

**Telling Stories about the Value of Co-responsibility:  
An educational strategy to train Spanish families in the  
values of the work-life balance**

Maria Rosa Buxarrais (Professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Barcelona)

Department of Theory and History of Education.

Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron 171, Edifici Llevant, 3rd floor, Office 338, 08035 Barcelona, Spain.

Phone: (+34) 934 035 225. Fax: (+34) 934 035 012. Email: [mrbuxarrais@ub.edu](mailto:mrbuxarrais@ub.edu)

Alexandro Escudero (Professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Barcelona)

Department of Theory and History of Education.

Passeig de la Vall d'Hebron 171, Edifici Llevant, 3rd floor, Office 338, 08035 Barcelona, Spain.

Phone: (+34) 934 035 225. Fax: (+34) 934 035 012. Email: [alexandroescudero@ub.edu](mailto:alexandroescudero@ub.edu)

**Abstract**

The entry of women into the workplace has not resulted in a just reallocation of the family's household chores. This situation has had two adverse effects: first, mothers experience difficulties in achieving a good work-family life balance; and, second, unwelcome changes occur in the children's health, their performance at school, and in their ability to make constructive use of their leisure time.

An educational proposal has been drawn up, designed to foster values for achieving a better work-life balance and adhering to the principles of: 1) placing the teaching of the values of co-responsibility at the heart of the family project; 2) taking appropriate action in the early years of the children's lives; 3) telling true or fictitious stories about the values of co-responsibility; and 4) engaging the children in dialogue so they might reflect on these values through informal, spontaneous activities of recreation.

Our research, conducted using grounded theory, identifies the strategies that families in Barcelona (Spain) adopt on a day-to-day basis to achieve a good work-life balance. Our results show that families have various practical concerns, but one overriding worry: they all express the hope that their children will grow up to

be happy, decent people; yet they do not implement any systematic actions to achieve this objective.

**Keywords:** moral education, co-responsibility, grounded theory, work-life balance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Studies examining ways in which work and family life can be reconciled have revealed that the entry of women into the workplace has not resulted in a just reallocation of household chores (Papi & Frau, 2005, Parella & Samper, 2007). While the situation has generated certain legislative changes and modifications to state labor policy, it is still mothers that are given fewest opportunities of achieving a good work-family life balance (Tobío, 2002).

This failure to reconcile work and family life does not only affect mothers although, as most of them continue to take responsibility for household chores and to play a leading role as care providers for family members, they are the ones that suffer most noticeably its unwelcome consequences. Moreover, children who grow up in families that do not actively seek such reconciliation suffer its ill effects in terms of their health, their performance at school, and in their ability to make constructive use of their leisure time.

Several studies have reported that emerging public policies aimed at institutionalizing the reconciliation of family life and work in the legal, business, institutional and social ambits of Spain have been significant; yet, they remain insufficient (Barbero, 2006; Cánovas, Aragón, & Rocha 2005; Carrasquer & Martín, 2005; Fernández & Tobío, 2005; Lorenzo, 2004; Parella & Samper, 2007; Plantenga & Remery, 2010; Quintanilla, 2005; Rivas, 2006).

The active, dynamic role adopted by the families themselves in the democratization of family practices is fundamental for achieving the reconciliation of work and family life and, in turn, for improving the quality of life. This challenge, however, is conditioned by several factors, including the entry of women into the workplace, the disappearance of the patriarchal order, and the consolidation of “family negotiating” practices (Gimeno, 2008; Meil, 2006, 2011), factors that are transforming the concept of the traditional family and the emergence of the plurality of family forms.

There is a vast literature describing the strategies for moral education in non-school environments (Chazan, 1985; Garrod, 1993; Noddings, 2002), but it is now important to start building “middle-range” theories as to what might motivate families to engage in a project aimed at achieving a good work-family life balance, and as to how to teach children the values involved in such a family project.

## 2. RESEARCH GOALS

Our aim is to identify what might motivate families to engage in a project aimed at achieving a good work-family life balance, and how children might be taught the values implicit to such a family project.

To achieve this, it has first been necessary to:

- Identify the motives, conditions and variables that determine the ways in which families seek to achieve some kind of reconciliation of work and family life.
- Analyze the factors upon which we might base a strategy for teaching values within the family, and the uncertainties that might jeopardize the success of this project.

Based on the above, it was possible to construct and organize several theoretical notions that have enabled us to draw up an educational proposal for fostering values for the reconciliation of work and family life that might be implemented within the families themselves, and which seeks to fulfill the following conditions: 1) placing the teaching of the values of co-responsibility at the heart of the family project and to do so by providing good examples, 2) telling true or fictitious stories about the value of co-responsibility, 3) taking appropriate action in the early years of the children's lives when leisure time is still firmly family based and 4) engaging the children in dialogue so they can reflect on these values through informal, spontaneous activities of recreation.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

By implementing the Grounded Theory methodology, we identified the main concerns of those families that show an interest in reconciling their family life and work, and we analyzed the strategies they adopt each day to overcome these challenges. To achieve this, we adopted empirical methods while gathering our data, conducted inductive analyses and applied the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Given its inductive nature, this methodology provides for a certain flexibility in the data collection, but the following five methodological principles were strictly adhered to: 1) the simultaneous collection and analysis of data; 2) the processes and products of the research were determined by the emerging data and not by preconceived theoretical frameworks; 3) the analytic processes and constant comparisons gave rise to theoretical discovery and development, and not verification of preconceived theories; 4) research sampling was based on what emerged from the data; and 5) the systematic use of analytical procedures led to increasingly more abstract levels of analysis (Charmaz, 2006). If we were successful in achieving the above, then this study possesses a high degree of fit with reality because it both serves to explain that reality and is relevant to those individuals involved (Glaser, 1998).

#### 4. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Our unit of analysis was two-parent families<sup>1</sup> (in which it was supposed that the mother and father engage in a process of negotiating household chores) with at least one child under the age of 12 (this being the maximum age for compulsory primary education), in which at least the mother or the father is employed (and hence an effort is required to reconcile work schedules and family life), resident in Barcelona and with an extended family living close by (the relationship between the nuclear and extended family being of relevance to this study). The comparison groups comprised variations with respect to this unit of analysis and were used to compare our data (see Figure 1: Unit of analysis and comparison groups).

##### *4.1 Participants and data gathering.*

Nineteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted anonymously with mothers and fathers who fulfilled the characteristics of the unit of analysis and thirteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted anonymously with families who fulfilled at least one of the characteristics of the comparison groups. The data were collected between February and December 2012, according to the following guideline of questions related to eleven areas of research:

1. About the family:

Current description of the family.

Description of the family as it was previously - if there have been any changes.

Identification and description of turning point that brought about the change.

Change in the family's lifestyle.

Current lifestyle.

2. About the important things in life:

People considered to be important.

Areas of life considered to be important.

Reasons for their importance.

Level of importance.

3. About the ability to reconcile work and family life:

Ability to find good work-life balance and to attend to what is important.

Difficulties in finding a good balance and in attending to what is important.

Intentions of paying attention to what is unimportant.

Knowledge of the question of achieving a good work-family life balance.

4. About those periods when striking a good balance has been difficult:

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<sup>1</sup> The classification of families proposed by Diego Ruiz Becerril (2004) was adequate for defining the unit of analysis for the study.

- Period of life when it was difficult to reconcile work and family life.  
Strategies used to overcome these difficulties.
5. About seeking help to reconcile work and family life:  
Help sought or received from professionals to reconcile work and family life.  
Help sought or received from relatives to reconcile work and family life.  
Help sought or received from friends to reconcile work and family life.
6. About the consequences of failing to reconcile work and family life:  
Psychological, emotional or physical effects attributed to failing to reconcile work and family life.
7. About how to overcome the difficulties of reconciling work and family life:  
Conscious, controlled strategy for reconciling work and family life today.  
Unplanned, uncontrolled elements for reconciling work and family life today.
8. About the current work-family life balance:  
A good balance is achieved.  
A certain degree of balance is achieved.  
No balance is achieved whatsoever.
9. About learning how to reconcile work and family life:  
The factors that allow or influence learning about how to reconcile work and family life.  
The process for the reconciliation of work and family schedules.  
The outcome and advantages of learning to reconcile work and family schedules.
10. About teaching how to reconcile work and family life:  
The family members that can learn to achieve a good work-family life balance.  
The ways in which they learn or might learn to achieve a good work-family life balance
11. Self-reflection on achieving a good work-family life balance:  
Current level of satisfaction and means of improvement.

#### *4.2 Coding procedure.*

##### *4.2.1 Open coding.*

The coding procedure was undertaken in accordance with Strauss and Corbin (1997): that is, open coding, followed by axial coding and, finally, theoretical coding. The coding was conducted with *TAMS Analyzer* software taking into

account the in vivo/socially constructed coding system (Glaser, 1978)<sup>2</sup>. Table I: Coding the areas of research, the open coding.

#### 4.2.2 Axial coding.

The categories obtained from the open coding were ordered so that the axial coding could be completed (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), and in this way the peripheral categories of the study emerged as well as the core category (see Figure 2: Core category in relation with the peripheral categories). The core category to emerge from the study is: *family-based leisure*. The peripheral categories were organized within the following areas<sup>3</sup>:

· Motives for the reconciliation of work and family life.

1) The lack of resources (time or money) to perform all the household chores, and to care for children and provide help with their schooling.

2) The feeling that family life and work prevent the parents from dedicating time to their social (maintaining friendships) and personal lives (continuing education and sport).

3) Those families that have achieved a certain balance between work and family life, feel they need family strategies to safeguard this balance.

4) The desire for children to be educated in values of equality and co-responsibility.

· Conditions for the reconciliation of work and family life.

1) The adult members of the family show themselves to have the ability to solve disagreements peacefully and constructively.

2) A basic agreement has been reached regarding the values in which the children will be educated.

3) At least one person (usually the mothers) in the family has a very high threshold of acceptance when it comes to undertaking household chores and are amenable to assigning these chores to themselves, whether they are in paid employment or not.

4) A flexible notion exists regarding the strategies for reconciling work and family life because they can vary depending on the particular moment in the evolution of the family, on the parents' employment status, on the degree of autonomy expressed by the children, and on the personality of the family members.

5) Men that have not traditionally been involved in the performing of household chores show a certain degree of proactive cooperation, although the distribution is

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<sup>2</sup> While the in vivo codes are expressions that the interviewees used, the socially constructed codes are concepts devised by the research team.

<sup>3</sup> Studies based on grounded theory perform the coding and the organization of concepts based on the emerging data. Such studies avoid promoting *how things should be* and rather describe and explain *what things are like*.

not necessarily equitable, because the women continue to feel responsible for the household chores.

· Variables affecting the reconciliation of work and family life.

1) The more support the family can call upon and the greater the family's purchasing power, the easier it is for them to overcome the specific difficulties of reconciling work and family life.

2) One family member forgoes their career or paid employment (out of choice or by resigning themselves to the circumstances).

3) If the family is able to hire help to care for the children and to perform the household chores, then the practical difficulties of reconciling work and family life can be resolved, but it transmits a way of living that could hinder the subsequent promotion of values of equality and co-responsibility.

4) The adults in the family take the models learned in their earlier nuclear families (which would typically have been a traditional family model) as their main point of reference for devising strategies to balance work and family life. Therefore, it is very common to see that the division of household chores is based on sex, and that a demanding, stressful job (which usually leaves no time to engage in family activities) is considered a desirable life model and creator of personality.

· Contexts of the reconciliation of work and family life.

1) With the economic crisis, families quickly learn to adopt models of austere living. The activities associated with making savings allow them to engage in recreational activities as a family, which promote close personal relationships and dialogue.

2) Working hours are generally quite inflexible, and hinder strategies aimed at reconciling work and family life.

3) The sense of family can go some way to compensating economically for the precarious nature of the labor market, and the provision of social welfare and supplementary benefits.

· Uncertainties in the reconciliation of work and family life.

1) Satisfaction based on the formation of habit, i.e., an expression of satisfaction with the current reconciliation of work and family life achieved through force of habit, rather than being the result of an equitable process of negotiation.

2) Responsibility for caring for the children is assigned to the eldest child, the harmful effects being expressed in terms of his or her health, performance at school, and use of leisure time.

3) The mothers generally have a higher tolerance threshold as to what might be considered an unequal distribution of household chores or the lack of proactiveness in their performance. If this threshold is lowered, and a plan to



reconcile work and family life does not exist, the dissatisfaction and frustration may lead to a breakdown in the relationship.

4) Those who led active lives before settling down in the relationship and having children tend to maintain this lifestyle. If a plan for reconciling work and family life does not exist, the result is activity overload; if the family at least manages to organize their schedules, leisure time is typically filled with more activities.

5) Feelings of guilt (particularly on the part of mothers) for experiencing a need for personal realization as a counterpoint to family life.

6) Expressions of rebuke from children as they are given no time or space for leisure activities.

7) The children suffer from poor health.

8) The children underperform at school.

· Desirable outcomes of the reconciliation of work and family life.

1) Family-based leisure: a successful reconciliation plan provides time and space for leisure, and these times and spaces are shared as a family.

2) Satisfaction based on genuine belief: decisions regarding the assignment of household chores or the having to forgo a career or paid employment are taken as part of a process that is considered fair.

3) Good health.

4) Good school performance.

5) The satisfaction of realizing that each activity engaged in as a family promotes values of reconciliation: equality and co-responsibility.

#### 4.2.3 Theoretical coding.

The identification of the core category and its peripheral categories allowed us to identify two factors: first, the existence of different levels of concern among families regarding the reconciliation of work and family life; and second, the emergence of distinct patterns of behavior to address the uncertainties at each level.

The main concerns of families when addressing the problem of work-family life balance can be grouped in three levels, which we label a) Concern about the compatibility of the family's schedules, b) Worry about the work-family life balance, and c) Transcendental ideal. Table II: Levels of family concern when addressing the reconciliation of work and family life, an outline of the three levels.

a) Concern about the compatibility of the family's schedules. Some families struggle to resolve the incompatibility of inflexible work and family life schedules. At this level the everyday concerns identified included finding time to help the children do their homework, accompany them to their leisure activities and take them to school. The uncertainties at this level are generally resolved with the help of the partner and the extended family; and, in the worst case scenario, by



the adults forgoing their leisure activities. At this level the strategy for resolving problems related to the household chores was succinctly captured in the words of one of the interviewees, and which was subsequently adopted as an in vivo code, "If one of us can't get it done, then the other can" (see Table I: Coding the areas of research). This strategy suggests that the household chores that one partner is unable to do are finished by the other. Often, however, the one who ends up doing most of the household chores is the mother.

b) Worry about the work-family life balance. Although in most families the compatibility of schedules remains stable, be this detrimental to a good balance or not, various concerns remain about the uncertainties or risks that might threaten this stability. These threats are solved by taking on hired help or by planning with the partner a fairer distribution of household chores and child care responsibilities. It is at this level that some families deal with the notion of reconciliation, and always in terms of a fair distribution of household chores. As for their level of satisfaction with the work-family life balance, most of those interviewed claimed that they were on the whole satisfied. However, when the inductive analysis looked beyond the worries and concerns of the families, a more transcendental desire emerged from those interviewed.

c) Transcendental goals. The main finding to be made in this study is the revelation that all the families, regardless of differences in their internal make-up, hope that their sons and daughters will turn out to be good, decent people that will lead happy lives, and who will be recognized in the future as people with moral values rather than necessarily as people who have achieved economic or material success; but none of the families undertake in a systematic, conscious or frequent manner activities within the family that might help achieve this moral development of the family. This dimension of the moral development of the family conducted within the family is generally not present in the families studied here. In fact, some interviewees only reflected thereon following prompting from the research team.

Excerpt from Interview 20:

*How do you hope your son will turn out in 25 years' time?*

I've never really given it any thought. I suppose that he should be what he wants to be, as long as he's happy.

*And how would you like other people to see him?*

I don't know, sincere, genuine. I don't know.

*And in terms of his happiness, what are you personally doing now so that people will see him as being happy in 25 years' time?*

I don't know. I try to do as much as I can.

Excerpt from Interview 14:

*How do you hope your children will turn out in 25 years' time?*

In 25 years' time, how do I hope they'll turn out? Well, obviously, I hope they're happy and successful, I use the word successful because it encompasses many things, successful in their family lives, financially, with good health, etc., really it encompasses more or less everything, because just being happy is fine, but...

*And how would you like other people to see them?*

Like when they speak about them... Gosh, I don't know... like everyone else I suppose, that they speak well of them... I don't know, really, I don't know, as people that are likable, pleasant, as people that the others enjoy spending time with.

*And in terms of their happiness, what are you personally doing now so that people will see them as being happy in the future?*

What am I doing so that they can be happy tomorrow? Well, I promote family values, make sure they're friendly, well, I don't know, it's difficult to forecast what they're going to be doing 25 years from now, but you work at it everyday to make it happen.

The emergence of the core category, its relationship with the peripheral categories, and the finding of the families' poorly defined transcendental goals allowed us to construct a theoretical sampling of the concept of family-based leisure. Subsequently, we gathered information to verify that:

1. There is a period of time during which the children want to share their leisure time with their parents. This period ranges from early childhood to about the age of eleven; this is a period during which *leisure is family based*. After this period of time the desire to share leisure time with family members or within the family wanes rapidly.
2. During this period of time (the *family-based leisure* period) the children particularly enjoy listening to and telling stories.
3. During this period of time, parents find few obstacles within the family to their influencing the moral development of the family because they are the main points of reference for their children because their behavior is considered exemplary and a model by their children.
4. During this period various opportunities exist for reflection on family values; these spaces are free, recreational and spontaneous.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

According to recent studies of the family, the traditional family model is being transformed by several factors, among which the most notable are the entry of women into the workplace, the disappearance of the patriarchal order, and the consolidation of "family negotiating" practices. In theory, these three factors should result in a just reallocation of household chores and child care responsibilities. However, this study has shown that mothers continue to bear a

double burden of work that impacts on all family members, with harmful effects in terms of the children's health, their performance at school, and in their ability to make constructive use of their leisure time.

Recognizing the desirability of reconciling work and family life so as to improve the quality of life of all family members is not sufficient for families to develop a project to this end. Nor is it sufficient simply to organize their work and domestic schedules. What is required is a series of systematic, conscious actions to promote the acquisition of the values of achieving a good work-family life balance.

This study suggests that the strategies families should adopt to reconcile work and family life be placed in three groups: first, strategies that address the practical concerns of everyday life; second, strategies that reduce concerns about the uncertainties that might threaten the fragile stability of family schedules; and, third, strategies that promote the ethical and moral development of the children.

The first two levels of action for reconciling work and family life can be resolved with the participation of the extended family (especially with the help of grandmothers), and with the contracting of paid help. However, both strategies tend to be occasional rather than frequent, and one-off solutions, rather than continuously applied over time. In general, families try to resolve the difficulties of the first two levels within the nuclear family, and do not want to depend on the extended family or paid help.

The third level, that is, the parents' hope that their children will grow up feeling happy and to be good, decent people, is not tackled with a conscious systematic strategy. Although families might feel that their particular way of coordinating their domestic and work life is good, none of them has given any thought to how they might consolidate a project of reconciliation that consciously and systematically favors and promotes their children's learning of the values of reconciliation.

The adults in charge of the children (most typically the mothers) face a number of difficulties when seeking to find a balance between the various areas of their lives (work, home, their social life, family life, and their personal life). This challenge is resolved by identifying their priorities and merging the boundaries between the above areas: for example, with the birth of a child, the social and personal areas merge with that of the family. And the education and up-bringing of their children becomes the priority area.

Neither the changes within the families, nor the deluge of household chores weakens the educational responsibilities that mothers and fathers claim to have, but new economic, social and cultural situations do force them to consider other times and other spaces for fulfilling their function of helping their children with their homework.

The main finding of this study lies in the fact that it identifies a period of time in which all family members wish to share their leisure time together. This period extends from early childhood until the children reach the age of eleven, approximately. During this period of time mothers and fathers are still the most

important point of reference and model for their children, and so they are an important influence on the development of their values.

During this period of life one of the activities the children enjoy most is telling and listening to stories. The value of this activity lies in the fact that the stories allow scenarios to be invented in which moral decisions have to be taken. Relaxed, friendly and sensitive conversations have proved to be more potent in the formation of values in children, than formal classes focused specifically on the teaching of ethics (Noddings, 2002).

*Family-based leisure* time becomes, however, abruptly reduced. The weakening of family oriented leisure time is to be expected as children seek greater autonomy, and find new points of reference as to how to behave in contexts that lie outside the family.

Therefore, *family-based leisure* time provides an ideal opportunity to place the teaching of the values of co-responsibility at the heart of the family project and to do so by presenting good examples, and by telling real or fictitious stories. This is a fun, spontaneous and free way of gradually molding those who we hope one day will be happy and decent people.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## 7. APPENDICES

Table I: Coding the areas of research	
Area	Coding theory
	The <i>in vivo coding</i> appears in inverted commas, The <i>sociologically constructed coding</i> appears in bold.
1. About the family	<b>Diversity of family types: same concerns.</b> <b>Active lives when single are no guarantee of the ability to reconcile work and family life.</b>

**Table I: Coding the areas of research**

Area	Coding theory
2. About the important things in life	<p>The <i>in vivo coding</i> appears in inverted commas,                      The <i>sociologically constructed coding</i> appears in bold.</p> <p><b>The family is fundamental.</b>  <b>Work is necessary.</b>  <b>Sport, leisure and education are important.</b></p>
3. About the ability to reconcile work and family life	<p><b>Concerns about the incompatibility of work and family schedules.</b>  <b>Worries about reconciling work and family life.</b></p>
4. About those periods when striking a good balance has been difficult	<p><b>The birth of a child represents a radical change.</b>  <b>The help from a member of the extended family, hiring help and mothers voluntarily forgoing their careers or paid employment.</b></p>
5. About seeking help to reconcile work and family life	<p><b>Help from “babysitters”.</b>  <b>Help from extended family.</b></p>
6. About the consequences of failing to reconcile work and family life	<p><b>Emotional effects: guilt, self-rebuke or anxiety.</b>                      “Don’t go and get sick, I’ve no one to leave you with”  <b>Effects on schooling: underperforming.</b>  <b>Effects on leisure time: giving up recreational or sports activities.</b></p>
7. About how to overcome the difficulties of reconciling work and family life	<p>“If one of us can’t get it done, then the other can”</p>
8. About the current work-family life balance	<p><b>Satisfaction from force of habit.</b>  <b>Satisfaction based on genuine belief.</b></p>

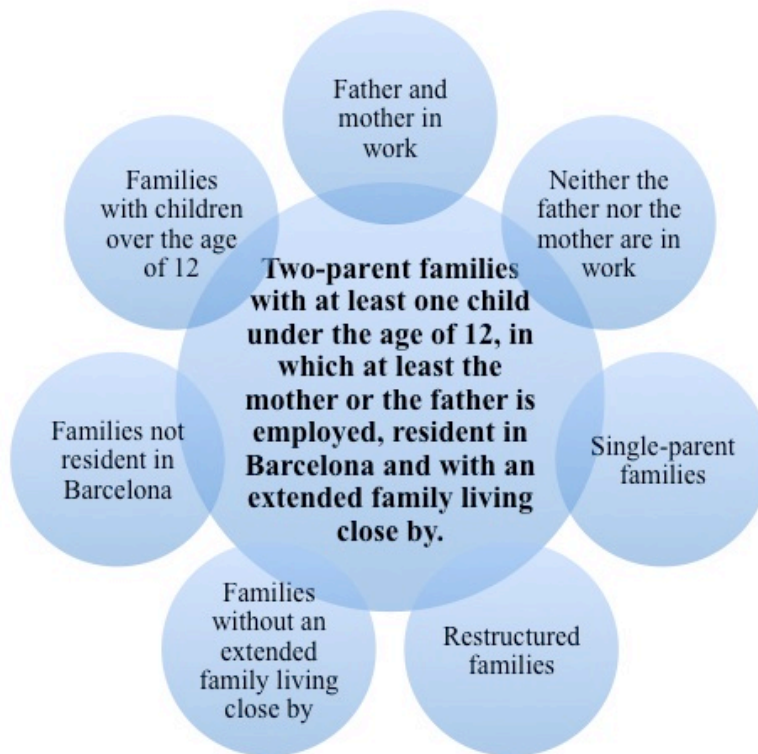
Table I: Coding the areas of research	
Area	Coding theory
	The <i>in vivo coding</i> appears in inverted commas, The <i>sociologically constructed coding</i> appears in bold.
9. About learning how to reconcile work and family life	<b>Father and mother as models.</b> <b>Working hard is a good model of effort and endeavor.</b> <b>Dialogue.</b>
10. About teaching how to reconcile work and family life	“That they will be good, decent people”.
11. Self-reflection on achieving a good work-family life balance	<b>As the children grow up, the challenges disappear.</b> <b>Things would be better with better time resources and more money.</b>

Table II: Levels of family concern when addressing the reconciliation of work and family life		
Level of concern	Description	Adopted strategy
Very high	There is not enough time and/or sufficient resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· To help with homework.</li> <li>· To accompany children to their leisure activities.</li> <li>· To take them to school.</li> </ul>	They are generally resolved by calling on a member of the extended family or by hiring help.  In other cases, by the adults forgoing their leisure activities.

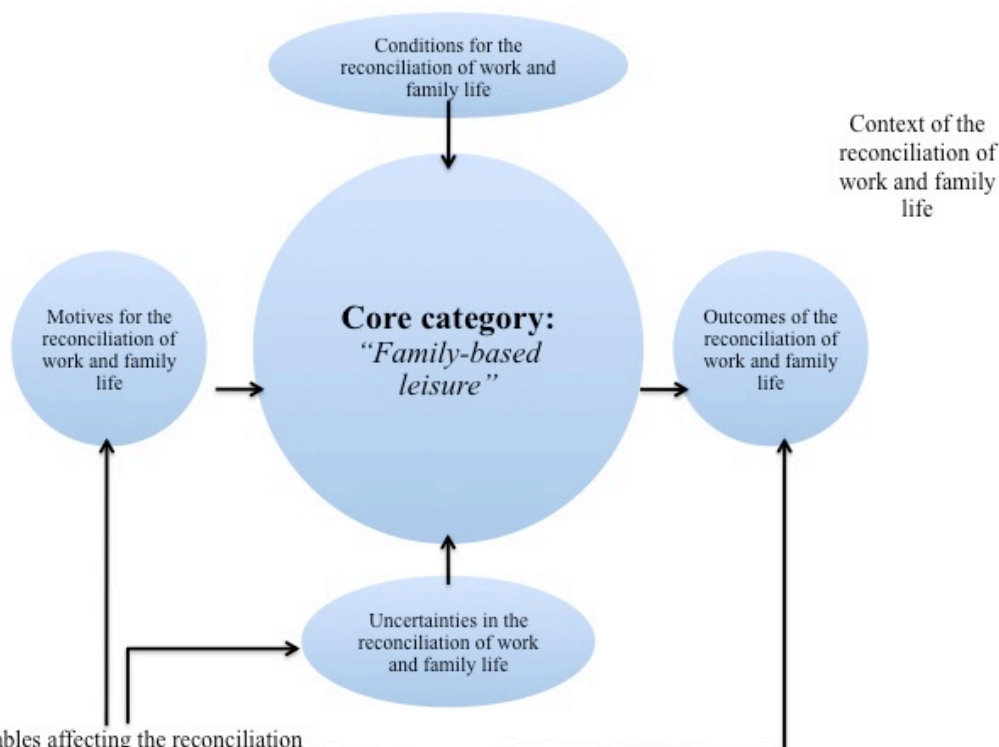
<b>Table II: Levels of family concern when addressing the reconciliation of work and family life</b>		
Level of concern	Description	Adopted strategy
High	Threats to: · Health	They are resolved spontaneously by hiring professional help, or by planning a fairer distribution of the household chores with the partner.  In other cases by seeking a fairer distribution of the household chores.
Low or null	A more transcendental desire regarding their children's lives.	No strategies exist.



**Figure 1: Unit of analysis and comparison groups**



**Figure 2: Core category in relation with the peripheral categories**



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