

What do we want now or later? Work-family decisions in a dual-earner context.

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Abstract:

Dual-earner couples navigate complex decisions about work and family, both in short and in the long run. Partners not only juggle work and family demands individually, they also need to align career and life commitments as a couple (Bailyn, 1977; Masterson & Hoobler, 2015; Petriglieri, 2019; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014). This makes them vulnerable to work-family conflict, or a perceived incompatibility between professional and family role pressures (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Parasuraman, Greenhaus, & Granrose, 1992). Work-family conflict is associated with stress at home and at work, and it often involves time pressures (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Moreover, incidents of work-family conflict confront dual earners with decisions about priorities and the allocation of resources such as time and effort (Crawford, Thompson, & Ashforth, 2019; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Poelmans, 2005; Powell & Greenhaus, 2006). These decisions can take the form of micro-decisions which occur on a daily basis (e.g. who picks up our sick child from daycare?), but they can also relate to more long-term career – or anchoring – choices made by couples (e.g. should one of us work part time?) (Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014).

Existing work-family and career research has mainly explored decision-making as a rather conscious process, by which individuals make daily and anchoring choices in a reasoned and coherent manner. However, human choices are also characterized by automatic thinking processes, which are inherently prone to cognitive bias and can lead to suboptimal outcomes. As a consequence, individuals – and couples – may have difficulties reaching sustainable career and life decisions. We draw on behavioral decision-making literature to inform how dual-earner couples deal with work-family conflict decisions in the short and long run. When experiencing work-family conflict, dual earners are typically under pressure to decide, which we argue makes them more susceptible to cognitive biases. In the short run, individual partners will likely focus on avoiding immediate costs (O'donoghue & Rabin, 1999), choosing options that are not necessarily in line with long-term preferences or couple commitments. For long-term decisions, partners may disproportionately focus on potential losses (Tversky & Kahneman, 1992), thereby missing out on desirable work-family choices for the couple as a whole (Buehler & McFarland, 2001).

In this theoretical paper, we develop several research propositions on how cognitive biases may impact the short- and long-term decisions dual-earner employees make in response to work-family conflict – as individuals or as couples. These propositions may guide work-family and career researchers to think about and include cognitive biases in their future studies. If we advance our knowledge on the potential constraints to work-family decisions, we can build more sustainable careers in the future.

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