Work-family habits? Exploring the persistence of traditional work-family decision making in dual-earner couples

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ABSTRACT

Decisions made within the family have long been recognised as a central obstacle to achieving gender equality, not only in the home, but also in the workplace due to the interdependent relationship between work and family domains. Here we focus particularly on how couple-level work-family decision-making processes influence (non)egalitarian work-family decisions. We draw on a qualitative diary study with 60 participants, comprising 30 heterosexual, dual-earner couples situated in the UK, to examine work-family decision-making in daily practice. Our findings suggest that egalitarian family identities, previously highlighted as important, are necessary but insufficient in enabling egalitarian work-family decisions. Instead, our findings highlight the important role played by the decision-making *processes* couples engage in, particularly in relation to their frequently habitual nature. Thus, we show how, while family identities held by men and women may be converging, habitual decision-making processes often continue to prevent egalitarian daily arrangements. We introduce the concept of 'work-family habits' and develop a novel framework depicting daily work-family decision making processes engaged in by dual-earner couples, revealing how each of these processes can contribute to either more traditional or egalitarian work-family practices.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the work-family literature has consistently recognised that gender equality will not be achieved at work until it is achieved in the home (e.g., Michaelides, Anderson, & Vinnicombe, 2023; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016). Understanding the daily practices that promote gender equality is important as organizations and society continue to struggle with progress (e.g., Frear, Paustian-Underdahl, Heggestad, & Walker, 2019). Given the somewhat limited success to date of organisational work–family and gender equality policies (Padavic, Ely, & Reid, 2019; Perrigino, Dunford, & Wilson, 2018; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015), and assertions that equality must be achieved in the home, if it is to be achieved at work (e.g., Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016), we consider a complimentary perspective, focusing on daily work-family decision making processes at the micro-level (e.g., Powell & Greenhaus, 2012).

The dual-earner couple has become the predominate family form across much of the world (England, 2010) challenging traditional family organisation strategies of heterosexual couples relying on specialisation of work and family roles along gendered lines and thus 'separate spheres' for men and women (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegård, 2015). These 'separate spheres' have become

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increasingly blurred due to intensifying engagement of women in employment, and in increasingly professional careers and higher-ranking positions (Goldscheider et al., 2015), further challenging how responsibilities should be managed within the household.

Despite this blurring of roles and boundaries, research continues to highlight the relatively one-sided nature of this shift with women taking on greater economic responsibilities, but with a less pronounced decrease in family responsibilities (e.g., Milkie, Raley, & Bianchi, 2009), alongside their frequent responsibility for family emotional work (Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020) and the 'cognitive labour' (Daminger, 2019) required to maintain daily work-family arrangements. Such traditional, gender-based, family arrangements lead to a 'second shift' for women, added daily pressure and work-life conflict, and subsequent challenges in maintaining and progressing in careers (Bianchi, 2011). For instance, in their study of academics, Schiebinger and Gilmartin (2010) point out that despite three decades of government, university, and industry dedicated resources aiming to increase the number of women scientists, an ongoing lack of egalitarianism in the home is still a key contributing factor to the stalled career progression of women. While noting that US work-life policies lag behind other industrialized nations, contributing to ongoing gender inequalities (Allen, French, & Poteet, 2016; Schultheiss, in press), regardless of more progressive policies in Europe, enduring gender equality challenges remain. For instance, in the UK, fathers have equal access to work-family policies, but uptake is low (Kaufman, 2018). In Sweden, persistent gender norms shape parents' negotiations in line with traditional expectations (Grönlund & Öun, 2018), and in Norway women report doing more housework and childcare than men, even when both work full-time (Kitterød & Rønsen, 2012), despite celebrated policies in both countries.

Moreover, there is evidence this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic with women bearing the brunt of childcare and home-schooling (Collins, Landivar, Ruppanner, & Scarborough, 2021), resulting in psychological or behavioural withdrawal, or even complete exit, from paid employment (Ashman, Radcliffe, Patterson, & Gatrell, 2022; Kossek, Perrigino, & Rock, 2021). This is despite other research over this period suggesting that, where more egalitarian approaches were adopted, well-being was enhanced for both men and women, while also allowing both to maintain job performance (Hennekam, Ladge, & Powell, 2021; Shockley, Clark, Dodd, & King, 2021). Existing research, therefore, suggests that gendered role specialisation remains prevalent in terms of family-level behaviours, and often to the detriment of both mothers and fathers.

Decisions made within the family have long been recognised as central obstacles to achieving gender equality at work due to the interdependent relationship between the two (Williams & Williams, 2010; Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). For instance, prior research highlights significant career penalties at the point of motherhood, referred to as 'the motherhood penalty', primarily as a result of gendered parenting decisions, practices and expectations (e.g., Kossek et al., 2021). Furthermore, while 'dual-earning' is now the norm across much of the OECD, and 'full-time dual earning' is on the rise, there are still many countries in which a 1.5 earner model prevails wherein it is usually the mother who works part-time and the father who works full-time, including in the UK where the current study is situated, as well as across other countries such as Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Australia, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands (OECD, 2022). This is particularly the case, when youngest children are below the age of eight years old (OECD, 2022), and when there is more than one child under the age of 14 in the household (OECD, 2022). This trend for mothers to amend work roles to accommodate heavy caregiving responsibilities leads to all women of childbearing age considered a 'threat' to workplace productivity and associated stigmatisation (e.g., Gloor, Li, Lim, & Feierabend, 2018). Scholars have therefore suggested that progress towards gender equality has stalled at home, and subsequently in the workplace (e.g., Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016). However, while acknowledging this slowed progress towards more gender-equal sharing of work-family responsibilities, there is evidence that some couples are achieving greater equality (e.g., Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015; Shockley et al., 2021), leading to questions regarding how, when, and why this might be the case?

To explore this further we argue that it is pertinent to understand family dynamics (Kramer & Kramer, 2021); here specifically daily work-family decision making processes at the couple-level. In order to help us understand such daily practice, we now consider the literature on work-family decision-making, including a consideration of (gendered) family identities, frequently identified as playing a key role in such decisions, before turning to a discussion of decision-making *processes* specifically, drawing on the broader decision-making literature.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work-family decision-making and the influence of family identity

Due to the aforementioned breakdown of 'separate spheres' of home and work, work-family decisions, or more often negotiations with partners, are increasingly complex (Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). Kaufman and Bernhardt (2015: 5) note that "there is limited knowledge about *how* couples arrive at decisions about work and family life". Yet, this is arguably key to understanding how traditional gender roles are maintained or contested and revised. Existing evidence suggests that heterosexual couples' decisions can reinforce gendered beliefs about appropriate behaviour for men and women (Stertz, Grether, & Wiese, 2017), as it is such everyday practices that constitute our realities (Medved, 2004).

Distinctions have been made between different types of work-family events and associated decision making. For instance, Crawford, Thompson, and Ashforth (2019) focus on 'work-life shock events', defined as "disruptive, novel, and critical" events (p. 195) wherein the ways in which work, and family have previously been navigated become untenable, requiring couples to rethink their approach. Radcliffe and Cassell (2014) highlight the importance of two different types of work-family events. Firstly, 'anchoring' events, which involve major life/career decisions (see also Poelmans, 2005), often made at key points in couples' lives, for example where one member of the couple considers taking a promotion, moving jobs, or reducing their working hours. They distinguish these from 'daily' work-family events, where regular work-family conflicts, whether as a result of work interfering with family (WIF) or

family interfering with work (FIW) (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992), require frequent decisions about allocation of resources. For instance, making decisions about who will finish work to collect children, or whether to answer work calls during family time. While it is pertinent to acknowledge the importance of both types of decision-making due to the circular relationship between anchoring and daily decisions, and the way in which they continuously influence one another (see Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014), our focus in the current paper is upon extending understanding of *daily* work-family decision making processes in particular, to examine more regular, routine negotiations at the couple-level, and whether and how they may be contributing to sustaining gender (in)equality.

Greenhaus and Powell (2003) were the first to explore daily work-family decision making, taking an episodic approach (Maertz & Boyar, 2011) to investigate work-family conflict. Here, drawing on responses to vignettes depicting work-family conflicts they highlighted how role salience, the importance of work and family roles in relation to a person's identity, impacted decision making. Powell and Greenhaus (2012) further developed theorising around the impact of identity on decision making by acknowledging that individuals may vary in the ways in which they construe their family identity. Following identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), they refer to meanings' individuals assign to particular social roles (e.g., mother, father) as influencing who they perceive themselves to be, and associated expectations they have of themselves within these roles (Bagger, Li, & Gutek, 2008). Consequently, Powell and Greenhaus (2012) suggest that work-family decisions are likely to be influenced by how family roles are conceived, but also that these decisions are unlikely to be made individually, but rather jointly within dual-earner couples.

Building on these assertions, Masterson and Hoobler (2015) developed a conceptual couple-level typology, proposing that different 'family identity' construals held by individuals together lead to particular 'couple types', explaining how work and care are shared. Specifically, adopting a role-based perspective (Stryker & Burke, 2000), these authors propose that individuals construe family identities (i.e., what it means to be a 'good family member') in two primary ways: 'care-based', where the family role is focused upon providing hands on care; and 'career-based', where the family role focuses on financial provision. Importantly, the authors highlight how individuals may see their family role as encompassing *both* construals simultaneously, referred to as a 'dual-centric family identity'. Masterson and Hoobler (2015) suggest that, in heterosexual dual-earner couples, how each partner construes their family identity *in combination* gives rise to a particular couple type, describing the kinds of work-family arrangements they will enact. They propose five couple types that may emerge: In the first two types, 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' couples, they propose an asymmetric combination of care- and career-based identities, for example 'traditional' couples, where the mother is primary caregiver and the father primary breadwinner, result from the woman holding a care-based identity and the man a career-based identity, while in non-traditional couples, these roles and identities are reversed. In the remaining three couple types, family identities are symmetrical. For example, the 'outsourced couple' resulting from both partners reflecting career-based identities, the 'family-first couple' following care-based identities, and finally the 'egalitarian couple' which is, importantly, theorised to result from both partners holding 'dual-centric identities.'

The propositions of the latter, however, have yet to be empirically explored and contradictions in the literature endure. For example, in recent years men's and women's beliefs regarding family roles have become increasingly egalitarian (Knight & Brinton, 2017), coupled with women's increased attachment to the work domain (Connolly, Aldrich, O'Brien, Speight, & Poole, 2016), and a move towards more involved fathering (e.g., Ladge, Humberd, Watkins, & Harrington, 2015). It may therefore be reasonable to consider that many parents hold dual-centric family identities, suggested to give rise to egalitarian practices wherein shared care is normative (Masterson & Hoobler, 2015). Yet, gender specialisation persists, particularly when children are involved (Kossek et al., 2021; Milkie et al., 2009), raising questions regarding why traditional arrangements continue if dual-centric family identities are central to egalitarian practices. Indeed, Masterson and Hoobler (2015: 85) suggest further research is needed "to untangle the strength and potential interactions of various factors", to better understand decision making processes involved in negotiating daily (non) egalitarian work-family arrangements.

2.2. Couple-level decision-making processes

Despite their significance, our understanding of the specific *processes*, involved in daily decision making at the couple-level remains under-researched (Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Maertz, Boyar, & Maloney, 2019; Poelmans, 2005), particularly when it comes to a focus on patterns of daily practices and decision making processes that may foster gender (in)equality (cf. Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016).

In the broader decision making literature, it is well established that people develop decision making shortcuts when time and data are limited and when similar scenarios arise regularly, and that this can lead to decision making biases (Bazerman & Moore, 2013; Kahneman & Tversky, 1996; Newell & Simon, 1972). Interestingly, in the family communications literature, studies have also, for quite some time, suggested that family decision making is particularly likely to rely on such shortcuts and more implicit, unreflective decision making, as a result of time and information limitations, and regularity of decisions, meaning they are often made quickly and spontaneously (Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1989). More recently, conceptual frameworks in the work-family decision-making literature echo these assertions, suggesting that where stored scripts sufficiently match the experienced event, work-family decisions may be made with little further cognitive effort, potentially relying on more automatic processing (Maertz et al., 2019; Poelmans, 2005; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012). However, to date there is limited empirical evidence regarding how such processes play out in daily practice, and even less consideration of the potentially gendered nature of such scripts, or potential impact of such decision making processes on the maintenance of traditional work-family arrangements. On the latter point, calls for research investigating the role of gendered social norms within these processes have increasingly been called for (Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Poelmans, 2005).

Existing literature on habits highlight how they are acquired through upbringing, often at an unconscious level, therefore infrequently reflected upon, or brought into consciousness (McNay, 1999). Gendered processes are classic examples of unconscious habitus

formation, passed on unconsciously from generation to generation, thereby implicitly informing gendered work-family practices (Lupu, Spence, & Empson, 2018). In a recent study, Lupu et al. (2018) found that men often reproduce traditional family models despite a desire to be more involved fathers by continuing to routinely engage in gendered stereotypical behaviour, reinforcing the status quo. They suggest habitus conditions them to perceive traditional arrangements as the only option, making it difficult for them to imagine viable alternatives.

Cluley and Hecht (2020) conducted one of the few studies exploring daily work-family decision making at the couple level, interviewing couples together and apart about daily routines and practices. They concluded that couples made similar decisions across various situations and that joint family identity construals appeared important in creating *implicit* rules that couples followed. They suggested that future research should explore how different decision making practices influence gender (in)equality and whether there are cognitive heuristics and biases at play, proposing that couples may rely on cognitive shortcuts. Sources of such shortcuts may include an individual's experience of their own parenting (Lupu et al., 2018); from observing others, or from enduring habits formed during parental leave, which in most nations is more frequently taken by women (Grunow, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2012). Once habits are formed, confirmation bias, selectively searching for supporting information and discarding the opposite (Bazerman & Moore, 2013), may also work to maintain established ways of doing things, leading people to become convinced of their own approach, overlooking relevant alternatives and new evidence (Workman, 2012).

Considering the above, it seems plausible that less conscious decision-making processes may play an important role in daily work-family decision making, potentially working to maintain gendered patterns of work-family behaviour. Despite this, the influence of less conscious work-family decisions, biases, and shortcuts on daily work-family decision making and gendered work-family sharing practices is yet to be empirically explored.

2.3. The current study and research questions

Our research has two aims: first, to understand the ways in which individual family identities (often theorised as integral to work-family decision-making) may or may not contribute to the persistence of traditional work-family decision making and thereby arrangements within couples, and second, to theorise the role of less conscious decision-making processes, or 'work-family habits', in this process. This leads us to the following research questions:

RQ1. How do family identity narratives within couples' relate to the persistence of expressed traditional work-family arrangements and decision making?

RQ2. How do work-family decision making experiences and processes unfold in daily practice and what role do less conscious decision making processes play in the persistence of daily reported traditional work-family decision making?

RQ3. How and why do some couples report establishing and maintaining more egalitarian daily work-family decision making, and what role do narrated family identities and less conscious decision making processes play?

3. Method

3.1. Research design

Given the complexity of work-family decision making in practice, qualitative research has been called for to enable better understanding of underlying experiences and mechanisms of such daily processes (e.g., Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Masterson & Hoobler, 2015; Poelmans, 2005). To address these complexities, we adopted an interpretivist approach, concerned with understanding people's first-hand, subjective experiences of particular aspects of their social world and the meanings they attach to phenomena and actions (Duberley, Johnson, & Cassell, 2012; King & Brooks, 2017; Van Maanen, 1979). Here we were particularly concerned with developing an in-depth understanding of meanings and interpretations participants subjectively ascribed to their work and family identities, to daily work-family events, and to their decision making both in retrospect and in situ, in order to enable a description and explanation of daily work-family decisions and behaviours (Van Maanen, 1979). Sometimes these meanings require surfacing as they are not immediately apparent to the respondent. This is a particular strength of qualitative, multi-method research where less conscious processes can be surfaced via a "conversational technology" (Gammack & Stephens, 1994: 76) supportive of participant reflexivity (Cassell, Radcliffe, & Malik, 2020). We therefore utilised interviews and qualitative daily diaries to collect extensive, contextually rich accounts followed by template analysis (King & Brooks, 2017) with the aim of investigating how participants "experience, sustain, articulate and share with others their socially constructed everyday realities" (Duberley et al., 2012, p.21). Conducting in-depth interviews allows engagement in open-ended conversations with participants eliciting rich narratives, with the potential for insights into participants' less conscious thoughts, emotions, and motivations (Cassell et al., 2020). Qualitative diaries compliment interviews by attaining data from participants in the moment, when engaging in routine practices within their natural context, thereby enabling access to more momentary experiences and reflections often less likely to be discussed in retrospect (Radcliffe, 2018). This combination of methods, where daily experiences are reflected on in-depth, both in the moment, and in retrospect, is therefore apt at enabling insights into the less conscious aspects of social interactions and daily practice.

3.2. Researcher positionality

From an interpretivist stance, wherein research is conceived as a detailed, situated, and inherently partial account (Bell & Sengupta, 2021), rather than viewing the researcher as a potential source of bias, it is instead important to acknowledge the active role

researchers play in the research process and the subsequent knowledge produced (King & Brooks, 2017). Accordingly, it is important to situate ourselves in relation to our research (Morrow, 2005).

The research team comprises three authors, all employed full-time, each at different stages of their academic career and lives, and all of whom specialize in qualitative research methods. Specifically, the team comprises of senior, mid-career, and early career researchers, two of whom are parents (one with grown up children and one with school-aged children), and one of whom is not currently a parent. The research team acknowledges a specific attitude towards gender equality, that is, we believe that equality is an important societal goal, and it is with this is mind that we orientated towards this particular focus within the current research. Therefore, we acknowledge our tendency to view gender equality as an issue requiring further attention and improvement. Further, our initial expectations at the start of the research were that work-family identities were more complex than the categorization into dual-centric, career or family-focused, based on the lived experience of two of the authors and based on numerous qualitative research projects previously conducted with parents. The first author, based on her own personal experiences of navigating work and family within a perceived egalitarian partnership, was particularly interested in understanding what constituted such dynamics, while the author currently without child dependents, thereby operating from a relative distance to the subject under study, anticipated that the majority of childcare would still fall on the women, likely based on her broader engagement with gender (in)equality literature.

Hence, we acknowledge that a different combination of personal and academic experiences and motivations could have led to a different specific focus, and different interpretations of the data. In line with an interpretivist perspective, we hold that all knowledge is situated, and our interpretation is not reflective of a singular truth or reality, but rather reflects one possible interpretation (Bell & Sengupta, 2021). Yet it is pertinent to note that given our diverse backgrounds and experiences with the topic of study, we began this research with quite different expectations of work-family decision making and its relationship to gender equality, as a result of our research team representing both insider and outsider viewpoints. This diversity within the research team enabled us to leverage the benefits of both insider and outsider status (Bartunek & Louis, 1996), further assisting an exchange of diverse perspectives and reflections via ongoing and iterative collective reflection and discussions regarding how our own experiences and values might influence the research process (King & Brooks, 2017), examples of which we discuss throughout.

3.3. Sample and recruitment

In accordance with the study's ethical approval, participants were recruited using self-selection and snowball sampling (Saunders & Townsend, 2018). Initially, an information sheet explaining the research purpose, requirements and confidentiality measures was disseminated via parents' groups on LinkedIn and Facebook. Subsequently, snowball sampling was employed to reach further participants willing to engage in the study. Given the specific requirements of the desired population (i.e., dual-earner couples with children wherein both partners are required to participate in the study), and, in particular, in-depth engagement owing to the qualitative, 'shortitudinal' diary element (Spencer, Radcliffe, Spence, & King, 2021) of the research design, this was deemed the most effective way of recruiting the necessary number of participants to enable rich insights into research questions posed (see Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003; Radcliffe, 2013).

Sixty participants took part in the study, comprising thirty heterosexual, dual-earner couples from the UK ($M_{age} = 36$, SD = 5.8), all of whom were responsible for between one and three child dependents, wherein at least one child was of primary school age or younger (range 10 months to 11 years old, $M_{age} = 6$). The sample were predominantly white British (56 participants; the remaining four self-reporting as Asian British, Black British, White and Asian, and White and Black Caribbean) and represented varying occupational backgrounds from both public (47 %; 36 % of which were men, 64 % women) and private (53 %, 63 % of which were men, 38 % women) sectors, with the majority (93 %) broadly classified as holding 'white collar' jobs. This included graphic designers, chartered surveyors, veterinary surgeons, and school teachers. The majority worked full time ($n = 46$; 29 men and 17 women), yet women formed the largest majority of part-time workers ($n = 13$), reflective of employment patterns within heterosexual dual-earner couples across the UK (OECD, 2022). However, both members of the couple working full-time remained the dominant working arrangement in our sample (see Table 1).

Table 1
Couple-level working arrangements.

	Traditional couples ($n = 21$; typical case)	Egalitarian couples ($n = 7$; variant case)	Non-traditional couples ($n = 2$; rare case)
Female FT & Male FT ($n = 16$; typical case)	9 (Couples 3, 4, 5, 13, 18, 19, 20, 26, 27)	6 (Couples 8, 16, 22, 24, 25, 28)	1 (Couple 11)
Female PT & Male FT ($n = 13$; variant case)	12 (Couples 2, 6, 9, 10, 12, 14, 15, 17, 21, 23, 29, 30)	1 (Couple 1)	–
Female FT & Male PT ($n = 1$; rare case)	–	–	1 (Couple 7)

FT = full-time working hours; PT = part-time working hours.

3.4. Data collection

Interview questions were designed by the first and second authors based on a review of the literature on event-based work-family conflict experiences, work-family decision making, and the influence of family identity (e.g., Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Maertz & Boyar, 2011; Masterson & Hoobler, 2015; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014). At this stage, it is important to note that while we were interested in the *factors that influence* work-family decision making (e.g., how particular family identities influence decisions making), we had not yet considered decision making *processes* (e.g., the cognitive processes by which particular decisions are made), nor consulted the broader decision making literature as these avenues were instigated by analysis of our data. Rather, the interview schedules were developed with a focus on how daily work-family events were experienced as well as reasons for adopting particular daily work-family strategies, including an interest in the role of family identity.

Following informed consent, initial interviews were conducted with both members of the couple present in order to engage in interactive discussions about how work and non-work roles are navigated (Bjørnholt & Farstad, 2012). Each initial interview was audio recorded, lasted between 30 and 90 min, and took place in interviewees' own homes. These interviews began with demographic and background questions about work (e.g., job role, industry, working hours) and family (e.g., number and age of children, usual childcare arrangements), and capturing any key 'anchoring decisions' for background context |(|see Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014), before exploring thoughts and feelings about work and family roles (for instance, exploring what these roles meant to them and how they interpreted these roles). Questions then turned to exploring how they generally managed daily work and family demands, and typical work–family challenges, whether these might be challenges in which work interfered with family (WIF) or where family interfered with work (FIW) (Frone et al., 1992). Subsequently, drawing on the critical incident technique (Chell, 1998), couples were asked to provide an example of the last time they experienced a work-family conflict, thereby instigating a decision-making process, with follow-up questions utilised to draw out how and why resolution strategies were decided upon. For instance, once participants had identified a specific work-family conflict, follow-up questions focussed on different options considered at the time, why they did or did not engage with particular options, and how they experienced this process and the resolution.

Given our focus on *daily* work-family decision making we considered that reliance on interview accounts alone may risk discussions being less reflective of daily experiences, thought processes and interpretations in the moment. We, therefore, utilised qualitative diaries to enable us to capture the specifics of work-family events, interpretations, and decision-making in situ (Radcliffe, 2013). Following initial interviews, all participants were given a qualitative, semi-structured, individual diary to keep for a four-week period, wherein each day they were asked to report incidents of work–family conflict (again, including incidents that may be considered as examples of both WIF and FIW) by answering four open-ended questions. First, they were asked to describe the incident, secondly how and why they decided on a particular resolution, thirdly the consequent decisions made, and finally to report any associated practical and emotional implications. We also provided space each day for them to record anything else they deemed relevant.

Diary entries were recorded on around 40 % of observed diary days, which was considered a good response rate. Response rates varied between participants with some recording entries more frequently than others; conflicts and subsequent decisions reported in participant diaries ranging from 3 to 16. Overall, 422 daily decisions were reported across all diary entries. Once participants returned their diaries, a second follow-up interview was arranged, this time with each participant individually, to protect participant privacy following completion of private diaries (see Radcliffe, 2013) and permit potential additional information, perspectives, or experiences that may be more readily expressed without their partner present. Follow-up interviews were unstructured; focused on diary content and reflections on experiences over the preceding four-week period (see Cassell et al., 2020).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed along with diary data.[1] This resulted in approximately 565 pages of diary data and 2910 pages of transcribed interview data, therefore approximately 3475 pages of qualitative data for analysis.

3.5. Data analysis

To analyse these data, we followed procedures of template analysis (TA) (see King & Brooks, 2017), a well-established, highly flexible approach to thematic analysis predicated on hierarchical coding, and well suited to integrating data from different sources. Our analysis was guided by the logic of abduction, whereby the "empirical area of application is successively developed, and the theory is also adjusted and refined" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017, p.4), involving iterations of both deductive and inductive reasoning.

In order to answer our research questions, and attain a more comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of daily work-family decision making, this involved the analysis of individual narratives alongside an exploration of how these experiences contributed to couple-level processes and practices. Examining individual family identities within couples first requires an understanding of each individual's personal family identities, beliefs, and values regarding their family role, and how these relate to work-family decision-making practices. Therefore, incorporating an individual-level element, we were able to explore the diversity of individual identities, and the way in which they influence work-family arrangements and decision-making, as well as the ways in which individuals negotiate their roles and expectations within the couple context. Considering the couple as a unit of analysis was also particularly pertinent, enabling us to understand how the interaction and interplay between partners' expressed family identities contributed to the experience of traditional or egalitarian work-family arrangements, and importantly in enabling us to understand daily decision-making interactions and practices. By incorporating both individual and couple level analyses, we were therefore better

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[1] All participant data were rigorously anonymized in accordance with the study's ethical (IRB) approval (I.e., removal and/or pseudonymisation of any potentially identifying/sensitive information).

able to capture the complexity and interdependence between individual identities and couple dynamics. Our approach recognizes that individuals bring their own values and beliefs into the couple relationship, influencing work-family practices and decision-making, but that such practices and decision-making are inherently relational and therefore require investigation at the couple-level.

For parsimony, we outline our analysis process in stages, highlighting how this process was punctuated with collective reflection points (see Fig. 1).

3.5.1. Stage 1: developing the initial thematic template

Interview transcripts and diary data were read broadly by the first author, enabling data familiarization, immersion, and creation of individual participant and couple-level summaries (King & Brooks, 2017). Subsequently, in line with the procedures of TA, we commenced with development of an initial template. Coherent with the logic of abduction we began with a number of 'a priori' codes (King & Brooks, 2017; see also Birkett, Carmichael, & Duberley, 2017; Michaelides et al., 2023). King and Brooks (2017) recommend use of a priori codes where researchers begin with an interest in a particular element of the phenomena under investigation. In our study this was particularly relevant as we were interested in explaining a 'puzzling case' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2017) regarding persistence of traditional work-family arrangements despite the likely increase of dual-centric family identities (as outlined in Section 2.1.), which required a critical exploration of the extent to which the theorised relationship between family identities and couples' work-family arrangements, played out in daily practice. Specifically, drawing on Masterson and Hoobler's (2015) family identity and couple-level typology, we included initial 'a priori' themes, that represented their three theorised family identity construals[2] and subsequent five, couple-level types,[3] theorised to emerge based on different combinations of individual-level, family identities. Drawing flexibly and critically upon these 'a priori' themes (King & Brooks, 2017) alongside inductive coding (for instance, at this stage early inductively derived codes included a major code of 'other decision making factors' and subcodes such as 'support options available' and 'meaning of work'), the first author began developing the initial template through a close reading of 2 couples' interview transcripts and diary data. This data were combined into a single analytical template to enable data integration (King & Brooks, 2017). This initial phase of coding was predominantly descriptive in terms of highlighting repeating ideas in the data, and focused broadly on exploring daily work-family challenges and how and why these challenges were resolved in particular ways, including the potential role of individual family identities.

3.5.2. Stage 2: refining and developing the thematic template

Following stage 1, case summaries and the initial template were reflected upon by the entire research team. Initially separately, each team member worked through the entire dataset utilizing the initial template to look for positive and contradictory evidence. Together we shared examples of alternative views or discrepancies and engaged in collective reflexion and discussions until agreement was reached. For example, a review of data within an early theme labelled 'support options available' prompted the third author, operating from a relative distance to the topic of study, to question whether support was genuinely (un)available in certain situations, leading to a critical re-examination and further reflections, which initially led to suggestions to relabel this theme as 'preferred support options', interpreting the data as reflecting preferences for types of support. The ensuing discussion initiated further reflections by first and second authors regarding how childcare 'preferences' may be unconsciously gendered, and a subsequent return to literature on parenting norms. These collective reflections, supported by the combination of insider and outsider status within the researcher team, led to another review of the data by all members of the team and laid the foundation for later 'option blindness' and 'gendered competency traps' codes. The analysis process progressed in this way, wherein we regularly compared and contrasted our interpretations of themes and applicability of codes, thereby ensuring reconciliation through discussion to reach consensus (Birkett et al., 2017; Morrow, 2005), thus contributing to the trustworthiness of our analysis (Morrow, 2005).

'A priori' themes were utilised to tentatively align individuals with predominant family identities based on discussions of their family roles during interviews (see Table 2) and to separately group couples to reflect how care was shared across the couple (based on interview and diary data) by drawing on the aforementioned five 'couple-level types' (Masterson & Hoobler, 2015). Importantly, couples were grouped based on daily work-family practices reported, rather than by family identity narratives espoused by each individual within the couple. For instance, couples wherein the woman reported and resolved daily conflicts much more so than her male partner were categorised as 'Traditional', while couples where both partners experienced a similar number of daily conflicts, with each evidently feeling responsible for and involved in a similar number of conflict resolutions, were categorised as 'Egalitarian' (see Table 2 for further details and examples).

In line with the prevalent distinction between decisions that arise from work interfering with family (WIF) or family interfering with work (FIW) within the work-family literature (see Frone et al., 1992; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997), we initially considered coding separately work-family decisions resulting from WIF or FIW due to our familiarity with this in the literature. However, within our data we identified numerous decisions where the directionality was unclear, meaning that assuming that either "work" or "family" was the instigator of a particular event or decision was unnecessarily limiting. Such a categorization implied rigid boundaries between time designated for work and time designated for family, which was not always the case in daily practice as reported by our participants. On consulting the literature to aid our analytical decision making, we found that while research utilizing a work-family conflict 'levels' approach (see Maertz & Boyar, 2011) often implicitly assumes a discernible direction, work-family conflict theory suggests that conflicts can be experienced without immediately recognizing a direction of cause (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), which becomes

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[2] Care-based, career-based, and dual-centric
[3] Traditional couples, family-first couples, outsourced couples, non-traditional couples, and egalitarian couples.
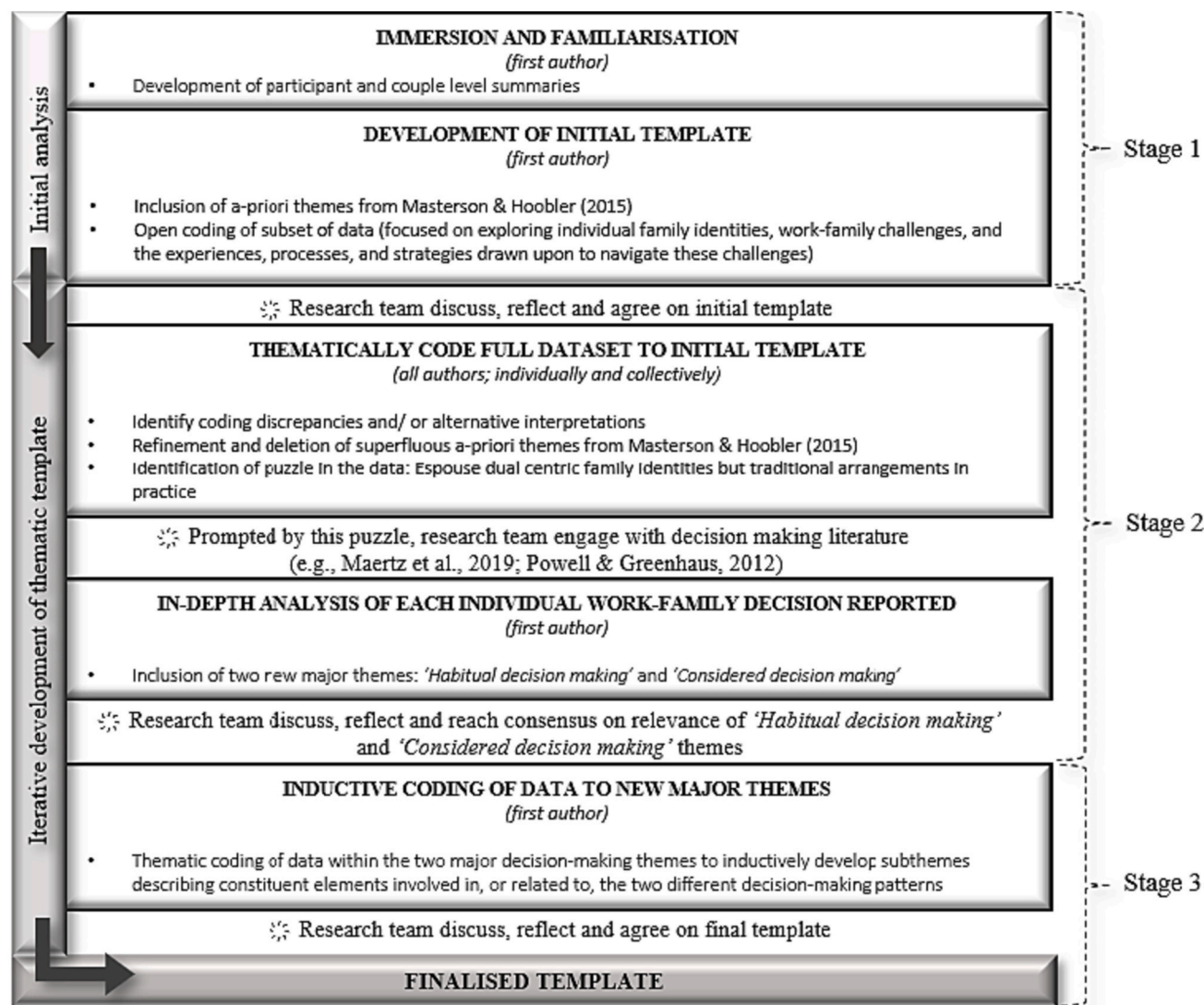
Fig. 1. Three staged analysis process.

Table 2

Final thematic template (coding structure) and illustrative quotes.

Major themes (1st order codes)	Sub-themes (2nd & 3rd order codes)	Evidence (Illustrative quotes)
1. Family identity	1.1 Care-Centric (5 participants; variant case)	17F: "I like to be the one to pick him up and drop him off and even when you're at home you don't usually do you? Because I really want to do it if I can" "I love Lewis more than I care about work" 2F: "Obviously, for me, Fiona is more important than my work…I want to be a good mum to my daughter by spending time with her without rushing. I like hearing about her day and being there if she needs me" 9F: "If I go full-time, I wouldn't be able to always take them to school, so I don't want to have to do that"; "…making things easier for the children and trying to fit around them and make sure they don't miss out on anything first and foremost and then I suppose I have to take work into consideration too"
	1.2 Provider-centric (8 participants; variant case)	17M: "I think Lewis can't have the life we've got unless we've got money coming in, it's as simple as that" "Money is a massive thing" [when talking about his family role] 27M: "[my job] is a big money income for the family…it would not have come up in my head [not to work]" 6M: "I just work to earn money…. [at home] I just do what I can really".
	1.3 Dual-centric (47 participants; typical case)	*N.B. Coded based on **both** above narratives being clearly present in participant interviews and diary entries.* 7M: "[being a good dad is] to bring up your child and offer them support, love, those kinds of things to ensure they will be decent people" "If I get busy, I can always book extra work in at the weekend to support family finances". 2M: "Sometimes the job does have to take priority and the children just have to understand that because it pays the bills"; "I felt guilt and helped her [with her homework]"; "people who can go 5 days without seeing their family…my friend is having problems with his daughter now because he's never been there for her". 4F: "I'd hate not to be able to spend a lot of time with him…I want to be there for all his firsts and us to be close"; "I would have been devastated if I had to [give up work] because I would have felt I would be ruining our future". 8F: "We've always tried to explain to them that the reason we work is so we can afford to do all these things and like we have lots of nice family holidays together"; "I think to be seen as a good role model and make sure they understand you're there for them…I guess trying to have time as a family"
2. Couple-level work-family arrangements	2.1 Traditional arrangements (21 couples,; 42 participants; typical case)	17F: "We've taken on really traditional roles…hadn't thought about it like that before"; "I probably carry all the work-life balance issues in a way". 6M: "…if it's going to take all day it's usually my wife who stays at home". 2M: "She arranges things, I just go along with it. She's very organised". 2F: "I'm the one who does everything really, so he doesn't really have to think about it". 3F: "He just sort of goes to work and comes home and doesn't really get involved". 27M: "She sorts it all out. That's where I really benefit. She does let me concentrate on work, she does more around the house"; "Did no parenting"; "I can free up some time to help now and again but it's rare". *Other indicators: the woman reports & resolves substantially more daily WF conflicts than her partner*
	2.2 Non-traditional arrangements (2 couples, 4 participants; rare case)	7M: "when it comes to our daughter, anytime she's ill or anything it makes sense for me to just stay off because I can…I can be flexible like that"; "I arranged to start my first job at 9:30 am so I could drop her at nursery"; "Picked her up from nursery so made sure I finished work early". 11F: "…he takes more of the responsibility, he's the main carer. It's a personal choice". 11M: "We sat down on Sunday and agreed I would drop our youngest off to football on my way to work…I am able to do flexible hours I was a bit late arriving but that was fine"; "…basically I decided to do what was necessary on the home front…It was important for me to be at home". *Other indicators: the man resolves substantially more daily WF conflicts than his partner*
	2.3 Egalitarian arrangements (7 couples,; 14 participants; variant case)	1M: "…too much responsibility is not placed on one person…in the morning we both get the children ready as it is quite an effort for one person" 1F: "He had taken him to the initial hospital appointment, so I wanted to take him this time and allow him to get a full day's work in". 8M: "We are both prepared to do it together and share things. Basically, I don't think you can afford not to when you both work full-time…so I think it's just about doing things together and sharing things that makes it work". 25M: "She is happy in her career, I'm happy in my career. So, I feel, for us to work as a family or as a unit… I don't think anyone has a particular role". *Other indicators: Both partners are responsible for and involved in resolving daily conflicts; both report a similar number of daily WF conflicts*

Table 2 (*continued*)

Major themes (1st order codes)	Sub-themes (2nd & 3rd order codes)	Evidence (Illustrative quotes)
3. Work-family decision making processes	3.1 Habitual decision making *(21 Couples, 42 participants; typical case)* *3.1.1 Reality blindness*	3M: [During interview] "I might leave work an hour or a couple of hours early to pick him up" [However, in diary entries there was no evidence of this happening, she was the one dealing with all conflicts]. 3F: [During follow-up interview] "He didn't have a lot to put in the diary, so he was a bit worried…He just sort of goes to work and comes home and he doesn't really get involved". 19M: [During interview describing the approach he takes in a WF conflict situation] "…I'd just go to the boss and say my daughter's ill I've got to go. Being with your child has to be your priority." [However, in diary entries it is evident that she is the one who deals with the daily conflicts in practice, seeking her mum's support before his, with his support actually evidenced as a last resort]. Diary, day 15 "when there's nobody else…it's got to be done". *Other indicators: Also evidenced based on a comparison between what was discussed during interviews and presentation and experiences reported in daily diaries.*
	3.1.2 Option blindness	27F: Day 2: [claims his support is not an option/no flexibility] "I probably take more on…to him, there's no option that he can change things", Day 5: [highlights he does actually have some flexibility] "one of his sites is closer to home so, he can just arrange to be at that site if he wants to be home early" 27M: "My wife sorts it all out…her work life has more flexibility and scope to adapt". 21F: "I had to leave work and go and get her…I suppose events kind of informed that decision really because there was just no other course of action."
	3.1.3 Gendered competency traps	18M: "She tells me what's going on…Unless it's written down on the notice board or the calendar, my memory's not a good, and I can never remember what's going on." 17F: "I get everything ready for nursery and sort things out the night before…My husband is like he can't do this; he just wouldn't know what to do." 30F: "It's an unwritten rule that I sort out all her food because I know what she likes… it's quicker and easier"
	3.2 Considered decision making (9 Couples, 18 participants; variant case) *3.2.1 Appreciation of partners work role*	28M: "Sometimes she will have meetings that are more important than what I've got going on." 25M: "As she's in a new role or newish role she tends to vent and ask my opinion…I am also in quite a new role, so we talk about it. She wants to work for another big company, then she wants to work for a small, start-up company. This is her plan, and she could take another step on her plan, so that's a positive for her. And if she's happy doing what she's doing, then that is a positive for me... She is happy in her career, I'm happy in my career. So, I feel, in order for us to work as a family or as a unit… I don't think anyone has any particular role".
	3.2.2 Constant communication	25M: "We talk about work and family everyday…we try to think things through rather than do things for the sake of doing that". 16F: "So whichever one of us speaks to nursery, we'll always then phone each other and let them, you know, let each other know what's going on...he gives me an update, he's in touch with me like 8:00 every morning to let me know, and I do the same…You know, so we're in constant contact". *Other indicators: Also evidenced based on patterns of communication observed across diary entries.*
	3.1.3 Temporally based fairness	1F: "My husband had taken our son to the initial hospital appointment, so I wanted to take him this time and this allowed 1M to get a full day's work in" 1M: "ready to take some more time off when required next time". 25F: "So, for us it's very much, whoever comes home first, they'll put the food on. Um, so it is a real partnership, and it is very much 50/50, so we both do things, um, that are generally considered a male role or a female role."

particularly pertinent when investigating specific events in action. For instance, Poposki (2011) found that the placing of blame when a work-family conflict occurs depends on the order in which events were scheduled, highlighting how the distinction between these two types of conflict can be quite subjective. Based on these considerations we therefore decided not to categorize decisions in terms of directionality in order to reflect this overlap and subjectivity.

Continuing this abductive approach, we utilised 'a priori' themes critically, drawing on this early theoretical framing in a way that enabled us to see more readily the limits of existing understanding (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). For example, further ongoing critical reflection and discussions within the research team regarding initial 'a-priori' themes led to revision of the 'a priori' 'career-centric' family identity code to instead refer to 'provider-centric'. This better reflected narratives in our data focusing on the financial provider element of their family role, not always enacted by those who had, or sought to develop, 'careers'. Similarly, during this process we agreed to delete two 'a priori' couple-level codes, 'family-first' and 'outsourced' taken from the Masterson and Hoobler (2015) framework (see Section 2.1). In the case of the former, no such arrangement was found in our data, whereas in the latter, following ongoing discussion, we agreed that in practice this arrangement aligned more strongly with that of 'traditional' couples in the sense that our data highlighted how organisation of any 'outsourcing' of care was decided upon, organised, and managed by the woman.

Adhering to the procedures of TA, the initial template was therefore modified to better reflect the data as a critical analysis was undertaken across the entire dataset (King & Brooks, 2017).

Through this process of refining the thematic template, it became apparent that dual-centric family identities (Masterson & Hoobler, 2015) were 'typical cases' within our data (see Hill & Knox, 2021[4]), with the majority of participants ($n = 47$), both male and female discussing family narratives highlighting the simultaneous importance of both financial provision and caregiving. However, when grouping couples based on the extent to which they made decisions to share care, here the 'typical case' (Hill & Knox, 2021) was the enactment of traditional arrangements (21 couples, $n = 42$), with couples reporting egalitarian arrangements identified as 'variant cases' (7 couples, $n = 14$) (Hill & Knox, 2021). It was therefore evident that other factors were influencing (non)egalitarian couple arrangements, beyond family identities within couples.

Through ongoing analysis and discussions within the research team regarding such codes, including noting that frequency of communication seemed to be important, our attention was directed to the role of decision making *processes* engaged in when addressing daily work-family challenges, and how they differed between couples enacting traditional arrangements, and those enacting more equitable arrangements. This finding in our data prompted us to examine work-family decision making *processes* in more detail. In line with abduction, we therefore, pursued a new theoretical avenue (Ketokivi & Mantere, 2010), turning to the work-family, and broader decision making process literatures. In particular, suggestions that work-family decisions may entail limited cognitive effort, instead relying on more automatic processing (Maertz et al., 2019; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012), reflected what we were finding in our data, particularly in relation to couples enacting traditional arrangements.

Subsequently, it was agreed that first author would conduct an in-depth analysis of each individual work-family decision reported (in both interviews and diaries), with a focus upon decision making *processes*. This led to the first author proposing new themes, categorising work-family decisions broadly into *'Habitual decision making'*, representing those in which limited reflection or discussion took place and where resolutions were perceived as almost inevitable, and *'Considered decision making'*, where different options were considered in detail, and often together, hence a more considered and deliberate process was engaged in (see Table 2). Again, all members of the research team looked to identify positive and contradictory evidence, and in the same way as described previously, where alternate views were posed, engaging in discussion until agreement was reached.

3.5.3. Stage 3: finalising the thematic template

In the final stage of our analysis and in line with the hierarchical nature of TA, within each of these major decision making themes, the first author then worked through the data to inductively develop subthemes describing constituent elements involved in, or related to, each of these decision making patterns, engaging in regular discussions with the other authors regarding emergent sub-themes, sharing examples, and attaining their perspectives. In doing so we identified habitual decision making as being maintained by three key processes: *option blindness*, *reality blindness*, and *gendered competency traps*. In contrast, by examining decision making processes that were evidently more considered, alongside a broader examination of those couples who were more frequently engaged in such decision making, we found that *continuous communication*, a focus on *temporally based notions of fairness*, and an evident mutual appreciation of the *importance of one another's' employment*, was paramount in enabling less habitual, more considered, daily work-family decision making. The final thematic template is represented in Table 2, and each of the constituent elements are discussed in the findings that follow.

4. Findings

In what follows, we draw upon our above analysis to examine each of our research questions in turn. First, in line with research question one, we explore how family identity narratives within couples relate to couple-level work-family arrangements and how they interact. Second, to answer research question two, we examine how work-family decision making processes unfolded in daily practice and the role played by less conscious processes, conceptualised as work-family habits, in the persistence of expressed traditional work-family decision-making. Finally, to address research question three, we examine how and why some couples manage to maintain more egalitarian work-family practices.

4.1. Untangling the relationship between family identities and couple-level arrangements

We first explored the relationship between participant's family identities and couple-level work-family arrangements in line with research question one. We found that five participants, all women, espoused care-centric family identities, all of whom reported traditional couple-level arrangements. Conversely, eight participants, seven men and one woman, presented provider-centric family identities, and again all reported traditional couple-level arrangements.

However, importantly, the typical case in our data (47 participants) were those evidencing dual-centric family-identities. However, rather than this symmetrical combination of dual-centric family identities necessarily aligning with egalitarian couple-level arrangements, a broad variety of different arrangements were reported. First, we identified two couples (17 & 11) wherein both partners espoused dual-centric family identities, who enacted a non-traditional arrangement, where the man took the role of primary caregiver (cf. Masterson & Hoobler, 2015). These non-traditional arrangements had evidently been instigated by external circumstances. For

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[4] Hill and Knox's (2021) offer coding frequency categories, wherein 'general' case/theme refer to all or all but one participants, 'typical' refers to more than half of participants, 'variant' refers to at least two, but less than half and 'rare' refers to one or two participants.

example, 11 M had experienced health issues, explaining, "…there are medical factors that come into play…I had a serious illness", and 7 M had been made redundant just before their daughter was born. Second, seven of our couples did report couple-level arrangements that resembled an egalitarian, shared care arrangement. These participants emphasised in both their interviews and diaries how care was shared between them. For example, 1F explained how they, "ensure the work is shared and we can both interact with the children before school and nursery" and her partner, reiterated how, "the children see that responsibility is shared between both of us". Within their diaries they also both reported experiencing the same work-family conflicts, collaboratively navigating work and family via ongoing communication, and taking turns to resolve conflicts arising. Such egalitarian arrangements will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.3. Particularly interesting, however, were those couples where both partners presented dual-centric family identities but still presented traditional couple-level arrangements.

4.1.1. The persistence of traditional arrangements despite dual-centric family identities

As outlined in Table 2, dual-centric family identities were typical cases in our data, yet egalitarian arrangements remained rare. Indeed, there were ten couples (20 participants) where both the man and woman emphasised dual-centric family identity narratives, yet enacted traditional couple-level, work-family arrangements. For example, couple 19 made it clear that they each viewed being a good parent as both providing financially for their family *and* being there to provide hands on care. The importance of hands-on care was evident, for instance, when they discussed their daughter being unwell:

> 19F: "…you just think well if you've got the flexibility and she's poorly, I want to be with her while she gets through it."

> 19M: "…I'd just go to the boss and say my daughter's ill I've got to go. Being with your child has to be your priority."

Concurrently, they both stressed that providing financially for their family is also an important part of their family role, often focusing on how work arrangements are based on family financial considerations. For instance, she explained "childcare's expensive" but being able to afford childcare is important to "the way my daughter's growing up…she's very independent". However, within diary entries it became evident that she usually dealt with daily work-family issues, such as their daughter being ill, the school run, or remembering their daughter's needs for the day ahead. For example, when discussing her daughter's doctor's appointments, she explained, "I tend to be the one to do that", and on an occasions where she could not leave work, she concluded, "there's been no one to cover, so I have called my mum", rather than seeking her partner's support. Similarly, he described taking time off work as a last resort, explaining "when there's nobody else…it's got to be done".

This pattern was evident across our couples who both expressed dual-centric family identity narratives yet continued to enact traditional arrangements, particularly in daily diary entries where women tended to report dealing with more work-family conflicts than their partners. It was therefore evident that both members of a couple expressing dual-centric family identities *alone* was not sufficient in terms of achieving egalitarian arrangements in practice, and that other issues were playing a role in the continuation of gendered role specialisation. Accordingly, our findings now turn to consider how work-family decision making processes unfold in daily practice and the differences in daily decision making patterns between couples enacting traditional and egalitarian arrangements. In line with research question two, we first investigate decision making processes within those couples expressing traditional work-family arrangements.

4.2. Beyond identity: exploring work-family habits

When examining the daily decision making patterns of couples, it became apparent that decisions were often made in a habitual way, with limited reflection or discussion taking place, and resolutions perceived as almost inevitable. In particular, we observed three key habitual decision making patterns or biases that appeared to be working to sustain specialisation along gendered lines: reality blindness, option blindness, and gendered competency traps.

4.2.1. Reality blindness

Reality blindness refers to the observation that couples often perceived themselves to be sharing care somewhat equally when retrospectively reflecting on work-family arrangements during interviews, despite evidence to the contrary within diary entries. This retrospective perception of equality prevented more reflexive engagement regarding how they might share more equally. For instance, in their interview couple 15 narrated egalitarian practices, however, even in a discussion in which she is aiming to convey this, alternative interpretations became apparent,

> I think we quite share it a lot. There is no one main parent…but I think we share it 50% it's not like I spend more time with them…Well, I probably take them more often to the nursery and pick them up and I spend maybe a little bit more time with them but definitely the time you spend with them is more quality time because they love him (Laughs).

In their diaries, it was evident that rather than sharing equally, she predominantly reported organising childcare. The following diary excerpt highlights how challenging and exhausting it was for her to do this alone each day, and the effect it had on her work,

> He started work very early so he left before I woke up, this means he cannot help me with the babies, and I am struggling to get them ready on time. I woke up earlier than usual, but still after preparing breakfast, dressing both toddlers, and getting ready myself, I was running late. I was stressed…I felt guilty when pushing them to walk quicker. Since I left nursery later than usual, I got stuck in traffic. I arrived late and everyone seemed disappointed.

He did not report similar experiences nor responsibility for taking their children to and from nursery, despite the rhetoric of somewhat equal sharing presented in interviews. Similarly, when couple 21 discussed daily work-family decision making, he explained,

> I think it was mainly who could easily take a day off…it mainly came down to that. We are just trying to I suppose….at least trying to balance who takes time off work.

However, throughout their diary entries, she predominantly reported taking time off work to care for their daughter. Despite him discussing having greater flexibility, she still reported more days off when their daughter was sick. In this way, couples appeared to fall back into gendered roles without being consciously aware this was happening, highlighting a degree of retrospective, unreflexive blindness to their rather different daily experiences, masking ongoing inequalities.

4.2.2. Option blindness

Another form of blindness permeating decision making accounts was option blindness, where we observed a perception of limited options available when seeking to resolve a work-family conflict. Couple 10 again suggested a more equal system of sharing responsibilities during interviews, reporting that if one of their children was unwell, "we have to just see who draws the short straw really". However, in their diaries it became apparent that she felt responsible for day-to-day childcare and associated planning and organisation, and rarely considered seeking support from her husband as an option to resolve conflicts. For example, on an occasion when the children were unwell, she used her annual leave, presenting this as the *only* option,

> All three of the kids had some kind of bug and they were throwing up and you can't ask a friend to look after them on days like that so I just said I'm going to have to take a day's holiday because *I can't do anything else.*

Similarly, despite working from home a number of times during diary completion, 27 M did not perceive using this flexibility as an option to support work-family conflict resolution, viewing his partner's flexibility as the only option when it came to resolving such conflicts, or as his partner explained, "he couldn't see any other option". A focus on particular options at the expense of others was evidently influenced by gendered parenting norms. For example, 23F discussed how the ideals of her own mother influenced her decision-making processes when their daughter was unwell,

> If they're really poorly I feel…. mum always says, "you want your mum when you're poorly", so I can't really abandon them when they're desperately poorly.

Here her consideration of preferred resolution options is influenced by gendered parenting norms passed on from her own mother, and the role of the father in such situations was absent from the conversation, encouraging an unreflexive blindness to the availability of his support as an option.

4.2.3. Gendered competency traps

Relatedly, our data also highlighted the traps participants fell into with regard to their own, and their partner's, internalised gendered competencies, which had come to act as automatic shorthand for daily work-family decision making. Within couples who enacted more traditional arrangements it was apparent that male partners perceived themselves as less competent in the home domain, as explained by 17M,

> It's a bit like at work, you know when somebody's doing something really well, like she looked into all the Ofsted reports for nurseries…she knows what she wants. All those activities she takes our son to, she'll know what's best, she'll look into it, you know…and that's almost like one person's leading, the other person's…

He framed this as something she is good at, when he explained "…it's not just about traditional roles but who's best….". However, it became apparent that this was influenced by implicit gendered assumptions regarding who was good at tasks in each domain, rather than as a result of each person taking turns actually engaging with these different tasks. In explaining why his wife dealt with the majority of childcare tasks and daily conflicts, he said,

> It is different because you're a bloke and when she's had a year off, and you've basically been trained to work…. she's basically been the primary child carer but then I've done nothing but work, you know you're constantly thinking of work…

Such gendered competency beliefs were also reflected in female's accounts. For example, 30F talked about why she would prefer to take time off work with her daughter if she was sick, and even why she would choose to ask her mum, before asking her partner,

> In some ways I feel I would prefer her to be with my mum if she wasn't well than with my husband, which sounds awful, but I think sometimes you just need a caring womanly touch when you're not very well.

Such gendered parenting beliefs therefore led to reduced feelings of competence due to a lack of routine practice, yet these were instead often interpreted and internalised as being due to 'natural' gendered competencies. These assumptions led to biased decision-making shortcuts that position women automatically and unreflexively as the 'natural' family organiser, resulting in them being predominantly responsible for daily additional labour. Women being perceived as 'naturally' better home organisers and carers influenced men's feeling of competency in this domain, contributing to habitual decision making patterns.

4.3. Establishing & maintaining egalitarian arrangements: considered decision making

Despite the predominance of traditional couple-level arrangements, seven of our couples reported a more egalitarian approach. In addressing research question three, we next turn to examining the daily decision making patterns of these couples to understand how and why some couples manage to establish and maintain more egalitarian practices. We observed three key differences; the shared value placed on one another's work role (but particularly the woman's) and how this influenced daily decision making, continuous daily communication, and a strong focus on time-based notions of fairness.

4.3.1. Appreciation of partners work role guiding decision making

Firstly, for those whose arrangements were more egalitarian, it was apparent that both members of these couples valued and understood one another's work role. In particular, there was evident value placed on the woman's employment, whereby she greatly valued her own employment, but equally her partner appreciated and understood the importance of her work, and this was considered in daily decisions. For instance, 1F described the importance of her job as a social worker,

> My role in the council is something that I enjoy so it's important because I love that job…I can't not turn up…there are a lot of people relying on you.

In his diary, her husband also acknowledged the importance of her job, and this evidently influenced daily decisions. For instance, he explained that "her priorities were more important as there was no cover at her workplace…I felt no guilt". This value was not financially based, but rather involved both partners conceiving of the female's work role as adding value in other ways, such as societally. For instance, 28 M discussed his partner's job as more important than his own in terms of her having "real meaning in her job whereas mine is more just about making money". Value placed on, and an understanding, of female partners' employment evidently encouraged egalitarian daily decision-making.

4.3.2. Continuous communication

Daily patterns of continuous communication were another key distinction observed in the diaries of more egalitarian couples. For example, couple 28 regularly reported, "we discussed what we were going to do the next day" and talked about having, "a great, detailed conversation" or "a long discussion to try to figure out the best way forward". 25F also explained how "it's not just about updating the diary and then not speaking to each other" but rather "constantly communicating throughout the day so we are both aware". Similarly, in the diary entries of couple 1 they were in regular contact throughout each day to decide who would pick the children up and who would prepare dinner. For example, 1 M reported:

> Spoke to my wife at 4pm to check who was best placed to pick up the children …spoke to her again later, at 4:45pm and she was to stay later at work so could only pick the two kids up from school and I was to pick up the youngest from nursery.

Each decision was clearly deliberate and negotiated rather than based on implicit assumptions, which, as observed within traditional couple arrangements, were often underpinned by gender-based assumptions. This constant communication meant both parties were frequently aware of one another's specific work pressures and commitments, as well as any conflicts experienced, rather than any one individual automatically resolving these alone.

4.3.3. Temporally based fairness and patterns of turn-taking

The final key distinction observed in the diaries of couples reporting egalitarian practices was a dedication to temporally grounded notions of fairness, where fairness was perceived as sharing tasks in a temporally equal manner, thereby turn-taking, rather than specialising by dividing tasks along gendered lines. Such temporally based fairness considerations were evident when 8 M talked about how they managed school holidays,

> We discussed what leave we would be taking on which days around our work commitments to make sure we could spend some time with the boys. She decided to take Tuesday off, we would both go into work on Wednesday, I would take Thursday off and we would both have the day off together on Friday. It was a joint decision and worked out well for all of us.

Couple 8 also shared the daily morning routine together, getting their sons ready and travelling into work together, dropping their sons off on the way. Similarly, couple 1 also talked about sharing the morning routine. For instance, he explained in his diary how "we both get the children ready as it is quite an effort and too much for one person" and later reflected on how "the children see that responsibility is shared between both of us and we both learn about their coming day and can set them up for it". This time-based, turn-taking approach mitigated blindness, increasing available information, for instance regarding children's daily routines, requirements, and associated challenges, upon which to base future decisions. It ensured both members of a couple were practiced in routine childcare and organisation, holding a shared understanding and mutual appreciation of what was involved. This further strengthened their focus on temporal fairness and turn-taking, moving away from implicit notions of gender-based competencies, instead engaging in more effortful and deliberate consideration each time a work-family decision was made.

5. Discussion

The current research makes three key contributions to the work-family literature. Firstly, participants' reported experiences suggest a relationship between family identity dynamics within couples and work-family decision-making, thereby empirically building upon,

Masterson and Hoobler's (2015) conceptual framework. Our findings suggest a mismatch between participants' family identities and daily couple-level arrangements. By drawing on qualitative diary data, we were able to highlight how, despite many of our participants expressing dual-centric family identities, only in rare cases did couples report achieving something close to egalitarian arrangements in daily practice. Here we illustrate how both members of a couple holding dual-centric family identities appeared to be necessary for more egalitarian couple-level arrangements, but not sufficient alone to ensure such daily egalitarian practices (cf. Masterson & Hoobler, 2015).

Secondly, we extend work-family decision making theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Maertz et al., 2019; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010, 2012; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014), responding to calls to further understanding of work-family decision making *processes* (e.g., Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Maertz et al., 2019) by introducing the concept of 'work-family habits' and developing a novel framework depicting different work-family decision making processes engaged in by dual-earner couples. We reveal the important role work-family habits play in daily decision making as well as highlighting the ways in which they may contribute to the persistence of traditional, gendered work-family decisions. Just as existing research on decision making has high-lighted the tendency to rely on cognitive shortcuts or predefined scripts (Gioia & Poole, 1984; Newell & Simon, 1972), we identified that our couples often relied on such shortcuts when making daily work-family decisions. Specifically, we uncover how work-family habits were sustained by three key decision making biases or traps (Kahneman & Tversky, 1996) operating at the couple-level; reality blindness, option blindness, and gendered competency traps (see Fig. 2). Here, we note how these biases, and thereby habitual work-family decision making, may contribute to and be sustained by maternal gatekeeping behaviours, where mothers, consciously or unconsciously, impose some degree of restriction on fathers' involvement in childcare tasks (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2015) and decision-making (Hauser, 2012). Gendered competency traps may be sustained in part by maternal gatekeeping behaviours, reducing fathers' routine practice and leading to perceptions of fathers as less competent in this domain. This could contribute to option blindness, where father's support is not perceived as an option, potentially resulting in them being excluded from decisions altogether.

Our data suggests that all three biases worked together to maintain habitual decision making based on limited information, reducing daily effortful processing (Newell & Simon, 1972; Poelmans, 2005). Given that processes unfolding within the family are a recognised obstacle to achieving gender equality in the workplace and career progression (e.g., Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016; Williams & Williams, 2010), our findings respond to calls to better understand how different decision making practices influence gender (in) equality (e.g., Cluley & Hecht, 2020). Extending recent research (e.g., Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Masterson & Hoobler, 2015), we highlight how habitual decision making processes may surpass dual-centric family identities, inadvertently leading to enacting traditional ar-rangements, wherein women shoulder the burden of care. As noted in previous literature, this is important as gender role specialisation has been found to harm women's professional participation and career advancement (Ashman et al., 2022; Thébaud & Pedulla, 2016; Yavorsky et al., 2015).

Thirdly, we further extend work-family decision making theory (Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Greenhaus & Powell, 2003; Maertz et al., 2019; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010, 2012; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014) by revealing daily decision making patterns constitutive of egal-itarian work-family practice. This enables important new insights regarding how persistent work-family habits may be broken at the couple-level. In particular, our findings suggest three key practices evident within couple's diaries where care tasks were shared more
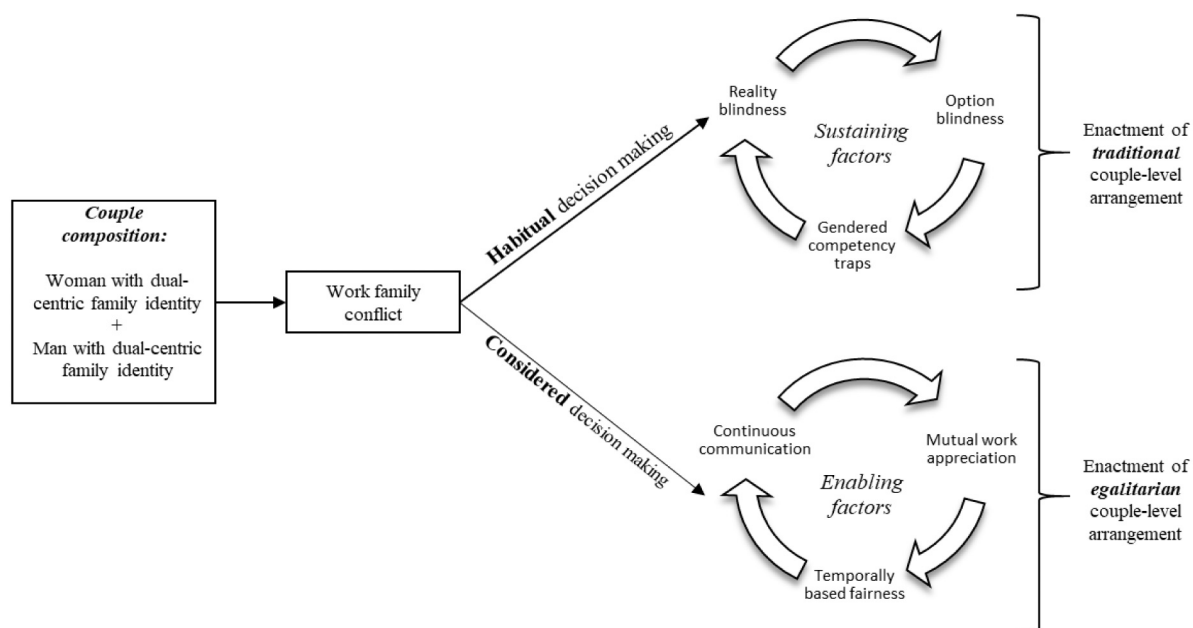

Fig. 2. Framework depicting habitual and considered work-family decision-making processes.

equally; a mutual appreciation of one another's (although particularly the woman's) work role and career, continuous daily communication, and a keen focus on temporal notions of fairness. As with the work-family habit cycle discussed above, these three practices appeared to be mutually constitutive, reinforcing one another (see Fig. 2), but here in a way that enabled increased availability of information on which daily work-family decisions were based, thereby overcoming common decision making traps (Bazerman & Moore, 2013). In line with earlier assertions in family communication studies that any disruption to routine interactions will promote more explicit and reflective discussions (Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1989), Maertz et al. (2019) posit within their conceptual framework, that it is when novel situations arise for which no scripts exist, that we may see more conscious, deliberate work-family decisions. Here, our findings suggest that couples engaged in egalitarian work-family arrangements may do so by treating each situation as novel to some extent and engaging in ongoing deliberation and information sharing with one another, thereby considering a broader range of potential options and solutions, rather than relying on pre-determined scripts.

It is important to note that decision making biases revealed in the current study are evidently informed and maintained by broader gendered social norms highlighted in existing literature as influencing individuals' family identities (e.g., Gregory & Milner, 2009; Lupu et al., 2018). Work-family experiences and decision making within dual-earner couples does not occur in isolation from the social systems in which they are embedded, impacted by organisational and societal processes working to constrain or facilitate more egalitarian work-family practices (Kossek et al., 2021). However, here the experiences of our participants suggest that work-family habits may be an important linking mechanism, informed by broader societal norms, but working to maintain gendered norms as part of individuals' daily practices and identities. By increasing awareness of couple-level patterns that reinforce or breakdown inequality we can start to consider ways to encourage more daily egalitarian couple-level arrangements.

5.1. Limitations and future directions

Here we focused on *daily* work-family decision-making, but we expect similar decision making habits may be important when couples make *anchoring* decisions (Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014). Future research should explore this in more detail, particularly as we find, in agreement with other studies (e.g., Cluley & Hecht, 2020; Radcliffe & Cassell, 2014), that daily decisions, habits and routines are framed by anchoring decisions. For instance, in our data, where couples had previously made the anchoring decision that the woman should work part-time at the point of having children, in most cases this did indeed, perhaps unsurprisingly, appear to influence daily decision making and the extent to which care was shared. Consequently, those women who had moved to part-time working following children, often experienced and reported resolving more daily work-family conflicts with less engagement of their male partner, thus contributing to more traditional daily patterns of decision making. However, of the sixteen couples in which both members worked full-time within the current study, there remained nine couples (18 participants) who still described traditional, daily work-family decision-making. This is in line with previous literature highlighting that even when women work similar or longer hours than their male partners, they continue to engage in more unpaid labour at home (e.g., Kitterød & Rønsen, 2012; Lyonette & Crompton, 2015). This suggests that both partners working full-time does not necessarily lead to egalitarian sharing at home and here we shed light on the importance of considering the role of daily work-family habits. Conversely, there was one couple in our study in which the female partner worked part-time, and the male partner worked full-time hours (couple 1), but who still narrated daily egalitarian practices. Based on our interview data we learned that at the point of having their first child, both members of this couple made the anchoring decision to make changes to their work to better accommodate childcare; he moved to a more flexible, public-sector role, and she reduced her working hours. In this case, we might tentatively suggest that either both or neither member of a couple making anchoring decisions to amend their work roles in order to accommodate family, rather than only the woman doing so, may be more conducive to future daily egalitarian decision making practices via increasing information availability upon which to make daily decisions and thus weakening the propensity for work-family habits. However, further research is needed to explore such potential, complex relationships between anchoring decisions and daily work-family habits.

Relatedly, it would also be interesting to explore the nuances of conversations and negotiations occurring at such key transition points, for instance, at the transition to parenthood, or surrounding work-life shock events (Crawford et al., 2019), to investigate whether and how option blindness, reality blindness and perceived competency traps may play a role in anchoring decisions, whether other biases may operate when such decisions are made, or whether such events, wherein there is a disruption to usual routines, encourages more considered decision making (Maertz et al., 2019; Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1989).

Further, while the framework proposed by Masterson and Hoobler (2015) and other studies investigating identity in the work-family literature (e.g., Bagger et al., 2008; Powell & Greenhaus, 2012) focus on the importance of *family* identities in understanding couple's work-family choices, our findings suggest the potential importance of couple-level *work* identities, particularly in relation to the way in which both members of a couple conceptualise the woman's work identity. A focus on diverse ways in which people may conceptualise work identities has been discussed extensively in broader organisational literatures (e.g., Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997) but has not been considered in such depth in relation to work-family decision making.

In the spirit of our methodological approach, the aim in this study was to better understand the lived, daily subjective experiences of our participants, here heterosexual dual-earner couples managing work and family. Future research could therefore explore the transferability (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our findings to other samples and contexts. For example, a limitation of the current study is that our participants were predominantly white, middle-class couples, working in white collar jobs and it is therefore important to contextualise the current findings in light of this. In addition, our focus is on couples who live together with their biological children. However, in recent decades we have observed increasing family heterogeneity, with a rising number of lone-parent and blended families, constituting complex work-family arrangements (Radcliffe, Cassell, & Malik, 2022; Schaefer, Gatrell, & Radcliffe, 2020).

Future research could examine work-family decisions in diverse families, particularly considering early suggestions that remarried couples may be more egalitarian and may also engage in more conscious, deliberate decision making due to the complexity and relative novelty of their daily family arrangements (Sillars & Kalbfleisch, 1989). Further, it would be interesting to understand more about how, why, and which kinds of work-family decision making processes are established by same-sex couples, and the extent to which this is based on habitual as opposed to more considered decision making. Existing research indicates that same-sex couples divide household labour and parenting tasks more equally (e.g., Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, 2012) and future research unpicking daily decision making processes involved in developing and maintaining such egalitarian sharing would be particularly interesting.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, our findings suggest that traditional work-family decision making may often persist regardless of family identities held by individuals within couples due to work-family habits based on internalised gender roles, which reduce daily information overload and effortful processing. We highlight specific biases that can work to maintain work-family habits, while also revealing daily practices that may work to break these habits by increasing available information upon which to make more considered work-family decisions. We argue that, while the daily decision making required to encourage egalitarian arrangements may be more effortful, this is key to improving gender equality and a real freedom of choice regarding career and family engagement for both men and women.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Laura Radcliffe: Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Project administration. **Catherine Cassell:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Supervision. **Leighann Spencer:** Validation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing, Visualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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