

Career-Relationship Intersections of Women in STEM Post-Secondary Programs and Their Romantic Partners

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Abstract

This study explored how emerging adult women in STEM post-secondary programs jointly pursue their career plans with their romantic partners. The Action-Project Method (A-PM) was used to conduct an exploratory qualitative inquiry with six emerging adult couples, ages 20 to 28, from Western Canada, where there was a woman pursuing STEM-related university education. A-PM video-assisted interviews and consensus-based qualitative analysis within and across cases revealed the intersection of STEM career goals and other life goals commonly encountered during emerging adulthood, and career decision-making processes for the woman in STEM. Couples' STEM-related conversations were characterized by high levels of self-disclosure, comfort sharing their perspectives with each other, and, for several couples, warm and collaborative conversational tones. Furthermore, partners provided a variety of supports for the women to persist in their STEM career paths. Additional emergent themes included (a) experiencing various challenges with pursuing STEM career paths, (b) family of origin expectations in pursuing STEM, (c) the assumption that both members of the couple would be working in the long term, (d) attempting to achieve work-life balance, and (e) discussion of the purpose of work in a person's life.

Keywords: STEM, career development, romantic relationship, emerging adult, Action-Project Method

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Note: co-author José Domene was at the University of Calgary when this study was conducted but has subsequently relocated to Simon Fraser University.

There is an enduring gender gap in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education (Wall, 2019). Worldwide, women make up only 35% of individuals enrolled in STEM-related post-secondary education (UNESCO, 2017). Women's underrepresentation in STEM is problematic, in part, because STEM occupations are some of the most well-paid and rapidly growing employment opportunities (Wall, 2019). As women are discouraged or denied from lucrative career paths, the STEM field loses potential for diverse and novel perspectives. Understanding factors that influence the career development of these women is a critical step towards addressing this ongoing inequality.

There is an extensive body of literature exploring factors that both promote and hinder the retention of women in STEM at various life stages, including in the years before and during post-secondary. Some proposed explanations for lower retention in STEM include the existence of an unwelcoming climate and persistence of gender stereotypes; insufficient numbers of women to form a critical mass within educational and professional communities, leading to marginalization; reduced STEM-related achievement, choice, and self-efficacy; and family influences, such as work-family conflicts and the amount of family support and resources being provided (Buck et al., 2020; Dabney & Tai, 2013). Ultimately, the decision to persist in or exit a STEM career path is complex and has multiple contributing factors.

The complexity of making STEM-related career decisions is particularly salient for women in post-secondary education programs, who are often at a developmental stage where they are also actively involved in romantic relationships. In their review of the literature, Domene and Johnson (2021) conclude that the growing body of research evidence suggests career and relationship goals are deeply interconnected during emerging adulthood, which refers to the developmental stage in industrialized societies that occurs between the ages of 18 to 29 years old (Arnett, 2018). Shulman and Connolly (2013) proposed a "transitional" stage in romantic relationship development, during which emerging adults seek to coordinate career and life plans with a partner (p. 27). In alignment with this proposition, existing research has revealed emerging adult couples influence and support one another's career development, provide encouragement and motivation, model positive educational or occupational behaviours, make academic achievement a relationship standard, and even treat each member's educational and career goals as shared tasks (Domene et al., 2012; Manning et al., 2011; Mortimer et al., 2002).

Many emerging adults are pursuing goals related to love and work and establishing commitments in both of these areas may have advantages, such as greater life satisfaction and self-efficacy in managing work-family conflicts (Luyckx et al., 2014). On the other hand, partners may draw attention away from educational and career pursuits, and there is some evidence that anxious attachment to romantic partners might hinder career decision-making (Kvitkovičová et al., 2017; Manning et al., 2011). Career pursuits may also pose challenges for romantic relationships. In a study of newlyweds, some of whom were emerging adults, having a spouse with a higher workload predicted declines in marital satisfaction (Lavner & Clark, 2017). Despite these findings, few studies have explored the intersection of romantic relationships and career development for women in STEM. Building on the existing literature suggesting potential intersections between career development and romantic relationships during emerging adulthood, this study was designed to explore career-relationship intersections for emerging adult women pursuing careers in STEM.

Romantic Relationships and Women's Pursuit of STEM Careers

Existing research suggests romantic relationships may have both positive and negative impacts on the career development of women pursuing STEM post-secondary education and occupations. Shen (2024) found the likelihood of remaining in a STEM or STEM-related (i.e., healthcare) occupation was greater for women whose spouses also worked in these occupations. While the reasons for this finding were not explored, Shen identified the role of spousal support as an area for further investigation. There is some evidence suggesting women in STEM majors may enter romantic relationships with partners who have complementary expectations, values, and priorities in the realms of relationship, family, and career (Barth et al., 2016; Dunlap et al., 2019). At the same time, Park et al. (2011) found romantic goals may conflict with attitudes and behaviours related to STEM for women in university. Other studies have found marriage amongst women in STEM education to be associated with lower STEM persistence intentions and publication productivity, with some women experiencing pressure to downplay accomplishments and employment prospects to avoid spousal conflict (Fisher et al. 2020; Wang et al., 2017). Park et al. (2016) were interested in how preferences for traditional romantic partners, conceptualized as partners who are more intelligent than oneself, impact the pursuit of STEM. These authors found that when the goal of being romantically desirable was activated, women who preferred more intelligent romantic partners showed poorer math performance, lower identification with math, and lower interest in STEM careers. This study raised questions about the role of gender norms and expectations in the pursuit of STEM alongside romantic relationships.

Qualitative research and the accounts of women in STEM provides some insight into the career-relationship intersections of this population. Drawing on data from a larger investigation into chemistry and physics graduate students' transition into science careers, several women interviewed at a range of career stages indicated they had prioritized family life (i.e., romantic relationships, marriages, and children) when making educational or career decisions (Wyss & Tai, 2010). Compared to men, women more frequently reported work-family conflicts and seemed slightly more open to prioritizing relationships, including newer, less committed relationships. Dabney and Tai (2013) analyzed a subset of 11 interviews drawn from the same research initiative, involving women who were pursuing or had attained physics doctorates. The authors found that, although romantic partners may offer emotional support, "pick up slack," and even promote retention in STEM education, they can also be a hindering influence on career, such as by taking time away from work (p. 6). Conversely, in a study by Piatek-Jiminez (2015), women completing undergraduate mathematics majors reported they would not allow romantic relationships to interfere with the pursuit of their careers in the future. Ghose (2025) reflected on historical challenges for women in physics pursuing marriage and family, alongside her own challenges with the "two-body problem" in physics academia. Some women in STEM have highlighted the need for workplace policies and practices that better accommodate caregiving responsibilities (Stuart, 2019), and there is evidence that new mothers are more likely to leave STEM careers than new fathers (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2019). Despite these insights, many questions remain regarding the influence of romantic relationships on women's pursuit of STEM careers, including questions about the goals and processes that occur as women and their romantic partners pursue these careers together.

Contextual Action Theory

Contextual Action Theory (CAT) provides a useful framework for conducting research on career development goals and processes (Young & Domene, 2012). This theory assumes intentional, goal-directed, and socially constructed action, typically occurring between people rather than individually, as central to understanding career development and human behaviour in general (Domene, Valach, & Young, 2015; Young & Domene, 2019).

Within this framework, *action* is understood from three complementary perspectives: (a) observable, *manifest behaviour* (i.e., verbal, and nonverbal behaviour); (b) *internal processes* that guide the action (i.e., thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations); and (c) the *meanings* that are socially constructed around an action. Action can also be organized by level of complexity. *Elements* are the observable, measurable components of action (e.g., words used in conversation, gestures, silence) which combine into *functional steps* (e.g., making a statement), representing sequential movement towards goals (e.g., to communicate an idea) and *intentional frameworks*. *Intentional frameworks* reflect the overall purpose of an interaction and overlap with specific goals. Importantly, actions are not limited to conversation. For example, the element of sitting down at one's desk may contribute to the functional step of studying and the goal/intentional framework of doing well on a test. Groups of related actions organized around shared goals are referred to as *projects*, which occur in the medium-term, while *careers* subsume several related projects over the long-term (e.g., a year or a lifetime). For example, a STEM career may include the action of attending class and the project of completing post-secondary education.

CAT emphasizes *joint action*, or the actions taken together by multiple people (e.g., couples) working together to achieve their goals (Young & Domene, 2019; Young et al., 2021; Young et al., 2005). CAT's relational emphasis is ideally suited to provide a broader understanding of the factors that both help and hinder career development for women in STEM who are in romantic relationships. Given its focus on joint action, CAT offers an optimal framework to explore how couples act together to achieve STEM career goals, and how romantic partners may support women in pursuit of those goals.

Present Study

Research on career-relationship intersections during emerging adulthood, for women in STEM is still at an exploratory stage, and the processes through which these women navigate career and relationships remains largely unknown. Understanding these processes may provide important information for addressing the gender gap that persists in many STEM occupations. For this reason, we conducted a qualitative exploration of the joint actions and projects of couples in pursuit of a STEM career. The study was guided by an overall research question, "How do women in STEM post-secondary programs jointly pursue their career plans with their romantic partners?" and two sub-questions:

1. What kinds of projects do these women engage in with their romantic partners around pursuing a STEM career?
2. What goal-directed actions are taken together by these women and their romantic partners to achieve their STEM career projects?

Method

The study was conducted using the Action-Project Method (A-PM). The A-PM is a qualitative method designed to explore intentional, goal-directed action between people within social and cultural contexts (Young et al., 2021; Young et al., 2005). The method is rooted in the theoretical assumptions of CAT. We used the A-PM to observe and understand couples' joint actions and projects, along with additional patterns of similarity (i.e., themes) that provided further insights into the process of pursuing a STEM career. The research team did not make a priori assumptions about the specific actions, projects, or themes that might be observed, but, rather, these were created from the data collection and analysis process and are assumed to be a co-construction between participants and the research team.

Participants

Following approval by the authors' institutional research ethics board (REB21-1275), participants were recruited via word of mouth and advertisements posted on a news and discussion-based social media platform and distributed by STEM-related departments, faculties, and student organizations within one university in Western Canada. Participants were recruited between September 2021 and January 2022. In A-PM studies, participants are selected based on whether they are from the population of interest and whether they have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Young et al., 2005). In published A-PM studies, sample sizes are highly variable and range from approximately 25 dyads (Young et al., 2021) to only one or two cases (e.g., Valach & Young, 2013; Young et al., 2000; Young et al., 2007). Consistent with the sample sizes used in previous master's theses and doctoral dissertations employing the A-PM, we set a target sample of 12 participants, divided into six couples (Graham, 2009; Klaassen, 2010; Lee, 2010; Polak, 2014; Silva, 2019).

Telephone screening interviews confirmed participant eligibility based on the following set of inclusion and exclusion criteria: (a) both members of the couple were between 18 and 29 years old; (b) both self-identified as being in a committed, romantic relationships spanning at least one year (including 2SLGBTQI+ relationships); (c) at least one member of the couple self-identified as a woman pursuing a STEM degree full-time; and (d) both members of the couple had conversational fluency in English.

Two exclusion criteria also informed the selection of participants. First, couples where either member was a parent were excluded because relationship and career dynamics were expected to be substantially different for families than for couples. Second, couples where the woman in STEM was pursuing a health career were excluded from the study because gender disparities in health professions are not the same as in other STEM fields (Chan et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2017). Furthermore, many definitions of STEM exclude the health professions (e.g., Wall, 2019). Note, however, that individuals in biology degrees who were considering STEM careers outside of the health sciences were not excluded. While these criteria served as a guide, final recruitment decisions were made based on the perceived fit of a participant dyad with the research questions.

The final sample included 12 participants (six couples), aged 20 to 28 years ($M = 22.5$; $SD = 2.78$). Seven participants identified as female (all the women in STEM and one romantic partner), while the remaining five participants identified as male. The women in STEM described themselves as being from the following ethnic/cultural backgrounds: European Canadian, Vietnamese, South Asian, Chinese Canadian, and Chinese Vietnamese. The romantic partners reported their ethnic/cultural backgrounds as European Canadian, Vietnamese, South Asian, and Mixed Ethnicity. The women in STEM included participants who were pursuing doctoral degrees in Computer Science ($n = 1$) and Biophysical Chemistry ($n = 1$), and participants enrolled in bachelor's degrees in Computer Science ($n = 1$), Bioinformatics ($n = 1$), and Biological Sciences ($n = 2$). Four of the partners were also students, pursuing a doctoral degree in Computer Science ($n = 1$) or undergraduate degrees in Computer Science ($n = 1$), Arts ($n = 1$), and Electrical Engineering ($n = 1$). The remaining two partners had previously completed at least some post-secondary education and were pursuing employment in K-12 education ($n = 1$) and power engineering ($n = 1$) at the time of their research involvement. All couples reported being in a committed, romantic relationship together (one married, one dating and cohabiting, and four dating but not cohabiting). Relationship length ranged from nearly two years to over eight years. Five couples reported primarily speaking to each other in English, while one couple indicated mainly speaking to each other in the language of their shared country of origin. After the first interview, each participant was provided a \$25 CAD Amazon.ca gift card as an honorarium (\$50 CAD per couple).

Research Team

The research team consisted of a university professor who identified as a Mexican-Chinese man, a graduate student who identified as a European Canadian woman, and a graduate student who identified as a European Canadian woman and completed her degree during the project. All three researchers were in long-term romantic relationships and were in, or were pursuing, careers in counselling psychology. One of the graduate students was also in the emerging adulthood stage of development at the time of data collection and analysis. As such, the research team was familiar with some of the issues raised by participants, which enriched

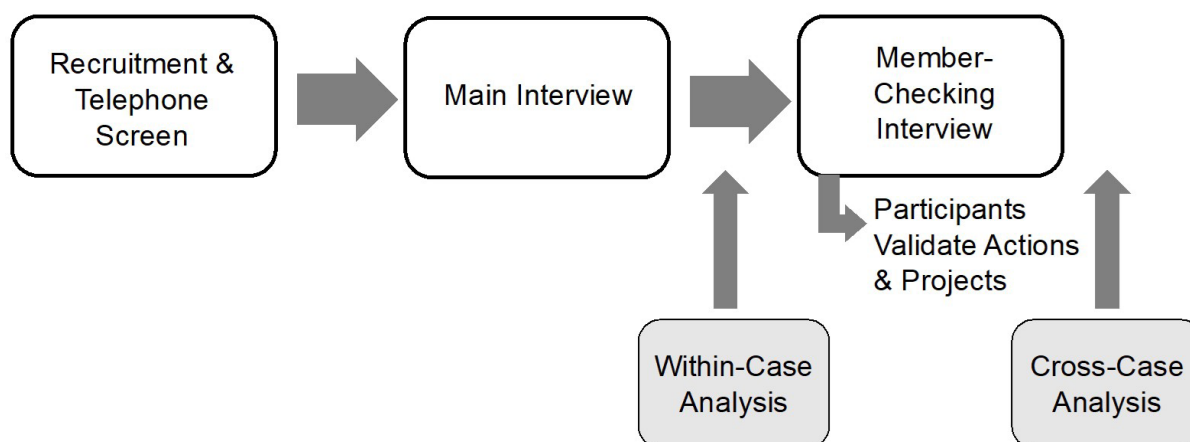
the discussion during the consensus-based analysis process. Throughout this process, the research team engaged in ongoing discussion of the potential influences of their worldviews and biases on the research, with the intention of ensuring their frames of reference did not overly influence the study results.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The research procedures were based on Young and colleagues (2021) brief (i.e., non-longitudinal) version of the A-PM recommended for time-limited research (see Figure 1). To comply with institutional and provincial health authority restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, our procedures incorporated online adaptations of the A-PM method recommended by Campbell and Domene (2024). The first author completed the interviews, while the entire research team conducted the within-case and cross-case analysis together.

Figure 1

Condensed Action-Project Method Process



Main Interview

All main interviews were conducted and recorded using a video conferencing platform, with both members of the couple in the same physical location. The first stage of the main interview, the *warm-up*, was designed to increase participant comfort while preparing the couple for the joint conversation. At this stage, participants were asked general questions about their careers and romantic relationships until they appeared comfortable and primed to move into the joint conversation. Potential questions included: “How did you two meet?”; “Can you tell me a bit about your relationship with each other?”; “Can you both tell me a bit about your future career or educational plans?”; “[Woman in STEM], What has your experience been like as a woman pursuing STEM?”; and “How has it been, balancing [Woman in STEM’s] STEM career goals with your relationship together?” As part of the warm-up, the researcher helped couples to identify possible topics for the *joint conversation*, by asking them about the most relevant or urgent topics for them regarding the women in STEM’s career path, in the context of their relationship (e.g., “If you had to pick one or two things that you feel would be the most relevant or urgent right now, for you two to focus on regarding [Woman in STEM’s] career path in the context of your relationship together, what would they be?”).

Next, the couple completed the *joint conversation* stage of their interview, a data collection process that involved a self-directed (i.e., recorded without any researchers present) discussion about pursuing a STEM career in the context of their romantic partnership. The joint conversation, ranging in length from 15 to 16.5 minutes across the sample, allowed the research team to observe couple’s process of discussing this topic. For the final stage of the main interview, the *self-confrontation session*, each member of the couple individually reviewed the video-recorded joint conversation with the interviewer without their partner present.

The self-confrontation session provided additional information on participants' perspectives during the joint conversation (i.e., internal processes and goals/social meaning). The interviewer played the recording of the conversation back to the participant, pausing every two minutes to ask the participant about their thoughts and feelings during that segment of the joint conversation. At the end of the session, the participant was asked about their overall intentions or goals for the joint conversation, how typical the conversation was, in terms of the way the couple normally interacted, and whether they had any additional information they wanted to share about the conversation.

Within-Case Analysis

Shortly after each couple's main interview was completed, a within-case analysis was conducted for that couple, using the procedures described in Young et al. (2021) and Jensen et al. (2022). First, the warm-up and joint conversation sections of the main interview were transcribed with the assistance of the automatic transcription feature built into the video conference platform. Summary notes were used to capture the content of each participant's self-confrontation. Along with the demographic information that participants provided, these transcripts and notes formed the data set for the within-case analysis process.

As recommended by Young and colleagues (2005, 2021), the analysis began with two researchers using a consensus-based, inductive and deductive qualitative analysis strategy, identifying actions and joint actions, including elements, functional steps, and goals. The analysis involved considering the theoretical tenets of CAT, as well as close engagement with the data. Each two-minute segment of the joint conversation was coded for its elements (e.g., "agrees," "suggests a topic for discussion," "interrupts"), guided by a code list that has been used in previous A-PM studies conducted with couples. Functional steps and goals for each segment were identified by considering *how* and *why* participants were interacting in a cyclical manner, as described in Jensen et al. (2022). Finally, the intentional framework (i.e., overall goals) for the conversation were identified from the self-confrontation. Throughout the process, the researchers discussed possible interpretations until consensus was reached about which interpretation was most plausible. The results of this analysis were compiled into narrative summaries, one for each person and a joint narrative for the couple as a whole, which included a description of the couple's projects related to pursuing STEM career goals.

As a final step in the within-case analysis process, all three members of the research team independently reviewed the full data set and the narrative summaries prior to discussing the case together. These discussions followed the procedures described in Young et al. (2005) and were guided by the overarching goal of considering multiple possible interpretations about the data and reaching consensus between team members in terms of their understanding of what was occurring for each couple. The consensus-based discussion process focused on addressing the research questions and identifying any additional themes that the research team identified as meaningful within the case. Following the member-checking interviews, any corrections or additions to the narratives and project descriptions were considered in the cross-case analysis, described below.

Member-Checking Interview

After the within-case analysis was completed for a couple, the participants were invited to return for a *member-checking interview*. All but one of the member-checking interviews were conducted by videoconference, with the remaining interview being conducted by telephone. The member-checking interviews allowed participants to provide feedback on, or make changes to, the researchers' written narrative summaries of findings that emerged from the within-case analysis, as well as the joint projects identified for that couple. One couple chose not to participate in the member-checking interview; instead, the woman in STEM from this couple sent minor written revisions to her individual narrative via email. In the two instances where one member of the couple declined to participate in the member-checking interview, the member-checking focused only on findings related to the remaining participant's experience and the project descriptions. The joint narrative and individual narrative for the other member of the couple were not reviewed in these cases.

Cross-Case Analysis

Finally, the information provided by all couples was examined together in a *cross-case analysis*, conducted by the entire research team. Consistent with previous A-PM research, the cross-case analysis involved examining the data set for three randomly assigned cases at a time, prior to reviewing the entire data set together (Young et al., 2021). Next, the cross-case analysis followed the same consensus-based, inductive and deductive analysis strategy used in the within-case analysis, except that the focus was on identifying the broader patterns that were present across the different couples. Specifically, we discussed and reached agreement on patterns of similarity and difference among the cases.

Procedures for Methodological Integrity

The A-PM incorporates multiple strategies to promote methodological integrity and rigour (Young et al., 2021; Young et al., 2005). As recommended by Young and colleagues, a detailed audit trail was maintained, including records of potential (i.e., screened) and included participants, and all stages of data collection and analysis. The consensus-based analysis process, which included the three researchers discussing each other's perspectives and potential biases throughout the analysis, minimized the chances of any one person's biases and perspectives disproportionately shaping the findings (Young et al., 2021). Member-checking interviews were designed to align the analysis with participants' own perspectives and language, further reducing the chances of the research team's biases overly influencing the findings (Young et al., 2005). Furthermore, the A-PM incorporates multiple sources of information, which attend to all three perspectives on action proposed by CAT (i.e., manifest behaviour, internal processes, and goals/social meaning; Young et al., 2021). To elaborate, the data set included information from video recordings of the warm-up and joint conversation (i.e., manifest behaviour) and summary notes of the self-confrontations (i.e., internal processes and goals/social meaning).

Results

The within- and cross-case data analysis revealed numerous similarities, differences and unique patterns related to how emerging adult women in STEM post-secondary programs jointly pursued their career plans with their romantic partners. The couples constructed a variety of *projects* related to women pursuing a STEM career, which we organized into two categories, projects where the focus was on the intersection of STEM career goals and other life goals and projects focused on career decision-making. In pursuit of their projects, couples engaged in a variety of specific *actions*, including the use of warm and collaborative conversational tones, high levels of self-disclosure, and providing various supports for the women to persist in their STEM career paths. Aside from findings related to the research questions, the analysis process also identified five additional emergent themes that provided insight into the larger context in which couples' STEM career actions and projects were constructed, including challenges encountered in pursuing STEM careers, family of origin expectations, the assumption that both members of the couple would be working, pursuing work-life balance, and considering the purpose of work.

Sub-Question 1: Joint Projects

The cross-case analysis revealed several similarities across the projects (i.e., multiple related actions over a medium time period) that couples constructed related to women pursuing a STEM career. Specifically, projects reflected two overarching categories: (a) the intersection of STEM career goals and other life goals commonly encountered during emerging adulthood and (b) career decision-making for the woman in STEM.

The Intersection of STEM Career Goals and Other Life Goals

Five couples considered how the woman's STEM career goals might intersect with the couple's other life goals. That is, these couples were navigating the intersection of STEM career goals with other life goals commonly encountered during emerging adulthood. Specific life goals varied from couple to couple but, across the sample as a whole, included relationship progression, marriage, deciding where to live, and having children. Exemplifying this category of project, Marya described the couple's difficulties rectifying her lack of a concrete career goal with the couple's shared vision for their personal life:

What's also challenging then is to pull that non-target into some of the life-family career paths of we want to live in a small kind of town in [province in Canada] and go skiing all the time and go hiking and do all these activities that we love, and I've never had those line up with my career trajectory yet.

This category of projects also included the possibility of relocating or resolving couple's future geographic locations. Fred and Aria, two PhD students, considered how to pursue their individual careers while staying together in the same place:

Fred: You might get job in another city. I might get job in another city. There might be [jobs] in different countries as well, so, as you mentioned, we have to be [in] the same place. That's also obviously the same for my case. I also want to be [in] the same place, but [...] if I have to sacrifice some good things to keep us together, I will do that. So, sometimes I worry about your opinion, in that case, because from the very beginning you are a way better student than me. So, you have a better career compared to mine [...] Will you be able to do any sort of such sacrifices if needed?

Aria: Yeah, definitely, because if it keeps us in the same place, then I'm okay to do this kind of sacrifice.

The ways that the couples could navigate this intersection were not always clear to them, and for two couples, this lack of clarity was a source of disagreement. T expressed openness to moving for Matthew's career, but Matthew preferred the decision to equally reflect each person's career opportunities. Since Matthew was more certain about his career goals, T perceived her own situation as more flexible and believed she may be able to clarify her career path by accompanying him as he pursued his post-degree career. For another couple where the partner (Andrew) was employed full-time, this intersection seemed complicated by the fact that, despite their similar ages, they appeared to be at different life stages from one another:

Emily: I have heard a lot that you should study at different universities and not only stay at the same one, but I'm not sure how I feel about that [...] But, I don't know, if a really good opportunity presents itself somewhere else, I might consider that, and I don't know if I will take it or not, but that's an opportunity. And yeah. If I want a job or career that is fulfilling, then that might be a possibility.

Andrew: Yeah, that's what concerns me because I'm out here looking for a house now, to buy. And then, I'm gonna buy a house, and then you're gonna go disappear somewhere for five years.

In an exception to this pattern, Charlotte and Elle's joint conversation included no discussion of how they might coordinate their career and relationship goals to integrate their individual lives. This divergent finding suggests that considering how to pursue career goals alongside relationship goals is not a priority for at least some women pursuing STEM careers.

Career Decision-Making for the Woman in STEM

Notably, most of the women in STEM were in ($n = 2$) or were considering ($n = 3$) graduate school, which may reflect the fact that many STEM career paths require advanced degrees (UNESCO, 2017). Their

status as students, some of whom were also considering future studies, may have influenced their involvement in the second category of project that emerged from the data analysis. Specifically, four couples were engaged in projects related to career decision-making for the women in STEM. For example, T expressed uncertainty about selecting a career:

I like sitting in a class learning about stuff and I like going to the labs and being given a problem and then solving that, whatever. But no job comes to mind when I think about like, 'oh, a job, where I can sit in a lecture [and] learn about,' you know? [...] I like my major, but I don't know how I'm gonna apply that someday.

Notably, across the six couples, the women in STEM were at different stages in their career decision-making processes. Career decision-making processes that were identified in the cross-case analysis included: (a) the woman being passionate about her STEM education, but unsure of what she wanted to do for a career (as in the above quotation); (b) the woman primarily considering STEM careers but not entirely ruling out other career possibilities including becoming a full-time parent; (c) considering different specific occupations and education levels within a single STEM field; and (d) weighing the relative merits of continuing to pursue a career direction the woman had been on for several years versus switching to a new career path.

The exceptions to this general pattern were two couples where the woman in STEM already had a specific post-graduation career in mind and, in one case, a job offer in place. In the latter case, the couple had a project focused on transitioning into the workforce, because the woman had a specific job lined up after she graduated. However, this participant still seemed open to changing career directions later on in life. In the other exceptional case, the woman had at least generally decided on a specific STEM career field. Nonetheless, in contrast to the majority of the sample, these two participants seemed to have completed their career decision-making processes, at least for the time being.

Sub-Question 2: Goal-Directed Actions

Patterns of action, as conceptualized within CAT, that were similar across the couples included (a) using warm and collaborative conversational tones, (b) exhibiting high levels of self-disclosure/participant comfort with sharing their perspectives, and (c) partners providing a variety of supports for the women to persist in their STEM career paths. Additionally, several patterns of actions varied across couples. Specifically, variation was observed in terms of their engagement in planning versus going with the flow and participants' level of optimism for the future. These patterns of action revealed how couples discussed, and ultimately worked together, towards the woman in STEM's career plans and goals.

Warm and Collaborative Conversational Tone

For four couples, the joint conversations were characterized by a tone that was warm and collaborative. These couples appeared connected and in-tune with each other, acting as a team in pursuit of their goals. Aria, reflecting on the evolution of her relationship, shared her shift from a previously competitive orientation towards acting collaboratively with her husband:

During my study, or during my goal, I didn't want to consider about what is my relationship with you, or anything else, because I always wanted to be the top one. So that's why sometimes I took a decision, a little bit more like self-centred decisions maybe. But right now, I think we are on the same path. We have the same kind of thinking. So, in our career as well, and in our relationship as well, we came into this stage that we think about each other's career too.

Although a warm and collaborative tone was most prevalent, it was not universal. For two of the couples, their joint conversation was more debate-like. This debate-like quality is exemplified by T and Matthew's discussion

of whether their relationship, and specifically the partner's education, influenced the woman in STEM's decision to take a coding course:

T: I don't think me being exposed to you doing things like that, like coding and stuff all the time would make me—like if I see you do something like a hobby or something a lot and I try it, I don't think the fact that you like it would make me like it too.

Matthew: I beg to disagree. Before I came to university, I never played volleyball once in my life, and I was a swimmer, and you liked volleyball. And I came here, and I started liking volleyball because you liked volleyball, and now I'm on a volleyball team.

High Levels of Self-Disclosure

The joint conversations of all six couples featured high levels of self-disclosure. Participants in this study appeared comfortable sharing their individual perspectives with one another. This theme was present even when perspectives differed between the two members of a couple. Exemplifying that comfort, Charlotte (a woman in STEM) explained, "It's just very natural, very comfortable to talk about it, 'cus I know she won't judge me for anything."

The Provision of Support

Across couples, partners provided a variety of supports for the women to persist in their STEM career paths. The specific nature of the support varied across couples, but included providing emotional support (e.g., words of encouragement, validation, and encouraging attention to mental well-being), verbal support (e.g., suggestions/advice and reminders), and practical support (e.g., household labour). In addition, some partners supported the woman in STEM by modelling/setting a positive example and making career decisions that benefit both members of the couple. For example, Frank shared how he provided practical support to Marya during her PhD candidacy preparation:

So, yeah, just supporting in whatever way that means. Like, when you're doing your candidacy, it was trying to be here to make all the meals and just do that sort of housework, or that sort of thing, while you were super focused on getting prepped for your candidacy [...] Just little things like that that make a difference, I think.

Emily, who did not live with her partner, still made an explicit connection between household labour and support for her STEM career during the couple's joint conversation: "I know that I'd appreciate it if, during the times when things are much more busy, if you can help me remember things and help me focus on things and, I don't know, possibly pick up extra slack." Charlotte shared an example of emotional support from her same-sex partner: "I know she re-assures me, a lot, and kinda tries to drill that idea of like, my academic performance does not equate to my self-worth."

For two couples, support included figuring out an appropriate amount of support that did not overwhelm the woman in STEM's independence. In his self-confrontation, Adam explained:

I guess one thing that I struggle with a bit is what extent I push her to do things that I think that would be good for her, and trying to find the balance of encouraging and not just trying to tell her how to live her life [...] It's just hard for me to do, so I just want to get better at that, just because she has her own spirit. Yeah, she likes to do exactly what she wants.

Furthermore, for two couples, this support was reciprocal. For these couples, there were indications that the woman in STEM also provided support for her partner's career pursuits. As Adam described:

It kind of goes both ways, where I try to help her out and she tries to support me. Just 'cus there's a number of things I probably wouldn't have done, but did, because you know, she was in my corner.

Although the research team did not identify reciprocal support in the within-case analysis for the other couples, this may have been a function of the research question, which was focused on the woman in STEM. That is, participants were aware that the study was about supporting the career of the woman in STEM, so they may not have focused on the ways that the woman in STEM supported her partner's career during the data collection.

Patterns of Action that Varied Across the Couples

Couples varied from each other in terms of their desire to plan for their future and their optimism for that future, which may be reflective of broader variations in terms of how emerging adult couples interact with each other. There was significant variation in terms of engagement in planning versus going with the flow in pursuing couple's goals for the future. For two couples, the partner preferred to "go with the flow," while the woman in STEM preferred to have a concrete plan. For two couples, this pattern was reversed. In a fifth couple, both members seemed to engage in planning ahead, while no clear pattern was observed for the final couple in terms of this action. Couples also varied in their level of optimism for the future, or their sense that things would ultimately "work out." For four couples, optimism was expressed by only one member of the couple (three partners and one woman in STEM). For the other two couples, optimism was expressed by both members. For example, Frank expressed optimism that the couple could balance personal goals with Marya's STEM career goals:

I think we both need to think outside the box [...] You're like oh, we can't have it both ways sort of thing, but I don't know if that's necessarily true. I think maybe it won't be the easiest path to try to merge both those but why not?

Additional Emergent Themes

Going beyond the identified patterns in participants' projects and actions, the cross-case analysis process identified five additional themes that were relevant to the overarching research question. These themes were: (a) challenges with pursuing STEM career paths, (b) family of origin expectations in pursuing STEM, (c) the assumption that both members of the couple will be working in the long term, (d) pursuing work-life balance, and (e) discussion of the purpose of work in a person's life.

Challenges with Pursuing STEM Career Paths

In four couples, the woman in STEM identified and described various challenges associated with pursuing a STEM career path that were not connected to their romantic relationship. These challenges included peer-to-peer competition and comparison, academic rigour, fear of failure, female underrepresentation, and experiences of gender discrimination. Forms of gender discrimination described by the two participants who experienced this phenomenon included sexual harassment, sexist comments, being looked down upon, and having others minimizing their knowledge and expertise. Both of these women were also engaged in efforts to increase gender inclusivity in STEM. Furthermore, both women described their perceptions that, although there are still problems, the climate of STEM for has improved over time for women:

Marya: In terms of being a female actually in STEM I really do a lot of equity diversity and inclusion work because, I just think it's important. But we're almost there in terms of equality in the science field, particularly mine. But definitely there's been times, where I've been you know discriminated against, or looked down upon, or thought to be not as good as a chemist, due to being a female.

In contrast, Monica described but did not appear to be concerned about underrepresentation of women in her field and engaged in peer-to-peer comparison. Aria, a computer science PhD student, had not noticed gender-related discrimination or differences in the number of students in her courses and stated that the top students in her classes tended to be women.

Family of Origin Expectations in Pursuing STEM

Three couples discussed family of origin expectations in pursuing the woman's STEM careers. Those expectations varied but included encouragement to prioritize marriage and family-oriented goals, what future life options to pursue (within or outside of STEM), and school performance. For the woman in STEM in all three of these couples, family expectations seemed to carry significant weight. In her discussion about whether or not to pursue a career in pharmacy, Charlotte expressed this pressure:

And then also with [my mom] just telling all of our family members and family friends that I'm going into it, it just feels like I have an even bigger expectation to go into it [...] It's just if I don't go into it, I feel like I'm just gonna break my mom's heart. 'Cus that's all she wants for me, and I guess both of my parents, they just came here, sacrificed everything just so I can get a good education, where it's like, I feel like I have to.

The Assumption that Both Members of the Couple Will be Working in the Long-Term

For five of the six couples, the research team identified an underlying assumption that both members of the couple would be working in the long-term. Consider, for example, Charlotte and Elle's discussion of shifting career paths over the lifespan:

Elle: Yeah. I feel like people change up their lives all the time, and it doesn't mean that you can't restart your life at 30. It doesn't mean that you can't restart your life at 40. Like, it's a little late, but better late than never.

Charlotte: Yeah no, I get that. But yeah, I have the rest of my life to kind of do what I want. It's just I don't wanna start over and just start at zero again, and kind of work my way up. It just seems like even more work.

Elle: I think at the end of the day, [...] it's always going to be more work. I don't think that you're starting at zero. I think you're going back into something with a different experience and a different mindset because by the time you figure it out, you're not going to be the same person that you are now, right?

One possible exception to this pattern was Marya, who mentioned full-time parenting as an option she was considering for her future. Nonetheless, she was also exploring various STEM career paths and becoming a full-time parent did not appear to be a priority for her:

There's also a part of my brain that says, and it's a lot of my upbringing, that well I could also just be a mom and just, not do science. And so, it's well maybe, you could move out to a small town and live there and do all your things and not work in science and to me that just blows my mind, because I haven't had a single day where I haven't thought about advanced science.

This finding needs to be interpreted in light of another aspect of the sample: only two couples were considering how to fit children into their future work and lives. These were also the oldest two couples in the sample. The possibility of having children and, by extension, the impact of becoming parents on career plans, may become more salient for couples in their mid to late 20s than in their early 20s.

Pursuing Work-Life Balance

Three couples and one additional partner disclosed information related to negotiating work-life balance in the context of pursuing a STEM career. These participants were considering how to balance their career development with other facets of their lives (e.g., their relationships, mental health, or other interests/hobbies). In his self-confrontation, Adam shared his desire for Monica to focus more on developing interests beyond her STEM career:

I really appreciate just being able to like, if on the weekend I want to do something, it's really no big deal. I can just go ahead and do it. But for her, she probably has to worry about this meeting, that meeting, all sorts of different things, and it's just like... we're still so young. [...] I just guess that I want her to have things that she's interested in outside of school, and work, and everything else that's always gonna be there.

Notably, this work-life balance seemed to be aspirational, an ongoing negotiation rather than something the couples had attained. Exemplifying this negotiation, Marya shared the following during the warm-up:

Things like that of managing anxiety have been huge for me [...] making sure I'm eating, sleeping, working out, and having those, I guess, self-care and those personal pieces built into my everyday because [...] when things get too busy at work or in school, what starts going is sleeping. What starts going is like, oh I just will skip this meal, or I won't work out today. And that's where I have flexibility to make those decisions, and so it's really focusing on those pieces for me to ensure that those are all components of my day.

Discussion of the Purpose of Work in a Person's Life

All six couples' joint conversations included some discussion of the broader purpose of work in a person's life. For three couples, this discussion took the form of expressing disagreement, while the other three couples were in agreement. In terms of the couples who expressed disagreement, in two cases the woman in STEM prioritized practical/pragmatic considerations for her future career (e.g., earning potential, financial and time investment) while the partner prioritized happiness, enjoyment, and/or the pursuit of non-work interests. The third couple (Emily and Andrew) showed the opposite pattern, with the partner prioritizing pragmatic considerations while the woman in STEM prioritized self-fulfillment. For example, during their discussion of whether fulfillment can come from a job, they stated:

Andrew: I think my general experience in this world is that jobs are not fun. Any job you have, no matter how fun it is in [week] one, week 100 you'll be sad.
[...]

Emily: I would like to not, have a career that I dislike. [...] I refuse to have and maintain a career that bores me because, doing things makes me feel fulfilled, and I am not going to give that up. I need something that makes me feel fulfilled and like I've accomplished something.

On the other hand, two couples were in agreement with each other about their desire to prioritize fulfillment in a career and were exploring or pursuing an occupation that the woman in STEM would "love" or feel "passionate" about. In contrast, members of the final couple both seemed more concerned with pragmatic aspects of career than with self-fulfillment (e.g., reconciling their individual careers with their desire to live in the same geographic location).

Discussion

In this study, we used the A-PM to explore how women in STEM post-secondary programs jointly pursue their career plans with their romantic partners, extending existing knowledge about interconnections

between careers and romantic relationships during emerging adulthood. We identified two kinds of commonly occurring projects and numerous goal-directed actions taken by the six couples to pursue the woman's STEM career. Several additional emergent themes contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the women's career and relationship processes. This research shed light on the ways in which women in STEM and their romantic partners navigate possibilities and goals in the realms of love and work. Furthermore, this study extended the existing literature on the interconnection between career and relationship during emerging adulthood, and amongst women in STEM.

Joint Actions and Projects

The first category of projects we identified involved the intersection of STEM career goals with a range of other life goals commonly encountered in emerging adulthood, such as relationship progression, marriage, having children, and deciding where to live (Arnett, 2014; Domene et al., 2015; Kvasková et al., 2022). Domene et al.'s (2012) A-PM study of emerging adult couples transitioning from post-secondary into the workforce similarly revealed a category of projects related to "balancing multiple priorities," and an overlapping category of projects about "deciding where to live" (p. 20). Our findings also align with literature suggesting family and relationship considerations may influence career decision-making for some women in STEM (Wyss & Tai, 2010). Furthermore, recent research with emerging adults converges with our observation that some participants experienced tension between their careers and other life goals (Young et al. 2022; Youmans et al., 2022). Regardless of their specific stage of career development, emerging adult couples seem to consider how their careers and lives outside of work intersect.

The second category of projects involved career-decision making for the woman in STEM, including identifying careers or the next step in the woman's career path. Across the sample, couples varied significantly in their stage of career decision-making. These findings are not surprising, considering emerging adulthood tends to be a period of both career exploration and individual variation (Arnett, 2018, 2000). Projects related to career decision-making and career development have also been identified in other A-PM studies with emerging adults (Domene et al., 2012; Khalifa et al., 2018; Young et al., 2022; Young et al., 2015; Young et al., 2011). Our study extends the previous research to the population of women in STEM and their romantic partners. The fact that many of the joint projects were focused on career decision-making suggests that exploring and considering multiple career paths may be a common experience. This finding also aligns with research on emerging adulthood, which has demonstrated that this developmental period is characterized by extended career decision-making and delays in entering the workforce, at least for individuals in developed nations (Arnett, 2014; Domene et al., 2015). Overall, the projects identified in this study are highly aligned with research on emerging adulthood more generally.

Partners in this study provided a wide variety of supports for the women to persist in their STEM careers paths. Other research has similarly identified romantic partners as a potential source of career support for women in STEM in particular (Dabney & Tai, 2013; Wyss & Tai, 2010) and for emerging adults in general (Domene et al., 2012; Manning et al., 2011; Mortimer et al., 2002). In both Domene et al. (2012) and the present study, support emerged in couples' interactional patterns during the joint conversations, and in our study, four couples' joint conversations were characterized as warm and collaborative. Unique to our study, the research team observed that couples' joint conversations featured high levels of self-disclosure and comfort sharing their perspectives. Regardless of the degree of alignment (or lack thereof) in the perspectives of individual members of the couple, these couples showed striking openness with one another. These findings should be considered within the context of the study topic, which may have attracted partners who were supportive of the woman in STEM's career.

Additional Emergent Themes

The finding that women experienced challenges with pursuing STEM that were not related to their romantic relationships supports the continued presence of numerous barriers for women in STEM education that have been identified in previous research, such as underrepresentation (Frank, 2019; UNESCO, 2017;

Wall, 2019), perceived lack of belonging (Lewis et al., 2017), sexual harassment and gender-related bias (Leaper & Starr, 2019), and sexism enacted with both well-meaning and hostile intentions (Kuchynka et al., 2018). As two participants explicitly stated, it appears that, although the climate of STEM education programs may be improving for women, there is still much work to be done.

Arnett (2018) suggests that while emerging adulthood is a time in which individuals make decisions independent of their families of origin, the influence of those families remains with them. Consistent with Arnett's conceptualization, half of the women in the present study described how family of origin expectations (mainly from parents) influenced their pursuit of STEM careers. Existing research suggests parents can influence post-secondary students' STEM career development in many ways (Craig et al., 2018; Puccia et al., 2021). For example, in some cultures, parents may hold strong opinions about what career their adult children should pursue, including attitudes and beliefs about STEM (Ikkatai et al., 2019). When considered alongside this previous research, the present study findings confirm the importance of attending to the family context of career for women in STEM.

Couples in this study seemed to be operating from the implicit assumption that both of them would be working in the long-term. This observation aligns with the increasing prevalence of dual career couples in Western societies (e.g., Arnett, 2018). This finding should be interpreted in light of the fact that the two older couples in this sample were thinking about children, while the four younger couples were not. Also, couples where either partner was a parent were excluded from the study. Therefore, having children may simply not have been a relevant concern at this stage in the lives of many of the participants. One additional explanation for participants' expectations that both partners would be working long-term may be that we recruited women who were actively pursuing STEM and, therefore, had career goals in mind. Furthermore, five out of the six participating couples identified as heterosexual. In the context of traditional yet persisting gender roles in North America, if the woman is pursuing a career, it is likely both members of the couple will be.

Similar to the project relating to balancing career and other life goals, three couples and one partner were considering how to balance their career development with other facets of their lives (i.e., work-life balance). Dabney and Tai's (2013) study with female physicists similarly identified a desire for work-life balance, as well as the aspirational nature of this balance—something “just outside of [participants'] reach” (p. 4). In Dabney and Tai's study, pursuing a life outside of school was accompanied by a sense of guilt—something that was not observed amongst our sample. Perhaps this difference is reflective of the shifting discourse around work in North America that has accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the importance of work-life balance as a consideration for many workers (Como et al., 2021).

Beyond balancing work and life, couples discussed the overarching purpose of work in a person's life. Typically, participants fell into one of two camps: (a) those who emphasized the practical/pragmatic aspects of work (e.g., considering earning potential, financial and time investment) and (b) those who emphasized the importance of obtaining fulfillment, happiness, or pursuing passions through their work. These camps mirror two categories of messaging emerging adults may receive: to either “get a real job” or “follow your passion” (Domene et al., 2017, p. 407). The latter camp also overlaps with the notion of career as calling, or “work that a person perceives as his purpose in life” (Hall & Chandler, 2005, p. 160). Although participants provided some clues into the reasons behind their differing values around career, additional research with a different focus is required to fully understand the reasons behind the prioritization of passion versus practicality or vice versa, both in the specific context of pursuing STEM careers and also more generally.

Limitations

Among the limitations of this study, we employed a condensed (i.e., non-longitudinal) version of the A-PM and were, therefore, not able to observe how couples' actions in pursuit of their projects evolved over time (Young et al., 2021). Another limitation is that the data may have been influenced by social desirability bias, considering there was no deception involved, and participants were aware of the purpose of the study at the outset. For example, some of the participants may have been motivated to represent “women in STEM” well, and to encourage other women to persist in STEM through their narratives. Similarly, partners may have been motivated to appear supportive of the women's career paths for the researchers. The method's reliance on

co-constructing meaning with participants may have limited participants' willingness to report or demonstrate actions that could be perceived as undermining their partner. However, participants reported that the content of the conversations was typical for them, despite some differences in their interactional style related to the research context (e.g., more focused, more formal, awareness of having an "audience"). Additionally, many of the themes that emerged in this study are consistent with existing research about STEM retention and career development in emerging adulthood more generally, which suggests that social desirability did not exert a greater influence in this study than in other similar studies.

Furthermore, since four out of twelve participants did not return for the member-checking interviews, we could not confirm that they agreed with our interpretation of their data. Due to scheduling restrictions on the part of the participants and research team, the time period between the main interviews and the member-checking interviews was longer than is recommended by Young and colleagues (2021). This extended duration may have made it more difficult for participants to remember details of the first interview.

In addition, the sample included two individuals who were enrolled in science degrees (biology, chemistry) at the time of their research involvement, but who revealed that they were considering a health profession (pharmacy, medicine) among the future career options that they were contemplating. Therefore, another limitation of the study is that the screening process to exclude women pursuing health careers did not work as intended, possibly because some of the participants were at relatively early stages of career decision-making. In retrospect, it may have been more effective to have used self-reported intention to pursue a STEM career outside of medicine/health as the inclusion criterion, rather than the nature of their education program. Lastly, as an exploratory, qualitative research method, the A-PM is not designed to produce generalizable results. Nonetheless, transferability of the findings needs to be evaluated in light of the characteristics of the emerging adults who participated in the study.

Future Directions for Research

Couples in this study reported having a partner who supported the woman in STEM's career or educational plans. Therefore, it is recommended that future research be conducted with a broader range of couples to capture the influence of partners and relational dynamics that may be less supportive (e.g., career-hindering influences) as well as traditional versus non-traditional gender roles. Future research might also explore the pursuit of STEM careers amongst couples where either partner is a parent and compare couples who have decided on having or not having children, or who are undecided. Researchers should also explore the role of STEM workplace culture compared to relationship dynamics (e.g., partner support) in work-family conflicts. This research is especially important considering evidence that parenthood may influence STEM retention (Cech & Blair-Loy, 2019). Considering the finding that families of origin continue to exert an influence that emerged for at least some of the women in this study, a future A-PM study could focus on the projects that occur between emerging adult women in STEM and members of their family of origin, such as their parents. Furthermore, although participants identified as coming from a variety of ethnic/cultural backgrounds, research that focuses on the experiences of women from specific cultural groups that are under-represented in STEM education would be beneficial. Buck et al. (2020) has highlighted the need to consider intersectionality (Combahee River Collective, 2014; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) when researching gender disparities in STEM. Buck et al. (2020) also identified a lack of research on underrepresented genders in STEM beyond women, which should be addressed in future research. In addition, replication of the study with the longitudinal version of the A-PM might provide a fuller picture of the ways in which the projects and actions identified in the present study evolve over time. Quantitative, longitudinal research could be conducted to determine whether any of the actions or projects identified are predictive of STEM retention outcomes (e.g., degree completion, obtaining a STEM occupation). While an in-depth investigation of women's underrepresentation in STEM was outside the scope of the current study, this is an important area for ongoing research.

Implications for Career Counselling Practice

This study yielded several important considerations for professionals supporting the career development of emerging adult women in STEM post-secondary programs. An important finding that emerged from this study is that, while some women in STEM education programs may have a specific career goal in mind, others may be at an exploratory stage even if they are graduate students. Career practitioners working with this population should assess clients' stage of career development and select interventions that are in alignment with the client's career stage. Amundson (2018) provides excellent suggestions for career interventions appropriate for clients at varying stages of career development.

Couples in this study were also considering the purpose of work in a person's life—that is, what they value in a career. This finding underscores the critical importance of career development conversations during emerging adulthood. A major task in career counselling with women in STEM education may be facilitating deepened understanding of their career values. It may also be beneficial to normalize the idea that career values may not be static (Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2001), and that different members of a couple may have different priorities for their future work. In the realm of couples counselling, it may be important to make explicit each individual romantic partner's career values and to identify any discrepancies or conflicts that are present across the couple. If such conflicts exist, it may be beneficial to implement relationship counselling interventions designed to resolve general differences in values and priorities, even if these interventions are not specifically designed as career interventions (Domene & Johnson, 2021; Domene et al., 2015).

Careers do not exist in a vacuum. Our study lends support to researchers who have highlighted the inseparability of career and other domains of life (e.g., Domene & Johnson, 2021; Hudson Breen & Lawrence, 2021). Although the participating couples were very much engaged in career development efforts, they were also focused on other facets and goals for their future lives together. In assisting emerging adult women in STEM to clarify their career path, it may be important to encourage reflection on the kind of life they would like to lead outside of work, and how a given career path does or does not cohere with that desire. This reflection is particularly important considering the number of years of education required by many STEM careers, and existing research indicating that students in STEM post-secondary programs and adult women in the STEM workforce express concerns about managing their work-life balance in a STEM career (Beddoes & Pawley, 2014; Brue, 2019; Tan-Wilson & Stamp, 2015). In many cases, the role of the counsellor may be to assist the client in developing creative solutions to real or anticipated work-life conflicts (Amundson 2018; Hudson Breen & Lawrence, 2021).

For the couples in this study, pursuing a STEM career was a joint process. Career goals were constructed within relationships. These goals involved not just the woman in STEM but also their romantic partner and sometimes their family of origin relationships. Domene, Landine, and Stewart (2015) recommend career counsellors should assess both the relationships that may be influential in young people's career development and the impact of those influences on their career decision-making. The findings of the current study suggest that this practice is just as important for women in STEM programs as for other individuals at this stage of life. There may be a need to reconcile personal values and desires with family expectations. Our findings also suggest romantic relationships may be an important resource to harness, offering tangible support and collaborative/team effort during the woman's pursuit of their STEM career path. Furthermore, for some couples, what presents as a career problem may be better suited to couple or family counselling than career counselling (Domene & Johnson, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study revealed some of the important ways that emerging adult women in STEM degree programs pursue their career goals together with their romantic partners, as well as the nature of their actions and projects. For emerging adult couples in the current labour market and social context, career development may include consideration of the purpose of work in a person's life. All couples in our study were negotiating the role of work in their lives, and for some this negotiation was connected to trying to maintain work-life balance as a value. Furthermore, most participants placed importance on figuring out how

to pursue STEM career goals alongside their other life goals. However, STEM fields are not always conducive to achieving this balance (e.g., Dabney & Tai, 2013). Therefore, we recommend for post-secondary educators and student services personnel, including career counsellors, to explore additional ways to increase work-life balance for their students.

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