Introduction

The issue of women’s opportunities for promotion in employment, or women’s careers, has recently been high on political and social agendas. The report of the Hansard Society Commission (1990) was concerned about the lack of women in top positions in public service, in corporate management and in key areas of influence such as the media, universities and trade unions. In 1991 the public campaign ‘Opportunity 2000’ attracted a great deal of media attention for its objectives to increase the quantity and proportion of women’s participation in higher levels of management in public and private work organizations. Women have entered the professions and career-oriented occupations in larger numbers since the 1960s. A question that now needs urgently to be addressed is how do we analyse and begin to assess what is happening to women who do embark on careers in professions and in occupations with promotion ladders?

This article represents some reflections following research into women’s careers and gender differences in careers in Britain. The research was predominantly a qualitative project which used career histories as data, along with some background statistical information. The project included careers in teaching and headship in primary and secondary schools (Evetts 1990, 1994a), careers in science and engineering in two large industrial organizations (Evetts 1996), and careers in the four major High Street banks (Parker et al., 1998).

This article addresses a number of related issues. The analysis section outlines three dimensions of explanations about women’s careers: cultural, structural and action dimensions. The three are considered as aspects of determinism and choice in women’s careers and are illustrated with regard to different professional sectors. The article argues that change needs to be a prominent feature in the analysis of women’s careers but that change is differently perceived and interpreted in analyses in the three different dimensions.

Analysing Change in Women’s Careers: Culture, Structure and Action Dimensions

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This article addresses a number of related issues. It outlines and illustrates three dimensions of explanations about women’s careers: cultural, structural and action dimensions. The three dimensions are considered as aspects of determinism and choice in women’s careers and are illustrated with regard to women’s careers in different professional sectors. The article argues that change needs to be a prominent feature in the analysis of women’s careers but that change is differently perceived and interpreted in analyses in the three different dimensions.

The analysis is concerned with women’s careers and promotions in organizations and the professions. The discussion focuses on women who are in non-manual and middle-class occupations that have a knowledge and expertise base usually acquired in higher education and/or vocational qualifications that are general, academic or job-related. These non-manual occupations frequently have promotion positions (perhaps management positions) which can be achieved through some combination of factors such as length of service, experience, ability and aptitude, and the acquisition of further vocational qualifications. Where organizations and professions have promotion ladders, such ladders can be nationally standardized (e.g. in teaching and nursing — although increasingly with local or regionally negotiated variations) or they can be firm- or company-specific (e.g. in industrial organizations — although many industrial firms use a common Hays Scoring System for lower and medium-level posts and positions). Qualifications and promotions are linked in that occupational qualifications bestow competence on practitioners which is of great significance to the ideology of professionalism (Crompton and Sanderson 1990).
and qualifications also form the prerequisites and justification for merit-based systems of promotion.

Gender differences in the patterns of careers, as well as in the number and distribution of promotion posts, have already been well documented. In promotion terms the qualified individual can develop a linear career and seek regular promotion in a profession or organization. Alternatively, the qualified individual can remain at the practitioner level. Many qualified women develop occupational careers which might include extended periods at practitioner levels, perhaps during part-time employment. Crompton and Sanderson (1990) noted that part-time work is not considered relevant to the ‘linear’ careers that are developed in organizational and professional contexts. It is in respect of linear promotions that women’s careers are generally different to those of some men (Evetts 1994b). Men predominate at the higher promotion levels of organizations and professions, and ‘organizational hierarchies are not sympathetic to women’ (Crompton and Sanderson 1990, p. 71). In addition, women are, for the most part, entering only certain types of career; they develop careers in the public sector caring professions, but considerably fewer develop careers in technical or commercial professions in the private sector.

Analysis

Analysis of women’s careers in particular occupational contexts is increasing and several explanations have been developed. Researchers have made use of feminist concepts as well as ideas from the sociology of occupations and the professions in order to explore and attempt to account for the gender differences in careers. For a period, researchers interested in women’s careers had differences in careers. For a period, researchers explored and attempted to account for the gender differences in occupational contexts and the professions became more widely recognized and acknowledged (Silverstone and Ward 1980; Spencer and Podmore 1987), that researchers began to develop explanatory theories and concepts to explore the issue of women and career. In general, there are three parts to or dimensions of these explanatory theories which emphasize different factors and kinds of influence. The three dimensions also result in different interpretations of change and continuity, different perceptions of choice and determinism, in women’s careers. The three dimensions of explanatory theories are:

1. Cultural dimensions: family and feminine ideologies, and organizational cultures.
2. Structural dimensions: family structures and organizational processes.
3. Action dimensions: women’s choices and strategies.

In the sections which follow, the three dimensions of the explanations of women’s careers are outlined, illustrated and assessed in respect of careers in particular occupational and professional sectors. It is not intended to imply that particular researchers focus only on one kind of explanation to the exclusion of others — although this sometimes happens. Most other researchers have linked dimensions one and two in explanations and many have emphasized the determinants (culture and structure) rather than the choice elements in women’s careers. There is indeed a tension within feminist analysis between those who emphasize the system (culture and structure) determinants of and constraints to women’s careers and those who stress women’s choices, decisions and actions in the resultant outcomes. The vitriolic exchanges between Hakim (1995) and her critics well illustrate this tension.

The argument in this article is that in general one dimension is no more important than the others. Rather, that all three dimensions are needed for a full explanation of women’s career experiences, of aspects of change as well as continuity in women’s careers. It then becomes a matter for empirical demonstration in particular occupations and sectors that one or another dimension is more important at different times and in different social systems. Certainly individuals will perceive different dimensions to be more important in the accounts they give of their own experiences of their career.

Although many feminist researchers have linked the cultural and structural determinants of women’s careers, this analysis will maintain that there are different kinds of determinants. It will be argued that the
cultural aspects (beliefs and ideologies) are analytically distinct from the structural determinants (organizational promotional ladders and the divisions of labour in organizations and families). The analysis is undertaken to clarify the different dimensions and elements but also to indicate how the dimensions are inextricably linked and interrelated. Culture and structure elements are analytically distinct, different in kind and mutually supporting, although they are sometimes difficult to disentangle in practice.

It is also important to acknowledge that I have emphasized the third dimension (choice and agency) in my analysis of careers. I have been particularly interested in the choices which women make, and the strategies which are devised, when women face cultural and structural determinants of and constraints to their careers. Thus my analysis has emphasized the diversity, variety and complexity of women’s career decisions; a diversity which might be interpreted as post-modern as well as post-structural.

Cultural dimensions: family and feminine ideologies, and organizational cultures

Most feminist theories and forms of explanation can be used to illustrate this dimension. When explanations consider cultural factors, then the focus is the belief systems and controlling social attitudes which affect occupational choice and career aspirations. Cultural dimensions emphasize the controlling notions of femininity, of what it means to be a woman; the ideology of the perfect family which influences ideals of femininity; and the culture of work organizations and the professions, particularly the culture of management, which is usually perceived as strongly masculine. Feminist analysis has included examination, often deconstruction, of belief systems and controlling ideologies in contemporary society.

Cultural belief systems influence and control behaviour by means of commonsense notions of what is ‘natural’ as well as through moral precepts of what is right and appropriate. The beliefs that are incorporated in the cultural dimensions of femininity and family, as well as the supposed masculinity of many work organizations, continue to be powerful controlling forces in women’s working lives. Such ideologies affect the ways in which women choose an occupation or profession, decide to balance paid and unpaid work, their identities and sense of satisfaction with themselves as partners, wives, mothers, daughters and professional or career workers. Contemporary feminist literature has demonstrated the deep embeddedness of gender within labour market processes and practices (Adkins 1995). Against such ideological forces, the practitioner career, which enables the woman to combine paid professional and unpaid work while avoiding promotion, would seem a highly rational choice (Brannen and Moss 1991) at least for a period. To pursue a linear career and compete for promotion, the woman might have to consciously oppose the ideological dictates of family and motherhood as well as the cultural imperatives of what it means to be feminine. Such powerful ideological forces have had a clear controlling effect on women’s career aspirations and achievements.

In addition, cultural analysis has centred on the gendered aspects and attributes of the processes in work organizations themselves. Bourne and Wikler (1982) described the ‘discriminatory environment’ and the ‘maleness’ of professions. There have been conceptual debates about ‘organizational cultures’, e.g. Morgan (1986), and Pringle (1989), and Hearn et al. (1989) have discussed ‘organizational sexuality’ as an explanatory factor. Other researchers have identified the masculine imagery of particular kinds of work such as engineering (Cockburn 1985) or science (Byrne 1993), or the military associations of technology (Hacker 1989).

In contrast, the caring professions have a different image, but this results in other sorts of problems for women’s careers. Davies (1995) examined the professional predicament in nursing and how our idea of nursing is connected with ideas of what it is to be a woman. This has consequences for the status of nursing as a profession and for medical dominance within the health service. Similar sorts of problems have been described for women teachers and headteachers (Acker, S. 1983, 1989), and of the divisions particularly between primary and secondary heads in the teaching profession.

Another aspect of the culture dimension of explanations has been analysis of the culture of management in organizations and the professions, which has been handled in different ways over time. Crompton (1997, p. 19) has argued that ‘feminist politics has always been characterized by a tension between “equality” and “difference”’ and this is well illustrated in feminist attitudes to the culture of management. Early research on women in professional and managerial work had been concerned to demonstrate ‘no difference’ in leadership styles and task
performance (see summary of such work in Marshall 1984, pp. 14–17). Shakeshaft (1987) argued that such a strategy was essential in the 1960s and 1970s in order to refute the biases and prejudices which claimed that women were less effective than men in managerial positions. In the 1980s, feminists began to pursue a different strategy which emphasized gender differences and gave prominence to female (in contrast to male) attributes (e.g. Gilligan 1982). Efforts were made to analyse the existence of a specifically female work culture. Such a culture was seen to emphasize collegiality (rather than hierarchy), caring and sensitivity in relationships (rather than authority) and had a different perception of priority and good practice. It was also suggested that such a female work culture was advantageous in many respects for clients, customers, work colleagues and for workers themselves (e.g. Gray 1987).

The strategy of asserting difference, rather than sameness, did help to shift the focus away from women’s deficiencies in career terms on to women’s strengths. Marshall (1984), for example, talked about women managers taking communal and relatedness values with them into organizations. Some of the effects she perceived to be a perspective on connectedness and an acceptance of affiliation and cooperation (in contrast to individual competition) as an alternative and an improved means of getting work done.

The dilemmas for women seeking promotion in organizations and professions remained, however. If work, the professions, industry and organizations, as presently constituted, are ones where a culture of individualism and competitiveness constitute what is recognized as career potential, then women who want to achieve career promotion will be required to meet such expectations, and to manage the cultural dilemmas they entail for women, if they wish to succeed. There are likely to be important differences in these respects, however, between organizational and professional sectors.

In general, organizational and managerial cultures are likely to pose difficulties for women in engineering and science. In the organizations I studied, the beliefs about ‘good’ management were perceived to be in conflict with women’s other roles and responsibilities. Similarly ‘good’ management was not perceived as involving caring, relatedness or connectedness. Consequently, women who were seeking promotion in these industrial organizations had to demonstrate promotion potential in the organization’s terms. The women had to adapt and match the cultural expectations of the work organization.

There were similar cultural difficulties for women in banking where it was frequently suggested that customers preferred a male manager and financial advisor. These cultural dilemmas did not apply to the same extent in teaching and headship, however. The headteachers in my research managed in diverse ways and had a wide variety of leadership styles and skills but the differences were not gender-related. Some of the women headteachers were certainly troubled by the intrusion of gendered expectations and assumptions into their professional work and even the priority given to their gender rather than their professional identity. Only the promotion of more women into senior management positions in schools (and elsewhere) will break the stereotypical cultural assumptions of men as managers and women as assistants. It is such gendered cultural associations which make difficulties for women in senior positions in organizations and professions.

The cultural dimensions of explanations are prominent and persuasive in accounting for women’s career difficulties and gender differences in careers. Arguments are complex but essentially the explanation is that women will have learnt to prefer and to choose certain kinds of occupation, or certain sections of occupations. For the most part women will seek the satisfaction of helping others in their chosen fields and avoid the potentially hostile, individualistic, competitive and assertive areas of promotion in organizational careers. Women who, in their career choices, ambitions and behaviour, seem to challenge gender stereotypes will be perceived as odd, as different (or even deficient) in essential aspects of femininity, caring and relatedness. They will be admired by a few but they will mostly be criticized, by other women as well as men, in their attempts to break new ground.

Such powerful cultural expectations and ideological forces have had, and continue to have, a clear controlling effect on women’s career choices, aspirations and expectations. The cultural dimensions of explanations have been used to emphasize the difficulties for and the determinants of women’s career choices, and the continuation and reproduction of gender differences in career achievements.

**Structural dimensions: family structures and organizational processes**

Many sociological theories and forms of explanation can be used to illustrate this
dimension of explanations. It is important to note, however, that dimensions one and two are very closely linked in explanations and other researchers (e.g. Davies 1995; Crompton 1997) have preferred not to separate them but rather to regard both as aspects of structure. Feminist sociologists in general have emphasized both cultural and structural dimensions in their explanations. Davies (1995), for example, stresses both structural and cultural processes in her analysis of the professional predicament for nursing.

The structural dimensions of career include the institutional and organizational forms and patterns in both the family and the work organization. Structural dimensions are the ways in which work tasks and responsibilities are divided up between members of the family; the divisions of labour and departmental systems in work organizations; and the promotion ladders and career paths within work organizations and professions. These family and work structures and work promotion processes form the contexts in which women’s career decisions and choices are made, and which differentially affect the occupational destinations and career trajectories of women and men.

The structures and processes of the family in Western industrial or post-industrial societies have had a clear controlling influence on the gendering of careers. Feminists have termed this family structure as patriarchal (Beechey 1979; Barrett 1980; Acker, J. 1989) and have examined the effects of the structure of the patriarchal family on women’s position in capitalist systems of employment (Kuhn and Wolpe 1978; Leonard Barker and Allen 1976). Clearly, the ‘reasonableness’ of the controlling ideologies of femininity and the family are also part of this determining structure, and indicate the interrelatedness of cultural and structural aspects of career. Women are perceived, and perceive themselves, as having the prime responsibility for the support and maintenance of their families, both nuclear and extended, and the care of its members. These responsibilities both limit and confine women’s commitment to paid work and to promotion in their careers. Thus, the requirements of the paid work and careers of men are perceived as of primary significance for the present and future well-being and economic security of the family and its members. Women’s careers are required to recognize and incorporate this structural determinant.

Family structures co-exist with organizational work structures as conditions for and determinants of women's paid work and career experiences. Organizational structures consist of the divisions of labour, work practices, departmental divisions, promotion ladders and hierarchies of work position in organizations and professions. It is these structures, and the job descriptions and experience requirements of particular positions, which affect career paths and trajectories. These structures also result in gender differences in occupational distribution and promotion progress.

The organizational processes which produce such gender differences in careers have been variously described. Witz (1992) analysed the professional practices of social closure and used material drawn from the emerging medical division of labour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Podmore and Spencer (1986, p. 44) maintained that the ‘stacking up’ of women in particular sectors or ‘ghettos’ of professions and organizations tended to emphasize rather than reduce the divisions between men’s and women’s work. Clegg (1989) discussed organizational power structures as factors affecting patterns of gendered employment. Collins’ (1981) and Pfeffer’s (1989) accounts were examinations of the ‘political’ construction of careers where the resources of workers and the politics of groups within organizations were examined in order to explain how careers were constructed.

There has also been growing interest in the ways in which gender interacts with bureaucratic organizational processes and how gendered career paths reform as a result of organizational change. In an edited collection, Savage and Witz (1992) have reviewed the theoretical developments which have resulted in gender and organizations having a prominent place in service class changes. In a recent analysis, Halford et al. (1997) examine how organizations in banking, local government and nursing have been restructured and how gendered career paths have been shifted accordingly. The cultural contradictions experienced by women in career positions in the professions and management have also been a common theme in this structuralist research literature (Hearn et al. 1989; Cockburn 1991; Davidson and Cooper 1992; Evetts 1994b).

The structure of the labour market and the demographic supply of and demand for middle-class labour also affect organizational policies and hence the career opportunities, particularly for women. A predicted decline in the supply of qualified labour in the mid-1990s resulted in a flurry of activity (e.g. provision of crèche and nursery facilities, career break schemes), by banks and other employers of middle-class labour, in attempts to retain their professional female workers.
This level of activity has not been sustained, however, since other technological and efficiency changes altered the demand and supply balances in particular labour markets. The balance is determined in highly complex ways in industrial and commercial organizations but there will be differences compared with the processes in public service organizations like schools and hospitals. Despite such sector differences, labour market conditions and economic contexts constitute nevertheless critical structural determinants of career opportunities.

The characteristics of particular internal labour markets also differentially affect the distribution of career opportunities for women and men. It is through the occupational culture of particular work and through the generalized acceptance of certain procedures and processes for controlling and managing promotion in that work, that internal labour markets, or career opportunities and constraints, are created. A gendered internal labour market is formed when a career structure emerges whereby some members (e.g. men) can progress and achieve promotion in the career whereas others (e.g. women) are left in practitioner/occupational positions.

There is a considerable body of evidence that women are excluded from, exclude themselves, or find it difficult to compete for, career positions in the internal labour markets of professions and organizations (Kanter 1976; Collinson and Knights 1986; Crompton and Sanderson 1990). Different occupations use different processes rendering internal labour markets distinctive. One way is through gender-differentiated recruitment where men and women train and apply for different jobs (Savage 1992). There are other structural and cultural mechanisms, however, and these have been receiving increased attention as more women have been training for and recruited onto the bottom levels of career ladders.

The structural divisions of professional work, and the development of separate career and promotion ladders within organizations, have important consequences for gender differences in careers. Spencer and Podmore (1987) discussed the specialist divisions within professions and the marginalization of women professionals into low-ranking, lower-paid, specialties. Crompton and Le Feuvre (1996) demonstrated how women in medicine in both Britain and France made family-orientated choices of medical specialization and how this might be different for careers in banking (Crompton and Harris 1998). Savage (1992) identified the gendered structural division within banking organizations into high expertise positions (predominantly female) and managerial positions (predominantly male). Thus the women professionals in banking developed technical specialist knowledge but had no managerial responsibility or authority for other workers, or for decision-making within the organization.

Similar structural divisions were apparent in the organizational contexts which I examined. In the organizations where the engineers and scientists worked, there were indications that the women were choosing, or were being encouraged to choose, the professional rather than the managerial promotion routes. The women were thereby becoming highly skilled technical specialists but not the managers of other engineers or scientists. Gender divisions were also apparent between the primary and secondary school sectors in the headteacher careers. Promotion in banking careers similarly reflected some of Savage’s divisions. This was not the whole story, however, and there was more diversity and complexity in career patterns and in women’s career choices than such structural generalizations would seem to indicate.

The analysis of structural influences on careers has increased understanding and awareness of family, professional and organizational structures and processes which constrain and limit the actions of some women career builders and reproduce gender segregation in occupations. The importance of cultural factors is part of the same process since family and organizational structures depend on a generalized acceptance of the ‘reasonableness’ of particular patterns. Thus there is uncritical acceptance of beliefs such as that ‘career success is individualistic’, ‘promotion is merit-based’, ‘certain jobs are most appropriately women’s jobs’, and that ‘women’s family roles are more important anyway’. These cultural beliefs and controlling social attitudes support and maintain the structural arrangements and processes within work organizations and families. Such ‘common-sense’ beliefs constitute the hegemonic ideology that shapes the promotional constraints for women’s careers. The structural (like cultural) dimensions of explanations have been used to emphasize the difficulties for and the determinants of women’s careers, as well as the continuation and reproduction of gender differences in careers.

**Action dimensions: women’s choices and strategies**

Analysis of the cultural and structural dimensions of explanations focuses primarily on the
determinants of careers, or at least the constraints in the careers of women. The 1980s had seen the re-emergence of an action or agency frame of reference, however, in which, in the context of cultural and structural constraints, women were perceived as actively building their lives and careers out of the conditions created and maintained by larger structural and cultural forces.

In action or agency interpretations, careers are not perceived as determined by cultural and structural forces. Rather, such forces are mediated in their impact by processes of social interaction; cultures and structures are experienced; individuals respond and react in diverse ways; people construct their own meanings, make choices and develop strategies.

Action analysis puts women themselves (as well as men) back into sociological models as making decisions and exercising choices despite continuing cultural barriers and structural constraints (Hakim 1996; Crompton 1997). In the action frame of reference, analysis of career does not have to be confined to promotion progress (or lack of it) in work organizations and professions. Analysis can also include other work, other roles and responsibilities which women actively or more reluctantly undertake (Finch 1983). These other kinds of work do not have to be judged or assessed as handicaps, problems or difficulties for women’s careers, unless that is how women themselves experience them. This kind of analysis emphasizes that inequalities, constraints and power are experienced and dealt with in very different ways even by people from similar social groupings (Weiner 1994). Analysis also recognizes the complexity of every individual life where, for example, women can experience oppression in some spheres, while being privileged and also exercising oppression in other spheres (Holland and Blair 1995).

In analysis of the action dimensions of women’s careers, the difficulties of organizational and professional promotion structures and the cultural belief systems of family and femininity still have to be managed by women. Women will manage such constraints in different ways which include adaptation, manipulation, negotiation, resistance and confrontation. Tactics for coping with constraints will vary between one woman and another and for any one woman will vary over time and in different contexts. In order to study the different ways in which individuals manage constraints, interactionists have suggested the concept of ‘strategy’.

The concept of ‘strategy’ has been central in interactionist research since ‘it is where individual intention and external constraint meet. Strategies are ways of achieving goals’ (Woods 1983, p. 9). The use of the concept of strategy has been critically examined by Crow (1989) who indicated the difficulties which arise from ill-considered usage such as in situations of differential power resources or when outcomes are essentially unplanned or unintentional rather than strategic. The analysis of strategies has, however, enabled the active part played by individuals themselves to be studied. This has increased our understanding of individual creativity in developing strategies, as well as our appreciation of the diversity and complexity with which individuals use whatever resources they have to cope with and manage constraints.

No particular strategy is valued more than others, although promotion-successful women, particularly in male-dominated careers, have sometimes received a disproportionate amount of media attention and acclaim. Such women have also received a disproportionate amount of criticism, however, often from feminist researchers who have interpreted successful women’s promotion achievements as a sellout to or an adoption of male career patterns and values by means of the exploitation of other women’s labour (e.g. of cleaners, nannies, etc.). The action dimension is concerned to emphasize, however, the rational ‘choice’ element of all career decisions, in the face of complex career constraints and variable career resources.

In the analysis of careers which I have undertaken I have considered the action dimension of careers (of women’s career ‘choices’ and career strategies) alongside the cultural and structural determinants of careers in particular organizational contexts. I have demonstrated wide diversity and variety, as well as complexity, in the ‘choices’ that were made and the strategies that were developed.

The diversity and complexity were indeed enormous. Thus some women were developing linear careers in the industrial or commercial organizations or in schools in the education system. Some were achieving high promotion positions by remaining (or having to remain) single and/or childfree. Others were developing highly complex caring arrangements and coping strategies at least for a period. Other women were choosing not to focus on promotion but instead to balance paid work and family responsibilities either for a short period or as a longer-term career strategy. Some women chose particular sectors of their organizations and professions perhaps avoiding managerial positions, again for
shorter or longer periods, in order to enable them to fulfil other responsibilities. Other women chose career patterns which involved part-time and practitioner careers, again for short or longer periods. Several women, particularly in teaching, had taken career breaks beyond statutory maternity leave, though younger women and women in engineering, science and banking were perhaps less inclined to do this.

Most of the women knew that particular career choices assisted while others were likely to handicap promotion progress, but they opted for such choices as seeming to meet their immediate needs, aims and goals. The consequences for the careers of the engineers and scientists of ‘choosing’ the professional specialist rather than the managerial route, for example, were well recognized. Obviously some of the women would change their minds over the course of their careers and perhaps become discontented with a particular course of action that was chosen or was felt to be the best way at the time. This is what makes careers dynamic and a process rather than a once-and-for-all decision. Also some of the women had fewer choices to make in their particular organizational contexts or fewer resources in their personal lives. Certainly particular career choices limited future career options and opportunities, and careers often resulted from earlier decisions which closed some doors and narrowed the range of future possibilities.

It is also important to emphasize that the career ‘choices’ and strategies were essentially personal and individual. Collective action did not form a part of the career decision-making process. The women had developed individual and personal solutions to the cultural and structural constraints in their careers. Either by prioritizing promotion or by negotiating various balances in their careers, they were concerned to meet, not challenge the needs and demands of their organizations and professions. These women were active in constructing resolutions and devising personal strategies. They chose between the examples set by other women in their organizations or in schools but they did not expect company or educational policies, trade union procedures or feminist principles to help sort their arrangements. Their personal situations and their career ambitions and intentions were perceived as too variable and diverse (too complex) to be adequately met by corporate systems or collective action.

In general, then, in the action dimension of explanations, careers are not determined in any causal way by structural and cultural factors. Structural processes and cultural expectations constrain choice but nevertheless women do choose to an extent between opportunities available to them. Careers frequently result from earlier decisions which narrow the range of opportunities available to them. Careers also result from happenstance, serendipity and from chance coincidences and encounters as well as from career planning, structural and organizational changes and changes in cultural conditions.

Discussion

This article has suggested the importance of three dimensions (culture, structure and action) in the analysis and explanation of women’s careers and of gender differences in careers. This concluding section will return to aspects of change and continuity in women’s careers and relate these to the determinants and choice dimensions of explanations.

Although the preceding sections have separated the three dimensions for the purpose of clarification and illustration, it is important to have constantly in mind the links and inter-connections between the processes of career culture, structure and action; of how structure and culture arise out of actions and how actions are influenced by structure and culture (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). What people do in their careers always presupposes some kind of pre-existing structure and culture (promotion ladders, rules of behaviour, cultural expectations, etc.) but in what they do, people simultaneously recreate the structure and culture anew or alternatively new structures emerge and cultural expectations are gradually adjusted. The processes of structuration (Giddens 1984) include both the reproduction or modification of existing, as well as the creation of new, structures.

Structural change is certainly ongoing and continuous and there is recognition of the impact of legislation on women’s opportunities for careers (Walby 1997). There is also acknowledgement of other structural changes, in both work organizations and families, but these changes are usually interpreted as detrimental for women’s career opportunities. Changes in the structures of work organizations include the general trends of downsizing and the removal of middle levels of management, and new departmental divisions and groupings of workers. Other changes specific to particular internal labour markets include new job descriptions and divisions of responsibilities; increasing levels of self-employment, consultancy work and short-term contracts; budgetary devolution and the
development of internal financial markets in organizations.

Change is even apparent in the structures and processes of families. Structures of family are increasingly diverse with lone parenthood as the fastest growing family form (Social Trends 1997). Weekend-only partnerships are also an increasing pattern, particularly for dual-career couples. Extended family responsibilities for child care, along with increased use of nursery and creche facilities and after-school clubs (where they exist), the employment of nannies or informal arrangements between working mothers, all indicate diversity of structural conditions and patterns.

Despite recognition of these ongoing structural changes, the paradox is that the structural dimensions of explanations continue to emphasize the reproduction of constraints to women’s careers and of gender differences in career achievements. Aspects of gender inequality (like wage differentials and unequal career destinations) continue to be emphasized in explanations. Changes are interpreted as the shifting or adaption of gendered career routes such that career inequalities continue to be reproduced though in different organizational forms (Savage 1992; Cockburn 1991; Halford et al. 1997).

It seems, therefore, that it is the action dimension of explanations which has gone furthest in incorporating change. Structural change is accompanied by increased complexity, diversity and variation in women’s career choices and strategies. The biggest changes are perceived to have occurred in women’s attachment to paid work and in their career ambitions. Women now expect to be in paid work for the large majority of their adult lives (Dex 1988). The break for child care, which in the past often marked the end of the paid work career for many married women, is now increasingly limited to paid maternity leave only (Sly 1996). Some women who are educated, trained and experienced in their occupations are showing more reluctance to develop practitioner careers (Crompton and Sanderson 1990). Some are wanting to compete for the higher positions in professions and organizations. This results in the increased diversity and variation in women’s career ambitions and expectations which research is beginning to demonstrate.

When women’s career actions and expectations change, and changes are also occurring in career structures in organizations and families, then changes in career cultures will eventually follow. Changes in cultural expectations for and beliefs about gender-appropriate career behaviour might be slower to affect and to sustain. The controlling force of cultural imperatives constitutes a check and a brake on both action and structural impetuses for change. Cultural assumptions, stereotypes and moral prescriptions will eventually change, however, and beliefs and expectations will adapt to sustain new structural career patterns. There is already evidence of change as present-day attitudes to and the limited acceptability of the working mother, the career woman and the dual-career partnership are beginning to demonstrate.

It is possible (more speculatively) to suggest, therefore, that in recent years it has been research into women’s career actions and choices that has been of paramount importance in challenging traditional gender-differentiated explanations for women’s careers. It is important not to underestimate the increasingly diverse ‘choices’ made by women actors in the organizations and professions in which they are building careers. The analysis of cultural and structural constraints on and determinants of women’s careers needs to be supplemented by recognition of the variety and variation of women’s responses. This results in untidy variations and contradictions in work places and organizations which represent women actors’ coping strategies as well as the attempts of some to challenge the constraints to women’s careers.

Perhaps there is a need for feminist analysis to bring women as agents for change into sociological analysis and theory, while recognizing the continuing force of structural and cultural imperatives. The continuing division of feminist researchers into opposing factions: of those who emphasize determinants and those who emphasize choice; of those who stress reproduction and continuity and those who stress change; of the perception of women as victims or women as agents; such oppositional thinking will need to be reassessed if we are to make analytical progress. Only by beginning to understand how change provides opportunities as well as constraints can women begin to devise career actions that will be appropriate for changing career structures and cultures.

References


