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IDENTITY AFFIRMATION AS THREAT? TIME-BENDING SENSEMAKING AND THE CAREER AND FAMILY IDENTITY PATTERNS OF EARLY ACHIEVERS

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We develop a model of dual identity affirmation through which professionals make sense of their career and family identities by incorporating past and future identity enactment into present self-concepts, and by enacting suspended career or family identities in fleeting momentary ways. The model emerged from a qualitative inductive study of professionals whose career identities had been affirmed by achieving early career success recognized by a 40 Under 40 Award. Identity affirmation often sparked career and family identity threat that individuals resolved through time-bending sensemaking. During times of family focus, early achievers attained a sense of *dual identity affirmation* by believing that they had in the past (*identity residue)*, or would again in the future (*identity projection)*, focus on the career role, mitigating career identity threat. During periods of career focus, they similarly projected future or remembered past family involvement to mitigate family identity threat. Early achievers also found more fleeting ways to maintain their identities in *identity bursts* that helped them resolve threat to their career or family identity while the other was taking precedence. Three identity patterns emerged: identity bursts anchored *chronic accelerating*, while residue was key to *lane switching*; *seasonalizing* was anchored by both residue and projecting.

Receiving awards for hard work. Achieving career goals. Earning recognition in a professional field. It seems everyone desires these outcomes. Leaders manage for them, academics measure them, and professionals seek them as affirmation for their efforts. Indeed, individuals' identities are entwined with goals of success (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) as they envision "having it all" (Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012). However, despite understanding that "people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, and revising" their identities (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996: 126) in an ongoing process of "becoming" (e.g., Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), many of our theories end once success has been achieved, or do not fully account for the impact of success in one domain on other important identities. This raises the question: What is the nature of identity work after success?

We were drawn to this question as we examined a group of *early achievers*: winners of a prominent "40 Under 40 Award" in a major metropolitan area

We are grateful to our participants for sharing their stories, and to one 40 Under 40 winner in particular, who was pivotal in securing the sample. We wish to thank Elaine Hollensbe, as well as three anonymous reviewers, for their helpful feedback on our work. We'd also like to thank Glen Kreiner and students in his Qualitative Methods course for reviewing an early draft of this paper as part of their final. Earlier versions of this work were presented at the annual meeting of the 2014 Academy of Management in Philadelphia, PA and the 2018 Work Family Researchers Network Conference in Washington, D.C.

in the United States. These are individuals who were recognized as "up-and-coming professionals," young CEOs at small companies and promising talent at large companies or nonprofits who had made a significant impact on their communities. Our qualitative inductive study revealed that for these early achievers, whose career identities had been strongly affirmed by the award amid a landscape of other awards and career successes, external recognition for career success was not the end, but a catalyst of a delicate process of making sense of their career and family identities. Early achievers, while excited about the early career success and grateful for the affirmation, struggled with what that affirmation meant for their career and family identities. Surprisingly, career affirmation catalyzed a sense of identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011), acting as an exogenous trigger for sensemaking, creating a strong context for career and family identity management over time. Extant research has focused on identity work under conditions of threat (Petriglieri, 2011), potential imbalance as a result of "greedy careers" (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009), and changes in nonwork identity (Ladge et al., 2012) or during professional socialization (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, 2000; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Here, we focus on identity work spurred by affirmation.

Identity threat stemming from affirmation is worth studying for several reasons. First, affirmation-based identity threat might require unique responses. When identities are threatened with "potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity" (Petriglieri, 2011: 641), individuals may restructure their identities to nullify the sense of threat (Petriglieri, 2011) by changing the importance or meaning of the identity, or exiting the identity entirely (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). However, individuals experiencing threat from career affirmation have already invested heavily in, and received adulation for, their work identity, suggesting that this identity is highly valued and provides self-worth, making exiting or revising the importance of affirmed identities unappealing and unsustainable. For example, it is difficult to imagine Academy Award winning actors exiting the profession after experiencing the "Oscar curse," which proposes that there are negative consequences to positive status shifts (e.g., Jensen & Kim, 2015). It is even more difficult to imaging exiting a family role. Affirming the work identity means individuals must grapple with two strong identities. Second, because organizations and careers offer milestones and routines for affirmation, work offers multiple opportunities to experience affirmation. Hence, understanding reactions to affirmation offers important insights into how individuals come to know themselves. Finally, because the work–family interface is permeable, it is unclear how affirmation-caused threats in one valued identity may impact the other. Work–family research has illustrated the realities of time constraints that necessitate trade-offs in which the career or family role is sacrificed (e.g., Mennino & Brayfield, 2002; Mickel & Dallimore, 2009) since effective participation in work and family domains can rarely be simultaneously achieved. Studying affirmation therefore allows us to answer calls for more qualitative research to explore the processes and nuances of the work–family interface (Kreiner et al., 2009; Neal, Hammer, & Morgan, 2006).

We take a grounded theory approach to develop a model of how career identity affirmation can act as a threat, triggering individuals' attempts to affirm both their career and family identities. As a result, individuals "bend time," incorporating a temporal perspective into their identities: projecting identities into the future, and leveraging interpretations of their past to come to terms with and make sense of the present. By believing that they have successfully enacted their ideal career or family identities in the past, or will be able to in the future, individuals become locked in patterns of affirmation that chronically or seasonally affirm their identities. Individuals redefine career and family identities such that ideal self-concepts can be achieved over time, rather than at any one point in time.

Our study offers three theoretical contributions. First, we incorporate a sense of time into belief-driven and action-driven identity-related sensemaking strategies. We introduce and elaborate the time-bending sensemaking concepts of *identity bursts*, *identity residue*, and *identity projecting* as strategies to mitigate identity threat when identities provide a strong sense of self-worth, are difficult to exit, and are ripe for spillover effects. Second, these sensemaking strategies are efforts to achieve *dual identity affirmation,* which we define as individuals' attempts to validate claims to both career and family identities through a sense of internal gratification. By exploring these efforts, we reveal three different identity patterns: *chronic accelerating*, *lane switching*, and *seasonalizing.* We illustrate how balance may be achieved cognitively, if not actually, over time, affirming both career and family identities and effectively expanding the lens of time through which individuals view present self-concepts. Finally, we establish that external recognition for career success

can be threatening and catalyze sensemaking—extending theory by suggesting that an outcome that might be assumed to have a stabilizing effect can act as an external shock with consequences for ongoing career and family identity work. Given the inductive nature of this study, the literature review that follows outlines theoretical gaps that motivated our research question, as well as research that served as "touchstones" (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006) that deepened our analyses.

MULTIPLE LIFE ROLES, IDENTITY, AND TIME

Career and Family Identity Management

The self is multifaceted. Professionals invested in career success are also mothers, fathers, spouses, daughters, sons, and community members. Identities include who we are today (actual selves), who we will become (future selves), who we have been (past selves), who we and others would ideally like us to be (ideal selves), who we and others think we ought to be (ought selves), who we might possibly be (provisional selves), and who we could have been but never will be (alternative selves) (Higgins, 1987; Ibarra, 1999; Obodaru, 2012). Given that identity is densely interwoven across so many interpretations of the self, it is not surprising that identities act as a "root construct" for making sense of life (Ashforth et al., 2008). Yet the downside of being a root construct is that, because it touches so many aspects of life, this dense weave of identities can also be threatened by the vicissitudes of life.

Identity encompasses more than career and family roles, but these are among the most important identities for many professionals. A total of 97% of married-couple families report at least one parent working (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), and when work and family are central to the self-concept, conflict between the two roles is more acutely perceived (Cinamon & Rich, 2002). Despite myriad boundary tactics (behavioral, temporal, and physical) that attempt ideal levels of work–home segmentation or integration (Kreiner et al., 2009), and coping strategies to deal with stress associated with juggling work and family (e.g., Schnittger & Bird, 1990), work–family conflict has detrimental effects on well-being and career success (e.g., Amstad, Meier, Fasel, Elfering, & Semmer, 2011). Conflicting work and family demands threaten ideal identity enactment.

Achieving a sense of "balance" looms as one solution. Work–family balance has been defined in several ways, including the absence of work–family conflict, equal engagement and satisfaction with work and family roles (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003), and effective participation in work and family domains (Voydanoff, 2005). A social component has also been incorporated by defining work–family balance as the "accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains" (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007: 455). Most definitions are agnostic to the timeframe over which balance may be achieved, though Greenhaus and Allen (2011: 174) specified that balance is achieved when effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are consistent with life values "at a given point in time," implying a sense of balance in the *present*.

To achieve balance and protect career and family identities, individuals improvise a toolkit of identity management tactics. One potential avenue for achieving balance is through strategies of work–life or identity *integration* (e.g., Kreiner et al., 2006). Yet integration strategies that fuse career and family identities are difficult because they conflict with societal expectations for the ideal worker and ideal parent, which prescribe complete devotion to each domain (e.g., Blair-Loy, 2003). Fusing career and family identities is particularly problematic for women who have "competing devotions" (Blair-Loy, 2003). What remains are strategies that keep career and family identities separate, referred to as segmentation, differentiation, or compartmentalization (Kreiner et al., 2006, 2009; Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). These strategies signify that career and family identities cannot be simultaneously enacted, leaving each vulnerable to threat. Given the difficulties in simultaneous identity enactment, expanding the window of time through which one considers career and family roles may help achieve balance and avoid threat.

Those whose career identities have been affirmed may be particularly vulnerable to identity threat as they question how they will continue to achieve high levels of career success while maintaining the level of family sacrifices they made along the way. Career affirmation may actually make family sacrifices more salient. Although discrepancy from ideal self-concepts is likely always present to some degree, when it becomes salient vis-à-vis an external shock (e.g., an organizational disaster or, in the case of this study, a major promotion or award), it becomes a source of identity threat such that ascribed identity meanings will be difficult to maintain (Petriglieri, 2011: 641). Petriglieri (2011) emphasized that with conflicting family and career identities, when "an

individual is overinvested in one at the expense of the other—and the latter causes a threat to the former's enactment—the response commonly involves changing the importance of the identities in order to regain balance and diminish conflict" (Petriglieri, 2011: 652; see also Brewer, 2003; Kreiner et al., 2006). She also noted the possibility that identities might be threatened by successes; however, it is unclear whether this same strategy would be adequate. As we discuss below, individuals might less effectively deploy these strategies for deeply engrained, valued, and difficult-to-change identities of career and family, and thus seek additional avenues to mitigate threat stemming from affirmation.

Although Petriglieri (2011) has identified responses that can be deployed to mitigate threat across a variety of situations, these strategies may be less effective for those who hold valued career and family identities. For example, diminishing the importance of either the career or the family identity may be unattractive and, in some cases, unachievable. Parental instinct is innate; revising down the importance of caring for a child would violate laws of nature and social role theory (Eagly, 1987). Similarly, meaning for professional identities is defined by social expectations, making them difficult to change (e.g., the ideal worker norm [Acker, 1990]). Further, affirmed career identities may provide a strong sense of self-worth, increasing their importance. An exit strategy seems unlikely for a family identity or for those with affirmed career identities, such as 40 Under 40 winners.

Taken together, the difficulties inherent in balancing, integrating, and mitigating (i.e., protecting and restructuring) career and family identities, coupled with the study of work–life trade-offs and pervasiveness of work–family conflict, suggest that a comfortable work–life equilibrium is often out of reach. Indeed, 60% of working adults find balancing work and family difficult (Keene & Quadagno, 2004), consistent with descriptions of "fragility" and "vulnerability" inherent in balancing multiple life domains. This fragility in the moment can be understood if we can theoretically account for the creative use of "time" in the sensemaking strategies used by individuals to assuage identity threats. Alongside restructuring identities themselves, we suggest that individuals restructure concepts of time to create self-continuity and mitigate theat.

Sensemaking and Concepts of Time

Identity threat necessitates sensemaking. Indeed, "work–family conflict is an intermediate result in an ongoing sense-making and decision-making process in individuals" (Poelmans, 2005: 266). Sensemaking is "a search for contexts within which small details fit together and make sense. . .It is a continuous alternation between particulars and explanations, with each cycle giving added form and substance to the order. It is about building confidence as the particulars begin to cohere and as the explanation allows increasingly accurate deductions" (Weick, 1995: 133). Because identities can reach into the future (e.g., future selves [Markus & Nurius, 1986]) or into the past (e.g., past selves [Albert, 1977]), sensemaking strategies for mitigating identity threat may require some mental time traveling to help individuals make sense of who they are. "Temporal self-understandings. . .can be a highly significant sensemaking device" (Ybema, 2010: 483); for example, individuals at the bottom of the status system (e.g., homeless) engage in "fictive storytelling" to embellish past experiences or fantasize about the future in order to generate identities with dignity (Snow & Anderson, 1987); rugby players "focus on the present" in response to the identity threat that typically short careers pose (Brown & Coupland, 2015).

Time-related strategies from research on work–family trade-offs (Mickel & Dallimore, 2009) also offer some insights. For example, applying a future orientation may relieve tension in the present by framing a trade-off as foregoing present gains for future benefits. Despite these threads of evidence about time-related sensemaking, an overarching theory is lacking; "scholars note frequently that people work on different identities at different times, but the temporal relationships between these processes of identity work, and the trade-offs and sacrifices. . .which may accompany these choices are virtually unexplored" (Brown, 2015: 31). This unexplored terrain motivated us to build and extend theory.

Taken together, our review of the literature suggests that experienced success has been hinted at as a form of identity threat, but not theoretically developed. The extant literature has suggested a set of identity tactics that might be less favorable in situations of success because these tactics require reweighting identities in ways that might be too onerous. Emergent identity concepts have described working parents as seesaws, jugglers, or trapeze artists (Lee, MacDermid, Dohring, & Kossek, 2004). These labels connote a sense of movement and suggest that identity balance is "quite fragile and tenuous, vulnerable to shifting circumstances in multiple life domains" (Lee et al., 2004: 310). Work and family identity questioning and management persist over

time (Ladge et al., 2012: 1466); however, threads in the extant literature have pointed to the importance of sensemaking about how identities are enacted over time as a conceptual anchor that might influence theory development. While our initial research question sought to explore sensemaking following career success, as we dug deeper into the data, identity affirmation, threat, and concepts of time emerged as constructs of interest. As is common in inductive studies (Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, & Kataria, 2015), we refined our broader research question that catalyzed the study into two more focused questions:

Research question 1: For individuals with salient career and family identities, how does career identity affirmation from external recognition create identity threat (if at all)?

Research question 2: How do individuals with salient career and family identities construe time to make sense of their identities, mitigate identity threat, and achieve internal dual identity affirmation (if at all)?

METHODS

Sample

Based on the opportunities for theory building identified in our review, we employed an inductive grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to elaborate theory on the process of managing career and family identities in the context of career affirmation. We collected data in two waves. Wave 1 provided broad insights that, along with the literature, focused our attention on the temporal nature of the sensemaking strategies individuals use to mitigate threats to career and family identities; these strategies were particularly acute for those who had achieved greater career success. These themes from Wave 1 caused us to pivot toward a more purposefully sampled context (Yin, 2009) in Wave 2: professionals who were recognized with "40 under 40" awards denoting early career success. We reasoned that extreme career success during a time when many people also choose to start a family would mean that early achievers may be grappling with concurrent family and career identity enactment, and therefore the strategies they were employing to make sense of how they were managing their identities would be more transparent (Yin, 2009).

Wave 1. The first two authors jointly conducted 20 (60-minute) face-to-face interviews with professionals who worked a minimum of 30 hours per week. Interviewees were recruited from a professional development conference in a large Midwestern city and were compensated with $50 cash or donation. Characteristics of Wave 1 were as follows: sex (7 men, 13 women), age (M = 46; SD = 9.6), parental status (five nonparents, 15 parents), marital status (14 married, two divorced, three committed relationships, one single), and race (18 of 20 White). Semi-structured interviews included questions asking participants about work and personal life roles, choices made to fulfill those roles, and strategies for managing them (see Appendix A). Interviewers asked follow-up questions about comments that opened new terrain for insights, capturing uniqueness in each interview (Kreiner et al., 2006). The first two authors jointly coded all interviews.

We took an iterative approach of comparing existing theories with our coded data. Through open coding, the first three authors developed a list of first-order concepts, which converged into second-order themes. For example, we noticed evidence of time-related sensemaking strategies, which we coded as "temporal perspective" and included statements about "ebbs and flows" about one's current situation being "only for a short time," carefully protecting "my boys' time," or how the past was, or future would be, different. Wave 1 data verified existing identity management strategies from the literature; for example, *identity protection* responses such as "feeling sorry for stay-at-home moms" or *identity restructuring* responses such as deciding "you don't have to be CEO of a company" (Petriglieri, 2011). In addition, our interviews began to reveal novel time-related identity management strategies to mitigate threat by drawing on past experiences or envisioning future experiences. For example, participants reported they "used to be" a certain type of professional that "worked much more," or a parent that was "more patient," and held on to that former self as an important part of their current identity. Others believed they would more perfectly achieve their ideal career or family identities in the future. Thus, the most important themes from Wave 1 were temporal sensemaking strategies in response to identity threat.

Many Wave 1 participants had not experienced significant external career identity affirmation, and therefore did not seem to experience the threat of maintaining a high level of success. For example, one man described trading off career success for a job that gave him more time for family, noting that work "doesn't make me who I am" (1-15).[1] On the other

[1] After each quotation, the data collection wave and the participant identification number are specified in parentheses (i.e., Wave-ID).

hand, some Wave 1 participants did report career identity affirmation and subsequent threat. One executive (1-13) reported that she felt "such validation in being good at [her job]," but was also disappointed "five days out of seven" because of the pressure to be a "perfect everything" at work and home. Another participant had just accepted a promotion and reported that it was akin to writing a "bestseller," where the "most stress comes in writing the book after the bestseller." (1-5). As we examined the data more closely, time-related sensemaking strategies were more pronounced among those who had experienced externally recognized career success. Thus, we sought a sample that might be more revelatory with respect to affirmation and threat, and chose to sample a population that had achieved a great deal of success during a time when family responsibilities and identity were also blossoming, to make the theoretically relevant strategies we were beginning to see more transparent (Yin, 2009).

Wave 2. In Wave 2, the first two authors conducted 45 semi-structured interviews with recipients of 40 Under 40 awards (1994–2015) honoring those who had achieved early career success along with community involvement. The award broadly symbolized an intense set of identity-affirming experiences, just as climbing Everest means having surmounted many smaller peaks en route to the summit. Achieving high levels of career success prior to age 40 requires a significant focus on career identity while concurrently maintaining family responsibilities, triggering sensemaking strategies to avoid identity threat in either domain.

Information on award winners was publicly accessible. Our first contact was an awardee that was closely networked with other awardees and helped us recruit participants using a snowball method. We conducted interviews face to face with nine participants, and over telephone or video conferencing with 36 participants. Background information of participants in Wave 2 was as follows: age ($M = 41.2$; $SD = 7.0$), sex (16 men, 29 women), parental status (eight nonparents, 37 parents), marital status (33 married, one remarried, three divorced, three committed relationship, five single), race (39 of 45 White). Seven had jobs in academic settings, 18 were corporate executives, 15 were entrepreneurs, and five were attorneys. Participants were asked about the affirmation and identity threat from the award and how career and family identities had been maintained over time in the face of identity threat (Appendix B).

Data Analysis

Similar to our Wave 1 approach, we used grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We followed a three-stage process (Pratt et al., 2006) for coding the data and developing theory building from first-order concepts, to second-order themes, and then aggregate dimensions. While this process is often described in a linear fashion for clarity, the process was more iterative: theory informed our questions, data collection was intertwined with early data analysis, and later data analysis was again informed by theory (Harrison & Rouse, 2014). Interviews were conducted until new data did not provide additional insights and we determined that we had reached theoretical saturation.

Stage 1: Developing first-order concepts. The first two authors identified statements regarding participants' experiences regarding dual identities via open coding (Locke, 2001), and then selected common statements to create temporary categories and first-order concepts. We used a contact summary, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), to document the tentative categories that emerged in each interview in a timely manner. We used our emergent potential categories to revise and guide later interviews (Spradley, 1979). As a result, first-order coding began during the interviewing process, where the codes were more tentative, and the codes became more solid after we had concluded interviewing and coded the transcripts.

Stage 2: Discovering second-order themes. In this stage of analysis, we compared distinctions within and across waves and captured changes in our constructs of interest (i.e., identity threat and time-bending sensemaking strategies [Pratt et al., 2006]). As we integrated categories, they became more conceptual and more theoretical so that we could proceed from open to axial coding (Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, statements about future changes in identity enactment could be divided into two categories of identity projecting, including finite situation and envisioning the future.

Stage 3: Aggregating theoretical dimensions. After creating second-order themes, all four authors explored how these themes fit together in theoretical dimensions. This included going back to the extant literature to compare our emerging dimensions with existing concepts in the literature so as to hone in on distinctions and similarities. It also required us to look at the "narrative causality" in the descriptions provided by our informants by examining quotes in longer passages (Abell, 2004). This sense of causality

allowed us to begin to see how the theoretical dimensions fit together in a conceptual framework. Though statements about career affirmation are sometimes decoupled from the threats they describe within a given quote, career affirmation permeated early achievers' narratives about their identities, thoughts, and behaviors. All authors discussed alternative theoretical frameworks and compared them to the data to find a model that held fidelity with the descriptions provided by our informants (Locke, 2001). Figure 1 shows our first-order codes, second-order categories, and aggregated theoretical dimensions.

FINDINGS

What emerged from our interviews was a model of career and family identity patterns through which individuals sought to make sense of career and family identity threat using time-related sensemaking strategies. Time-related sensemaking includes belief-driven *time-bending* sensemaking strategies through which individuals mentally travel to the past and the future, allowing themselves a larger time window through which to view themselves in the present; and action-driven sensemaking strategies through which individuals more briefly enact threatened identities. In the sections that follow, we begin by demonstrating how externally conferred career identity affirmation can generate career and family identity threat. Next, we provide evidence for the time-related sensemaking strategies used to address identity threat. Finally, we describe three identity patterns that emerged through the different time-bending sensemaking strategies: chronic accelerating, lane switching, and seasonalizing. We illustrate how each pattern serves as an attempt to validate career and family identities and achieve dual identity affirmation. In contrast to the external affirmation of the 40 Under 40 Award, dual identity affirmation is a sense of internal gratification with respect to fulfillment of both work and family roles often described as "feeling connected in both worlds" (2-37). Figure 2 illustrates the time-bending strategies deployed to achieve dual identity affirmation; Table 1 provides additional evidence.

External Recognition for Career Success and Identity Affirmation as a Source of Threat

For many, the 40 Under 40 Award was just one of many they had received. As a result of this recognition and other external identity affirmations (e.g., making partner at a law firm, being promoted to executive level, receiving high-visibility work assignments), participants had a strong sense of career identity affirmation. Career identity affirmation from external recognition engendered feelings of being validated, affirmed, legitimate, credible, honored, or proud of their careers. One described the affirmation that came from winning the 40 Under 40 Award as follows:

> I actually won the first year that I applied. I was kind of blown away. It just felt really good to be validated for all of the hard work that I had been putting into this company and to my professional life. There were so many people that reached out to me. There were people that reached out to me that I had been trying to get in front of for a year or longer to say, "Oh, we've heard that you won. Congratulations." I think, as a small business owner, you never know really what you're doing, if you're on track, so that was super validating. (2-35)

External affirmation from career success kicked off a process to obtain internal identity coherence between career and family identities. As a result of recognition, early achievers had a strong sense of career identity affirmation but they also had other important identities. The majority were parents (82.2%) and married or partnered (80.0%), and those that were not still reported having important family identities, talking at length about significant others, parents, or extended family. Yet rather than generate a sense of contentment or serenity, affirmation of their career identities led many to question who they were, who they had been, and who they were becoming in both career and family domains. One described the flood of questions he weighed after winning the award, wondering if his past and future sacrifices were worth it:

> I got a good glimpse of what it would be and I also see what additional sacrifices would need to be made to take it to the next level. Then it's trading that off and saying, "Okay, I can maybe get to the next level," but who knows, because of a lot of other factors. It's like, "Okay, but what else do I have to sacrifice?" (2-9)

Another early achiever's success left her questioning her future family identity as a parent:

> [The] transition in a law firm from being an associate to being ostensibly an owner of the firm, there are all kinds of trade-offs that come with that, right?. . .When I made partner I was pregnant, so I didn't know what kind of a mom I would be because I wasn't a mom, but of course I was thinking about what that would be like and I knew theoretically what sort of a mom I wanted to be. . .It's a constant worry. (2-40)

FIGURE 1
Data Structure

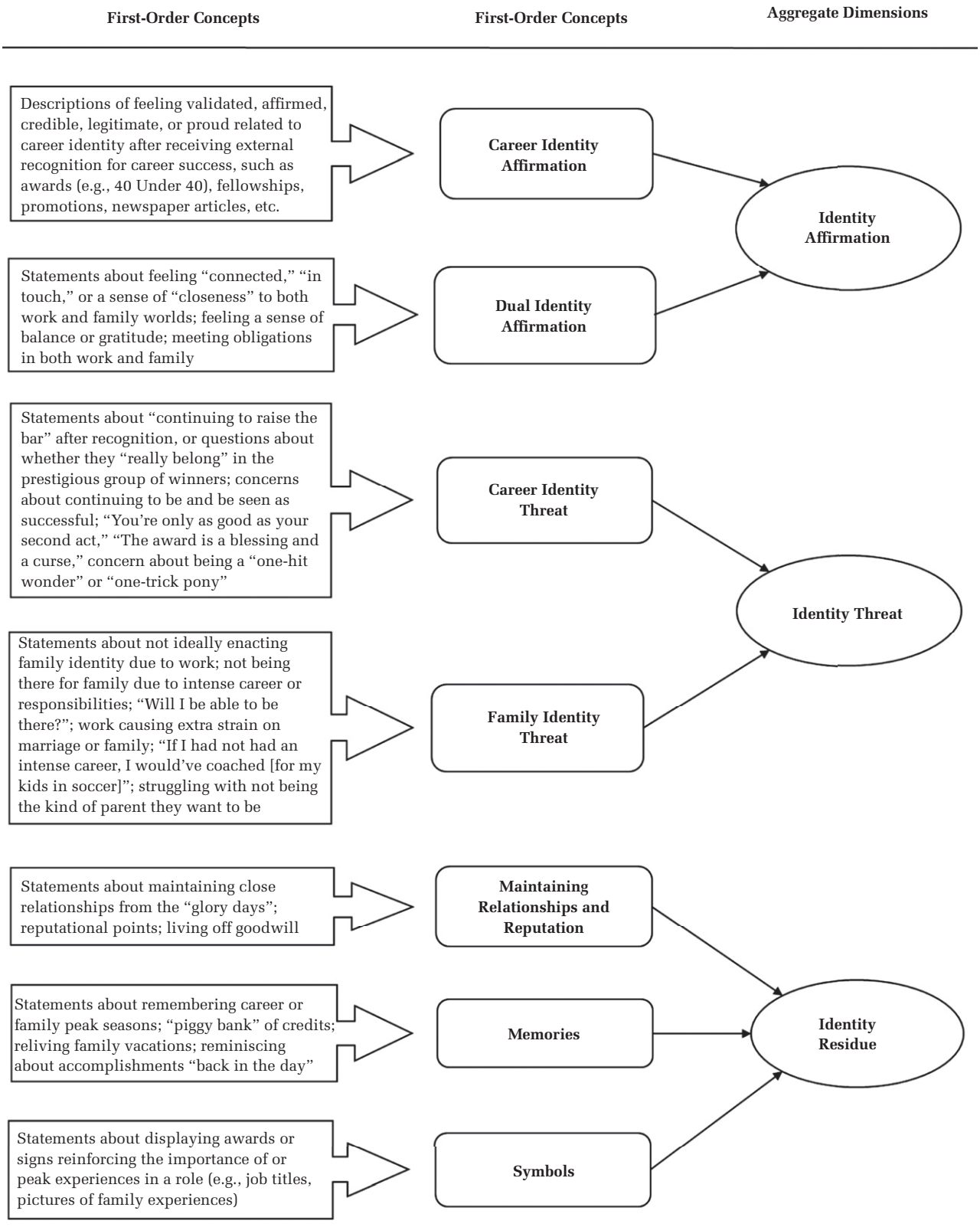


FIGURE 1
Continued

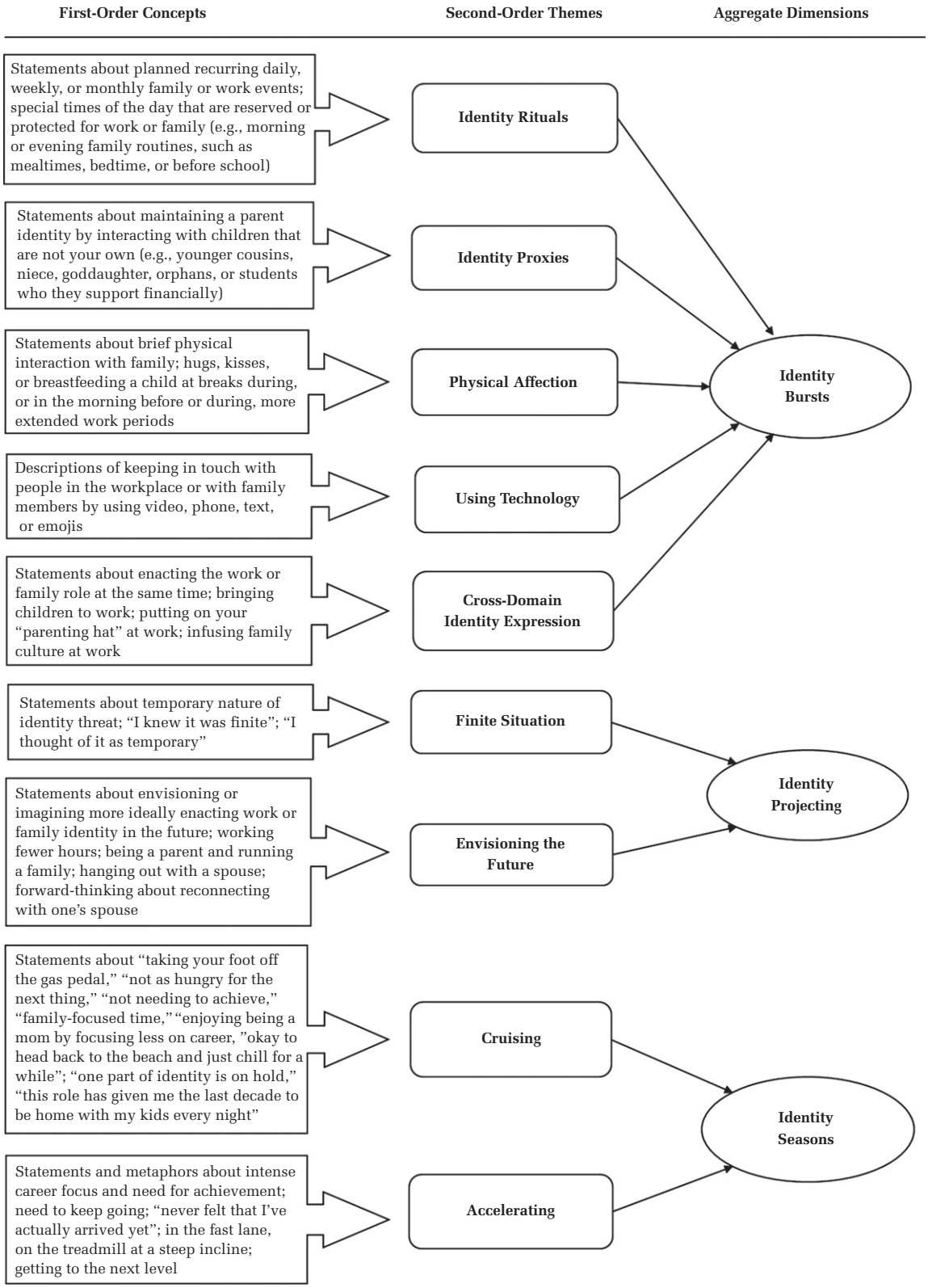
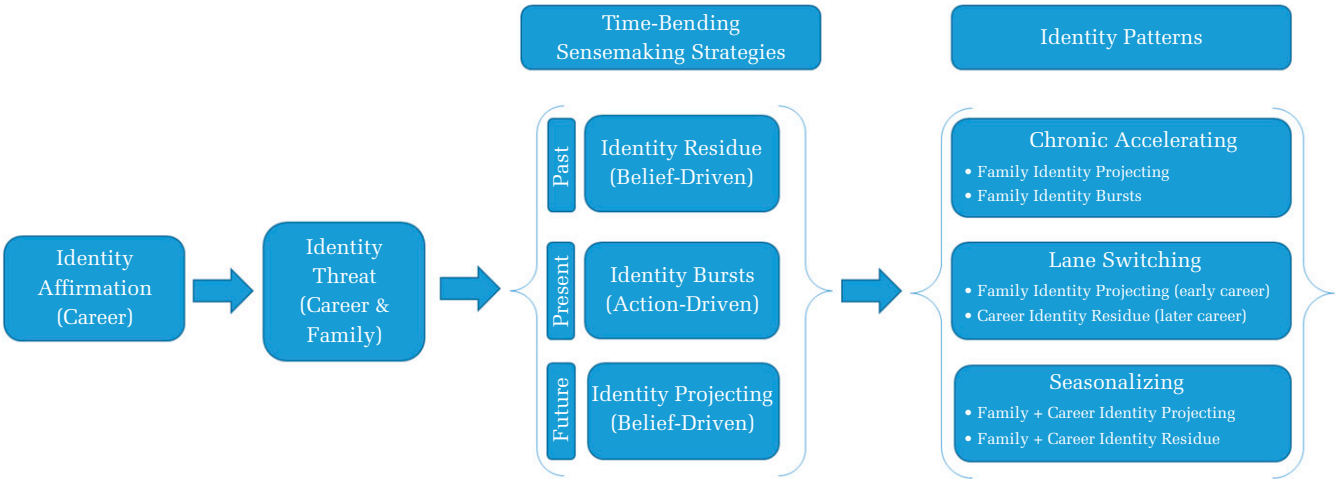


FIGURE 2
Time-Bending Sensemaking and the Career and Family Identity Patterns of Early Achievers



This "constant worry" emerged in both career and family domains in slightly different ways.

Affirmation as a source of career identity threat. Receiving the 40 Under 40 Award—which acted as the crest of a wave propelled by the undercurrents of the career success that precipitated it—triggered early achievers to question whether they deserved to be part of the prestigious group. Some described feeling like a "fraud" (2-35) or "imposter" (2-31; Clance, 1985), or not wanting to be a "one-trick pony":

> I didn't want to be a one-trick pony. I didn't want the success that I had early in my career—I consider it early in my career—to be what defined me. I don't want my peers to see me as a has-been. . .Like you were the superstar in high school, and then the rest of your life was so average. I just always wanted to be taking a step forward and up. (2-42)

Others described recognition as a "tough act to keep following" (2-28) and not wanting to be "somebody who had a great future behind them" (2-18) and began to worry about how they might continue to achieve the same level of success, in order to avoid being a "one-hit wonder" (2-35). One mentioned having people ask, "My God, the last award or last major article you guys were in was 2009. What happened since? Have you guys died?" (2-36). Another's mentor made this career threat explicit, telling her she was "only as good as her second act":

> That was big, when the community started noticing me as a community leader that was very big. Actually, you'll love this. After my first award, the very first person I celebrated with because I happened to be meeting with him that day, he's in his 40s, 50s. He's another entrepreneur. The very first sentence he said was "You're only as good as your second act." Even when celebrating, we just love cutting people down. You know what I mean? We just love reminding each other, right? (2-10)

The result was that affirmation was threatening the meaning of the career identity, causing reflection about how well the individuals were enacting their identities and how they could and should continue to enact their identities in the future.

Affirmation as a source of family identity threat. Career identity affirmation also made sacrifices to other identities salient, generating a sense of family identity threat. Family identity threat took several forms: some felt family identity threat as a direct result of career affirmation; others felt family threat more acutely as career affirmation pulled them down an intoxicating path of recognition-seeking, at the expense of family time. One new mother (2-25) described the moment of receiving the award as "the epitome of terror" while holding her weeks-old new baby, viscerally juxtaposing her fear about her ability to continue fulfilling her family identity in the moment of career identity affirmation. Another described how a promotion that involved more travel "gave him a seat at the table," and allowed him to do work that "really drives me" (2-4). However, the promotion and his "intense career" threatened his ability to be the dad he wanted to be because he was unable to coach his kid's soccer team. He worried about what he was missing along the way, causing

TABLE 1
Dimensions, Themes, and Quotations

Aggregated Dimensions	Second-Order Categories	Exemplary Quotations
Identity affirmation	Career identity affirmation	"I felt like the award really elevated me professionally. I mean, the public recognition, public contributions I've made in the public sphere, it was really rewarding and felt like an external validator had said I had done good work and keep your eye on her because she's going to keep doing good work. I have found that having that award on my resume has been very prestigious. It is like a stamp of approval that I am someone that should be seen and considered, taken seriously." (2-38)
	Dual identity affirmation	"I think that comes up a lot. . . having it all, and you feel like you're juggling all these things. Something's always moving, and something in my family is always moving. Someone needs me, or we're planning to do something together. Same thing at work. So, as long as everything is kind of moving and I'm not dropping anything, it means that I'm able to give attention to all the things that I want to and need to. So, balance, to me, is I'm feeling good because work is going well and I'm meeting my obligations there, and my family is happy and I'm in touch with them and I'm meeting my obligations there, and I'm feeling okay about myself because I'm able to take care of myself and do the things that are important for me to do just for me, too." (2-42)
		"Overall I feel pretty good about all areas [professional, parent, and spouse]. I feel like I've been able to balance all of them and fulfill those roles to the best of my ability over time, over that longer period of time. And certainly not looking for perfection but it's something that I've had to consciously work at regularly. . . On occasion I might feel disappointed that I missed something or had to put something on hold. But overall I feel very positive. They know their father and have a relationship with me. Again going back to that balance comment. I think I'm doing a far better job than most, probably because of that freedom and flexibility. It's been a very deliberate strategy on the part of both my wife and I." (2-23)
Identity threat	Career identity threat	"I think in specifics to the award, there's maybe a little bit of impostor syndrome to it. Like there's a little bit of like, now everyone thinks I'm some sort of high-performing leader. Like, what if I'm not?" (2-31)
	Family identity threat	"So it's always taking growing roles and growing accolades means you only raise the bar higher and more to accomplish and achieve as a result. Relationships suffered actually because you don't have a two-hour Saturday morning call with family members that one would used to have because now I'm always on, always working. I'm always having my time stretched and demanded in multiple areas. So it's a new world for me versus say 10 years ago where I was still on an upwardly mobile career trajectory and now I must say it's sort of like alright, I'm there and yet the demands prevent me from being with the ones I love as much as I'd love to." (2-27)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Aggregated Dimensions	Second-Order Categories	Exemplary Quotations
Identity residue	Maintaining relationships	"I'm having a group chat with my best girlfriends. . . They've been with me through all of that and I've been there with them through all of their journeys. We're so good at reminding each other about how incredible we are. They always think it's weird whenever I'm not feeling confident. I'm well thought of in the group as the successful and most confident one of us. . . But it is nice to hear them just think that I can do anything." (2-25)
Identity residue	Reputation	"I feel like that's exactly what this time was that I bought myself some really great reputational points in my career early on. I worked very hard to do that early on so that I could step off a little bit." (2-5)
	Memories	"We probably take more trips than other families do and make it more of a bonding life experience for them so the time we have together is worthwhile and they remember it. . .We were just in New York a week or two ago for the weekend to have some family time. We tried to cram in as much as we could... and then when we came home, I would continue to ask, 'What was your favorite part? What would you leave out?' Just to keep it more present in their mind. . . . I think if they're going through maybe a hard point in their day or a challenge in their life that at least they can look back at something, the positive that happened or look forward to some additional family time that will be coming." (2-24)
	Symbols	"I was on the board at [company] and after I left [my job as CEO]. Am I getting obsolete? I mean, one of the things I've brought to that board was that I was a CEO... CEOs think different. Will I want to be a CEO again someday? Maybe. Not right now, but maybe. Yes and that is why I am a CEO at heart. Right now, I'm not and I've made that trade-off and it's okay. I also know I can do that again but I'm pretty sure I won't until my kids are out of school." (2-8)
Identity bursts	Identity rituals	"The ritual is just, they know that's the time that I'm home. We don't eat dinner together except when I'm on vacation. So they will say, 'Daddy are you going to be home in time to read a book?' That's what their expectation is. If I get there before, great, but then they're not disappointed. You know what I mean? As for me, I make sure that I have my timing together so that I don't schedule anything during these times because otherwise then I'm like, 'Oh, [expletive]. What did I do?'" (2-26)
	Identity proxies (family threat)	"I'll for sure be parenting somebody whether it's children of mine or not. There might be kids in [my home country] that we'll try to bring over because they're still family there or kids that could use a different environment. Regardless of whether or not I have kids. So 20 to 30 years, yes. I'm sure to be parenting somebody, paying for somebody to go to college." (2-10)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Aggregated Dimensions	Second-Order Categories	Exemplary Quotations
Identity bursts	Physical affection (family threat)	"Part of the way I do that is I bring one of my kids or two of my kids with me and I make a little bed for them under the table in my office, and we just talk periodically as I'm working, and they know that Mom is here to work and they're here to play, and they can ask questions periodically, but they need to kind of be quiet. That helps a lot, but I do find too, when they're not with me, when I get home, I want to spend more snuggle time or reading time or close time because it does help to feel connected. . . Being able to kind of go and snuggle my kids or cuddle with my spouse is important because it brings that back out because once I get in to that highly logical efficient mode, I struggle to get out of it." (2-41)
	Using technology	"I have every device that exists and they all contain pictures of my kiddo. . . then we have a shared family—like a shared album on our devices and so we can all post pictures and then we can all see it. So my partner and I and then our nanny can post. . . I do look at those more often than I probably even realize... So if I'm on a conference call and it is not my turn to speak, 'Oh, going to look and see some cute pictures of my kid.' It just makes me feel—he's always on my mind anyway and I think he's the most charming human being in the world. I love to look at cute pictures of him. . . Yes, it makes me feel more connected." (2-40)
	Cross-domain identity expression	"When I think of families, I obviously have a family of my own then I think about the role in my family, I think about my clients in my business and they're family, I think about our vendors and they are literally all my family. I treat them that way, I think about them. That's why I love them in that way." (2-34)
Identity projecting	Finite situation	"I just know that it is temporary. It's just that moment of that thing I have. That's what I was saying when I'm saying I have to get through that moment. . . I'm thinking about getting my work done because the sooner it gets done, the better I'll feel. So I wouldn't say that I think of a future time like that, like in the way of it being temporary, but certainly in the sense that whatever the current feeling is, it being temporary." (2-20)
	Envisioning the future	"I thought about like in the summer, is it possible for me to go down to a reduced appointment where it would be 10:00 to 3:00, and the answer is probably yes. Yes, I dream. . . I dream too about—like a contracting schedule or a schedule where I would just have more control over my day-to-day schedule where I could schedule out—I'm going to take client appointments in the morning. I'm going to be out 12:00 to 2:00 because it's tee-ball day or whatever." (2-5)
Identity seasons	Cruising	"My life orientation is such that I feel like I checked the box on my nonprofit stuff, but I'm pretty happy with what I've achieved at work, and so while I'm kind of a natural striver, I also don't feel like I need—like my

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Aggregated Dimensions	Second-Order Categories	Exemplary Quotations
		ego doesn't need to achieve more. I don't need to be the president of my firm or I don't need to be the highest donor, and so I say that because if my wife called me now and said like, 'You've got to come home. Something is really. . . I'm really sad,' right? I'd find a way to do that, even though it's just a want." (2-12)
	Accelerating	"It sounds weird, but I've won a lot of awards, so they probably could look at the wall and see I won—yes, I won a CLIO. I won gold medals at the [Major City] Film Festival. I had a bestselling book. I've had very public success—but it's funny. Even I felt like, 'God, there's still so much more to do.'" (2-19)

him to wonder, "If I'm not doing it now, am I ever going to do it?"

However, the threats were not just about regrets from the past but also about the intoxicating potential of future career identity affirmation:

> So to me, the drawbacks of reward and recognition, if you're driven by the high and continuing the high is where you lose work–life balance because it's such a drug. The affirmation can become a drug to certain kinds of people, and it does to me. So then I get sad and then I'm like, "I'm wasting my time on stupid stuff and why aren't I going out to play tennis with my niece, or planning my niece's wedding, or going to see my daughter in [another city]?" I don't do enough that I should. . . It's not that I don't have a choice; I just don't do it. . .and it's sad, honestly. (2-43)

Two others described career affirmation as "golden handcuffs" (1-5, 2-40)—a different symbol, but even so they used a similar, drug-related metaphor describing succeeding in their careers as so intoxicating that it encouraged them to sacrifice time with family, making them vulnerable to identity threat. Another described these conflicted feelings about winning the award as "a blessing and a curse" (2-2). These awards were against a landscape of other affirmations for success; the 40 Under 40 Award threw into sharp relief how affirmation influenced identity management. One attorney described how a series of career affirmations pulled her down a path where she was unavailable for her children for certain periods of time:

> There have been a couple of points along the way where I felt like I had to kind of ignore the family for a while. In a way the success is part of what allows me to keep doing that, right? If I hadn't been successful two years ago, I wouldn't have a busy practice now which is part of what makes me not respond to the school nurse for three hours, right? But at the same time it wasn't like a career experience that I've ever had since, nobody turns that down. It's so infrequent for a lawyer to have a jury trial, and certainly a long and complicated one. I became a partner during that trial. . .I knew my family was kind of stressed out. So I did not feel fabulous about myself as a mother during that time. (2-37)

In cases such as these, career affirmation threatened family identities by creating a sense that early achievers had missed out on their family identity in the past or that continued success might induce them to move further away from it in the future.

Time-Bending Sensemaking: Residue, Bursts, and Projecting

Given the threats that seemed to come with career identity affirmation, early achievers described themselves using a troika of time-bending sensemaking strategies that aligned with identity enactment in the past, present, and future—*identity residue* (past), *identity bursts* (present), and *identity projecting* (future)—that helped them maintain a sense of connection to both career and family identities while enacting one or the other. Expectations for continued career success set into motion by the award meant that enacting one identity seemed to intensify the threat in the other. Belief-driven time-bending sensemaking incorporated past and future selves into the present (i.e., identity residue and identity projecting) to reduce identity threat. When residue was not available, and the future was murky,

threatened identities were enacted fleetingly in the present, using identity bursts, which are more action-driven strategies.

Identity residue. Under conditions of threat, individuals often reached into the past and recalled times they had more ideally enacted their career or family identities. Unlike "fictive storytelling," which has a "pipe-dream quality" (Snow & Anderson, 1987: 1360), or imagined selves, which are created from forgone identity options (Obodaru, 2017), identity residue is the use of memories of affirming, more ideal past enactment of identities, and thus "real" rather than "imagined" identity experience. These positive identity experiences from the past were remembered and relived through strategies including *maintaining relationships and reputation*, maintaining a "piggy bank" of *memories*, and collecting *symbols* of past identity that conjured images of ideal identity enactment. Maintaining relationships and reputation were particularly useful for addressing present career identity threat, whereas memories and symbols kept both past career and family identity enactment alive in the present.

Maintaining relationships with people who had been witnesses to peak identity fulfillment and could affirm identities when threatened helped bring past identity enactment into the present. Maintaining relationships mitigated identity threat by either (1) facilitating storytelling about the "glory days" that kept prior peak identity experiences top of mind, or (2) proactively creating reputational "goodwill" that could be relied upon during periods of less career focus. As examples of the first, one woman (2-2) described how she continued to meet for happy hour with coworkers that reminded her that she was "the golden child for a while" to deploy the identity residue strategy, while another (2-25) relied on a group chat, a more constant and accessible method, to remind her of her past successes when she was not feeling confident. As an example of the second, one father (2-16) discussed how he intentionally created "close enough relationships with clients" so that he could avoid threats to his career identity while being more family focused:

> As a parent, I knew I was making the right decision. As a business owner, as a professional, I felt confident that I had close enough relationships with those clients. I had seen them recently and I did a good job of planning it. It was a very proactive deal. It wasn't just, "Okay. I'm going to shut this down. I hope I don't lose the business." I'm going to ramp up the travel, so I can slow it down, so I can ramp up again. (2-16)

Others relied on their stellar professional reputations for career identity residue during times of family focus, and explicitly describe this as "goodwill":

> I think you can live off that goodwill for a long time. . .I built really good relationships with my clients who trusted me, who very much knew that I would respond to them if they needed something whether I was in the office or not. . . I think that because I had been doing this for so long and had developed that goodwill with my clients that I'm providing great service, being responsive. . .that even if they were dealing with somebody else while I was gone, there's still kind of no question in their mind that they still would prefer to work with me when I was available. (2-17)

Reputational goodwill embedded in relationships from prior periods of identity affirmation seemed to offer a long half-life that buffered early achievers from career identity threat.

Memories of times where one's identity was more ideally enacted could also be recalled to bring past identity into the present. Similar to nostalgia, a predominantly positive emotion that provides a source of self-continuity in the present (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015), one respondent talked about the importance of creating a "piggy bank of credits" to "draw upon" good memories, presumably during times that he was not able to fulfill his own or others' expectations for himself as a dad.

> I think from the standpoint of travel these are the good memory makers, if you will. They're the moments in life that you embed in your head and you talk about regularly because they're good times and they're some of the best of times. When we do hit a low time, you got a little piggy bank of credits or something to fall back on that this isn't—life has been a lot better and it can be better. There are certain times and events that work and others that don't. We do the best we can to be there and be present and so forth, but it may not be a 100%. (2-21)

Creating a "piggy bank" of identity credits was also helpful to combat career threat. "[Living] off those old memories" helped bring past peak career identity enactment into present self-concepts.

> There's been a bit of a trade-off in how hard we're pushing to create more events, given that I don't spend as much time doing it. I do kind of live off some of those old memories "Wow, we were on [popular TV show]. . .Wow, we played for the President." (2-28)

Identity residue could also be physically instantiated using pictures, awards, titles, or other physical artifacts as *identity symbols* of past identity enactment. Having symbols of work at home and symbols of family at work helped keep early achievers "centered in both worlds" and mitigate identity threat. One early achiever captured this sentiment by noting that she used her title as a symbol that kept her "fingers in the pie," defending herself from career threat during a seven-year period of family focus that came three years after winning the 40 Under 40 Award. The title was residue from a time that she was more career focused:

> I felt like I was falling behind but I didn't necessarily feel threatened. Part of it is I had an automatic title as a business owner and I think that made a difference. I could go to a social event or even a work event and I could say, "Oh, I'm the owner of the [XYZ Company.]" No one is going to say, "Well, how many hours do you work and you're a mom." I could fake it and I still had enough fingers in the pie that I was doing lots of different things but I never felt threatened as much as maybe. . .confident. (2-22)

Family identity symbols also brought back memories of peak family time to stave off family threat. For example, one early achiever's family consistently played a particular game during their vacations, Sequence,[2] that served as a symbol of peak family experiences when played in the present that "[seemed] to bring back the memories of vacations," which were "probably the peak of personal time." However, symbols could also be portable, transporting an identity from one domain to another to bring the very recent past into the present. For example, when one woman traveled for work, her daughter asked her to take along one of her action figures to maintain a sense of closeness to her. The symbol of her daughter substituted for being there in person, and helped the respondent keep her parent identity in the present while focusing on her career:

> Most recently when I was travelling for work and I told my daughter that I was going on an airplane. Obviously, she wasn't going with me, and I wanted to take something of her with me to be able to enjoy that and think of her. She gave me a little superhero doll. So I just took cute photos of me with Super Woman, Super Woman on my suitcase and stuff like that. That was a nice thing for when I was missing her. At dinner, I had Super Woman next to me reading the menu. I took that picture in front of the chair. I think she thought it was cute but it was also actually more helpful for me than I thought it was going to be just for when I was missing her. (2-32)

Identity projecting. Rather than looking to the past, some looked to incorporate future identity enactment into present self-concepts through *identity projecting*, which involves believing that the current state of threatened identity enactment is temporary and more ideal identity enactment is envisioned for the future. Identity projecting is a belief-driven sensemaking strategy, making it distinct from provisional selves, which are more action-driven "trials for possible but not fully elaborated identities" (Ibarra, 1999: 44), and identity play, which is "crafting of immature possible selves" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010). Identity projecting involves envisioning the *probabilistic* future enactment of the ideal self and paints a fairly clear, rather than immature, picture. Identity projecting mitigates threat by allowing the individual to (1) believe that the threatening identity enactment is a *finite situation* and (2) *envision the future* that permits less identity threat and more ideal identity enactment, both of which help to move future identity enactment closer to the present.

Identity threat can arise from "present cues of future harm" (Petriglieri, 2011). Hence, future harm can be averted if individuals can envision an end to the situation. One woman described how guilty she felt about working weekends after a "spectacular career break":

> I felt terrible about it, but I always knew it was finite. I knew that it was not going to go on forever, like [these] engagements were short term. But you know of course I felt guilty. I would stay the weekends working. I would go a couple weeks without seeing the kids and you know that felt bad. I felt guilty about it, but I also really believed that working that weekend would really be important for the career and to this particular engagement. . .For weeks maybe, maybe a month, I was a pretty terrible mom. (2-18)

She felt better about not seeing her children for a couple of weeks in a row by thinking that the situation was "finite" and "short term." Believing that identity threat would come to an end was helpful when career identities were threatened as well:

> Right now I'm trying to figure out the divorce, that's definitely taking a lot of my emotional and mental energy. I'm lucky that I work at a place where they're like, "Take whatever time you need. We know you're good for it and you know what? Eventually, you'll come back to full capacity." My thinking right now is this is going to be six months of dealing with family [expletive]. I'm just anticipating that the next six months, I'm not going to be my full, awesome,

[2] Sequence is a board-and-card game. Players compete to create sequences of five chips in a row.

> wonderful self at work. That's okay. "You know what? In six months, I'll be back to normal." It's definitely helpful. (2-32)

Cognitively limiting the threatening career enactment to six months effectively counteracted present cues to future identity harm in part because these beliefs were coupled with clearly *envisioning the future* where the individual would again be her "full, awesome, wonderful self at work." While this enhanced picture of herself was only six months away, others pictured a future that was years away, but with varying degrees of clarity.

Another looked into the future and envisioned a time when he could have more time for "hanging out with my wife." He worked 50–60 hours per week, and there had been "extended periods" in his career when he had worked even more, "like a two- or three-week period where I wouldn't be home until 10:00 at night, six nights." During these times, he explained, "You feel worse. I explain to my wife that, yes, it sucks, but this is also like—this is the gig" (2-12). He made sense of these times by believing that the future would be different:

> Twenty years from now, I for sure will not work 50 hours a week at my primary day job; what I imagine will be happening is I'll have a primary job that will probably be this one, or I get the same offer, because this is a great thing for me, but it'll be fewer hours . . .So then I think at that point, it'll be pursuing one or more significant side projects that could either be for profit or nonprofit, and then having an expanded social and hobby life as well as having more time hanging out with my wife. (2-12)

Others envisioned a time of year—summer—during which they put their careers on hold in order to focus more on their children. One woman had always worked and was an entrepreneur in addition to holding a management position at a different organization. She envisioned having a "summer" with her daughter before she left for college:

> Just this morning, I think I said to my daughter, "I would love to not work during the summer." There were these little pieces where I'm, "I wish I could stay home with you for a summer." I've often thought about just taking a leave during the summer to just kind of have a summer. . .I just feel like we could travel, like if it were next summer and get her ready for college. (2-3)

Most held the future only in their minds, but others created tangible, accessible pictures of the future. One quite literally envisioned the future by maintaining two vision boards, one which she kept at home and one at work. The boards displayed pictures of the aspects of her life that she yet to fulfill, including starting a family of her own, but were important to her identity.

> I'm going to have a really great, super handsome significant other. [We're] going to have kids, and then I'm going to adopt a few kids and then we're just going to have a happy, wonderful family. Yes, it's on the vision board. I'm looking at it. (2-34)

The efficacy of identity projecting seemed to increase with the clarity of the envisioned future; ambiguity is distressing (e.g., Kruglanski, 1990). Vision boards painted an ideal future that one could quite literally see, effectively allowing one to incorporate the future into the present self-concept and mitigate threat.

Identity bursts. Early achievers often relied on affirming their identities through *identity bursts*, defined as enacting identities in more fleeting, episodic, and intense ways in an attempt to mitigate identity threat in the present. In contrast to residue and projecting, which are belief-driven strategies, identity bursts are action-driven sensemaking strategies and allowed individuals to invest smaller amounts of time to maintain or "stay in touch" with a career or family identity during more extended periods of prioritizing the other identity. While residue and projecting are primarily cognitive strategies, bursts are active strategies to create more near-term residue and projecting. For example, one early achiever described a period when she turned on the "work machine" when she was a new working mom. This period of intensity was affirming to her career as an attorney, but also to her family identity.

> It was like a two- or three-week period, but the thing about it though is personally, I was just, "Okay, I still got it." Being a mom has not made it so that I can't turn on the work machine when I have to. Honestly, that felt like a good achievement. "Okay, I can do what I have to do." I felt like I was just winning at both, which is in a way comical, right? . . ."This is not sustainable in any way," but I felt like, "Okay, I can do this." (2-40)

Specific identity burst strategies also included adhering to *identity rituals,* fostering relationships with *identity proxies* (e.g., others' children), offering *physical affection, utilizing technology*, and engaging in *cross-domain identity expression*.

Some chose to precommit to brief periods of recurring identity enactment by establishing *identity rituals*. Identity rituals included vacations, meals, or

any planned time that occurred with regular frequency (e.g., daily, monthly, yearly) that allowed individuals to affirm their identities with predictable cadence. Like a circadian rhythm, the predictability of these rituals helped resolve identity threat because early achievers and their families could look forward to the next time of deep family focus with some certainty. Rituals created opportunities to use near-term identity projecting and residue. Mirroring the role rituals play in maintaining organizational culture (e.g., Weber & Dacin, 2011), family identity rituals helped establish a family culture that substituted for constant interaction. One entrepreneur described the importance of establishing monthly rituals with his children similar to his work-related rituals:

> I try to create rituals. So what I try to do is schedule and create rhythms in the personal and parent role. . . I started scheduling a breakfast meeting with each individual child each month so that they have a meeting with Dad at 7:00 a.m. until drop off once a month where we have one on one time or go to eat pancakes on a Tuesday. So to me it's about rituals and it's about what do you say yes to and what do you say no to. And a lot of times it's what you say no to that's more important. . .The outcome was, I felt a little more in control of accomplishing the goals and I felt like there was a plan. There was a recognition of the effort and there was positive reinforcement from my children and my spouse saying, "This is really great. . .special." And it's a ritual now that we have. (2-23)

His scheduled monthly breakfast meetings with each child served to "create rhythms" in his family role, helping him to feel more in control and like there was a "plan." Others created rituals in an even more public way, which amplified the number of people aware of the precommitment. One example of such public precommitment came from an early achiever who was a partner in his law firm, and led his daughter's Girl Scout group:

> I decided to be a Girl Scout, and that means during the school day, which is also during a work day, I'd have to block out time for that, but I also felt like that was a good choice. It was important to me. I wanted to prioritize it. Even though I have the freedom to do it without having to justify it to anyone, which is so fortunate, I think that there is a trade-off. I mean if there is a client that's a little bit miffed because they want something that day and I might say no, but I'm like, "You know what? I'm going to tie myself to the mast and submit to that," and so then it makes it much easier to follow through on a day-to-day basis having made the earlier decision, "This is my value, I'm going to do it. . ." By precommitting for the duration of something, you make a day-to-day sacrifice. You don't need to think about it as much, because you already know your answer. (2-12)

The ritual of leading Girl Scout meetings during the work day and to "tie [himself] to the mast and submit to that" supported identity affirmation because he "[didn't] need to think about it as much," lessening identity threat. Identity rituals enabled a sense of "synchronicity" and "harmony" with family, as was the case with this busy entrepreneur:

> My wife and I, we work out three days a week, and we walk usually two to three days a week together. We have such a regimen. We used to sometimes fight when I come home . . . but because of these control points every morning, we're talking. We spend an hour and a half together every single morning. It brings you the synchronicity and into harmony, and our family time does the same thing for us. (2-36)

Hence, these daily rituals created a sense of identity fulfillment by providing a consistent and predictable foothold in an identity that allowed the identity to be fulfilled on a repeating basis, helping achieve dual identity affirmation. Though rituals mostly pertained to family, individuals also created career identity rituals, which helped mitigate family identity threat. For example, planning to work late every Tuesday night ensures that "everybody is informed" and avoids the question, "Oh my God, when are you going to be home?" (2-41).

Early achievers who did not have children with whom to create rituals found ways to enact their family identities through *identity proxies*, which involved bursts of interactions with others' children (i.e., those of close friends and family members), or by mentoring. One explained, "[the reason I can be so] involved in the community and involved in all these things is because I'm not married and don't have a kid yet." He was in his mid-30s, wanted to have children, and though he "was not getting any younger," the future was unclear:

> When do I meet the right lady? No one knows. . .I have a real good set of friends that I connect with a lot, godfather to an almost four year old so I spend a lot of time with her and her little brother and their parents of course. It's like, I'm only going to say yes if I'm going to commit to actually being there for them as they grow. Having a chance to really get close with my

> goddaughter and her brother. I mean that's helped a lot in that space. It's like, "Okay. I can be doing a lot in that space." (2-6)

Getting close to his goddaughter and her brother helped mitigate identity threat in the family "space." This same individual also mentored college students through a scholarship program, and planned a group interaction with them close to his birthday, reminiscent of a family celebration that shares similarity with the identity rituals discussed above. Starting a scholarship may seem simply philanthropic, but he described the scholarships as a piece of his "personal life" because of the "strong connection" he built with the students (see Table 1). Another described how his "paternal role" was fulfilled through identity proxies in his large family; though married, he delayed having children:

> Many people have said I would become a great parent because I had played such great mentor roles not only to my younger cousins but also to my aunts and uncles who also felt like my siblings...And then also to my employees or interns or actual mentees, I had created a mentor program for literally hundreds of students at a local middle school. Right, and so I had already been in that mentor, paternal role for so many people and didn't feel as though I needed to be needed anymore. (2-27)

By acting in a sort of surrogate family role, whether as a godfather, mentor, or cousin, early achievers were able to use these interactions to experience the sense of family "connection" they felt they were missing when focusing on their career identity.

While proxies allowed for a psychological connection to the family identity, others sought to maintain a more literal connection through engaging in increased *physical affection* with loved ones. Increasing physical affection could be an attempt to mitigate guilt related to family identity threats, as guilt motivates reparative actions such as amending, compensating, and apology (Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007). Mothers in particular reported maintaining a sense of physical closeness and connection with their children during times of career focus that threatened the family identity: "I would go in and snuggle [my son] in the morning when he would let me do that just to be close to him and feel physically connected to him so that I can remember what was really important in my life" (2-1). Another described the "visceral" benefit of moments of physical interaction with her son throughout working from home for a day.

> I worked intensively all day, but I was at home and the nanny was there. I had easy opportunities to buzz down and feed my baby for 15 minutes and then come back up. . .I mean relief as a result of it. It was the tension to be able to resolve. Being at home, like physically being at home and easily able to have a very quick, I mean, even a one-minute little interaction. . .Yes, it really is like sort of a visceral kind of thing. . .that idea of the quick physical interaction, definitely there's something about that. Feeling connected—like the interaction sort of reinforces that he's good and happy. (2-33)

Even "one-minute" bursts of physical interaction allowed her to feel connected to her family. In contrast, another respondent (2-17) described how maintaining physical connection by holding her new baby while she worked allowed her to feel "bonded" to him despite sometimes feeling like she "ruined her maternity leave." Hence, the increase in physical affection provided salve to identity threat.

When separated by distance, such as during business travel, physical affection became out of reach. During these times, *technology* helped "keep in touch" with the identity that was suspended for a time. Technology supported the "fungibility of time and place" (2-17) and was useful for enacting other identity bursting strategies remotely. For example, one respondent (2-29) used technology to express physical affection and stay connected through use of "kissy face" emojis throughout the day. Another described how he was more likely to use technology to keep in touch with his wife after he had kids; although he seemed comfortable being out of touch with his spousal identity, he felt the need to mitigate threat to his parental identity by connecting.

> My kids are too young to really Skype. So when I'm on the road, I send videos back to them. Usually a couple a day. Something simple like, "Hey [son], thinking about you this morning. Hope your day at school is going well. I'm getting ready for my day. I'm going to see my client and we're going to go for a bike ride. Have a great day." I'll usually try to talk to [my wife], have a live conversation with her once [per] day, we usually text back and forth. I intentionally try to stay in touch. Before I had kids, it was easy for me to forget to call. [My wife] would usually say, at least call me once. (2-16)

While technology helped him to keep in touch with his family through "live conversation," in other cases technology helped transmit symbols and supported rituals. Similar to the woman who traveled with her daughter's action figure, another took

pictures of a toy dolphin wherever she went and texted them back to her children to maintain a connection. The dolphin acted as a symbol of family identity that technology helped transmit:

> But now for example when I have to travel, we have a routine where I bring this little plastic dolphin that's like the size of my thumb in my purse and I take pictures with him, places where I am, and then I text them to the kids so that. . .there's some connection. I still feel like a real person even when I'm not there. And then usually my husband sends me pictures of what they are doing. (2-37)

Early achievers also reported using technology to keep in touch with their career identities. Strong career identities were hard to disconnect from for long, and technology enabled brief electronic check-ins with work during times of suspension, allowing people to indulge their family identities while mitigating threat to career identity. While pictures and verbal conversations were important for technological family check-ins, one early achiever described how checking his phone for work emails ironically allowed him to be "more present" for his family, creating certain "freedoms" from career identity threat.

> At the same time, if I can stop looking at my phone because, "See, he got back to me, boom." It helps me to be more present because it's floating in my head, "did he get it" or "did she get back to me," you know, some of that. It does create some freedoms. So it's a give and take. It's an interesting dance that gets done with technology. (2-19)

Early achievers also found ways to express threatened career or family identities in the alternate role, which we call *cross-domain identity expression*, allowing them to proxy identities in a different sphere of their own lives. This sensemaking strategy is similar to an identity integration tactic "infusing self-aspects into tasks" (defined in Kreiner et al. [2006]) and "real enactment" of a forgone identity (Obodaru, 2017). For example, one respondent (2-3) described putting on her "parent hat" to listen, help, and motivate employees at work, which enabled her to more transiently enact her family identity. Similarly, early achievers found ways to fleetingly enact career identities during times of family focus, thinking about identity enactment as a "Venn diagram." As one early achiever's life evolved, she was no longer able to do what she loved doing the most—improvisational comedy—so she found other ways to stay in touch with that career-related identity, by enacting it with her kids, at a coffee shop, or in a parent-teacher association (PTA) meeting.

> One of the things I love when I did perform was I love making people laugh. If you forget about that and you just get into the grind—it doesn't mean you have to be on the stage to do that. You can make your kids laugh, you can make the people at the PTA meeting laugh, you can be the one at the coffee shop who's super friendly and makes a joke with the barista. I'm most happy when I'm remembering that this is one of the things I love and then I do it no matter where I am versus thinking, "Oh, I can't do it because I'm not doing it on the stage or whatever." (2-22)

Others found ways to maintain a sense of closeness to family through their work more consistently in the present:

> You know, in a subconscious way, running a restaurant [that reflects my cultural heritage], gives us a chance to represent my culture. And because it's using my grandmother's recipes to further build an empire that she started building, it keeps me closer to my family. So I think I used my culture as a stand-in for family. That thing, that culture, I'm representing that family so it keeps me close with them directly, indirectly, literally and figuratively. (2-27)

Using his cultural heritage as "stand-in for family" at work helped mitigate family identity threat.

In summary, projecting one's identity into the future, commemorating a past identity as residue, or having bursts of identity enactment emerged as the tripartite time-bending sensemaking strategies. Using these time-bending sensemaking strategies allowed early achievers to stay in touch with career and family identities as they attempted to find their way toward fulfilling dual identities.

Identity Patterns: Chronic Accelerating, Lane Switching, and Seasonalizing

Extant literature has suggested that "a person's multiple identities are arranged in a salience hierarchy; the higher its rank within the hierarchy, the more important the identity is to the person and more likely it is that the person will try to enact that identity in as many situations as possible" (Obodaru, 2017: 525; see also; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). This insight provides a theoretical anchor for the differences in early achievers that we highlight in this portion of our findings. While our process focus and interpretive data preclude us from interrogating the variance or the "likeliness" of our informants to enact their identities, theorizing on identity hierarchies

provides insights into what might push individuals down different paths. Considered as a single instance, each of the time-related sensemaking strategies might have limited long-term impact. However, over time, as these enactments aggregate, much the way an oxbow lake emerges from the slow buildup of sediment in a river, sensemaking strategies might help shape an identity. Early achievers who place their work identity at the top of their salience hierarchy feel threat to that identity more acutely and enact strategies to protect that identity. The same is true if they prioritize their family identity. Much like "scientists studying quantum physics by accelerating atoms and then analyzing the patterns that result from the colliding particles (Ashforth et al., 2008: 343), "people learn their identities by projecting them into an environment" (Weick, 1995: 23). By enacting strategies to protect their identities, over time early achievers constructed a perception of larger patterns in their identity.

Three identity patterns emerged from the data: (1) chronic accelerating, (2) lane switching, and (3) seasonalizing. Interpreting career affirmation as career threat promoted career *chronic accelerating,* a state of mind and period of time with sustained higher levels of career and lower levels of family focus. Chronic accelerating was characterized by diving deeper into the career domain, and was revealed by family identity projecting as well as elaborate identity bursting strategies. In contrast, *lane switching* originally follows a path of career accelerating before switching to career *cruising*, a state of mind and period of time with decreased career focus and increased family focus, and was revealed by career identity residue strategies. Finally, *seasonalizing* showed a pattern of toggling back and forth between cruising and accelerating, revealed by reliance on both identity residue and projecting strategies, which allowed these individuals to interpret their identities as containing seasons of cruising and accelerating.

Chronic accelerating. Reminiscent of the "drug" and "golden handcuff" metaphors, chronic accelerating involved a seemingly inescapable career momentum that often came with sacrifices to family time. External career affirmation early in one's career encouraged chronic accelerating by providing a glimpse of what could be achieved in the future. Loathe to give up or let up having not accomplished career ideals, chronic accelerating meant perpetual striving to fulfill career identities. Perpetual and intense career focus meant that residue from past family identity enactment was less readily available, however. With the past of little help, individuals expanded the lens of time forward, projecting more ideal family identity enactment onto the unwritten pages of the future. Often, a cloudy lens to the future made identity bursts a very attractive option; thus, chronic accelerating heavily relied upon bursting strategies to maintain a connection with family identities. Chronic accelerating allowed careers to flourish and bank accounts to grow, but left individuals with regret relative to family identities.

In the section that follows, we provide a few prototypical examples tracing the identity threat, sensemaking strategies, and affective outcomes for chronic accelerating. Lori[3] described the inescapable momentum that had always driven her chronic acceleration:

> You never truly arrive. That actually has always driven me. I've always kept going, kept going, kept going. It never felt that I've actually arrived yet. . .I found that once I got in to the mode of just really working hard and building, I've never really stopped. Even though I achieved the stability that you would need to have a reasonable lifestyle, I've never stopped. I've always made a conscious choice to continue to build versus spend more time on family, which is a regret, but it's very hard to do both. (2-11)

Even though Lori was a mother to one daughter and expressed "regret," her sense of the threat that you "never truly arrive" meant she chose to "continue to build versus spend more time on family." As a result, her identity as a mother was often quite threatened:

> Obviously, I was spending a lot of hours working, so [my daughter] would have a lot of day care provided which was hard to deal with, and it's very miserable to exist that way because you have to make certain sacrifices to push forward. I think that was fairly hard...My daughter really felt that I haven't been around as much and that she would have to bring herself up. There was some animosity there which would always frustrate her when you have to make your compromises in life. But as she's grown into a teenager, if I'm around, she doesn't want me around. She would say, "Why are you here?", "You complain I'm not around but when I am, you don't want me around." That's been a negative side effect of being so driven in work. It's a negative impact on family. (2-11)

Faced with the identity threat of a daughter who was not always excited to have her around, Lori

[3] Prototypical examples have been given pseudonyms to retain anonymity.

attempted to use identity rituals as a bursting strategy to try to maintain a connection with her daughter, and in doing so, her family identity:

> So we decided every Tuesday night would be her date night if she wants to go and do that, but she would never want to do it. I mean, she wanted to know that it was available, but she would never want to actually act on it. (2-11)

Though she expressed that the ritual of Tuesday night date nights "would have been really wonderful," in essence her daughter's lack of cooperation denied her the opportunity to affirm her family identity in this way. However, when family members cooperated, rituals could be effective as a "survival skill." For example, another woman had a ritual of throwing annual "over-the-top fun" birthday parties for her children to "counter. . .questioning [surrounding her] not being home":

> So, when we did birthdays, it was over-the-top fun. I like big, I like fun. I think—every birthday party—and think about how many you'll have, like 12 and I have three kids, so 36. They're going home with Beanie Babies, they're bringing Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, we got horses coming, so they were always like these signature, fun. Being inclusive and having everybody always invited, and just making all the kids feel like they're awesome, and making it fun. So yes, I think that that is what's been a survival skill for me. You almost have to counter some of the questioning you not being home, you've got to make sure the time that you're home is really fun. (2-43)

Since rituals often depended on receptivity of family members, however, chronic accelerating could involve using identity proxies in a different, yet more indirect attempt to affirm family identities independent from family member cooperation. Returning to Lori (2-11), more symbolic relationships could serve as proxies for the threatened family identities:

> I have a little kindergarten that's named after my daughter, in [a developing country] and we plan to build another nine. . .For me, if it's something that I love, you don't even know that you're working. . .I think another regret is not—I would have loved to have more children but it just was not practical so I figured that I can work with orphanages rather than do it for myself. (2-11)

In this case, chronic accelerating necessitated building a solution that allowed for more chronic family identity bursting. In lieu of building a family, Lori built kindergartens for children in a developing nation.

Though she proxied for the relationship with her daughter, she also quite vividly envisioned a future that connected her more directly with her family identity. At times, Lori lived separately from her husband "so that there's no one waiting for you to come home if you are busy working." She envisioned building a living space that was physically connected to her husband and to her daughter:

> We want to build a compound where we have three houses. One for [my husband], one for me, one for [my daughter], so that we're neighbors. So our goal is to create that. We started looking at that. And then tubes in between the houses for all the animals to run back and forth. Well, I think the wonderful thing is . . .Your husband is close. . . Your daughter would be close. So it'd be much easier when we're neighbors. . .I really reflected on, am I doing things correctly and my takeaway from that experience was that I want to spend more time with my daughter and husband. (2-11)

Envisioning a future with connected houses corresponded with hopes for a less threatened family identity. These hopes could be dashed, however, when significant others muddied the lens to the future because they failed to believe the chronic accelerator would ever change. Another individual envisioned two months during which he might spend more time with his family in between intense entrepreneurial endeavors, when he only had his day job. However, his wife did not believe this would ever happen:

> I think [my wife] might want me to be around more but she knows that I can't. So she's not going to—that's like banging your head against the wall. You can only fix the things you can fix. Even when we talk about it, I'm like, "Oh, yes. Well, when this happens. . ." and she's like, "Shut up. You know that's not going to happen." You know you [are] just going to start something else. (2-26)

The risk is that the envisioned future is eclipsed with age and reality, and lacking residue, dual identity affirmation seemed further out of focus.

The early achiever who had described career recognition as a "drug," and had "over-the-top" birthday parties to compensate annually now had grown children and was still struggling with family identity affirmation, wishing she could have more kids to "fill her heart":

> I used to just cry over thinking about not being there during all those years that my kids were home. . . It was *my* loss more than theirs. . .Now, it's kind of lonely. It's like this is the [terrible] stage of life... I

> should probably feel really great, slow down, but that's not how I feel. I'm so lonely. I wish I had more kids. I really, really, really do. Freaking A, you should have four. . .because it's so sad when you get older, and then you have two kids or three kids to call, it is not enough. If they're not near—because one is over in—one's in [another city], and one's sick, and one's got his career and he's travelling around. I never see them. Two more would be awesome. That would fill my heart longer, and I would have had—I wish I could even adopt one now. I'm 54. (2-43)

Chronic accelerating involved addressing identity threat with family identity projecting and creative identity bursts, but a sense of regret and loss often seemed to remain.

Lane switching. In contrast to the inescapable intoxication of career momentum that propelled chronic accelerating, others accelerated in their careers until they had generated enough identity residue such that career threat subsided, and then switched lanes to career cruising. While expanding the lens of time into the future was the hallmark of chronic accelerating, lane switching involved expanding the lens of time into the past, which corresponded with joy, relief, and gratitude suggestive of dual identity affirmation.

Lane switching was similar to chronic accelerating, such that external affirmation for career success was at first threatening, highlighting that more aspirational goals had not yet been achieved and motivating career acceleration. However, when external affirmation eventually recognized the achievement of the early achiever's most ambitious goals, career threat became less salient, leading to cruising. In other words, lane switching and chronic accelerating may look similar at the outset, but lane switching meant eventually making the choice to cruise, perhaps when a goal was achieved or enough career identity residue was amassed. For example, Pete described how the external validation of the award came at a time when his career goals and ambitions to climb to higher rungs of the corporate ladder remained unachieved:

> It just wasn't the right time for me to slow down. I likened it to being on a treadmill. At the time when I received the award, the treadmill was moving pretty fast and it was at a pretty steep incline. So, I just personally wasn't ready to rest on my laurels. I wanted to continue to climb up the corporate ladder, as they say, and it was just the time in my life I was just extremely focused on my career and getting to the level that I wanted to get to in an organization. (2-39)

Once Pete had achieved the level of senior vice president, however, the external validation aligned with his own career goals, and cruising was more attractive:

> I think I was at director level when I received the award. I always aspired to be at least a vice president. . .I have now achieved senior vice president level. I'm just comfortable with where I'm at. I don't aspire to be a CEO. . .and really don't aspire to move up. I feel like I could be at this level for the rest of my career. I'm at a level incline and I'm at a nice walking pace right now. Go with your slow job. It's a nice place to be. I think part of it was that early on I had determined what level I wanted to get to and I got there. To me, that allowed me to maybe take the foot off the gas a little bit. (2-39)

The treadmill metaphor aptly reveals how lane switching meant moving "pretty fast" and "at a pretty steep incline" for the first part of his career, comparable to chronic accelerating, but the "level incline" illustrates how lane switching eventually involved taking his "foot off the gas" and switching to career cruising once he was ready to "rest on [his] laurels."

Having first built sufficient career identity residue, Pete described how he kept in touch with work colleagues to relive "the warrior days" when his foot was "on the gas." Though he and his colleagues had all made the transition to cruising, they kept in touch with their peak career identities through each other:

> We talk about who would get in to the office earlier and who would work weekends and who would try to put more color in their presentation than the other person. It's almost like business war stories. We're reliving the warrior days when we knew we were competing against each other in order to move up in organizations. With some of them, it's just been interesting to go back and think through some of the crazy things that we did in order to keep our foot on the gas as much as we did. (2-39)

Through his relationships, Pete kept his past intense career focus alive in the present. This strategy seemed to have a positive effect on his relationship with his significant other:

> I think it's helped our relationship we aren't both go, go, go, a hundred miles an hour in different directions. Absolutely. . .It's just now that we have this lifestyle you look back and go, "I wish I would have done it earlier." (2-39)

The sentiment of wishing he had switched lanes earlier was shared by others. For example, the

woman who had felt the "epitome of terror" (2-25) when receiving the 40 Under 40 Award while holding her newborn baby had also switched lanes to cruise. She was grateful that she switched lanes when she did:

> I would wake up early and work, I'd wake about 3:00 a.m. and work. I would get home, eat dinner and then pull up my laptop on the couch just to keep working. I was on boards and committees and other initiatives and I just had so—on my weekends, I had meetings on weekends. I was working so much, and I loved it. Now, I think back to that and I just feel sorry for that person. I have no regrets for doing all that, but I feel so lucky and grateful. . .Now it's like, "Oh, my gosh. Thank God this happened when it did." I didn't have to wait another eight years or something to experience this joy. (2-25)

The sense of relief evident by "feeling sorry for that person" she was during career acceleration was something that chronic accelerators never experienced. Instead, lane switching was often accompanied by a sense of gratitude indicative of dual identity affirmation, as a different early achiever described:

> I would just say that it's very clear to me when we're up in our cabin during the workday and the middle of a 90-degree day in summer time that I've been there for two weeks and I've logged in maybe an hour a day. Then there were my kids and my wife hasn't been working and I'm only 44. I'm very grateful that all the work that I've put in up until that point allows that to happen. I know a lot of my friends who only get three weeks off each year would love to do that—so yes, I think that's most apparent that when I'm in a beautiful place with people that are special to me during a regular workday that I know that, yes, that the success has given me that opportunity and I'm grateful for it. (2-28)

Relying on residue, the above respondent "lived off old memories" from his earlier success while he now enjoyed a more extended season of cruising at the lake cabin. Early career success that parlayed into residue was key to achieving dual identity affirmation. The only downside seemed to be waiting until career accelerating had generated enough residue to render it effective against career threat. Pete mused: "I also know that having tried to do it earlier maybe wouldn't have gotten us to where we are today." (2-39)

Seasonalizing. Some of our informants described using time-bending sensemaking strategies as *identity seasons* (see Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978), and were able to make sense of their career and family identities by expanding the lens of time into both the past and the future. Identity seasons ebb and flow as one identity shifts into the foreground while the other moves to the background, and play out over longer or shorter seasons of a person's life. Seasonalizing meant not necessarily trying to "have it all" in the moment, but rather envisioning identities as being enacted over time and as a result stretching meaning from one time period to another and enabling a sense of balance across longer spans. Metaphorically, then, priorities given to different identities might be thought of as "seasonal" because of the potential for oscillations between identities, as one is enhanced through enactment and the other is subsequently threatened by this enhancement. Likening accelerating and cruising to being on a "teeter-totter" (2-35), toggling between "passing people in the left lane" and "cruising in the right lane" (Marie, 2-2), times when you go "full bore in your career" and times that you "lay off a bit" (2-5), and to "miles that you pace yourself," seasonalizing meant approaching a career as a "marathon and not a sprint" (2-17), which allowed for periods of career cruising. As Marie described:

> I mean, you're a bit the golden child, right? You step back and you say, and I'm sure many of the 40 Under 40 people have in their life felt like, "Wow, no matter what I do, people think I'm great, right?" You reconcile that in a different way, you kind of say, "Well, okay, I rode that wave and now, it's okay to head back to the beach and just chill for a while. . .Wow. Okay, I can do this now, and I can feel good about that. I can tell the story in a way that makes sense to me and makes sense to others." (2-2)

While "going to the beach" captures a sense of the freedom from seeking additional career identity affirmation as a result of cruising and relying on reputational residue as the "golden child," it was also a metaphor as Marie began working part-time to focus on her identity as a parent. As opposed to "being on a surfboard and riding the wave" of career affirmation and success, Marie was "carrying the surfboard with a smile" on her face. Though at times seasonalizing could look like lane switching, over time a pattern emerged, such that Marie toggled back and forth between periods of career and family focus:

> You'll see a seven-year pattern. Everything I've done has been seven years. I've often said to people, it's like you're driving in the left lane when you're passing people and then I feel like with [Company Name], I moved over to the right lane and just cruised. This is a choice. I remember saying that [my husband] and I are

> really struggling with both of us working. Then, this opportunity at [Company Name] came and I thought, this is cool, this is what I was meant to do. I've been very blessed like I've been so blessed just to have this literally every seven years, how these opportunities come my way. (2-2)

Seasonalizing relied on projecting identities into the future as well. Some could clearly picture the future and even had an exact date in mind of when the seasons would change. After having taken several steps back in her career, another woman was working toward "June 2021" where she had the choice "to be CEO again" and again realize her peak career identity:

> It's something I really like to talk about. I've started thinking about my career in a little more structured way. I've picked that date of June 2021 as a trigger date that I'm working toward and that I've worked myself backwards with some goals toward that. What I've said is in 2021, I want to be at the point where I've developed something that I have the choice. I have the choice to say, "Okay, I've got all this stuff going but now I want to be a CEO again and jump way more back into my work." (2-8)

However, the double-edged sword of having strong career and family identities meant that as cruising seasons wore on, the lens to the past and future became less clear, making using identity residue and projecting more difficult, and creating vulnerability to career identity threat. During periods of passing people in the left lane, Marie was focused on her career, making progress, being promoted, while during periods of cruising in the right lane, she was less career focused and more focused on her family. Although she felt blessed to have cruising seasons and a "sense of balance," Marie relayed the threat she felt when the residue was waning, and she compared herself to other 40 Under 40 Award winners during periods when she was less career-focused, which prompted her to switch lanes again:

> The award is a blessing and a curse because it sets expectations for you. Oh, what am I doing compared to [my friend], or what am I doing compared to other people that have come across who were in my [40 Under 40] class? So, it's interesting. Am I using my time and talents to really contribute or are you letting yourself down or letting others down because you're in the right lane? (2-2)

Career threat while cruising came from self-comparisons rooted in identity affirmation, causing some to contemplate switching lanes and "step back on the accelerator" (2-5). Right after her daughter was born, another woman chose to take a break from being a corporate executive in order to work part time to spend more time with her daughter, but career threat during that time made longer seasonalizing difficult:

> It just kind of wore on me from an identity perspective. . ."Oh, so you're staying home now?" The fact that that bothered me was very telling. If I could go back in time and talk to myself and say, "You're going to do it for a year. . .you have time with your daughter, so just enjoy it." But instead all I could do was think about, "Is this going to be my new career? Am I ever going to go back, and if I want to go back will I be able to get back in? I just couldn't shut it off...I should've just laid back in the canoe or the white water raft. I liked being identified as someone who is successful in their career. (2-14)

She had difficulty enacting an identity projection strategy; she could not "lay back in the canoe" and instead questioned whether she would "ever go back" or would be able to "get back in." However, after eventually returning to a full-time executive position, she found success in seasonalizing over shorter periods of time. In comparison to seven-year seasons, she stayed in touch with both career and family identities on a daily basis:

> Tuesday would have been almost the perfect definition of what I'm loving about my life right now. In the morning we're doing this interview with a woman who reports to [the President]. I get on a flight, and that evening I'm taking my daughter to tee-ball and I'm standing on the field with her like any other mom—that day is the perfect definition of what's working in my life right now. It's just. . .two very different things if you will, but they're both a priority in my life and so that day defines who I'm becoming and how I'm finding balance as a mom. I feel like I'm the kind of mom I hoped I could be and still have a really high-level job, like I'm somehow doing both. Everyone just can't have both. I'm somehow doing that, so why do I want to mess with that? (2-14)

Whether over the course of a day or over years, seasonalizing meant having a sense of balance over time by redefining the time horizons over which balance was measured, affirming both career and family identities. In comparison to daily and seven-year seasons, one entrepreneur described his success at seasonalizing over a "quarter or year":

> I think anyone who thinks that they can be everyone to everybody at all times is crazy. I am all of those things at once but at any given moment I need to be focused

> on being Dad; I need to be focused on being president and CEO of the company. While I'm all those other things too and I bring those experiences, and lenses, and roles to the table as a full person it's about focus, and I think that there's a directed view on balance. People thinking they're in and out of balance. And they measure it on too short of a timeline. I think balance needs to be measured in a longer period of time. "Okay, was I in and out of balance this day or week," really isn't—the question is, "How am I doing this quarter or this year?" (2-23)

Redefining balance over time meant that seasonalizing could bring a sense of gratitude, feeling blessed, lucky, proud, and sometimes amazed for having achieved dual identity affirmation.

DISCUSSION

For our early achievers, external recognition for success surprisingly served to set into motion a course of identity management that involved both family and career identities. By revealing the threat emanating from recognition for success, our emergent model significantly extends research on identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011) by showing how identity affirmation can threaten salient career and family identities. Our work also showcases ways in which identity work embraced and played with notions of time. As custodians of their identity, early achievers used time-bending strategies of identity residue, identity bursts, and identity projecting to support attempts at dual identity affirmation. These strategies were used differentially in chronic accelerating, lane switching, and seasonalizing as individuals interpolated between family and career identities. Our insights lead to several important theoretical and empirical contributions in the identity and work–family literatures.

Contributions to the Identity and Work–family Literatures

First, our work illustrates a portfolio of time-bending identity management strategies used in identity work. Those that were able to project career and family identities into the future, enact identities fleetingly in the present, or rely on identity residue from the past, were better able to make sense of themselves in the present. Alongside responding to identity threat by restructuring career and family identities (e.g., Petriglieri, 2011), our findings suggest that individuals additionally restructure concepts of time when identities have been affirmed to further guard against threat.

Second, restructuring concepts of time played out in myriad ways, revealing identity patterns of chronic accelerating, lane switching, and seasonalizing. So that any one identity was not in suspension for long, our data revealed identity seasons that unfolded over months or years (*macro seasons*), as well as those that unfolded over the course of a day or week (*micro seasons*) differing in the frequency and magnitude of the shifts. Some respondents shifted their focus by changing jobs every seven years (2-2), while others seasonalized over the course of the day (2-14) through diligent schedule management. Temporal depth—the temporal distance of the past and future from the present (Bluedorn, 2002) that one typically considers—may affect the use of microseasons and macroseasons. Microseasons may be comfortable for those that typically contemplate the past and future over shorter time horizons, while macroseasons may be more comfortable for those with longer temporal depth.

Our data provides some evidence of the emotional outcomes of seasonalizing, chronic accelerating, and lane switching that allows us to speculate about the relative efficacy thereof. Seasonalizers, with their use of identity projecting and residue, often felt blessed, grateful, and lucky for effectively maintaining a connection to both career and family identities in the present. *Microseasonalizing*, which involves alternating between career and family identities over shorter periods of time, may be the most effective strategy for creating a sense of "balance," but requires discipline to actively manage the boundaries between work and family (Kreiner et al., 2009), often on a daily basis. Lane switching often yielded a sense of joy, relief, and gratitude after switching lanes, but individuals may endure a long and uncertain period of family identity projecting in the process of accumulating career residue prior to switching lanes. Biological clocks may render the initial career acceleration period uncomfortable for women if career acceleration involves delaying having children past prime child-bearing years. Chronic accelerating may require the most energy to continually enact family identity bursting strategies to maintain a connection with family identities, causing stress and anxiety, and risking burnout.

Comparing award winners by cohort suggests differences in the identity patterns that emerged. Not surprisingly, participants who won the award 10 or more years ago were more likely to have the perspective needed to recognize the identity seasons

that played out over longer periods of time (i.e., years) or to have built enough residue to switch lanes. (Macro)seasonalizing was more likely to emerge among those who had won the award in earlier years, and could look back over their lives to observe broader patterns. Those who persisted at chronically accelerating had accepted the guilt that came along with that identity pattern. In contrast, participants who had won the award approximately 5–10 years prior commonly used seasonalizing strategies over shorter periods of time (e.g., daily), especially if they had children. Participants who had won the award in the most recent five years were often younger and had more success with family projecting, but were less sure of how the pattern of their lives would unfold into larger seasons. One participant expressed fear about whether she would ever return to her "supercharged professional lane" if she paused for a family season.

Third, our findings extend existing theories of identity that often consider affirmation or validation as stabilizing outcomes of identity work, rather than instigation for it. While extant work has considered identity work as ongoing, conditions of threat, struggle, or major life changes (e.g., motherhood, divorce, work role changes) are more commonly the impetus (Ashforth, 2001). Further, Ibarra's (1999) model of provisional selves, Pratt and colleagues' (2006) model of identity work, Hermanowicz and Morgan's (1999) model of group identity rituals, and Elsbach's (2009) work on professional designers include (positive) external evaluation, social validation, identity affirmation, and (identity) recognition, respectively, as key outcomes of individuals managing their career identities. Affirmation often serves as a desired outcome of identity management because "(e)xternal parties also confer identity by providing social signals about who one is becoming. By gauging others' reactions to their behavior, people learn more about who they are and who they want to be" (Ibarra, 1999: 781). Indeed, the very thing that might seem to make an identity more stable, such as affirmation, can also be the thin edge of the wedge that dislodges it, causes spillover, and has dramatic implications for salient life identities.

We provide an alternative narrative about the experience of success and identity affirmation. Rather than upheaval as a starting point for identity work, our emergent findings reveal the unintended, and sometimes upending, consequences of positive recognition. Reminiscent of the "Oscar curse," winning an award may be enviable, but the trappings of success were not without cost for many of our participants. Some wore themselves out by chronically accelerating in their careers and expending energy holding off perpetual threats to their family identities. Others eventually interpreted career affirmation as a signal that they could switch lanes and cruise, but even in so doing they still wrestled with identity issues along the way. These insights underscore the dynamic nature of identities (e.g., Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996) and suggest that our theories need to account for the notion that positive events and affirmations may have multipronged outcomes and be both affirming and threatening.

Finally, our framework makes contributions to the work–family literature by emphasizing the need to examine work and family issues through a temporal lens. Work–life balance has been defined in terms of equal engagement, satisfaction, or effective participation in work and family roles (Greenhaus et al., 2003; Voydanoff, 2005). Although one might not expect these early achievers to find a sense of balance, their experience suggests that balance is fostered when thinking more expansively about their identities over time. By deploying strategies related to past, present, and future identity enactment to infuse into the current self-concept, individuals were closer to achieving a sense of balance. Those with flexible time perspectives (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009) may experience less work–family conflict and more balance. Future studies, as well as measures of work–family conflict and balance, would be enriched by incorporating an element of time that broadens the definition to include past and future selves.

Our time-bending sensemaking strategies also complement the time-allocating strategies prevalent in the work–family literature. Time-related coping, accommodating, or scheduling strategies, such as rearranging work schedule for a family event (Behson, 2002), changing one's work schedule to a compressed work week, or simply being more "efficient" while at work (e.g., Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006) are all focused on time allocation in the present. Rather than changing time allocation, time-bending strategies provide professionals with cognitive approaches to think differently about time, extending present self-concepts into the past and the future. Some activities that would conceptually be defined as work–family conflict or accommodation might actually be functional strategies to strive for dual identity affirmation. For example, leaving work in the middle of the day to attend a child's game or consolidating long work days to free up other days

are thought of as ways to manage work and family demands on time, but these might also be identity management strategies. When temporally sequenced and intentional, behaviors resonant of work–family conflict may lead to identity affirmation.

Limitations and Future Research

While we chose our sample and method in order to build theory and answer exploratory research questions, all studies have weaknesses that limit the sweep of their implications. First, although we have proposed a dynamic model from our data, we did not perform multiple interviews with informants over time to see how their sensemaking strategies changed; rather, we relied on retrospective accounts of what they had experienced. This is a common limitation for interview-based studies, so we tried to mitigate this concern by interviewing early achievers that had won the award at different points in time and then comparing their answers from different life stages during our axial coding process. This provided us with a between-person view of how the sensemaking strategies were being used over time, and a better sense of the possibilities for transitions between accelerating and cruising. That said, this limitation provides an opportunity for future research, which could perhaps use panel data or experience sampling methods, to better track the impact of time-related sensemaking strategies on identity management over time.

Second, the generalizability of our findings may be limited given that we focused on early achievers who experienced external recognition for success that affirmed their identity at a young age and in a very public way. Although our research journey began with Wave 1 participants who did not experience this prominent identify affirmation, our research questions naturally evolved based on variation in affirmation and threat observed in Wave 1 to inform Wave 2. We focused on using what we learned from Wave 1 as a platform for fully examining how identity affirmation might catalyze the process that emerged in our Wave 2 data. However, a cursory comparison shows that some Wave 1 informants experienced threat and affirmations from promotions. Future research might build a richer typology of identity affirmation to better describe which types of success trigger the kind of identity threat described here, and whether the same identity patterns may emerge. In particular, seasonalizing may be a strategy individuals adopt if they derive a sense of self-worth from their career identity, whether or not it has been affirmed. A less affirmed sample may also reveal the emergence of additional sensemaking strategies and identity patterns, including, for example, chronic cruisers. Finally, though gender was not the focus of our study, future research might examine how men and women enact these strategies differently.

Practical Applications

Despite the threats to identity, many participants arrived at a state of dual identity affirmation, due in part to the flexibility and schedule control that their jobs as entrepreneurs, attorneys (the majority were partners), academics, and high-level executives afforded them. In particular, identity burst strategies or cruising seasons can be facilitated by the availability of flextime, as well as benefits such as vacation time or professional sabbaticals. Some identity rituals rely upon predictable time off from work to focus on family. Organizations can encourage individuals to use their vacation time, which can promote identity bursts and also build identity residue through the creation of memories. Although these benefits are common, their uptake is highly variable as there may be perceived organizational penalties for utilization (Manchester, Leslie, & Dahm, 2018). Research has suggested that U.S. workers forfeit approximately one week of vacation each year (Project: Time Off, 2016).

Despite these issues with utilization, many organizations support the idea of flexible work. But to what extent do they also support flexibility in careers? Although the "boundaryless career" has been espoused (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), organizations may assume that early achievers want a career ladder that goes straight to the top, while in reality they may be looking for the jungle gym (Gunz, Jalland, & Evans, 1998). Our results suggest that the ebbs and flows represented in identity seasons require a more liberated perspective on careers and human resources systems that support different models of movement through an organization. Assumptions that professionals desire a ladder straight to the top may make it difficult for them to have their desired careers, creating job dissatisfaction, poorer well-being, or turnover to another organization where they are not on a predestined track. External affirmation at the beginning of a career might make it difficult for individuals to recreate themselves.

We might also consider whether there are unintended consequences of externally recognizing early career success. Although our participants were

honored to receive the award, it also triggered threats to identity that might require support in the form of coaching, peer discussions, or mentorship in which the vulnerability of career and family identities is explicitly discussed. It is also possible that early achievers are at risk of burning out following their rapid rise to success. Might it be worthwhile to consider the more subtle appeal of the slow and steady performer? To value the tortoise as we do the hare? Such a perspective would require rewarding a multidimensional sense of self that plays out over time, a sense of self that deploys the time-bending strategies revealed here and embraces the seasons of one's identity.

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APPENDIX A

QUESTIONS FROM THE WAVE 1 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What is your occupation and position? Please describe a typical week. What are your work responsibilities?
2. Take a minute to envision the professional you would ideally like to be. Describe the way you would think, feel, and behave as this ideal professional. Are you always your best self at work? Describe the way you actually think, feel, and behave as a professional when you are not your best self. Describe the person you ought to be at work.

3. Tell me a little about your family. Are you married? Do you have children? How old?
4. Now, envision the parent you would ideally like to be. Describe the way you think, feel, and behave as this ideal parent. Are you always your best self as a parent? Describe the way you actually think, feel, and behave as a parent when you are not your best self. Describe the parent you or others think you ought to be.
5. How does holding more than one important life role affect your ability to be your best self at work and as a parent (to be the self you or others think you ought to be at work and as a parent)?
6. How does being a parent (professional) affect your ability to be your best self at work (as a parent)? How does being a parent (professional) affect the way you feel, think, or behave as a professional (as a parent)?
7. In the past, what kinds of life (work) choices have you made in order to fulfill work (parental) responsibilities?
8. Describe the most important and influential trade-off you have made. How do you feel about the choices you have made? How do you cope with any negative emotions (e.g., regret, disappointment, guilt)?
9. What do you do to manage the demands of your work and life roles?
10. With whom do you discuss or compare your work and life choices? How do these people affect your decisions and feelings? How are these strategies working for you?
11. How satisfied are you with your career? Family life? Work–life choices? Why? Overall, how satisfied are you with your life? Why?
12. How often do you feel nervous, stressed, or disappointed? Why? How much do you have to be proud of?

APPENDIX B

QUESTIONS FROM THE WAVE 2 INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Congratulations on winning the 40 Under 40 Award! Let's talk about how you got to the point of earning this award. Could you draw a timeline of your career and label peaks and valleys—what moments have been your biggest successes?
2. We want to know about you as a whole person, including more than your career identity. You know how Superman is also Clark Kent or Wonder Woman is Diana Prince? Let's pretend that winning the 40 Under 40 makes you a bit of a superhero. Superheroes always have multiple identities, so if your work-self is a superhero, what are your other identities (other important life roles)?
3. Can you please draw a parallel timeline for your family or personal life, highlighting the peaks and valleys? How do these two lines relate?
4. After winning the award, what did you think or how did you feel about yourself as a professional (parent or spouse)? Did you ever question how you would continue to achieve this level of success?
5. Have you ever put your professional (parent or spouse) identity on hold for a period of time—days, weeks, or even years? How did you feel about yourself as a professional (parent/spouse)?
   - Can you describe a time when your identity as a professional (parent or spouse) was threatened? What did you think about or do to make you feel better about yourself as a professional (parent or spouse)? Why did you choose this strategy? What was the outcome for you?
   - What work–life decisions have you made that affect your identity as a professional (parent or spouse)? Why did you make this decision? How did this affect you as a professional (parent or spouse)?
6. Though things might have changed, do you ever think about the person you used to be?
   - Why do you think about who you were in the past? How does it affect how you think about yourself as a mother or father, spouse, and professional now? How do you remember who you were in the past?
7. How do you foresee your life changing over the next few years and into the future? What does the future hold for you? How does this make you feel about yourself as a professional, parent, or spouse?
8. When you look back, can you describe a time or think of a time when you felt good about yourself both as a professional and a parent? How do you define work–life balance? What does it feel like to be balanced?