ACHIEVING WORK-FAMILY BALANCE: AN ACTION REGULATION MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Work and family are highly intertwined for many individuals. Despite this, individual-level strategies for achieving effectiveness and satisfaction across work and family roles have not received sufficient attention. We address this issue by conceptualizing work-family balance from an action regulation perspective as the successful joint pursuit of work and family goals. Building on insights from the work-family literature, action regulation theory, and multiple goals research, we propose a theoretical model that explains how people can jointly attain work and family goals by using four action strategies (i.e., allocating resources, changing resources and barriers, sequencing goals, and revising goals). We address the conditions under which each strategy is used, depending on the malleability of resources and barriers for goal attainment, time to deadline of goals, as well as feedback and monitoring of progress across work and family goals. Our model offers new insights and research implications regarding work-family balance and helps develop practical interventions that result in improved management of the work-family interface.

Keywords: action regulation; multiple goals; work-family balance

Achieving Work-Family Balance: An Action Regulation Model

An increasing number of women in the workforce, technological innovations, cultural shifts in attitudes toward the relationship between work and family, and the diversity of family structures have led to an increased academic and general interest in how people can successfully manage work and family roles (Allen, 2012; Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). The academic literature has blossomed over the past few decades and now includes several theoretical work-family models. Many of these focus on the role of demands and resources in creating conflict between work and family roles (e.g., Clark, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Voydanoff, 2002). Other more recent models have been developed to understand how work and family roles can enrich one another, namely via resources being transferred across roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). A third construct, work-family balance, defined as people's overall appraisal of how the effectiveness and satisfaction devised from each role are consistent with their own values and standards (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011), has been studied considerably less than role conflict and enrichment. Nonetheless, researchers have also theoretically implicated the role of demands and resources in fostering work-family balance, arguing that fit between demands and resources in each domain is a precursor to balance (Voydanoff, 2005).

Thus, demands and resources seem to play a critical role in work-family relations, but the literature lacks theory that incorporates the active role of the individual in coping with or leveraging these demands and resources (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Kiburz, Allen, & French, 2017; Maertz & Boyar, 2011). Our theorizing is based on the assumption that work and family are two key life domains in which people actively develop and pursue goals. However, little previous work has been devoted to understanding the strategies people use to jointly pursue goals in these domains. We address this gap by proposing an action regulation theoretical model that conceptualizes work-family balance as an outcome of the successful joint attainment of work and family goals. We specifically develop a dynamic model in which

demands, resources, and barriers to goal attainment interact with the temporal dimension of work and family goals to predict the use of different action strategies that help to attain work-family balance. We conceptualize demands as role requirements, expectations, and norms that people internalize or redefine as work and family goals (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Locke & Latham, 2002). We define resources as anything perceived by individuals as helpful to achieve their goals (Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018), and we define barriers as anything perceived by individualsas inhibiting the achievement of their goals (Heckhausen, Wrosch, & Schulz, 2010; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000).

We base our model on action regulation theory, a meta-theory that explains how people regulate goal-directed behavior through cognitive processes such as goal development and selection, orientation, planning, monitoring of execution, and feedback processing (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Zacher & Frese, 2018). At the core of our model is the view that humans are self-regulating agents who do not merely passively react to demands imposed upon them by work and family roles, but also actively shape their environment and development by setting, pursuing, adapting, and/or abandoning work and family goals through the use of different action strategies.

By proposing an action-theoretical view on work-family management, our model contributes to the extant literature in several ways. First, by focusing on the active pursuit and attainment of work and family goals, our model provides insight about how balance can be achieved through the adaptive use of individual-level action strategies. Although previous work (Grawitch, Barber, & Justice, 2010; Voydanoff, 2005) has considered the role of demands and resources as they relate to balance, these conceptual models leave a "black box" regarding the mechanisms explaining how demands and resources translate into balance. Specifically, these models tend to focus on fit between demands and resources, with little attention paid to the process of how people actually attain this fit. By considering the complex interactions between demands, resources, and the previously neglected concept of barriers, we

attempt to fill in this black box and explain how various combinations of these factors impact the use of different action strategies, which ultimately promote work-family balance.

Second, our model extends previous work-family balance frameworks in that it considers the dynamic nature of work and family resources, demands, and barriers as well as work and family goals. Previous theoretical models have either only focused on current levels of demand and resource as they relate to balance (Voydanoff, 2005) or have only included brief references to the role of time in resource allocation (Grawitch et al, 2010). Thus, our model is more comprehensive than previous work in considering how temporal dynamics play a critical role in work and family action strategies and ultimately work-family balance.

Third, action regulation theory represents a broad framework of goal striving, but it does not explicate concrete behaviors that contribute to goal attainment (Zacher & Frese, 2018). In the theoretical work-family balance literature, researchers have referenced the use of certain strategies to attain balance but have done so in a manner that lacks details (Voydanoff, 2005). We extend theorizing on action regulation and role management processes (Marks & MacDermid, 1996) by proposing specific strategies of how people jointly pursue work and family goals while monitoring resources, demands, and barriers, as well as goal pursuit and feedback processing. We also discuss when each strategy is likely to be most effective and how strategies are used and altered based on resources, barriers, time to deadline, and progress toward work and family goals.

Finally, our model offers a starting point for developing new interventions for work-family management. Much of the extant research focuses on achieving work-family balance through means such as workplace flexibility or supportive supervision (e.g., Ferguson, Carlson, Zivnuska, & Whitten, 2012; Valcour, 2007), which are largely outside of the employee's control. In contrast, our model focuses on individual-level strategies that could be addressed in personal interventions. For example, based on an assessment of the specific demands, resources, and barriers related to work and family roles, career counselors could

assist clients in devising corresponding work and family goals and use specific action strategies that are best suited to jointly attain these goals. Based on our model, these action strategies would consider mutual goal linkages and goal deadlines as well as the availability and malleability of resources and barriers.

WORK-FAMILY BALANCE, MULTIPLE GOALS, AND ACTION REGULATION

Research on Work-Family Balance

The construct of work-family balance has historically been plagued by unclear definitions in the academic literature (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Maertz & Boyar, 2011; Wayne, Butts, Casper, & Allen, 2017). Researchers have most often conceptualized balance as the absence of role conflict and presence of role enrichment (e.g., Frone, 2003). However, this approach has been criticized based on the idea that a person may experience very little conflict because he or she is simply not actively involved in one particular role, which does not seem balanced per se (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Likewise, enrichment between roles may not occur due to the specific nature of those roles, but a person could still feel a sense of balance between them. Recent reviews ultimately suggest that conflict and enrichment are important work-family concepts in their own right, but they are distinct from the concept of balance (Wayne et al., 2017).

Other conceptualizations of balance focus on domain involvement, arguing that a balanced person is highly and equally involved in both work and family domains (e.g., Kirchmeyer, 2000; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). This approach is limited in that it does not take into account individuals' values. That is, a person who values work more than family will not likely feel balanced if involvement across the two domains is actually equal (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). The third major approach to balance involves a holistic appraisal of one's efficacy combining work and family roles (Wayne et al., 2017). Within this holistic appraisal perspective, some researchers have focused on satisfaction with balance (e.g., Valcour, 2007), others have focused on effectiveness in both roles (e.g., Grzywacz & Carlson,

2007), and yet others have included both in their definition (e.g., "an overall appraisal of the extent to which individuals' effectiveness and satisfaction in work and family roles are consistent with their life values at a given point in time"; Greenhaus & Allen, 2011, p. 174).

Theoretical models explaining the process by which people achieve work-family balance are rare and existing frameworks are quite distinct from each other. Specifically, Marks and MacDermid (1996) argue that roles operate within a non-hierarchical system and balance is achieved by expanding role identities to create a fluid sense of self. Voydanoff's (2005) framework is more concrete, proposing that family, work, and boundary-spanning demands and resources contribute to work demands-family resources fit and family demands-work resources fit. This fit, which is defined as the extent to which resources in one role are sufficient to meet demands of the other role, in turn impacts boundary-spanning strategies and ultimately work-family balance. Interestingly, Voydanoff's definition of work-family balance has considerable overlap with the work-family fit concept itself, defined as a global assessment that work and family resources are sufficient to meet work and family demands. Lastly, Grawitch et al. (2010) argue that work-life balance occurs when people are able to effectively allocate resources across domains in a way that creates perception of fit between those resources and demands and individual characteristics. The authors define balance as successfully protecting non-work resources from being used.

In contrast to existing balance frameworks, our model of work-family balance is aligned with conceptualizations from comprehensive reviews (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011; Wayne et al., 2017). Specifically, the important components identified in these reviews are that a person feels effective and satisfied in each role in a way that aligns with his or her own personal values attached to each role. We argue that by viewing balance through a goals lens, these components are naturally captured. Attaining goals creates a sense of effectiveness in a given domain, and inherent in numerous goal theories (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1982) is the idea that positive affect or satisfaction arises from goal attainment. Goals are internal

representations of desired states that are linked with personal values and standards (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). As such, the sense of effectiveness and satisfaction derived from goal attainment in both domains naturally corresponds to values attached to these roles.

The Role of Goals for Action Regulation

All human action is motivated and guided by goals that serve as standards for behavior (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Locke & Latham, 2002). Based on multiple goals research (Unsworth, Yeo, & Beck, 2014), we conceptualize work and family goals as hierarchically structured and having multiple facilitative and inhibitory connections with each other. Goals vary in their degree of specificity, temporal range, and level of consciousness (Unsworth et al., 2014) and can be self-developed, assigned by others, or stem from norms and expectations in the family, organization, or society (Heckhausen et al., 2010). Goals are central concepts in two complementary theories, control theory (Carver & Scheier, 1982, 2002) and action regulation theory (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Hacker, 1985). Control theory suggests that people monitor the discrepancy between a goal and the present state and take action to reduce this discrepancy (Carver & Scheier, 1982). Building on this notion of a discrepancy-reducing negative feedback loop in control theory, action regulation theory proposes an elaborated action regulation sequence, during which people follow up the goal development and selection phase with phases of orientation and information search, planning, monitoring of execution, feedback processing and, possibly, goal revision (Frese & Zapf, 1994).

A key difference between the theories is that control theory focuses on the reduction of discrepancies between a goal and the current state, whereas action regulation theory outlines additional regulatory processes such as orientation, planning, and monitoring of execution (Zacher & Frese, 2018). Orientation refers to mapping the environment for opportunities and constraints regarding goal attainment, which in our model refers to evaluation of available resources and barriers related to their work and family goals. According to Miller et al. (1960), plans are bridges between thought (i.e., goals) and action

(i.e., execution of behavior). Planning is important for our model, as plans serve as mental simulations of action strategies to attain work and family goals and can thereby affect strategy use. Monitoring of execution involves a comparison between plans and behavior, which is invoked in our model in terms of changing or maintaining certain goal attainment strategies based on changes in in demands, resources, and barriers.

Both control theory and action regulation theory acknowledge that goals operate at different levels (e.g., lower level goal of finishing a project as a means to attain a higher level goal of getting a promotion; Lord & Levy, 1994; Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960). However, research based on these theories has so far largely neglected that people typically pursue multiple goals at once, both within and across work and nonwork contexts (Neal, Vancouver, & Ballard, 2017; Sun & Frese, 2013). Moreover, the small extant body of research on multiple goals has predominately focused on competing goals (e.g., productivity and safety goals; Neal et al., 2017; Unsworth et al., 2014; Vancouver, Weinhardt, & Schmidt, 2010). This does not align well with the fact that work and family goals are not always mutually exclusive and people often strive to jointly achieve goals in both domains. Our model aims to address this gap by outlining how and when different action strategies are used and changed to jointly achieve work and family goals and ultimately work-family balance.

FOUR ACTION STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE WORK-FAMILY BALANCE

Based on action regulation theory and research on multiple goals, we propose that people use four basic action strategies to jointly attain work and family goals and ultimately achieve work-family balance (Figure 1). Action regulation theory distinguishes between goal engagement and goal disengagement strategies (Freund & Baltes, 2002; Heckhausen et al., 2010). Goal engagement refers to all behaviors that aim at achieving existing goals while goal disengagement refers to all behaviors that aim at detaching from goals (Wrosch, Scheier, Miller, Schulz, & Carver, 2003). The first two proposed strategies represent goal engagement strategies through which people try to either (a) achieve their goals directly by activating and

allocating existing resources or (b) achieve work and family goals more indirectly by changing resources and/or barriers. The other two strategies represent goal disengagement strategies through which people either (c) partially disengage from a goal by sequencing goals or (d) fully disengage by revising and abandoning goals in their current form and selecting new goals. Table 1 provides an overview of the strategies, definitions, aims, and illustrative examples.

Insert Figure 1 and Table 1 about here

Before introducing the four action strategies, we briefly explain how demands, resources, and barriers relate to the pursuit of work and family goals. *Demands* are role requirements, expectations, and norms that individuals adapt or redefine into individual as well as dyadic (e.g., with spouse, supervisor) and small-group (e.g., family, team) work and family goals. Hence, demands are not the same as goals but rather a precursor to goal development. Demands need to be accepted and redefined as a personal goal that the individual actively aims to pursue (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). We thus base our model on the assumption that every person engaged in work and family roles faces certain demands in these roles and that these demands lead to the emergence of different work and family goals.

Resources are frequently considered in the work-family literature as factors that help people cope with demands (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Consistent with elaborations of conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), we define resources as anything perceived by individuals as helpful to achieve their work or family goals. Resources can exist at various interconnected levels, ranging from the individual to the macro-level. For example, on the individual level, emotional stability, internal locus of control, and optimism can be regarded as key personal resources (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). On the environmental level, support from organizations, supervisors, and coworkers are resources that help to deal with work-family issues (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011; Michel, Kotrba,

Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011).

In addition, we propose that *barriers* that inhibit goal attainment must be considered. In the work-family literature, barriers have mostly been considered in structural terms, including job characteristics (e.g., requirement of physical presence in an office for 40 hours weekly and lack of flexibility; Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013), career structures (e.g., little tolerance for career interruptions; Moen & Roehling, 2005), and gender roles (e.g., gender roles constraining the behaviors of men and women in home and at work; Eagly, 1987). Barriers can also exist at different levels. At the micro-level is a disagreement regarding certain work and/or family goals with one's spouse. At the meso- and exo-levels, barriers may be organizational policies that lack flexibility, or low availability of part-time positions in the labor market for a specific occupation, respectively. At the macro-level, discrimination of working mothers may be a barrier to attain work and family goals.

Barriers are not simply a lack of resources or vice versa. For example, a person might not receive much organizational support for simultaneously achieving work and family goals. However, this does not automatically imply that this person faces active obstruction for doing so. On the other hand, just because a person is not confronted with discriminatory action regarding certain work and family goals does not automatically imply that this person receives support for achieving these goals. Hence, we propose that resources and barriers exert incremental and cumulative effects on the use of action strategies and goal attainment. Finally, barriers can also be distinguished from demands. Our conceptualization of demands refers to environmental norms and expectations that are translated into personal goals. Demands are thus neither necessarily positive nor negative for goal attainment but simply induce the development of goals. In contrast, barriers are factors that inhibit attaining goals.

Allocating Resources to Work and Family Goals

The first action strategy (*Allocating*) entails activating and allocating existing resources to achieve current work and family goals. The general notion that work-family

balance depends on the successful allocation of resources (e.g., time, energy) to each life domain has been previously proposed in the work-family literature (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Grawitch et al., 2010). Our formulation of this strategy advances this idea in that it ties in the multiple goals perspective and identifies the possible and necessary means of allocating resources to simultaneously achieve both work and family goals.

An important principle of multiple goal systems is goal multifinality, which means that an action can have a facilitative value for multiple goals simultaneously (Kruglanski et al., 2002). A critical component of this strategy is to identify and use resources that simultaneously facilitate goal achievement in both life domains. We herein refer to such resources as *boundary-spanning resources*, which we define as any means that simultaneously facilitate the attainment of a work *and* family goal. For example, obtaining a higher income due to a promotion facilitates the goal of feeling successful in one's career while also facilitating the goal of providing financially for one's family. Increased energy and positive emotions experienced by playing with one's children can facilitate the family goal of being a caring parent *and* the work goal of getting respite for better work performance the next day. Because capitalizing on multifinality makes the most efficient use of existing resources, the successful activation and allocation of boundary-spanning resources is particularly important to achieve work *and* family goals.

Resources not only vary in the degree to which they are boundary-spanning, they also vary in their degree of transience. As illustrated by ten Brummelhuis and Bakker (2012), some resources (e.g., social network, skills) are more structural and are not easily depleted. Other resources are more volatile (e.g., instrumental help from others, physical energy) and erode more easily when used. Structural boundary-spanning resources are hence the most valuable resources to simultaneously achieve work and family goals because they are not easily depleted even when used to achieve multiple goals simultaneously. A first priority when applying the strategy of allocating to achieve work and family goals is thus to *identify*

and utilize structural boundary-spanning resources.

However, oftentimes, these boundary-spanning resources alone might not be sufficient to jointly achieve work and family goals. Under these circumstances, the activation and allocation of additional goal-specific resources becomes necessary. Based on the principles of substitutability and goal equifinality, most goals can be achieved through several means (Kruglanski et al., 2002). Substitutability entails that a specific means can substitute another in accomplishing a goal (e.g., finishing a project either by working additional hours or by soliciting help). Equifinality means that a goal (e.g., being a caring parent) can be achieved by various actions (e.g., helping with homework or playing a game).

A second important component of this first strategy is thus to *identify different goal-specific means that can substitute for each other* and that each can be useful for goal attainment. For example, spending long hours at work might be only one of several ways to get a promotion. Other means might include establishing a good relationship with a supervisor or making suggestions for improvements. By identifying and using such alternative means for goal attainment, people can save transient resources, such as time or energy. This reduces competition for such resources across work and family goals and allows redeploying these saved resources to attain other goals. This, in turn, facilitates simultaneous goal attainment in both domains.

A feature that distinguishes work and family goals from many other types of multiple goals pursuits (e.g., leisure, educational, or health goals) is that work and family goals are often dyadic or small-group goals. As such, they represent the demands of stakeholders in these life domains that must be integrated with personal needs: goals in the family domain are often established together with a spouse or children, while work goals often are developed with supervisors or colleagues. This strategy thus also must take into account that means to attain work and family goals are not just at the individual level but might include *negotiating actions with important stakeholders*. For example, the goal of high job performance might be

a small-group goal established within a team. Identifying means for goal attainment might thus also include negotiating ways that the team can contribute to an individual's job performance, for example, by sharing information more efficiently. This also ties back to using alternative means to achieve goals to save transient resources such as time or energy.

In sum, at the core of this action strategy is considering the multiple goals linkages that exist between work and family goals at multiple levels of the goal hierarchy, including identifying structural boundary-spanning resources as well as multiple means for the same goal. The successful application of this action strategy then depends on the activation and allocation of resources that have positive simultaneous effects on work and family goals, supported by the activation and allocation of multiple additional resources for each specific goal. Challenges when implementing this strategy are that people need to be careful not to overspend available resources to pursue one goal at the cost of other goals. As such, this strategy requires that individuals need to exert mental effort to coordinate and switch between different goal pursuits, including different mindsets and actions necessary for such pursuits (Hamilton, Vohs, Sellier, & Meyvis, 2011).

Changing Resources and Barriers Pertaining to Work and Family Goals

This strategy (*Changing*) aims to intentionally increase resources and reduce barriers to permit attaining existing work and family goals. This strategy is different from the first one in that it is not about activating or allocating existing resources but about strengthening resources, creating new resources, or reducing existing barriers to goal attainment. The principle of goal multifinality also applies here, which means that to jointly attain work and family goals, it is particularly important to *increase boundary-spanning resources and reduce boundary-spanning barriers*, the latter referring to anything that simultaneously hinders the attainment of work and family goals. For example, confronting the destructive behavior of a spouse can decrease the barrier of emotional exhaustion, which hinders attaining the goal of being a good parent as well the goal of being a productive employee. This strategy can

include *negotiating actions with important stakeholders to increase resources and reduce barriers*. For example, one's spouse could take on a more active role in childcare, which increases the focal individual's time and energy resources that facilitate the goal of earning a higher income for the family as well as contributing to the work goal of getting a promotion.

In addition to changing boundary-spanning resources and barriers, the application of this strategy also includes *taking actions that create additional resources as well as addressing barriers* that are more specific for a work or family goal. This idea is again based on the principles of goal substitutability and equifinality (Kruglanski et al., 2002), which imply that the attainment of a work or family goal can be facilitated by a range of resources and inhibited by a variety of barriers, some of which are highly specific to a particular goal. Examples are a person acquiring new job skills that facilitate the goal of getting a promotion, a supervisor being persuaded to assign more challenging tasks that help to develop skills, or a person confronting a spouse's destructive behavior that makes attaining the goal of being a good parent difficult. In sum, the successful application of this strategy depends on taking actions and negotiating actions with important stakeholders that increase boundary-spanning resources and reduce boundary-spanning barriers, complemented by building resources and diminishing barriers that are more specific for each work and family goal. A key challenge with this strategy is that actions to build resources and address barriers can themselves deplete resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018), such as when time and energy are expended to build a better rapport with work colleagues. As such, there might be a limit to how many additional resources a person can build or to what extent existing barriers can be addressed without negative consequences for overall goal pursuit due to resource depletion in other areas.

Sequencing Work and Family Goals

The third action strategy (*Sequencing*) represents a form of temporal goal disengagement. This strategy specifically aims to *sequence work and family goals in that one goal is prioritized in the shorter term to be able to achieve the other goal in the longer term.*

Such a form of goal disengagement, when used at appropriate times, prevents one from

fruitlessly pursuing goals. It is therefore a critical strategy if work and family goals cannot

jointly be achieved at present to maintain high overall goal attainment in the long run

(Wrosch et al., 2003). In the specific case of this strategy, the disengagement is only partial,

as a person would only temporarily disengage from a certain goal, while keeping the intention

to attain this goal at a later point in time. Inherent in this strategy is the notion that trying to

achieve work-family balance might include making tradeoffs between these two domains

(Mickel & Dallimore, 2009), because work and family goals often cannot be achieved

simultaneously. For example, a person might decide to postpone spending more time with

family to the weekend and first focus on completing a work project during the week.

An important advantage of this strategy is that it allows focusing one's resources on

one goal at a time and thus avoiding resource drain and ensuring that enough resources can be

allocated to the current goal. However, in the context of work-family balance, an important

component of this strategy is again to *consider the goal linkages across work and family

goals* at different levels. The most successful application of this strategy is to prioritize a work

or family goal that promotes subsequent goal attainment in the other life domain due to a

facilitative goal linkage. In this way, while prioritizing one goal might be detrimental for the

attainment of another goal in the short-term, its attainment will be facilitated in the longer

term. For example, focusing first on getting a promotion and postponing having a family

might lead to more flexibility in working hours later, which ultimately facilitates the goal of

being more present in family life.

As with the other strategies, this strategy also includes taking the dyadic and small-

group nature of goals into account when judging the feasibility of postponing one goal in

preference of another. This might imply the necessity to *re-negotiate demands with important

stakeholders* to achieve a mutual agreement on when which goal should be pursued. The

successful use of this strategy thus depends on considering the goal linkages across different

time horizons of work and family goals (also due to shared goals with key stakeholders) and prioritizing work or family goals that maximally facilitate future goal attainment in the other life domain. A key challenge with this strategy is that the temporarily unattainable goal needs to be set aside ("shielded") while the more proximal goal is pursued (Johnson, Chang, & Lord, 2006). While such goal shielding helps to focus attention and increase performance for other goals, it also necessitates exerting mental effort to suppress goals and to shield them from active goal pursuit and interference with other goals (Johnson et al., 2006).

Revising Existing Work and Family Goals and Selecting New Goals

This strategy (*Revising*) consists of *intentionally revising or abandoning work and/or family goals*. It represents an extreme form of goal disengagement. Revising or abandoning unattainable goals prevents one from fruitlessly pursuing goals and is thus critical to jointly attain work and family goals in the long run. In the context of work-family balance, the necessity to revise goals does not come from the fact that a specific, single work or family goal would be impossible to attain. Rather, revising goals is needed when people cannot attain existing goals in *both* life domains with any of the previously described strategies. A failure to disengage from goals in this situation would lead to a failure to achieve goals in both life domains, even if specific goals in one domain might be attained. By revising existing goals and selecting new goals in the work and/or family domain, people can thus ensure that they still can achieve goals in both domains. Thereby they can attain some sense of balance, even when attaining the original goals in both life domains is impossible.

Goal disengagement consists of *changing expectations for goal attainment* (Johnson et al., 2006). Such changes can mean that the desired level of goal attainment is lowered or that attainment is no longer expected at any level (i.e., the goal is completely abandoned). For example, a person might devalue the goal of getting a promotion and completely abandon the goal. Alternatively, the *aspired goal level might be reduced* so that getting promoted to team leader is now the goal versus the previous goal of getting a promotion to area manager.

Because work and family goals are often dyadic and small-group goals, goal disengagement also includes *re-negotiation with important stakeholders and changing their respective expectations for goal attainment*.

Apart from changing existing goals, an additional important component of goal disengagement is to *establish new goals that better correspond to existing resources and barriers* and can be pursued instead of the abandoned goal (Johnson et al., 2006). This also allows re-directing attention and resources to other goals and helps coping with experienced loss due to abandoning a goal (Wrosch et al., 2003). In sum, the successful use of this strategy entails finding ways to disengage from goals if they are unattainable across work and family roles (including re-negotiating goal expectations with stakeholders) and developing new work and/or family goals that are jointly attainable given current resources and barriers. A key challenge in implanting this strategy is that disengaging from a goal can be accompanied by an internal struggle as to whether one should try to continue to attain the goal or actually revise or even abandon it, which can negatively affect well-being (Brandstätter, Herrmann, & Schüler, 2013). Effects on well-being due to goal disengagement might particularly occur if it is not accompanied by a reengagement in new goals (Wrosch et al., 2003).

SELECTING AND ALTERING ACTION STRATEGIES

The Selection of Different Action Strategies to Attain Work and Family Goals

After introducing the four action strategies, we now explain in more detail under which conditions a specific strategy is more or less likely to be used. According to action regulation theorists (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Heckhausen et al., 2010), individuals generally prefer to exert primary control strategies, which involve changing the environment so that it allows fulfillment of one's goals. Only as a second resort would people apply secondary control strategies, which entail changing the self (i.e., one's goals) to bring it in line with environmental resources and barriers. Hence, individuals generally prefer to achieve their goals through various goal engagement behaviors and only resort to goal disengagement

strategies if a goal cannot be attained directly.

We propose that the four action strategies tend to be pursued following a natural sequence of preference. Allocating resources to existing work and family goals represents the simplest form of goal engagement and should be the most preferred strategy. Changing resources and barriers to attain existing goals is also a form of goal engagement but is more complicated and requires more time and effort compared to simple resource allocation. We thus expect this strategy to be used as a secondary resort if existing resources are not sufficient to jointly attain work and family goals. Sequencing work and family goals entails partial goal disengagement by postponing a goal. This strategy should be less preferable than the previous two strategies and come into play if these strategies are insufficient to jointly attain work and family goals. Finally, revising work and family goals represents the most extreme form of goal disengagement and this strategy should be the least preferred option. It needs to be applied if existing work and family goals cannot be achieved with any of the other strategies.

Based on an action regulation framework (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Zacher & Frese, 2018), we presume that people search for action-relevant information such as resources or barriers for goal attainment (i.e., orientation) and develop action strategies for goal attainment based on this information. We extend action regulation theory with our model by theorizing which conditions enable people to successfully use more or less preferable action strategies to attain work and family goals. We suggest that three key aspects need to be considered: (a) the facilitative or inhibitory nature of resources and barriers related to work and family goals, (b) the malleability of resources and barriers, and (c) the temporal dimensions of work and family goals (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

First, resources and barriers differ in the extent to which they facilitate or inhibit

jointly attaining work and family goals. According to goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al.,

2002), and consistent with action regulation theory (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Zacher & Frese,

2018), different means can have various degrees of facilitative or inhibitory value for a goal.

For example, having flexible work hours might highly facilitate achieving the goal of being

able to pick up the children from daycare but not be facilitative for attaining the goal of being

emotionally considerate toward one's spouse. Likewise, having a long commute might

strongly inhibit the goal of spending more time with one's children in the evening but not

inhibit the goal of spending vacation with the family.

Strongly facilitative resources and weakly inhibitory barriers represent the ideal

condition for goal attainment. People will (continue to) pursue a goal if they have high goal

expectancy, which results when no barriers prohibit goal attainment and the goal seems

achievable given the available resources (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Similarly, based on goal

setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), resources and barriers that allow achievement of

work and family goals will create a high sense of efficacy for goal attainment and thereby

promote high goal engagement. We thus presume that under the condition that existing

resources and barriers allow the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals, people

will try to directly attain both their work and family goals by activating and allocating

existing resources.

However, the activation and allocation of existing resources might often not be

sufficient to simultaneously achieve work and family goals. In multiple goal systems, most

goals are linked in some direct or indirect way (Kruglanski et al., 2002), which means that

most resources are boundary-spanning to some degree. In addition, many resources are

transient and get depleted when used. Consequently, using resources to attain work and

family goals often leads to the depletion of boundary-spanning resources (e.g., time, energy),

which prevents the simultaneous attainment of goals in both life domains. As a result, people

need to consider alternative, more indirect, goal attainment strategies (Figure 2).

Proposition 1a: If existing resources and barriers allow the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals, individuals will respond to work and family demands by applying the action strategy Allocating.

*Proposition 1b: If existing resources and barriers do **not** allow the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals, individuals will respond to work and family demands by applying the action strategies* Changing, Sequencing, *or* Revising.

The second aspect that needs to be considered to understand how resources and barriers affect the use of action strategies is that resources and barriers differ in the degree to which they are malleable. As outlined in the work-home resources model (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), resources range from highly volatile (e.g., positive affect) to more stable (e.g., social networks). Likewise, barriers can be more volatile (e.g., uncooperative behavior from a supervisor on a given day) or more stable (e.g., laws or company policies that impede the realization of certain work and family goals). As a result, the specific resources and barriers related to work and family goals can be more or less amenable to change by an individual.

Hence, using the *Changing* strategy is only feasible if resources and/or barriers are sufficiently malleable to an extent that allows the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals. Importantly, this sufficient malleability does not need to be attained for every single resource or barrier. Rather, it depends on the degree to which the specific constellation of resources and barriers linked with work and family goals can be changed to a sufficient level that allows joint goal attainment. Based on the principles of goal substitutability and equifinality (Kruglanski et al., 2002), to successfully apply the *Changing* strategy, low malleability of some resources and barriers could be compensated by high malleability of other resources and barriers, resulting in an overall sufficient malleability of resources and barriers to jointly attain work and family goals.

In some instances, the constellation of resources and/or barriers might not be

sufficiently malleable to reach the required level to simultaneously attain work and family goals. For example, some resources (e.g., self-esteem) and barriers (e.g., discriminatory organizational practices) are not very malleable and thus cannot easily be changed. Also, building resources and reducing barriers requires resources (e.g., time, energy, money), which might place a limit on the extent to which changes are possible (Hobfoll et al., 2018). If such limitations to malleability cannot be compensated by high malleability of other resources and barriers linked to the same goals, people will need to use action strategies that include some form of goal disengagement.

The third aspect that determines strategy use is *time to deadline* of existing work and family goals, which refers to the assessment of the time left until a goal must be achieved (Vancouver et al., 2010). Such deadlines reflect the disappearance of opportunities and emergence of constraints for goal attainment at future points in time (Heckhausen et al., 2010). For example, obtaining a promotion might be possible within the next three to five years but might become increasingly difficult after that period due to certain organizational structures and policies. Deadlines are also often inherent in demands that are translated into goals. For example, a spouse expects that the partner takes a more active role in childcare immediately versus over the next years which sets a short deadline for attaining the goal of becoming more engaged in childcare. Generally speaking, when the deadline to achieve goals is long and thus sufficient time is available to attain goals, people will strive to attain their current goals by applying goal engagement action strategies (Seijts, 1998). Applied to our model, this means that if sufficient time is available so that resources and barriers can be changed to a degree that allows simultaneous attainment of work and family goals, people will attempt to change resources and barriers accordingly (Figure 2).

However, sometimes the time to deadline of work and family goals will be too short to successfully apply the *Changing* strategy. This can occur even if resources and barriers could theoretically be changed to a level that allows simultaneously attaining work and family

goals. Yet such changes (e.g., acquiring new competencies, establishing new contacts, or challenging and revising existing regulations) might require substantial time that might not be available due to deadlines of some goals. As a result, people might need to consider alternative strategies that include some form of goal disengagement to maintain overall goal attainment across both life roles.

> **Proposition 2a:** *Under the condition that existing resources do **not** allow the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals, and if resources and barriers are sufficiently malleable within the time to deadline of work and family goals, individuals will apply the action strategy of* Changing.

> **Proposition 2b:** *Under the condition that existing resources do **not** allow the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals, and if resources and barriers are **not** sufficiently malleable within the time to deadline of work and family goals, individuals will apply the action strategy of* Sequencing *or* Revising.

Based on the principle that people prioritize attaining existing goals and only if necessary change their goals (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; Heckhausen et al., 2010), we propose that individuals should generally prefer to apply the strategy of *Sequencing* over *Revising* whenever possible. Sequencing already includes some form of goal disengagement because the attainment of an existing goal needs to be postponed. However, by sequencing goals, the goals themselves do not need to be changed and people can still attain their original work and family goals, although no longer simultaneously. The successful application of the *Sequencing* strategy strongly depends on the time to deadline of existing work and family goals (Figure 2). Only if a work or family goal can be postponed long enough so that another goal can be achieved first, while still leaving enough time to achieve the second goal later, can this strategy be successful.

However, while the strategy of *Sequencing* already includes a trade-off between work and family goals, in some instances this might still not be enough to achieve goals in both life

domains. Sequencing goals necessitates that goals have some temporal flexibility regarding when they can be attained because it postpones attainment of some goals. One important limitation in this regard is that many goals have deadlines that make postponing them unfeasible. For example, successfully completing a project at work or maintaining and building a caring relationship with one's life partner cannot be postponed indefinitely without negative consequences. As a result, when time to deadline is too short to sequence goals, we predict that individuals revert to a more extreme form of goal disengagement and revise existing work and family goal and develop new goals (Figure 2).

> ***Proposition 3a****: Under the condition of insufficient malleability of resources and barriers, if time to deadline of work and family goals is long enough to allow postponing the attainment of one goal, individuals will apply the action strategy of* Sequencing.

> ***Proposition 3b****: Under the condition of insufficient malleability of resources and barriers, if time to deadline of work and family goals is **not** long enough to allow postponing one goal, individuals will apply the action strategy of* Revising.

Altering Action Strategies Based on Monitoring and Feedback Processing

Action regulation theory proposes that during the execution of action strategies, people can flexibly adapt their goals and plans and coordinate their actions based on feedback about their progress and performance (Zacher & Frese, 2018). Feedback loops are a core feature of many self-regulation theories. They include an input of the perceived level of current goal attainment, a standard against which this level is compared, a comparator that detects discrepancies between the two, and an output function that changes behavior and cognition to reduce the gap between the standard and current level of goal attainment (Carver & Scheier, 1982; Lord, Diefendorff, Schmidt, & Hall, 2010). An important proposition of action-theoretical accounts of human behavior and self-regulation is that such dynamic adjustments of actions based on feedback are critical for goal attainment and performance

(Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Lord et al., 2010; Zacher & Frese, 2018). Meta-analytic research also supports the notion that frequently monitoring goal progress is important to increase overall goal attainment (Harkin et al., 2016).

In the context of our model, this suggests that people monitor the extent to which they have attained their goals in the work and family domains compared to their desired standard of goal attainment in both life domains. In addition, recent extensions of control theory stress that goal-performance discrepancy assessments are not static and that velocity, the speed at which progress toward a goal is made, is also taken into account when evaluating goal-performance gaps (Johnson et al., 2006). We hence propose that to attain work-family balance, people are constantly obtaining and processing feedback regarding the current state of goal attainment in the work and family domains, in combination with the speed at which they are making progress toward these goals. Ideally, this evaluation would indicate that the current strategy is resulting in progress at sufficient speed toward jointly attaining work and family goals.

However, this evaluation might also reveal that the current action strategy is not producing the desired results. If a person is applying the *Allocation* strategy, simultaneously achieving work and family goals might require more resources than expected. Resources might also deplete faster than expected or barriers might unexpectedly hinder goal progress. In addition, unexpected spillover effects might occur, for example when depleting a resource to attain a work goal has unexpected negative effects on the ability to attain a family goal. When applying the *Changing* strategy, resources might prove to be much harder to build and barriers harder to overcome or reduce than expected. Moreover, building resources or reducing barriers might require more boundary-spanning resources than expected (e.g., energy), thereby hampering overall goal progress. For the *Sequencing* strategy, people might observe that progress toward one goal makes subsequent attainment of the other goal unexpectedly harder. This could occur if pursuing a goal depletes resources or creates barriers

in unexpected ways that hinder subsequent goal attainment. For example, working toward obtaining a promotion first might lead to unexpected exhaustion from work and negatively impact one's romantic partnership, endangering attaining the goal of having a family later. Moreover, attaining a goal first might take longer than expected which can make it unlikely that the second goal can be attained later due to insufficient time left to attain that goal. Even when applying the *Revising* strategy, this might prove to be insufficient to jointly attain work and family goals. Examples are when revising a work goal does not free resources to the expected and needed degree to allow the simultaneous attainment of a family goal or when a revised goal still needs more resources than expected to be attained.

Ultimately, whether the evaluation of goal attainment state and speed of progress leads to a change in the applied action strategy depends on the temporal dimension of the relevant goals. As stated by Vancouver et al. (2010) in their formal computational theory of multiple-goal pursuit, people monitor the deadlines of goals and the remaining time to attain goals. The remaining time, the discrepancy between desired and current state of goal attainment, and the estimated time it takes to attain a goal, create an expectancy for goal attainment. If an individual evaluates this expectancy as too low, a change in action strategies would result. Applied to our model, this suggests that the deadline for required goal attainment across work and family goals plays an important role. If deadlines are too short relative to the current state of goal attainment under consideration of the speed of progress, the expectancy for goal attainment should be significantly reduced. Conversely, if goals have sufficiently long deadlines that allow goal attainment given the current state of goal attainment and speed of progress, the expectancy for attaining work and family goals should remain higher, reducing the need for revising action strategies (Vancouver et al., 2010).

In sum, we propose that people will revise their current action strategy if the state and speed of progress of goal attainment across work and family goals is unsatisfactory relative to the time to deadline of goals. Importantly, to attain work-family balance, this assessment has

to simultaneously consider work and family goals. This means that a negative evaluation of goal progress for either a work or a family goal can trigger a change in strategy, even if other work or family goals could be achieved. Thus, to attain work-family balance, goal progress toward work and family goals is non-compensatory and an action strategy is only successful if it leads to the attainment of goals in both life domains. For example, a person might use the *Changing* strategy and create more time for work and caring for children by renegotiating that the partner takes a larger role in completing household chores. If an evaluation of goal progress for each goal, under consideration of time to deadline, leads to the conclusion that the current strategy could lead to the attainment of the work goal (i.e., getting a promotion at work), but would be insufficient to meet the family goal (i.e., being a caring parent), then the current strategy would be deemed inadequate.

If a change in strategy is indicated, we propose that people consider moving on to the next strategy in the sequence of preference (i.e., from *Allocating* to *Changing*, from *Changing* to *Sequencing*, from *Sequencing* to *Revising*). Which strategy people ultimately chose will depend on an updated assessment of available resources and barriers, the malleability of resources and barriers, and the time left to deadline (see Figure 2) that is informed by the feedback obtained on goal attainment status and speed of progress. Because revising goals and selecting new goals already represents the most extreme form of goal disengagement, we assume that if this strategy is deemed insufficient, people would need to revise existing goals even more radically and select other possible goals until joint goal attainment in the work and family domain becomes possible. Alternatively, if revising or abandoning goals would be associated with severe negative consequences, people could reengage in a renewed assessment of demands, resources, and barriers and try new ways of implementing the other strategies to attain existing goals.

> **Proposition 4**: *Action strategies will be altered if the current strategy is deemed*
>
> *insufficient to attain goals jointly in the work and family domains, based on feedback*

on the status of goal attainment and speed of goal progress, and under consideration

of the time to deadline of goals.

An important component of action regulation theory is that people are not just reacting to feedback and adjusting their actions accordingly in a mechanistic way. Rather, individuals are seen as self-directed agents who also choose and adjust their actions based on monitoring the environment and performing mental simulations of possible actions and consequences (Zacher & Frese, 2018). In our model, we build upon this notion and propose that people will constantly monitor changes in demands, resources, and barriers pertaining to their work and family goals and form estimates of what such changes might mean for attaining their goals in both of these life domains. This is important because the demands, resources, and barriers related to work and family goals are not static. The proposed action strategies include the intentional increasing of resources, decreasing of barriers (i.e., the strategy *Changing*), and re-negotiation of demands (i.e., the strategies *Sequencing* and *Revising*) as ways to attain work and family goals. We thus propose a dynamic feedback loop where the use of action strategies affects work and family demands as well as resources and barriers, as indicated by the dashed arrow in Figure 1.

In addition to such intentional changes, demands, resources, and barriers related to work and family goals might change over time based on changes in personal (e.g., attitudes, skills) and environmental conditions (e.g., family situation, organizational demands). Moreover, unexpected events and opportunities can arise that lead to sudden shifts in experienced demands (e.g., illness of a family member), available resources (e.g., assistance from a colleague at work), and existing barriers (e.g., organizational telework policy). Based on action regulation theory (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Zacher & Frese, 2018), we presume that people will monitor such intentional and unintentional changes in demands, resources, and barriers. This means that, in addition to actual feedback, people will also alter their action strategies based on *anticipated* effects on goal attainment and progress of observed changes in

demands, resources, and barriers. We propose that these anticipated effects function in the same way as actual feedback on goal progress. They should lead to corresponding adaptation in action strategies if goal progress is expected to be insufficient when considering changes in existing resources and barriers, the degree to which resources and barriers are malleable, or the time to deadline of goals (see Figure 2).

The evaluation of demands, resources, and barriers can also lead to the conclusion that these factors have changed in a favorable way. For example, a change in work demands might lead to new work goals that are easier to attain with current resources, or new organizational policies are being introduced which facilitate the attainment of family goals. Under such conditions, we presume that people will reevaluate which action strategy can be applied (as in Figure 2). They should also aim to choose a new strategy that allows a more direct goal attainment and requires less goal disengagement than the current strategy (i.e., a preference for strategy *Allocating* over *Changing*, *Changing* over *Sequencing*, and *Sequencing* over *Revising*).

ACTION STRATEGIES, GOAL ATTAINMENT, AND WORK-FAMILY BALANCE
Use of Action Strategies as a Predictor of Work-Family Goal Attainment

People simultaneously pursue multiple goals in work and family domains, each with specific associated resources, barriers, and time to deadline. To attain work and family goals, different action strategies are needed, depending on the extent and nature of resources, barriers, and time to deadline related to work and family goals. Our model thus implies that people will use different action strategies at any point in time to achieve different work and family goals. As a result, the combined application of multiple action strategies should lead to the highest overall attainment of different work and family goals.

However, different action strategies not only need to be combined to achieve multiple goals, they also need to be used in a dynamic and flexible way. Because demands, resource, and barriers can change over time, adapting action strategies accordingly is critical for

optimal goal attainment across work and family goals. In addition, using action strategies can themselves lead to changes in demands, resource, and barriers. This implies that the application of action strategies is a dynamic process in which using one strategy has implications for the use of other strategies. This often includes trade-offs between the strategies applied for different work and family goals. Because most work and family goals are linked in a direct or indirect way and many resources and barriers are hence boundary-spanning, applying a certain action strategy for some goals might mean that a different action strategy needs to be chosen for other goals to account for resource losses. For example, using the strategy *Allocating* to attain a specific set of work and family goals (e.g., successfully finishing a work project and spending time with the family on weekends) is likely to deplete some resources (e.g., energy, time). Without sufficient resources, *Allocating* may no longer be feasible for other combinations of work and family goals (e.g., successfully finishing a work project and taking a vacation). In this instance, one might need to revert to the *Sequencing* strategy for these goals (e.g., postponing taking a vacation until the project is finished).

However, applying a specific action strategy for some goals might also have positive implications for the strategies available to attain other goals because it frees resources that can be used otherwise. For example, applying the strategy *Revising* for some goals (e.g., abandoning the goal of taking on an additional leadership role) might free resources that can then make the use of the *Allocating* strategy feasible for other goals (e.g., showing high performance in the current job and spending time with family after work). An optimal use of action strategies thus combines different action strategies for different work and family goals in a dynamic and flexible way, while considering the mutual goal linkages between work and family goals.

> **Proposition 5**: *Action strategies have the strongest positive effect on work and family goal attainment if strategies are used flexibly over time dependent on changes in demands, resources, and barriers across work and family goals.*

While we conceptualize the appropriate use of action strategies as being generally positive for work and family goal attainment, it is important to note the boundary condition that the extent of such positive effects also depends on existing demands. If demands are extremely high (e.g., extreme performance expectations at work, very high expectations of spouse regarding time spent with family), even the best coordinated and adaptively used action strategies might fail to achieve the goals that reflect these demands in both life domains.

Goal Attainment and Work-Family Balance

Our theorizing is based on the basic proposition that work-family balance is the result of attaining goals in both work and family domains. Greenhaus and Allen (2011) postulated that balance consists of a sense of effectiveness and satisfaction across work and family roles. The concept of satisfaction is straightforward, but effectiveness is more complicated. Previous researchers have not offered a clear definition for effectiveness, labeling it broadly as productivity (Kofodimos, 1993), success at work (Caligiuri & Lazarova, 2005), meeting one's own performance standards (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011), or accomplishing negotiated role expectations between an individual and relevant parties in his/her work and family roles (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). In addition, existing work does not clearly specify the relationship between the two balance components of satisfaction and effectiveness. In an empirical study, Wayne et al. (2017) showed that balance effectiveness and balance satisfaction are two distinct but related aspects of work-family balance. They also alluded to the possibility that effectiveness might temporarily precede satisfaction based on self-perception theory (Bem, 1972), which argues that people infer attitudes from behaviors. As such, once effectiveness is achieved, people may then form attitudes regarding satisfaction toward specific roles.

In our model, we build upon goal research which suggests that goals represent personal strivings for desired states or objects (Austin & Vancouver, 1996). If a person is able

to jointly attain goals in work and family domains, this should lead to the experience of effectiveness across work and family roles as personal standards for achievement (i.e., goals) have been reached. Following Greenhaus and Allen (2011), we thus conceptualize effectiveness as a personal appraisal. However, because we posit that a sense of effectiveness emerges from the attainment of both work and family goals, it also relates to the fulfillment of negotiated role expectations with important others (Grzywacz & Carlson, 2007). This is because work and family goals are also derived from environmental demands. Hence, a sense of effectiveness can also emerge from fulfilling expectations of others that have been transformed into personal goals.

Research shows that goal attainment is closely linked to well-being, especially if the attained goals are consistent with personal values (Emmons, 1986; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). The reason for this positive effect of goal attainment on well-being is based on need satisfaction (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). A sense of competence is regarded as one of the primary needs of individuals that should be fulfilled to experience well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Applied to our model, this suggests that a sense of balance effectiveness fulfills the need for competence across work and family roles and thereby promotes satisfaction across work and family.

> *Proposition 6: Attaining goals in work and family domains promotes work-family balance by creating a sense of effectiveness and satisfaction across both domains.*

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

We presented an action regulation model of work-family balance that conceptualizes balance as the joint attainment of work and family goals. The core of our theorizing addresses the different action strategies that people can apply to attain goals in both work and family domains, under which conditions these strategies are more or less likely to be used, and the processes by which these strategies are altered if necessary. This theorizing provides a new and useful perspective on the work-family interface because action regulation theory and

intentional strategies have not been sufficiently considered in the work-family literature

despite their potential contribution toward a better understanding of how people can

successfully manage work and family roles in a proactive way (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000).

Specifically, our model provides novel perspectives on work-family balance, offers a dynamic

perspective on work and family management, enriches the literature on multiple goals and

action regulation, and stimulates new approaches in practice, specifically in terms of action

strategies on the individual level.

Implications for Theory

       Work-family balance. Existing work-family balance research has mostly focused on

balance as a fit between resources and demands, with a lack of clarity on the process through

which fit occurs or specific strategies that are used to facilitate such fit. This small body of

previous work has also used various definitions of balance, none of which are aligned with

contemporary conceptualizations. Our model goes beyond existing theorizing by positing

balance not as simply the result of a match between demands and resources in different life

roles, but as resulting from the use of adequate action strategies based on demands, resources,

and barriers that allow for goal attainment in each role. This helps illuminate how people

actually deal with the various dynamic demands, resources, and barriers in their lives.

       We also go a step further by positioning active goal pursuit and goal attainment across

work and family roles as the explanatory mechanisms that lead to a sense of work-family

effectiveness and affective balance. In doing so, we answer researchers' calls to offer a

theoretical model of the work-family interface that incorporates self-regulation (Baltes &

Dickson, 2001; Schmidt, Beck, & Gillespie, 2013). Moreover, in applying an action

regulation perspective to work-family balance, we illustrate novel applications of

conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), a theory that is often invoked in work-

family scholarship as a means to understand how individuals react to work and family

stressors in light of available resources (e.g., Greenhaus & Ten Brummelhuis, 2013; ten

Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012). Our contribution centers on the fact that one tenant of conservation of resources theory is that psychological resources are important for goal attainment, but this concept has not, prior to our model, been explicitly incorporated into extant theorizing. That is, most previous work focuses simply on the use and loss of resources with regard to work-family management and goal attainment, but not on how resources relate to the application of different action strategies to jointly attain goals across work and family roles.

        Temporal perspective on work-family management. By integrating time to deadline of goals in our model, we add a temporal dimension to better understand the successful management of work and family goals. Time to deadline is clearly relevant for strategies used in work-family goal attainment, as it is also a central construct in models based on goal and action regulation theories (Heckhausen et al., 2010; Seijts, 1998). Considering time to deadline extends existing work-family theorizing in that it allows for the consideration of specific types of work and family goals, some of which may be episodic and short-term in nature versus others that are more chronic (e.g., Maertz & Boyar, 2011). Future research based on our model could additionally consider the potentially important role of workers' life stage (e.g., having young children, "empty nest"). Despite some calls in the work-family literature to take the important role of time and the dynamic nature of work and family domains into account (Allen & Shockley, 2012; Demerouti, Peeters, & van der Heijden, 2012), the existing work-family literature has largely neglected studying the work-family interface from a life stage perspective (Allen, 2012; for exceptions see Moen, Kelly, & Huang, 2008; Thrasher, Zabel, Wynne, & Baltes, 2016; Zacher, Jimmieson, & Bordia, 2014). This is surprising, given that individuals' demands, resources, and barriers in the work and family domains and, thus, work-family relations may change considerably over the life course (Allen & Shockley, 2012). By theorizing about how (changes in) demands, resources, and barriers relate the use of different action strategies, our model can contribute to a better

understanding of how different life stages impact the attainment of work-family balance.

Multiple goals and action regulation. Our model contributes to the literature on goals by integrating research on multiple goals pursuit with the notion of balance from the work-family literature. Based on the assumption that resources are limited, previous research on multiple goals has primarily focused on how individuals prioritize competing goals (e.g., productivity and safety goals; Johnson et al., 2006; Neal et al., 2017). We extend this literature by suggesting that individuals use a range of different action strategies, including, but not limited to, prioritizing among competing goals, to deal with demands, resources, and barriers in both work and family domains. Moreover, we extend research on action regulation theory by integrating cognitive-behavioral processes such as goal selection, planning, and feedback processing with the concept of work-family balance. While the existing literature has addressed several general principles of action regulation (i.e., allocating resources, changing resources, sequencing goals, revising goals), we present a novel and coherent model of how, why, and when different strategies can be used to jointly attain work and family goals. Moreover, previous research on action regulation theory has mainly focused on behavior within the work domain and neglected that people can use action strategies to manage goals and demands across multiple life domains (Zacher & Frese, 2018).

Implications for Future Research

A first issue to address in future studies is how the processes proposed in our model play out at the dyadic and group levels, at which different goals are selected by couples and families or employees, supervisors, and colleagues. Research could explore how work and family goal alignment and conflict with important others affect the type of action strategies people use. Such studies could also explore interaction effects across levels of analyses and how effects of environmental factors are moderated by individual characteristics. Similarly, not much is known about how individual differences affect the selection of action strategies. One possible avenue for such inquiries is to consider the effects of regulatory foci (Lanaj,

Chang, & Johnson, 2012) on goal management and to what extent having a promotion or prevention focus affects the application of different action strategies.

A potential boundary condition of our model is that we focus on the *intentional* use of strategies to attain work and family goals. Goals vary systematically in their degree of specificity and level of conscious awareness. Project goals are at a medium level of specificity and generally higher in level of conscientiousness compared to highly specific task goals and less specific life goals (Unsworth et al., 2014). This implies that people most likely strategize about project goals (e.g., getting a promotion) versus task (e.g., finishing a report) or life goals (e.g., being a successful employee; Zacher & Frese, 2018). It is thus possible that our proposed model most specifically applies to project goals and less to task or life goals. Specifically, as life goals are by definition rather distant and more abstract (Unsworth et al., 2014), people might rarely see the need to abandon or revise their life goals, even if lower level goals leading to such life goals might need to be revised. Future research could thus evaluate to what extent people engage in intentional action strategies in relation to different types of goals or to what extent the proposed strategies might also function without conscious awareness.

We presented four broad categories of action strategies to attain work-family balance. Within each of these categories, concrete actions are enacted that might have more specific predictors in terms of specific demands, resources, and barriers. These strategies might also function across different time horizons. For example, when applying the *Sequencing* strategy, postponing finishing a project at work in favor of having time to help children with their homework might have different predictors than postponing to get a promotion in order to focus on raising a family first. Future research could examine in more detail how more specific expressions of the herein proposed general action strategies are related to more specific predictors and outcomes.

Another promising avenue for empirical studies is to investigate to what extent

bounded rationality (Kahneman, 2003) affects the suggested processes in our model. Due to incomplete information, biased information collection and processing, and limits in information processing capacity, we can assume that people do not make perfectly rational choices about when to apply which action strategies. Future studies could examine how aspects of bounded rationality affect the selection of work and family goals, the evaluation of resources and barriers, and the choice and adaptation of action strategies.

Implications for Practice

Apart from new research avenues, our model has several implications for practice. Many of these implications center on the four action regulation strategies. The *Allocating* strategy involves the availability of resources. In this sense, this speaks to the need for organizations to offer employees' resources that are relevant to work goal attainment and boundary-spanning resources that may also help with family goal attainment. Flexibility is a key example, as research suggests that people have both family- and work-related (e.g., productivity) motives for using flexible work arrangements (Shockley & Allen, 2012). The strategy of changing resources and barriers speaks to the need for organizational systems to be amenable to change, which may require allowing employees to have a voice in processes so that the need for change is apparent to senior leaders (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998). This idea is indirectly incorporated in recent work on family-supportive supervisor behaviors (Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009). A key component of supportiveness is creative work-family management, which means that supervisors deviate from typical work structures to allow for better work-family management for individual employees. This also parallels the concept of idiosyncratic deals (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). Thus, the greater the extent to which available resources are flexible, the more likely individuals are to feel they can engage in the *Changing* strategy. The third strategy involves sequencing work and family goals, respectively. Typical organizational structures are not particularly amenable to altering work goals at the career level. That is, organizational advancement typically requires full time

devotion to the work role with no career breaks (Moen & Roehling, 2005). As others have stated (e.g., Moen & Orrange, 2002), we advocate for more flexible career paths that will allow people to feel that they have more options in how they sequence longer term work and family goals.

Our model also offers practice implications on the individual level that go beyond the dominant focus on contextual factors. These implications are also important for professionals who assist individuals in achieving work and family goals, such as career counselors, coaches, mentors, or supervisors. Specifically, our model suggests that individuals should apply an action regulation process to achieve work-family balance. First, it is important to clarify the demands at various levels (i.e., from micro- to macro-level, including expectations of various stakeholders) and how they inform work and family goals. Second, the resources and barriers related to these goals should be examined, including their respective degree of malleability and the time to deadline implied by these goals. Third, based on these clarifications, individuals can determine the best possible action strategies to attain various goals and specify the necessary action steps. Fourth, during strategy execution, it is important to continuously monitor goal progress as well as any changes in demands, resources, and barriers. Finally, based on these evaluations, goals and strategies could be revised if necessary. Applying these steps results in a continuous and proactive process of work and family goal pursuit that should help people attain work-family balance.

Conclusion

We have presented a novel theoretical model that contributes to a better understanding of the work-family interface by proposing what types of action strategies people could use under which circumstances to proactively achieve goals in both work and family domains. As such, our model provides new theorizing on how people can attain work-family balance that should be useful for designing practical interventions as well as further research into this burgeoning topic.

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TABLE 1

Description of the Four Basic Action Strategies to Attain Work and Family Goals

	Strategy	Definition of Strategy	Aim of Strategy	Illustrative Examples
Engagement Strategies	Allocating	The intentional activation and allocation of existing resources to achieve work and family goals.	To identify and pursue means for simultaneously attaining work and family goals based on goal multifinality (i.e., one means leading to several goals) and equifinality (i.e., multiple means for one goal).	• Use existing knowledge and skills to achieve goals • Take advantage of existing policies that support the attainment of goals • Request help from other people to attain goals
	Changing	The intentional increase of resources and/or reduction of barriers related to work and family goals.	To increase resources that allow for the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals and/or to reduce barriers that prevent the simultaneous attainment of work and family goals.	Increase resources: • Acquire new skills (e.g., time management) • Improve health with regular exercise • Invest in social relationships Reduce barriers: • Reduce exhaustion by meditation • Challenge negative assumptions by important others • Resolve existing conflicts with important others
Disengagement Strategies	Sequencing	The intentional prioritization of some work or family goals in the shorter-term so that other goals can be attained in the longer term.	To prioritize goals in order to achieve some work or family goals first, which then allows the attainment of other family or work goals later.	• Postpone having a family until a promotion has been attained • Take care of young children first and enter the workforce again later • Finish an important project at work first before spending more time with family later
	Revising	The intentional revision of existing work or family goals and the selection of new goals.	To disengage from work or family goals by changing demands and to select new work or family goals that can simultaneously be attained considering existing resources and barriers.	• Decrease personal performance expectations for goals • Reduce performance expectations of other people for goals • Develop new goals that are attainable with existing resources

FIGURE 1
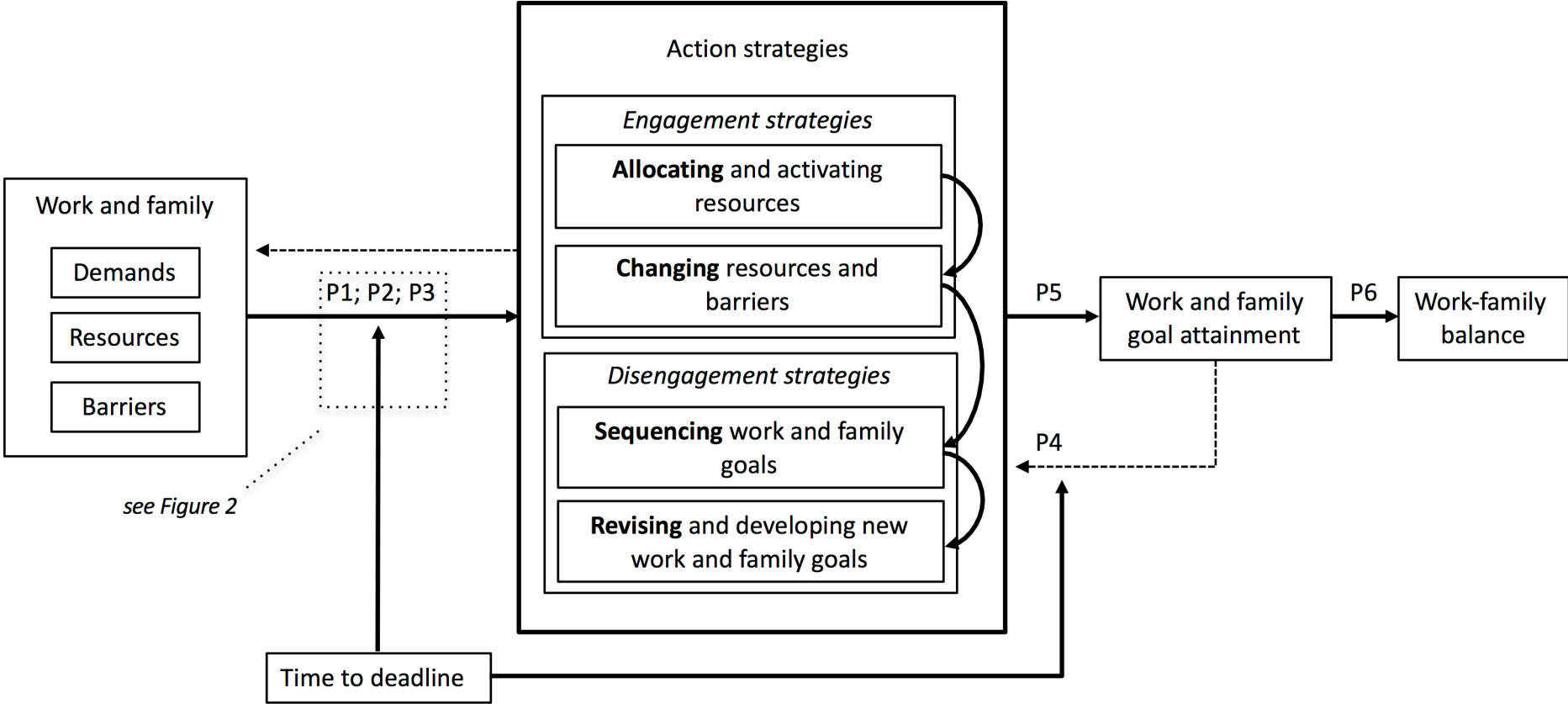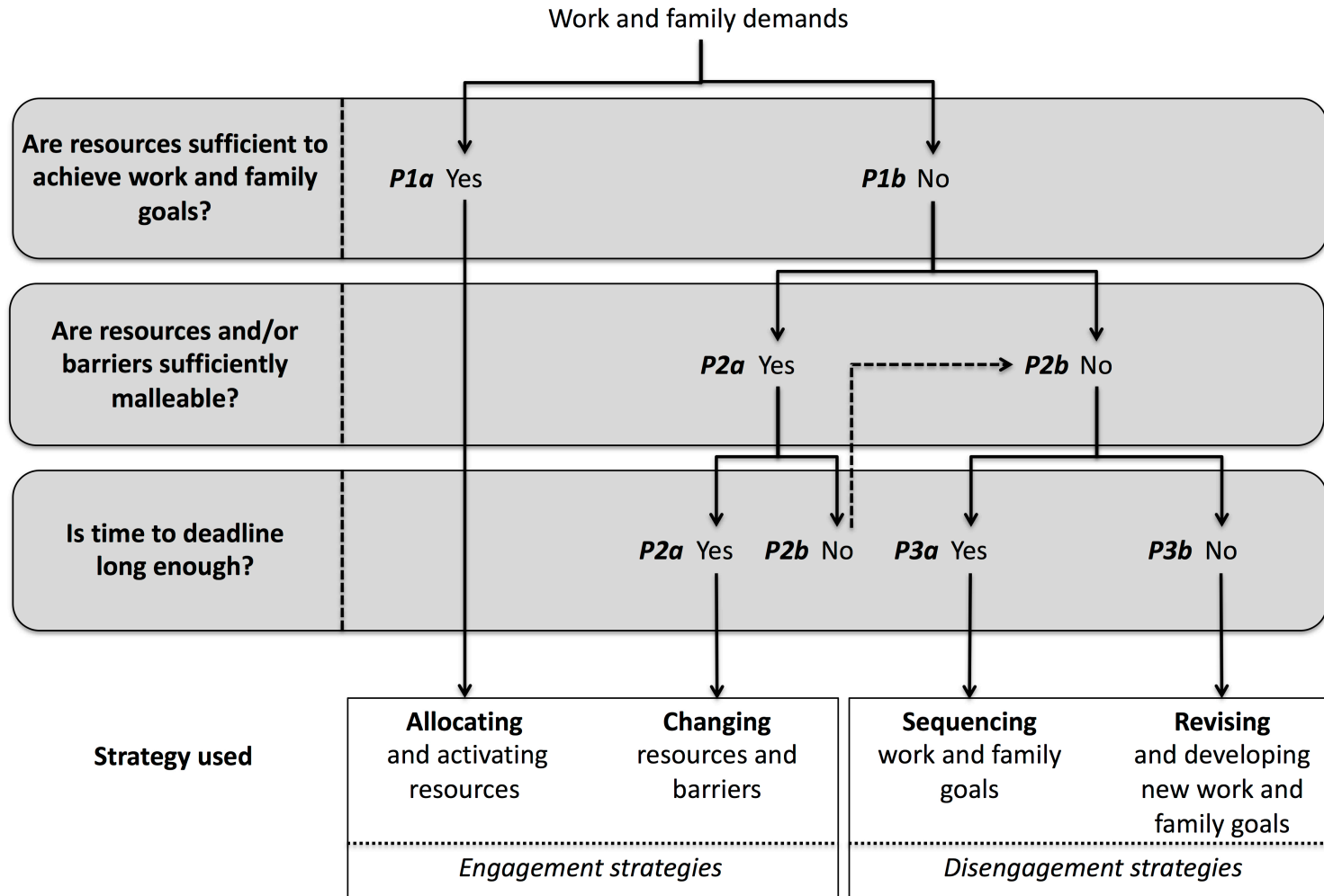
An Action Regulation Model of Work-Family Balance

FIGURE 2

Use of Action Strategies Under Different Conditions of Resources, Barriers, and Time to Deadline of Work and Family Goals

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