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# Making it work as a working mother: The role of paradox mindset in positive appraisal of working motherhood tensions

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**Abstract**

A prolific body of research on work-family interface documents the simultaneous, yet conflictual demands women face in fulfilling their roles as a career woman and a mother. However, little is known about how women cope with these contradictory tensions associated with working motherhood. This is important as many working women may decide to postpone motherhood to avoid the accompanying tensions. In this light, the current research leverages on the burgeoning literature on paradox management to investigate the role of a paradox mindset in positively appraising tensions to motivate dual career-motherhood endeavors. In positively appraising career-motherhood tensions, a paradox mindset is argued to encourage dual goal pursuits via two possible paths – *acceptance* and *appreciation* of these tensions. Findings underscore appreciation of tensions as an important aspect of positive appraisal that explains how a paradox mindset can be harnessed to encourage the simultaneous pursuit of career aspirations and motherhood. Specifically, findings of a correlational study on working females provide evidence that a paradox mindset promoted intention for dual career-motherhood pursuits via appreciation of tensions, albeit not via acceptance of tensions.

*Keywords:* Tensions; paradox mindset; work-family conflicts; positive appraisal

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**Introduction**

Despite the shift from male-breadwinner to dual-earner households, the disproportionate division of childcare tasks persists (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010), with women still shouldering primary caregiving duties. As mothers, women are expected to devote all their time, attention, and effort to care for their children (Christopher, 2012; Paré, 2016). However, this widely-held intensive mothering ideology seems to be in conflict with the normative expectations pertaining to the ideal worker. As good workers, people are expected to be whole-heartedly committed to their employer or company at the expense of their family or other non-work obligations (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Turner & Norwood, 2013).

Clearly, as the ideal mother "cannot divide her attention, energy, or time between paid work and her children" (Paré, 2016, p. 27), the role combinations of being a worker and a mother are associated with seemingly incompatible role expectations and demands that can spark considerable tensions for working mothers (Williams, Suls, Alliger, Learner, & Wan, 1991). As the hegemonic influence of these expectations and ideologies pervades different aspects of life (Crowley, 2014), most career-minded women have to confront the choice between their career and motherhood goals (Dex & Joshi, 1999). Similarly, as the role attributes associated with the ideal mother stereotype contradict those associated with the ideal worker stereotype (Hodges, Park, & Smith, 2013), many working women experience conflicts in shouldering the dual responsibilities of work and motherhood.

As a professional, the ideal worker exemplifies competence-related behaviors (e.g., being assertive), whereas as a nurturer, the ideal mother epitomizes warmth-related behaviors (e.g., being affectionate). Since warmth and competence are often viewed to be opposing attributes (Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005), working mothers face apparent contradictory behavioral expectations. For example, research has suggested that while

working mothers are viewed as more professionally competent, they were also perceived as less dedicated to their families as compared to non-working mothers (Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990).

From a social role theory perspective, career-motherhood tensions can be conceptualized as a form of inter-role conflict that emerges from these seemingly competing role demands (i.e., energy, time, and behavioral expectations) of being a career woman and a mother (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Page, 2013). Whereas work-family conflict generally reflects the competing demands and pressures associated with work and family (e.g., wife) roles, career-motherhood tensions specifically captures the conflicting expectations associated with being a career woman and a mother.

How do women cope with the contradictory demands associated with working motherhood? For women who view these tensions as dilemmas that require trade-offs (Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011), they may 'opt-out' of employment to stay home and raise their children (Dillaway & Paré, 2008; Percheski, 2008). Alternatively, they may decide to pursue their career ambitions by postponing parenthood (Matysiak, 2009; Simoni, Mu, & Collins, 2017; Tobío, 2001). Besides such either/or strategies, women may adopt a middle-ground approach (see Leung, Liou, Miron-Spektor, Koh, Chan, Eisenberg, & Schneider, 2018) by scaling down their paid employment. By adjusting their career aspirations away from full-time employment to part-time employment, women can remain somewhat economically active while caring for their children (Baird & Burge, 2018; Booth & Van Ours, 2008).

Nevertheless, resolving competing work and family demands by making such work-related concessions comes at the expense of their career prospects and occupational choices (Budig & England, 2001; Tomlinson, 2004; Webber & Williams, 2008). For example, despite the joys of at-home parenting, stay-at-home mothers often lament over unfulfilled career

aspirations (Stone, 2007). While working part-time may afford women more time and energy to care for their children (Amstad et al., 2011; Higgins, Duxbury, & Johnson, 2000), many mothers involved in part-time work nevertheless express disappointment in missing career advancement opportunities (Webber & Williams, 2008). To address these negative feelings, they may decide to emotionally detach from or deny their career passions while focusing their time and efforts to take care of their children (Johnston & Swanston, 2007).

As the career ambitions of the modern working women continue to soar (Tajlili, 2014), there has been increasing interest in studying how women can reconcile these tensions and integrate their work and family roles more seamlessly (Hilton, 2016; Slaughter, 2012). How can working mothers thrive with tensions and turn this challenge into opportunities? The present research sets out to address this timely and important question.

Management research on organizational tensions has illuminated the importance of applying a paradox lens (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). Such studies accentuate how competing demands (e.g., cooperation vs. competition, autonomy vs. flexibility; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) can be fruitfully conceptualized as paradoxes that comprise of seemingly "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, pp. 382). Towards this end, the current research uncovers the value of a paradox mindset in reconciling career-motherhood tensions to motivate dual goal pursuits so that women can reap the rewards and mitigate the costs of working parenthood.

A *paradox mindset* encourages individuals to accept and appreciate tensions (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018). By shaping the way women make sense of and interpret tensions surrounding working motherhood, a paradox mindset motivates them to simultaneously pursue their career and motherhood aspirations. Instead of polarizing full-time employment and motherhood into either/or choices, a paradox mindset encourages women to view career-motherhood tensions as paradoxes and to adopt both/and strategies. As

such, it is argued that women can leverage a paradox mindset to fruitfully reconcile their seemingly incompatible roles as a mother and a career woman via positive appraisal of tensions (i.e., *acceptance* of tensions and *appreciation* of tensions).

**Motivating Dual Career-Motherhood Pursuits with a Paradox Mindset**

Working motherhood is replete with dialectical tensions (Couture & Johnson, 2011; Toffoletti & Starr, 2016) since the roles of working and mothering are associated with contradictory norms, demands, and pressures. As such, the simultaneous pursuit of career and motherhood goals may be daunting to many working women. With limited personal resources such as time and effort (De Sousa, Peterman, & Reeve, 2018) to fulfill dual demands of work and childcare, the tensions of seemingly contradictory demands of full-time employment and motherhood increasingly gain salience (Grady & McCarthy, 2008).

In spite of profound shifts in work and family roles, many college educated women still hold beliefs that full-time employment interferes with motherhood (Goldberg, Kelly, Matthews, Kang, Li, & Sumaroka, 2012). This perceived incompatibility of work and motherhood demands leads women to exaggerate the harmful effects of full-time work on the child's development (Goldberg & Lucas-Thompson, 2014). These deeply entrenched normative beliefs of work-family incompatibilities (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017) also foster attitudinal ambivalence towards the prospect of working motherhood (McDonald, Bradley, & Guthrie, 2005). Hence, when career and motherhood are conceived as competing endeavors., women are driven to view trade-offs between being a career woman and a stay-at-home mother (Laney, Carruthers, Hall, & Anderson, 2014). To cope with these anticipated career-motherhood tensions, such women adopt either/or strategies that discourage the simultaneous pursuit of career and motherhood goals.

How can women cope with these tensions more effectively? As "the problem is not the problem; the problem is the way you think about the problem" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008,

p. 227), the answer lies in how working women conceive the dual demands of employment and childcare plays a pivotal role in how they make work-family decisions. Whereas perceptions of incompatibility can pose as dialectical dilemmas to working mothers in managing the contradictory role pressures of being a mother and a worker, it can also be promisingly conceived as paradoxes.

The conceptualization of career-motherhood tensions as paradoxes envisages the simultaneous coexistence of competing demands as contradictory, yet interdependent (Schad et al., 2016). Working mothers often find themselves in a double bind – they are viewed negatively if they pursue one role, they are also viewed negatively if they pursue another role. This double bind reflects the seemingly contradictory yet intricately interwoven nature of paid work and family life (Schultheiss, 2006). If they espouse the ideal norms as a career woman, their complete dedication to work responsibilities impedes on their mothering abilities; if they embrace the ideal norms as a mother, their devotion to domestic and childcare commitments curtails their career potential (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016).

A paradox mindset compels women to accept these contradictory demands by viewing them as simultaneously possible (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). By encouraging women to embrace these tensions comfortably, a paradox mindset inspires them to confront the challenges surrounding working motherhood with confidence (Smith & Berg, 1986). Instead of feeling threatened by these tensions, a paradox mindset emboldens women to pursue dual career-motherhood goals.

Notably, although work and motherhood demands appear distinct and oppositional, they can inform and enrich each other. As the resources gained in one role can be reinvested in other roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), experiences in one role can benefit experiences and performance in another (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). For example, work experiences can foster positive parenting styles that benefit the child's development (see Kim &

Wickrama, 2014). Likewise, mothering experiences of working women can add value to their professional lives (Greenhaus & Singh, 2004). Studies have demonstrated that childcare experiences can improve female managers' leadership competencies such as patience (Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002).

Thus, as each life role is nested within a web of other mutually connected life roles (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Flum & Blustein, 2000), it is important to understand how this interdependence informs and impacts women's decisions to participate and invest in work and family roles. While acceptance of the conflictual aspects involved in managing work and motherhood is important, the potential for these roles to be meaningfully integrated in ways that can complement each other should not be overlooked (Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005). By recognizing the potential value in engaging both seemingly conflicting demands, a paradox mindset spurs women to harness the benefits of managing such demands (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018).

In-depth interviews with married mothers underscore the value of considering mutually enriching possibilities associated with work and motherhood (Johnston & Swanson, 2007). While most full-time employed mothers were unable to reconcile the tensions between motherhood and work, some women managed to integrate their seemingly contradictory roles "such that contradiction no longer existed [insisting that] employment made them better mothers" (Johnston & Swanson, 2007, p. 457). These findings lend credence that a paradox mindset can promote dual career-motherhood pursuits by bringing forth a sense of positive interdependence between employment and motherhood. Through positive appraisals of mutually enriching opportunities, the adoption of a paradox mindset can foster deep appreciation for the intricate interdependencies of dual career-motherhood endeavors.

In light of these possibilities, it is reasoned that for working women to discover the benefits and mitigate the harm of these anticipated tensions, it is important for them to *accept*

the contradictory nature of work and childcare demands as well as *appreciate* the possibilities

for mutual enrichment. It is only when women embrace and integrate the dualities of working

motherhood can they unearth valuable opportunities to effectively reconcile these tensions

(Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis, & Tracey, 2017).

In response to increasing calls for studying the nuanced processes of how people

interpret and approach paradoxes (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), the current research

elucidates the mechanisms of how a paradox mindset helps working women navigate career-

motherhood demands. Specifically, it is argued that a paradox mindset encourages intention

for dual career-motherhood pursuits via positive appraisal of tensions that pertains to two

psychological mechanisms – acceptance of tensions and appreciation of tensions (Figure 1).

On the one hand, the *acceptance path* involves viewing these contradictory demands as

simultaneously possible (Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012). The comfortable

acceptance of career-motherhood tensions reduces anxiety and feelings of incompatibility,

thus energizing individuals to seek out integrative both/and possibilities (Tian & Smith,

2014). On the other hand, the *appreciation path* extends beyond conceiving work and family

roles as mutually constraining to recognize how the involvement in one role can benefit or

even enable the other. By acknowledging rewarding mutual enrichment possibilities in

combining employment and motherhood, women recognize dual career-motherhood pursuits

as more beneficial than pursuing only one goal, thus encouraging them to simultaneously

invest in their careers and motherhood (Beckman & Houser, 1979). Building on these

arguments, I hypothesize that:

> *Hypothesis 1:* A paradox mindset is positively associated with the intention to
>
> pursue dual career-motherhood goals.

*Hypothesis 2:* Acceptance of career-motherhood tensions mediates the

positive relationship between the adoption of a paradox mindset and dual

career-motherhood pursuit intentions.

*Hypothesis 3:* Appreciation of career-motherhood tensions mediates the

positive relationship between the adoption of a paradox mindset and dual

career-motherhood pursuit intentions.

Integrating these hypotheses, the current research uncovers the value of a paradox

mindset in motivating working females' intention to pursue working motherhood via positive

appraisal that encompasses acceptance and appreciation of career-motherhood tensions

(Figure 1).

## Overview of Research

Working women's decision to have children is often complicated by the demands that

emanate from multiple life roles (O' Laughlin & Anderson, 2001). For instance, work

commitments can interfere with caring and nurturing responsibilities. Coupled with concerns

of motherhood bias in the workplace (see Aranda & Glick, 2014), women may be dissuaded

to pursue working motherhood. As such, it is important to understand how working women

plan work and family roles. In this light, the present research examines how working women

can leverage a paradox mindset to reconcile the challenges of working motherhood.

To offer evidence for the dual mediational account of paradox mindset in facilitating

the pursuit of dual career-motherhood goals, the current study draws on a correlational design

with a sample of working women. In the study, participants were asked to complete items

assessing individual differences in the adoption of a paradox mindset, positive appraisal (i.e.,

acceptance of tensions and appreciation of tensions), dual career-motherhood pursuit

intentions, and other control variables. Mediational analyses were conducted to test the

hypothesized model.

**Participants and Procedures**

Participants were recruited from the Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform for US$1.

Eligible participants are female who is engaged in full-time employment and does not have a

child. A total of 196 responses were collected, but one response was removed as the

participant provided incomplete data. Furthermore, considering the substantial decline in

fertility with increasing age, 68 participants were removed from the final analysis because

they are above 40 years old. The dramatic demographic shift favoring delayed childbearing

has contributed to the infertility epidemic (Friese, Becker, & Nachtigall, 2006). Despite the

availability of increasingly sophisticated reproductive technologies, attempts to conceive

through assisted reproduction are often met with little success especially for women aged 40

and above (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2005). Interviews with

first-time parents after age 40 revealed that they commonly experienced conception

difficulties associated with age-related infertility despite reproduction technologies, as well as

their retrospective views that having children is optimal during their 30s (Mac Dougall,

Beyene, & Nachtigall, 2012). As the current research examined females' intention to pursue

motherhood, it is important to take into account the objective and perceived dramatic decline

in conception success after the age of 40. Therefore, only heterosexual working women aged

40 and below were included in the data analysis.

The final sample comprised of 127 working women ($M_{age} = 30.15$, $SD_{age} = 4.59$) of

which 89 were married. We continued data collection until the Mechanical Turk platform

was unable to further increase the sample of participants that met the selection criteria even

prolonging the time for allowing more participants to take part in the study.

A majority of participants held an undergraduate or postgraduate degree (52.0%

Bachelor's degree, 15.7% Master's degree, 7.1% Doctorate degree). The mean length of

work experience was 10.16 years ($SD = 5.66$). Participants were informed that the study

investigated their feelings, mindset, and choices surrounding work and family planning.

The online questionnaire started with items assessing the individual differences in

paradox mindset. Next, participants responded to scales measuring positive appraisal (i.e.,

acceptance of tensions and appreciation of tensions), and dual career-motherhood pursuit

intentions. The questionnaire also included a measure of childbearing attitudes as a control

variable. At the end of the survey, participants completed an honesty check measure. Prior to

answering these measures, participants were reminded of their status as a full-time working

female who currently does not have children.

**Measures**

The following measures were administered in the order presented. The verbatim pool

of items is presented in the Appendix. Unless otherwise stated, all items were administered

on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *Strongly disagree,* 7 = *Strongly agree*).

***Paradox mindset.*** Individual differences in endorsing a paradox mindset were

assessed through statements such as "When I consider conflicting perspectives, I gain a better

understanding of an issue" and "Tension between ideas energize me" (9 items taken from

Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; α = .90).

***Positive appraisal of career-motherhood tensions.*** Next, participants responded to

items measuring positive appraisal (i.e., acceptance of tensions and appreciation of tensions).

This measure was developed for the purpose of the current study to unpack the psychological

consequences of adopting a paradox mindset. The result of the confirmatory factor analysis

on this newly developed two-factor positive appraisal scale will be reported in the next

section.

Positive appraisal of tensions scale comprises of acceptance and appreciation of

tensions. Sample items assessing acceptance of tensions include "I accept that there are

contradictory work-motherhood demands" and "I recognize that mothering responsibilities could interfere with my work commitments" (6 items). Sample items assessing appreciation of tensions are "Working motherhood presents opportunities for me to excel because having a career can make me a better mother" and "I can make a better mother if I have a career" (4 items).

   ***Dual career-motherhood pursuits.*** To measure intent to engage in dual career-motherhood pursuits, participants rated their agreement with statements such as "I aspire to be a full-time working mother" and "I feel that I can pursue my career and motherhood at the same time" (5 items adapted from Battle & Wigfield, 2002; $\alpha = .86$). The dual career-motherhood pursuits score was formed by aggregating these items, with higher scores reflecting a greater likelihood to pursue dual career-motherhood goals.

   ***Childbearing attitudes.*** To account for individual differences in childbearing preferences, participants responded to items such as "I look forward to having children" (2 items taken from Li, Lim, Tsai, & O, 2015; $\alpha = .98$).

   ***Honesty check.*** At the end of the questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate if their responses are truthful and valid. Participants were encouraged to be honest in responding to the question and were informed that their answer would not affect compensation.

**Results**

   First, the two-factor conceptualization of the positive appraisal scale was validated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Items were loaded respectively only on their hypothesized factors, which were specified as orthogonal factors. Satisfactory fit indices are defined as RMSEA < .08 and CFI >.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The initial model exhibited poor fit indices: RMSEA = .23, CFI = .58, and $\chi^2(34) = 388.13$, and modification indices ($\chi^2_{critical}(1) > 3.84$, $p < .05$) were used to identify model misspecification (see Table 1). Items

were dropped one at a time and both improvements to model fit and new modification index reports were checked. Through this iteration, three acceptance of tension items and one appreciation of tension item was excluded to achieve the final model. The revised two-factor model exhibited satisfactory fit indices with RMSEA = .08, CFI = .98, and $\chi^2(8) = 15.60$. The revised two-factor model was also superior to the initial model ($\chi^2_{difference}(26) = 372.53$, $p <$ .001), with all factors exhibiting good construct reliability (CR) as assessed with Joreskog $\rho >$ .70 (see Table 2).

The literature suggested that a post hoc power analysis using Monte Carlo simulations is appropriate for more complex models with two potential mediators as the simulations can yield power estimates to detect either mediation effect (Schoemann, Boulton, & Short, 2017). The Monte Carlo power analysis was conducted with 5,000 repetitions as prescribed by Mundform, Schaffer, Kim, Shaw, Thongteeraparp, and Supawan (2011). The current sample ($N = 127$) yielded a very low post hoc power of 1% in detecting the indirect effect of paradox mindset on dual goal pursuits via acceptance of tensions, but a very high power of 99% in detecting the indirect effect via appreciation of tensions.

Next, to test the hypothesized model (see Figure 1), SPSS PROCESS Macro Model 4 (Hayes, 2013) was used to conduct mediation analysis with two parallel mediators (see Hayes, 2012). This model tested the indirect effect of paradox mindset on intention for dual career-motherhood pursuits as mediated by acceptance of tensions and appreciation of tensions. Bootstrapping with 10,000 sampling iterations was used to estimate all bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals. The dual mediation model was tested including and excluding childbearing attitudes as a covariate (see Footnote 1). For brevity, only analyses controlling for childbearing attitudes are reported, but the two sets of analyses yield the same findings. Descriptive statistics and inter-correlations between variables are tabulated in Table 3, and the regression tables are tabulated in Table 4.

Consistent with Hypothesis 1, participants with a paradox mindset were more likely to endorse dual career-motherhood pursuits ($b = .28$, $t = 3.57$, $p < .001$). In the first path, paradox mindset positively predicted appreciation of tensions ($b = .41$, $t = 4.24$, $p < .001$), but not acceptance of tensions ($b = -.095$, $t = -1.07$, $p = .29$). In the second path, while appreciation of tensions positively predicted intention for dual goal pursuits ($b = .60$, $t = 8.58$, $p < .001$), acceptance of tensions was not significantly associated with the intention for dual goal pursuits ($b = -.043$, $t = -.58$, $p = .56$).

To test the mediation effects, bootstrapping with 10,000 bootstrap samples for indirect effects was conducted. The analysis indicated a non-significant indirect effect of paradox mindset on dual goal pursuits via acceptance of tensions, $95\%CI_{boot}$ [-.018, .027], providing inconclusive support for Hypothesis 2. In support of Hypothesis 3, the analysis showed a significant indirect effect of paradox mindset on dual goal pursuits via appreciation of tensions, $95\%CI_{boot}$ [.01, .43].

These mediation results are consistent with the post hoc power analysis using the Monte Carlo simulation method, as the power to detect the mediated effect of appreciation of tensions was much higher than that for the mediated effect of acceptance of tensions. Specifically, findings indicated that a paradox mindset promoted intention for dual career-motherhood pursuits via appreciation of tensions, albeit not via acceptance of tensions. This differential pattern will be further explained in the general discussion.

Taken together, the findings support that adopting a paradox mindset led female participants to have higher tendencies to positively appraise the tensions between career and motherhood roles to promote working motherhood. Notably, a paradox mindset benefits dual goal pursuits via appreciating career-motherhood tensions, but not just accepting tensions.

**General Discussion**

The competing ideologies being an ideal mother and an ideal worker (Toffoletti & Starr, 2016) engender contradictory dual role tensions in the contemporary society. As such, navigating motherhood while striving for a rewarding career can be challenging.

The current findings have illuminated the value of a paradox mindset in motivating dual career-motherhood pursuits (Hypothesis 1). More importantly, the findings have shed light on the psychological processes through which a paradox mindset can encourage intention for dual goal pursuits. A paradox mindset offers a unique vantage point for exploring and scrutinizing incompatibilities to positively appraise anticipated career-motherhood tensions. By realizing that engagement in dual career-motherhood endeavors need not be depleting but can be mutually enriching, a paradox mindset casts a new light of understanding these seemingly incompatible roles to foster appreciation for the contradictory expectations associated with being a career woman and a mother.

While the results accentuated the importance of recognizing the mutually enriching aspects of combining work and family roles (i.e., appreciation of tensions), it provided inconclusive evidence for the value of accepting the conflictual aspects involved in career and motherhood pursuits (i.e., acceptance of tensions). One plausible explanation for the lack of a significant mediating effect of acceptance of tensions is that a paradox mindset is less likely to promote the mere acceptance of tensions, which is deemed insufficient for inspiring integrative both/and solutions if individuals just seek to harmonize and passively accept conflicts by seeking middle ground solutions rather than scrutinize conflicts (Leung et al., 2018).

Although acceptance and appreciation of tensions both involve conceiving incompatible career-motherhood demands as simultaneously possible, it is reasonable to argue that the appreciation of tensions could further liberate women to take a more active role

in directly dealing with the contradictory aspects of dual career-motherhood pursuits by recognizing the opportunities that the seemingly conflicting roles can mutually benefit each other. In contrast, acceptance of these tensions may still reflect negative evaluations of one's ability to impact the circumstances (Blalock & Joiner, 2000). Therefore, a paradox mindset was not associated with acceptance of tensions because its effectiveness hinges on proactive confrontation of tensions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). As such, a paradox mindset encourages effective management of contradictory demands to proactively uncover the integrative opportunities of these demands rather than fostering attempts to reduce tensions by passively accepting the conflictual aspects of dual career-motherhood pursuits.

Together, the current research elucidates the psychological processes through which the anticipated tensions of working motherhood can motivate women towards dual career-work pursuits. By adopting a paradox mindset, working women tend to appreciate the contradictory demands associated with being a career woman and a mother, thereby casting a fresh light in making sense of these seemingly incompatible roles. As such, working women gain valuable insights that encourage dual career-motherhood endeavors.

**Theoretical and Practical Contributions**

The present research offers contributions in both theoretical and practical fronts. One important way the findings contribute new knowledge to the paradox literature is by accentuating the benefits of a paradox mindset in reconciling tensions that emanate from work and family domains. Whereas the extant literature documents the importance of leveraging a paradox mindset in coping with organizational tensions (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), previous studies on paradox have only examined the experience of tensions (e.g., 'sense of conflict', Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote, 2011; 'experienced tensions', Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018). As such, the present research enriches these findings and adds novel knowledge by exploring the nuances of the tension management process to illuminate the

pivotal mechanism of positive appraisal of tensions. By prompting a renegotiation of work and familial expectations and boundaries, positive appraisal of tensions offers working women with a fresh outlook that fosters appreciation of how these contradictory demands can benefit one another. As such, a paradox mindset can inspire confidence to pursue working motherhood. More broadly, the current study also uncovers the value of a paradox lens in examining not only everyday tensions in organizations but tensions engendered by the intersection of work and non-work (e.g., family) spheres.

Conceived as a form of work-family conflict, career-motherhood tensions highlight the complex demands faced by many working women which are factored in their careful deliberation to have children. Previous studies on work-family conflict highlight personal and contextual resources (e.g., social support, see Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) to cope with dual role demands and pressures. A paradox perspective diverges from these earlier lenses in understanding the psychological underpinnings when people respond to these competing tensions. The adoption of a paradox perspective also aligns with calls for studies that not only examine aspects of conflict but also how work and family roles can enrich each other (Frone, 2003; Karatepe & Kilic, 2009). As such, by drawing on paradox as a research lens, the current study advances theoretical debates and offers fresh insights in work-life interface research. Further, by explicating the core of career-motherhood tensions as contradictory but interdependent elements that can be positively appraised, the current study accentuates the value of a paradox mindset. Specifically, the findings attest to the importance of positive appraisal in coping with contradictory dual role expectations. The adoption of a paradox mindset spurs women to positively appraise opposing discourses of motherhood and paid employment, which helps them appreciate the underlying complex interdependencies and mutual enrichment possibilities to motivate dual career-motherhood pursuits.

Research suggested that decisions in one role are influenced by other roles that one occupies (Poelmans, 2005; Powell, Greenhaus, Allen, & Johnson, 2019). As such, in examining the stream of work-family decisions that individuals make throughout their work lives, it is important to understand how inter-role interdependencies may impact decisions. Towards this end, the current research illuminates one potential process (i.e., appreciation of tensions) in which individuals can simultaneously manage work and family roles (Parasuraman & Greenhaus, 2002) when they have to contemplate role entry and exit decisions (Demerouti, Peeters, & van der Heijden, 2012).

From the perspective of work-life integration, the present findings offer valuable insights into how women can more seamlessly integrate their work and familial roles. The notion of *work-life integration* diverges from *work-life balance* as it is not concerned with equally high involvement in both work and family roles (Kirchmeyer, 2000), but with a more wholesome perspective that harmoniously combines these roles and discovers how both roles can mutually benefit each other. In reconciling the tensions that emanate from their dual roles of being a mother and a career woman (Marcinkus & Hamilton, 2006), the current study highlights the benefits of a paradox mindset in drawing attention to the positive aspects of dual role engagement.

Current findings also add to the goal pursuit literature by underscoring how inter-goal relations can impact the coordination of multiple goal pursuits (Riediger & Freund, 2004). The goal literature tends to conceptualize relationships between goals as either one of interference (i.e., resource constraints and incompatible goal strategies) or facilitation (i.e., instrumental relationships among goals and overlapping goal attainment strategies). The current study illuminates how mutual interference and facilitation among goals can co-exist simultaneously. In reconciling the tensions that emanate from contradictory, yet interdependent goals, individuals can adopt a paradox mindset to interpret the pursuit of one

goal in light of the costs and benefits of pursuing another goal. For example, if women can realize the possibility that the pursuit of motherhood can be complementary (i.e., inter-goal facilitation) rather than simply resource depleting (i.e., inter-goal interference) in relation to attaining their career aspirations, they are more likely to initiate and pursue dual career-motherhood goals.

The current findings also bear practical significance in understanding how working women can thrive amidst career-motherhood tensions to engage in the simultaneous pursuit of career and motherhood aspirations. As policy makers have recognized the impacts of career-motherhood tensions in deterring women from working motherhood pursuits, they have often only focused on policies that minimize the interference of work on family. Besides reducing the objective constraints against committing to work and family responsibilities (e.g., allowing flexible work schedules, offering maternity money bonuses), the current research reveals that an appreciation of paradoxical tensions surrounding working motherhood is beneficial. With a paradox mindset, working women can recognize how the underlying elements of these paradoxical tensions can complement and mutually benefit each other as well as seek integrative both/and solutions to manage these incompatible dual role pressures and demands.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

Although the current research offers several promising insights, it nevertheless presented some limitations that should be addressed in future studies. Firstly, the findings remain correlational at present and experiments that manipulate a paradox mindset is required to establish causality. In an ongoing follow-up study, I address this limitation by priming female undergraduate students to adopt a high or low paradox mindset. Following that, participants are tasked to craft a story that projects their positive appraisal of tensions between their career and family roles.

Secondly, the current study measured intention rather than the actual pursuit of dual career-motherhood goals. Building on Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) attitude-behavior model, several researchers have studied women's family planning attitudes, intentions, and behaviors (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1978), as well as their intention to work following childbirth (Granrose, 1984). In support of this model, empirical evidence demonstrates the mediating role of behavioral intentions in accounting for how attitudinal and normative beliefs predict actual behavior (see Vinokur-Kaplan, 1978). Therefore, although the current findings are limited to women's intentions, by examining evaluations of anticipated career-motherhood tensions, it arguably still offers important precursory insights as to how women can be motivated towards becoming a working mother. Nevertheless, future studies should examine actual career-planning behaviors.

Relatedly, it should be acknowledged that work-family role negotiations occur more broadly within the couple dyad (Peake & Harris, 2002). Working females' decisions to invest in work and family roles are largely influenced by their partner's involvement in and commitment to these domains. With the growing number of dual-earner households, a dyadic approach is beneficial as couples share work and family investments (Casper, Eby, Bordeaux, Lockwood, & Lambert, 2007). Thus, future studies will benefit from a paradox perspective in delineating career-motherhood tensions on a dyadic level as these tensions are often nested within a family unit.

Although the present research underscores how the life of a working mother is fraught with tensions, it does not assume that working fathers do not grapple with the collision of work and family responsibilities. Contemporary fatherhood demands that men "see more to fathering than breadwinning" (Ranson, 2012, pp. 743), as such they as well face contradictory requirements of work and fatherhood. However, as fatherhood and motherhood can entail very different experiences, the tensions faced by working fathers will inevitably be

different from those faced by working mothers. There is a greater overlap in men's professional and fathering responsibilities than that of women's professional and mothering responsibilities (Park & Banchefsky, in press). Further, women are expected to assume more childcare responsibilities than men regardless of their working hours (Park, Smith, & Correll, 2008). Despite their actual commitment and competence, mothers are also often viewed as less devoted to work than fathers do (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004). Thus, women tend to be more sensitive to the impacts of parenthood on career opportunities and advancement than men (O' Laughlin & Anderson, 2001).

Clearly, the permeability of the work-family boundary is greater for women than men, rendering the tensions of working parenthood to be more salient for working mothers than fathers (Park, Smith, & Correll, 2010). Nevertheless, with more males expressing interest in greater childcare involvement and rejecting the traditional gendered role expectations that specify a primary devotion to work, future studies should verify whether the same psychological processes under investigation could also be applicable to working fathers.

Recent research suggests that college-educated women tend to underestimate the demands of contemporary motherhood and the challenges involved (Kuziemko, Pan, Shen, & Washington, 2018). Relatedly, not all working women that embark on the journey of motherhood may experience success across their work and parental roles. As such, working mothers can harness a paradox mindset to enable such virtuous cycles via positive appraisal to appreciate and thrive with these contradictions over time. Hence, another future research direction is to explore the benefits of a paradox mindset in facilitating dual role success. Further, women who successfully manage their work and family lives are likely to gain a greater sense of satisfaction from their dual roles as a working mother. In light of these possibilities, the aforementioned ongoing study that primes a paradox mindset also includes measures of anticipated dual-role success and dual-role satisfaction.

## Conclusion

Paradoxically, the attributes and behaviors that fulfill the work role might contradict with those that fulfill the mothering role. While the coexistence of role pressures from work and family spheres exposes working mothers to seeming conflicts and tensions (Greenhaus & Foley, 2007), it also opens up possibilities of reaping mutual benefits. A paradox mindset acknowledges and unifies the seemingly conflictual yet interrelated and synergistic nature of career-motherhood tensions. The present research demonstrates that with a paradox mindset, working women can reap the synergistic benefits of combining work and family roles to engage in dual career-motherhood pursuits via appreciation of these anticipated tensions.

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**Footnotes**

1. Consistent with the results including childbearing attitudes as a covariate, the results

    of the dual mediation analysis excluding childbearing attitudes as a covariate

    indicated a significant main effect of paradox mindset on dual career-family pursuits

    ($b = .30$, $t = 3.52$, $p = <.001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. In the first path, paradox

    mindset positively predicted appreciation of tensions ($b = .42$, $t = .060$, $p < .001$), but

    not acceptance of tensions ($b = -.091$, $t = -1.03$, $p = .31$). In the second path, while

    appreciation of tensions positively predicted intention for dual goal pursuits ($b = .64$, $t$

    $= 8.57$, $p < .001$), acceptance of tensions was not significantly associated with the

    intention for dual goal pursuits ($b = -.034$, $t = -.42$, $p = .68$). Bootstrapping with

    10,000 bootstrap samples indicated a non-significant indirect effect of paradox

    mindset on dual goal pursuits via acceptance of tensions ($95\%CI_{boot}$ [-.018,.022]),

    providing inconclusive support for Hypothesis 2. In support of Hypothesis 3, the

    analysis revealed a significant indirect effect of paradox mindset on dual goal pursuits

    via appreciation of tensions ($95\%CI_{boot}$ [.10, .46]).

# Tables

*Table 1.* Factor analysis results for the initial model including all positive appraisal of tensions items

| Factor and Items | Loadings |
| --- | --- |
| **Positive Appraisal of Tensions** | |
| **Acceptance of Tensions (CR = .62)** | |
| I accept that there are contradictory work-motherhood demands. | .60 |
| I recognize that mothering responsibilities could interfere with my work commitments. | .89 |
| I feel comfortable with the tensions arising from pursuing both motherhood and career at the same time. (removed from final scale) | .09 |
| I acknowledge the competing responsibilities as a working woman and a mother. | .89 |
| I embrace the conflicting demands of motherhood and work. (removed from final scale) | .01 |
| I can fulfill my work and motherhood duties by resolving the competing demands. (removed from final scale) | .09 |
| **Appreciation of Tensions (CR = .78)** | |
| Working motherhood presents opportunities for me to excel because having a career can make me a better mother. | .74 |
| I can make a better mother if I have a career. | .85 |
| As a working mother, I will set good examples for my children. | .60 |
| I believe that working mothers can spend more "quality time" with their children than stay-home mothers. (removed from final scale) | .52 |

*Note:* RMSEA = .23, CFI = .57, and $\chi^2(34)$ = 299.93

*Table 2.* Factor analysis results for the final model

| Factor and Items | Loadings |
|---|---|
| **Positive Appraisal of Tensions** | |
| **Acceptance of Tensions (CR = .84)** | |
| I accept that there are contradictory work-motherhood demands. | .60 |
| I recognize that mothering responsibilities could interfere with my work commitments. | .92 |
| I acknowledge the competing responsibilities as a working woman and a mother. | .86 |
| **Appreciation of Tensions (CR = .78)** | |
| Working motherhood presents opportunities for me to excel because having a career can make me a better mother. | .73 |
| I can make a better mother if I have a career. | .85 |
| As a working mother, I will set good examples for my children. | .63 |

*Note:* RMSEA = .08, CFI = .98, and $\chi^2(8) = 15.60$

*Table 3.* Summary of descriptive statistics and inter-correlations.

| | *M* | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Paradox Mindset | 4.39 | .10 | | | | | |
| 2. Acceptance of Tensions | 5.68 | .10 | -.09 | | | | |
| 3. Appreciation of Tensions | 4.76 | 1.15 | .36** | .09 | | | |
| 4. Dual Career-motherhood Pursuits | 4.61 | 1.24 | .46** | .01 | .67** | | |
| 5. Childbearing Attitudes | 4.63 | 2.09 | .09 | .037 | .15 | .37** | |

*Note:* The entries are inter-correlation values. *p < .05; **p ≤ .01.

*Table 4.* Summary of dual mediation analysis.

| Predictors | Criterion | Est. | SE | p | 95% CI LL | 95% CI UL | $R^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| X: Paradox Mindset | M1: Acceptance of Tensions | -.095 | (.43) | .29 | -.27 | -.081 | .011 |
| X: Paradox Mindset | M2: Appreciation of Tensions | .41** | (.096) | <.001 | 0.22 | .59 | .15 |
| X: Paradox Mindset | Y: Dual Career-motherhood Pursuits | .28** | (.080) | <.001 | .13 | .44 | .57 |
| M1: Acceptance of Tensions | | .043 | (.075) | .56 | -.19 | .10 | |
| M2: Appreciation of Tensions | | .60** | (.070) | <.001 | .46 | .74 | |
| *Indirect effects:* | | | | | | | |
| X to M1 to Y | | .004* | (.011) | | -.018 | .027 | |
| X to M2 to Y | | .24 | (.090) | | .087 | .43 | |
| Total indirect of X | | .25 | (.090) | | .091 | .43 | |

*Note:* The entries are unstandardized coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. *$p < .05$; **$p \leq .01$

**Figures**

*Figure 1.* Schematic representation of the hypothesized dual mediation model with the

relationship between paradox mindset and dual career-motherhood pursuits mediated via the

positive appraisal of career-motherhood tensions (i.e., acceptance of tensions and

appreciation of tensions).
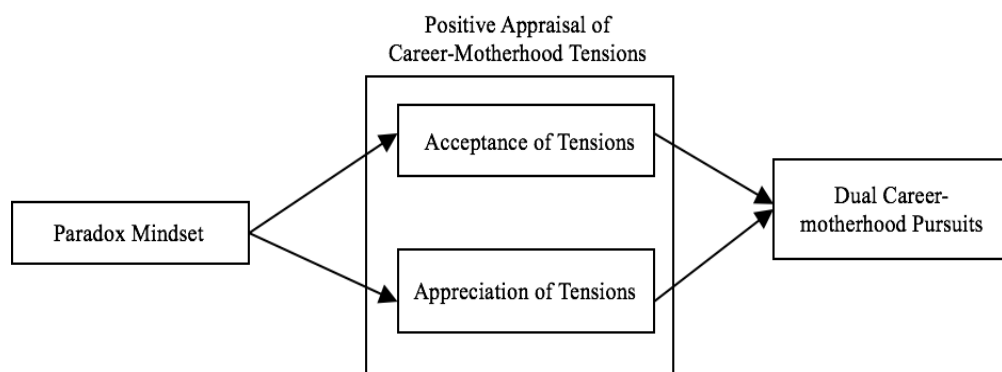
**Appendix**

**Paradox Mindset Scale**

(1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*)

1. When I consider conflicting perspectives, I gain a better understanding of an issue.
2. I am comfortable dealing with conflicting demands at the same time.
3. Accepting contradictions is essential for my success.
4. Tension between ideas energize me.
5. I enjoy it when I manage to pursue contradictory goals.
6. I often experience myself as simultaneously embracing conflicting demands.
7. I am comfortable working on tasks that contradict each other.
8. I feel uplifted when I realize that two opposites can be true.
9. I feel energized when I manage to address contradictory issues.

**Positive Appraisal of Career-motherhood Tensions Scale**

(1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*)

**Acceptance of Tensions**

1. I accept that there are contradictory work-motherhood demands.
2. I recognize that mothering responsibilities could interfere with my work commitments.
3. I feel comfortable with the tensions arising from pursuing both motherhood and career at the same time. (dropped after conducting CFA)
4. I acknowledge the competing responsibilities as a working woman and a mother.
5. I embrace the conflicting demands of motherhood and work. (dropped after conducting CFA)
6. I can fulfill my work and motherhood duties by resolving the competing demands. (dropped after conducting CFA)

**Appreciation of Tensions**

1. Working motherhood presents opportunities for me to excel because having a career can make me a better mother.
2. I can make a better mother if I have a career.
3. As a working mother, I will set good examples for my children.
4. I believe that working mothers can spend more "quality time" with their children than stay-home mothers. (dropped after conducting CFA)

**Dual Career-motherhood Pursuits Scale**

(1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*)

1. I will simultaneously manage the demand of my career and the demand of taking care of my family.
2. I will continue working when I have children.
3. I feel that I can achieve my career goals whether I have children or not.
4. I aspire to be a full-time working mother.
5. I feel that I can pursue my career and motherhood at the same time.

**Childbearing Attitudes Scale**

(1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*)

1. Having my own children (at some point in time) is important to me.
2. I look forward to having children.