In search of family-friendly careers? Professional strategies, work conditions and gender differences in work–family conflict
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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to investigate whether women in a dual-earner context acquire family-friendly jobs as a strategy to keep work–family conflict down. The analysis is based on a survey of newly graduated highly educated men and women in five occupations in Sweden (n ≈ 2400). The sample was stratified by occupation and gender to minimize the influence of factors other than gender. The results show that women are more family-oriented, but also more career-oriented than men in their professional strategies. In their jobs, women have less control over work and schedules than men but a similar level of work demands. However, women face lower requirements for employer flexibility (e.g. frequent over time) and this is related to their professional strategies. Finally, women report a higher level of work–family conflict than men in the same occupation, but this gender difference becomes non-significant when accounting for women’s lower level of control. In sum, women in this sample clearly aim for both family and career and do not acquire family-friendly jobs, but aim to avoid ‘family-unfriendly’ requirements for constant availability. To some extent, this enables them to limit their work–family conflict but due to their lower control over work, women still experience more conflict than men in the same occupation.

RÉSUMÉ
L’objectif de cet article est d’étudier si les femmes dans un contexte à double revenu acquièrent des emplois favorables à la famille en tant que stratégie visant à réduire le conflit travail-famille. L’analyse est basée sur un sondage auprès d’hommes et de femmes nouvellement diplômés et hautement qualifiés dans cinq professions en Suède (n ≈ 2400). L’échantillon a été stratifié par profession et par sexe afin de minimiser l’influence de facteurs autres que le genre. Les résultats montrent que les femmes sont plus orientées vers la famille, mais aussi plus orientées sur la carrière que les hommes dans leurs stratégies professionnelles.
Dans leur travail, les femmes ont moins de contrôle sur le travail et les horaires que les hommes, mais un niveau de exigence de travail similaire. Cependant, les femmes sont confrontées à des exigences inférieures pour la flexibilité de l’employeur (par exemple des heures supplémentaires fréquent) et cela est lié à leurs stratégies professionnelles. Enfin, les femmes signalent un niveau de conflits entre le travail et la famille plus élevé que les hommes dans la même profession, mais cette différence de genre devient non significative lorsqu’on tient compte du plus faible niveau de contrôle des femmes. En résumé, les femmes dans cet échantillon visent clairement à la fois la famille et la carrière et n’acquièrent pas d’emplois favorables à la famille, mais visent à éviter des exigences «inaimaîbles à la famille» pour une disponibilité constante. Dans une certaine mesure, cela leur permet de limiter leur conflit travail-famille, mais en raison de leur faible contrôle sur le travail, les femmes éprouvent encore plus de conflits que les hommes dans la même profession.

With the rise of the dual-earner society, the ‘family-friendliness’ of jobs, occupations and welfare states has become a central issue in scholarly debates. A central assumption in the study of labour market gender inequality is that women accommodate care demands in their professional strategies and prioritize family-friendly work conditions over wage and career development. However, such assumptions appear increasingly problematic, and in research on work–family conflict these issues have not been thoroughly explored.

In this article, we bring together the two fields of research to scrutinize the mechanisms linking strategies, work conditions and gender differences in work–family conflict. We examine, first, if women are less career-oriented and more family-oriented than men in their professional strategies and, second, if women’s jobs involve lower demands and more control than men’s jobs and if differences are related to gendered strategies. Finally, we analyse gender differences in work–family conflict to see if women’s level conflict is suppressed through the choice of family-friendly jobs.

To expose the meaning of gender and explore the assumptions of gendered strategies, we utilize a new data set comprising Swedish men and women who recently graduated from five higher educational programs, leading to occupations with different gender composition (n ≈ 2400). The sample was stratified such that an equal number of men and women were sampled from each occupation. Thus, we compare men and women that are similar in terms of education, occupation, cohort and career stage and who live in a context where the gender equal dual-earner family is supported by policies and social norms. In sum, we put the notion that women mitigate work–family conflict by modifying their professional strategies to a strong test that can help us to assess the relevance of traditional assumptions about the mechanisms sustaining gendered patterns in work and family.

1. Previous research and our contribution

The notion of gendered strategies developed in human capital theory remains a point of departure for much research on labour market gender inequality. Meanwhile, research on work–family conflict has not incorporated the reasoning on gendered strategies into
theories or empirical models. Below, we present these two fields of research, highlighting the importance of empirically scrutinizing the idea of family-friendly work, and its gendered connotations. Finally, we explain how our study contributes to this end through the choice of context, the specific sampling strategy and our analytical approach.

1.1. Labor market theory and the notion of gendered strategies

Human capital theory (Becker, 1985, 1991) suggests that women – envisaging future family responsibilities – choose jobs that require less skill investments, less time commitment and less effort than men’s jobs, thereby compromising their wage and career prospects. Building on Becker’s notion on gendered human capital investments, researchers argue that women, who expect to make work interruptions to care for children, will avoid jobs and occupations that require continuous skill development and such deliberations are presented as a driver behind occupational gender segregation and gender wage gaps (e.g. Estevez-Abe, 2005; Polachek, 1981; Polavieja, 2008). Other scholars suggest that women choose jobs and occupations with lower wages because they prioritize flexible work arrangements that allow them to care for their families (e.g. Glauber, 2011; Goldin, 2014; McCrate, 2005). In sum, gender differences in professional strategies – particularly, women’s inclination to choose work with lower demands and more flexibility – are invoked to explain inequalities in the labour market including occupational segregation and gender wage gaps.

The idea that women aspire to family-friendly jobs is echoed in other research highlighting the importance of preferences and work orientations. For example, Hakim claims that gender differences in labour market participation and outcomes reflect differences in life-style choices and values. Specifically, she argues that women are generally more family-oriented than men, thus they choose jobs that allow them to accommodate family demands and value factors such as flexible work hours higher than pay and promotion opportunities (Hakim, 1991, 2000, 2002 – but see Glass & Camarigg, 1992; Rowe & Snizek, 1995).

However, with the rise of the dual-earner society – involving substantial shifts in gender norms, labour market behaviour and family practices – these traditional assumptions appear outdated and potentially problematic. In particular, we note that women now outnumber men at the universities (OECD, 2014a), thus apparently make heavy investments in human capital. Also, issues of work–family reconciliation have soared to the top of the European political agenda (European Commission, 2016), and institutions supporting the dual-earner family are being strengthened. Considering these developments, it is not clear why younger generations should devise their professional strategies based on traditional expectations. In a country like Sweden, this seems particularly unlikely.

In Sweden, as well as in other Scandinavian countries, state policies promoting the dual-earner/dual-carer family model have been in place since the early 1970s. By directing social and economic rights and obligations (e.g. transfers and tax systems) to the individual rather than the family as a unit, Swedish welfare state institutions encourage women’s employment and economic autonomy (e.g. Sainsbury, 1999; Saraceno, 1997). Further support is provided through extensive family policies, comprising generous and gender-neutral parental leave schemes as well as public full-time childcare services from age one (e.g. Korpi, 2000; Thévenon, 2011). These policies provide parents with considerable
flexibility, for example, by allowing them to temporarily reduce work hours to care for children. Thus, the vast majority of women remain in the same jobs also after becoming parents.1

As a result of these policies, female and maternal labour force participation have been high by international standards. In 2010, the gender gap in employment was about 5% in Sweden, as compared to the OECD average of 18% (OECD, 2017). Also about 80% of Swedish mothers with children under three are employed, as compared to about 52% in the OECD (2014b). In other words, Swedish women combine dual roles in work and family even when children are small. The dual-earner/dual-carer family is also evident as a widespread social norm and this ideal is a more pronounced in Sweden than in many other countries (Edlund & Öun, 2016).2

In sum, Sweden provides a context where both policies and norms encourage men and women to combine dual paid work and family throughout the childrearing years and to share the burdens equally. Thus, by choosing the Swedish context for our study we provide a strong test of theoretical assumptions that women – but not men – choose family-friendly work to keep work–family conflict down. As explained below, this is further underlined by our sampling strategy.

More generally, we note that the ‘family-friendliness’ of jobs remains an issue open to empirical investigation, in particular regarding its gendered aspects. As discussed below, we do not know whether women aim for ‘family-friendly’ work to keep work–family conflict down or indeed what constitutes a ‘family-friendly’ job in the modern working life.

1.2. Gender, strategies and work–family conflict

Individuals’ possibilities to balance demands from work and family can be assessed with the construct of work–family conflict, which has a dominating standing in work–family research. However, despite a vast body of research, gender has not been thoroughly explored in this field. In particular, the notion that women adapt their work involvement to reconcile work and family has not been incorporated in theory and research designs.

Work–family conflict is defined as

a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect. That is, participation in the work (family) role is made more difficult by virtue of participation in the family (work) role. (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77)

In other words, work–family conflict captures subjective experiences of work spilling over into family life, creating a tangible stress which has been shown to have negative consequences, e.g. in terms of depression and anxiety, burnout, absenteeism, less job and life satisfaction and worse parent–child relationships (e.g. Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). The main thrust in this research field has been to establish how demands from work and family are related to the level of work-family conflict in the working population and results typically show that longer work hours, higher work load, higher education/class position increase conflict while results for parenthood are more mixed (for overviews see, e.g. Byron, 2005; Pitt-Catsoupes, Kossek, & Sweet, 2006).

Despite a large amount of research, however, the field remains underdeveloped with regard to gender, both theoretically and empirically. The evidence as to whether men
and women report different levels of work–family conflict is mixed. Despite women’s larger family responsibilities, many studies find no gender differences (for an overview see, e.g. Byron, 2005), although others report that women report higher levels of work–family conflict (e.g. Ruppanner & Huffman, 2014; Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2012). We argue that these puzzles can be better understood if we regard work–family conflict as a residual concept, which captures the daily strain or interferences that remain after strategies to resolve the competing demands from work and family have been employed (Grönlund & Öun, 2010; cf. Carlson & Grzywacs, 2008). Therefore, the lack of a direct relationship between gender and work–family conflict can mask the fact that women adjust their work involvement to reduce frictions between the two spheres. Certainly, studies showing that gender differences in work–family conflict appear as work hours are controlled for point to the importance of female part-time work (Grönlund, 2012; Grönlund & Öun, 2010). However, to understand gender patterns in modern society a more comprehensive view of strategies must be applied. The conceivable strategies are likely to differ between men and women, but also between educational groups. Part-time work may be a less viable (and less desirable) option for women in high-skilled jobs. The demands in high-skilled jobs are not necessarily alleviated by family policies allowing for parental leave and work hour reductions. Regarding the impact of family policies, it can be noted that the level of work–family conflict is not necessarily lower in the Scandinavian countries than in countries with other family policy models (e.g. Grönlund & Öun, 2010; Edlund, 2007; Strandh & Nordenmark, 2006 – but see, e.g. Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Stier et al., 2012). Presumably, such policies may raise expectations that work and family can be successfully combined and therefore encourage the career ambitions of women.

In sum, it is vital to study more closely the links between gender, professional strategies, work conditions and work–family conflict. Before turning to the analysis, however, it is important to clarify the concept and measurement of ‘family-friendly’ work.

1.3. Modelling family-friendly work

Family-friendliness is not a scientific term, yet it is more than a buzzword. First, we note that the idea that women need and acquire family-friendly jobs pivots around the themes of work demands, that is, explicit or implicit requirements from the organization, and employee control, that is, the individual’s possibilities to exert some influence over when and how to meet these requirements.

Second, both demands and control can be described from two dimensions: time and strain. In human capital theory, these aspects are closely intertwined. Becker argues that gender differences would appear in time investments – as reflected in work interruptions as well as work hours – but also regarding investments of energy or effort (Becker, 1985). Because childcare and housework demand a lot of energy, women will economize on their use of energy by seeking jobs that are ‘more convenient and less energy-intensive’ (Becker, 1985, p. 554), that is ‘less demanding jobs’ (p. 555). As a result, women will not only devote less time to paid work than men, but also spend less effort on each hour of work.

In a similar vein, research on work–family conflict has recognized that the frictions individuals experience when demands from work and family are incompatible can be both time- and strain-based (Carlson, Kacmar, & Williams, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).
However, there is no comprehensive theoretical model that incorporates these dimensions – time and strain, demands and control – in a way that makes it possible to study the importance of gendered strategies and outcomes in the modern working life.

In this analysis, we use the established job demand control model as a base but add a time dimension which considers schedule flexibility as both a demand and a control factor. This approach represents an extension of previous research on work–family conflict and a bridge between this field and labour market research.

The job demand-control model (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990) has a strong standing in research on work and stress. The model, which has been empirically related to a range of stress-related problems (Landsbergis, Schnall, Schwartz, Warren, & Pickering, 1995; van der Doef & Maes, 1999), states that high job demands – defined as psychological stressors related to workload and time pressure – are less likely to cause harmful stress if the employee has a high degree of control or decision latitude, meaning that s/he can exert some influence over the pace of work, decide when and how to perform different tasks and have a say in policy decisions. In a previous study, we have demonstrated that the job demand-control model is relevant also for explaining work–family conflict (Grönlund, 2007).3

In research on work–family conflict, the number of work hours has been a central indicator of work demands. Also, measures of strain, such as workload, have been included in several studies, some which suggest that a high work load is as at least as consequential as long work hours (Grönlund, 2007; cf. Skinner & Pocock, 2008, for overviews and meta-analyses see, e.g. Byron, 2005; Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011). However, the concept of job control has been sparsely applied in this research field, and scholars are prone to re-define it to mean schedule control or flexibility (Higgins, Duxbury, & Julien, 2014; Moen, Kelly, & Huang, 2008). Regarding schedule flexibility, results are inconsistent. Some studies report that flexible schedules reduce work–family conflict while others find that they increase conflict (Higgins et al., 2014). When effects are found to differ by gender, some studies find that flexibility increases women’s conflict (Hammer, Neal, Newsom, Brockwood, & Colton, 2005), while others report the opposite (Lyness, Gornick, Stone, & Grotto, 2012). According to recent meta-analyses (Allen, Johnson, Kiburz, & Shockley, 2013; Byron, 2005; Michel et al., 2011; cf. Nijp, Beckers, Geurts, Tucker, & Kompier, 2012), flexible schedules reduce work–family conflict; however, Allen et al. (2013) point out, effects are small – in particular considering the high hopes attached to such work arrangements (see, e.g. OECD, 2007; Pitt-Catsoupes et al., 2006; Straub, 2007).

One reason why the effects of schedule flexibility seem unimpressive could be that flexibility can entail both employee control and new organizational demands. Modern working life is often discussed in terms of a deregulation and ‘flexibilization’, deriving from globalization and new technologies as well as from new organizational forms and management ideals. In this situation, the regulation of when, where and how work should be carried out has been loosened (e.g. Allvin & Aronsson, 2003; Beck, 1992), particularly in high-skilled and service sector occupations. Thus, individual employees are increasingly required to define and structure their work and, consequently, to draw the line between work and non-work. In this ‘boundaryless’ situation, a large decision latitude may also be a stressor, particularly in complex jobs. For example, possibilities for teleworking could encourage employees to bring work home and contributes to role blurring and work–family conflict (Schieman & Young, 2010).
The blurring of boundaries can also be a result of new demands from the employers in downsized organizations, aiming for rapid, flexible adaptations to fluctuating markets. Research shows that employers’ requirements for flexibility including overtime work or a working time that fluctuates with the organizational needs, increase work–family conflict and limit the positive effect of employee flextime (Grönlund, 2004; cf. Jonsson, 2007). Other studies show that mothers have jobs with less overtime hours, business travels and other time-consuming demands than fathers and that such differences are related to differences in wages (e.g. Magnusson, 2010; Magnusson & Nermo, 2017).

In sum, we find that family-friendliness is a matter of both demands and control and that both factors have a time and a strain dimension. However, there are several gaps between the research fields regarding the definitions and empirical application of these factors. Moreover, we argue that, in modern, complex jobs, the concept of flexible scheduling can denote both employer demands and employee control. In our analysis, we apply a comprehensive model that simultaneously considers these different aspects.

1.4. Contribution, aim and hypotheses

With the analysis presented here, we hope to contribute theoretically and empirically to the gender perspective of work–family research. By linking together labour market research and research on work–family conflict the study can further our understanding of mechanisms sustaining gender patterns and inequalities.

The study was designed to put the theoretical assumptions of gendered professional strategies to a strong test by using a sample comprising younger highly educated individuals in Sweden and compare men and women who are similar in terms of education, occupation, cohort and career stage. The logic of this sampling strategy is that if expected gender patterns appear in this sample – where differences between men and women should be minimized – the proposed mechanisms can be regarded as valid and relevant even in contemporary society. The strategy of comparing men and women under conditions of maximum similarity also allows us to keep in check central factors often confounding research on gender.

The overall research question is whether highly educated women in a dual-earner context acquire family-friendly jobs as a strategy to keep work–family conflict down. This question is addressed through an empirical analysis in three steps. First, we examine if men and women have different professional strategies, i.e. if men are more career-oriented and women more family-oriented in their occupational choices and their job search focus. Second, we attempt to establish whether women’s jobs are more family-friendly with lower demands and more employee control than men’s jobs and if such a difference are related to gender differences in strategies. Third, we analyse gender differences in work–family conflict – more specifically work interference with family (WIF)– to see if women’s conflict is suppressed through the choice of family-friendly jobs.

Based on the reasoning above, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1. In their professional strategies, that is their motivations for occupational/job choices, men are more career-oriented and women more family-oriented.
H2. Women have jobs with more family-friendly work conditions than men, that is, lower work demands and more employee control. This gender difference is explained by differences in professional strategies.

H3. Due to women’s more family-friendly jobs, there is no gender difference in work-family conflict. However, when work demands and employee control are accounted for, women perceive more work-family conflict (WIF) than men.

Because the sample is limited to five occupations, we cannot examine how the percentage of women in an occupation relates to strategies, work conditions or work–family conflict. However, since occupations with different gender compositions are represented, we briefly comment on occupational patterns. Based on the arguments above, we would expect respondents in the occupations in which women are in majority (here: psychologists and social workers) to be more family-oriented, have more family-friendly work conditions and report a lower level of work–family conflict than respondents in the male-dominated or gender-balanced occupations (here: civil engineers, police officers and lawyers).

2. Data and method

The questionnaire was distributed in 2013 to Swedish men and women that had graduated from five higher educational programmes: Degree of Master of Science in Engineering (hereafter: engineers), Degree of Master of Laws (lawyers), Degree of Master of Science in Psychology (psychologists), Degree of Bachelor of Science in Social Work (social workers) and the Police Programme (police officers). The first four programmes are all university-based programmes although they differ somewhat in length (engineers and psychologists 5 years; lawyers 4.5 years; social workers 3.5 years). The engineering programme has several branches or specializations and the sample was drawn from the five largest of these. The Police Programme, provided by the Swedish National Police Academy, is a post-secondary education but not a university programme. The programme comprises 1.5 years of studies but the basic training for police officers also includes 6 months of trainee service. The sample was drawn from the National Register of Higher Education and The Swedish Register of Education and comprised individuals that had obtained a degree from the programmes in the years 2007–2010. The timespan was necessary in order to obtain a large enough sample of the underrepresented gender in all educational programmes. Sampling, distribution and coding was administered by Statistics Sweden. The response rate was 55%.

The motivation for choosing these programmes was to obtain a close-up picture of gender and occupational choice. First, the programmes are similar in the sense that they all lead to a specific professional title. Thus, in contrast to more general academic programmes, individuals applying for these programmes have already made an occupational choice. Second, the programmes display clear differences in their gender-mix: two are male-dominated, two female-dominated and one is gender balanced. Finally, an equal number of men and women were sampled from each educational programme. The sample used in the analyses includes only those that worked in these occupations at the time the questionnaire was distributed. This means that for all individuals in the analysis the education and occupation correspond.
The stratification of the sample by occupation and gender implies that women and men that have made gender-atypical occupational choices have been oversampled. A reason for this sampling strategy was to expose the meaning of individual gender by minimizing the influence of other factors. The stratification also implies that the variable occupation reflects central characteristics of the occupation (e.g. skill requirements) rather than its gender composition. However, to put the results in a broader perspective we also present some analyses where weights are used to adjust for the oversampling of individuals in gender-atypical occupations. Using weights, then, the share of men and women in each occupation corresponds to actual share in the population (i.e. all individuals graduating from these programmes 2007–2010).

The empirical analysis is based on linear (OLS) regressions and comprises three steps where we consider gender differences in (1) professional strategies (2) work conditions and (3) work–family conflict. Also, we examine the links between strategies and work conditions and between work conditions and work–family conflict.

In the first step, the dependent variables are two indexes signifying different professional strategies: career orientation and family orientation. These measures were retrieved from a factor analysis of seven statements concerning the respondent’s motivation for his/her occupational choice and his/her priorities in the job search process after graduation from the university. In the analysis, two separate factors or dimensions were extracted. One factor showed high scores for items related to wages and career prospects, while the other had high scores for statements related to work–family reconciliation (results available from authors on request). Based on these results, we constructed two additive indexes. Career orientation comprises four statements: good initial wages in occupation and in job; possibilities for career advancement and/or good wage development in occupation and in job (response categories: very important, quite important, not very important, not at all important, index range 4–16, mean 11.23, std 2.57). Family orientation comprises three statements: the occupation provides work hours that can be adapted to family/partner/private life; the job provides work hours that can be adapted to family/partner/private life; the job does not require moving or long-distance commuting (response categories: very important, quite important, not very important, not at all important, index range 3–12; mean 8.89, std 1.96). A drawback of these measures of strategies is the retrospective nature of the questions as individuals may have problems of recalling their actions and motivations. However, because educational choice and the job search following graduation are central matters in a young person’s life and because the survey was answered a relatively short time after graduation, the problems of recollection should be comparatively small in this sample.

In the regressions, we examine gender differences in career orientation and family orientation, controlling for occupation.

In the second step, we use three dependent variables: work demands, employer flexibility and employee control. These variables were retrieved through a factor analysis which included several measures of demands and control (results available from authors on request). These include established measures from the demand-control model as well as new indicators capturing working time flexibility, which is measured from the point of view of both employer and employee (cf. section 1.3). From the 10 items entered into the factor analysis, three separate factors were extracted and these were used to construct three additive indexes. Work demands is an index of the indicators ‘My work is..."
psychologically demanding’ and ‘Due to a high work-load I often work under great time pressure’ (response categories: to a very high extent, to a high extent, to some extent, to a small extent/not at all, index range 2–8, mean 5.72, std 1.38). Employer flexibility comprises three items, ‘The number of hours I work varies considerably as the work load varies’, ‘I often have to work overtime’, ‘I am expected to be available by phone or email during non-work hours’ (response categories: completely true, quite true, not very true, not at all true, index range 3–12, mean 6.60, std 2.34). Employee control combines five items: ‘I am able to influence which work tasks to perform’ ‘I can decide how to perform the work tasks’ ‘I can decide the pace at which I work’, ‘I can influence important decisions affecting the organization’ and ‘I have great freedom to decide over my work time’ (response categories: to a very high extent, to a high extent, to some extent, to a small extent/not at all, index range 5–20, mean 12.52, std 2.98). It can be noted that the indicator of work demands corresponds closely to the definition used in the demand-control model, while the employer flexibility index captures demands for accessibility, overtime work and variation in work hours due to organizational needs. The final indicator, employee control, comprises aspects of decision latitude as defined in the demand-control model but also schedule control.

The three factors are used as dependent variables in separate regressions. In the regressions, we first examine gender differences in each of the three factors (controlling for occupation), and then enter the indexes of career orientation and family orientation.

The dependent variable in the third step of the analysis is work–family conflict. This is an index of three questions in which the respondent was asked to assess how often during the past few months he or she has (a) felt too tired after work to enjoy the things he/she would like to do at home (b) kept worrying about work problems when he/she was not working (c) found that his/her job prevented him/her from giving the time he/she wanted to his/her partner or family (response categories: always, often, sometimes, almost never, never, index range 3–15, mean 8.53, std 2.37). This is an established measure of work–family conflict or more precisely, WIF. In previous research, it has been recognized that work–family conflict can take two directions, WIF and family interference with work (FIW). WIF is clearly the most prevalent, and the most commonly studied, and for this conflict, work demands are far more consequential than family demands (e.g. Byron, 2005; Carlson et al., 2000; Michel et al., 2011). Our focus on professional strategies and work conditions further motivates the focus on WIF. Obviously, this does not mean that gendered responsibilities for housework and children are not relevant to measures of WIF. On the contrary, work infringing on private life may be more problematic for women precisely because of these responsibilities.

In the regressions, we first examine gender differences in work–family conflict (controlling for occupation), then enter the main explanatory variables of work demands, employer flexibility and employee control. As explained, we expect these variables to be suppressing variables, that is, we expect gender differences to increase when accounting for work conditions. In the final model, we control for a range of variables typically included in work–family conflict studies, namely work hours (15–70, mean 41.6, std 5.5), spouse/partner (ref: living without partner) and children living in the household (pre-school 0–6 years, older children, ref: no children). Respondents currently on parental leave are excluded from the analysis of work–family conflict, as per definition they have no such conflict.

Descriptive statistics for all variables for men and women are presented in Appendix, Table A1.
3. Results

As mentioned, the empirical investigation comprises three steps. First, we examine whether men and women report different professional strategies, specifically if men are more career-oriented and women more family-oriented in their occupational choices and their job search focus.

The results show that in this sample, gender differences in work–family strategies are more complex than traditionally assumed. As seen in Table 1, women are both more career-oriented and more family-oriented than men after controlling for occupation. In other words, regardless of the choice of occupation, the professional strategies of women in this sample reflect a dual commitment to work and family. Thus, hypothesis 1 is only partly supported.

Regarding occupational patterns, we note that psychologists and social workers, that is, respondents in the two occupations where women are in majority, report a stronger family focus than respondents in the other occupations. At the same time, further analyses show that the level of career focus is higher in these occupations than in the male-dominated police occupation.

Before continuing, we can compare these results with those from weighted regressions where the gender composition of the occupations corresponds to that in the population (not displayed). These regressions show that if the sample would reflect actual occupational segregation, the level of career focus would be significantly lower for women than for men. In other words, differences in career focus appear to be related to occupational choice. However, women have a higher family focus both in the weighted regressions and in our stratified sample.

The next question is whether women have jobs with more family-friendly work conditions than men, that is, jobs with lower work demands, less requirements for employer flexibility and more employee control, and whether such gender differences are explained by professional strategies.

The regression results displayed in Table 2 shows no significant gender difference in the level of work demands and accounting for strategies does not change this result. In fact, none of the strategies is significantly related to the level of work demands (M1a–M1b). However, women report a significantly lower level of employer flexibility than men (M2a). Entering the indicators capturing strategies (M2b) we find that career focus is positively related and family focus negatively related to requirements for employer flexibility.

Table 1. Career and family orientation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M1. Career orientation</th>
<th>M2. Family orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>12.22***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex (ref = man)</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (ref = lawyer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil engineer</td>
<td>0.41**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>−1.13***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>−2.23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>−2.63***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R² (%)</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Levels of significance: *p < .5, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Moreover, the gender coefficient becomes non-significant when strategies are accounted for. Thus, gender differences in employer flexibility are explained by the different strategies reported by men and women. As the table shows, both strategies also have direct effects on employer flexibility that are statistically significant and take the expected directions.

Finally, contrary to our hypothesis, we find that women have a lower level of employee control than men. Accounting for strategies does not change this result. More generally, we note that the level of family focus is not related to the respondent’s level of control over their work and schedules. In sum, hypothesis 2 is supported only for employer flexibility. These results indicate that women in this sample do not choose family-friendly jobs but avoid family-unfriendly work conditions involving overtime work, unpredictable schedules and requirements for constant availability. The occupational patterns do not suggest that the individuals working in occupations dominated by women have more family-friendly work conditions, however, they do report less employer flexibility than individuals in the other occupations.

In the weighted regressions (not displayed), women display a lower level of employee control and a significantly higher level of work demands than men. Thus, women’s jobs appear to be less family-friendly than men’s jobs. At the same time, women report a significantly lower level of employer flexibility and this gender difference is larger in the weighted regressions than in the stratified sample. The gender difference clearly decreases (but remains significant) when the occupation is accounted for. In sum, the findings show that employer flexibility is related to occupational choice but even compared to men in the same occupation, women have jobs with less employer flexibility. This gender difference is partly explained by professional strategies. Aiming for both career and family, the women in this sample do not choose family-friendly jobs but attempt to avoid the most family-unfriendly work conditions. This ambition is reflected both in occupational choices and in the job search process.

Finally, we turn to the analysis of work–family conflict. Initially, we hypothesized that women would have a similar or lower level of work–family conflict than men, but that the gender difference would be suppressed by differences in work demands and

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Work demands, employer flexibility and employee control.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept 5.50***</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Occupation (ref = lawyer)</td>
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<td>Civil engineer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ (%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Levels of significance: * $p < .5$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. 

A. GRÖNLUND AND I. ÖUN
employee control. Thus, when the family-friendliness of jobs was controlled for, the gender difference in work–family conflict would increase. However, the empirical analysis did not sustain our predictions regarding gender differences in work conditions. Considering that we found women to have less employer flexibility but also less employee control than men (and a similar level of work demands), we expect these variables to mediate the relationship between gender and work–family conflict in different ways. Less employee control could explain a higher conflict among women, while women’s lower employer flexibility would suppress gender differences. Thus, the gender coefficient would decrease in one case and increase in the other.

In Table 3, M1 we note that even in this select sample of highly educated men and women in the dual-earner context of Sweden, women have a significantly higher level of work–family conflict than men. When controlling for employer flexibility in M2 the gender coefficient increases but only slightly. The finding provides only weak support to the notion that women’s conflict is suppressed by their avoidance of family-unfriendly work conditions. The coefficient decreases again when the indicator of work demands is entered in M3 and becomes non-significant when accounting for employee control in M4. The results remain in M5, when the controls of work hours, partner and children are added. The effect of work hours is not significant, presumably because in this sample of highly educated employees very few work part-time. School-age children increase work–family conflict, but having pre-school children in the household does not, despite the fact that respondents on parental leave are excluded. Presumably, a fair share of this group may still have partners on leave.

In the weighted regressions, too, women have a higher conflict than men, but the gender coefficient becomes non-significant when we control for occupation. This finding seems to indicate that women make occupational choices in order to keep work–family conflict at a bearable level. However, our analysis also shows that the effect of occupation is compositional. In the stratified sample, comprising an equal number of men and women in each occupation, women have a significantly higher conflict even after controlling for

### Table 3. Work–family conflict.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
<th>Model 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>6.05***</td>
<td>3.50***</td>
<td>4.73***</td>
<td>3.90***</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.26**</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (ref = lawyer)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil engineer</td>
<td>−0.42*</td>
<td>−0.13</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
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<td>Psychologist</td>
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<td>0.64***</td>
<td>−0.00</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<td>Social worker</td>
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<td>0.52**</td>
<td>−0.06</td>
<td>−0.02</td>
<td>−0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>−0.39**</td>
<td>−0.59***</td>
<td>−0.54**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer flexibility</td>
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<td>0.17***</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work demands</td>
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<td>0.67***</td>
<td>0.66***</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee control</td>
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<td>−0.10***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work hours</td>
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<td>Children (ref = no children)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>0–6 years</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
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<tr>
<td>7–17 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.41*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Partner (ref = no partner)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
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<td>2076</td>
<td>2076</td>
<td>2076</td>
<td>2076</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$ (%)</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Cell entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients. Respondents currently on parental leave have been excluded (see text). Levels of significance: *p < .5, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
occupations. In other words, women have a higher level of conflict than men but in a sample reflecting the true gender composition of occupations this gender effect would be masked. Our stratified sample also shows that although women avoid family-unfriendly work, they still perceive a higher level of conflict than men in the same occupation.

A reason for this finding may be that family-friendly and family-unfriendly work conditions cannot be easily separated. We expected women’s conflict to increase when controlling for employer flexibility but found weak evidence of such a suppressing effect. At the same time, we found that gender differences in work–family conflict became non-significant when accounting for women’s lower level of employee control. However, further analyses show that these two variables are correlated such that respondents with higher levels of employer flexibility also have more employee control. Certainly, this finding further complicates the notion of individual strategies.

4. Discussion

The thrust of this paper was to investigate whether women in a dual-earner context acquire family-friendly jobs as a strategy to keep work–family conflict down.

Despite the select sample comprising highly educated young people working in the same occupations in Sweden – a country with longstanding dual-earner/dual-carer policies – the results point to significant gender differences in professional strategies, work conditions and work–family conflict. However, these patterns are more complex than commonly assumed in theory and debate.

First, in their professional strategies, women in this sample are more family-focused but also more career-focused than men. Thus, they expect to combine career and family but are aware of the need to balance demands from the two spheres. If data is weighted to make the gender composition of occupations correspond to that of the actual population, women also have a lower level of career focus than men. In other words, gender differences in career focus appear to be related to occupational choice. However, this is not the case for gender differences in family focus. Thus, regardless of the choice of occupation, we find that women’s professional strategies reflect a dual commitment to work and family.

Second, the results do not suggest that women have more family-friendly jobs than men. Even in this select sample, women have a lower level of employee control and a similar level of work demands. However, to balance demands from the two spheres, they avoid the family-unfriendly work conditions involving overtime work, unpredictable schedules and requirements for constant availability.

To some extent, avoiding such work enables women to keep down their work–family conflict. However, their level of conflict is still significantly higher than for men with comparable demands from work and family. Instead, the results suggest that the gender difference in conflict is related to the fact that women have less control over their work and schedules. Here, it should be noted both this analysis and some previous studies suggest that employee flexibility often is awarded in exchange for employer-based flexibility (Grönlund, 2004; Bailyn, 1993; Jonsson, 2007). Thus, family-friendly and family-unfriendly work conditions cannot be easily separated.

In sum, the article demonstrates a link between gender, professional strategies, work conditions and gender differences in work–family conflict. However, the associations are far from clear-cut and the findings point to the limitation of both individual strategies.
and to the de-familializing capacities ascribed to Scandinavian family policies. While these policies enable mothers to combine dual roles in work and family through providing parental leaves, public childcare and a right to part-time work, such entitlements are not enough to even out the playfield for men and women in professional jobs. Though they aim as high as men and expect to balance work and family, women in these jobs both limit their career and wage prospects (cf. Grönlund, 2017) and perceive more work–family conflict, since access to flexible work conditions are related to employer demands for constant availability.

Clearly, the study reported above has several limitations. An obvious drawback is the cross-sectional design. Thus, when discussing mechanisms by linking strategies, work conditions and work–family conflict we cannot make causal inferences. Also, our measure of strategies may be less than optimal, both because of problems of recollection associated with retrospective questions and because we do not know if the priorities in their job search match the jobs they actually got. However, a validation against wage data shows that the measures of both strategies are related to wages in the expected directions (results available from authors).

More broadly, the strengths of our approach also constitute its weaknesses and a motivation for further research. With a select sample of Swedish high-skilled individuals and a focus on professional strategies and work conditions, we could provide a strong test of central assumptions in human capital theory, and provide new insights on gender and work–family conflict. However, to get a comprehensive picture of the mechanisms sustaining and challenging gender inequalities in work and family, analyses should also be conducted in other policy contexts. Also, because both strategies and outcomes may differ between educational groups, there is a need for analyses focusing on younger cohorts in low-skilled occupations. Ideally, the processes connecting gender, occupational choice and work–family reconciliation should be further explored both with quantitative longitudinal data and in qualitative studies. Finally, more measures, such as FIW, could be incorporated to capture work–family interactions more comprehensively.

Despite these limitations, the present analysis strongly suggests that central assumptions in theory and debate need to be updated to account for the complex situation for women in present-day societies. The professional women in this sample value wages and career as high as men and expect to balance careers and family responsibilities. Nevertheless, we find gender differences in work–family conflict even within the same occupation. Thus, even in a context strongly promoting gender equality, the modern work life has not adapted to the ambitions and expectations of modern women.

Notes

1. In work–family research, family-friendly work arrangements are often discussed at organisational/ workplace level (see e.g. Pitt-Catsoupes et al., 2006). However, while employers play an important role for providing ‘family-friendly’ work conditions and workplace cultures in liberal welfare states, this is not the case in Sweden, where these rights to parental leaves, day care services and work hour reductions are statutory rights provided by the state and offered to all parents. Also, work conditions in general are highly regulated in centralized (sectoral/occupational) collective agreements. Instead, the choice of occupation becomes more crucial in Sweden. Research often point to the relatively high levels of occupational segregation in Sweden/Scandinavia (e.g. Estevez-Abe, 2005) and as mentioned, such segregation is regarded as a result of gendered professional strategies. Therefore, the choice of the
Swedish context together with the sample design – aimed at disentangling individual gender from the gender composition of the occupation – allow for a strong test of the theoretical assumptions in human capital theory (see Data and method).

2. Despite the strong dual-earner/dual-carer ideal, a gendered division of paid and unpaid work can be found also in Sweden, and presumably, such gender roles continue to be transmitted to new generations through early socialization in the family (Fulcher & Coyle, 2011). Still, it can be noted that in Sweden, female labour force participation was high by international standards already in the 1970s. In 1985, where most respondents in our sample were small, almost 80 percent of all women were in employment (Edlund & Öun, 2016). Thus, younger Swedish generations (such as our respondents) have grown up largely in families where both spouses work. Presumably then, they had role models that encouraged them to pursue a less traditional division of paid and unpaid labour (cf. Fulcher, Dinella, & Weisgram, 2015).

3. Over the decades, different attempts have been made to extend the demands control model. One such attempt is the demands resource model which is sometimes referred to in work–family research (see, e.g. Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The argument here is that the demand control model is too simplistic because different demands and resources can be important in different occupations/job situations. However, because this model lacks a theoretical criterion for choosing between a plethora of potentially important variables we believe it is less useful. As a contrast, the job demand-control model focuses on decision latitude and is well grounded in both psychological and sociological research. The theoretical arguments regarding demands and control – that is, decision latitude – can easily be extended to cover also schedule flexibility. Finally, because the factors of demands and control fit well with the theoretical arguments in human capital theory and research based on this and similar theories, this seems to be an appropriate model for our analysis.

4. Only about 170 respondents reported that they are not employed in the profession they were trained for. We also excluded a small number of individuals who work less than 15 hours per week, to make sure that only individuals who are well established on the labour market are included in the analyses. Those who have a job but are temporarily on parental leave are included in the analyses of working conditions, but not in the analyses on work–family conflict, due to the wording of the survey questions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes on contributors

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Ida Öun is a researcher at the Department of Sociology, Umeå University. Her research is mainly comparative and concerns the interplay between individuals’ subjective experiences and the welfare state context, with a specific focus on the relationship between gender relations and family policies.
References


Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics for all variables (Means).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyer</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil engineer</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
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<td>0.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police officer</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>11.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family orientation</td>
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<td>7–17 years</td>
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