Life role salience: A study of dual-career couples in the Indian context

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ABSTRACT
To explain career development of professional men and women, the developmental approach is becoming increasingly popular as it allows for a broad perspective encompassing both work and family roles. It recognizes the fact that developmentally men and women are different. The present study explored whether, for dual-career couples working in the Indian context, the salience attached to different life roles by male and female partners does indeed vary differentially across the life cycle in keeping with the propositions of the adult developmental theories of men and women. Data were collected from 92 dual-career couples. Results provided only partial support for the propositions of adult development theories, examined in terms of the differences between the life role salience of male and female partners. In particular, the expected reversal of salience attached to work and family roles at mid-life, between men and women, was not evident. Our results seem to challenge the universality of the existing developmental frameworks and suggest the need to broaden the theoretical base to incorporate diverse socio-cultural realities that have a bearing on life role salience.

KEYWORDS
dual-career couples ● life role salience ● work–family roles
Introduction

With the growing centrality of work in people's lives, there has been an increase in research aimed towards understanding the processes underlying career development and the ways in which it can be facilitated. Of the several theoretical approaches that have been used to explain career development, the developmental approach has been gaining considerable popularity for its dynamic and comprehensive perspective. This approach sees careers not as static phenomena but as an evolving reality which offers individuals different constellations of challenges and choices at different stages. Instead of focusing on the work life alone, the developmental approach addresses issues relating to work-family interfaces. And, significantly, the developmental approach allows for a different view of the career development of women, by acknowledging the fact that developmentally women are different from men.

Although considerable elaboration of the developmental approach has been undertaken by Levinson (1978, 1986), Bradwick (1980) and Gilligan (1980) to understand the career development of men and women respectively, empirical investigations of some of the tenets of this approach have been limited, and restricted particularly to the western context. Since the work and family domains are differently ordered in different societies, it is possible that the challenges that they present to individuals at various stages of their lives are not the same across contexts. Consequently, the universality of the propositions of the development approach to understanding careers may not hold, if cross-cultural comparisons are made. In light of this reasoning, this paper explores some of the propositions of the developmental approach within the Indian context, in terms of the life role salience of professional men and women.

Life role salience refers to an individual's internalized beliefs and attitudes about the personal relevance of a role, standards for the performance of the role, and the manner in which personal time, money and energy resources are to be committed to the performance of the role (Amatea et al., 1986). As a construct, life role salience lends itself admirably for our exploration, as different aspects of life role salience can be expected to vary across the life span of an individual. To facilitate an appreciation of the objective of this study, some of the prominent theoretical approaches to the career development of men and women are reviewed.
The developmental approach to understanding the career development of men and women

Career development of men

Career growth of men can be understood using Levinson’s life stages theory (1978, 1986) which is one of the most influential adult developmental theories of men. Levinson (1978, 1986) analysed male adult development as evolving throughout the life span of the individual in orderly, time-bound and alternating periods of stability and change. He described four basic periods of stability: the era of pre-adulthood (8–22 years), the era of early adulthood (17–45 years), the era of middle adulthood (40–65 years) and the era of late adulthood (60–65 years). Alternating between the periods of stability are four periods of change which extend roughly for a period of five years: the early adult transition (17–22 years), the age 30 transition, the mid-life transition (40–45 years) and the late adult transition (60–65 years). According to Levinson, during the periods of stability the life structure of the individual is built through the timely tackling of the appropriate developmental tasks, while, during the periods of change or transition, the life structure is reviewed and accordingly modified to allow for external sociological realities as well as for internal psychological processes.

The major preoccupation for men during the early adulthood years is building a career and a family, with the career usually taking precedence. Hence, the twenties are characterized by purposeful activity towards achieving occupational goals. The age-30 transition that follows the early adulthood years is directed at improving one’s standing in one’s career and in the world of work. This period is the most distinctive one for men, as it marks a time during which they experience high self-esteem having ‘come into their own’ and having become senior, contributing members of their organizations and their community.

According to Levinson, the precedence of career over family holds true for men up to their middle adulthood years. It is not until mid-life transition (40–45 years) that men begin to experience and deal with family issues, and with conflicts between career and family in a significant way. In fact, during the mid-life transitional phase, men begin to integrate the polarities of life between young and old, masculine and feminine, attachment and separateness. They also undergo major reappraisals, disillusionment with the self-concept and personality changes. Men tend to become more self-reflexive, less stereotypically masculine and more feminine, and more committed to mentoring the next generation. During the last and final stage of late adulthood, men have to cope with physiological changes, retirement, changes in
family roles and a preoccupation with death of parents, siblings, spouse and self.

Studies by Arnold and Feldman (1986), Schein (1978) and Super (1977) have also contributed to life stage theories. Feldman (1987) has attempted to integrate the works of the above mentioned, including Levinson (1986), to develop a neat model of life and family stages. He divides the life span of a man into seven stages, with each stage lasting about seven years. These stages are adolescence (15–22), young-adult transition (22–30), young adulthood (30–38), mid-life transition (38–45), middle adulthood (45–55), late-life adult transition (55–62) and late adulthood (62–70). Many of the psychological issues delineated by Feldman (1987) as characteristic of each stage are very similar to the ones mentioned by Levinson (1986).

Career development of women

Similar to Levinson’s ‘Seasons of a man’s life’ (1978), Bradwick (1980) identified four basic life phases for women: the early adult transition years (17–28 years), the settling down period of the second adult life phase (30–40 years), middle adulthood (40–45 years) and the age 50 and older phase. These life phases explain much of the career growth of women.

During the early adult transition years (17–28 years), most women are preoccupied with getting married and settling down to family life (Bradwick, 1980). Even for those women who are working and have had a professional education, traditional roles remain an integral part of their identity. Women’s investment in work is not as significant as that of their male counterparts. In fact, during this stage, most women see work as ‘something important to do rather than something to be’ (Gallos, 1989: 120).

The age 30 to 40 years phase which signifies the settling down period of the second adult life phase, is very different for women as compared with men (Bradwick, 1980). During this phase, men usually invest very heavily in work and are busy climbing up the career ladder to ‘become one’s own man’ (Levinson, 1978). ‘Becoming one’s own woman’, however, involves more than being successful in one’s profession. This is a time when most women, even those who are fairly successful in their career, experience great self-doubts and anxiety about their femininity. They wonder if all that they have sacrificed for their career has been worth it. For those women who have postponed having children, time is running out as the biological clock begins to tick loudly. For women who have started their families, juggling work and family roles causes stress and fatigue which often results in a compromise, either in professional work or in relationships with the spouse and children. This in turn leads to a sense of guilt, low self-esteem and personal inadequacy (Gallos, 1989).
The middle adulthood phase (age 40 to 50) is again different for women as compared with men. While many men go through a painful mid-life crisis at this time, women, on the other hand, experience greater assertiveness and professional accomplishment at work (Gallos, 1989). Bradwick (1980) views this phase as a time of great promise for women despite the fact that children may be leaving home and there is the possibility of facing loneliness because of divorce or widowhood. Professional resurgence takes place because by this time women have usually finished the full-time job of mothering and now more or less enjoy the ‘social sanction’ to work.

The age 50 and older life phase is similar for men and women in the sense that both have to deal with the single most important developmental task of this period, namely, managing withdrawal and separation (i.e. preparing for death, either of self, spouse, siblings or parents). However, this phase may still present a time of significant professional accomplishment for women. This is because most women marry at a younger age than men do. Hence, during this phase, their husbands, who are often older than them, may retire, leaving them free to take up their career interests again with full vigour. Moreover, now being at home as retired spouses, these husbands may be in a position to support the career efforts of their wives.

From the description of the differential adult development of men and women presented so far, it appears as pointed out by Gilligan (1980) that the developmental process of women is the mirror image of that of men. If Levinson’s model of male development derives its energy for initial growth from a man’s quest for one’s dream of autonomy and task mastery, then, for women, growth and dreams in the initial period are primarily based upon interdependence and relationships (Gilligan, 1980), and linking as different from detaching. While both men and women have to deal with resolving the conflict between separation and attachment, they go about it in different ways. Men usually begin with an emphasis on individuality and workplace achievement, and finally move towards an exploration of connectedness with others and an acknowledgement of the fact that others are equally important to self. Women on the other hand begin with assuming a connectedness with significant others, and then move towards accepting and handling separation, assertiveness and the recognition of the self as being as important as others.

Asynchronism in dual-career and family linkages

Focusing their attention on dual-career couples as the unit of analysis, Sekaran and Hall (1989) proposed a developmental framework for analysing the manner in which dual-career couples manage their work and family roles. Building upon the work of Daniels and Weingarten (1982), they suggested
two models – the sequential and the simultaneous – to analyse work–family interface for dual-career couples, and related it to the concept of synchronism or compatibility.

In the sequential model, one of the partners (usually the woman) slows down, stops or interrupts the career to cope with parenting responsibilities, as a result of which that partner’s career goes out of schedule with reference to the organization’s timetable for career development. In the simultaneous model, both the partners enact their work and family roles simultaneously. This model comprises five stages of career and family development, and each stage is characterized by some form of synchronism/asyncronism.

In the pre-launching and young-married, childless-couple stages, both the partners tend to be more career-oriented than family-oriented. Within the overriding constraints of finding two suitable jobs in the same place, work goals and aspirations are the dominant themes for the couple. Thus, during this stage, the partners are in sync with the organizational career timetable, as well as with each other regarding their career and family experiences. The couple reports a high level of mastery and pleasure (Baruch et al., 1983).

During the young parenthood stage, the career development of one of the partners (usually the woman) lags behind that of the other partner, as this partner takes time off or slows down the career to deal with family responsibilities. As a result, this partner goes out of sync with the organization’s timetable for career attainment as well as with the spouse’s career.

During the mature parenthood stage, when the children are in school, the previously career-involved partner (usually the man) who has reached mid-career and is in sync with the organizational calendar, now begins to take a greater interest in family affairs. At this stage, the previously home-oriented partner (usually the woman) starts investing more time in their career and becomes more and more involved in work. As a result, the couple once again displays couple synchronism and organizational asynchronism.

Finally, in the empty-nest stage, when children have left home, the focus shifts from each partner’s self as parent to the self in relation to the other. The partner who had taken a back seat earlier can now devote undivided attention to his/her career. According to Sekaran and Hall (1989), at this stage, men and women tend to acquire more of the qualities that were previously associated more with the opposite sex.

The developmental framework for dual-career couples offered by Sekaran and Hall (1989) draws heavily from the adult development theories of men and women. Central to their sequential model is the notion of changing life priorities with changes in the salience attached to different roles, by men and women. To understand and explore the possibility of changing life
role priorities of Indian dual-career couples, a preliminary understanding of the Indian context is in order.

The Indian context

Traditional Indian society has always been hierarchical. The several hierarchies within the family (of age, sex, ordinal position) and within the community (of caste, lineage, wealth, learning, occupation) have been maintained by ‘a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief’ (Chitnis, 1988: 83). Indian society has been popularly described as a society where individuals live by their ‘ascribed’ rather than ‘achieved’ status.

The traditional Hindu family ascribed the status of ‘pativrata’ to the wife. ‘Pativrata’ literally translates as ‘one who is vowed to her husband’. It implies that a wife must accept as her beholden duty the service and devotion to her husband and family (Chitnis, 1988). In general, Indian society has given women in the family a status lower than that of men, and Indian culture has, through folklore, folk songs and legends, served to maintain such an inequality. It has highlighted the self-sacrificing, self-effacing, pure image of the woman, which has reinforced her role as devout and dutiful wife and doting mother. Her enabler role thus gets precedence over the performer role. Such a veneration of the woman’s role as wife and mother has lent sanctity and stability to the institution of marriage in India, and has been responsible for the indulgence of children in Indian families, especially of sons. While studying the inner world of the Indian child, Sudhir Kakar remarks, ‘In the case of a Hindu woman, at least in the imagery of culture, maternal feelings of tenderness and nurturance occur in combination with a profound gratitude and the readiness for a poignantly high emotional investment in the child’ (Kakar, 1981: 79).

In addition to the concept of the ideal woman as being pure, chaste and nurturant, there has been the other concept of her as being malevolent, aggressive and destructive (symbolized in Indian mythology by goddesses such as Durga and Kali (Das, 1981)). This (confusing) duality that characterizes the concept of the Indian woman presents her in the final analysis as the simultaneous embodiment of energy/power, and nature and harmony (Wadley, 1988).

The status of women in Indian society underwent a major change as a result of liberalism, social reforms and nationalism that emerged during the course of the British rule. Access to westernized education under British rule facilitated the entry of women (initially of the upper castes) into the world of paid work in formal organizations. While, first, the entry of
women was mainly in traditional fields such as teaching, tailoring, nursing, etc., after independence of the country in 1947 and the subsequent thrust to women's education, there has been a steady trickle of women into professions such as medicine, engineering and management. In fact, modern India can be said to be witnessing the growth of a body of middle-class and upper-middle-class educated women, living in large urban agglomerations, who are fairly emancipated in socio-economic terms (Menon, 1997). Their empowerment has been facilitated by the constitutional recognition of equal status of women, the acceptance of the need and spread of women's education, and progressive legal enactments that bestow them with constitutional equality.

The changing status of women in modern India and their entry into the workforce, along with the forces of urbanization and industrialization, have been accompanied by changes in the nature of the Indian family. While systematic studies on the typical modern Indian family are lacking, there is evidence of a growing trend towards nuclearization of the family with emphasis on the 'jodi' or 'couple' (Jain, 1996), a rise in disposable incomes of the family as a result of both partners being in employment, an increase in the use of labour-saving devices for household chores, and emerging (though weak) evidence of pressure on other family members to realign their family roles as women strain under the double burden of managing work and family.

**The present study**

The adult development theories of men and women presented above suggest that, as men and women grapple with different developmental tasks in different ways at different periods of their lives, the importance that they attach to different life roles will differ across their life spans. Along with this, the personal resources that men and women are able and willing to invest in their work and family roles may also differ at different phases of their lives.

As the number of dual-career couples increases significantly, important issues concerning life role salience need empirical exploration. While such studies are beginning to appear in the context of developed countries, in developing countries this is a largely unexplored territory. The present study is a step towards filling this research gap with a focus on Indian male and female professionals. The specific objective of this study is to explore whether the importance attached to different roles differs for Indian professional men and women across their life span.
Methodology

To meet the objectives of the study, a sample of dual-career couples belonging to different age groups was required. Since no study involving both the partners of dual-career couples had previously been conducted in India, no list of dual-career couples for survey purposes was readily available. To generate the sample for this study, the 'snowball sampling' technique was used (Green et al., 1995).

Snowball sampling was thought to be the most appropriate sampling procedure for this study because dual-career couples are still not common in India and to that extent they depict rare characteristics. Moreover, generation of a sample by relying on networks and referrals, as is usually done in snowball sampling, would be easier in the case of dual-career couples as they are known to keep in touch with other dual-career couples as a strategy to cope with the innately stressful nature of their lifestyle (Skinner, 1980).

The first few respondents were women who were randomly selected from the alumni list of a premier management institute in Western India. The reason for beginning the survey by selecting women alumni was to increase the likelihood of identifying dual-career couples as professional women show a tendency to marry professional men (Rice, 1979). Of the questionnaires sent out to the women alumni of the institute, only those responses of married alumni were selected for the final survey where: (a) both spouses were living together; (b) both spouses were executives or professionals in the fields of medicine, management, law, architecture, teaching, etc.; and (c) both spouses were full-time, salaried employees of organizations. A conscious effort was made to select only couples in Bombay to avoid the confounding effects of lifestyle that differs across cities in India (Business Today, 1994). Sample selection did not take place at one point of time but evolved as part of the snowballing technique. Data were collected through the self-administered questionnaire. Each couple was given two questionnaires, one for each spouse, and both the partners were requested to fill in their responses independently without consulting each other. All the questionnaires were personally delivered to and collected from the respondents.

Respondents

The final sample for the study comprised data from 185 responses of which 184 responses came from husband–wife pairs (i.e. 92 couples). The distribution of the respondents across age categories is given in Appendix 1.
Seventy-five per cent of the respondents were postgraduates. There appeared to be a bias in the sample towards the management and medical professions, which may have had to do with the snowball method of sampling used.

**Measures**

**Life role salience scales**

The importance that individuals attach to their different life roles was measured by using the life role salience scales (LRSS) developed and validated by Amatea et al. (1986). LRSS are multi-dimensional scales which are designed to assess respondents' personal expectations concerning occupational, marital, parental and homecare roles. The aspects of personal role expectations assessed by means of these scales include the personal importance or value attributed to participation in a particular role, as well as the intended level of commitment of personal time and energy resources to enactment of a role. These dimensions are measured with the help of a set of eight attitude scales comprising in all 40 items. One sample item is, 'My life would be empty if I never had children'. Responses are obtained on a five-point Likert-type format ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

The advantage of using these scales is that they are reliable, well validated and extensively used. The coefficient alpha values reported by Amatea et al. (1986) for the different scale dimensions in a study of married couples, are as follows: parental role reward value (0.84), parental role commitment (0.80), marital role reward value (0.94), marital role commitment (0.81), occupational role reward value (0.86), occupational role commitment (0.83), homemaker role reward value (0.82), homemaker role commitment (0.79).

In addition, the scales are capable of giving considerable information about respondents since they are applicable to persons anticipating as well as currently engaged in the four roles. For instance, the scale can capture the reward value and commitment to the parental role even from married couples who are yet to have children.

**Results**

**Descriptive statistics**

Table 1 gives the descriptive data and correlation coefficients of the eight life role scales for the sample of husbands and wives taken separately. Although
no effort had been made to actively ensure that the responses of husband and wife were given independently and without consultation with each other, the very fact that, of the 64 possible inter-correlations between the responses of husband and wife, there were only three significant correlations, provides some evidence of the independence of responses (see Table 1). Further, the significant correlations were found only with respect to those roles for which husband and wife were, in any case, likely to have a joint identity as a couple, i.e. the parental and marital roles. For instance, wives' parental role reward value and parental role commitment were significantly related to the husbands' parental role reward value. Similarly, the marital role commitment of the husbands and wives was significantly correlated.

In general, the reward value and commitment that respondents attached to specific roles were strongly correlated to each other. Similar findings have been reported by Chi-Ching (1995).

Table 2 gives the descriptive data of the eight role salience scales for husbands and wives falling in each of the age categories considered. The age categories were kept at five years for the sake of uniformity while comparing the adult development of men and women. Moreover, many of the life stage theories have taken the stages to be around five years, for example, Levinson's (1986) transitional phases of five years, and Feldman's (1987) life stages of seven to eight years. A look at Table 2 indicates that marital role commitment for women dips during the mid-thirties to the mid-forties, while being much higher during the early and late stages of the life cycle. For men, marital role commitment is very high initially (during the period under age 30). Subsequently, it fluctuates over the life cycle, and is at its lowest during the 50+ years phase.

### Analysis of variance

Results of the ANOVA procedure on the role salience scales revealed main effects of respondent's age on marital role commitment ($F = 2.812, p = .018$) and parental role reward value ($F = 2.356, p = .042$); and main effects of respondent's sex on occupational role commitment ($F = 12.19, p = .001$) and occupational role reward value ($F = 5.628, p = .019$). Interaction effects of respondent's age and sex were evident on marital role commitment ($F = 2.219, p = 0.054$).

### t-test analyses

Detailed $t$-test analysis of the role salience measures indicated interestingly that, for both husbands and wives, the commitment to the occupational,
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<td>0.26*</td>
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Notes:
- \( n = 91 \)
- One-tailed significance: *0.01 **0.001
- ORRV: Occupational role reward value (RRV); PRRV: Parental RRV; MRRV: Marital RRV; HRRV: Homemaker RRV; ORC: Occupational role commitment (RC); PRC: Parental RC; MRC: Marital RC; HRC: Homemaker RC for husbands
- Same variables for the wives are differentiated by the 'W' before each variable name. Hence we have: WORRV, WPRRV, WMRRV, WHRRV, WORC, WPRC, WMRC, WHRC
| Age (in yr) | ORRV | MRRV | HRRV | MRC | ORC | PRC | MRRV | HRRV | MRC | ORC | PRC | MRRV | HRRV | MRC | ORC | PRC |
|------------|------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|-----|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| <25        | 4.20 | 3.88 | 4.17 | 4.36 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.89 | 3.86 | 4.03 | 3.86 | 4.03 | 3.89 | 3.86 | 4.03 | 3.86 | 4.03 | 3.89 |
| 25-29      | 4.07 | 3.95 | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 |
| 30-34      | 4.19 | 3.88 | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 |
| 35-39      | 4.16 | 3.88 | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 |
| 40-44      | 4.20 | 3.88 | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 |
| 45-49      | 4.23 | 3.88 | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 |
| 50+        | 4.13 | 3.88 | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 |
| Total      | 4.08 | 3.88 | 4.17 | 4.17 | 4.03 | 4.37 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 | 4.03 | 3.96 |

Figures in parentheses indicate standard deviations.
M: Males; ORRV: Occupational role reward value; PRRV: Parental RRV; MRRV: Marital RRV; HRRV: Homemaker RRV; MRC: Occupational role commitment; ORC: Parental RC; MRC: Marital RC; HRC: Homemaker RC.

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parental, marital and homemaker roles was significantly less than the reward value that they derived from each of these roles ($p < .001$).

In addition, except for occupational role reward value, occupational role commitment, homemaker role commitment and marital role commitment, independent $t$-tests indicated that husbands and wives did not differ significantly from each other on their scores for the reward value from and commitment to the different life roles. Occupational role reward value and occupational role commitment of husbands was significantly greater than that of wives ($p > .05$). This result supported the significant main effect of respondent's sex on occupational role reward value and occupational role commitment. The homemaker role commitment and the marital role commitment of wives was significantly greater than that of husbands ($p > .05$).

A test of difference of mean scores of the occupational, marital, parental and homemaker reward values and commitment of males and females for each age group revealed that:

- Occupational role reward value differed significantly between males and females for the 45–49 years age groups ($p = .05$).
- Occupational role commitment differed significantly between males and females for the age groups 30–44 years and 45–49 years ($p = .01$).
- Marital role reward value did not differ significantly for males and females almost throughout the life span except for the late adulthood years of age 50+ ($p = .01$).
- Marital role commitment did not differ significantly between males and females for all age groups except for the period 30–34 years ($p = .05$).

Homemaker role reward value, homemaker role commitment, parental role reward value and parental role commitment did not differ significantly between males and females for all age groups.

**Discussion**

Our results indicated that, in general, the personal importance or value that both male and female professionals attached to participation in a particular life role exceeded by a significant extent the intended level of commitment of personal time and energy resources to the enactment of that particular role. In other words, the internalized beliefs and attitudes of both sexes regarding the personal relevance of the marital, occupational, homemaker and parental roles, and the standards held by them for the performance of these roles, were much greater than the personal resources (i.e. time and energy) that they were
able and willing to commit to the performance of these roles. Similar results have been reported in a recent study of dual-career couples (Chi-Ching, 1995).

In our study, however, interesting differences emerged when the mean scores of the reward value and commitment to each of the life roles of the husbands and wives were compared. Despite both the partners being professionals, the occupational role emerged as being more salient to husbands than to wives, and husbands were also more committed to this role than wives. This result, along with the significant main effect of respondent's sex and non-significant main effect of respondent age on occupational role reward value and occupational role commitment, calls into question the propositions of adult development theories of changing work identities of men and women across their life spans. It appears that, once both men and women professionals have developed a certain understanding of and commitment towards their occupational role through socialization and other processes, this salience remains more or less unchanged throughout their life. Any role redistribution then perhaps gets restricted only to the family roles. It probably takes place among the parental, marital and homemaking roles. For example, for our sample, significant inter-correlations were observed among the reward value and commitment scores of the family roles, while significant inter-correlations between the reward value and commitment of the occupational and other life roles were absent. This could mean that performance in one family role, such as say the parental role, was significantly influenced by and/or significantly influenced performance in other family roles, such as the spouse and homemaker roles. However, influence processes between the occupational and other family roles were non-present. This could also be evidence of a segmentationist relationship between work and family. While co-relational data alone is not sufficient to fully support the interpretations made above, the data do provide some pointers regarding possible processes that are at play linking work and family. Greater support for these interpretations may come from future studies that focus on providing rich qualitative information regarding the nature of linkages between work and family roles.

While the homemaker and marital roles were equally important and rewarding to both husbands and wives, wives were more committed to these roles than husbands. However, marital role commitment was also affected by age as was indicated by the significant interaction effect in the ANOVA analysis. In other words, while, in general, women were more committed to the marital role than men, this commitment varied at different points of time in the life span of both men and women.

This difference in marital role commitment across different age groups
lent support to the sequential development model for dual-career couples (Sekaran and Hall, 1989). It also partially corroborated some of the propositions relating to the family roles made by the adult development theories of women, though not of men. The marital role commitment of females behaved as per expectation in the sense that it was highest during the twenties when most women are expected to be preoccupied with marriage and settling down, and it was lowest during the late thirties when women who are approaching middle adulthood are presumably sharing greater assertiveness and professional accomplishment at work, and paying less attention than before to family roles (marital role being one of them).

However, for men, marital role commitment was highest during the twenties, and was in fact even higher than men's occupational role commitment for that period. While this finding partially supported the developmental theories about men in the sense that building a family emerged as a major preoccupation for men during the early adulthood years, this result did not confirm the theoretical expectation that a simultaneous and indeed a more dominant preoccupation for men during this stage would be their concern for building a career. Likewise, contrary to the theoretical prediction of men in their fifties attaching greater salience to their family as against career-oriented goals, in our study, the marital role commitment of male respondents was the lowest in their fifties.

There is, however, the possibility of a cohort or generation effect here, especially given the cross-sectional nature of the study. It could be that the men in the thirties age group studied in this sample, especially the kind who would choose a professional woman as a life mate, had internalized a set of values that gave precedence to family over career. In the case of the male respondents who were over 50 years of age, value systems had perhaps conditioned them to emphasize career over family.

Further one could speculate that the results, instead of fully supporting the adult development theories of men and women, confirm to some extent the trends in marital satisfaction observed over the family life cycle by Rollins and Cannon (1974) and Blood and Wolfe (1960). On the basis of a cross-sectional study, Rollins and Cannon (1974) concluded that marital satisfaction was highest for newly weds (roughly the twenties age group in our study) and it dipped during the middle stages of the family life cycle of school-going to teenage children (roughly the late-thirties age group in our study). Based on their study, Blood and Wolfe (1960) concluded that marital satisfaction would decline in a linear fashion over the course of the family life cycle. If marital commitment can be seen as being associated with marital satisfaction, then the fluctuations in marital role commitment across the life span of men and women in our study are better understood in the light of
the studies on marital satisfaction rather than the adult development theories of men and women.

However, in whatever manner one speculates about the results, the one issue that gets clearly highlighted is the asymmetry that characterizes the dual-career lifestyle. Even though both partners in a dual-career family are supposed to enjoy mutual empathy and understanding of both home and work obligations, the observation that, compared with wives, husbands attached significantly greater importance to reward value and commitment to the occupational role could imply that the distribution of resources between work and family roles is improperly balanced between husband and wife. Therefore, the common expectation that husband and wife in a dual-career family would be more inner-directed and flexible in applying personal values, and, having transcended some of the traditional gender role stereotypes, would have embraced a more egalitarian lifestyle, was not confirmed in our study.

The fluctuating commitment to the marital role in conjunction with the unwavering commitment to the other family roles, particularly the parental role, has special bearing, indicative of role dilemmas for dual-career couples in the Indian context. These dilemmas could be interpreted in two alternative and radically different ways. The first and more obvious line of interpretation would imply that, in a situation of competing priorities, our results show that children come before the spouse. Taking the argument further, our results can imply that the institution of marriage may not be as solid and firm in the Indian context as it is popularly made out to be. Thus, in cases where dual-career couples do stay together despite severe pulls and pressures on their marriages, their common understanding and shared commitment to their parental roles may have a lot to do with it. Taking this line of argument still further, it could mean that childless dual-career couples could be more susceptible to marital dissolution than couples with children. In this regard, future studies can compare the experiences of dual-career persons with and without children.

An alternative and less apparent interpretation of the above results is based on the traditional Indian concept of marriage as an enduring institution. Once having entered a matrimonial alliance, the partners regard marriage as a stable, insoluble, almost taken-for-granted relationship. If marriage is ‘for keeps’, then the assumption could be that the limited time and energy of partners that characterize dual-career lives could be better spent in roles requiring maintenance and nurturance like the parental role. To some extent, the above finding could be indicative of the Indian value system of being family-oriented first and individualistic later, or of putting children before self. Future research needs to explore the relative validity of these competing explanations.
t-tests for differences in the mean scores of the life role salience scales of males and females in each age group revealed that, except for a brief period during the late forties and early fifties, when the reward value from the occupational and marital roles respectively was significantly greater for males than for females, the personal importance attached to the different life roles by men and women was more or less the same throughout the life span.

However for the early thirties age group, the occupational role commitment of males significantly exceeded that of females, while the marital role commitment of females significantly exceeded that of males. These results were consistent with the expectation that, during the early adulthood years, males would be more career-oriented while females would tend to be more family-oriented.

The consistency of our results with the expectations of the adult development theories did not continue into the middle adulthood phase. In fact, contrary to the theoretical expectation of a reversal of roles during the middle adulthood phase (age 35 to 45), in our study, the occupational role commitment of men continued to be significantly greater than the occupational role commitment of women. The absence of a tendency towards reversal of roles at mid-life has also been observed by Chi-Ching's (1995) study on professional men and women in Singapore.

There could be two possible explanations for the above finding. First, as has been alluded to earlier, the internalized beliefs and attitudes of men and women, and their personal expectations regarding life roles could be so strongly ingrained as per gender role norms that a complete switch-over of roles in middle adulthood may not be taking place. Second, the predictions in the adult development theories of a resurgence in the involvement of women in the work role during the middle adulthood phase is implicitly based on the assumption that, by this time, women would have finished meeting their parenting obligations. Further, with children grown up and having left home, they would now be more or less free to go back to work. However, given the high value and importance attached to the parental role in the Indian context, it is possible that Indian women do not, notionally and actually, reduce their involvement in the parenting role until their children are well into their late teens, or are adults. Also, the practice of children in their early teens leaving home to go out to study and work is almost non-existent in countries like India. Even in educated families with professional partners, the universe from which our respondent set was drawn, there is a strong positive value attached to children staying with their parents (unless they have to go out of the city to pursue higher education), until they attain adulthood and start earning (when their parents, if retired, start staying with them!). Hence, in their mid-life, most Indian women continue to shoulder the
earlier parental and other family responsibilities, which prevent them from returning to work with heightened vigour as postulated by many western theorists. In fact, our data revealed that the mean age of the youngest child for women between the ages of 35–45 years was 9.5 years. This clearly indicated that the middle adulthood phase of women in our sample did not coincide with the empty nest stage of the family life cycle. Another possible reason could be that professional women delay having children. If this is indeed so, then it opens up another avenue for future research, i.e. examining the validity of adult development theories for the case of women from dual-worker families versus women from dual-career families.

Limited social sanction for women to work professionally in this life phase in the Indian context could also be because of the fact that women, especially those who live in traditional joint and extended families, are often responsible for the care of elders in the family, ‘parenting’ of a different kind. Even when women report living in nuclear families (as was the case with a large part of our sample), they experience belonging to a notional extended family set-up. Nuclearity of family structure is forced upon them because of space constraints, especially in a crowded metropolitan city like Bombay. However, responsibilities towards parents/in-laws continue and are fostered through a curious relationship of dependence centreing on childcare needs. For instance, in Bombay, it is often observed that many working women leave their children in the care of their parents/in-laws on a daily basis – dropping them off on the way to work, and picking them up on the way back – on account of a lack of good quality day-care and crèche facilities. In some cases, retired parents/in-laws have also been known to shift their residence closer to that of their daughters (-in-law) to help them in their child-rearing responsibilities. Such a relationship of dependency causes many women to feel psychologically obligated to their parents/in-laws. As a result, they are never released from their responsibility of ‘parenting’.

All these factors seem to suggest that the forties, a phase of ‘great promise’ for women mentioned by Bradwick (1980), may be more applicable to the western societies where children tend to leave home at an early age, causing the ‘empty nest’ stage of the family life cycle to coincide with the middle adulthood years of women, where joint and extended families are not common and where extensive and dependable state-based or private support exists for the child and elder care.

Furthermore, re-employment of women in their mid-forties after a career break requires re-training facilities as well as willingness on the part of organizations to offer women challenging and meaningful jobs. Both of these conditions are currently lacking in the Indian context.

Our results thus call for penetrating and extensive cross-cultural studies.
to sharpen our understanding of different phases of the adult development of women across different cultures and societies in the world. While there seems to be a surge the world over in aspirations of professional women, contemporary theoretical models require much refining, especially as they appear to address realities obtaining predominantly in certain societies. Our study underscores the need for broader frameworks that can capture the rich diversity of professional women's experiences across the globe.

**Summary**

This study aimed at examining whether the life role salience of male and female professionals varied across the life cycle in a manner consistent with the predictions of the adult development theories of men and women. The study provided only partial support for the adult development theories of men and women. Our results did not show evidence for the reversal of life roles at mid-life. In particular, the study found no resurgence of interest in work by female professionals at later stages of their life cycle. It was suggested by the authors that a possible reason for this was the continuing parental obligations of Indian women that extend well into their late adulthood years, the responsibility of care for the elderly that falls almost exclusively on women, the lack of re-training facilities to enable women to update their skills and knowledge after a career break, and the absence of a willingness on the part of organizations to offer challenging jobs to professional women who are keen for re-entry. The results of the study call for further refinements of our understanding of the career development of women through greater empirical research spread across a wider set of cultural contexts.
### Appendix 1: Demographic details of respondents (92 couples)

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### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Ravi Moorthy and Shirin Madon for their academic and emotional input, and the anonymous reviewers for their critical comments. Grateful thanks are due to all our respondents for participating enthusiastically in the project.

### Notes

1. The high observed means may be due to a social desirability bias while answering some of the loaded items of the scales. However, as this bias is
likely to affect all responses, its net effect on the results can be expected to be negligible.

In order to calculate the two-way interaction effects, respondent age categories 20–25 years and 25–30 years were collapsed. This was done to overcome the problem of zero observations in the first age category for husbands. Since there were only five observations for females in the 20–25 years age category, this procedure did not seriously distort the rest of the results.

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