Secure Base Relationships as Drivers of Professional Identity Co-construction in Dual Career Couples

Jennifer Louise Petriglieri  
INSEAD, jennifer.petriglieri@insead.edu

Otilia Obodaru  
Rice University, otilia.obodaru@rice.edu

Through a qualitative study of 50 dual-career couples, we examine whether and how partners in such couples shape each other’s professional identities and how they experience and interpret the interactions between those identities, their relationship, and their careers. We found that the extent to and way in which partners shaped each other’s professional identities depended on the nature of a couple’s attachment, in particular whether one partner—or both—experienced the other as a secure base. At the individual level, people who experienced their partner as a secure base engaged in professional identity exploration, endeavoring to actualize desired professional identities, even when doing so was risky, and expanded their professional identity to incorporate attributes of their partner’s identity. At the dyadic level, couples who had a unidirectional secure-base structure experienced their professional identities as being in conflict, whereas couples who had a bidirectional secure-base structure experienced their professional identities as enhancing each other. Building on these findings, we develop a model of professional identity co-construction within secure base relationships that breaks new theoretical ground by exploring interpersonal identity relationships and the nature of the secure-base structure between two people as underpinning these dynamics.
The most important career choice you'll make is who you marry.

Sheryl Sandberg (2013)

Since the 1970s when they were first recognized and labeled, dual-career couples have transitioned from being the “new deviant” (Green and Zenisek, 1983) to being the new normal in the world of work. Dual-career couples are a subset of dual-earner couples in which both partners actively pursue careers—that is, sequences of jobs that “require a high degree of commitment and that have a continuous developmental character” (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976: 9). Careers involve jobs that are typically professional or managerial in nature (Lovejoy and Stone, 2012) and, in the contemporary world of work, provide a primary avenue by which these individuals define and express themselves (Giddens, 1991; Grey, 1994). A growing body of research addresses how couples sustain two careers and how their work and family lives unfold. With the majority of professionals now members of dual-career couples (Catalyst, 1998; Parker and Arthur, 2004; Abele and Volmer, 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014) and organizations struggling to adapt their career trajectories to people who do not have the support of a traditional stay-at-home partner (Hall and Chandler, 2005; Tharenou, 2008; Harvey, Napier, and Moeller, 2009), a better understanding the experiences of dual-career couples is timely and consequential.

Professional and managerial careers demand a considerable ongoing investment of time as well as intellectual, and emotional energy (Grey, 1994; Blair-Loy, 2003; Sennett, 2006). As a result, sociologists have long argued, such careers leave little for those who pursue them to dedicate to the equally demanding institution of the family (Coser, 1974; Moen and Roehling, 2005) and are often implicitly designed for workers whose full commitment is supported by a stay-at-home spouse (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1990; Reid, 2015). For both partners in a couple to
pursue such careers is thus challenging. Existing research has honed in on the socioeconomic facets of this challenge and elucidated the practical arrangements (Moen and Sweet, 2004; Stone, 2007; Lovejoy and Stone, 2012; Clarke, 2015) as well as the cultural (Blair-Loy, 2003; Moen and Roehling, 2005) and economic (Becker, 1981; Cooper, 2014) forces that lead couples to pursue or abandon two careers. We know much less about the psychological challenges dual-career couples face, such as how they experience and interpret their lives and work, their selves and each other, and the consequences of those experiences and interpretations.

From a psychological perspective, what makes dual-career couples unique is that work is an important source of self-definition for both partners (Gilbert, 1993; Bird and Schnurman-Crook, 2005). In most nondual-career couples, work is the central source of self-definition for men and being a loving caretaker is the central source of self-definition for women, regardless of whether or not both partners have income-generating jobs (Hertz, 1986; Hochschild, 1989; Kaufman and Uhlenberg, 2000; Tichenor, 2005). Whereas these so-called traditional couples sustain one important professional identity, dual-career couples must sustain two1 (Parker and Arthur, 2004). The purpose of this paper is to uncover how dual-career couples manage these challenges. Specifically, we explore how the members of a couple influence each other’s professional identities and how they experience and interpret the interactions between them. We conducted an in-depth field study with 50 dual-career couples in which we separately interviewed both partners about all aspects of their lives: work, nonwork, and relational. Our inductive qualitative research method aligned with our intention to build new theory in an underdeveloped area.

1 In line with previous researchers (e.g. Ibarra, 1999, Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), we use the term professional identity, as opposed to work identity, to signal that these identities relate to jobs in elite professional or managerial domains.
To account for the interweaving of personal and professional lives in dual-career couples, we employed a psychodynamic lens to theorize from our data. Specifically, we drew on and expanded attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982/1969) to reveal how the nature of the attachment relationship in a dual-career couple underpins how the partners sustain and shape each other’s professional identities. Delving into the psychology of dual-career couples, our analysis suggests that the way couples influence each others professional identities depends on whether they experience each other as a secure base (Bowlby, 1988), a concept deriving from attachment theory. In taking this approach, we join the growing ranks of organizational scholars who incorporate psychodynamic insights into theories about work and organizing (Pratt and Crosina, 2015; Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Barsade, Ramarajan, and Westen, 2009; Ashforth, Schinoff, and Rogers, 2015; Ashforth et al, 2014; see also the editorial in the special issue of Organisation Studies on the subject, Fotaki, Long, and Schwartz, 2012).

Within the psychodynamic field, attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982/1969; Hazan and Shaver, 1990; Feeney and Van Vleet, 2010) is a well-established and extensively researched theory of development. However, it has not yet been deployed to study work and organizational phenomena, even though Barsade et al. (2009) noted that attachment theory would be a “particularly fruitful area” (p. 150) for organizational scholars to incorporate into their theorizing. We answer this call by using it to cast new light on the experience of dual-career couples, in general, and on the dynamics of their professional identity construction and development, in particular.

This paper makes substantial contributions to theories of professional identity construction. Although an established body of scholarship has demonstrated that the processes by which people construct, maintain, and change their professional identities are highly relational
(Van Mannen, 1997; Ibarra, 1999; Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton, 2000; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006), “few theorists capitalize on identity work process as truly relational” (Lepisto, Crosina, and Pratt, 2015, p. 17). Instead, scholars have used an individual unit of analysis, placing the professional at the center and treating others as exogenous influences—triggers or validators—in professional identity construction. In contrast, we use individual and dyadic units of analysis to show how two people shape each other’s professional identities and how they experience and interpret the relationship between them. We expose the phenomena of interpersonal identity conflict and enhancement that occur when one partner interprets the enactment of his or her professional identity as infringing or benefitting the enactment of the other’s. This dyadic-level identity relationship, driven by a couple’s attachment relationship, shapes how people narrate the nature and development of their professional identity.

As is the norm in qualitative studies, the interplay between attachment structure and professional identity construction emerged as we iterated between collecting and analyzing our data and reading extant literatures that helped make sense of that data. However, for ease of reading, we provide an account of the study in the traditional linear fashion, reviewing first both the literatures that helped us frame our study as well as those we used to interpret our findings.

**Dual-Career Couples**

Over the past 50 years, social and economic changes in the Western world have led to a dramatic shift in the structure of the typical family away from a traditional breadwinner-homemaker arrangement to one in which both partners work (Barnett and Hyde, 2001; Bond et al., 2003). The vast majority of research into this change has examined dual-earner couples in which both partners have paid jobs (Hall and Hall, 1979; Hochschild, 1989; Bielby and Bielby, 1992; Moen, 2003; Pixley and Moen, 2003; Moen and Sweet, 2004). We are interested in dual-career couples,
an elite subset of dual-earner couples in which both partners pursue active careers that typically unfold in the professional and managerial domains (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976). Although they are a minority of dual-earner couples, dual-career couples are typically more egalitarian (Biernat and Wortman, 1991) and accordingly give “insight into future trends in two-earner couples” (Pixley, 2009a: 102). Like all elites, they are worthy of study because they “exert a profound moral and normative force as a cutting-edge standard for how the larger economy should evolve” (Sennett, 2006: 10).

Although struggles such as the work/life strain of managing two jobs and a household are common to dual-earner and dual-career couples (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Rothbard, 2001; Moen, 2003; Rothbard, Phillips, and Dumas, 2005; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2009), the latter face unique challenges because both partners are invested in careers that demand substantial investment time and emotional energy. Research suggests that it is difficult for couples to sustain two careers and that many eventually transition to being one career/one job or one career/one homemaker couples (Blair-Loy, 2003; Stone, 2007). This is caused, in part, by the difficulty of coordinating the demands of two careers (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Moen and Roehling, 2005) and in part by the difficulty of negotiating flexibility with employers that could enable one or both partners to continue their careers at a slower pace (Wharton and Blair-Loy, 2006; Stone, 2007) or to take breaks and later opt back in without penalty (Lovejoy and Stone, 2012).

Alongside exploring the reasons why sustaining dual careers is so difficult, scholars have investigated the various strategies couples employ to manage and prioritize their demanding careers vis-à-vis each other both over the long-term (Pixley, 2009a) and during specific career decisions, such as whether to make an international relocation (Harvey, 1998; Selmer et al.,
2011). Whereas some couples routinely prioritize the man’s career (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Moen and Sweet, 2004), others, especially those who are younger, try to maintain two careers by heavily outsourcing family work (Hertz, 1986; Clarke, 2015). Alternatively, partners may take turns prioritizing their careers (Hall and Hall, 1979; Clarke, 2015) or both partners may constrain their career trajectories to manage the total demands of their family unit (Becker and Moen, 1999).

Existing research has paid much less attention to what lies beneath the practical arrangements that couples make to pursue two careers. We know little about how they psychologically sustain or struggle at being dual-career couples, how partners influence each others’ professional lives above and beyond trading off whose career is prioritized, and how couples experience and interpret their lives and work, their selves and each other. To explore these areas requires investigating the identities of dual-career couples. Identity is a construct that encompasses instrumental, experiential, and expressive considerations. People pursue identities in order to get something done, to experience and convey themselves in a desired way, and to connect to significant individuals, groups, and organizations (Swann and Bosson, 2010). Identity is a particularly interesting construct for dual-career couples because one of the ways they are unique is that work is an important source of self-definition for both partners (Gilbert, 1993; Bird and Schnurman-Crook, 2005). Therefore, central to dual-career couples is that they must sustain and manage two important and high-maintenance professional identities (Parker and Arthur, 2004).

The concept of professional identity is largely absent in studies of dual-career couples. With the exception of one article theorizing that identity underpins how couples decide their career prioritization strategies (Budworth, Enns, and Rowbotham, 2008), the remaining handful
of studies that consider identity focus on gender identities rather than the professional identities of partners in dual-career couples (e.g. Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Blair-Loy, 2003; Tichenor, 2005). As organizational scholars, we are interested in how members of dual-career couples influence and shape each other’s professional identities and how they experience and interpret the interactions and relationship between them. This is a significant gap, given the importance of and interest in understanding how people craft their professional identities.

**Professional Identity and Its Construction**

The realization that how people define themselves at work affects their performance, status, and well-being has fueled scholars’ interest in examining the process and consequences of forging, revising, and undoing self-definitions at work (Ibarra, 1999; Bartel and Dutton, 2001; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006). Professional identities answer the question “who am I as a professional?,” such as a banker, a doctor, an entrepreneur, or a CEO. We draw a distinction between the *attributes* and the *narrative* of a person’s professional identity. Identity attributes are the characteristics people use to define who they are at a point in time. Examples of professional identity attributes include being a “tough” police officer (Van Maanen, 2010) or an “artistic” chef (Fine, 1996). A person’s professional identity narrative describes his or her process of becoming (Allport, 1955) the worker he or she is and thus grounds the individual’s identity in history and projects it into the future (Ibarra and Lineback, 2005; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). For example, it would be ambiguous for a general manager to claim the identity attribute of being technically oriented without the narrative of having risen through the technical ranks to become general manager. For professionals, identity narratives are expressions of their internal career (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010), that is, subjective accounts of how their unfolding work roles over time relate to and describe who they
are (Schein and Van Maanen, 1977; Barley, 1989). These accounts are distinct from people’s external career, that is, the sequence of jobs that can be tracked on someone’s resume (Barley, 1989).

Scholars have long known that our identities are forged through interactions with other people (James, 1890/1957; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1956), and existing research confirms that people make sense of who they are as professionals—both the attributes and narrative of their professional identity—in relationships. Researchers in this area have thus far focused on the effects of relationships within the domain of work, showing how role models (Ibarra, 1999), peers (Van Mannen, 1997; Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton, 2000), mentors (Kram, 1988; Higgins and Kram, 2001), managers (Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006), and stakeholders (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006) shape a person’s professional identity. Two gaps, however, exist in relational theories of professional identity construction.

**The role of nonwork relationships.** Common across research on professional identity construction is an emphasis on relationships within the work domain. Yet people’s work and nonwork lives are both relevant to and affected by each other (Edwards and Rothbard, 1999; Rothbard, 2001; Ramarajan and Reid, 2013). Although there is compelling evidence that people’s relationships at work can shape their nonwork identities (Ely and Meyerson, 2010), the reverse influence—how people’s nonwork relationships influence their professional identities—remains largely unexamined. The closest relationship most adults have is with their spouse (or equivalent), whom research has consistently shown to have a central role in shaping who one is (Agnew et al., 1998; Drigotas et al., 1999; Aron, 2003). The importance of these relationships and their relative longevity—many romantic relationships span multiple work identity transitions
and some even outlast an individual’s entire career—make them ideal for investigating the impact of nonwork relationships on professional identity construction.

**The dyadic nature of professional identity construction.** Although it is accepted that people craft their professional identities through interactions with others, scholars have thus far not considered the other as a true interaction partner (Lepisto, Crosina, and Pratt, 2015). Instead, extant work has focused on the worker as the unit of analysis and treated the other as an exogenous factor—triggering, granting, or denying someone’s professional identity claims. By doing so, current theories reveal only half of the relational picture. Studying how both individuals in a relationship influence each other’s process of constructing a professional identity is an indispensable part of investigating the link between identity and relationships. Such processes of cocreation and reciprocal causation between individuals and the relationships within which they are embedded are as rarely studied as they are important (Ibarra, Kilduff, and Tsai, 2005). Studying both partners in dual-career couples enabled us to move between the dyadic and individual levels of analysis and thus investigate professional identity construction in a truly relational way. However, using the dyad as a unit of analysis is not enough in this process. In addition, we need to understand the nature of those dyadic relationships. For a more nuanced understanding of the structure of and variations in relationships we turn to the literature on attachment theory.

**Attachment Theory and Partners as Secure Bases**

Attachment theory describes how long-term interpersonal relationships shape people’s development (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982/1969). In contrast to other theories that conceptualize development as a series of stages linked to the human life cycle (Erikson, 1959; Levinson, 1978; Kegan, 1983), attachment theory argues that people have an array of
developmental pathways open to them, and close relationships will heavily influence the particular pathway chosen (Bowlby, 1988). Attachment theory argues that who we are, and, indeed, who we become, is influenced by who we are attached to and how we are attached to them (Bowlby, 1988; Rice, 1990; Shaver and Mikulincer, 1997; Feeney and Van Vleet, 2010).

Originally developed to understand the bond between infants and caregivers, attachment theory has identified three attachment patterns—secure, anxious, and avoidant—thought to shape both children’s development and their capacity to form and maintain relationships in adult life (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Although attachment theory is still sometimes portrayed as a trait-based theory, recent research has proven that early patterns of attachment, although they provide templates for later relationships, do not fully determine our attachment patterns and development as adults. Rather, such patterns can vary depending on those with whom we have close relationships and can also vary across time with the same interaction partner (Hazan and Shaver, 1987; Kobak and Hazan, 1991; Sibley, Fischer, and Liu, 2005; Fraley et al., 2011). Thus, attachment theory is a fluid model of human development that assumes people have the capacity to develop at any stage of life depending on their attachments to close others.

Work on attachment theory in adults has focused on the nature of attachment between romantic partners. Mirroring the relationship between an infant and his or her parents, an adult’s spouse (or equivalent) tends to be the primary attachment figure (Hazan and Shaver, 1990; Hazan and Shaver, 1994) on whom the person relies for comfort and security and who is in a unique position to influence his or her development and identity. In the initial few years of a romantic partnership, adults seek physical closeness both to satisfy their sexual attraction and their need for comfort and emotional support. At this stage, they typically become a safe haven (Bowlby, 1982/1969; Collins and Feeney, 2000) for each other, providing care and support when
the other is in distress. Over time, partners may also become a secure base (Bowlby, 1988) for each other by providing support and encouragement for one another’s exploratory behavior. We highlight the secure-base function of relationship partners here because it relates to identity construction and emerged as a sensitizing concept (Bowen, 2008) during our data analysis, thereby orienting our interpretation of the study findings.

Someone comes to regard another person as a secure base when he or she experiences the other as dependably supportive and encouraging of his or her exploratory behavior.² Exploratory behavior involves moving away from the secure base to explore the wider environment, take on challenges and risks, and make discoveries (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004). In adults, this can take many forms and occur across life domains (e.g., trying a new sport, traveling to an unknown city, making new friendships, making a risky career move, etc.). There are three distinct, albeit related, characteristics of a secure base: He or she (1) encourages and accepts his or her partner’s exploratory behavior, (2) does not unnecessarily interfere with his or her partner’s exploration, and (3) is available in the event that his or her partner faces a setback and needs to retreat from exploration (Feeney and Thrush, 2010). To illustrate, imagine Sarah, whose partner Simon is currently unhappy and anxious about his career. In acting as a secure base for Simon, Sarah actively encourages him to explore alternative careers while not interfering by trying to steer him in a particular direction. Should Simon hit bumps in the road as he pursues new career options, Sarah would be available to provide reassurance and to encourage him to carry on with his journey. If Sarah provides these three functions consistently over time, Simon will likely regard her as responsive to his needs and reliable, and he will come to regard her as a secure base (Feeney, 2004). Just as repeated interactions over time can build and reinforce a person’s

² It is important to note that the perception that a partner constitutes a secure base does not depend solely on his or her behavior but on the interpretation of that person’s motives and reliability.
reliance on another as a secure base, so can certain other repeated interactions erode this reliance (Hudson et al., 2014).

Having a secure base in our primary attachment figure fosters identity development because it is through novel explorations that we develop our sense of who we are (Kamptner, 1988; Rice, 1990; Lapsley, Rice, and FitzGerald, 1990). The construct of a secure base is thus especially pertinent to studies of identity, especially at a time when professional identities are not simply ascribed but are more often achieved. Yet, with one notable exception that explored how organizational members may come to rely on change agents as secure bases (Kahn, 1995), no studies in the management literature, to our knowledge, have applied the construct of secure base or attachment theory to professional settings. In an extensive review, Barsade et al. (2009) noted, “We could not find even one article about this construct published in prominent journals within organizational behavior” (150). Despite this dearth in the management literature, a small number of studies in the field of vocational psychology have found that college students who rely on their parents as secure bases are more likely to engage in career exploration and identity development than those who do not (O’Brien and Fassinger, 1993; Blustein, Preziosso, and Schultheiss, 1995; Ketterson and Blustein, 1997). This suggests an important link between the psychological characteristics of a person’s nonwork relationships and their professional identity, a link our study explored in depth.

METHODS

Research Sample and Data Collection

We recruited couples for this study from the MBA alumni population of a large global business school. In line with Pixely’s (2009b) recommendation for identifying dual-career couples, we first asked people to self-identify as being in one by emailing to invite them participate in a study
to “research the careers and lives of dual-career couples.” Those who expressed interest were asked to send us a copy of their and their partner’s resumes. This enabled us to ensure they met our criteria of having careers (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976) before we proceeded to the interview stage.

In total, 50 couples participated in the study, and an overview of their demographics and careers is shown in Table 1. Although we did not limit our sampling by sexual orientation, all the couples who volunteered and met our study criteria were heterosexual. All except 8 couples were married, and those 8 were the newest couples in our sample, with relationships ranging from 3 to 7 years. Of the 50 couples, 33 were based in Europe, 4 in the Middle East, 3 in Asia/Australasia, and 10 in North America; 19 were mixed nationality couples. Although we did not limit our sample by age, we found that responses to our initial emails disproportionally came from younger alumni (midthirties to late forties). As we concurrently collected and analyzed our data, our emerging theory suggested that we had identified a set of dynamics that might shift over time. To investigate this further, in the second stage of data collection we continued to follow a theoretical sampling logic by targeting older alumni who were more likely to be in relationships of a longer length (Locke, 2001). As a result, our sample encompasses people whose careers were well under way but at different stages. Representative (relatively) junior jobs held by informants include managing director in an investment bank or country vice president in a multinational corporation. Representative senior jobs include CEO of a large corporation or the founder of a entrepreneurial venture.

We interviewed each member of a couple separately and assured the individuals that the content of their conversation would be kept confidential from their partner. The interviews were based on a life-story technique (Atkinson, 1998), but rather than focusing on informants’ entire
lives, they focused on the life of the couple. Although the interviews were open-ended, we used a semistructured protocol that included questions about the couple and its development, the careers of each member of the couple and their development, and interactions between careers and the couple to ensure that we covered the same core ground with each informant. (Our interview protocol can be found in Appendix 1.) All interviews were voice recorded with permission and professionally transcribed. The quotes from these interviews that appear in this article are followed by a code that identifies the research informant by the number of the couple in the dataset, the gender of the interviewee, and the number of years the couple had been together. For example, 3M5Y is the man from couple 3, who had been together for 5 years; likewise, 17F16Y is the woman from couple 17, who had been together for 16 years. All names, dates, locations, and specific roles have been disguised throughout the paper to protect the anonymity of the research informants.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

**Data Analysis**

We employed grounded theory techniques (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) for our data collection and analysis. This involved collecting and analyzing data in parallel and moving inductively between our growing dataset, our emerging theoretical framework, and bodies of established literature that could inform our data collection and analysis.

Data collection unfolded over a year. As is usual in data collection based on a grounded theory method, patterns and variations that emerged during early data collection shaped the protocol for later interviews (Spradley, 1979). For example, during the first 8 interviews, the theme of how couples described their interdependencies strongly emerged. This led us to include more probing questions in subsequent interviews to elicit the narratives that couples told about
these interdependencies and to determine whether, and to what extent, partners of a couple shared these narratives. By the twenty-sixth couple had been interviewed, the protocol was stable and remained so for the rest of data collection. By the fortieth couple, no new topics and themes emerged, suggesting that we were approaching theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After ten more couples confirmed it, we stopped collecting data.

For the sake of clarity, we describe our data analysis as a set of sequential steps, despite the process being iterative. In the first step, we coded the interview transcripts of a small number of couples. For each couple, we first coded the partners’ transcripts separately using the individual as the unit of analysis. Once done, we reviewed the two transcripts side-by-side to code the couple at the dyadic level of analysis. At this level, we coded for instances of (dis)agreement or variation between the partners; for example, we coded for (dis)agreement in how partners described a particular turning point or significant event (e.g., a geographic move). At this stage our codes were descriptive and closely reflected terms and descriptions used by the informants themselves (Locke, 2001). Having coded the transcripts independently, we then jointly discussed the couples we had independently coded in order to reach a consensual coding for the individual transcripts and each couple as a dyad. Initially, these meetings were time intensive as we developed and refined themes, built a coding scheme, and made sense of the data. As our understanding of the data developed and our coding scheme solidified, our independent coding of the transcripts became congruent and the consensual coding was more rapid. We continually repeated this step throughout data collection; each iteration typically involved coding 4 couples and thus 8 interview transcripts.

In the next step, we moved to axial coding (Locke, 2001), which involved looking for themes among the descriptive codes, grouping codes based on similarities and differences, and
abstracting groups to theoretical constructs. To illustrate, approximately a third of the way into our data collection and analysis we had a number of descriptive codes that referred to how people perceived their partner to encourage them to take risks in their career and provide an anchor from which they could more confidently and fully engage in their career. Concurrently, we were reviewing the psychoanalytic literature, which led us to attachment theory and the construct of a secure base. That construct immediately struck us as closely relating to a cluster of our descriptive codes and enabled us to see the relatedness between the aforementioned codes. This insight led us to use the concept of secure base as a sensitizing concept (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2008), which guided our analysis of patterns that had emerged from our data. We then used these patterns to inform and extend the concept of a secure base. Applying this method thus led to a generative moment in our research (Carlsen and Dutton, 2011).

Once the data collection was complete, we met for an intensive week to distill an overarching theoretical model by relating the analytic categories to one another. During that time, we repeatedly returned to the transcripts and the literature to ensure that our theoretical model accurately represented the data and built on and extended existing theory. After drafting our model (see Figure 1 later in this article), we conducted member checks with eight informants who verified our key interpretations and conclusions.

**FINDINGS**

**Overview**

At the core of our theoretical model is the concept of a secure base. We found that whether partners in dual careers provided a secure base to each other was a key factor in how they influenced each other’s professional identities. The influence of a secure base was evident both at individual and dyadic levels of analysis. At the individual level, people who regarded
their partner as a secure base engaged in both *professional identity exploration*, in which they endeavored to actualize desired professional identities even when those were risky, and *professional identity expansion*, in which they incorporated attributes of their partner’s professional or personal identities into their own professional identity. At the dyadic level of analysis, we found that how couples experienced and interpreted the interactions and relationship between their two professional identities depended on their dyadic secure-base structure. Specifically, couples who had a unidirectional secure base structure, in which only one partner was a secure base for the other, experienced conflict between partners’ professional identities; that is, they perceived that the enactment of one partner’s professional identity infringed on the enactment of the other partner’s professional identity. In contrast, couples who had a bidirectional secure base structure in which each partner was a secure base for the other experienced enhancement between partners’ professional identities; that is, they perceived that the enactment of one partner’s professional identity supported the enactment of the other partner’s professional identity.

We begin the presentation of our findings by using data to flesh out and illustrate the construct of a secure base. We then discuss the individual-level effects of having a secure base partner. Finally, we present the dyadic-level effects by contrasting unidirectional with bidirectional secure-base couples.

**Having a Secure-Base Partner**

We found ample evidence in our data that people experienced their partner as providing the three distinct, yet related, characteristics of a secure base (see Table 2 for additional evidence to that presented in the text): encouraging their partner’s exploratory behavior, not interfering in their
partner’s exploration, and being available to provide support should a retreat from exploration be necessary (Bowlby, 1988). People provided these functions to their partners in a variety of life domains. Given the focus of our paper, we present evidence here on the characteristics as they relate to people’s careers and professional identities.

One man who had been the director of a charitable foundation and was contemplating making a career transition at the time we interviewed him explained how

[my partner] encourages me to think outside the organizational box, and that’s what I’m really trying to do this year. At the same time, she’s very open to the fact that, at the end of the day, I have to decide entirely, you know, where I’m going to feel good and comfortable, and she will support me in any way. (47M3Y)

This encouragement of exploration went beyond being a cheerleader for change and involved people nudging their partners to take up opportunities that they might not have considered, in this case “to think outside of the box.”

Another example was a woman who produced visual arts shows whose husband triggered her transition from freelancing in small independent arts venues to joining a large commercial arts venue by drawing her attention to a job opportunity that she had overlooked.

I was in my own little world thinking, “Oh, well, I could do this project and this project,” and [husband’s name] said, “Well, there’s a huge opportunity right here—and what have you got to lose? Why don't you just try for it?” And once I’d decided to, then I made sure to get it.” (18F8Y)

This first characteristic of encouraging exploration was balanced by the second: People who were secure bases did not interfere with their partner’s exploration. A partner in a strategy consulting firm, for example, explained how her husband had been

very supportive of [first employer], but he was also very supportive of my decision to leave [first employer]. He’s literally really given me the impression that it was totally up to me. He was always being very supportive of me and also very confirming, basically, that I was doing something that was actually great and something that I should indeed feel happy about. (32F20Y)
Although people felt their secure base did not interfere, they did not equate this characteristic with a lack of care. As the founder CEO of a food production business explained, her husband cared deeply when she was unhappy in her previous job and encouraged her to explore other career options. Unlike what mentors or role models might do, however, he did not suggest a particular direction.

He was the one saying to me, “You should change jobs. You’re not really, really happy. It’s not really your thing.” And so when this opportunity came, I think he was very neutral about it. So it’s been more like, you know, this is my thing. He doesn’t really, or he hasn’t gotten involved at all. (26F13Y)

Finally, people who regarded their partner as a secure base experienced them as being continually available to retreat to should they encounter difficulties in their exploration. A managing partner in a professional services firm noted his wife’s constant intuition about when he was struggling with difficult career issues: “I think sort of she always knows, for example, if I’m not sleeping very well, she’ll know that I’ve got something on my mind.” He continued to give a specific example of when she was available to act as a sounding board during a time when he took a particularly stretching and difficult role in his career:

And I’ll give you perhaps the hardest [time]: in 2002, I was running a [country] business unit; I had 40 partners working for me, and I had to make 10 of them redundant. And, I’ll tell you what, that was the most difficult decision. And that was a 3-month process that was very tough. And obviously I used [wife's name] as a sounding board. (50M27Y)

Likewise, a woman who became the CEO of a manufacturing company at a relatively young age and was pushing the company to grow faster explained how her husband enabled her to perform such a demanding role:

A CEO is a very lonely job where you can hardly speak to anybody at work about your fears, your dilemmas, your frustrations. You cannot share it with the people that report to you. And [husband’s name] plays a very important role. … If I’m very upset, if I’m frustrated, if I have big worries, we always try to talk things [through]. (27F20Y)
A strong pattern emerged in our data: Some people described their partner as encouraging their exploration plus one or both of the other two characteristics; others described their partners as providing none or just as not interfering with their exploration. In the first case, we coded them as having a secure-base partner. In the second and third cases, we coded them as not having a secure-base partner.

[Table 2 about here]

**The Impact of Having a Secure-Base Partner on Professional Identity**

**Professional identity exploration.** Research on attachment theory shows that having a secure base enables people to engage in exploratory behavior (Bowlby, 1988). Congruent with this, we found that informants who saw their partner as a secure base reported engaging in professional identity exploration, which we define as endeavoring to actualize a desired professional identity even when that is risky. People wove stories of this exploration into their professional identity narratives, and all, at least partially, attributed their ability to engage in exploration to their relationship with their partner. A man who 15 years prior to the research interview had founded a company in what was, at that time, a politically volatile developing country, explained that the transition came about because he “started going on a regular basis to [country name], always on the way to Japan, and then I got sort of hooked on [country name] at a very early stage.” Pursing his transition from being a professional services employee to becoming an entrepreneur was, he described “an absolute uphill struggle, meaning no demand, no clients, no products, I mean, just a hopeless task.” He noted that in his pursuit of this professional path, his wife

influenced me in the way that she allowed it to happen…. You need to be open for your partner to engage in something that at the time does not really look that promising. She didn't want me to become a bank director or something. For her, it was more important for me to find something I would really like and be excited about. (45M23Y)

His wife’s encouragement for him to do something he would “be excited about,” even if it was
risky, thus shaped his process of professional becoming. In a similar vein, a senior manager in a retail firm who founded a food production company explained, “I don't think I would have had the courage to become an entrepreneur if it had not been for his support…. If I had been single or so on, I don’t think I would have had the courage” (26F13Y).

These two illustrations exemplify the attribution these individuals gave to their secure-base partners for their professional identity exploration. They did not describe their partners as simply offering moral and emotional support but as providing courage and encouragement, the push they needed to actualize the professional identities they desired. In some cases, informants even described their partners as shaping their desires, encouraging them to aim higher and take more risks. For instance, a lawyer who wanted to transition to a new firm explained that she had applied to a more prestigious firm than she imagined and thus achieved a higher-status professional identity as a result of her husband’s encouragement.

His view was that I was underselling myself, so that caused a lot of discussion and debate . . . I think in terms of where I moved to and decided to go. I didn’t want to apply to [firm name] because I wasn’t sure if I was good enough, but in hindsight he was right. (3F5Y)

**Professional identity expansion.** Informants who saw their partner as a secure base also expanded their professional identity to include attributes of their partner’s identity. A marketing vice president explained how her husband, who was a banker,

influenced me in an analytical way…. So right now I sometimes, like I even received a comment from my colleague saying they think I’m very analytical, which surprised me very much because I would never imagine myself being an analytical person, say like 10 years ago. Yes, so I think it’s a shift I can see in myself. (6F7Y)

Although the incorporation of those attributes into her professional identity had brought career benefits, the surprise she expressed illustrates that this was neither a deliberate nor a necessarily conscious process. Rather, the internalization of her husband’s analytic identity seemed to creep up on her until the day when external feedback confirmed that she was indeed an analytic
marketing manager. Although the process may have been unconscious, its consequences, and its attribution to her partner, were clear.

In another case, a director of exports noted how she differed from her partner of 3 years in that “I still am but I used to be even more, you know, very impulsive and emotional and I like a fight, you know. And he’s totally the opposite, so he’s very calm and a no-emotion type guy.” She went on to explain how incorporating his identity attributes into her professional identity had brought a dramatic shift from a state when “we did a few years ago a 360 in the company and my only issue, the issue that everyone sees with me, is not my skills, it's how I manage and handle people.” At the time of our interview, she described having

changed my attitude toward the people that are working for me or the people I work [for] within the organization. I’m less aggressive; I’ve been able to sit down and listen more than I used to; I’m more empathetic to people’s feelings and needs and issues and problems. (24F3Y)

When individuals introjected attributes of their partner’s identity, it not only expanded their professional identity but could also make it unique with respect to their colleagues. The director of an accounting firm, whose wife was a socialist politician, noted that.

[I’m] more rounded and more, I guess, open to other ideas; when I discuss with business friends, they all have a certain way to look at politics and what politics should do for business, and I realize I’m a bit an outlier [laughs] with less pro-business views than a bit similar people, I would say, because I’m more influenced by living with a politician who’s not only got to care for business, but to care for everybody. (28M25Y)

Such allusions were consistently present, although sometimes less explicitly attributed. An executive board member of a bank whose wife was a successful entrepreneur, for example, explained that although he was “not meant for a startup,” his wife had influenced him to

be the entrepreneur in a bigger corporation. So in that, you know, if I take a bank, which is very conservative, then I’m the rebel in the bank, and I’m the entrepreneur in the bank who does basically what I think I should do and not what’s coming from the power. (26M13Y)
At this individual level of analysis, we found that informants who had a secure-base partner engaged in professional identity exploration and expansion, whereas those who did not have a secure-base partner reported neither professional identity exploration nor expansion.

**Secure-Base Couples**

At the dyadic level of analysis, in some couples, only one partner perceived the other to be a secure base, whereas in others, both partners perceived each other to be secure bases. We labeled these couples, respectively, unidirectional and bidirectional secure-base couples. We found marked differences between how couples in the unidirectional and bidirectional categories experienced and interpreted the interactions and relationship between their two professional identities and in the consequences of those experiences and interpretations on their professional identities. To describe these differences, we draw on the cases of two couples, one illustrating the unidirectional secure-base category (Ursula and Ulric), and one illustrating the bidirectional secure-base category (Bala and Bachir). We chose these couples because they were representative of their respective categories. We detail their narratives and present accompanying evidence from other couples in the text to further ground our theoretical claims. In Tables 3 and 4 we offer two additional illustrations of each type of couple. Because this part of our model describes dynamics at the dyadic level of analysis, in the following subsection, as well as in the additional data tables, we present data from both partners in a couple as opposed to single quotes from individuals as in the previous subsection.

---

3 At the time of interview, 21 couples were unidirectional secure-base couples (split roughly equally between couples in which the man provided the secure base and those in which the woman did), and 27 were bidirectional secure-base couples. For two couples, there was no evidence of either partner providing a secure base to the other; these couples had been together less than 3 years, a period less than it typically takes to build a secure base (Bowlby, 1988). We do not claim that these numbers are representative of the frequency of unidirectional and bidirectional secure-base couples in general, nor do we use them as part of our analysis or theory building. We simply provide them to give the reader a more detailed description of our data.
**Unidirectional secure-base couples.** As unidirectional secure-base couples negotiated their professional identities vis-à-vis each other, they experienced and interpreted those identities as locked in conflict. We define interpersonal identity conflict as occurring when both partners in a couple experience the enactment of one partner’s professional identity as infringing on the enactment of the other partner’s professional identity. This experience of conflict seemed to stem from the asymmetry of unidirectional couples’ relationships. The asymmetry of the secure-base structure mirrored the asymmetry of the dynamics of reciprocal professional identity influence in that the partner who gave more to the relationship (i.e., provided a secure base) also received less from the relationship (i.e., performed less career exploration and experienced no professional identity expansion). We illustrate these asymmetries and the related identity conflict through the case of Ursula and Ulric.

Ursula (29F23Y) and Ulric (29M23Y) met during their MBA programs 23 years before we interviewed them for this study. On graduation, they moved to New York, where they have lived ever since. They have three teenage children. Ursula pursued a corporate career, rose quickly through the management ranks, and at the time of the interview, was the CEO of a midsized privately held agribusiness. Ulric began his post-MBA career in a large corporation and soon after took the plunge into entrepreneurship. His career had since been volatile, oscillating between exciting ventures and periods of unemployment. At the time of interview, Ulric perceived Ursula as his secure base, whereas Ursula did not find him to be a secure base for her.

Ulric’s transition to the startup world came 4 years into his marriage to Ursula and coincided with the birth of their first child. Having become restless in a corporate job, which he described as “[not] my natural habitat,” he began to explore other options and eventually joined a small tech venture, a move that Ursula had encouraged:
I went into entrepreneurship because I thought that was the best way for me to create financial independence and provide an interesting career path for myself and then independence for the family. And Ursula supported that very well, especially at the beginning; she thought it was exciting.

Ulric recognized that Ursula enabled him to become an entrepreneur. As he put it, “The fact that she’s working has enabled me to do what I have been doing. I wouldn’t have been able to otherwise.” Ursula’s enabling influence went beyond offering financial support. She provided him freedom and encouragement to engage in and explore a risky professional option. Ursula’s lack of interference had been a major factor, as he explained: “I feel like I’ve made my own decisions a lot, without her.”

Instead of exploration, Ursula, like other informants without a secure-base partner, described her professional identity as a treadmill on which she had simply kept walking, “the only thing I have done is woken up every day and got going.” She continued:

What I have right now is a terrific role, and it’s very challenging and very demanding, and I have a lot of responsibility. But I could be doing it in a different context, in a bigger brand, or with bigger headlines out there, in some way, shape or form, with a bigger public company or—you know, who knows? So I guess that is all quite possible. But I’ve just not explored it because I’m like, this is working. I’m not going to break it.

Ursula explicitly linked her lack of exploration to having supported Ulric in his: “I was still underwriting all of his dreams and his risk taking and all the rest.” The experience she described was of not having explored many alternatives, even though she mentioned various interests such as “I would love to teach, I’d love to work in philanthropy, I’d love to—I mean, there’s just, the list is very, very [long]—I would love to do public policy.”

Ulric and Ursula were exemplary of unidirectional secure-base couples in that the partner who received but did not provide a secure base engaged in professional identity exploration, whereas the partner who provided but did not receive a secure base narrated his or her professional identity as having forgone exploration. This asymmetry, driven by the asymmetry in
secure-base provision and receipt, underpinned the interpretation by couples that their professional identities were in conflict with one another. Members of unidirectional secure-base couples often described such conflicts and reported the inevitability of making trade-offs between their respective professional identities. The partner who served as a secure base was invariably cast as making more trade-offs. As Ursula explained, “You know, well, you just have to make compromises along the way, don’t you, to make all of that work.” Ursula was conscious that she had been a secure base for Ulric even when it went against her personal interests. Describing Ulric’s transition into entrepreneurship, she recalled,

I was in hospital, after [first child] was born, Ulric pacing up and down and talking through different [startup] options he had, and being struck at the time by feeling so kind of—actually quite vulnerable myself…. Ulric was like, “Well, we could do this, we could do that, I could do this, I could do this.” And I was sort of like, “What about paying the bills? What about, you know.” I mean, that’s kind of a very vivid memory. But I sort of said, “Okay, fine. We’ll back this for you.” And off he went. And I went back to work.

It is tempting to interpret Ursula as the victim in the couple—a sacrificial lamb to Ulric’s career exploration—yet her quote reveals that the interpersonal identity conflict was as much her doing as his. By willingly accepting her role as a secure base for Ulric, without expecting him to be one for her, Ursula locked herself into the role of secure-base provider and Ulric into the role of beneficiary. Although unspoken, this was a dynamic that both of them were conscious of, and both had incorporated it into their professional identity narratives. As Ulric noted, “I chose the entrepreneurial path, and she has been the stable one, and, you know, being married to somebody who’s pursuing an entrepreneurial path is at times stressful.”

Ursula and Ulric’s case was typical of unidirectional secure-base couples; they took interpersonal professional identity conflict as a given. As the wife in another unidirectional couple said, “With dual careers it is very challenging, right? Especially when both people have PhDs” (21F24Y). That these couples could hardly imagine, it seemed, different relational
arrangements or different work and love lives suggests that over time, their experiences might have become generalized as schemas of how relationships worked. One explanation for this generalization is simply habit. What they most often experienced had become, so to speak, a theory of the (relational) world. Another explanation might be that their regret for missed career options and lost opportunities was a form of displacement of their regret for what they had missed within the couple. The experience of a unidirectional secure-base couple that had struggled with infidelity provides some support for this interpretation.

Since their marriage at a young age, Sévrine (17F16Y) had been a secure base for Sébastien (17M16Y), who was not one for her. Sévrine and Sébastien had agreed that his professional identity exploration would take priority, which led Sévrine to report, “I would have loved to work for a larger company … [but] we agreed that Sébastien’s career would take precedence over mine.” Over the years, Sébastien, who was the CEO of a manufacturing company when we spoke, had come to believe that their arrangement had stirred up Sévrine’s envy. “I feel there’s a bit of her which, to some extent, is envious of what I’ve achieved because I might be too overwhelming for her. … We’ve both done very well, but I’ve done significantly better than her.” In the years before the interview, Sébastien reported, Sévrine had had an extramarital relationship. Although such affairs are not uncommon, what stood out about the incident with this couple was that Sébastien interpreted it in relation to his identity and career. As he explained, “I tried to figure out who the gentleman was. [He was] quite the opposite of what I am. He’s not an alpha male like me, not really career focused, more of a drifter. I think there are bits and pieces of my alpha personality which she doesn’t appreciate.” Sébastien, in other words, narrated Sévrine’s affair as a quest for what he had not given her, or more precisely, for who he had not been to her.
We found, however, that interpersonal identity conflict did not necessarily lead to overt relationship conflict as was the case for Sévérine and Sébastien. Much depended on how couples interpreted the conflict. Whereas some unidirectional secure-base couples, like Sévérine and Sébastien, interpreted identity conflict as requiring sacrifice, others interpreted it as requiring compromise. Takayuki, a specialist consultant whose wife Takara was a high ranking administrator at a large university, explained how he had “made peace” with curtailing his exploration of desired professional identities.

I have made my peace with following her along, wherever that takes us. … I decided not to push my career because I know it would lead to difficult decisions about getting the big offer wherever—New York, or Chicago, or someplace—and then having to make that decision of “okay do I let go of a job paying a quarter of a million or more a year or that balance of money versus quality time together?” (21M24Y)

To summarize, in unidirectional couples, the asymmetry in the secure-base structure mirrored the asymmetry in individual professional identity development within the couple. But the experiences of these couples went beyond asymmetry: Partners experienced their professional identities as being in conflict with each other such that they were forced to make trade-offs, sacrifices, and compromises. In terms of professional identities, the couple was a zero-sum game in which the development of one partner’s professional identity was interpreted to come at the expense of the other’s.

[Table 3 about here]

**Bidirectional secure base couples.** In contrast to unidirectional secure-base couples, as bidirectional couples negotiated their professional identities vis-à-vis each other, they experienced those identities to be in an enhancing relationship. We define interpersonal identity enhancement as occurring when both partners in a couple experience the enactment of one partner’s professional identity as benefiting the enactment of the other’s professional identity.
This experience, our findings suggest, stems from the symmetrical nature of the couple’s secure-base structure: The fact that both partners provided and received a secure base led both to engage in professional identity exploration and expansion and to regard those activities as benefiting themselves and their partner. We illustrate these dynamics through the cases of Bala and Bachir.

Bala (50F27Y) and Bachir (50M27Y) met 27 years prior to the data collection for this study, shortly after both had completed master’s degrees. They married a year after meeting. A few years later they moved to their native country, where they have remained and raised four children, all of whom are now in their late teens and early twenties. Bala pursued a career in public office, having held a number of political posts, at the time of the interview Bala was a high ranking public official. Bachir’s career unfolded in a professional services firm. He rose quickly through the ranks and held various senior positions; at the time of the interview, he was one of the managing partners in the firm. When they were interviewed, Bala and Bachir both perceived each other to be a secure base.

Like all members of bidirectional secure-base couples, both Bala and Bachir reported engaging in professional identity exploration. As Bachir noted, he and Bala had “two very high-risk careers.” Although Bachir had remained in the same firm for most of his professional life, he frequently moved between various roles and was able to pursue his passions within the firm and to grow his professional identity. As he described, “I’ve probably moved every sort of, let’s say, every 3 years, but many of my roles have been international.” Meanwhile, Bala had taken on various political roles; for example, she told the story of how “just after the [9/11 attacks she was promoted] into a difficult brief of overseas development, and within 6 weeks having to go out to [war torn country] on my own…. It was a very scary point.” Both credited the other as not only encouraging but in many ways enabling their professional identity exploration. Bala noted
Bachir’s response when she was offered her first senior political role while their children were still in elementary school: “He said, ‘Well, you’re ridiculous to even think twice—this is a promotion, you’ve got to go for it. You will cope, we will cope.’ And he was right.”

Following a similar pattern, Andreas, who transitioned from heading an international development agency to being an independent freelancer in his field, noted, “It’s been essential to have Alice’s presence in my life, or our life together, in fact, has been sort of the stability that allowed me to do that. … I don't think I’d have been able to survive without Alice” (40M6Y). At the same time, his partner, Alice, an ambassador who transitioned to a post in a war-torn capital, explained how she had “wanted to go to [world region] again” but had “hesitated in applying for [war torn capital] because I knew it would mean a separate life. But then Andreas very much encouraged me to do it, you know. And then, yes that was difficult to resist” (40F6Y). As her partner concluded, “We mutually work to encourage the other to flourish” (40M6Y).

The symmetry within these couples underpinned both partners’ interpretation that their professional identities were mutually enhancing. As Bala noted, Bachir’s career had not impinged on her own professional identity exploration: “To be honest with you, I don't think it has held me back.” Instead, Bachir summed up what they had contributed to the couple by saying “I might have earned more than Bala, but at the end of the day, becoming a [name of political role] is like having a gold medal…. That’s something that’s more valuable, in one sense, than money.” Thus, as a couple, Bachir and Bala were jointly wealthy and acclaimed, things that both could enjoy but neither, in their minds, could have accrued alone. Bala and Bachir’s case was exemplary of bidirectional couples who rejected the notion that the professional identity development of one partner occurred at the expense of the other. Rather, they narrated it as being
done on behalf of the couple such that both partners achieved and grew more together than they could have independently. As the head of a hedge fund whose wife worked in the arts noted,

Our careers are, because they’re so varied and different, I think together they make us richer because they open our eyes to different areas; they give us access to a different type of people, you know different people that are involved in the arts, different people involved in finance tech, and that makes us together more rounded, more informed, more interesting as people. So I think our careers enhance us as people. (18M8Y)

This sense of mutual enhancement—that both partners were better people as a result of the other’s professional life—was common in bidirectional couples. The founder of a retail chain reflecting on this mutual enhancement said, “I think we’ve both become better persons and also more successful in our careers because of the other person” (26F13Y).

Over and above interpersonal identity enhancement, we found that members of bidirectional couples partly narrated their individual professional identities as joint self-definitions. A CEO explained that although “we know that we need to have a bubble where I have my own identity and she has her own identity,” what was actually the case was that “our family cell is probably stronger than any of what we do outside.” He continued, “I just observed that’s the way we have learned to grow. … We’re very much a fusion-type family where her success is the success of the family as a whole; my success is the success of the family as a whole” (31M20Y).

Couples enacted this partial merging of professional identities through joint projects that brought together both partners’ professional identities. Bala and Bachir, for example, having both reached the peak of their careers, were now contemplating a joint career transition. Bala explained:

We could both go and do something together. I mean, I did joke to him that we could go off and be missionaries—why not? And he looked at me—I wasn’t terribly serious about that - but I did say that we should think a bit out [of] the box. We’re both quite entrepreneurial—our whole family’s quite entrepreneurial; the kids are pushing him quite
hard for the idea of setting up a company or running a company together. I mean, we’re actually at that rather nice “blank sheet of paper” stage, although it’s a bit scary.

This melding of professional lives into projects was common. A couple of successful entrepreneurs, for example, had set up “a foundation with some part of the profits of our company, supporting NGOs in [developing country where his business was based] and in [developing country of her origin]” (45F23Y).

To summarize, in bidirectional secure-base couples, the symmetry of the secure-base structure was mirrored by the symmetry of professional identity influence in that each partner gave equally to the relationship (i.e., provided a secure base) and also received equally from it (i.e., performed career exploration and experienced professional identity expansion). But the experience of these couples went beyond symmetry to positive synergy: Not only did the partners reap individual benefits in terms of developing their own professional identities, but these professional identities enhanced each other such that they felt they had achieved together much more than they could have on their own. In terms of professional identities, the couple had become more than the sum of its parts.

[Table 4 about here]

DISCUSSION

Building on these findings, we offer a model (see Figure 1) that illuminates the psychological underpinnings of how members of dual-career couples influence each other’s professional identities and experience and interpret the interactions between them. It underscores how the secure-base structure within the couple is key to these psychological dynamics and explains how that structure influences each individual’s professional identity construction as well as the dyadic-level coconstruction of the relationship between the couple’s professional identities. We present the model here, ground it in existing research, and discuss its theoretical
implications for research on dual-career couples, identity, and attachment theory. We end by outlining the practical implications of our findings, the limitations of our study, and suggestions for future research.

[Figure 1 about here]

At the individual level of analysis, how partners influenced each other’s professional identities depended on whether they relied on each other as a secure base. People who had a secure-base partner engaged in professional identity exploration and expansion (depicted in Figure 1 by a dashed line surrounding and expanding the individual professional identity of the person(s) who receives a secure base). Attachment theory predicts that people who have a secure base will feel safe enough to autonomously explore their world (Bowlby, 1988; Feeney, 2004). Over and above confirming this connection, we found that people wove their experience of exploration into the narrative of their professional identity. Specifically, their narratives featured stories of seeking and then pursuing their desired career path even when this meant making risky moves. The exploration enabled by a secure-base partner was thus integral to people’s experience and interpretation of professional becoming (Allport, 1955). This finding reveals that people who receive a secure base not only engage in exploratory behaviors but internalize it and integrate it into their identity.

Professional identity exploration was accompanied by identity expansion whereby people incorporated facets of their partner’s professional and/or personal identities into their own professional identity. Existing literature accounts for the ways in which people’s professional identities are shaped by socialization in organizations or professions (Van Mannen and Schein, 1979; Pratt, 2000), the influence of role models (Ibarra, 1999), peers (Van Mannen, 1997; Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton, 2000), and mentors (Kram, 1988; Higgins and Kram, 2001;
Ragins and Kram, 2007). Each of these factors mold people’s professional identities to a set of institutional, organizational, or local norms, thus in some way standardizing them to their context. In contrast, our findings highlight a way that people’s professional identities become somewhat unique to, or stand out in, their professional context, thus highlighting a mechanism by which individuals construct unique professional identities. This expansion does not replace other factors that shape people’s professional identity but is layered on top of them. People who expanded their professional identity, therefore, held professional identities that were aligned with their context yet unique to them, which supported their optimal distinctiveness (Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006). The absence of identity expansion in people without a secure-base partner suggests that expansion does not result from mere proximity to a romantic partner (Aron et al., 1991; Aron, Aron, and Smollan, 1992) but from the function the partner serves, which can lead (or not) people to incorporate them into their sense of self.

At the dyadic level of analysis, we found that each partner’s professional identity was further influenced by a set of identity dynamics that the couple cocreated and that was driven by the secure-base structure of the couple. The relationship between the professional identities of members of unidirectional secure-base couples involved identity conflict, which we define as the enactment of one partner’s professional identity in a way that is experienced as infringing on the enactment of the other partner’s professional identity. This dynamic occurs at the interpersonal level. It is thus distinct from, albeit related to, the intraindividual identity conflict documented in the existing literature (Ramarajan, 2015), which occurs when one individual holds two identities that conflict. In such cases, to avoid conflict the person must either draw clear time and space boundaries between the identities or prioritize the enactment of one over the other (Stryker and Burke, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009). We found that interpersonal identity conflict drove couples
to prioritize the enactment and development of one partner’s professional identity at the expense of the other person’s. Interestingly, as the case of Ulric and Ursula illustrated, the person whose professional identity development was prioritized was not necessarily the one who earned the most money or whose external career was the most successful (Becker, 1981) but the one who received from but did not provide a secure base to the other. The interpersonal secure-base structure set up an asymmetrical relationship dynamic that locked one partner into the role of supporting the other’s development and the other into the role of being supported. Although the partner in unidirectional couples who provided but did not receive a secure base did not experience professional identity exploration and expansion, his or her professional identity did not remain untouched by the relationship. Instead, interpersonal identity conflict shaped his or her professional identity narrative. Specifically, that person’s professional identity were narrated as constrained; for some this was in terms of compromises and trade-offs, whereas for others it was in terms of sacrifices.

The relationship between the professional identities of members of bidirectional secure-base couples, in contrast, involved identity enhancement, which we define as occurring when the enactment of one partner’s professional identity is experienced as benefiting the enactment of the other’s. This took place at the interpersonal level and is distinct from intraindividual identity enhancement, which refers to enhancement between two identities held within one individual (Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009; Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar, 2010). Interpersonal identity enhancement was evidenced by the partners’ professional identity exploration being cast as complementary, done in sync with each other and on behalf of the couple. In such couples, the interpersonal secure-base structure set up a symmetrical relational dynamic that positioned both partners as supporters and beneficiaries of development. Moreover, rather than narrating their
professional identities solely in individualistic terms, partners narrated their professional identities, in part, as joint or collective self-definitions (represented on the right in Figure 1 by a dashed line surrounding and expanding both individuals’ professional identities). Thus, in terms of levels of abstraction, the professional identity of each partner in a bidirectional couple becomes both a dyad-level identity describing the individual as a professional in terms of the couple and an individual-level identity describing the individual as an autonomous professional.

**Theoretical Implications**

Bringing to bear attachment theory on theories concerning the maintenance of dual-careers and professional identity construction is the most novel aspect of our approach and theorizing. We build a bridge that has long been called for (Barsade, Ramarajan, and Westen, 2009) but not yet built, to our knowledge. We hope that our study demonstrates that this bridge is generative because of the relevance of attachment theory to many areas of organizational theorizing. Attachment theory deepens existing organizational theories by revealing the psychological dynamics of relationships that explain why people make specific choices and interpretations of their work, lives, selves, and relationships. It also broadens existing organizational theories by honing in on dyadic structures and outcomes, offering new insights about how people in a relationship mutually influence each other.

In the following sections we describe the key theoretical implications of our work for research on dual-career couples, professional identity construction, and attachment theory.

**Dual-career couples.** The majority of existing conceptualizations about how couples sustain dual careers concern the practical strategies these individuals use to manage and prioritize those careers vis-à-vis each other (Hertz, 1986; Becker and Moen, 1999; Pixley, 2009b;
We expand the focus of these theories to encompass the ways that members of dual-career couples influence who each partner becomes as a professional (Allport, 1955). We show that by providing a secure base, people can significantly influence each other’s professional paths. They can encourage their partners to explore and actualize desired professional identities and enhance the content of their partners’ professional identities with their own attributes. Thus, while current theories frame partners as being either constrainers or enablers of each other’s careers, our theory reframes partners as active shapers of each other’s working selves.

Perhaps our most significant contribution to theory on dual-career couples stems from our insight that couples have either a unidirectional or bidirectional secure-base structure, which drives interpersonal professional identity conflict or enhancement, respectively. Existing dual-career couple work is steeped in the language of trade-offs and compromises, underpinned by an implicit assumption that managing two demanding careers is a zero-sum game (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1976; Hertz, 1986; Blair-Loy, 2003; Stone, 2007; Clarke, 2015). Although our analysis of unidirectional secure-base couples aligns with this work, our analysis of bidirectional couples reveals those who have a very different interpretation of their lives and work, their individual selves, and each other. Their subjective experience of having dual careers was that they had grown and achieved more as a couple than they could have alone or in a single-career couple. This finding suggests that dual-career researchers would do well to reframe the question of how couples can sustain dual careers to instead asking how and when couples can benefit from having dual careers.

Lifting the lid on these psychological dynamics also offers fresh insights into the practical arrangements that existing research on dual-career couples has studied extensively. In
our sample, the question of whose professional identity development was prioritized—and indeed, whether the couple did prioritize one partner’s professional identity development to begin with—was not answered by factors suggested in previous research, such as gender (Bielby and Bielby, 1992; Tichenor, 2005) or earning potential (Becker, 1981; Winkler and Rose, 2000), but by the secure-base structure within the couple. Thus, what partners gave and received psychologically had a profound impact on what they gave and received practically.

**Professional identity construction.** The notion that identity construction is a relational process lies at the foundation of identity theorizing. Yet most existing research takes an individual, not a relational, approach to understanding how close others influence a person’s identity construction (Lepisto, Crosina, and Pratt, 2015). By using the dyadic unit of analysis, we reveal a true relational picture of professional identity construction and surface new dyadic-level identity constructs. Specifically, our finding that a couple’s secure-base structure determines whether the partners interpret their work identities as conflicting or enhancing each other has significant theoretical implications for identity research.

The existing literature has devoted much attention to understanding the relationships between individuals’ multiple identities (Van Sell, Brief, and Schuler, 1981; Brook, Garcia, and Fleming, 2008; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2009; Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009; Creed, DeJordy, and Lok, 2010; Horton, Bayerl, and Jacobs, 2014; Ramarajan, 2015), with an important substream specifically investigating the relationships between an individual’s work and family identities (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Rothbard, 2001; Ruderman et al., 2002; Rothbard, Phillips, and Dumas, 2005; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). This wealth of research has led to valuable insights into the nature and effects of intraindividual identity conflict and enhancement. For instance, we know that one way individuals negotiate their identity conflicts is by
prioritizing one identity over the other (Greenhaus and Powell, 2003; Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep, 2006) and that when a person simultaneously expresses two enhancing identities, he or she experiences an increase in performance and personal growth (Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Rothbard and Ramarajan, 2009; Ramarajan, 2015). Our new constructs of interpersonal identity conflict and enhancement show effects that are similar but at the dyadic level. Thus, rather than a person prioritizing one of his or her identities over another, a couple prioritizes one member’s identity over the other member’s identity; likewise, rather than an individual experiencing increases in performance or personal growth, the couple experience such benefits. Identifying these interpersonal-level effects shows that the importance of these constructs transcends the individual level of analysis and broadens existing theorizing by showing how interpersonal identity configurations impact individuals’ professional identity construction.

We also contribute to existing theories by demonstrating the important influence nonwork relationships can have on professional identity construction. Whereas existing studies focus on the impact of work relationships (e.g. Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), we show that people’s professional identities can be potently shaped by their spouses. We found that romantic partners can impact the attributes of one’s work identity through expansion, that is, introjecting attributes from the romantic partner’s work identity into one’s own. A number of psychology studies have shown that individuals in close relationships incorporate each other’s identity attributes into their own sense of self (Aron et al., 1991; Aron and Aron, 1996; Aron, Mashek, and Aron, 2004). Our findings deepen this existing self-expansion theory in two ways. First, we show that self-expansion is driven by the psychological function a partner serves; it only occurs when the partner provides a secure base. This finding challenges the existing view of self-expansion as being the result of mere proximity.
and/or repeated interactions with a romantic partner (Aron et al., 1991; Aron, Aron, and Smollan, 1992) and has profound implications for understanding the psychological underpinning of a variety of vicarious experiences (e.g. Decety and Grèzes, 2006; Goldstein and Cialdini, 2007; Galinsky, Wang, and Ku, 2008; Gino and Galinsky, 2012). Second, although existing work focuses on how spouses impact each others’ nonwork identities, we show how self-expansion can cross the work/nonwork divide. This finding contributes to the growing scholarly consensus that work and family are no longer “separate worlds” (Kanter, 1977), distinct from and unaffected by each other (e.g., Ramarajan and Reid, 2013).

Taking these findings together, we suggest that couples act as micro identity workspaces for their members. The concept of identity workspaces, defined as “institutions that provide a holding environment for individuals’ identity work” (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 44) has thus far been theorized and researched at the institutional and organizational level. Our study suggest that relationships themselves can also act as identity workspaces. The presence of monogamy to satisfy erotic and relational needs in modern society (Phillips, 2010) makes spouses the most salient relationship that many adults have in a period of their lives when their careers are also central. The importance of that relationship has been reinforced by the increasingly short-term, instrumental nature of the relationship between workers and their employing organizations (Rousseau, 1990; Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). It may be that marriage as an institution compensates for the lack of organizational identification and makes people more willing to take the risks required to thrive in contemporary careers. Our findings also highlight that such micro identity workspaces take different forms and that the form taken is shaped by the attachment relationship of the couple.
Attachment theory. While the main contribution of our research is to bring attachment theory to bear on organizational theories, our work also expands attachment theory in three meaningful ways. As Bowlby, who coined the term attachment noted, “All of us from cradle to grave are happiest when life is organized as a series of excursions, long or short, from the secure base provided by our attachment figure(s)” (Bowlby, 1988: 62). Despite his intention that attachment theory be applied across the human life span, most work with it has either been in relation to children or has looked at the impact of childhood attachment patterns on adult processes and outcomes (e.g. Schirmer and Lopez, 2001; Pines, 2004). Moreover, even though the connection between having a secure base and engaging in exploratory behavior lies at the foundation of attachment theory, “there has been little theoretical elaboration of the interplay between attachment and exploration in adulthood” (Feeney and Van Vleet, 2010, p. 226).

Therefore, our first contribution to attachment theory is to demonstrate the importance of the attachments people form in adulthood for their continuing exploratory behavior. We show a clear difference between the exploration of adults in dual-career couples who have a secure base versus those who lack one. Having a secure base enables people to engage in professional identity exploration and pursue their desired professional path. Perhaps most significantly, these findings apply in the domain of work, which is as central to the lives of many adults (Gini, 2001) as play is to the lives of the children about whom attachment theory was first developed (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Second, although attachment bonds are “shared dyadic programme[s]” (Bowlby, 1982/1969: 377), which can be reciprocal between adults (Hazan and Shaver, 1994), research often uses an individual level of analysis that investigates the impact of attachment on only one partner (e.g. Davidovitz et al., 2007). Even when researchers hone in on the dyad to investigate
how partners cocreate attachment patterns, the reported outcomes (e.g., exploratory behavior and levels of well-being) remain individual (e.g. Feeney, 2004; Hudson et al., 2014). In taking the dyad as the unit of analysis, our study introduces the concept of a secure-base structure and the two different forms this can take: unidirectional or bidirectional. We show that the form of a couple’s secure-base structure has a set of consequences not previously identified in attachment research and theorizing. Namely, couples with a unidirectional secure-base structure experience interpersonal identity conflict, whereas those with a bidirectional secure-base structure experience interpersonal identity enhancement. These findings highlight that our attachment relationships in adulthood impact not only our individual ability to engage in exploration but also how we experience and interpret our lives and work vis-à-vis each other.

Third, although original formulations of attachment theory link secure base and identity development by stating that people discover and shape their identities by exploring the world (Bowlby, 1988; Rice, 1990; Shaver and Mikulincer, 1997; Feeney and Van Vleet, 2010), our theoretical model explains how identity is shaped by the provider of the secure base. Specifically, we show that having a secure-base partner not only leads to professional identity exploration but also to professional identity expansion whereby a person incorporates aspects of his or her secure-base provider’s identity into his or her own. Thus, it is not just the function of a secure base that fosters our identity development but the unique identity attributes held by our secure-base provider that shape who we are and who we become (Allport, 1955).

**Practical Implications**

Dual-career couples reflect the zeitgeist of today’s professional world (Catalyst, 1998; Parker and Arthur, 2004; Abele and Volmer, 2011; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Although the proportion of professionals in dual-career couples continues to rise, the societal
narratives concerning how to survive and thrive in them remain curiously stuck. Academics and social commentators alike portray sustaining dual-careers as a Herculean task that requires significant trade-offs and sacrifices from both parties (Moen and Roehling, 2005; Stone, 2007; Slaughter, 2015). A key finding of our study is that this cultural narrative of struggle, trade-off, and compromise does not represent the experience of all dual-career couples. Instead, some of those we interviewed clearly interpret their careers as mutually enhancing and beneficial. This is important because, when making sense of their experience and constructing their identities, people draw heavily from available cultural scripts (Campbell, 1994; Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1996; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Shifting the societal narrative, or at least adding a counternarrative, can therefore potentially help dual-career couples coauthor their experience in more positive ways.

Most research on dual-career couples focuses on practical arrangements and thus has only limited advice to offer these couples. Understanding the psychological arrangements of dual-career couples would, on the other hand, likely help researchers to have more useful advice and perspective to offer to these individuals. Such advice is all the more relevant in an increasingly boundariless, self-directed, extraorganizational career landscape (Sennett, 1998; Cappelli, 1999; Ashford, George, and Blatt, 2007; Arthur, 2008; Bidwell and Briscoe, 2010) in which the influence of people’s life partners is ever more important. Our research suggests that dual career-couples should concern themselves as much with their psychological arrangements as they do with their practical ones. By working on their relationship and attempting to provide a secure base to each other, couples may be able to sustain a bidirectional secure-base structure that reaps both individual and dyadic benefits.
Limitations and Future Research

As is the case with all attempts to build theory inductively from accounts gathered from a specific population, this study is vulnerable to generalizability challenges. First, dual-career couples are an elite subset of dual-earner couples, and given their unique need to sustain two demanding work identities, it is an empirical question as to whether the findings from this study generalize to all dual-earner couples. Specifically, while it stands to reason that dual-earner, and if fact, all couples, will have a unidirectional or bidirectional secure-base structure, the impact of this on the couple may vary. In dual-career couples, for whom work is a central source of self-definition, it is perhaps not surprising that the exploratory behavior enabled by having a secure-base partner is conducted in the domain of work. For other couples in which different life domains are central, exploratory behavior may be more evident in domains aside from work.

The relatively large and diverse nature of our sample does give us confidence that our findings will have naturalistic generalizability to other dual-career couples (Stake, 1978). Unfortunately, no same-sex couples who met our criteria for being part of the research volunteered to participate. Although some scholars have suggested that the work-family dynamics among same-sex couples may be qualitatively different from those of mixed-sex couples because of the lack of gender roles (Budworth, Enns, and Rowbotham, 2008), we see no reason why the attachment patterns should vary based on gender. Again, this would be an interesting avenue to explore.

Most research studies raise at least as many questions as they answer. The novelty of our theory building, which brings together three literatures that have as yet remained largely separate, raises an unusual number of questions. Here we focus on what we believe are three of the most exciting avenues for future research.
We believe there are immense opportunities to deepen and broaden existing organizational theories by applying attachment theory to the domain of work. Although some social scientists have applied attachment theory to work by looking at the connection between worker’s general attachment patterns and workplace outcomes such as stress (Schirmer and Lopez, 2001) and burnout (Pines, 2004), there has not yet been research on its relevance to work relationships. Many organizational phenomena—from trust and relationship repair (Pratt and Dirks, 2007; Kim, Dirks, and Cooper, 2009; Gillespie and Dietz, 2009) to mentoring and peer support (Kram, 1988; Gersick, Bartunek, and Dutton, 2000; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003) to leadership (Heifetz, 1994; Hogg, 2001; DeRue and Ashford, 2010)—are relational. Using attachment theory to investigate what lies beneath the surface of these relationships, as we have done, has the potential both to explain these phenomena in new ways and to identify new dyadic-level effects. As an example, researchers have made significant progress investigating when and how people give care to and receive it from each other in organizations as well as what the effects are of such interactions (Kahn, 1993; Rynes et al., 2012; Barsade and O’Neill, 2014). This organizational caregiving represents the safe-haven function of attachment relationships (Kahn, 1996; Louis, 1996). As yet unexplored are when and to what effect people in organizations provide a secure base for each other, thus encouraging each other’s exploratory behavior. With the expectation in modern organizations that individuals will chart their own career path and create their own opportunities to grow (Sonenshein et al., 2013), understanding the power of relationships in this area is important. We hypothesize that this could occur in peer-peer, mentor-mentee, boss-subordinate, and leader-follower relationships, all of which are worthy of future research in terms of secure base dynamics.

Cutting-edge theorizing on multiple identities at the individual level has called on
researchers to investigate intraindividual identity configurations (Ramarajan, 2015). Our study indicates that it would be equally useful to investigate interpersonal identity configurations as a way to parse out dyadic mechanisms by which people construct their identities. This would broaden existing scholarship that shows how our relational partners act as triggers (Pratt, 2000), shapers, (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009), and validators (Van Maanen, 2010) of our identities. It would also require scholars to adopt a truly relational approach by investigating both parties in a relationship rather than focusing on one key actor.

Over time, relationships change and people’s attachment patterns may evolve (Hudson et al., 2014). Although not presented in our findings, we found some evidence that over the long term, couples’ secure-base structures could change. In our sample, changes that involved a switch from a unidirectional to a bidirectional secure-base structure or vice versa seemed to be triggered by a jolt, “a discrepant or surprising event that causes people to pause and reflect on their experience” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 716). These might include an unexpected layoff, the birth of a child, or the death of a close family member as well as a slow buildup of information that reaches a tipping point (Ibarra, 2003). An interesting avenue for future research on dual-career couples would be to take a longitudinal perspective—that is, to follow couples over several years or even decades—to develop a picture of how their psychological and practical arrangements change over time. This would also contribute to the attachment theory literature, which currently lacks detailed longitudinal studies that show how adults’ attachment relationships may evolve over time.

Professionals often publically attribute their success to their spouses, and current popular wisdom holds that the most important career choice a person makes is who to marry (Sandberg, 2013). These sentiments, like much career literature, are focused on how people attain and
sustain progressively more senior roles. Our study shows that it is not only for economic or objective career progression that our spouses matter, but, perhaps more importantly, it is for their role in shaping how we inhabit our professional roles and wider lives. Although our spouses may or may not impact what we do in our professional lives, they have a profound impact on how we interpret those lives, and who we become through them.
REFERENCES

Abele, A. E. and J. Volmer. 

Acker, J. 


Ainsworth, M. D. S., et al. 

Allport, G. W. 
1955  "Becoming: basic considerations of a psychology of personality." : Yale University Press.


Aron, A. 

Aron, A. P., D. J. Mashek, and E. N. Aron. 

Aron, E. N. and A. Aron. 

Aron, A., E. N. Aron, and D. Smollan. 

Arthur, M. B. 


Bielby, W. T. and D. D. Bielby.  


Bird, G. and A. Schnurman-Crook.  

Blair-Loy, M.  

Blumer, H.  
1954  "What is wrong with social theory?" American Sociological Review: 3-10.

Blustein, D. L., M. S. Prezioso, and D. P. Schultheiss.  

Bond, J. T., et al.  

Bowen, G.  

Bowlby, J.  

Bowlby, J.  

Brook, A. T., J. Garcia, and M. A. Fleming.  


Catalyst. 1998  "Two careers, one marriage: Making it work in the workplace." .


Decety, J. and J. Grèzes.
2006 "The power of simulation: imagining one's own and other's behavior." Brain research, 1079: 4-14.

DeRue, D. S. and S. J. Ashford.

Drigotas, S. M., et al.

Dutton, J. E. and E. D. Heaphy.

Dutton, J. E., L. M. Roberts, and J. Bednar.


Ely, R. J. and D. E. Meyerson.
2010 "An organizational approach to undoing gender: The unlikely case of offshore oil platforms." Research in Organizational Behavior, 30: 3-34.

Erikson, E. H.

Feeney, B. C. and M. Van Vleet.

Feeney, B. C.

Feeney, B. C. and R. L. Thrush.


Goffman, E.

Goldstein, N. J. and R. B. Cialdini.

Green, D. H. and T. J. Zenisek.

Greenhaus, J. H. and G. N. Powell.
2003  "When work and family collide: Deciding between competing role demands." Organizational behavior and human decision processes, 90: 291-303.

Greenhaus, J. H. and N. J. Beutell.

Greenhaus, J. H. and G. N. Powell.

Grey, C.

Hall, D. T. and D. E. Chandler.

Hall, F. S. and D. T. Hall.
1979  "two career couple." Addison-Wesley.

Harvey, M.

Harvey, M., N. Napier, and M. Moeller.

Hazan, C. and P. Shaver.
Hazan, C. and P. R. Shaver.  

Hazan, C. and P. R. Shaver.  

Heifetz, R.  

Hertz, R.  

Higgins, M. C. and K. E. Kram.  

Hochschild, A.  

Hogg, M. A.  

Horton, K. E., P. S. Bayerl, and G. Jacobs.  

Hudson, N. W., et al.  

Ibarra, H., M. Kilduff, and W. Tsai.  

Ibarra, H.  

Ibarra, H.  
Ibarra, H. and K. Lineback.

Ibarra, H. and R. Barbulescu.

James, W.
1890/1957 "The principles of psychology." : Dover Publications Inc.

Kahn, W. A.

Kahn, W. A.

Kahn, W. A.

Kamptner, N. L.

Kanter, R. M.

Kaufman, G. and P. Uhlenberg.

Kegan, R.

Ketterson, T. U. and D. L. Blustein.

Kim, P. H., K. T. Dirks, and C. D. Cooper.


Moen, P. and S. Sweet.  

Moen, P. and P. Roehling.  


Parker, P. and M. B. Arthur.  
2004  "Giving voice to the dual-career couple." British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 32: 3-23.

Petriglieri, G. and Petriglieri J.L.  

Phillips, A.  

Pines, A. M.  

Pixley, J. E. and P. Moen.  

Pixley, J. E.  

Pixley, J. E.  

Pratt, M. G. and E. Crosina.  

Pratt, M. G. and K. T. Dirks.  
Pratt, M. G.

Pratt, M. G. and P. O. Foreman.

Pratt, M. G., K. W. Rockmann, and J. B. Kaufmann.


Ramarajan, L.

Ramarajan, L. and E. Reid.

Rapoport, R. and R. N. Rapoport.
1976 "Dual-career families re-examined: new integrations of work & family." : M. Robertson London.

Reid, E.

Rice, K. G.


Robinson, S. L. and D. M. Rousseau.


Sennett, R. 2006  "The culture of the new capitalism." New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University.
Shaver, M. and P. R. Mikulincer. 


Slaughter, A. 

Sonenshein, S., et al 

Spradley, J. P. 

Stake, R. E. 

Stone, P. 

Stryker, S. and P. J. Burke. 

Sveningsson, S. F. and M. Alvesson. 

Swann, W. B. and J. K. Bosson. 
2010 "Self and identity." Handbook of social psychology.

Tharenou, P. 

Thornborrow, T. and A. D. Brown. 
Tichenor, V.  
2005  "Maintaining men's dominance: Negotiating identity and power when she earns more."  
Sex Roles, 53: 191-205.

2014  "Women in the labor force: A databook."  

Van Maanen, J.  
2010  "Identity work and control in occupational communities."  In S. Sitkin, L. B. Cardinal,  
and K. M. Bijlsma-Frankema (eds.), Organizational Control: 111-166: Cambridge University  
Press.

Van Mannen, J. and E. H. Schein.  
1979  "Toward a theory of organizational socialization."  In B. M. Staw and L. L. Cummings  

Van Mannen, J.  
1997  "Identity work: Notes on the personal identity of police officers."  Working Paper,  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge.

Van Sell, M., A. P. Brief, and R. S. Schuler.  
1981  "Role conflict and role ambiguity: Integration of the literature and directions for future  
research."  Human relations, 34: 43-71.

Wharton, A. S. and M. Blair-Loy.  
2006  "Long Work Hours and Family Life A Cross-National Study of Employees' Concerns."  

Winkler, A. E. and D. C. Rose.  
Table 1: Sample Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Couples / Individuals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of couples</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average age (range)</td>
<td>46 (27 - 61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average relationship length (range)</td>
<td>16 (2 -30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples with no children</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couples with 1-4 children</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals in corporate careers</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals in entrepreneurial careers</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals in professional careers *</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals in other careers **</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most junior representative jobs
- Local VP multinational business
- Manager strategy consultancy
- Midlevel civil servant
- Junior lawyer/Doctor
- Founder Small startup

Most senior representative jobs
- CEO multinational business
- Head partner strategy consultancy
- Senior politician/ambassador
- Senior lawyer/doctor
- Founder/CEO large business
- Portfolio career board memberships

* Professional careers included those in medicine and law
** Other careers included those in the not-for-profit, academic, political, and diplomatic domains
### Table 2: Evidence for Secure-Base Construct and Individual-Level Identity Effects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second-Order Themes</th>
<th>Representative First-Order Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Encouraged exploration | “[Name] helped me realize my ambitions and realize that I can achieve my ambitions, whereas I would have probably been a bit more conservative, thinking…. She’s kind of encouraged me to step out of that and achieve more than I thought I could and think more boldly, take more risk. (18M8Y)  
“He’s always the one that is pushing me to negotiate harder and take on bigger things than maybe I think I’m capable of. So I definitely think my career’s further along for his encouragement.” (31F20Y)  
“I think that I have only been able to do and achieve all the things that I’ve done actually partly because of the person that I’m married to….I think we are exceptional in a lot of ways. I do think that one of the biggest influences on what you end up doing career-wise is your husband’s attitude. [My career] is just as important to him as his career.” (23F16Y) |
| No unnecessary interference | [During a difficult career transition involving lots of internal politics] “He was a great listener, I bounced the whole thing off him the whole way through, but ultimately the decision was mine, and he never passed comment either way as to whether I’d done the right thing.” (15F7Y)  
“[Second long-term partner name] never, you know, in any way, in particular compared to my first wife, has said, “You should do this/you should do that/you’re worth more than blah-blah-blah.” (38M6Y)  
“He never tells me, “Do this/do that.” (45F23Y) |
| Continued availability | “[He’s] always present when I have a doubt or when I have a question, “[discussing a career setback] she was always there every step of the way and incredibly supportive and incredibly understanding, and trying to help and trying to help me see who I was, you know, and I think she understood the loss of confidence and all that. And so, I mean, she was there all the time.” (36M20Y)  
“He always encourages me, you know, like when I hesitate and I’m tired. Because he is very calm and very quiet, he has always much humor, you know, about many things around the professional field.” (42F29Y)  
“I] … didn’t get that role [a promotion to lead a high-profile business area] that I felt that I had earned [so] I was feeling really frustrated; I was just dying to vent so I called [wife] and told her and she was like, ‘What the hell?’ She was like angry. And that night she took me out for beers and was telling me, ‘This is their problem, not your problem.’ ” (12M13Y) |
| Professional identity exploration | “Before I met him I think I pretty much wanted to continue my studies, to pursue my PhD…. And I think somehow like I got somehow like an influence [from husband], it’s actually interesting to explore what’s outside of school. I didn’t really imagine working for a corporate before I met him, to be honest.” (6F7Y) |
| Professional identity expansion | “I used to be quite eager and impatient, and he’s someone who really—he lets things happen and he waits, and very often, you know, they happen by themselves, without you putting a lot of energy in. He’s someone who is really about letting people [have] freedom in their work—so not pushing people to do things and just letting them [have] their space. So I became a lot less pushy, less controlling, and of course I saw how effective it was.” (37F7Y) “Her emotional intelligence is off the chart and mine’s at about zero, I think, so I found it useful to get her insight into situations with people. [I’m] better at managing people, managing personal relationships within my organization.” (2M3Y) “I think she definitely keeps me—she kind of helps me bring out the more objective and rational side of my personality because she’s one of the most rational people I’ve ever met, which [laughs] I think is wonderful—and she kind of brings that out in me in terms of how I make decisions and stuff.” (12M13Y) |
Table 3: Unidirectional Secure-Base Couples: Two Additional Illustrations of Interpersonal Identity Conflict

Illustration 1
At the time of interview, Ruman (43M16Y) was an independent consultant in the financial sector, and Raashid (43F16Y) was a senior executive in a medical equipment firm. Raashid perceived Ruman to be her secure base, whereas Ruman did not find her to be a secure base for him. Their relationship began with Raashid making an international career move to join Ruman in the United States, shortly after which she became pregnant. During this period, which Raashid described as “a lot to handle,” Ruman stepped into the role of Raashid’s secure base, supporting her and pushing her to continue her explorations. As Raashid noted, he was able to hold my hand, when I needed him he was there. …[After the birth of their baby] he said, “You need to work, you’re not made for home.” Raashid attributed her subsequent career success to him, saying “The [career] risks I’ve taken and the changes I’ve made I would never ever dream of doing if I wasn’t in the couple.” At the same time, she recognized that “Ruman’s made a lot more sacrifices than I have.” Ruman had a clear sense of the moment when the asymmetry in their relationship was cemented:

There was a turning point for my career around [year] that really affected our marriage. I realized that the career I was going to, which is consulting where you’re traveling four out of five days, you know, I wouldn’t be able to handle that as well as handling my personal situation. So there was a trade-off to be done in terms of which one [I would focus on] … I became an independent consultant but there was an issue [because] … I believe that it was a joint decision, whereas she believed that I made it just on my own.

From this point on, Ruman described feeling “I could not, on a regular basis, be boundary-less.” He went on to note the conflict between the enactment of their professional identities: “Because Raashid is working, she travels significantly. Sometimes I do get projects that [involved] travel, you know, three/four/five days. But I can never imaging doing this and maintaining a dual career.” Raashid also recognized this conflict and that Ruman had sacrificed more than she had. She contemplated, “I do sometimes wonder if I’d made sacrifices [whether] … he could have gone further.”

Illustration 2
After a lengthy friendship, Wilbert (16M4Y) and Wanda (16F4Y) became romantically involved in their late thirties, quickly married, and had a daughter. Wilbert perceived Wanda to be his secure base, whereas Wanda did not find him to be a secure base for her. At the beginning of their relationship, Wilbert, who was an accountant, “got offered a partner in another firm and Wanda was extremely supportive of it and has been instrumental coaching wise and sort of to prep me for the interviews and tracking of the business plan.” Although Wilbert experienced Wanda’s support and encouragement, Wanda felt this lacking from Wilbert, particularly following the birth of their daughter, which prompted a period of career turmoil for her. She explained, “He’s not very good with [encouraging me], I must say. I mean, even yesterday, when I had this job possibility, he basically told me he had work to do and couldn’t talk about it.” She went on to describe how Wilbert’s need for support and encouragement left little space for her needs in the relationship: “He can be so affected or impacted or sensitive to things, there’s no room for me to be—so I tend to go the other way, I tend to harden up.”

This asymmetry in their relationship played out in the way they interpreted their professional identities vis-à-vis each other. Wanda explained:

“It’s been quite painful. I think it was explicitly agreed when he had the opportunity to become a partner, and I said I would support him and I realized what it entailed, including the fact that he would have to work very hard, [at the same time] I seem to have lost a lot of confidence in myself, in my ability to take center stage now.”

Wilbert confirmed Wanda’s account, noting how this was beginning to create tension in their relationship: “When I became partner and it became obvious that the efforts and sacrifices that come with the role sort of crystalized … the price of it is sort of too high as far as she’s concerned.”
Table 4: Bidirectional Secure-Base Couples: Two Additional Illustrations of Interpersonal Identity Enhancement

Illustration 1
Carlo (12M13Y) and Caitlin (12F13Y) both hold senior management jobs in the same global IT services organization. They began their career in the United States, spent the 5 years prior to the research interview at their organization’s European headquarters, and at time of interview were on the cusp of moving back to the global headquarters in the States. Discussing the symmetry in their work identity exploration, Caitlin began explaining the move to Europe:

Carlo knew I was really excited about this role. It was working in the [name] sector, which is everything I’m really excited about doing. He knew I wanted to live abroad and move abroad at some point in our careers, too. … He has quite a bit of seniority now [with his company] and so they trusted him and wanted to invest in him, and so they allowed him to transfer to this role that he’s in now.

Later, talking about the move back to the United States, she noted, “Now it’s his turn [Carlo got an opportunity back in headquarters that he wanted to pursue]. … I recently went for a new role [back in the USA], it will be more demanding, but just what I want.” Carlo commented on the move to Europe, “In many ways, kind of optimizing for - putting my faith in kind of our relationship and rolling back there actually paid off exponentially for me . . . career wise.” Thus, the lived experience of both Carlo and Caitlin was that their personal work identity exploration were mutually enhancing. As Carlo confirmed,

We’re extremely supportive of each other. I don’t really see—there’s no—I can’t really say there’s anything that hurts my career. … And being both gainfully employed by the same company . . . has a lot of advantages to it without making sacrifices to the other’s career.

Illustration 2
Daria (31F20Y) and Dirk (31M20Y) met during their MBA year and have both had high-profile careers with multiple international moves. At the time of interview, Daria was the marketing vice president of a media company and Dirk was the CEO of a retail firm, both based in the United States. Discussing the interaction between their careers, Dirk explained, “Our careers clearly benefited from the other. None of it would have happened if the other part of the couple was not either excited, supportive, and if we were not doing this in a partnership.” This belief that their careers had enhanced each other was confirmed by Daria, who recounted a move that, at first, she was reluctant to make but [that] actually benefited her career. “He was the primary driver of our [latest] move, he was launching [company name] and, you know, I didn't really want to come back [from Europe where they had been living]. And it ended up being the best career move for me ever.”

As a couple, Dirk and Daria expressed their identity through projects. As Dirk commented, “We love projects. We love to be—I think, in our personality, and at the foundation of our relationship and our marriage, we very much live in fusion—at every level.” He went on to explain, “Part of our wedding vows or commitment was, ‘Will you travel with me?’—was a notion that life is a travel and is a journey.” Integrating travel into their lives and careers had become the couple’s joint project, as Daria noted:

We both, as a couple, like to have adventures and change, it makes it [a] whole lot less scary than to do it on one’s own, you know, we’ve traveled, we’ve lived in [5 different international city names]. And the fact that we’ve been able to do that together while expanding our careers—I can’t imagine many other couples who manage to do [that].
APPENDIX 1

Interview protocol

All interviews were semistructured. This protocol shows the main categories of questions and the subquestions used as probes when the informants’ general narrative did not address these points.

1. Tell me about how you and [partner’s name] met and got together.
   a. Was [partner name] your first long-term relationship or have there been others?
   b. Where were you in your careers at the time?
   c. Were you aware from the beginning what each other’s career aspirations were?
2. Tell me about the development of your couple over time.
   a. Are you married? Do you have children? If so, when were they born?
   b. Have you faced any significant life decisions so far while you have been together with [partner’s name]? How did you navigate these personally/as a couple?
   c. What have been some of the key highs and lows of your time with [partner’s name]?
   d. Do you feel that you have gone through different stages or phases as a couple? If so, can you describe them and put names to them? What were the events that triggered a new stage? Did you go through these stages at the same time or were they staggered?
   e. How do you make decisions together?
3. Has [partner’s name] influenced who you are as a person?
   a. If I asked you to draw two circles, one representing yourself and who you are and the other representing [partner name] and who he/she is, how much would they overlap?
   b. How would you describe your couple as a unit?
   c. Would you say you are similar to [partner’s name] or different? In what ways?
   d. What would you say are the strengths of your couple (the things you have figured out)? What are the biggest challenges for your couple (the things you struggle with)?
4. Tell me about your career path to date.
   a. Have there been any significant turning points in your career to date? Has [partner’s name] had any influence on those?
   b. Have there been times when you have struggled with your career? What did you do? Did [partner’s name] have any input at those times?
   c. How do you feel about your career?
   d. How do you define success in your career?
   e. Has [partner’s name] had any influence on how you feel about your career?
   f. How would you describe yourself as a professional?
   g. Do you feel that your sense of who you are as a professional is influenced in any way by [partner’s name]?
5. Tell me about [partner’s name]’s career?
   a. How do you feel about [partner’s name]’s career?
   b. How do you think [partner’s name] feels about your career?
   c. Are there things in [partner’s name]’s career that you would like to have in yours?
d. Do you ever feel competitive toward [partner’s name]? If so, how and about what?

6. How do you see your career path vis-à-vis [partner’s name]’s career path?
   a. If I asked you to draw two circles, one representing your career and the other [partner’s name]’s career, to what extent would they overlap?
   b. Have you ever felt that you had to limit your own career to further [partner’s name]’s? How?
   c. Have you ever felt that [partner’s name] had to limit his/her career to further yours? How?
   d. Is there anything about being in your couple that helps your career?
   e. Is there anything about being in your couple that harms your career?

7. Can you give me some examples of situations in which things have worked particularly well between you and [partner’s name] and both of your careers?
   a. Can you give me some examples of situations in which things have not worked so well between you and [partner’s name] and both of your careers?

8. How do you see your career developing in the future?
   a. How do you see [partner’s name]’s career developing in the future?
   b. How do you see your couple developing in the future?

9. What was your experience of dual-career couples when you were a child/adolescent?
   a. What did your parents do?
   b. What was their relationship to each other/their careers/to you as a child like?
   c. [If they have children who are old enough] How do your children feel about your careers?
   d. What do you think your children will learn from you and [partner’s name] about how to manage relationships and careers?

10. Is there anything that we didn’t talk about that you think it would be important for me to understanding about your life and career and relationship with [partner name]?
Figure 1: A model of professional identity co-construction in dual-career couples