including absenteeism, organizational commitment, job performance, and turnover intentions, as well as giving rise to a range of stress-related outcomes for employees, including depression, substance abuse, burnout, and a multitude of negative physical symptoms (Allen et al. 2000), retaining discontented workers offers a cause for concern. Acknowledging the fear of losing a sense of purpose in one's life as part of the career decision-making process therefore enables research on modern careers to more accurately map the circumstances under which people may opt out of the work devotion schema, as well as to understand the condition of the workforce that remains. Without this insight, organizations may paradoxically retain committed, but profoundly personally discontented, employees. It

is my hope that scholars interested in pursuing these questions find utility in the theory of family aspirations and the conceptual mechanisms presented herein.

CONCLUSION

This article argues for a deeper and broader understanding of the temporality of the work-family experience. International aid workers may be an extreme case of ideal workers, but the theory developed here can be broadly generalizable. Overall, my findings suggest that a person's management of his or her career path is best understood as a dynamic, layered process, involving work and family aspirations alongside perceptions of the possibility for fulfillment from work or family in the future. To understand how ideal workers navigate career decisions, researchers must adopt a temporal perspective, considering how desired personal relationships in the future shape professional decisions in the present. Moreover, these findings suggest that career decisions are not purely rational, but rather are driven by aspirational considerations that involve highly subjective perceptions of work devotion and relationship uncertainty. More deeply examining the aspirational nature of family desires and work devotion will assist in a fuller understanding of what drives career decision-making, as well as the implications of inequality in organizational and labor market outcomes that arise from both the process of decision-making as well as the decisions themselves.

Appendix A1. Detail on the interview respondents.

Code	Age	Relationship Status	Aid Worker Spouse	# Children	Terminal Degree	Organizational Turnover between 2012 and 2017	Nationality
M01	46	Married	Yes	1	MA	Yes	United States
M02	50	Married	No	2	BA	Yes	Mexico
M03	48	Single	N/A	0	MA	Yes	United Kingdom
M04	43	Married	Yes	2	BA	Yes	United Kingdom
M05	37	Married	No	0	MA	Yes	Canada
M06	37	Single	N/A	0	PhD	Yes	United States
M07	48	Married	Yes	2	MA	N/A	United States
M08	50	Divorced	N/A	0	MA	No	South Africa
M09	48	Married	No	1	PhD	Yes	United States
M10	49	Committed	No	0	MA	N/A	Belgium
M11	42	Married	No	0	JD	No	China
M12	36	Married	No	0	MA	N/A	India
M13	42	Married	Yes	1	MA	N/A	India
M14	37	Married	No	0	BA	N/A	Poland
M15	58	Married	No	1	MA	Yes	India
M16	38	Committed	No	0	JD	Yes	United States
M17	41	Married	Yes	2	MA	No	United States
M18	46	Married	No	2	MA	Yes	Malawi
M19	59	Married	Yes	2	MA	Yes	United States
M20	36	Married	Yes	0	MA	N/A	Canada
M21	37	Married	No	1	MA	N/A	Italian
M22	47	Married	No	2	BA	No	Pakistan
M23	49	Married	No	1	MA	No	Guatemala
M24	48	Single	N/A	0	MA	N/A	United States
M25	61	Married	No	2	MA	Yes	United States
M26	64	Married	No	0	MA	Yes	Italy
M27	40	Married	No	2	MA	Yes	United States
M28	45	Committed	Yes	0	MA	N/A	Australia
M29	34	Married	No	0	MA	Yes	United States
M30	43	Married	Yes	2	MA	Yes	India
M31	51	Married	Yes	2	MA	Yes	United States
M32	36	Married	Yes	1	MA	No	United Kingdom
M33	62	Married	Yes	0	PhD	No	United States

Appendix A1 (continued). Detail on the interview respondents.

Code	Age	Relationship Status	Aid Worker Spouse	# Children	Terminal Degree	Organizational Turnover between 2012 and 2017	Nationality
M34	40	Committed	No	0	MA	Yes	France
M35	32	Married	Yes	0	MA	Yes	United States
M36	34	Committed	No	0	MA	No	United States
M37	32	Single	N/A	0	BA	No	Germany
M38	35	Married	Yes	0	MA	No	United States
M41	38	Committed	No	0	MA	N/A	United States
F01	44	Married	No	2	MA	No	United States
F02	44	Single	N/A	0	MA	N/A	Ecuador
F03	34	Single	N/A	0	MA	N/A	United States
F04	36	Single	N/A	0	MA	Yes	Germany
F05	43	Married	Yes	2	PhD	Yes	United States
F06	48	Single	N/A	1	PhD	Yes	United States
F07	44	Married	No	0	MA	No	United States
F08	45	Married	No	2	BA	N/A	United States
F09	32	Committed	No	0	JD	Yes	United States
F10	32	Committed	No	0	MA	Yes	United States
F11	39	Committed	No	0	JD	N/A	United States
F12	56	Married	No	2	BA	Yes	United States
F13	36	Married	No	0	MA	No	Thailand
F14	53	Married	No	0	BA	N/A	United States
F15	54	Single	N/A	0	BA	Yes	United States
F16	29	Committed	No	0	BA	Yes	United States
F17	63	Committed	No	2	BA	Yes	United Kingdom
F18	49	Divorced	N/A	1	MA	N/A	United States
F19	39	Married	Yes	0	MA	No	United States
F20	44	Married	No	2	MA	Yes	Turkey
F21	64	Married	Yes	2	MA	Yes	United States
F22	41	Single	N/A	0	MA	Yes	United States
F23	33	Single	N/A	0	MA	Yes	United States
F24	37	Single	N/A	0	MA	Yes	United States
F25	27	Single	N/A	0	BA	Yes	United Kingdom
F26	35	Married	No	0	MA	No	Pakistan

Appendix A1 (continued). Detail on the interview respondents.

Code	Age	Relationship Status	Aid Worker Spouse	# Children	Terminal Degree	Organizational Turnover between 2012 and 2017	Nationality
F27	40	Single	N/A	0	BA	Yes	United States
F28	42	Committed	No	2	MA	Yes	United States
F29	37	Divorced	No	2	MA	Yes	United States
F30	42	Married	Yes	2	MA	No	United States
F31	28	Single	N/A	0	BA	Yes	United States
F32	38	Married	No	0	PhD	No	United States
F33	30	Single	N/A	0	MA	Yes	United States
F34	41	Married	Yes	2	MA	Yes	United States
F35	33	Married	Yes	0	MA	Yes	United States
F36	43	Married	No	2	MA	No	Kenya
F37	37	Committed	No	0	BA	Yes	United States
F38	74	Separated	N/A	1	PhD	Yes	United States
F39	34	Married	No	0	MA	Yes	United States
F40	38	Married	No	2	MA	Yes	United States
F41	36	Married	No	1	MA	Yes	United States
F43	53	Married	No	2	MA	Yes	United States
F44	50	Divorced	N/A	1	MA	Yes	United States

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Table 1. Demographic Overview of International Aid Worker Survey Population and Interview Sample

	Population			Interview Sample		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Gender	132 (44.3%)	166 (55.7%)	298	39 (47.6%)	43 (52.4%)	82
Age						
Min	31	27	27	32	28	28
Max	69	74	74	64	74	74
Mean	47.9 (S.D. = 9.2)	43.7 (S.D. = 10.1)	45.6 (S.D. = 9.9)	44.3 (S.D. = 8.5)	42.1 (S.D. = 9.4)	42.6 (S.D. = 9.1)
Nationality						
U.S.	45 (34.1%)	104 (62.7%)	149 (50.0%)	17 (43.6%)	35 (81.4%)	52 (63.4%)
Non-U.S.	87 (65.9%)	62 (37.3%)	149 (50.0%)	22 (56.4%)	8 (18.6%)	30 (36.6%)
Relationship Status						
Single	15 (5.0%)	42 (25.3%)	57 (19.1%)	5 (12.8%)	12 (28.0%)	17 (20.1%)
Committed	16 (12.1%)	18 (10.8%)	34 (11.4%)	6 (15.4%)	7 (16.3%)	13 (15.9%)
Aid-Worker Spouse	2 (14.3%)	3 (16.7%)	5 (15.6%)	1 (20.0%)	0 (0%)	1 (8.3%)
Married	98 (74.2%)	91 (54.8%)	189 (63.4%)	28 (71.8%)	20 (46.6%)	48 (58.6%)
Aid-Worker Spouse	22 (22.4%)	23 (25.2%)	45 (25.2%)	10 (25.6%)	6 (18.2%)	16 (47.1%)
Parental Status						
Current Parent	82 (62.5%)	81 (48.8%)	163 (54.3%)	18 (50.0%)	19 (44.2%)	37 (45.1%)
Future Desire for Kids	33 (24.4%)	63 (36.0%)	96 (32.0%)	16 (41.0%)	21 (48.8%)	37 (45.1%)

Figure 1. Conceptual process model of how family aspirations influence career decision-making for people who embrace ideal worker norms

