## Introduction and Overview

Women in the United States have made rapid gains in higher education over the last few decades. Today, a larger percentage of women than men enter college and receive bachelor's degrees, and women are also now obtaining graduate and professional degrees at rates almost equal to that of men (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013; Goldin, Katz, and Kuziemko 2006). Although this gender reversal in educational trends has not altogether erased persistent gender inequality in labor market outcomes, it has propelled more females into socially powerful and previously male-dominated careers in arenas such as law, academia, and business (England 2010; Eagly and Carli 2007). These prestigious occupational arenas in particular, however, have also grown increasingly time-demanding and competitive, making it difficult for individuals to combine their work with other commitments such as having a family (Jacobs and Gerson 2004). For women, conflicts between work and family can prove especially difficult, as lingering, gender-essentialist ideologies maintain that childcare and household labor are primarily their responsibility if and when they have children (Hochschild 1989; Blair-Loy 2003; Stone 2007).

Recent studies highlight how highly educated, aspiring professionals may delay marriage and parenthood or forgo these choices entirely as they focus on their work (Huinink and Kohli 2014; Musick et al 2009; Miller 2010). Yet for women who begin their work lives with the notion of eventually starting a family, the question remains: when and how do family plans become entangled with career aspirations? Scholars interested in this question maintain that women's anticipations of work and family responsibilities are often strongly linked (Damaske and Gerson 2008), but there is mixed evidence regarding how family ideals concretely factor into job planning (see Cech 2016). Moreover, studies that examine this question tend to focus on either college students who are not at the ages in which marriage and/or parenthood are now common (Mullen 2014; Cech 2016; Weer et al. 2006) or working adults who are already well-enmeshed in careers (Bass 2015; Damaske 2011). We therefore know little about how women who are beyond their college years and yet still on the brink of entering demanding career pathways think about their futures.

To begin addressing this shortcoming, I turn to female graduate students in their final phases of advanced degree programs, an ideal population to investigate the intertwinement of career and family ideals. Women aspiring to join the ranks of ambitious lawyers, professors, and business leaders spend years of their lives in graduate training programs where they must constantly think about their future career trajectories and how to best position themselves to reach their goals. Yet these years often also overlap with ages in which partnership and parenthood become common, especially when women have prior work experience before entering graduate school or spend a significant period of time getting their graduate degree. The end of graduate school therefore represents a "critical moment" (see Thompson et al. 2002) in individuals' lives, where career and personal life choices require more mental and emotional attention and concrete planning. By capturing the thoughts and anticipations of women who are all at a similar life transition, we can therefore more clearly see the mental processes of career and family planning in the very moments that plans and anticipations start turning into concrete life decisions.

In this paper, I draw on in-depth interviews with 43 childless women in final phases of law, business, and doctoral programs at two different graduate institutions I call "Pacific Public" and "Elite Eastern." Although these women come from different social backgrounds and are immersed in substantively different degree programs, their thoughts and feelings reveal a common theme: the institution of graduate school itself plays a large role in shaping career

decisions. More specifically, I find that several common mechanisms which operate in graduate programs – institutionalized career pathways, formal and informal advice networks, and opportunities to "try out" different jobs before graduation – together make it difficult for women to envision how their work and family trajectories will play out, especially in regards to the most seemingly time-demanding career pathways. I also document the actual job decisions women make as they finish their programs, documenting heterogeneity in women's responses to perceptions of work-life conflict. Overall, I argue that while graduate programs are often conceived of as "pipelines," funneling students into highly specific career paths, the experience of graduate school itself can shape strong feelings of uncertainty and disenchantment when women think about the typical paths they are expected to take as successful graduates of prestigious programs.

These findings are important because they point to graduate school as an understudied yet important institutional context that shapes women's aspirations and preferences as they prepare to enter some of society's elite occupations. Preferences and choices are not made in vacuums, but rather unfold as people move through different institutional contexts and interact with others in the same spaces as themselves. In order to better understand how highly educated women are thinking about their future lives and making concrete career and fertility decisions, it is therefore necessary to more seriously consider the effect of attending graduate school, especially in a time when larger numbers of women are spending years of their lives embedded in advanced degree programs.

**Data and Methods**

The data I draw upon come from 43 in-depth interviews that I conducted in person between March and September of 2018. I interviewed 22 women at "Elite Eastern" (pseudonym), a prestigious, private university on the East Coast, and 21 women at "Pacific Public" (pseudonym), a large, public university on the West Coast. I interviewed an assortment of MBA, JD, and PhD students at each school. Interview participants had to be final-year JD students, final-year MBA students, or final-phase PhD students (typically 5$^{th}$ or 6$^{th}$ year). They also had to identify as female and be childless at the time of interview. The audio of all interviews was recorded and fully transcribed with respondents' permission, and I ensured every participant that I would be using pseudonyms and fake university names to protect their privacy.

My sampling strategy was to sample for range rather than representativeness (see Weiss 1994), meaning I aimed to construct as diverse a sample as possible in terms of social background, individual personalities and career orientations, and programs attended. My goal in recruiting such a diverse sample was to investigate whether or not students expressed common graduate school experiences in their interviews regardless of individual differences. My sample therefore contains women who are single, casually dating, engaged, married, and previously married, as well as first generation college students, first and second generation Americans, international students, and the first in their family to attend graduate school. The respondents also comprise a broad variety of racial/ethnic and class backgrounds, although the majority of my sample identified as white or Asian. Women's ages ranged from 24 to 36. PhD programs can provide dramatically different experiences depending upon specific academic field, so I interviewed women who were in different disciplines across the social sciences, humanities, and STEM fields.

I conducted interviews at the location of participants' choosing, typically academic buildings, internship offices, or cafes. Most interviews lasted 60 minutes, although they ranged from 40 to 100 minutes. Because the analytical power of interviews lies in their ability to get at

multiple perspectives and interpretations, as well as to uncover processes, my interviews were conversational and open-ended. I asked respondents broad questions about their motivations for graduate school, their academic and social experiences in their programs, and their thoughts and plans regarding the future.

I analyzed my interview transcripts using an iterative process based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), which allowed me to discover emergent themes and to re-evaluate my findings several times as I narrowed my research question and began to focus on the institutional effects of graduate school. Interviews were coded in batches, meaning I moved between processes of interviewing and analyzing my data several times. This fluid process allowed me to think about emergent findings and then confirm/refine them with later interviews. To analyze my data, I first coded large sections of each interview into broad themes based on the questions I asked (i.e., "motivation for graduate school"; "important social networks during graduate school") using the qualitative software package NVivo. This allowed me to get a broad sense of common trends as well as differences across individuals and programs. Next, in a series of re-codings, I added and refined thematic categories as I re-read through my data and grouped earlier rounds of codes into smaller, analytically interesting and emergent topics.

**Preliminary Findings**

Although this paper is still in the process of being written and revised, I will broadly summarize my main, emergent findings here. My final paper will make extensive use of interview quotes and summaries of women's individual experiences in order to support my arguments. I will also be including tables that present quotes from women in different programs and across the two different universities for the purpose of highlighting how common processes are occurring for graduate students in different contexts (see Table 1 below for an example).

First, my main argument is that the institution of graduate school itself contributes to uncertainty in how female students perceive their future ability to reconcile work and family demands. Although scholars have argued that graduate schools function as "pipelines" that funnel students into specific career paths upon graduation, I find uncertainty and disenchantment in how female students express their career goals, and a discordance between short-term career plans and long-term career ideals. Moreover, I find that as women express their career intentions, they have trouble envisioning when, or if, having children will fit into their career trajectories. The majority of women I interviewed either strongly wished to have children or were open to the possibility of having children, yet they tended to speak in vague ways about when and how family planning fit into their futures. Overall, I argue that this sense of uncertainty stems primarily from several common mechanisms that operate in graduate school, regardless of program.

Mechanism 1, or the "prescribed pathways" mechanism, demonstrates how graduate programs put an enormous amount of pressure on their students to follow certain pathways after they graduate. This happens in a multitude of ways, often depending upon the program (MBA vs JD vs PhD). For example, law students feel like they are supposed to get jobs at corporate firms because of the structured "early interview program" that occurs between 1L and 2L years. Business students feel pressure from career services and from on-campus recruiters to get certain jobs, and many MBA students talked about peer pressure as well – often dozens of them are applying for the same job. PhD students often feel like they must become professors (especially those in social sciences and humanities). For those that want to go into "industry" jobs, they often feel like they are being seen as less competent, less hardworking, etc. These "prescribed pathways," I argue, are difficult for women and contribute to uncertainty because they often

require intensive devotion to work, are inflexible, and are not conducive to work/life balance. Table 1 below presents some examples from women in my sample (names are changed), and provides an example of how I plan to structure other quotes in my paper.

**Table 1**

| | **MBA** | **JD** | **PhD** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Eastern Elite** | *"But six weeks in, people start recruiting on campus. And it's really easy to get wrapped up in the recruiting process...Because it's like easy. You go to these sessions, you meet people. But that's mostly for like...big tech companies, consulting, and finance. But like if you're not interested in those, and you don't know what you want to do, it's much harder to find your own path and do your own search." -Sarah* | *"I think the biggest challenge is like not going with the flow you know? Or resisting going like... I feel like the way they set up law school is just like, here's the big broad highway to the firms you know? And here's like the tiny path toward public interest like they don't make it as smooth and easy as [they should]..." -Kayla* | *"There's a stigma in admitting you have other priorities than your academics. But as I've gotten further in the program, I've started talking more with friends about our…plans for life. And that's how you find out about all these longer post-docs and stuff…" -Jen* |
| **Pacific Public** | *"I just felt like none of them [career services] ever actually cared about what I wanted to do or what my career goals were. They were just pushing me towards things that I told them multiple times I was not interested in. So, that was kind of tough feeling like I had to ... like I already internally had to push that stuff off. And then to have an external person being like, hey, you should apply to these things you don't want to do, like da da da. Just creating a lot of fear and anxiety." -Zoe* | *"I went to law school because... like I ultimately want to help people. And I think it's really easy to get lost in law school, because you just get kind of pushed into this corporate defense work. And it's easy to get disheartened" -Katie* | *"I think the people who go to academia are definitely more visible. And not just in terms of how the department like promotes them and like talks about them...but also in terms of like, the people who are more actively social in their time during grad school...I think there is more likelihood that they're going into academia. Of the people who quit, I mean, most of them go to industry." -Irene* |

Mechanism 2, or "the rumor mill," demonstrates how peer-to-peer information sharing is influential for women in graduate school, as women's organizations and informal support groups help women share advice about what jobs are flexible, enjoyable, and supportive for women. Yet as I argue, the rumors and stories women in graduate programs are exposed to often clash with the rigid, prescribed career pathways that schools try to promote, often contributing to women's sense of uncertainty in which career path or particular job they should choose.

Mechanism 3, or "seeing is believing," demonstrates how the structure of graduate programs provide women with opportunities to "try out" different jobs before they actually begin their careers. This is especially relevant for MBA and JD students, who do summer internships, but even in PhD programs, students try out teaching and independent research to see what they like/dislike. This structure was helpful for some women, who loved the cultures of firms and companies they worked at, but difficult for others, who felt disenchanted by the work they were doing and the people they were around. I argue that the ability to try out different jobs and workplaces before graduation provides both useful information but also a sense of alternative possibilities that leaves many female students ambivalent about what path is right for them.

Overall, I aim to argue that through several common mechanisms, the institution of graduate school is itself a contributing factor to how women think about their work and family futures. While we typically think of (and studies support) factors such as social background, gendered socialization processes, individual personalities, educational background (typically primary school and college), and workplace constraints as contributing to career trajectories and

their relationship with family decisions, we often don't recognize that as individuals prepare for their careers, their time in graduate school matters significantly.

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