

Full Length Research Paper

Interweaving Life and Career: The Recursive Impact of Life and Career Decisions Among Female Higher Education Faculty

Teri S. Peterson, Amy R. Slack, & Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton

Teri S. Peterson: Idaho State University, email: peteteri@isu.edu

Amy R. Slack: Idaho State University, email: slacamy@isu.edu

Cynthia Lee A. Pemberton: Colorado Mesa University, email: pembcynt@gmail.com

Accepted August 09, 2016

Through this study the researchers sought to describe and understand the unidirectional and recursive impact of major life and career decisions on female higher education faculty, and subsequently scaffold emergent themes using life course theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 female faculty members at an institution in the Intermountain west. Qualitative inquiry was used to analyze the interviews, providing rich descriptions and understanding from the perspective of the individuals' lived experience. Five themes emerged from the interview data. These themes were then scaffolded within life course theory to frame an understanding of the interplay of major life and career decisions on the career trajectories of female higher education faculty. The themes were geographical choice, family, support structures, job type, and time/balance. These themes illustrated the primary aspects of life course theory, particularly the Timing of lives, Linked or interdependent lives, Human agency in making choices, Developmental risk and protection, and Diversity in life course trajectories. The usefulness of applying this theory when considering female faculty perceptions about their lived experiences was supported by the study findings; facilitating and deepening our understanding of the interaction of life events and career decisions among female faculty in the academy.

Keywords: work life balance, career trajectory, female faculty, life course theory

Introduction

In this study we sought to describe and understand the recursive impact of major life and career decisions among female higher education faculty. Life course theory was used to help scaffold an understanding of the emergent data. Application of this theory facilitated the exploration of lived experiences of female faculty related to the work-family interface as they reflected on decisions made throughout their life courses. This study was cross-sectional in nature, incorporating interviews with women across multiple ages. Participants were asked to reflect on their career trajectories specific to the interaction of major life events and career decisions.

The U.S. conceptualization of work and family has been evolving over the past half century. The most significant historical transformation impacting being the increase in the number of women in the labor force, particularly married women and women with children (Moen & Sweet, 2004). As examples, from 1970 to 2014 the percentage of women working as dentists increased from 3% to 29%, lawyers from 5% to 33%, physicians from 9% to 37%, clergy from 3% to 19%, and judges

from 7% to 52%; with over 50% of post-secondary teachers being female (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). These numbers illustrate the extent to which work and family lived experiences have changed. The traditional male-breadwinner, female-homemaker model no longer describes the reality of the typical American family (Moen & Sweet, 2004), despite the fact that organizational adaptations to the evolving relationships between work, family and personal life remain more marginalized than mainstreamed (Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010). Riley, Kahn, Foner, and Mack (1994) described this as a "structural lag" where formal and informal policies and practices within the American culture fail to keep pace with the changing realities of work and family life.

As women have increasingly entered the workforce, many face what Hochschild termed the second shift in his 2003 book of the same name, bearing a disproportionate share of domestic work and caregiving for children and aging parents (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Although women have experienced her gains in the paid

work arena, according to Walsh (1995), many feel they are living “divided lives” (pp. 24-25) unable to integrate work and family effectively and often overwhelmed with frustration and guilt (Cownie, 2004). Likewise, female faculty feel pressure, experiencing both the second shift and feelings of divided lives as they try to integrate work and family life while pursuing a career trajectory in the academy (Applebaum, 2000; Astin & Leland, 1991; AWIS, 2012; Bailyn, 2010; Bristol, Abbuhl & Cappola, 2008; Cheung & Halpern, 2010; Gerton, 2011; Toutkoushian & Conley, 2005; Wolf-Wendel, Ward & Twombly, 2007). Using a descriptive approach and building on the literature, the interface of career and life decisions among female faculty was explored to seek a deeper understanding of work-life impacts by looking at the unidirectional and recursive nature of major life and career decisions.

According to the Survey of Earned Doctorates (NSF, 2015), “[o]verall, women earned 46% of all doctorates in 2014” (p.2); with a median age for completing a doctorate of just over 32 years. Given that for faculty hired directly into tenure-track positions it typically takes 5 to 7 years to earn tenure, these data imply that the age of being awarded tenure would be 37 years or older. This is older than average for childbearing. In 2006, the average age at which a woman had her first child was 25 years old (Livingston & Cohn, 2010). In addition, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists enumerate decreased fertility and increased risks with older childbearing (2011). Taken together, the timeline associated with a tenure-track academic career path would likely impact family-associated decisions for women in the academy, particularly as they relate to childbearing.

Research by Gappa, Austin and Trice (2007), Helms (2010), Mason, Goulden and Frasch (2009) and Wolf et al. (2007) found that younger faculty were and are more concerned with work-life balance, and that increasingly faculty are part of dual career couples, as evidenced by the fact that the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) now offers a recommendation for accommodation on this issue (AAUP, 2010). In addition, the relationship between work and home life has led to research on the effect of family-friendly policies on career trajectories, particularly for female faculty (Bailyn, 2010; Gerten, 2011; Wolf et al., 2007).

Assuming a desire for institutions to better understand the issue of work-life balance and attract and retain the best faculty talent, research focusing on the interaction of career and life choices is particularly relevant; and can potentially shed light on differences in choices associated with disciplines, institutions, academic job type (e.g., tenure- versus non tenure-track, and balancing teaching and research), as well as help illuminate the considerations faculty might engage concerning work life. With this in mind, we explored female faculty perceptions about the interaction of major life events and career decisions in creating their life trajectories. The thematic framework provided by the life course theory was used to scaffold understanding of the emergent data. Life course theory is described next.

Life Course Theory

According to Bengtson and Allen (1993) life course theory is an interdisciplinary approach deriving from the fields of psychology, sociology and family development that emphasizes transitions and trajectories. From a life course theory perspective, a person’s life is considered his/her life trajectory and consists of a series of transitions or life events (Elder, 1985; Hutchinson, 2011).

A *transition* is a change in role or status representing a distinct departure from a previous role or status (Elder & Johnson, 2003; Hagestad, 2003), such as: marriage, birth, divorce, remarriage, and death (Carter & McGoldrick, 2004; Hagestad, 2003). Life *trajectory* is made up of life transitions. Transitions are embedded in trajectories; and while trajectories do not necessarily exhibit straight lines, they typically reveal continuity in direction (Hutchison, 2011). *Life events* are significant occurrences that cause an abrupt change often producing serious and long-lasting effects (Hutchinson, 2011; Settersten, 2003). For female faculty, transitions associated with career trajectory and life events could include pursuing a faculty position that works best for them in terms of type of institution—research, comprehensive; type of position—tenure track or not, perceived support and family-friendly policies, and geographic location of the institution.

Elder (1994) identified four themes in Life Course Theory. These are: (a) Interplay of human lives and historical time; (b) Timing of lives; (c) Linked or interdependent lives; and (d) Human agency in making choices. Two additional themes were added by Elder (1998), Diversity in life course trajectories; and Developmental risk and protection by Shanahan (2000).

According to Mitchell (2003) life trajectories are influenced by the *Interplay of human lives and historical time*, with historical events producing group effects on individuals living during the same time period (Cooksey, Menaghan & Jekielek, 1997; Elder, 1985; Elder 1998). The ages at which specific life events and transitions typically occur is referred to as the *Timing of lives* (Hutchison, 2011). Three types of time are important in Life Course Theory: *individual* time, *generational* time and *historical* time. Individual time refers to a person’s chronological age. Generational time refers to the age cohorts in which individuals are grouped. Historical time refers to social changes and historical events occurring in a person’s life (Mitchell, 2003).

Life course theory emphasizes the fact that human lives are *linked or interdependent*. Human relationships both support and control behavior. Family life is typically interdependent in that parent’s and children’s lives are linked and mutually influencing. An individual’s life trajectory is made up of transitions constructed by *Human agency in making choices*, with the choices made shaping the individual’s life trajectory (Hutchison, 2011). Life Course scholars stress that the ability to make certain choices is contingent upon the opportunities and limitations presented (Hutchison, 2011; Mitchell, 2003).

Diversity in life course trajectories is a result of variations in social class, culture, gender, and individual life choices (Hutchison, 2011). Settersten and Lovegreen (1998) found that men's life course trajectories were more structured and predictable than women's. One explanation for this being the interwoven nature of women's lives with family. *Developmental risk and protection* are evidenced in life course trajectories. Experiences with one life event or transition may have an impact on subsequent transitions and events that may either add protective factors or put the intended life course trajectory at risk (Hutchison, 2011).

Methodological Approach and Sampling

In this study we explored female faculty perceptions about the interaction of major life events and career decisions in creating their life trajectories. Qualitative inquiry was used to identify emergent themes from a series of semi-structured one-on-one interviews with 12 female faculty. Qualitative inquiry was deemed appropriate because of its value in providing rich descriptions of complex phenomena, and focus on seeking understanding from the perspective of the individuals' lived experience (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Denzin, 2000). The emergent themes were then scaffolded using life course theory to frame an understanding of the career trajectories of these faculty members.

Following institutional IRB approval, we relied on a nonprobability, self-selection, convenience, criterion sample of 12 full-time female faculty, recruited via an electronic bulletin board and follow-up emails, employed at a Carnegie Classification, Public Doctoral University: Moderate Research Activity institution in the Intermountain West (Creswell, 2007). The 12 faculty represented five different academic colleges on the campus, spanned three decades in terms of age, included both tenure-track/tenured and non-tenure-track faculty, and varied in terms of having children in the home. Table 1 displays the participants' demographics.

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol queries were derived from the literature and based on an interpretive constructionist approach, using a responsive interviewing model as discussed by Rubin and Rubin (2005). This type of interview enabled the researcher to modify the topics and questions on the basis of the responses obtained, serving to help elicit participants' perceptions of their life course trajectory and unidirectional or recursive impact of their career and life decisions. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted between 13 and 45 minutes. The researcher took notes during and after the interviews, transcribed the audio recordings, and sent the transcripts to participants for clarification and, if desired, elaboration—a process called Member Checking (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). Two interviewees added minor clarifications during the member checking process.

Data analysis followed a General Inductive Approach as described by Thomas (2006). Data transcripts were read and reread to develop categories using open coding. The categories

were assigned to data units evoking issues of the unidirectional or recursive impact of career and life decisions, and organized into key themes. Five themes emerged: Geographic Choice, Family, Support Structure, Job Type and Time/Balance.

Units of text were then coded into one or more of the themes or left uncoded. The textual units consisted of phrases, sentences or groups of sentences conveying a coherent idea. A total of 410 textual units were coded. Data saturation occurred by the twelfth interview and therefore no further participants were solicited. Ary et al. (2006) defined data saturation as "the point at which no new information is forthcoming from additional participants or settings" (p. 631).

Table 1

Frequencies for the Demographic Variables on the Interview Participants

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
College or Division	
College of Arts and Letters	4
College of Business	1
College of Education	2
College of Science and Engineering	2
Division of Health Sciences	2
Tenure Status	
Not Tenure Track	2
Tenure Track, not yet tenured	5
Tenured	6
Highest Degree	
Ph.D.	10
Other Doctorate	2
Age Category	
30-39	4
40-49	4
50-59	4
Marital Status	
No	1
Yes	11
Child/children	
No	5
Yes	7

Results

Participants were representative of female faculty across disciplines and demographics. The demographic information, as presented in Table 1, reveals that all colleges or divisions within the University were present in the sample, with participant ages being uniformly distributed across the three decades represented. One participant was not married and seven had children. All tenure statuses were represented. No participants had less than a doctoral degree.

As stated there were five emergent themes. Textual units were coded as Geographical Choice when they referred to decisions about where to go to graduate school, where to look for a job, and where to accept a position. If the textual unit indicated a

decision concerning the spouse or children of the participant, or the intimate relationships of the participant, it was coded as Family. Support Structure was identified when participants spoke of emotional, physical, or financial support that enabled them to pursue their careers. When the textual unit referenced the participants' performance of, or feelings about their field of study, research, teaching or service performed as part of their academic position the unit was coded as Job Type. When participants spoke of the distribution of time across work and personal life, or making their work and personal life fit together the textual unit was coded as Time/Balance. Table 2 displays the thematic response frequencies across the five themes. These data are discussed below.

Table 2

Frequency of Occurrence for each of the Emergent Themes on the recursive Impact of Career Decisions and Life Decisions

Theme	Interview												Tot
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
Geographical Choice	8	5	6	6	4	6	2	1	2	3	4	4	51
Family	6	5	8	19	1	2	6	14	17	6	15	21	120
Support Structure	3	0	3	11	2	2	5	3	8	15	12	2	66
Job Type	1	6	7	7	7	3	6	3	4	5	5	12	65
Time/Balance	1	2	7	5	4	3	3	1	3	2	8	10	49

Geographical Choice

The interaction of life and career choices with respect to Geographical Choice was mentioned 51 times across the 12 interviews. Only one participant did not mention Geographical Choice as an aspect of the unidirectional or recursive impact of their career and life choices. The location, or flexibility of location of the spouse's job, the participant's or spouse's extended family, child custody considerations, and the location's physical and demographic attributes were all aspects which influenced the decision to accept a job offer at this particular institution.

The choice of geographical location for a career, rather than for personal reasons was more prevalent among faculty members younger than 40 years of age. Three participants indicated that their husbands were flexible enough, or had flexible enough skillsets to follow them to an academic position wherever it was offered. One participant explained as follows, "...in academia, you don't choose where you live. If you really want to be a

professor, you have to be willing to just get up and go anywhere." In contrast the participants in their 50s indicated they had modified career decisions based on the location of their husbands' careers.

Geographical choices were strongly influenced by family responsibilities. Eight of the 12 participants said they made geographical choices based on the location of their spouses, or proximity to their families of origin. Child custody arrangements geographically limited two participants. Additional geographical limitations came from mutual decisions on the part of the participant and her spouse based on the desire for a location that had the physiognomy and demographic characteristics they desired, such as the small town nature of the community, access to outdoor recreational opportunities and the cost of living: "...we're both from smaller towns, pretty into outdoor activities, so when I was looking at places like this ..., he was way excited about that" and "I was raised in a small town, my husband was raised in a small town, I kind of have always imagined raising a

family in a small town,” and “being somewhere that allowed us to [go camping] was important for us, but also important because we want to pass that love of the outdoors on to our kids.”

Family

The unidirectional or recursive impact of career decisions and family was the dominant theme whether considering the impact of career on personal life or personal life on career. Textual units related to the interaction of life and career decisions thematically classified under Family presented 120 times, making this the most frequently occurring theme. All participants mentioned family at least three times in the course of their interviews.

For some choices concerning life transitions, involving both the decision and timing of marriage and children, were interwoven with career decisions. Two participants indicated that had their husbands not been willing to follow them, they were not sure they would have gotten married. In the words of one participant, “my career, I think, impacted my decision to get married because he made it so easy for me.” Another stated, “I think honestly I prioritized my professional life over my personal life.” Two participants stated they delayed having children so they could become established in their career. One said:

My ambitions to have a certain kind of career superseded my desire to be married and to have children, and so that’s really where I put most of my energy...in whatever career path I was on at that time [sic]. I knew I did not want to have children until I was settled in my career, but it took me much longer to become settled in a career than I anticipated.

Two participants mentioned feeling compelled to have children because of their biological age: “I’m in my thirties, and so there is a limited amount of time that we can have those discussions [about whether or not to have children], so there is some frustration to that.” In terms of timing, another asked her major advisor’s permission to get married in the middle of the quarter. She then planned the timing of her children around her tenure decision. One participant, whose spouse worked in a similar field of study, mentioned conflict with her spouse arising from work situations.

In two cases, participants were employed in a discipline based on fieldwork, requiring an absence of some weeks from their families. One, with children, mentioned the difficulty of being away from home during this time. Another, without children, mentioned that the necessity of being away from home for her career might negatively impact her decision to have children since she would want to “be good enough in all of these areas,” that is both career and family. A third participant, reflecting on the unexpected advantage of combining fieldwork with having children said, “...when my son was born, I took him to the field with me, which was wonderful because all the people in the village there thought it was very strange that I had no children at 26.”

Only three participants stated that their career decisions had no impact on their personal life choices, although for these three

personal decisions concerning family did impact their careers. Two currently childless participants indicated waiting to have children until their career decisions were settled, yet, they still wanted to have children. Concerning the choice of whether or not to have children one observed, “I think it’s always going to be a balance, the personal interpretation of what you’re doing professionally.” For one participant the recursive impact of the decision of whether or not to have a child was eased by the willingness of her spouse to be the primary caregiver so that she could continue to pursue her career. However, she expressed some concern about being the career-oriented parent while her husband would be the primary caregiver for a child: “I think I’m going to have some social awkwardness with that. Culturally, I think it’s still very awkward for a woman to be in that position.”

The most frequently occurring issue in this theme was the impact of having children on the amount of time that could be devoted to research. Because participants felt their teaching duties were most pressing, it was often their research programs that suffered when the desire or need to spend time with children arose. As one participant stated:

I had a son who was nine months old, in a good quality daycare, so I was not concerned about him, but I had no flexibility, I had no extra time, so my research was pretty much nonexistent that year.

Another, considering having a child, said, “something would have to give, at least for a little while.” In contemplating the changes she would make to her research program if she had a child to consider a participant stated:

I would have to very intentionally try and shift my research focus to build it more, for a period of time, into laboratory work and computer modeling work, to be able to take the weight off the field component because some of the places I go are very remote, fairly inaccessible.

Two participants noted that because of their heavy teaching loads, they had to work on research more heavily in the summer. Others chose this particular university because they felt it would allow them to balance teaching, research and personal lives in a reasonable fashion. They felt that a more heavily research-focused university would not have allowed balance. In reflecting on why she chose this university over a “top tier, research one, university” one participant said, “If you want to be [at] a big research one, you work like 80 hours a week, and there was no way, that I knew I could do that and to have a family.” Four participants mentioned concern for their parents as they aged and how that might impact their career decisions. One mentioned having to find a job closer to her parents if something happened to them. Another stated:

If one of my parents were to pass away, or something would happen to one, I don’t know in terms of my career... I have enough experience and I’m well enough established, I feel confident that I could find a job back home.

Another subtheme in this category was the influence of family on choice of career. One participant entered her discipline out of a desire to more deeply understand her son's illness. Another had a family history (close relatives in the same field) of entering her particular field of study. Finally, a participant spoke at length about the influence of religion on her personal and her career choices. She originally made choices based on marriage, child-bearing and not pursuing a career because of expectations associated with her religion. As her thinking evolved and she started a career in academia, she referred to the choice between career and children as a "false dichotomy."

Support Structures

The second most prominent theme was Support Structures, both their presence and absence, impacting participants' ability and career track success. This theme was mentioned 66 times, spread out over 11 of the 12 participant interviews. Support was discussed as coming from participants' department chairs, spouses, family and others. In addition, support was discussed not only for the impact of its presence, but also the impact of its absence.

Most frequently, spouses were mentioned as important sources of support. Spouses were said to provide financial support when participants were in graduate school, support in caring for children, support in taking over housework, support in encouraging careers, and support through flexibility and willingness to follow participants on their academic career tracks. As one stated, "I would say that my husband is my biggest cheerleader." Another said, "From the very beginning he was willing to support me in what I wanted to do." Relative to other women who work a second shift (housework) after working a full day, one participant stated, "I have my own housewife by comparison, I married a man who is absolutely comfortable taking his share, and more of work around the house."

In terms of departmental support, a participant noted that her chair needing to pick up her own children at daycare while she was interviewing sent a strong message in terms of personal life support. In one case a participant spoke of the willingness of her chair to allow a sabbatical, and/or an unpaid leave of absence for a parent with two young children; thus providing the flexibility needed to deal with personal life events and enable continued career development. Likewise, two participants mentioned feeling that their chairs sent messages of support concerning family and personal lives. One stated that both her "...previous...and... current department chair[s] have been very supportive both of my career, but also of my family life." Two mentioned liking their colleagues and deriving support. One said, "I'm in a supportive and safe place, within my colleagues, within my group...they are interested in my personal and professional development, and for me to be successful." Another commented on mentorship from colleagues who were combining career and family, while in contrast, another participant noted a lack of colleague support. Finally, one participant mentioned the "stop the clock" policy, which allows an extra year before going

up for tenure. Interestingly, her fear was that the policy was too liberal and could be misused by faculty members.

Additional sources of support included children, teachers, coaches, mentors and parents. In the words of one participant, "I attribute, I would say 50% of my career success to mentors, to people that believed in me." The valuing of higher education in the family of origin was important for at least two participants. One spoke of a community of support from her childhood years to adulthood. She was part of a hobbyist group from an early age and they ultimately created a scholarship for her to attend college in her chosen field of study. In contrast, two participants mentioned the lack of familial support as a hindrance in their careers. One indicated that her husband's career took and still takes priority over hers:

My husband's job definitely overshadows everything. So if the kids are sick, I stay home, I'm the one that gets up things. I mean he's pretty good, if there are things that are really pressing for me he steps in. But he's had to learn that over the course of our marriage, rather than just doing it.

Two participants mentioned lack of support for having children from people they worked with. According to one, "I had my older son in the middle of the PhD, my own advisor wanted me to quit." Another, who decided to leave the Air Force after becoming pregnant, was told that she had made a good decision because a mother should be home with her children.

Finally, the flexibility of the work schedule allowing time for exercise had a supportive impact on the careers and personal lives for two participants. In order to enhance her feelings of balance, one described her time for running this way:

Right now I tend to work from home in the mornings, and then come in when I have my first actual commitments, that way I can get up and I can work, and then when it's warm enough, I go for a run.

She went on to say, this is a time that is "purely just mine, and I can think or be brain dead, whatever I want when I'm running." Another described the distraction impact on her job performance if she didn't take time in the morning to work out. She said, "...I have a...meeting in the afternoon that goes late, and I'm thinking about trying to get a workout in, and I can't be 100% focused."

Job Type

Job Type referred to the academic job the participant ultimately chose to pursue. In the academy there are different types of contracts and institutions. Some contracts are nine months and some 12. Some institutions focus on teaching, others more on research. Nine out of 12 participants commented on Job Type as it related to the interaction of career and life choices. Their comments centered on three issues: flexibility of the academic appointment, ability to do work for which they had a passion, and negative impact of administrative duties on families.

Although all mentioned that they worked in the summer, engaging both research and teaching, many noted that they enjoyed the flexibility that being off contract in the summer allowed them. As one stated, “I think the flexibility of this job allows for so much of a life too, a personal life too.”

Out of the 12 participants, seven mentioned a passion or love for their discipline, three mentioned a passion or love of teaching, three a passion or love of research, and two loving everything about their academic career. Two commented on feeling a personal sense of identity with their career and discipline. Thus the impact of their career decision on their personal life, was expressed through the personal satisfaction they received from their job/career performance. Finally, two participants had taken on some administrative duties. Both indicated that the additional work inherent in these duties, as well as the associated stress had negatively impacted their home life.

Within this theme, personal life influenced the type of job for at least three participants in their desire to have a job that also allowed a family life. This was reflected in choosing a university that they perceived allowed a balance between research and teaching, and a career that allowed schedule flexibility. While none of the participants indicated they worked less than 40 hours a week, they were able to work after the children went to bed, and/or felt they had additional flexibility with their time in the summer.

External interests also influenced Job Type. One participant was strongly influenced by her participation in athletics when choosing a discipline. Another by a desire to understand a family member’s disease in choosing a field of study. Finally, one participant mentioned that she decided to go straight from a PhD program into a tenure-track position so that she could start a family sooner. As she stated in response to her peers’ advice to apply for a post-doctoral research position rather than a faculty position:

I don’t want to go to a post doc, I want to go somewhere where I can stay, and not have it be somewhere else temporary, part of the reasoning was well that’s gonna set back kids a couple more years. I’m not getting any younger.

Time/Balance

The Time/balance theme addressed the issue of the impact of the time spent on their career spilling over into familial time and vice versa. All participants expressed this theme in their interviews resulting in 49 coded textual units.

Multiple participants mentioned taking work home in the evenings and on weekends. In the words of one participant, “If I don’t take work home, I just run out of hours in the day, and it’s not done.” In reference to working on research in the summer one stated, “also making sure that I’m not so focused on that [work], that it’s taking away from me being a good mom, and a good wife too, ‘cause you’ve got to maintain that relationship as well.” Another mentioned working “60-70 hour weeks and absurd days.” Another participant said that when she does

actually take time off from work “I notice that I’m more relaxed, I’m healthier, I’m nicer,” indicating personal well-being was also impacted.

Some participants felt good about the balance of their time spent at work and at home, some felt bad about it, and some were concerned about future developments (e.g., need to care for aging parents) that could impact the amount of time they had to spend on their careers. At least four participants indicated that having children had reduced the amount of time they were able to devote to their careers. One stated that since her children were born, “it has hugely decreased the amount of time I spend working.” Another began working half-time and worked her way up to full-time so that she would have more time with her children when they were small. One, whose son was grown, said this in reference to her high ratings on teaching, research and service: “I couldn’t do this if I had kids, or I had other responsibilities.” Another, preferring the phrase work/life fit to work/life balance said, “If we’re women, we have children and our lives, that’s who we are, is always going to win over this 8 hour day thing called work.” One participant expressed concern about increased demands on her time as her children got older and became active in extracurricular activities. Another expressed relief at the decrease in demands on her by her children as they grew up, allowing her more time to perform the tasks and duties necessary to succeed in her career. Two indicated concerns that having children in the future would impact their ability to work at the level they are currently working.

Four participants discussed the importance of identifying boundaries between their career and personal lives. One stated, “I am always here for my students, I get my research done, I focus on my teaching. But at the same time I am also off limits at certain times.” Another expressed that changing circumstances in her husband’s health will require a change in balance: “I love what I do, and I’m totally engaged in it, but I do think, and especially if my husband struggles more, that I’m going to need to find a little bit different balance.” Another, in her second year on the tenure-track, described how she felt about the lack of balance in her life:

I realized I was fantasizing about being hit by a car, because that would break a leg so I couldn’t teach... but I would still have my hands free to be able to type and finish getting out those final manuscripts that were sitting almost done on my desk.

Another, who had been granted tenure a year ago and whose children were a bit older stated, “I feel a lot calmer than I used to, I was so stressed, I just felt like I was failing at everything.” Another participant when asked about the balance between work and life responded, “I actually think I manage to do a pretty good job. But I think a lot of times I feel guilty about it.” These data indicated that for these women the demands of career and personal life seemed to move along their life trajectories in an ever-changing dynamic balance, requiring give and take in terms

of the amount worked and time devoted to personal and family needs.

Scaffolding the Emergent Themes - Life Course Theory

In an effort to describe and scaffold an understanding of the recursive impact of major life and career decisions on women's life course pursuits and lived experience in the academy, the five emergent themes (Geographical Choice, Family, Support Structure, Job Type and Time/Balance) were considered relative to the concepts and themes associated with Life Course Theory.

Geographic choice. Decisions concerning geography were reflected in three of life course theory themes: (a) *Interplay of human lives and historical time* as evidenced in the age-related effects; (b) *Linked or interdependent lives* in the interplay between participants, their spouses and their extended families; and (c) *Human agency in making choices*. Age-related/cohort effects, and thus historical time, human agency and linked lives were evidenced through the influence of personal life versus career in terms of Geographic Choice. Among the participants in this study, generational trends were evident with younger faculty more likely to choose a position based on career impact, while faculty over 50 indicated more of an interaction between personal life or spouse's needs and career needs. Participants over 50 were more likely to create their career in the location dictated by their spouses' needs. For most, though not all, career decisions were made in conjunction with their spouse's expressed preferences and needs; that is, in linked or interdependent ways. Finally, human agency was demonstrated in the relative weight individuals placed on their career, family and personal needs when making career-associated geographical choices.

The importance of Geographic choice in career trajectory decisions is evidenced in the literature. According to Kulis and Sicotte (2002) geographical constraints may lead to less advantageous career positions resulting in more part-time and non-tenure-track jobs. Concerns associated with geographical choice were reported in a survey of over 8,000 doctoral students conducted by Mason et al., (2009). Their study noted that geographical issues were more important for women than for men. Likewise, Perrone-McGovern et al. (2011) mentioned choice of geographical location as a major life decision; and Marwell, Rosenfeld, and Spilerman (1979) and Kulis and Sicotte (2002) noted more geographical constraints on female than on male faculty.

Family. More so than any other theme, the interaction of family and career influenced the life and career trajectories of the women interviewed. The Life course themes of *Timing of lives* and *linked or interdependent lives* were strongly evident in the Family theme. Participants' perceived career needs impacted the timing of life events such as marriage and the decision of, if, and when, to have children. The risk aspect of the theme *Developmental risk and protection* was evidenced by a participant's description of the conflict between her desire to have children and the perceived demands of her career trajectory.

Having put it off because of her career pursuit, having children was no longer an option. Another participant demonstrated developmental protection by clearing the timing of her marriage with her doctoral advisor during her pursuit of her PhD. The *Diversity in life course trajectories* was seen in the variety of timing of not only personal life events, that is some participants had children before, during and/or after embarking on an academic career, but also in the timing of the pursuit of an academic career.

The primary way in which the career path impacted personal lives appeared to be with regard to children. Mason, Wolfinger, and Goulden (2013) found that for women in academia only one in three tenure-track professors ultimately became a mother. The choice to delay starting a family associated with career trajectories often leads to infertility issues. Although not specific to the academy, a 2012 report by the Association for Women in Science (AWIS) found that 40% of women scientists delayed having children because of their careers. Issues of family have been reported in the literature with respect to the perceived impact of having children (Mason et al., 2009), satisfaction with number of children, and likelihood of being married (Ecklund & Lincoln, 2011). The findings in this study were consistent with this literature, as well as with concerns reported about the congruence of the tenure and biological clocks (Clark & Hill, 2010).

Support Structure. Life course theory was seen in expressions associated with Support Structure. Primarily, the *Diversity in life course trajectories* was evident in the variety of sources of support, and times in the faculty member's life course pathways when support was critical. Although many of the participants spoke of spousal support, only one mentioned community support while growing up. Some spoke of the support of their colleagues and/or department chairs. Examples of the *Timing of lives* was evidenced in the department chair's support, allowing a sabbatical to deal with having small children, and the community group support in providing scholarship dollars. This support also demonstrated *Developmental risk and protection*, in that financial support of a community group protected the participant's life course trajectory by providing for her college education so she could continue to move forward in her career. In addition, the *Interplay of human lives and historical time* was seen in the changes in the relative amount of gender specific housework and home-life activities these faculty perceived. *Linked or interdependent lives* was illustrated in this theme, as the importance of support from familial, work-related and other sources was significant for almost all the participants to move forward in their career trajectories.

The literature supports the importance of spousal, collegial and departmental support. Among the younger faculty interviewed, male spouse support was mentioned in terms of taking care of the home and family. Other participants mentioned help with homecare or children if they specifically asked for it. Although we did not measure the relative amount of time spent on care of the home and family, considering that only two out of 12

participants mentioned major support in this area, it seems this finding may be consistent with research indicating that women scientists do 54% of the core household tasks of cooking, cleaning and laundry, while men scientists only do 28% of these tasks (AWIS, 2012).

Mason et al. (2009) reported doctoral students' concerns regarding a lack of departmental support for work-life balance. Quinn, Yen, Riskin and Lange (2007) noted the importance of departmental culture in encouraging faculty to utilize family-friendly policies. One participant spoke to the importance of having developed a cohort of faculty in her department that supported each other personally and professionally. Two reported a lack of support from their departmental colleagues. These issues speak to the necessity of a culture of support for work-life balance. Thus, the study's findings aligned with and supported the importance of the proximal departmental culture of acceptance as it relates to positive career impact on personal lives.

Job type. The Job Type theme also fit well with Life Course Theory. An example of the *Timing of lives* theme was seen in the choice of the faculty member who skipped the post-doctoral phase of her career and went directly into a faculty position so she could start a family sooner. The *Linked or interdependent lives* theme was demonstrated in the influence of a family member's disease in choosing a field of study, providing the passion for the subject. *Human agency in making choices* was also seen in this theme. The choice to work at an institution purported to emphasize teaching, while simultaneously maintaining a strong research component, though not as intense as might be found elsewhere, in order to have more time with family was active and intentional.

Contrary to the literature suggesting that choice of entering a particular field could be influenced by social, romantic or other external considerations (Curtis, 2011; Park et al., 2011) the women in this study chose their discipline either because they were passionate about it from a very young age (as young as kindergarten) or because some other aspect of their lives had led them to develop an interest in the field. Wolf-Wendel, Ward and Twombly (2007) reported flexibility as a factor in type of institution selection (community college, four year, or high research). In this study, flexibility was frequently mentioned under the theme of Job Type. In addition, young faculty highly valued career flexibility (Helms, 2010) which was consistent with the findings in this study as most of the female faculty interviewed valued flexibility.

Time/Balance. Considering Time/Balance in terms of Life Course Theory, the most pervasive theme was that of *Timing of lives*. In the balance between time spent working and focusing on personal aspects of life, such as children, spouses and personal well-being, the demands of these different aspects change with time of life. The issues of changing demands of children as they age, and the potential for increasing demands for aging parents demonstrated the relevance of where these women were in their own age groups, specifically biological age

as reflected in the age of their children and parents, and where they were in terms of promotion and tenure in their academic jobs.

Summary Conclusions

Through this study the perceptions of female faculty relative to the recursive impact of their career and life event decisions were elucidated. In particular faculty perceptions associated with the interaction of major life events and career decisions in creating their life trajectories was explored. The emergent themes of Geographical Choice, Family, Support Structures, Job Type, and Time/Balance were found to interact with participants' career and life decisions. In addition, aspects of each emergent theme coincided with the major themes of Life Course Theory.

Geographic Choice decisions were reflected through job location, in terms of availability, application, offer and acceptance. Family was impacted by career, especially relative to timing of having children. Often, participants' expressed that the choices of if and when to have children were dictated by where they were in their career trajectory. Family was also impacted regarding attempts to balance career time demands with personal and familial needs. The impacts were recursive in that time at home was sometimes co-opted for work demands, with home demands sometimes interfering with the performance of work duties.

Support Structures were also recursive in their impact. Support from family, particularly spouses, freed the participants to devote time and energy to their careers. Support from department chairs and colleagues at work was evidenced both for career development and participants' personal lives. Job Type and choice to pursue an academic career were driven by the expressed desire for flexibility and the professional need for freedom and autonomy. Discipline choice appeared to be one of personal preference and/or passion.

Time/Balance was perhaps the most recursive of the emergent themes, with participants expressing feelings of tension between heavy career demands and the demands of their personal lives. In fulfilling needs in both these realms, separation in location frequently broke down in the direction of taking work home, demonstrating a reframing of work-life balance into work-life integration. For the women in this study, as well as the women in leadership studied by Cheung and Halpern (2010), work and family were important and interrelated, demonstrating a continued need to integrate women's lives.

As displayed in Figure 1, the life course theory themes were evidenced in the study findings. *Interplay of human lives and historical time* was supported by the different ways in which faculty members across age cohorts dealt with Geographical Choice and Support Structures. Younger faculty indicated that they responded to their careers in terms of geographical choice, rather than their spouses' careers. In contrast, participants 50 and older were more likely to have had their spouses' career dictate geographical location. Likewise, younger faculty indicated they were more likely to have spousal support for housework than

were the 50+ faculty. *Timing of lives* was strongly supported in the interaction of timing of children and timing of the career track. Changes in career and life demands as faculty members moved through time was reflective of this theme. *Linked or interdependent lives* was evident in joint decision making with spouses among this group of women, as well as in the importance of support structures within the family and workplace, and even extending out to the community. *Human agency in making choices* was seen across four of the five emergent themes since faculty members had to make decisions about location, job type, family related decisions, and the decisions that impacted the time and balance of their lives.

Diversity in life course trajectories was demonstrated by the variety of paths these women took through their personal and career lives. None of their stories and thus life trajectories were identical. Finally, *Developmental risk and protection* was evidenced through support structures, and decisions made in terms of the ascendance of career or personal lives at various stages in their trajectories. The usefulness of considering female faculty perceptions about their lived experiences in terms of life course theory was supported by the study findings; facilitating and deepening our understanding of the interaction of life events and career decisions among female faculty in the academy.

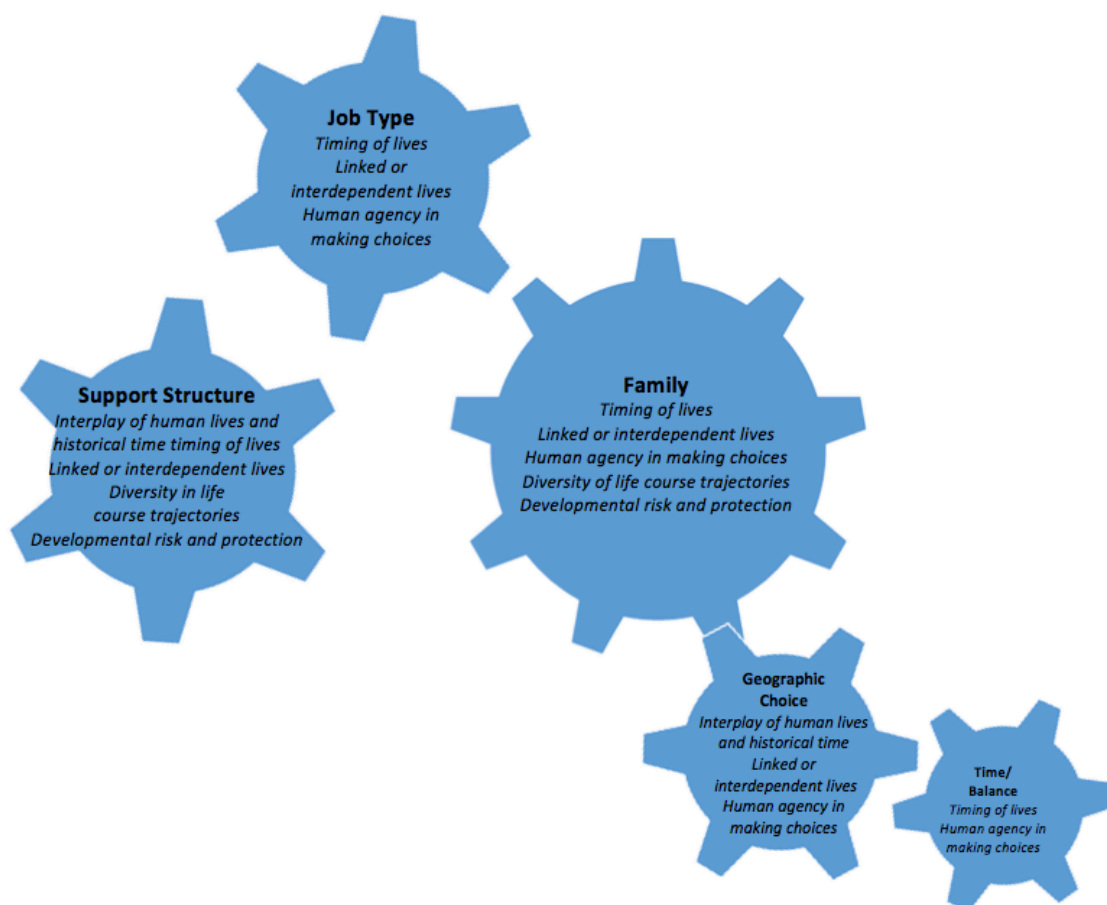


Figure 1. Emergent themes & life course theory

References

American Association of University Professors. (2010). *Recommendations on partner accommodation and dual career appointments*. Retrieved from: <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/dual.htm#2>

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. (2011). *Frequently asked questions: Later childbearing*. Retrieved from: <http://www.acog.org/~media/For%20Patients/faq060.pdf?dmc=1&ts=20120730T1952357833>

- Applebaum, E. (Ed.). (2000). *Balancing acts: Easing the burdens and improving the options for working families*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Razavieh, A., & Sorensen, C. (2006). *Introduction to research in education*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Astin, H. S., & Leland, C. (1991). *Women of influence, women of vision: A cross-generational study of leaders and social change*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- AWIS (2012). *The work life integration overload: Thousands of scientists weigh in on outmoded work environments, unfriendly family policies*. Retrieved from: <http://www.awis.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticle nbr=575>
- Bailyn, L. (2010). Redesigning work for gender equity and work-personal life integration. *Community, Work & Family*, 14(1), 97-112. doi: 10.1080/13668803.2010.532660
- Bengston, V. L., & Allen, K. R. (1993). The Life Course perspective applied to families over time. In P. Boss, W. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. Schumm, & S. Steinmetz (Eds.). *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methods: A Contextual Approach*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bristol, M. N., Abbuhl, S., Cappola, A. R., & Sonnad, S. S. (2008). Work-life policies for faculty at the top ten medical schools. *Educational Leadership*, 56, 1-8.
- Carter, E. A., & McGoldrick, M. (2004). *The expanded family life cycle: Individual, family, and social perspectives*. Boston, MA: Pearson Allyn & Bacon.
- Cheung, F. M., & Halpern, D. F. (2010). Women at the top: Powerful leaders define success as work + family in a culture of gender. *American Psychologist*, 65(3), 182-193. doi: 10.1037/a0017309
- Clark, C. D., & Hill, J. M. (2010). Reconciling the tension between the tenure and biological clocks to increase the recruitment and retention of women in academia. *Forum on Public Policy Online*, 2010(2). Retrieved from: <http://forumonpublicpolicy.com/spring2010.vol2010/women careers2010.html>
- Cooksey, E. C., Menaghan, E. G., & Jekielke, S. (1997). Lifecourse effects of work and family circumstances on children. *Social Forces*, 76(2), 637-665.
- Cownie, F. (2004). *Legal academics: Culture and identities*. Oxford and Portland: Hart Publishing.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Curtis, J. W. (2011). *Persistent inequity: Gender and academic employment*. Paper presented at "New Voices in Pay Equity" An Event for Equal Pay Day, April 11, 2011. Retrieved from: http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/08E023AB-E6D8-4DBD-99A0-24E5EB73A760/0/persistent_inequity.pdf
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.) (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Ecklund, E. H., & Lincoln, A. E. (2011). Scientists want more children. *PLoS ONE*, 6(8). Retrieved from: <http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0022590>
- Elder, G. H. (Ed.). (1985). *Life course dynamics: Trajectories and transitions, 1968-1980*. (Project of SSRC Committee on the Life Course.) Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Elder, G. H. (1994). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(1), 4-15.
- Elder, G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69(1), 1-12.
- Elder, G. H., Jr., & Johnson, M. K. (2003). The life course and aging: Challenges, lessons, and new directions. In Settersten, R. A., & Hendricks, J. (Eds.) *Invitation to the life course: Toward new understandings of later life*, (pp. 49-81). Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.
- Gappa, J. M., Austin, A. E., & Trice, A. G. (2007). *Rethinking faculty work: Higher education's strategic imperative*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gerten, A. M. (2011). Moving beyond family-friendly policies for faculty mothers. *Journal of Women and Social Work*, 26(1), 47-58. doi: 10.1177/0886109910392532
- Hagestad, G. O. (2003). Interdependent lives and relationships in changing times: A life-course view of families and aging. In Settersten, R. A., & Hendricks, J. (Eds.) *Invitation to the life course: Towards new understandings of later life*, (pp. 135-159). Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.
- Helms, R. M. (2010). *New challenges, new priorities: The experience of generation X faculty*. Retrieved from: The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education website: <http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=coache&tabgroup id=icb.tabgroup103414>
- Hochschild, A. R. (2003). *The Second Shift*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Hutchinson, E. D. (2011). *Dimensions of human behavior: The changing life course*. (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

- Kossek, E. E., Lewis, S., & Hammer, L. B. (2010). Work-life initiatives and organizational change: Overcoming mixed messages to move from the margin to the mainstream. *Human Relations*, 63(1); 3-19.
- Kulis, S., & Sicotte, D. (2002). Women scientists in academia: Geographically constrained to big cities, college clusters, or the coasts? *Research in Higher Education*, 43(1), 1-30.
- Livingston, G., & Cohn, D. (2010). *The new demography of American motherhood*. Retrieved from: Pew Research Center Publications website: <http://pewresearch.org>.
- Marwell, G., Rosenfeld, R., & Spilerman, S. (1979). Geographic constraints on women's careers in academia. *Science*, 205, 1225-1231.
- Mason, M. A., Goulden, M., & Frasch, K. (2009). Why graduate students reject the fast track. *Academe*, 95(1), 11-16.
- Mason, M. A., Wolfinger, N., & Goulden, M. (2013). *Do babies matter? Gender and family in the ivory tower*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Mitchell, M. (2003). Life Course Theory. In *International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family*. Retrieved February 13, 2015 from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3406900275.html>
- Moen, P., & Sweet, S. (2004). From "work-family" to "flexible careers:" A life course reframing. *Community, Work & Family*, 7(2), 209-226.
- National Science Foundation (2015). *2014: Doctorate Recipients from U.S. Universities*. National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, NSF16-300. Retrieved from: <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2016/nsf16300/digest/nsf16300.pdf>
- Park, L. E., Young, A. F., Troisi, J. D., & Pinkus, R. T. (2011). Effects of everyday romantic goal pursuit on women's attitudes toward math and science. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37, 1259-1273. doi: 10.1177/0146167211408436
- Perrone-McGovern, K. M., Ksiazak, T. M., Wright, S. L., Vannatter, A., Hyatt, C. C., Shepler, D., & Perrone, P. A. (2011). Major life decisions of gifted adults in relation to overall life satisfaction. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 34, 817-838. doi: 10.1177/0162353211425101
- Quinn, K., Yen, J. W., Riskin, E. A., & Lange, S. E. (2007, July/August). Enabling family-friendly cultural change. *Change*, 39(4), 43-47.
- Riley, M. W., Kahn, R.L., Foner, A., & Mack, K. A. (1994). Introduction: The mismatch between people and structures. In M. W. Riley, R. L. Kahn, & A. Foner (Eds.) *Age and Structural Lag: Society's Failure to Provide Meaningful Opportunities in Work, Family, and Leisure*, (pp. 1-12). New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Shanahan, M. J. (2000). Pathways to adulthood in changing societies: Variability and mechanisms in life course perspective. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 26, 667-692.
- Settersten, R. A. Jr. (2003). Propositions and controversies in life-course scholarship. In Settersten, R. A., & Hendricks, J. (Eds.) *Invitations to the life course: Toward new understandings of later life*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing.
- Settersten, R. A., Jr., & Lovegreen, L. (1998). Educational opportunities throughout adult life: New hopes or no hope for life-course flexibility? *Research on Aging*, 20(4), 506-538.
- Thomas, D. R. (2006). A General Inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237-246.
- Toutkoushian, R. K., & Conley, V. M. (2005). Progress for women in academe, yet inequities persist: Evidence from NSOPF: 99. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(1), 1-28.
- U. S. Census Bureau. (2012). *Historical income tables: People*. [Data file]. Retrieved from: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/people/>
- U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013). *Women in the labor force: A databook*. Retrieved from: www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-databook-2012.pdf
- Walsh, E. (1995). *Divided lives: The public and private struggles of three American women*. New York, NY: Anchor/Doubleday.
- Wolf-Wendel, L., Ward, K., & Twombly, S. B. (2007). Faculty life at community colleges. *Community College Review*, 34(4), 255-281.