

---

# WOMEN CALLED: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN WOMEN DUALY CALLED TO MOTHERHOOD AND CAREER

TINA SCHERMER SELLERS, and KRIS THOMAS  
*Seattle Pacific University*  
JENNIFER BATTS, and CAMI OSTMAN  
*Seattle, Washington*

---

The intersection between spirituality, motherhood and vocation is largely unexplored in contemporary writing and research. The cultural and religious messages received by women regarding motherhood and vocation often produce complicated dilemmas for women who seek to participate in both domains simultaneously. Even though working mothers represent a significant number of women in America, the stories, themes and voices of deeply spiritual career mothers have been largely silenced in literature. This phenomenological study looks into the lives of eleven Christian women who are mothers working across career disciplines in a liberal arts university setting. Four dominant themes emerged from the analysis, including the meaning of "calling," formative messages, the lived experience, and wisdom for the next generation. Though complex and demanding, overall these women were deeply satisfied and grateful for the opportunity to craft lives fulfilling longings to both motherhood and career. Implications for the community and future research are also addressed.

---

"I've worked really hard to think through carefully, what do I want and how do I accomplish that? How do I get there? I've consciously rejected and accepted some cultural messages beginning very early" (study participant).

"I think every person, every woman, has to figure it out for herself, what's the best fit. That's what I wish the culture and church would say" (study participant).

The idea of "calling" and the ways in which this concept is defined are at the heart of Christian vocation (Sumner, 2003). To what kind of work are we called? Where do our gifts lie?

What will our life's work be if we follow God's direction? These are questions that invite many faith-informed individuals to wrestle, listen and make difficult choices. Authors Roels and Andolsen (1997) describe the considerations involved in making vocational choices in the following way:

Vocation is the use of our gifts as a response to God, listening closely to what the Lord requires from each of us. Vocation will be unique to each person. Multiple combinations of stations may answer God's call and in different sequences, rhythms, and balances. Each Christian's vocation will by definition be highly particular, fitted to unique gifts, opportunities, circumstances, and covenants to which we are already obligated. The result is that we must carefully discern which roles we should occupy, in what balance we should occupy them, and at what pace we should allow each of them to develop. (p. 43)

We assume that working mothers, just like everyone else, have long had to sort through cultural and religious messages about what "calling" means. How does one live in a way that has integrity both to vocational calling and to one's commitment to parenthood? As Miller-McLemore (1994) says in her book entitled *Also a Mother*,

Adulthood for men and women alike involves the developmental task of determining the place of work in their life... Many women have an additional hurdle: they not only enter upon the external process of vocational change from lay person to trained person, they enter upon an internal process of transformation of their core identity from private to public worker. (p. 112)

That is to say, some women experience deeply their sense of calling in two significant domains, that of the workplace, or career, and that of motherhood.

Ample literature exists on the topics of women and career; Christianity and motherhood; and even faith, career, and women (Gallager, 2003; Sumner, 2003; Storkey, 2001; Miller McLemore, 1994; Kememan, 1991; Roels and Andolsen, 1997; Ashcroft, 1996). Yet

---

Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to Tina Schermer Sellers, MS, LMFT, School of Psychology, Family and Community, Seattle Pacific University, 3307 3rd Ave W, Ste 107, Seattle, WA 98119-1922. Email: tsellers@spu.edu

there is a significant lack of available research on women of faith who feel dually called to vocations of career *and* motherhood. Our research interests focus on exploring how calling is experienced by women who purposefully participate in both domains. As we found in our study, some of the silence on this topic may be partially due to the lack of available time these women have to research or write about their experiences. As researchers, our personal, cultural and church/community experiences sparked our curiosity regarding the experiences of women living out their callings to motherhood and career. Our own histories and contexts informed a set of questions aimed at evoking the varied historical and present life-styles, processes and perspectives of women in this demographic.

We know from statistics and census reports that women make up just under half of the workforce of mothers of school age children: four out of five are working (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 2003; U.S. Dept. of Licensing, 2002). We can infer then that the majority of mothers are, by choice or necessity, negotiating the challenges and questions of balancing work and family. For many women who identify themselves as Christians and say that their faith informs their decisions regarding vocation and child-rearing, there are conflicts between the discourses. These strong messages which give individuals clues about how to best live their lives may be dissonant as they come from various significant and influential sources. Often, there are diametrically opposed discourses coming from church (Tchividjian, 2001; Graham, 2002; Sumner, 2003), community, family and education (Grant, 1994; Storkey, 2001), leaving women to struggle individually with the discord reverberating in the culture.

For example, some Christian messages about calling encourage women to consider their own individuality as they make plans concerning career and family. The kinds of messages that advocate for a woman to explore her giftedness and passions when choosing vocational direction resonate in the following statement:

A woman's identity, her authentic personhood, includes her gifts, the things she loves to do, the things that energize her. These, in turn, are part of her calling and may become her work. But for a person to be able to follow Jesus, she needs to have a sense of who she is (identity), and she needs to be pursuing her calling. (Ashcroft, 1996, p.31)

In an equally definitive statement the same author states: "Women have been encouraged to idolize their family lives. We are so used to thinking this is

acceptable, even laudable, that we forget that Jesus stood out against this kind of idolatry" (p. 72). These kinds of challenges are inviting women to think about themselves and their direction as they make life choices and to consider children and family among the deciding factors rather than as the sole definition of who they are.

Other Christian women hear the discourse of traditional roles, as reflected in the writings of the famous missionary wife, Elisabeth Elliot, "[R]oles are not assigned on the basis of capability. They were determined at the beginning of Creation to be a man's role and a woman's role and again, we are not free to experiment, tamper with or exchange them" (1974, p. 144).

A third discourse is one of mixed messages. On the one hand, cultural feminist messages are praising women for bringing their gifts and strengths into the workforce in a way that is generative and influential (Gallager, 2003; Sumner, 2003). On the other hand, many feel that "social support for working mothers turned out to be empty permission without supplying the essential nuts and bolts for integrating family and employment" such as "quality child care, sick child care, maternal leave, flexible work schedules, housekeeping relief, etc. The overwhelming attitude of 'society' was that women may perform the work of men as long as they also perform women's work" (Sugar, 1994, p. 25). These mixed messages, the sentiment that a woman can do and be anything she wants, but the necessity of often doing it without the appropriate supports, are confounding for many women and indeed, for their partners and children. One author noted it this way, "Far from being admired by society for their dedication to work and family, employed mothers frequently felt looked down upon by their extended families or community at large. Working women were viewed with suspicion" (Sugar, 1994, p. 7). "The United States is the only industrialized nation that does not provide child care and parental leave policies supportive of families (married couples or others) in which mothers work" (Kameman, 1991, p. 18). Because of this, many families feel blamed, unsupported and further burdened.

While there are many faith filled women who hear statements about either giftedness or traditional roles and feel their experiences are represented, there are also many women sitting beside them in congregations all over America who are acutely aware of a growing frustration with these mixed messages.

## METHOD

### *Design*

We drew on phenomenological and ethnographic approaches to qualitative research, using intensive interviews (Lofland & Lofland, 1994) because we wished to hear the voices of and capture the details of the lives of the individuals interviewed. The in-depth nature of phenomenological interviews lends itself to small sample sizes (Boss, Dahu, & Kaplan, 1996; Creswell, 1998). In this case, we interviewed 11 individuals and after 11 interviews, themes began to reoccur in the data.

### *Participants*

The criteria for participating in this study were two-fold. First, participants had to be mothers and secondly, they were either working in a field of their choice or attending school full-time to that end. The individuals in this study self-selected into our sample because they “possess characteristics that match those of interest” (Lecompt & Schensul, 1999, p. 113) to those conducting the research. This process of selecting our informants insured that we obtained participants who identified with our topic of study and resonated with the term “calling” as it relates to the domains of profession and child-rearing.

Participants were solicited via email from among the faculty of a small Christian liberal arts university. The email was sent to all faculty members wherein the purpose and topic of the study were stated. Sixteen women responded to the email; 13 fit into the criteria. Of those, 2 chose not to participate and 11 were interviewed. Ten of the respondents had biological children of their own; one was step-parenting. The children of respondents ranged in age from 18 months to 26 years at the time of the interviews. Seven of the women had 2 children (one expecting) and 4 of the women had 3 children (one expecting) ( $M = 2.36$  per family).

The sample of 11 women ranged in age from 34 to 54 years ( $M = 43.5$ ). All were Caucasian. In this sample, 4 women worked full-time while all of their children were raised (37%), 3 had worked part-time and then full-time (27%), 2 worked part-time (18%), 1 was home until the youngest was 3-years-old and then went full-time, and 1 was home until the youngest was 5-years-old and then worked part-time (9% respectively). The denominational affiliations were varied, but all were Protestant (4 identified as Presbyterian and the others identified as Seventh

Day Adventist, Mennonite, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopal, and Non-denominational). Ninety-one percent of the participants had been involved in a church since childhood, and all described their Christian faith as important to them. All 11 of the women interviewed were married and 3 had been divorced.

### *Data collection*

All interviews were conducted by the principle investigator (PI), Tina Schermer Sellers, who also authored the original eight questions in conjunction with a team of researchers and in collaboration with a research consultant. In addition to the predetermined questions, the PI asked relevant follow-up and clarifying questions when helpful to elicit greater detail.

Because qualitative researchers do not claim to look at their material through neutral eyes (Weiss, 1994, p. 183), each of our four member research team wrote a biased statement and included discussion of our biases as they related to data analysis (Hodgson, Garcia, & Tyndall, 2004) in the following manner. First, we each read through copies of all transcripts to get a sense of the material. In a second reading, we took notes in the margins regarding significant themes (for example: noting the repeated examples of supportive messages coming from female mentors, family members, and colleagues). All themes were then transferred to a grid which allowed researchers to view the subjects' responses by question (down) and by individual (across). This provided a systematic line by line and focused coding procedure (Hesse-Biber, Howling, Leavy, & Lovejoy, 2004) as well as ease of comparison and discussion during our frequent meetings. Focused coding served to clarify themes and variations within and between ideas as we discussed both the content of the interviews and the research and discovery process. To add to the analysis and rigor the entire process was captured in memo writing by one of our researchers acting as a recorder and then discussed with the research consultant at frequent intervals. This process yielded findings as designated by the three primary researchers that were then verified by member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We found that experiences of calling were articulated as two distinct kinds of experiences: one was that of the original meaning of the idea of calling in

respondents' lives, and the other was the way in which their dual callings were lived out in a practical manner. Out of these two types of experiences we have identified four thematic clusters. First we discuss the "meaning of calling." Next, we examine messages respondents identified as supportive and unsupportive to their decisions to follow their vocational callings. Third, we look at women's descriptions of being dually called to two significant roles, and finally we examine the wisdom offered to the next generation.

### *Thematic Cluster 1: The "meaning of calling"*

Historically, the term "calling" has been used to depict a sense of passion, giftedness, a direction one longs for and a sense that God has placed this on one's heart (Sumner, 2003). In their various translations, the Christian Scriptures themselves utilize language that defines the discourse: "God has given gifts to each of you from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Manage them well so that God's generosity can flow through you. Are you called to be a speaker? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Are you called to help others? Do it with the strength and energy that God supplies" (1 Peter 4: 10-11; NLT, 1997). This understanding of the term "calling" is so widespread among Christian communities that we discovered very little digression from this among the interviewees as it pertained to vocation.

We did, however, uncover a very significant and consistent issue as we examined the meaning of "calling" in the lives of women who were dually called to career and motherhood. Almost across the board, "calling" to these two domains were languaged and experienced differently from one another. That is to say, while career calling was defined in traditional language which denoted a sense of early recognition of God-given gifts and longings that manifested themselves later in life, such language was rarely utilized when talking about motherhood. The call to motherhood was largely articulated as something that became an important focus or passion *after* becoming a mother.

Ten women interviewed, when speaking about career, spoke in the traditional language of calling. Words such as "drive," "passion," "longing," and "compelled" peppered the responses to questions about the meaning of calling as it related to career. Many expressed the sense that they had known something about their gifts and vocational direction

early in their lives and this passion propelled them forward in a focused way. One woman spoke clearly about her experience of the development of her career calling: "I had felt called to this since I was five. I can remember wanting to be a doctor my entire life."

Another participant gave us the sense of being "compelled" to continue in pursuit of her direction:

I knew probably 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade that I wanted to teach. [I] pursued it in college [and] went straight to a secondary ed. degree. So I've been at the university level ever since age 24. [I] did a masters degree ... but eventually decided I always wanted a PhD.

Yet another woman said: "[I have] a sense that the reason that I'm here is to do the work that I'm doing with [my field]. And if I was to go and do some other job, I would lack authenticity and integrity, it would just be wrong.... I feel called to [this], and to contribute to other people's lives." This participant was representative of the many who spoke of their field of study as a necessity in their lives, something that cannot be omitted.

When speaking of motherhood, on the other hand, we were surprised to discover that calling was articulated in a much more organic manner. Most women in our study spoke of "opportunity" and "responsibility" but did not speak of clear knowledge and compelling longing from an early age, even when they knew early in life that motherhood would be part of their life story. In fact, one woman said, "there was a definite, definite longing to be a doctor, to pursue that. There was not a definite longing to be a mom. It's just something nice that's happened." Another said, "So the motherhood part is not as much a clear distinct calling as just another fit for who I am but in a very different way."

Why would such a distinction between calling to career and motherhood occur in the language of women who resonated with the idea of living a dually called life when they responded to the invitation to participate in this study? One participant, an accomplished sociology scholar explained her process this way:

Growing up in a family where both grandfathers were ministers and my father was a minister, that was the assumption, that what we do in our life is about being called to it. We were getting called all around the globe because of "call." [Therefore], call for me was much more connected to the work I would do and the way that work would be about being part of God's helping people - to participate in God's work somehow. I grew up with a mother whose work was to be at home supporting the call of my father, so I never grew up with a

sense that what she did was call. . . . Of course [I] changed my idea about that significantly when I got older. What women did was invisible and was not about call. What men did was about calling. Somehow, I wanted to do it the way that men did it. That is why I did not think about being a mother. Thinking that would mean I couldn't do the other. When in graduate school, I started to think about women and gender and the ways in which my mother's own choices had been so limited and the frustration of her life around the fact that she didn't get to have a call. It was understanding my mother . . . and my frustration about my mother and the context of her lack of choice that opened me up to the possibility of calling including family. . . . It then began to feel like that language helped to frame for me the possibility of a "call" for a mother.

The above participant demonstrates that it was only after extensive thought and analysis of the cultural context of "calling" was she able to apply the traditional word to motherhood. Other women in our study also spoke of the relationship between motherhood and calling differently from the way they spoke of calling as it related to career. In the following quote, one sees the sense of commitment to children and the language of calling pertaining to the way in which the participant parents her children more than to the issue of whether or not to become a mother in the first place:

I can't imagine myself doing anything else [besides my current career] and I try, but it's like "I would miss this too much." I can sometimes imagine myself not being a mother. OK, I would miss a whole lot of things, but I could imagine it because I've been there. And sometimes you think when you are in the midst of all of the extra work that it takes to be a mother, . . . it's a whole lot more work to be responsible for children than not. And sometimes you think, "What was I thinking? Where was my brain? What wasn't working?" Or to be more accurate, I had no idea what I was getting into. . . . I always figured I would be a mom. It wasn't a question I ever asked. So when my husband and I were just dating, we talked about how many children, there was never a question of did we want children. It was how many children did we want? To decide not to have children would have been a conscious decision on my part, as opposed to having children . . . It could have been the default. . . . So I would not describe the decision to have children as a calling. The decision to be as good a mother as I can fits into the calling . . . maybe.

Another respondent put it this way:

Once the children were there, my heart was with them. . . . Children are something that you weld into tangible reality from the depths of your heart. Just to watch them develop into their own personhood is a marvelous thing, to know them as intimately as flesh of your flesh. . . . to help them become who they're meant to be. Plus the physicality of the whole thing.

The participants quoted above, like many others, were clear in the interview that they were devoted to the welfare of their children and loved them deeply,

but spoke of the calling to motherhood as being something that "grew and developed as [the] kids grew and developed." Again, this language was markedly different from the defined language used to describe vocational calling.

This led us to question the use of the term "calling" in this study. While women who volunteered to participate in the study responded to the language of "dual calling" in the original email, we wondered if what we referred to as dual calling was in fact, experienced as calling to career and commitment to, passion for and love of their life as mothers.

As researchers, two of us are mothers. In the process of coding the interviews, we realized that our own biases entered significantly into the naming of the study as one of women of dual calling. We decided to continue to use the term "calling" for both career and motherhood in this paper because the passion and meaning ascribed to the language seemed to resonate with women in the invitation to participate and also because it was the language used in the interviews. It was only in the analysis of the data that we discovered a difference in meaning between calling to career and the desire to engage in the practice of raising children.

### *Thematic Cluster #2: Formative Messages*

As researchers, we hoped to get a sense of what the formative messages were that supported women in deciding to live out their passions to motherhood and career. What did they hear from friends, family, media, church, and education and how did these messages influence decisions about career and motherhood? Who tended to deliver the different kinds of messages? And how did these messages help or hinder the development of a life lived in two such significant domains?

Participants described feeling supported to pursue their vocational calling by family, friends, culture and their church communities while they were growing up *prior* to getting married or becoming mothers. Many described being less aware or less affected by unsupportive messages until they were engaged in *both* motherhood and career.

*Intimate relationships and supportive messages.* Supportive, helpful messages both before and after becoming a mother often came from very personal sources and seemed to pertain primarily to one's decision to follow a call toward career *while* parenting. The primary deliverers of these messages for our

participants were (a) women in their families, (b) spouses, (c) women during their formative educational years (high school/college), and (d) women in their professional lives.

Nine of the eleven participants spoke directly of support coming consistently from their mothers and female extended family members. The support often came through a mother's modeling, as well as from a mother's willingness to communicate about her own process of either following her career passions or wishing she had done so. One 36-year-old participant stated:

My mom went to college, which was probably really unheard of almost forty years ago. And her parents encouraged her and her siblings in the same way. They all have just flourished in all of their callings—in every aspect.

Other participants spoke of their mothers' mourning of lost opportunities and encouraging their girls to follow through on educational and career dreams:

[My mother] worked a factory job from midnight to 7 am so she would be home for kids in the morning and home for kids at night. Her priority was always her children, but she had to bring in some income, so she managed it. She always said, "You need to be educated, you need to be able to support yourself, and to contribute to the family. And since you have to do it, you may as well be doing something you like." (48 year old participant)

I know that my mother had an influence on me. My mother was in a nursing program, and I think that she always wished that she would have gone on. I remember her telling me once that you can do anything that you want to do. I think she felt a lot of joy seeing me go on and have a career. I remember in high school her saying, "education can never be taken away from you." (42 year old participant)

While some women heard messages in the media and popular culture that supported the idea of women being able to "do it all," and an occasional book or program was cited as being influential, the lived experience of support came almost entirely from individuals who knew the subjects personally. Even the religious messages that supported their courses of direction came from individuals close to them. One participant told of the women in her family telling Biblical stories of strong women to one another.

The religious messages that I got from my mother and my grandmother included stories of heroic women of the Bible. We didn't hear all that much about meek and subservient. And that was strong enough that when the church was going on about you know, docile backgroundedness and so forth, there was a counterweight there.

There was also significant support for participation in both career and motherhood almost across the board coming from partners. Husbands and partners figured significantly in a woman's sense that she could live out her commitments and passions in both domains. Many stories were told of how the parenting couple adjusted work schedules to accommodate the needs of children especially when children were pre-grade school age. Phrases such as "we work together," "supportive," and "my advocate" were frequent in our interviews, though there was no direct question about how the marital relationship functioned or how roles were determined. In a grateful, strong voice, one participant put it this way,

... I mostly think my husband was the main total partner, champion. He was, in terms of encouragement, he would get mad if I would say, 'I can't do this.' He would tell me to get going ... [He came from] a family ideology that was, "[Men in our family] marry strong women." And that's a good thing. I think that's partly why I love them. Being strong is good to them, not something you should squelch or hide, so he was always like, "Of course, go!"

Another participant with very young children spoke of a time when she and her husband worked out a parenting plan suiting their family.

Because at the time we had [a boy] who had just turned 2 and [an infant] who had just been born. ... [my husband] ended up quitting his job and stayed home for a year full-time. [He] also did a career change/transition at the same time and after that year went to work and has worked ever since part-time...It's because he's working part-time that we are able to juggle our schedules and so when he's working I'm home, and the days that I am on-campus and teaching, he's home.

This was one of several stories of creative scheduling, career flexing, and fluid negotiations parents made in order to accommodate the multiple responsibilities and needs of family and work-life.

In addition to spouses championing their partners for becoming proficient in their fields, there were foundations laid earlier in life as women were influenced by other women who lived as models of dual calling. Participants gave many examples of women they encountered while in high school or college who paved the way for them and served to encourage them in following their passions. One participant described an early encounter when she first read Edith Hamilton's mythology. She reported, "[I] decided I was going to be her when I grew up. And she was a college professor even though she was a woman, and the fact that it's possible to do that." Another younger participant described a significant role-model in her formative years:

You know who I remembered reading about [and took as] my role model was Sandra Day O'Connor? She had just been nominated, and I remember thinking she was from Arizona like my mother, and she grew up in that southwest life ... She had four sons, and yet she went to Stanford law, was a judge, and her husband thinks she's great. I remember thinking, "That's it, there's somebody!" ... Just taking people who are out there, well-known figures who you will never ever talk to and just say it can be done.

Looking for role-models became essential for many of the women interviewed for this study. Finding an adequate company of women who were doing what they hoped to do as they pursued their studies provided encouragement and momentum. One participant while speaking of the doubt that would invade as she wondered what life would look like as both a career woman and a mother, had asked herself, "But again how do you balance all these things? How do you make it all work?" She describes how she kept her focus for her future during college:

What I ended up doing was I very intentionally observed my faculty—and my female faculty in particular, those who had kids, and it seemed like this was a great career for someone who wanted to be a professional and wanted to be a mom because of the schedule. You have summers off. Not really, but at the time I thought you did.... And so I thought, "That's what I want to do." So I went to graduate school with the intention of teaching academia and having a career that would allow me to do both.

These particular role models, whom our interviewees located during their formative years just before starting either family or career, were followed up by connections with colleagues who provided intimate encouragement for the complex life of a dually-called woman.

Given the message in some Christian communities that once women become mothers, they should stay home with their children and cease to participate in a significant way in their careers; the support of other professional, faith-filled women became essential for our participants. "I saw women faculty who felt called to what they were doing," one woman said, describing the beginning of her own career. Again and again, women spoke of how the encouragement of colleagues served to support them through periods of dissonance or frustration with other cultural messages. One participant, a mother of grade school age children, told this poignant story,

Any time there would be a study come out about how awful it was that children were in daycare I would just feel awful. I would read it, but I would feel terrible about it. Like, maybe I'm doing bad things for my children. And then I would talk to

a retired faculty member, whose children had daycare and whose children are my age. And she would say how proud she was of them, how independence was fostered for them, and how well they took care of themselves. It's like, OK if she can do it, I can do it.

Another participant told it this way,

It's been fabulous being in this department with women who have also been balancing and having tremendous support and empathy for each other in some of the struggles. [My colleague] and I have gone, from telling each other that we're unexpectedly expecting all the way through adolescence together, so I've always had her support.

These stories made evident the value of personal support coming from family, spouses, formative influences and colleagues, giving strength to decisions to honor the desire to live fully into both motherhood and career.

*Discouraging or unsupportive messages.* What participants described as unhelpful and discouraging messages frequently originated as more general communications from church or culture and again pertained to continuing to follow one's career call *after* becoming a mother. The majority of these messages were highly influenced by gendered cultural messages of the last 60 years. A 34 year old participant put it this way,

There was clearly a sense of a woman's priority must be with family and that needs to take precedence over any other obligations. I also remember very explicitly being angry about that at times and frustrated with why don't my brother's have the same message. But I think there was a message there to me that family is important but it's really the wife's responsibility to maintain the household and raise the children ... I think it's true for both men and women and we end up talking about this as a mom's issue and it's not ... it's a parent issue.

Some of these messages were explicit, such as the participant whose father insisted that she and her sister prepare themselves for motherhood and domesticity through participating in domestic tasks, while deprioritizing such tasks for the boy in the family. She told this poignant story:

I remember very explicitly a time in early high school, and I was staying at my dad's at one point, and he had asked my sister, who is a year older than I am to make a meal for the family one night during the week. She had chosen her night and made the meal and so I said, what about [my brother], who is a year younger than I am and who's responsible as well. And dad said, "Well [he] isn't going to have that responsibility when [he] is an adult, and it's not that important to him." And at that point I said, well I'm not going to do the meal either and didn't. At that point I was very resistant, if it's so good for me, why isn't it so good for him? And if he doesn't need to do it, then I'm not going to need to do it.

Most messages, however, came more subtly through lack of support for the lifestyle of a working mother. Many participants experienced confounding communications regarding the value of their work in their careers with the profound absence of practical support.

Societally, I just don't see structural support for those doing both. Right now I'm part of a mom's group and it's basically for [faculty and staff] moms of young kids. And one of the questions we recently raised was, "Why don't we have child-care on campus?" And the answer is there's [child care] next door but [it] doesn't take infants. So what do you do when you have a baby? And you know people manage, they juggle, they put things together. But that's what I mean by the structural support and the messages that are mixed. That, "Yeah great be a mom but once you are, you're on your own. Figure it out."

Distinguishing between cultural and religious messages was difficult for participants growing up in conservative Christian homes. The tight weave of cultural and gendered messages embedded in the negative religious messages experienced was significant for our participants. Since 10 women in our study had grown up in homes organized in this way, the most significant negative messages reported were experienced at church or through church affiliations. Negative cultural messages were primarily delivered in a "you can do it all—but with no structural support" message, while religious messages were delivered more broadly. Women in our study reported experiencing repeated themes through what was said or not said and by what was modeled or not modeled in their faith communities. For example, a young participant with passion in her voice said,

I did not grow up around any stay at home moms or hardly any. It was weird that someone's mom was home all day while they were at school where I grew up. My mom worked since I was in kindergarten, part-time and then full-time. But in my church it's very common, in fact a lot of women home school. So when I did decide to be part-time before I even got pregnant ... people at church would say very concerned, "What are you doing for daycare?" So that pull was very much, you shouldn't be working or you should be working very minimally but your kids need you. And I still feel that from my church.

One participant with frustration said this of comments from well meaning male colleagues,

The hardest times I had were discussions with male colleagues here, and this is not cultural, this is more religious. The religious culture. [Their] wives have "chosen" to stay at home, and [they say] how that's important for their family and how important they felt it was for their children. And here's the way it's put: For their children to be raised by them in a Christian environment and not by other people. Now that was never meant to say, "You (name of participant) are doing the

wrong thing..." But even if that's not what they meant...and I try to take it as that's not what they meant, it still comes across as we're making this choice, we think this is important, with the subtext, "Why don't you think this is important?" That's the hardest.

Another participant with adolescent children said this of modeled messages,

It was more modeling rather than words being said among people that I knew in the Christian community. It was the roles that people played, seeing women in those roles. And not ever saying that they shouldn't be pursuing careers. That never was. I was raised in a church where women did not hold leadership roles, so [it came] through as a message. Never clergy, never ministers, never pastors, never deacons, or elders. ... Currently I'm going to a church where although women play a lot of leadership roles, they're not on the pastoral staff. ... I thought about that in the message that my daughter's getting from that. The women are not in the highest positions at church. They're certainly in decision making roles, but not the highest decision making roles. And I think that's a pretty strong message. ... It feels like they're devaluing women.

Many participants described how the conflicting messages of culture, religion, and their own sense of call conjured up many lonely times of doubt, guilt and confusion. One participant clearly feeling this said,

Somebody else might not have any feelings of guilt that ... I'm not being the biblical model of the wife, partly because I'm working ... So, how can I meet every need of that spouse, and the kids and the ... So to some extent, especially growing up in a very conservative evangelical Christian home, which I'm very grateful for, but in this one regard, I would say that if anything it probably made it harder for me, because I feel like it's pretty clear that the most important role is being a wife and mother.

Though there were messages from culture and pulpit regarding the exclusivity of roles present before becoming a mother, they seemed to have less impact than other messages. Once women had children however, the messages began to apply and were often experienced in the culture as a lack of practical support and experienced in the religious community as a lack of modeling and/or overt/covert messages of doubt and discouragement.

### *Thematic Cluster #3: The lived experience*

After a woman has made the decision to depend heavily on supportive discourses or perhaps to move forward into vocational calling in spite of experiencing a lack of support, what does the life of such a woman look like? And perhaps more importantly, how does she feel and think about her experiences? The overriding sentiment regarding the practical,



lived experience of dual calling is that life is extraordinarily rich and complex, and requires flexibility and creativity.

One participant described this eloquently when she said:

My kids are now in college so they're not the little people underfoot, but I certainly did do that.... From 4:30am to the pool to the midnight seminar paper writing, it was, in a sense, taking a day and seeing it as these orange-size segments that were mom-kid priorities, and work-school priorities. I could go back and forth between those roles. And I was willing to take the cost out of my own sleep or I would gain weight. I wanted the costs to be my choice so that passionately the best days really did start at 4:30am driving somebody to the pool and ending up at the end of the day talking with my husband about philosophy and getting so excited about the mind-stuff and work and new ideas about what I was learning with a partner who enjoyed it.

This participant points out what many others said regarding the self-sacrifice involved in such a life when she says she wanted to "take the cost out of my own" life rather than allowing the children or work to suffer in the complexity. Others shared this experience: "And I had to give up some friendships when my kids were young and now as they've gotten older, that's one of the greatest joys." Another said, "Weekends, I mostly work, and try to get ahead on the week. And I do very little, I have very few friends, I don't do things socially. Most of that revolves around kid's activities."

One participant articulated what many others alluded to in terms of sacrifice; that there is often-times guilt involved in splitting one's attention, primarily because there is not enough time to give as much attention to each task as one would like, resulting in a sacrifice of the details in all areas. "That same Christian guilt that I know I put on myself, about not being a good enough mom ... now spills over into not being necessarily a good enough professor at a Christian university." This particular participant reminds herself that the guilt regarding the sacrifices in terms of quality of work in all domains is not a guilt that comes from God but rather from cultural messages and her own desire to excel. Others simply describe the details that don't get attended to with resignation such as, "But you start to wonder ... how much am I fully responsible for and how much do I let go of?"

In addition to the sacrifices, however, the women we interviewed repeatedly expressed their great passion and appreciation for a life organized this way. One participant said, "I think my kids have

contributed a lot to who I am," while more than one described experiencing the "visceral" aspect of such a rich existence.

I think the fact that I do both is good for both in the sense that I think I'm a more well-rounded person and therefore if I was home all the time, I would be at the end of my rope more of the time. So in some sense I feel like I've satisfied or maximized the possibilities .... And it's good enough.... I feel like my kids really do get the benefit of a mom who spends a lot of time with them and does a lot of things with them and is really engaged with their development and their growing and their lives. And at the same time I have the opportunity to develop my own self and contribute to students and colleagues in a way that I wouldn't necessarily be able to if I didn't have that part of my life.

As we listened to the lived experience of these women, it became poignantly clear how the canvas of complexity was nuanced with a rich and deeply satisfying narrative.

#### *Thematic Cluster #4: Wisdom for the next generation*

While interviewing the eleven participants of this study, it became apparent that with all of this rich complexity and depth of experience comes a great deal of wisdom. Women conveyed permission to young people to choose their priorities and give themselves permission to let some things fall through the cracks. At the same time, nonetheless, counsel frequently included warnings about the chronic complexity of living a dually called life. One woman said it clearly when she advised:

I think it's important for me to support younger women, and that means telling my students "chances are you will be working outside of the home." So then you have to look at what you're going to give up and how you're going to handle it. And you better have a supportive husband. That's the only way things are going to work out because he's going to have to give up some things too.

In fact, numerous times, participants said their advice to the younger generation would include that, in spite of what one may hear in the media or general culture, there are sacrifices and "you can't have it all," or at least not all at once.

Along similar lines, another important message to young people was to resist the inclination to dichotomize one part of life from another. A number of women in our study spoke of the need to look at life as a whole, even though it is tempting to

compartmentalize. When asked what advice she would give the next generation, one participant said, "Definitely that both parts are important, and that you can't really...or you shouldn't have to feel like you need to separate one from the other. I haven't really talked to that many women who have felt like they could only do one or the other."

Since most of the women in our study work as faculty at a university, they have the opportunity to have significant influence on people during some of their most formative years. One participant tells of an encounter she had with a student for whom life had been dichotomized into a "before and after marriage and children" perspective:

I'm finding that the girls who ask at least me, the ideology of their church or family is that you're not a whole woman until you're married or have kids. And basically one of them even closed the door and said, "What about sex? Isn't it sex that makes you a woman?" I feel strongly that you need to be seeking what God is calling you to be. And the husband and the kids come, rather than seeking the idea that the relationship will make you fully who you are.

So the advice to younger women can be summarized as: If you feel compelled to experience life as both a mother and a professional – follow your heart. But remember to think it through, and be gentle with yourself when you can't do it all. Realize you cannot entirely separate work from parenting and choose what falls through the cracks. Allow work to make you a better mom and let mothering make you a better professional.

## SUMMARY

As researchers, particularly during the data analysis phase of our process, we recognized both the complexity and the importance of our work. Even for our small team, work was organized around children's schedules and needs. The two researchers who are also parents both told stories of having to put aside their readings of interviews to focus on the very present requests of their teenage children. We commented frequently on the isomorphic experiences of members of our team with what we were observing in the transcripts. The following is an excerpt out of our P.I.'s research process journal:

10pm, Friday evening:

I am analyzing data at the kitchen table. Christian (18 year old son) calls and says he's bringing over a bunch of friends to sit in the Jacuzzi. I stop and put a huge pizza in the oven. After he arrives and hangs out a bit, he comes and pulls up a chair at the table and says, "Hey, I wrote a new song on the guitar," and plays it for me. He tells me of his wakeboarding trip. Kids

are walking all around eating pizza, me interacting and writing. Sometimes the seamless integration of my own life of dual call is deeply satisfying.

These parallel experiences potently illustrated the many dimensions of the lived experiences spoken of by the participants. Since there has been so little research on intersecting the callings of career and motherhood (Miller-McLemore, 1994), the present study gives a unique opportunity for women to share their experiences and for those supporting them (e.g., partners, family, friends and community organizations) to gain insight and offer relevant means of support.

## *Limitations of this study*

As this research progressed, limitations of this study became evident. Others emerged as we continued to code and evaluate the interviews. Even during the interview process, it became clear that the term "dual calling" was descriptive of an assumed experience, and even though participants were responding to this language as they selected into the study, it became evident that though the meaning of calling often remained consistent when describing mothering and career, the word "calling" was rarely used when participants described being or becoming a mother.

Another limitation of this study is the level of homogeneity of our subject pool (all white, all female professors, all living in the same region, etc). This limits the generalizability of the findings. Our hope, as can be seen by our suggestions for future research, is that as others take part in this study topic, discourses will be revealed in multiple contexts.

A final potential limitation of this study is that because of our biases and the similarity of our clinical and research training and personal experience, we have approached this study from a particular perspective. As other research is conducted a broader and more complex understanding will emerge.

## *Future research/questions*

Rich themes emerged from this qualitative study that are worthy of future investigation. This research is the beginning of a much longer and more intensive exploration process on this topic and accounts for a limited understanding of a complex socio-cultural phenomenon. Since qualitative research gives rise to the opportunity to examine complex stories and the meanings, beliefs and purposes that inform lived

experience, we hope to see examination of related themes in the future. Some of the areas of needed examination are: (a) broaden the subject demographic by race, region, ethnicity, career, denomination, faith orientation, etc; (b) explore in more detail how the integration of both parenthood and career are experienced; (c) examine the skills and adaptations women make to navigate through the culture and religious messages and find the way that was right for them; (d) look at how these gendered messages marginalize fathers and are experienced by fathers of dual career families; (e) explore who and what is most supportive (both physically/structurally and emotionally/spiritually) and what specifically is done that is experienced as supportive; (f) examine impact of churches and Christian faith based academic and professional settings; (g) study what the impact is on faith/spiritual development of a dually called life; (h) interview the children of dually called families over time; and (i) examine the impact (emotional/spiritual/physical) of guilt, doubt, and shame for dually called parents.

This qualitative study opens up a variety of avenues for investigating the complex, rich, and diverse lives of women/fathers/families dually called to parenthood and career. As the wisdom and insight of these families becomes more available to cultural structures, a wiser and more diverse cultural discourse of families of faith will emerge and benefit us all.

## REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, M. E. (1996). *Balancing act: How women can lose their roles and find their callings*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Boss, P., Dahu, C., & Kaplan, L. (1996). The use of phenomenology for family therapy research: The search for meaning. In D. H. Sprenkle & S. M. Noon (Eds.), *Research methods in family therapy* (pp. 83-106). New York: Guilford Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Elliot, E. (1974). *Let me be a woman*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers
- Gallager, S. K. (2003). *Evangelical identity & gendered family life*. Rutgers University Press.
- Graham, A. (2002). *Womanhood revisited: A fresh look at the role of women in society*. Great Britain: Christian Focus.
- Grant, G. (1994). *The family under siege: What the new social engineers have in mind for you and your children*. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House.
- Hesse-Biber, S., Howling, S., Leavy, P., Lovejoy, M. (2004). Racial Identity and the Development of Body Image Issues Among African American Adolescent Girls. *The Qualitative Report*, 9, (1), 49-75.
- Hodgson, J. H., Garcia, K., & Tyndall, L. (2004). Parkinson's disease and the couple relationship: A qualitative analysis. *Family Systems and Health*, 22, 101-117.
- Kameman, S. B. (1991). *Child care, parental leave, and the under 3s: Policy innovation in Europe*. Westport, CN: Auburn House-Greenwood.
- LeCompte, M. D., & Schensul, J. J. (1999). *Designing and conducting ethnographic research*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1994). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative research*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Miller-McLemore, B. J. (1994). *Also a mother: Work and family as theological dilemma*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.
- New Living Translation*. (1997). Tyndale House Publishing, Wheaton, IL.
- Roels, S. J., & Andolsen, B. H. (1997). *Organization man, organization woman: Calling, leadership and culture*. Westport, CN: Auburn House-Greenwood.
- Storkey, E. (2001). *Origins of difference: The gender debate revisited*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics.
- Sugar, M. H. (1994). *When mothers work, who pays?* Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.
- Sumner, S. (2003). *Men and women in the church: Building consensus on Christian Leadership*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Tchividjian, G. (2001). *For women only*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.
- U.S. Dept. of Labor, (2003). <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/emp-sit.t01.htm>
- U.S. Dept. of Labor, (2003). <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/famec.t05.htm>
- U.S. Dept. of Licensing, (2002). <http://www.dol.gov/wb/factsheets/hotjobs03.htm>
- Weiss, R.S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: The Free Press.

## AUTHORS

SELLERS, TINA SCHERMER: *Address*: School of Psychology, Family and Community, Seattle Pacific University, 3307 3rd Ave W, Ste 107, Seattle, WA 98119-1922. *Title*: Clinical Professor of Marriage & Family Therapy; Director of Medical Family Therapy; Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. *Degrees*: MS, Seattle Pacific University; BS, San Diego State University. *Specializations*: Medical Family Therapy; Women's Health, Sexual Health; Children and Parenting, Adolescent Development, Spiritual Formation, Career Direction and Vocation, Chronic Illness and Family Life, and Family/Work/Life Balance.

BATTS, JENNIFER W. *Address:* 3453 California Ave SW, Suite A, Seattle, WA 98116. *Title:* Marriage and Family Therapist; Medical Family Therapist. *Degrees:* MS, Seattle Pacific University; Post-Graduate Medical Family Therapist Certificate, Seattle Pacific University; BS, Multnomah Bible College. *Title:* Marriage and Family Therapist, Medical Family Therapist. *Specializations:* Women's Issues; Family/Work/Life Balance; Bio-Behavioral Collaboration and Pain Management; Chronic Illness and Family Life.

THOMAS, KRISTOPHER: *Address:* Seattle Pacific University 3307 3rd Ave W, Seattle, WA 98119-1922. *Title:* Marriage and Family Therapist; Medical Family Therapist. *Degrees:* MS, Seattle Pacific University; Post-Graduate Medical Family Therapist Certificate, Seattle Pacific University; BA, Western Washington University. *Specializations:* Object Relations Therapy; Integration of Self and Faith; College Student Counseling; Bio-Behavioral Collaboration and Pain Management.

OSTMAN, CAMI L.: *Address:* 5502 34th Ave N.E., Seattle, WA 98105. *Title:* Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. *Degrees:* MS, Seattle Pacific University; BEd, Western Washington University. *Specializations:* Adolescent Transitions, Life Transitions, Grief, Women's Issues, Divorce Recovery, Family Dynamics, At-Risk Youth, and Spiritual Formation.

Copyright of Journal of Psychology & Theology is the property of BIOLA University. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.