the *RHODES PROJECT*

WORKING PAPER

"And you think you have it all mapped out":
Women Rhodes Scholars'
Work-Life Identity Narratives"

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Women Rhodes Scholars' Work-Life Identity Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The phrase "work/life balance" has become ubiquitous in the academic and practitioner literatures. Many authors have noted that women's entry into the workforce, rather than increasing the extent to which responsibilities for home and work are shared between men and women, has meant that women end up working two jobs. Based on interviews with forty women Rhodes Scholars, this paper investigates elite women's work-life identity narratives and identifies two distinct discourses: work/life *rationing* and work/life *improvising*. Work-life *rationers* seek to minimize the conflict between work and life identities through "negotiating" and "mapping" to segment work and life identities and minimize tradeoffs between them to reach a static equilibrium. *Improvisers*, on the other hand, "juggle" and "blend" to integrate work and family identities and strive to achieve some temporary dynamic equilibrium. Work-life identity narratives invoke role models, family configurations, divisions of labour, identity work, and personal and professional identities. The paper concludes with a critical analysis of contemporary work-life discourse and suggests that improvements to professional women's lives require a more radical transformation of organisations and society than existing "gender-blind" work-life balance initiatives enable.

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<center>**"And you think you have it all mapped out":**

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INTRODUCTION

In the American television series *Damages* (2007-2012), the unfolding relationship between two highly successful lawyers grips viewers as it becomes increasingly intense, intimate, competitive, and ultimately dangerous. In the final scene of the final episode of the final series, the younger lawyer, Ellen, is congratulated by Patty, her mentor, for having taken "any measures necessary to win": *"You're finally in the game, Ellen", Patty says. "I look forward to going up against you again someday".*

Flash forward to the epilogue, set a few years later.

Patty enters a Manhattan pharmacy. A five-year-old girl blocks Patty's path to the counter, accidentally knocking an item from a display. A woman's voice calls, "Honey, come stand by Mommy." Patty's gaze follows the voice, until it lands on – Ellen. The women make eye contact for a moment, then Ellen turns to pay the cashier.

Outside, Patty gets into her limousine, telling her driver to take her home. A few seconds later, there's a knock on the window. Patty rolls it down – it's Ellen. "I wanted to finally thank you. I'm really grateful. For everything," she says.

Patty tells Ellen she's welcome. Then Ellen introduces her daughter. Patty looks at the girl for a long time, then locks eyes again with Ellen.

The driver asks Patty if everything's okay. We see the limousine window is closed, and Patty is daydreaming, Ellen never knocked on the window, the scene never happened. "I've changed my mind. Take me to the office."

<center>5</center>

Outside, Ellen and her daughter leave the pharmacy. As they walk down the street, the girl asks if Ellen knew that woman. "I used to", Ellen says. "Before you were born. When I was a lawyer. Should we go find Daddy?"

Fifty years after the second wave of feminism, if *Damages* and other portrayals of women in popular culture are to be believed, high-achieving women still face the stark choice between sacrificing their career, like Ellen, who had a career then opted out to have a child, or sacrificing intimate life, like Patty, who lost her marriage and children but ended up with a stunning career. This perception of significant tradeoffs between work and family has been reinforced in the popular press by Anne-Marie Slaughter, a Princeton professor and former State Department advisor, and Sheryl Sandberg, a Facebook executive, who debated in 2012 whether the younger generation of elite women could be wives, mothers *and* high-ranking professionals (e.g., Kantor, 2012; Lopez Torregrosa, 2012; Slaughter, 2012). In real life, few women in high corporate positions achieve the mythical "having it all", reaching the top of a high-powered professional career while maintaining a relationship and raising children (Hewlett, 2002).

This paper looks at how elite professional women deal with conflicting demands of personal and professional life using a grounded-theory approach, where our analysis of women's work-life identity narratives provides "thick description" about work-life balance (WLB). Our research is based on 40 transcribed interviews conducted with mid-life women Rhodes Scholars[1] as part of the Rhodes Project[2], and is also informed by over 300 responses to two questionnaires administered in this project. We examine what these women say about how they manage work-life conflict, and identify two alternate work-life discourses – work/life *rationing* versus work/life *improvising* – that provide insight into sensemaking

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[1] By convention, Rhodes Scholars are never described as "former", but all of the women interviewed attended the University of Oxford, most of them between 1977, when women were first offered scholarships, and 1995.

[2] http://www.rhodesproject.com/index.hml.

about personal and professional identities. We conclude that, despite the implicit assumption in the mainstream work-life discourse that work-life balance depends on women's individual choices and strategies, work-life balance is actually nearly impossible to achieve within existing organizational and societal constraints, despite the adoption of so-called "gender-neutral" stances and organizational initiatives (e.g., Kanter, 1977; Caproni, 1997; Calás et al., 2010; Kossek et al., 2010).

By studying women Rhodes Scholars, we provide further insight into how elite women manage the high expectations and challenges they face. Our work is guided by three research questions raised by scholars such as Caproni (1997):

1. How do elite women manage the conflict between work and life identities, and what do they define as success?

2. Whose ends are served – and not served – by the dissemination and adoption of the dominant discourse?

3. Are there alternative discourses that may better serve individuals, families, communities, organisations, and society?

This paper is structured as follows. First we provide a theoretical context for our research, reviewing research on work-life balance and work-life conflict. Next, we establish the importance of narratives and identity work in managing work-life boundaries and transitions. We position this within the larger context of work-life discourse. We then present our research methods and research sample, followed by our findings. Finally, we discuss our findings and reflect on work-life balance in the larger context of women and society.

Our main findings are as follows. We identify six key themes in the work-life identity narratives that provide further insight into WLB. We identify two main discourses from the women's narratives of work-life identity about how they manage work and personal identities. The first discourse we describe as *work-life rationing*, which focuses on finding

strategies in personal and professional life to segment identities and allocate scarce resources. The second discourse we describe as *work-life improvising*, the idea that work-life balance is illusory, life is dynamic and unpredictable, work-life identities must be integrated, and women must sacrifice either or both work or family, at least in the short-term. We conclude with a critical reflection on the larger context of work-life balance (e.g., Caproni, 1997; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005; Calás et al., 2010). Researchers and role models such as Anne-Marie Slaughter have pointed out the extent to which organisations need to change more than women need to change: "gender-blind" organisations constrain women's ability to achieve work-life balance. Current work-life balance discourse actually impedes women's lives. At least as long as

> "work-life discourse remains focused on the individual, power relations will remain beyond the scope of the discourse because understanding power dynamics requires a relational and structural, not individual, level of analysis" (Caproni, 1997: 53).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section we review research on work-life issues that shapes and informs our analysis of work-life identity narratives. Key concepts include work-life balance, work-life conflict, and work and life-identities, identity transitions and the boundaries between identities. We describe the role that narratives play in doing identity work around work-life issues, and link individual narratives to work-life discourse.

Gender and work-life balance among elite women

Since Kanter (1977) wrote the groundbreaking *Men and Women of the Corporation*, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women entering the workforce, especially in professional and other demanding careers that were previously closed to them. Furthermore, many women are continuing to work after marriage and children, where

previously they would have left the workforce, at least until their children had grown up and left home.

The majority of men and women pursuing professional and executive careers now expect to have both careers and families. Women, however, do not yet compete on an equal playing field with men in the corporate world either at work (e.g., Guillaume & Posic, 2009) or at home, where they continue to perform more of the physical and emotional labour associated with caring for their partners, children (and other dependents), and households. Even having more children was found to hinder women's career outcomes: while women were perceived to be less committed as the number of children increased, men were perceived to be more committed because more manly (Kirchmeyer, 2006). Furthermore, even the expectation that women will be more affected by spillovers from family responsibilities has recently been shown by Hoobler et al. (2009) to affect their chances of promotion and create the well-known "glass ceiling" effect at middle-management levels. Work-life issues are thus greater concerns for women (Guest, 2002).

Work-life balance – managing the competing demands of work and extra-work roles so as to achieve a satisfactory quality of life and allocation of time and effort between work, family, leisure, and other activities (e.g., Caproni, 2004) – has been a recent focus of academic research and organisational practice, where it is perceived to be important to employee productivity and retention (e.g., Carlson et al., 2009). To help employees achieve work-life balance, organisations have been implementing work-life initiatives such as flexible working, reduced work-loads, maternity leave, childcare support, leave for caring responsibilities, and so on, although organizational implementation has been found to have mixed outcomes (Kossek et al., 2010). Despite "gender-neutral" framing of these initiatives through terms such as "flexible working" (e.g., Smithson & Stokoe, 2005; Emslie & Hunt, 2009), however, work-life issues continue to be gender(ed) issues.

To understand WLB better, Mickel and Dallimore (2009) argue, we should study highly-educated professionals in prestigious occupations because they have more personal and professional options and choices than other groups. Achieving WLB, however, may be even more difficult for women in demanding professions or high corporate positions, which require longer work hours and greater resource investment, than those in lower-level jobs (e.g., Hewlett, 2002; Bacik & Drew, 2006). Women senior executives are less likely to be married and much less likely to have children than comparable men, whose wives devote more resources to maintaining the home and family (Hewlett, 2002). Similarly, Bacik and Drew (2006) suggested that female lawyers faced difficulty in balancing work and life because of a "long hours" culture and hostility to flexible work arrangements in the legal profession.

Much WLB research has focused on "family-friendly" initiatives aimed at women. Mickel and Dallimore (2009) suggested that work-family conflict may be managed through a) making changes in work-family roles, b) gaining support from spouse, and c) using family-friendly programmes offered by organisations. Similarly, Sheryl Sandberg, the Facebook COO, suggested women could balance work and family by following three rules: "require your partner to do half the work at home, don't underestimate your own abilities, and don't cut back on ambition out of fear that you won't be able to balance work and children" (Kantor, 2012).

Work-life conflict and identity work

A second focus of research on work-life balance has been on how women manage the conflict between work and life identities (e.g., Bacik & Drew, 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005; Mickel & Dallimore, 2009). *Work-life conflict* is created when different roles or identities conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985) or the demands of one domain conflict with the other (Kreiner et al., 2006a). One role can dominate the other – "I am a mother who also works as a

physician", or "I am a lawyer who is also a mother of three" –or they can be equally important – "I am a mother and a management professor". Work-life conflict results in time pressures (e.g., Perlow, 1999; Barnes et al., 2012), and strain (e.g., Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Researchers have examined the identity work that women do when they are negotiating the boundary between work and life identities and the transition between them (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2000; Guest, 2002; Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010). People create and maintain different identities in different domains in order to simplify their lives (Ashforth et al., 2000). Identity dynamics are especially important at the boundary between different identities (Kreiner et al., 2006a), where role transitions occur (Ashforth et al., 2000), or during transitions over the course of a career (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

Researchers have identified tradeoffs from work-life conflict, including work losses in return for personal gains and personal gains in return for work losses (e.g., Mickel & Dallimore, 2009). Work and life roles may indeed deplete each other, if people have only a fixed amount of resources to expend. On the other hand, having multiple roles may have positive effects (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000) if they are complementary (Rothbard, 2001), so that they may enrich each other. For example, Ruderman et al. (2002) found that despite the burden of "working the second shift" when they return home, women's managerial roles may be enriched by their personal lives.

People manage transitions and boundaries by integrating or segmenting different identities or roles (Ashforth et al., 2000; Guest, 2002; Rothbard et al., 2005), and by other forms of identity work (e.g., Mickel and Dallimore 2009). Identity work around boundaries and transitions has become more important in the work-life context because the boundary between work and home has become increasingly porous. Computer and communications technology, for example, weakens the distinction between home and work through

continuous contact via email, mobile phones and Skype, or through monitoring of home and even daycare through webcams (e.g., Fenner & Renn, 2010; Sarker et al., 2012). The rise of flexible working, telecommuting, and other initiatives has further eroded the distinction between home and work (e.g., Peters & Heusinkveld, 2010; Virick et al., 2010).

To study work-life identity work, the study of narratives has become important, because they are tied to how individuals create and maintain their identities (Brown et al., 2008), especially in demanding professions where people actively construct and maintain their identities through sensemaking (Kreiner et al., 2006b; Ibarra & Barbulescu 2010), using sensemaking narratives to "understand and clarify aspects of their working lives" (Brown et al. 2008: 1036). Thus, as Watson (2009: 425) argued, we should bring together narrative and identity work:

> "to study and better understand people's working lives and organizational involvement in the context of their whole lives and in the context of the societal culture in which they have grown up and now live."

Work-life balance discourse

A third strand of research on WLB shifts the focus of work-life balance away from individuals and their choices to critical analysis of the discourse surrounding work-life balance. Texts such as narratives reveal how organizational reality is created, changed, or destroyed through language (Phillips & Oswick 2012). Hence, narratives are part of the social construction of organisational reality (Watson 2009). Discourse shapes the reality of work-life balance (e.g., Guest, 2002; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005; Pichler, 2009).

Reframing the discussion of work-life balance in terms of discourse highlights the problematic nature of work-life balance and related issues in that "they are complex, ambiguous in meaning, and evolving in practice, rationales, and cultural acceptance" (Kossek et al., 2010: 4). As Guest (2002) points out, even the term work-life *balance* is problematic:

does "balance" refer to nouns, like scales, clocks, the human body, or the human mind, or is it a verb that refers to various forms of human agency such as power, trade, or money? If balance refers to scales, does a heavy load of work countered by an equally heavy load of family responsibilities represent a healthy work-life balance? How do we then account for the need for women to find extra time for work and family roles by significantly reducing the amount they sleep in order to find additional time, since they cannot create additional hours in the day (see for example Barnes & Van Dyne, 2009; Barnes et al., 2012). We should therefore carefully examine the nature of language used in WLB discourse. Without a critical understanding of WLB, any discussion ends up being tautological, because "we accentuate the view that WLB is the 'achievement' of an individual who combines various life domains in a successful and especially balanced way" (Pichler, 2009: 450).

This inherent ambiguity at the centre of work-life balance discourse argues for further investigation of how people use terms such as work-life balance in everyday life, because the "local context within which the language term is placed [is] a place of political struggle over meaning" (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005: 152). Critical discourse analysis demonstrates how the focus of work-life balance discourse on individual differences and choices works to conceal the power differentials and structural inequalities within which WLB exists (Caproni, 1997: Lorbiecki & Jack, 2000; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). Work-life issues challenge the idealized worker who places work first and whose work time and performance are never affected by family demands (Kossek et al. 2010).

RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

As noted above, scholars have recently argued for more research on WLB discourse (e.g., Guest, 2002; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005; Pichler et al., 2009), particularly on narratives and identity work. By taking a qualitative, grounded-theory approach to investigating work-

life balance among elite professional women in terms of work-life identity narratives, this research should shed further light on neglected aspects of WLB, particularly how it is interpreted by elite women, and how this interpretation shapes their understanding and actions. This section details our research approach, context, and data analysis.

Research approach

WLB research has been conducted from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives, as recent literature reviews such as Casper et al. (2007) and Pichler (2009) reveal. In keeping with our focus on WLB discourse, and in line with the qualitative nature of our data, we have taken a qualitative approach to research design and data analysis, drawing on previous examples such as Caproni (1997), Smithson and Stokoe (2005), Kreiner et al. (2006b), and Mickel and Dallimore (2009), among others.

A qualitative focus also complements quantitative research. According to Casper et al. (2007), who analysed 210 articles on work-family issues published over 24 years, research on WLB has over-relied on quantitative, cross-sectional, survey-based designs. Large-scale survey designs have been criticized for their shortcomings as well as their prevalence. Pichler (2009) argues that the concept of life is under-theorised and poorly-measured relative to work in large-scale surveys such as the European Social Survey (ESS) or the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). Guest (2002) argues that large-scale surveys of WLB obscure the meaning of balance, rather than the quantity of work and home activities.

Research context

Our research draws on data from the Rhodes Project, an ongoing study of women who were awarded Rhodes Scholarships for postgraduate study at the University of Oxford. The Rhodes Scholarships were funded by a benefaction from the South African entrepreneur Cecil Rhodes to recognize exceptional students who demonstrate leadership ability and a dedication to service for the public good, encapsulated as "fighting the world's fight".

Although the Rhodes scholarships were first awarded in 1903, women became eligible only in 1977 (a small number of Rhodes Visiting Fellowships were awarded to advanced women academics beginning in 1968).

83 Rhodes Scholars are selected each year from Australia, Bermuda, Canada, Germany, Hong Kong, India, Jamaica and Commonwealth Caribbean, Kenya, New Zealand, Pakistan, Southern Africa (including South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, and Swaziland), United States, Zambia, and Zimbabwe, with about a third from the US. Rhodes Scholars have been argued to represent an "elite within an elite". Well-known recent Rhodes Scholars span former US President Bill Clinton (Arkansas & University College 1968) and former Secretary of Labour Robert Reich (New Hampshire & University College 1968), to writer Naomi Wolfe (Connecticut & New College 1985), Google senior executive Shona Brown (Ontario & New College 1987), and new media pundit Rachel Maddow (California & Lincoln College 1995).

The Rhodes Project has been collecting data about women Rhodes Scholars since 2005. The present study mainly draws on the archive of interviews conducted with individual women Rhodes Scholars who were contacted by the Rhodes Project and agreed to participate. These women were elected to be Rhodes Scholars between 1977 and 1995, and hence were early-career (10 to 15 years) or mid-career (15 to 30 years) at the time they were interviewed. Interviews were semi-structured, and took one to several hours. The transcripts ranged from 2,000 to 10,000 words in length. The respondents were promised confidentiality, and because women Rhodes Scholars are a small group, and many of them are well-known or could be identified, we have completely anonymised the responses here. We also draw on the Rhodes Project's ongoing programme of surveys conducted with the same sample pool as the interviews, with 210 respondents to Questionnaire 1 (Q1), and 115 respondents to Questionnaire 2 (Q2).

To indicate the demographics of the women who participated in the interviews, we provide a brief summary from Questionnaire 1 (Q1), which was administered to the same set of women Rhodes Scholars who participated in the interviews (and indeed there is a substantial overlap between the two groups). 88% of respondents to Q1 were currently in paid employment (of those who were not, over 50% had been). 65% were the principal or equal breadwinners in their family, with a median annual salary of $100,000. Nearly all were in employed in academia, high-status professional occupations such as law and medicine, white-collar occupations such as teaching, or the arts and media.

69% of the Q1 respondents reported currently being married, with another 18% currently in a long-term relationship (89% reported being in a relationship in Q2). 58% reported having children; of these, more than half had the main or equally shared responsibility for caring for the children. 82.5% of the women who had children were currently working full-time at the time of questionnaire administration, compared with 90% of those who were childless. Their average age at the first child's birth was between 30 and 35.

Data analysis

In analyzing the interviews, we followed the tradition of grounded theory as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967), and subsequently expanded by Strauss and Corbin (1998), together with qualitative data analysis as guided by Miles and Huberman (1994). We first read through a small number of significant interviews and highlighted the key themes that emerged, selecting work-life conflict as the first theme to pursue in more depth. We then identified a wider set of interviews for further analysis. We used the principle of theoretical sampling to maximize variation along work-life balance issues. The wider set of interviews included women from early and late in the cohort; single and partnered women; women with children and women without children; heterosexual and lesbian women; and so on.

In these interviews we highlighted every instance relating to work-life conflict, or "thought units" that ranged in length from a short phrase to a sentence or paragraph. Each of the two authors open-coded these thought units independently with one or more codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We then worked collaboratively and discussed each instance, grouping the quotes together, and then dividing and recombining them until we agreed that each quote belonged to a particular group and not another. We used constant comparative analysis to generate themes and patterns based on how often they occurred, and how distinctive they were. We ended up with two main groups of quotations, "work-life balance" and "work-life improvising". We then further analysed the quotations within each group, and compared them across the two groups, and ended with the conceptual structure presented in Figure 1 and below.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Work-life balance issues were of significant concern to the women Rhodes Scholars. In Q1, the women Rhodes Scholars rated their three most difficult life decisions as being about career, children, and balancing work and family. It was important for them to be successful in both professional and personal spheres, especially since they felt that professional and personal expectations for women Rhodes Scholars were greater than for "average women". As a result, they expected to be simultaneously at the top of their chosen career, to be fantastic mothers, and to "make a difference in the world" as per the Rhodes credo.

In line with Mickel and Dallimore's (2009) research on professionals, the Rhodes women availed themselves of a wider range of WLB choices, including flexible working, au pairs, nannies, cleaners and other household help, daycare, boarding schools, and so on.

Nonetheless, nearly all of the mothers reported that having children had affected their lifestyle, especially their own career opportunities, but less so their partners (Q2).

On the other hand, this was counterbalanced by the need to work harder to meet the higher goals and expectations for career and family success. Work (71%) and time management (57%) created the main sources of stress (Q2): the median woman Rhodes Scholar was working the equivalent of a full-time (at least) job at work and at home, spending 46 hours per week on children and partners combined, 45 hours per week on paid employment (although 30% reported working more than 50 hours per week); 50 hours per week on sleep. As one woman pointed out,

> "We've got the choices, [but] we're now just doing five things a day instead of two. Most of us have the resources, we have the nannies, we have the support structures that make all of these things easier, whereas women who haven't been through tertiary education sometimes tend to have much less ability to manage the balancing. But certainly all the Rhodes Scholar friends talked about these things, you know, meeting the expectations of success thing again and balancing that with a personal life and family and fun."

Women Rhodes Scholars still carried heavier domestic responsibilities than male partners:

> [We]'ve now got all these options in the work place, but we're also still doing most of the home stuff as well and I think the more educated the group is the more we share the balance of homecare and even the very balanced know that there are conscious conversations and discussions about sharing – who collects the laundry and who cooks the dinner and who puts the kids to bed and who takes them to school? It tends to be the woman who does most of that planning and is also working. I mean not across the board, but even our generation I don't think it's balanced out as much as we'd probably like to think it has."

As a result, far from achieving work-life balance, many felt as though they were just being swamped by work and family demands, especially those with young children:

"I actually started at a corporate law firm [but] after my first child was born I made a decision to come here, because I thought it would be a lifestyle change. But I think it is a struggle. I have wonderful childcare at home, I have the support of my family, my parents are both retired, I have covers of all kinds, and then I have extra covers, and then I have my parents, and I have my in-laws if I need more covers. I don't know how women do it who don't have the full range of support. I know that there are women who feel that less conflicted than I do, but I feel conflicted. *I'm kind of barely managing.*"

Despite the challenges of combining work and family (or outside interests such as music or sport), even with help from partners or other sources of paid and voluntary support, women's work identities were generally too important to them to give up. This was partly economic: 50% reported that making money was important to them, and 76% weren't working to support their current lifestyle (Q1). 81% worked because of the intellectual stimulation, and 59% because it was their life passion (Q1). 94% agreed that their work "somewhat" or "completely" defined them (Q2). On the other hand, many of those with children argued that this role was central or "the most important" to them, and defended the 'traditional homemaker' vehemently:

"There is no reason why a mother who is at home with her children should not be regarded as contributing to her community and the world in general. They are still bettering society, whether they're involved in their children's schools, local church, community activities, charities, sports. The women I know who've chosen to stay at home are always busy doing hundreds of things – that's how they've chosen to apply their talents."

We found that six key themes were evoked through the lens of work-life identity narratives: role models, family configurations, division of labour, identity work, and personal and professional identities, as shown in <u>Figure 1</u>. We summarise each theme below.

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Role models

For the early women Rhodes Scholars (those who started in the late 1970s and early 1980s), there were few senior female role models who combined work and families:

"We had this dream of making it like guys, but we also wanted to be married and have kids and I don't think any of us saw any women growing up who did it. We'd just never seen it. We had no idea what it would look like. And so we were charging ahead kind of hopeful and really not having any idea of how it was going to work, or what would happen when his job says you go here and her job says you go here, and you have children caught in the middle – or you don't have children, you just want the domestic woman: what do you do? We didn't have any role models and that lasted a long time."

Senior women role models are essential to women's success at early and mid-career stages (Sealy & Singh, 2010). Role models aid self-regulation of identity, comparing one's current state with an ideal state and making adjustments to reduce any discrepancy (Rothbard, 2001). By the time the younger Rhodes Scholars came along, there were women role models. Interestingly, many cited guidance from employers, including identifying specific women role models, and publishing vignettes and profiles. One investment banker remarked that:

"There are two women at [her firm] who just clock off. They are extremely well-known, well-respected, senior investment bankers. One of them has five children, one of them has three children. I will never be able to get to that level, but you know. One of them is actually the Vice-Chairman of [the firm], she just says 5 o'clock, I'm out of there. It is just amazing."

Ideal family configuration: Partners and children

Guillaume and Pochic (2009) describe the idealized family of male breadwinner, homemaker wife, and numerous children as one of the underpinnings of gendered managerial careers. Merely by engaging in professional careers, elite women breach this model; however, the mirror configuration of female breadwinner and male "wife" is still rare. As Hewett (2002), among others, has noted, executive women tend to marry high-status men, and hence put their careers second in order to carry the traditional household and caring responsibilities.

The work-life identity narratives of the women Rhodes scholars invoked two kinds of partner: partners with demanding professional careers, "husband" or "sugar daddy", and partners who were willing to put their own career second or make compromises, including "stay-at-home dads" and "guys who take time out" or "drop out to be a parent". (We use partner rather than husband or wife here because the women in our sample had male and female partners, although not simultaneously).

Whether or not to have children (only a very small number did not want to have children, although some acknowledged it might not happen) and how many, and the timing of children versus career were other concerns. Not surprisingly, childcare rated highly as a concern.

Division of labour

Given the heavy demands on their time, women described in great detail how they actually organized their work and home lives, and their strategies for actually meeting both sets of demands. This theme also took in deciding which could not be realistically done; for example, many women gave up travel and conferences to make more time at home. Many women described detailed negotiations with partners about who does what, and how, and when:

> "He does all the cooking! I'm the dog's chef. I cook for the dog. I guess we divide the buying of provisions pretty evenly so this little market here is on the way to our house. We live over there and the university is over there. But you know we divide that pretty evenly. I do the dishes but on the occasional time when I cook he does the dishes and then household cleaning and things might get done once in a while."

Given the higher level of income typical of the Rhodes women's households, women often took advantage of paying for help with household and caring roles, although this was sometimes associated with being "less than perfect".

Identity work

A fourth theme was the identity work through which women created, maintained, and changed work and life identities. These identities changed through women's lives, in what one woman described as four to five year stages, and others described as being driven by the stages of children's development. Another aspect of identity work dealt with challenges, setbacks, and unexpected events, such as relationship breakdowns, the birth of disabled children, job setbacks, and other disappointments, but also included unexpected opportunities.

Personal and professional identities

The fifth and sixth themes of the work-life identity narratives concerned personal and professional identities. Subthemes included changing careers, e.g., switching from management consulting to social enterprise that were less financially lucrative but more personally rewarding; choosing different career tracks that allowed more work flexibility, and downgrading career goals.

WORK-LIFE IDENTITY DISCOURSE

A critical analysis of work-life discourse begins with the assumption that reality is socially constructed (Prasad & Caproni, 1997; Berger & Luckman, 1967). In his critical reading of managerial identity, McKenna (2010: 6) notes, the "selves and identities managers narrate" reflect an "identity they are called to `be'," one "normalized by prevailing and dominant managerial discourse".

As well as analyzing the interviews as work-life identity narratives, we thus also considered our data in wider terms as constituting two discourses about work-life balance. The first we describe as *work-life rationing*, which roughly aligns with work-life balance (e.g., Rothbard & Edwards 2000; Kossek et al. 2010). The second we describe as *work-life improvisation*, which aligns more closely with work-life juggling (e.g., Caproni 1997; Bacik and Drew, 2006). A very few of the respondents did not align with either discourses. One woman simply threw up her hands and said "just work and live". We called these women "resisters and rejecters", but there were two few in our interviews to include in further analysis. Table 1 summarises the differences between the two discourses across the themes that we identified in the work-life identity narratives.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Work-life rationing

In the rationing discourse, most of the language, particularly the metaphors, used to describe strategies for dealing with work-life conflict were highly rationalist and calculative. The term "balancing" occurred repeatedly, for example:

"It's a constantly shifting *balance*. And I think that's part of what I talked about in my speech is that, you know, sometimes the *balance* in my life has completely been in the direction of work. Right now the *balance* is probably 70% kids, 30% work. But the *balance* is shifting. You know when my kids were first born it was 100% them. It's a *balance* that changes from day to day and week to week and I'm constantly re-evaluating and I spend a lot of time not just evaluating to myself but talking with my eight-year-old daughter."

There were frequent references to balancing time, energy, or resource flows:

"The other thing about this is to know what actually *brings you energy and nurtures you* and once I started to figure that out, I did a lot less of the peripheral that was *draining* and a lot more of the peripheral that was *restorative*."

A third dominant metaphor was that of following a map or chart:

"I had no idea I was going to have another baby [in her mid-40s]. So that was a surprise baby. Professionally, I was thinking that I would be working a little bit more because I had my youngest in kindergarten, so I figured I would have more time to work on my writing projects and my research, and so now this has happened, so I put this in the category of *you just don't know what turn your life is going to take*. And *you think you have it all mapped out*.

Table 2 highlights the recurring metaphors in the work-life rationing discourse and provides some illustrative quotations from our interviews. As well as explicitly reflecting the influence of work-life balance in the academic and practitioner literature, the first set of

quotations supports an underlying rationale of resource depletion when work and home roles conflict (e.g., Rothbard 2001). That is, women have only a fixed amount of emotional and physical resources for work and life roles, so that they should strive for work-life balance by rationally calculating how much time and energy to give to each, and then doing what it takes to achieve and maintain the balance. Women engaged in intricate negotiations with their partners, down to "who cooks the meat and who cooks the vegetables".

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Moreover, we were struck by the preponderance of metaphors taken from the workplace, including "accounting [for]", "calculating", and "managing". Table 2 suggests, women increasingly employ the language of "work" at home. As Barley et al. (1988) noted, academics and practitioners influence each other through practices, symbols, and concepts, and these influences can be revealed through linguistic change of speech communities. More specifically, as Caproni (1997: 53) points out, "The language typically reserved for the work environment is now being used to help people 'manage' their lives". This convergence of work and home agrees with Hochschild's argument that "work becomes home, and home becomes work" (1997).

By representing partners and children as another set of demands to be managed rationally, rather than belonging to a separate identity and domain, this discourse encourages the segmentation of roles and resource allocation in order to sacrifice home for work. One woman even expressed her frustration that her children weren't better "employees":

"I get stressed out when I leave in the morning because I know I'm late, my patients are waiting for me, I've got to kiss my daughter and take a long time just to say good bye to them and then I also get stressed out, because I'm nursing right now and it

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seems I'm so busy with my work at work that I don't have time to nurse. That's very frustrating. And often my fast pace at work – because I'm very, very quick at working, at everything I do, I make decisions, I'm quick at seeing my patients, obviously I spend time with them, but obviously my children are much slower at home- they do things at their own pace and I think that – my son said to me this morning, 'Why are you so angry when you leave in the morning' and I realized that I do get angry, because they don't get into the car as quickly as I do and their pace is much slower and I just have to realize that I can't bring my work pace to my home, so that's frustrating. I'm going to have to learn to change paces and just realize that I can't do as much at home as quickly as I wanted to. I just have to enjoy the process of getting into the car each morning at a much slower pace. And it's tiring."

Overall, the work-life rationing approach was aligned with mainstream approaches to work-life balance. Work and life identities are segmented and separate, defined by boundaries in time and space and place, and with discrete transitions between the two. By taking a rational approach to work-life balance, work-life rationers attempt to minimize the overall tradeoffs between work and life identities, although sacrifices are still entailed: several women mentioned that it was impossible to satisfy the needs of partner, children, and work simultaneously. Others described what they perceived as shortcomings in each of these areas, partner ("Sex life? I wish!"), children ("I don't want their memories to be of a mommy who was never around when they were little"), and job ("women end up in the 'pink ghetto' career track").

Work-life improvisation

We describe the second discourse that we identified as *work-life improvisation*. As shown in Table 3, the language and metaphors used in the work-life improvising discourse were strikingly different from work-life rationalising, drawing on work-life "juggling" (e.g.,

Bacik & Drew 2006) rather than work-life balance. This was typified in one woman's remarks,

> "I am always *juggling* five hundred balls and thriving on the *juggling* aspect. Wanting very much to make the world a better place, and sometimes feeling frustrated that it's hard for one person, or a group of people can't seem to make that happen. But never giving up in that attempt. And I hope my friends would say that I am a very nice person, very grounded, very down to earth. I care as much about how my family are viewed as human beings as anything else. Accomplishments come second to how we behave as people."

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Metaphors for improvisation revolved around processes and being, rather than states and having.

> "I do spend quite a bit of time with them. I also, you know, do work, but it's all peaked around available childcare, rather than, you know work, and then…childcare based around that. Or you know, it's kind of a *dance* – if I get so much childcare than I can work that much, and if I get more work, maybe I'll be alright with more childcare, it's sort of an ongoing experiment."

Work-life improvisers were more vocal about the sacrifices to self, career and/or family:

> "If you have a busy career and you rush from that to being with children and no matter what stage they're in they have issues, and by the time you do that and make meals and stuff like that *there's nothing left in the day*; *there's no time left*. So as a necessity it means that *you've sublimated tons of needs* because you have needs."

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"Guys will also tell you that they can do this and they can do that and that's great – I can do this and I can do that! Oh my god, that's such bravado, he's full of shit, but really he probably can do it if he puts his mind to it just like you could, but maybe you don't care as much or have the same confidence in yourself, and so I think there is probably an understanding that you can do whatever it is that you want to do, I know it sounds clichéd, but also having the sense that if you choose to have a family it's a wonderful thing and *you will have to make some changes in your life*. I mean *it's just not possible to do everything* and *you just have to choose what's important* and not try and do everything."

The work-life improvisers were actively skeptical of the work-life rationing discourse and the idea of work-life balance:

"We talk about balance all the time and that sort of implies that if you add something on one side you have to take it away from the other and *it's sort of a zero-sum game*."

"I don't know, I still think it's a lot of make believe gazing and whining and all a bit off the cuff. *Anything that was remotely packaged as the work-life balance book I would just never buy*."

By rejecting work-life balance as some static optimum that can be attained through negotiation, work-life improvisers may paradoxically have been closer to obtaining such balance through what Smith and Lewis (2011) describe as *dynamic equilibrium*. Thus, the work-life improvisation discourse calls into question the whole basis of work-life balance in the accepted sense:

"For me, *there is not a clear, bright line between "work" and "life"*. Being a parent is important to me and to my husband. Flexibility is involving children in one's work when possible and appropriate. *I'm focusing on what I do not where I do it* (I work after their bedtime, at home, in the stands of Little League games etc.). Leverage,

technology: Blackberry, laptops, home computers limited to work all enhance flexibility and work/life balance."

Overall, the work-life improvising discourse aligns with critical perspectives that question whether work-life balance is achievable given the gendered nature of organisations and society (e.g., Caproni 1997).

DISCUSSION

Our first research question was "How do elite women manage the conflict between work and life, including family, and what do they define as success?" To answer this research question, we investigated the work-life identity narratives contained in our interviews with women Rhodes Scholars. The women who were interviewed appeared, at least on the surface, to come closer than most women to "having it all": almost all of them had rewarding careers and fulfilling family lives. A common thread among all of the women, however, whether single or partnered, parents or childless, was the difficulty of finding a satisfactory work-life balance, although many believed that they were doing much more than the "average woman". The two main work-life discourses – work-life rationing and work-life improvising – both revealed the drain on careers and family entailed through work-life conflict, being "superwoman" in both the workplace and at home. Personal and professional success was reduced at times to "just barely managing", especially in early career or when there were pre-school children.

Our second research question was "Whose ends are served – and not served – by the dissemination and adoption of the dominant discourse?" Although the opening up of professional careers to women can hardly be argued to be a bad thing, it is not completely clear that women are better off than before. Like other women, women Rhodes Scholars have been socialized not only to work hard and achieve great things in the public sphere, but also

to fulfill what one woman called the "fetishization of motherhood" promoted in contemporary society; however, they are expected to "manage" the challenges of home life and motherhood without the support systems in place for their male counterparts. By the time she was in her mid-forties, another respondent was pregnant and had several young children, yet she continued to try to see herself "in the same situation" as her male colleagues:

> "So I'm like well I'm not alone [in having four children] – these two guys are in the same situation and then [her friend, also a Rhodes Scholar] wrote to me, and said yeah but the difference is, number 1, you are having the baby, they aren't, and number 2, their wives are much younger [than you are]. So she was basically saying your accomplishment is bigger than their accomplishment. And furthermore, who's going take care of their baby after the [Rhodes] reunion? The wife."

The women we interviewed frequently described being tired, not only because of the demands being made on them at work and at home but because they believe they should be able to manage all of these jobs. Contemporary women are socialized, or "called to `be'," managers of the home and at the office. As Rothbard (2001: 664) suggests, the relationships between work and family may be stronger for women than for men because "men may segment (or mentally separate) these roles more than women do". Organisations co-opt these capabilities without recompensing them, for example the argument that experience as a mother enriches managerial capabilities:

> "You know, I always have felt that I wouldn't have ended up being CEO here if I hadn't had my twins because it really forced me to prioritize well and that is a great strength in business because in business there is always so much going on and you have to be able to focus and prioritize on what is most important."

> But whose ends are served if the only choices seem to be work-life rationing or work-life improvisation, and organisations still fail to adapt? It is worth remembering that "barely

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managing" was hardly what the original women's movement had in mind when 1960s feminists "sought an economic and social revolution that would create equality at home and at the workplace" (Rosen 2012). Instead, as Caproni notes, the discourse of work/life balance might "undermine women's and men's attempts to live fulfilling lives" (1997). Fortunately, if identity work involves "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson and Alversson, 2003: 1165; McKenna, 2010), women's work-life identity narratives could be articulated within other discursive frameworks.

Thus, the discourse of work-life balance seems to us to have benefitted post-capitalist organisations and traditional idealized workers (e.g., Guillaume & Posic 2009), rather than individual men and women. "The trouble with the rat race," Lily Tomlin noted, "is that the rats always win". Despite the promise of "having it all" and "gender-blind" organisations and work-life policies, the women who are best off at mid-career seem to be those who prioritised work over partner and family (like Patty), or family life at the expense of successful careers (like Ellen). One woman reported that a friend:

> "was basically told, 'your career, or your children?' and she chose her children – appropriately, but I wonder – I mean it's not the children that are the problem, it's the fact that the patriarchy's been running everything, you know and then all the values in the workplace, all the models for the values in the workplace were men's. And they still are, by and large."

This leads to our third and final research question, which was "Are there alternative discourses that may better serve individuals, families, communities, organisations, and society?" If there are, it is women who are struggling to articulate them. How can women be encouraged to do so? And how might labour be redistributed so that men's and women's lives are more fulfilling?

Our focus on women, rather than women and men, in the WLB context is deliberate. As Emslie and Hunt (2009) point out, although much work-life research is "gender-blind" or takes gender as neutral, it must be integrated into research on work-life issues. While both male and female professionals face conflict between professional and personal identities, the main responsibility for the household, family, and children, continues to fall on women. Kanter (1977: ix) noted that "as long as organisations remained the same, merely replacing men with women would not alone make a difference".

In *After Nora Slammed the Door* (1964), a speculative study of what happens to women after they walk away from their conventional roles in the home, Eve Merriam speaks of feminism's "unfinished revolution", after women walk away from their traditional role in the home, but before they discover a new role. In her afterword to the 1993 edition of *Men and Women of the Corporation* (1977), Kanter argued that "in order for businesses to compete effectively in the global economy" they would need to "attract, retain, motivate, and utilize effectively the most talented people they can find" (p. 23). For businesses to be able to do this, she stated, a "new social contract based on new realities," would have to be forged. In the introduction to their 2010 special issue of *Gender, Work and Organization*, Calás et al. argue that gender is one key entry point through which globalized capitalism may be observed, because as a "markers of difference," gender "serve to legitimize practices producing inequalities in the division of labour on a global scale" (p. 243).

As our findings suggest, elite women are talented and highly productive. But if even the most capable and well-resourced women are "barely managing" the new reality despite thinking they have it all mapped out, surely a new social contract is now long overdue. Women's productivity has not, historically, respected the boundary between work and life. Merriam's (1964: 233) answer to the question "What does Nora really want?" is very similar to what our elite women interviewees said they wanted (more than fifty years later):

"[N]ot only a room of her own, but a room with an outside view. She wants a satisfactory job life and a satisfactory home life as well. The right to an equal pay raise and the right to raise a family, to maintain the balance of both home and job without neglecting either. It is a measure of the potential of our society that she can voice such demands today. She is asking for a great deal: it is more than most men have ever had. Quite so, and so she will have to learn to ask for it for men as well as for women. Until both gain such a double unification of place in the world, neither will."

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has used interviews with a sample of women Rhodes Scholars to examine how elite women negotiate work and life roles, and manage the conflict between them. Based on these narratives, we identified two approaches to managing work-life conflict, which we described as work-life rationing and work-life improvising. Work-life rationers conceived of there being some static work-life balance, which could be achieved through a priori resource allocation and negotiation of home/work, whilst work-life improvisers strove for some sort of temporary dynamic equilibrium, which was driven mostly by continual readjustment and reaction. Both the rationers and the improvisers situated their strategies for managing work-life conflict within a similar world view, which prioritized identification of appropriate role models, selection of an appropriate partner, definition of home/work, selection of appropriate strategies, and identification of desired personal and professional goals and success.

In the wider perspective, we reflected on these two discourses – rationing and improvising – and whether they were "fit for purpose". Many authors have noted that women's entry into the workforce has meant taking on an extra job, rather than increasing the extent to which responsibilities for home and work are shared between men and women. Furthermore, while the playing field between men and women does not seem to have been

leveled significantly since midcentury, the expectations for women have been increased. And women have met those expectations. As one of our interviewees recalled learning from a fellow Rhodes Scholar, if we count the work that women do at home along with the work that women do at work, women's accomplishments over the past thirty years have been far greater than men's ("your accomplishment is bigger than their accomplishment"). Perhaps first recognizing this fact, and then deciding how, in a new social contract, the diverse energies and talents of men and women could most usefully be re-allocated, are the challenges for the twenty-first century.

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Table 1. Factors women associated with work-life balance discourse

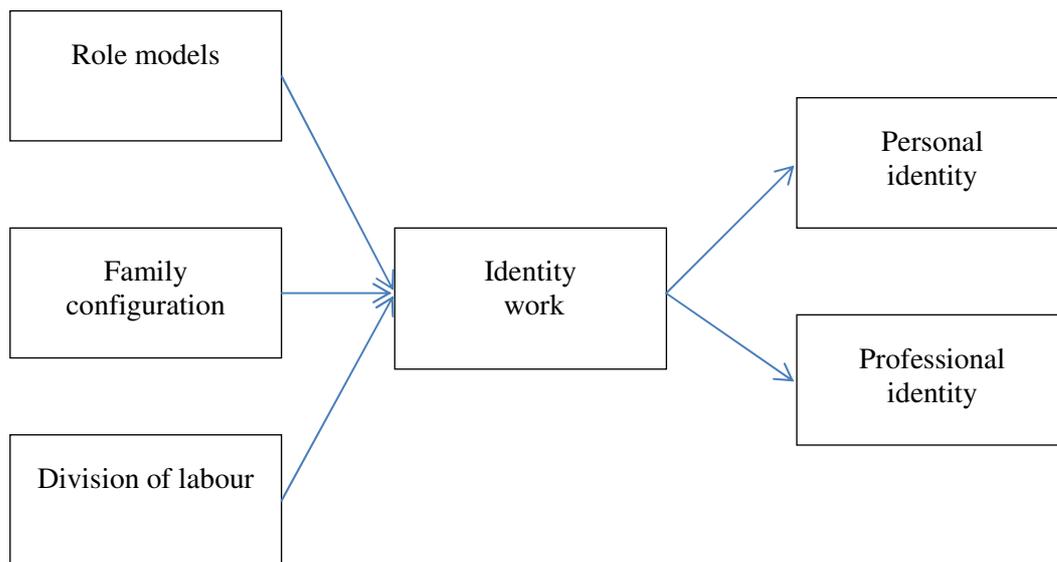| Factor	Rationing	Improvising
Role models	Values, expectations, ideals, concepts, roles	"Ought-to-be's", superwoman, career woman, feminism
Family configuration	Alpha male, husband, sugar daddy, two children	Stay-at-home partner, partner, children negotiable
Division of labour	Managing a home; outsourcing housework and childcare	Creating a home
Identity work	Segmenting Rules and procedures	Integrating Holistic
Personal goals	Competitive domesticity	Dancing on the edge of chaos
Professional goals	Global recognition	Make a local difference

Table 2. Work-life rationing discourse

Metaphor	Language
Balancing	Balancing the scales, tightropes, tug-of-war
	Balancing resource flows (e.g., energy)
Managing	Working another job, scheduling, mergers and acquisitions
Accounting	(Filling out a) balance sheet, allocation (of resources)
Charting	Mapping, changing course or reorienting
Problem-solving	Finding the right answer, calculating

Table 3. Work-life improvising discourse

Juggling	Juggling 500 balls
Dancing	Different rhythm, different timing
Running	Travelling constantly
Blending	Blending it all together; being flexible; being holistic
Sacrificing	"You can't have it all"; focusing on the highest priority; making choices versus living with choices; being ruthless

Figure 1. Factors in work-life balance discourse

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