

[Home](#) | [Job Search](#) | [Career Strategies](#) | [Business](#) | [Entrepreneur](#) | [Web](#) | [Money](#) | [Education](#) | [Network](#) | [International](#)

Advancing Women in Leadership Online Journal
Volume 21, Summer 2006

[AWL Journal Home](#)

[Current Volume](#)

[Archives](#)

[Call for
Manuscripts/Guidelines](#)

[[Journal Index](#)]

Exploring Women's Career Development: Implications for Theory and Practice
I. Surjani and Dr V. Suchitra Mouly

Abstract

With a few notable exceptions, most research into the occupational experiences of women is typically macro-social and based on large-scale, impersonal, aggregated, and static data. Whilst such data reveal the position of women in the workforce relative to men, they do not provide sufficient processual insight into the career development of women. Through a case study approach, this study aims to discern patterns in the career development of women managers, and to examine if these patterns conform to career models such as those proposed by White, Cox, and Cooper (1992) and White (1995, 2000). The case data comprise of the career journeys of 20 women managers from a broad cross-section of occupational sectors in New Zealand. The data reveal that although the majority of women managers display high career centrality, they do not work continuously as they have several years of interruptions for bearing and rearing children, and work part-time and retrain themselves through further education before returning to the workplace. Interestingly, they do not seem to plan their careers.

Exploring Women's Career Development: Implications for Theory and Practice

The rise in the number of women entering the workforce has generally highlighted the need for greater understanding of the development of women's careers and the career choices of women. Until now, most research in this field has been undertaken through large-scale, quantitative surveys. This type of research has been criticized for producing impersonal, aggregated, and static data that construct a firm judgment of the position of women in the work force and do not understand the processes by which they accomplished it (White, et al., 1992).

Traditional models of career development are based on middle-class working men and do not accommodate the occupational behavior of women (Gilligan, 1979). This is because these models assume that career movements occur upward in organizational hierarchies in a predictable manner. The models are also principally founded on taxonomy of stages of career or age, which is inappropriate when applied to women. Generally, the work cycle of women is less predictable and more complex than that of men (Perun & Beilby, 1981); women's career development does not simply lag behind that of men but may proceed in an

altogether different manner (Gutek & Larwood, 1987).

It is only recently that researchers (e.g., Pringle & Dixon, 2000; White, et al., 1992) have sought to examine women's career journeys empirically. Such research aims to enhance our understanding of the phases that women professionals go through while attempting to balance their domestic and professional obligations.

Our study seeks to add on to this scant but increasingly important strand of research. In the context of New Zealand, where the authors are based, the present research addresses the following questions:

- What patterns are discernible in the career development of women?
- How, if at all, do these patterns differ from the career models available in the literature?
- How can one modify extant conceptualizations of career development to better describe the empirical career journeys at hand?

Literature Review

For the purpose of this study, we use the definition of careers from Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989) as it furnishes a flexible and broader interpretation of careers. They define a career as the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time; thus, careers involve relationships between employees and their organizations over time. This definition in fact encompasses what Van Maanen (1977) describes as the study of individual and organizational change as well as societal change (Kanter, 1989).

White, et al. (1992) held in-depth interviews with 48 women managers or entrepreneurs in commerce and industry or senior members of high status. The study revealed that successful women experienced specific life stages (White, 1995, 2000). Although the nature, duration, and exact timing of certain life events differed, particular developmental tasks seemed to be predictable. The findings of White, et al. (1992) bore strong similarity to the career stages of Levinson (1978), which were based on interviews with 40 men.

The research of White and collaborators revealed that the majority of successful women evinced high career focus, and they worked continuously and full-time, fitting their domestic responsibilities around work or choosing to remain childless (White, 2000). It is revealed from this study that continuous full-time employment seems to be a condition for career success and if women want to reach an actual equality in organizations, then change is needed in the existing stereotype of a successful career.

Combining the triple helix model from Rapoport and Rapoport (1980), Hall's (1976) theory of sub-identity, as well as her own prior research on successful women, White (2000) suggested an integrated model which she called a double helix model that illustrates the lifespan development of successful women. In this model, Hall's sub-identities are a cross-section through the triple helix of Rapoport and Rapoport. Rapoport and Rapoport's (1980) triple helix model consists of three strands that interact in two different ways. The first interaction takes place during steady states between transitions. The issue here is balancing. The second interaction is at transition points and the issue is the critical impact of events. Hall's (1976) theory of sub-identities suggested that an individual's identity can be explained as consisting of several sub-identities indicating many aspects of the individual when performing different social roles. There is not enough explanation or justification from White (2000) as to why each strand from Rapoport and Rapoport's (1980) triple helix model has been linked to the Hall's (1976) sub-identity theory, although she noted that there was no such direct correspondence in the diagrammatical representation itself.

Copyright: Advancing Women in Leadership holds the copyright to each article; however, any article may be reproduced without permission, for educational purposes only, provided that the full and accurate bibliographic citation and the following credit line is cited: Copyright (year) by the Advancing Women in Leadership, Advancing Women Website, www.advancingwomen.com; reproduced with permission from the publisher. Any article cited as a reference in any other form should also report the same such citation, following APA or other style manual guidelines for citing electronic publications.

[Home](#) | [Job Search](#) | [Career Strategies](#) | [Business](#) | [Entrepreneur](#) | [Web](#) | [Money](#) | [Education](#) | [Network](#) | [International](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertising Info](#) | [Content, Reprints](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Sitemap](#)

AdvancingWomen Web site Copyright © Advancing Women (TM), 1996 -

For questions or comment regarding content, please contact publisher@advancingwomen.com.

For technical questions or comment regarding this site, please contact webmaster@advancingwomen.com.

Duplication without express written consent is prohibited