Re-incarnating life in the careers of women

Judith K. Pringle
Department of Management and Employment Relations, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Kathi McCulloch Dixon
Development Studies Programme, University of Auckland, New Zealand

Introduction

Women’s careers are broader than those traditionally conceptualized by men where “men build careers while women compose lives” (Bateson, 1989, cited in Arthur et al., 1999). Over the decades, careers and life development theories have variously intertwined and separated, from the broad life development focus of the Chicago schools in the 1930s (Barley, 1989), to Levinson’s work focus, to be extended once more through the concept of boundaryless careers (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). Earlier work suggested that: ... we need to reframe careers as cycles of progressive self-discovery and personal development through multiple social roles (Pringle, 1996, p. 21).

In this paper we develop this perspective further to consider a more holistic view of career, one that has the capacity to embody the emotional, spiritual, physical, psychological as well as the outer achievements of an “objective” career.

Women’s career models are necessarily an amalgam of personal development because they are not exclusively involved in, nor defined by, involvement in paid work. Men’s careers have, more or less, focussed on the world of work; either through paid work, volunteer activity or unemployment. It was the recurring patterns of men’s lives which gave rise to the development of “traditional” career theory such as Levinson et al. (1978) and Super (1957). The case for traditional linear theories of men’s careers not fitting women’s experiences has been well made and will not be established here (Gutek and Larwood, 1987; Marshall, 1989; Pringle, 1996; Woodd, 2000).

The subsequent question is: What descriptive models could be developed to better explain the multitudinous and diverse experiences of women’s careers? We believe there is a need for a model that can potentially provide better guidance for women to make sense of their lives. This paper traces the theoretical roots that inform our present understanding of women’s careers. We then sketch a broad model of personal “career” development, which is based on facets of explore, focus, rebalance and revive.

Early theorists

A number of theorists have built on and extended each other’s work, such as Erikson (1968), Super (1957) Levinson et al. (1978), Levinson and Levinson (1996), Bardwick (1980), with added commentary from Gilligan (1982) and Gallos (1989). Erikson (1968) created what has become a foundational theory of life stages and developmental tasks through which people sequentially progress. Super’s (1957) stages described the process of exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline with less of an emphasis on age. These stages were not linear in the sense of there being a single end point. Rather, during our lives we could pass through the cycle of exploration through to declining interest a number of times. Nevertheless, within each cycle, career progression is still conceptualised as upward (Mirvis and Hall, 1996).

Built around Erikson’s (1968) stages of the individual life course is Levinson et al.’s (1978) and Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) theory. They believed that the concept of a life cycle needed to be added to Erikson’s (1968) stages in order to provide a framework for specific events, roles, relationships and developmental processes. Their model is...
based on two premises, first the concept of life cycle/seasons and second, adult development. The life cycle is a sequence of eras, where each era has a bio-psycho-social character, which contributes to the whole. Each era is age specific, lasts about five to seven years and is separated by transitional periods of questioning and reassessment. It is in the transitional periods that major changes occur.

Although Levinson et al.’s (1978) initial study was of men, the later work of Levinson and Levinson (1996) specifically addressed women. However, they clearly states that the model developed from men’s lives could equally be applied to women because it: …provides a general framework of human development within which we can study the lives of individuals of all classes, cultures and genders (Levinson and Levinson, 1996, p. 36).

They acknowledge that women have different resources and constraints, which are both externally and internally sourced. Central to the life development model for women is the concept of gender splitting: …the creation of a rigid division between male and female, masculine and feminine, in human life (Levinson and Levinson, 1996, p. 38).

The splitting operates on several levels: culture, social institutions, everyday social life and the individual psyche. As part of this the: …domestic sphere … has been the key source of (women’s) identity, meaningful activity and satisfaction as well as dissatisfaction (Levinson and Levinson, 1996, p. 39).

Levinson and Levinson (1996) identify two modes of being for women, that of traditional homemaker and that of career woman. Other researchers (White, 1995; Hakim, 2000) also echo, either directly or obliquely, this dilemma of career woman-homemaker. The career woman, too, is shaped in part by the traditional homemaker because career women choose to: …liberate … self from the narrow constraints of the traditional pattern (Levinson and Levinson, 1996, p. 56).

This internal struggle, Levinson and Levinson (1996) suggest, is an ongoing one that develops as the woman ages and so the issues differ in each era. Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) general findings between career women and homemakers are that they experience the same sequence of periods in life structure development but in different ways. In addition, career women try to overcome the gender split and thus have a more developed voice (Levinson and Levinson, 1996, p. 201).

There are several assumptions that underpin Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) study. First, the models for both women and men are linear, in that they consist of a sequence of eras that follow one another. The women in the study are predominantly white women from the USA, thus the generalisability of the work is limited. Levinson and Levinson (1996) have assumed heterosexuality, class and cultural homogeneity. Additionally, the span of their theory is limited. “Late adulthood” remains undeveloped and the following stage of “late late adulthood” (80 years plus) is mentioned fleetingly (Levinson and Levinson, 1996, p. 413). Last, probably as an influence of Erikson (1968), Levinson and Levinson (1996) follow the general pattern of developmental studies with a focus on separation and individuation.

Levinson et al.’s (1978) work has been central to later models of women’s career development. A significant modification of their work comes from Bardwick’s (1980) research on women’s career development which questions Levinson et al.’s (1978) and Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) assumption of the self as centre. Instead, she suggests that for a woman “becoming one’s own woman” is only an illusion of autonomy. Rather, the task of women is to harmoniously combine the dichotomous roles of paid work and home responsibilities. Gilligan (1980) and others also believe that: …major transitions in women’s lives seem to involve changes in the understanding and the activities of care (Gilligan, 1980, p. 29).

Additionally, Bardwick (1980) suggests that Levinson et al.’s (1978) and Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) proposed gender differentiation is due to divergent generational attitudes. Women have undergone major changes in their involvement in work, while men’s roles have not significantly altered. Further, she points out the multitudinous aspects of women’s roles in comparison to men, who define the self primarily through work. Barnett and Baruch (1980, cited in Bardwick, 1980) found that women imagined their futures interpersonally not egocentrically, namely, women’s dreams are relational: Psychological egocentricity or psychological dependence or interdependence is the basic sex difference (Bardwick, 1980, p. 39).

There is a: …fundamental tension between interdependence and [an] egocentric sense of
self, between a formulated and fluid set of objectives (Bardwick, 1980, p. 39).

Simply, Bardwick (1980) emphasises “being” and connectedness, while Levinson et al. (1978) and Levinson and Levinson (1996) focuses on “doing” and individuation. These concepts mirror the concepts of agency and communion outlined later in the paper.

By focussing on women’s experiences, Bardwick (1980) made a number of important additions to Levinson et al.’s (1978) and Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) theory. To the early transition era for women (17-18) she included the development of sexuality and the internalisation of gender to women’s involvement in education, careers and relationships. Writing in 1980, she noted that by age 20 most women would have children, producing a likely conflict between an egocentrism and maternity. In the early transition era, Bardwick (1980) redefined Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) transition processes of age 28-39 as:

The age 30 transition and the settling down period of the second adult life structure (Bardwick, 1980, p. 45).

She adds that most women will be mothers and married, they frequently return to work, some work more ambitiously, some return to study and some have love affairs. This transitional period is more profound and prolonged than for men. Women face a basic pressure where there is a test of abilities, the occupational future becomes clearer, the biological clock ticks loudly and ageing issues occur. Adding to the complexity, she states that at this time women recognise that feminist values and traditional values both hold merit. These processes and changes often cause spouses to feel confused and resentful, and may result in stress for both partners.

Bardwick (1980) believes that age 40-50 (the mid-life transition and middle adulthood) is dominated by conscious ageing, an acknowledgment of mortality and, with that, a potential for increased illness and disease. For women with children, the major life phase ends with a resultant decrease in responsibility and concomitant increases in autonomy and interdependence. This shift is frequently coupled with major upheavals in long-term relationships. At age 50 and older, women experience the physical changes of menopause that Bardwick (1980) refers to as being symbolic of death. Subsequent feminist critiques have decreased the pathology of menopause and Sheehy (1995) goes so far as to label the following time as “post-menopausal zest”. Irrespective of the perspective taken, menopause is a time of physical changes that for some women create the need for emotional and psychological accommodations.

Neither Levinson nor Bardwick (1980) make any substantial commentary on the development processes or events in the later period of life. Bardwick’s (1980) additions to Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) theory do provide a positive focus on women, but her work can now be seen as historically bound. By using Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) model as a base and adding to it, women’s life/career development is still framed by men’s experiences.

Gallos (1989) reinforces this latter criticism and believes that the study of women’s development has been distorted, narrow and is a logical derivative of men’s experience. The male-based theories have given language and terms that then become the basis for looking at women’s lives, without seeing any distinctive issues for women. Further, she comments:

…women’s career gains and professional accomplishments are complements, not substitutes, for strong interdependent relationships (Gallos, 1989, p. 111).

This statement is in stark comparison to Levinson, who views marriage for women as a substitute for work. If we take Gallos’ (1989) stance and view career as a male construct then how can we apply it to women? Attempting to do so diminishes women’s worldview, which may include a work career, but is more commonly experienced as an interdependent part of a life, rather than being a separate component. From their study, Statham et al. (cited in Crozier, 1999, p. 8) note the seamlessness of women’s lives, where the facets of their lives “are interwoven, interdependent and mutually reinforcing”.

Gallos (1989) states that Levinson et al. (1978), Levinson and Levinson (1996) and others see psychological forces and social expectations at different ages influencing individuals to address particular accomplishments and issues. Bardwick (1980) “sees the process of evaluating life choices as more difficult and complex for women” where they can raise internal contradictions with “seemingly irreconcilable options” (cited in Gallos, 1989, p. 118). Women return to a “central life question – how do I deal with the importance of relationships?” (Gallos, 1989, p. 119).

Towards a model of women’s careers

Since Levinson et al. (1978), Levinson and Levinson (1996) and Bardwick (1980), there
have been attempts to create models of women’s careers, but what has emerged have been bundles of influencing factors (e.g. Gutek and Larwood, 1987) rather than coherency. A major problem is the lack of any overarching model to test or even refute. The concepts tend to be under-theorized or loose in application. Empirical studies have tended to focus on small, specific samples of often professional, higher status women rather than using more broadly representative samples. For example, from the experiences of dual career couples, Rappoport and Rappoport (1980, cited in White, 1995) developed a model of a triple helix to describe the interplays of home-work-leisure. White’s (1995) study of “successful” managerial women adapted this model to that of a double helix of home and work in combination with developmental, age-linked stages. These models are non-linear but are limited in their sample base and do not give sufficient value to a world beyond paid work.

From studies of women’s lives have come repeated themes of managing relationships, attachments and accomplishment (Giele, 1980; Hulbert and Schuster, 1993; Park et al., 1995). Many women researchers have consistently argued for more of a relational emphasis (Chodorow, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Gallos, 1989; Crozier, 1999). The Stone Centre has been particularly active in the development of relational theories of self. “self-in-relation” theory:

... emphasizes the contextual, approximate, responsive and process factors in experience. In short, it emphasizes relationship and connection (Jordan, 1997, p. 15).

Recent researchers of women’s careers have been more explicit about the place of relationships in women’s careers. For example, Woodd (2000) states clearly:

... the kaleidoscope of relationships that a woman sustains within her multiple roles contribute to her identity (Woodd, 2000, p. 9).

With attention to the relational aspect of women’s lives has been the recognition of a common struggle to find a balance between agency and communion. Marshall (1989) developed and extended the early meaning of Bakan’s (1966) concepts of agency and communion and applied them as a sense-making framework for understanding career behaviour. Agency and communion are worldvies, “two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms” (Bakan, 1966, pp. 14-15). Agency and communion are contrasting forms of human response to uncertainties in the environment. Agency expresses itself through control over the environment and is manifest in self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion. It can be succinctly thought of as “doing”, symbolised by Marshall (1989) as an arrow. In contrast, communion manifests itself in the sense of being one with other organisms (individuals, and the environment) and is conceptualised as being. It is not passive inactivity, but rather a choice of “letting things happen” (Marshall, 1989, p. 283). Communion is part of a wider context of interacting influences, interdependence, openness and flexibility to the environment which Marshall (1989) symbolises as a spiral.

Agency and communion are useful for conceptualising careers because it moves theorising away from a sex differentiated dichotomy and a restrictive separation of work-home spheres. Somewhat ironically, women’s career theorists have focussed overly on the role of relationships, while male theorists have emphasised the importance of paid work activities. This struggle for balance between agency and communion has been suggested as an important element in careers (Lips Wiersma, 2002) and perhaps even central to women’s careers (Arthur et al., 1999; Marshall, 1989).

### Life-career model

This brief review of women’s careers reveals a limited focus and a historical specificity. Even in the last decade, the timing of life events, expectations and experiences of women have changed rapidly. In response to O’Leary’s (1997) call to “validate a more diverse range of personal priorities, need, values and ambitions” (O’Leary, 1997, p. 97), we wished to develop a broad model that was inclusive of a multitude of experiences, and flexible rather than deterministic.

The following heuristic model is not based on empirical research but draws heavily on the work of career theorists discussed previously and on earlier research conducted by one of the authors (Arthur et al., 1999). The model evolved from our continued dissatisfaction and critique of how career theory was applied to women. Illustrative case studies are used as explanatory devices to explicate the aspects of the model. These case studies have been drawn from previous careers research that included the experiences of women and men from all occupational levels and the major ethnic groups in New Zealand (Arthur et al., 1999).

The model consists of four facets: explore, focus, rebalance and revive, each of which
are interspersed by periods of reassessment. These facets do not represent abrupt shifts but can be viewed as an evolutionary process. We do not deliberately link these facets with age; rather they are more closely linked with dominant life activities. However, some life activities are more obviously age-linked, for example, child bearing and retirement, while other aspects such as paid work, study, family responsibilities and travel can occur at any point throughout one’s adult life.

Movement within and between each facet results from interaction between past experiences, and both internal and external demands. In other words, the internal informs and shapes, and is informed and shaped by, external activities that can have connections with the internal emotional, physical, spiritual and psychological/intellectual processes. A woman who may cease paid work or reduce it to part time while she explores her emotional and physical capacities as a mother illustrates this connection. In this way external dominant life activities are intertwined with internal processes.

We suggest transitions from one facet to another may be unnoticed and evolutionary, and often it is only in retrospect that progressive shifts can be perceived and realised. However, transitions may also be abrupt, chaotic and all absorbing. Irrespective of the nature of transitions, they emerge through both conscious and unconscious choices. In the section that follows, the facets of the model are outlined.

Explore
Explore is a time for testing limits and possibilities. In this facet the individual will move away from, and often in reaction to, the boundaries established by family, educational and church institutions. It is a time when a woman investigates her potential through work or educational demands, through intimate relationships, through experiences afforded by travel, whether to another town, country or culture. This facet partly echoes Bardwick’s (1980) early transition era; however, we reiterate that the model is not age-linked. These exploratory choices and changes are illustrated by the following brief case study: Grace went straight from school into nursing training, graduated and practised for two years. She then made the decision to attend university to move her career in a direction that she thought would be more intellectually satisfying. Three years later she graduated with a commerce degree in Economics. During that time Grace married and separated after finding disillusionment within the relationship. She also spent time exploring her sexuality by choosing a relationship with a woman. After the completion of her degree, in an attempt to separate from her family and to create a space for making decisions about the future of work in her life, Grace embarked on her OE (overseas experience). Nursing afforded her an effective means of achieving this while living in a different country. This time also provided her with an opportunity to explore her spirituality through Judaism.

Grace has been exploring her sense of self through a variety of experiences and in various contexts. It has been, and continues to be, a time of searching, to explore her core values and self-identity. During this time Grace has gone through periods of connection and separation. This is manifest through separation from family and her marriage partner, while also seeking connection through other intimate relationships; moving from a caring, people-oriented occupation to a focus on individual intellectual pursuits through university study. This case study highlights a fragmented and discontinuous exploration of both the agency and communion domains.

It is possible that Grace may stay in this “explore” facet for some time or, less likely, for the whole of her life. Most women will, however, emerge from short-term explorations to eventually settle into a sense of self that affords some stability to allow a focus on work, relationships, and/or children, among other possibilities.

Reassessment
Reassessment may be summed up in the question: Where to from here? Reassessment is the process of making choices and decisions from the perceived options. The impetus for reassessment may come from internal needs and desires, a quest for balance between agency and communion, or sparked by serendipitous external events. Reassessment decisions are dependent on the specific mix of factors prominent for a woman at that particular time. Reassessment periods also offer value to what has been previously labeled as a career plateau (Arnold, 1997), where it can be perceived as a time of positive reflection that may lead to new directions. The reassessment time can be viewed as an incremental process, or an agentic choice.

From the exploration facet women often make choices that result in a shift to fuller involvement within a more circumscribed aspect of life. The reassessment that may occur after exploration draws on the myriad
experiences gained during this period of time. If the woman chooses to move out of the exploration facet she may then move to “focus”.

Focus
During the focus facet a woman will concentrate her full energies in an agentic way, on predominantly one aspect of life, such as family, study, paid or voluntary work. Some women may stay here for most of their lives, gaining satisfaction and a sense of development. This does not preclude continued exploration and attention to other aspects of life, but they constitute minor components at this time. These minor interests, whether or not they are related to the major focus of this period, may provide a kernel for later opportunities. The following case study illustrates an intense focus on paid work, with other factors at the margins that have the potential to provide future opportunities. This facet has been of intense interest within traditional career theory, with its focus on skill gathering and advancement within an organization or occupation (Peterson, 1984).

Priscilla left school at 17 wanting to become a designer. She joined an interior design company as a trainee, learned multiple skills and was rapidly promoted to the position of senior designer. As the company expanded she took on the job of contracts manager, developing important networks with sub-contractors and customers. Then a recession came, the company downsized, and as others left, Priscilla took on extra jobs far removed from interior design. She identifies with the company and prides herself on competence in every job. Priscilla has developed greatly through her job and has gained in confidence. She could stay there for the foreseeable future, and if she was a man it is likely that she may. However, she is married, would like to have children and hopes that she will be able to negotiate a part-time position with the company.

Through a focus on her paid work, loyalty to the company, adaptability and learning in multiple roles, Priscilla has become an accomplished designer with transferable business skills. Her knowledge, skills and networks may provide her with much desired flexibility when she feels ready to embark upon motherhood. Simultaneously they also provide potential opportunities in the future.

Reassessment
At this point questions may arise asking if there is more to life. At this transition the intensity of focus starts to wane and other aspects begin to gain prominence. For example, an awareness of intellectual capacity may increase, or for those who have been focused on home and family there may be a desire to achieve in the working world. Conversely, for those women who have been focused on paid work, other aspects of life may beckon. In the explore facet we suggested that it was a time to balance agency and communion simultaneously, “focus” presents as a sequential shift from one domain to another.

At this time, the old ways no longer serve – “something has to be released in order for us to find new life” (Batten, 2000, p. 57). Do we actively create a more balanced lifestyle, move into spirituality, creativity and enhanced relationships? Or do we shrink back from the challenge and stay with what we know? The case study of Sally provides a clear example of the dramatic shifts that can occur at reassessment.

Sally spent ten years in the advertising industry and was totally involved in work, “hungry to be challenged, working 80 hours a week”. At the time of the interview she had been on maternity leave for six weeks, and saw things differently. “I still have my hand in but am not really playing it … there are other things in life besides a [paid] job, … Young girls … their career is really important to them. One thing I have learned, don’t give your all to it, because it is really unimportant”. She looks back on her advertising career as a hectic hiatus in her life, one that she has now grown beyond. “It is the most useless occupation there is.” Sally has no plans for full-time work, and has become conscious of issues in women’s employment such as flexibility and the need to make the workplace family friendly.

For Sally, after an intense focus in paid work there has been an abrupt shift to openness to relationships and caring for others. She has maintained some future flexibility for herself by continuing to work part time.

Rebalance
If a woman chooses to alter her life course after the last reassessment period, the facet that follows may be rebalance. Previous theorists (Giele, 1980; Peterson, 1984) have claimed that such rebalancing involves a cross-over of gender roles and characteristics. We suggest that the cross-over is not necessarily of gender roles, but rather it is a time for pursuing developments that complement the existing self. Thus, the individual rebalances intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual concerns. This rebalancing may also have an external focus: paid work, increasing material assets,
family, community orientation, and service to others.

This time is characterised by a strong desire for congruence between one’s values and activities. This rebalancing may involve a process of discovery where women explore opportunities often pushed aside for other priorities earlier in life. Often final decisions about bearing children occur in this facet. At rebalance women “settle into themselves”, there is a confidence in personal beliefs and an ability to act from a strongly interdependent base of relationships and connections. The following case study shows Nita’s desire for congruence between her values and activities coupled with confidence in her personal beliefs.

Nita rejected her parent’s advice to continue her education, and drifted into temporary work to scratch a living together with her husband. Ten years later she decided to study, went to university, worked her way through a degree while continuing to care for her family, earned a teaching certificate and is now a high school teacher. Through her first teaching job at a white middle class school she became aware that she was perceived as a token for her ethnic group. She also began to see that the education system had failed “Pacific Island working-class kids”. As a result, her approach to work became informed by a deep commitment to educating children and to her own ethnic community.

Through Nita’s life we see an early focus on survival and providing for her family, a transitional time in education and a growing awareness of the implications of being from a minority ethnic group. All of these have contributed to a rebalancing of her concerns for education, social justice and a commitment to improve the social conditions of her ethnic group.

At rebalance there may be an increased confidence and assertion of one’s independence and autonomy reflected in comments like a “sense of being my own person, feeling more influential, more productive and effective” (Park et al., 1995, p. 60). This newfound agency is not only directed towards individual achievement but is nestled in an interwoven web of relationships, a combination of agency and communion.

Reassessment

Rebalance may provide satisfaction; however, many age-linked external triggers can also occur and precipitate a further reassessment: events such as the death of the woman’s partner or retirement. An increasing life span also means that women may look forward to probably another 20 or so years after “retirement” from paid or unpaid work.

Revive

In the struggle to find a balance between agency and communion, after a life of accommodating the “other”, women often seek the freedom to investigate other activities and interests in a more agentic way. New levels of autonomy can give rise to increased energy and exploration of activities that may have been adolescent interests. Still and Timms (1998) noted that some older women in their study entered paid work, some retired and yet others moved into self-employment. Gallos (1989, p. 121) adds to the list of developmental tasks, taking care of ageing parents and a more optimistic “learning to enjoy the time left”. Erikson refers (cited in Sheehy, 1995, p. 412) to this phase in a similar way:

The life cycle does more than extend itself into the next generation. It curves back in the life of the individual, allowing ... a re-experience of earlier stages in a new form.

Previous writers have emphasised the somewhat negative aspects of “decline” and preparation for death in the final stages of their theories. It must be acknowledged that the result of this reassessment period may be depression and a sense of aloneness in an increasingly difficult economic environment for women. A pessimistic outlook is not always the case, as the following case study suggests:

Janice is a career school teacher and counsellor. “I want to retire at 60, there are a lot of other things that I want to do. I want to move out of the city, although my husband and I don’t necessarily agree on this. I want to do some things for myself. I want more education, I am longing to do a project on the way the school system tends to support the status quo. I want to spend time fighting against what is happening, against the emerging class system that we’ve got. Another idea I’ve got has to with the absurdities of school – in terms of education schools are a ridiculous concept. I’d like to write something about that. I’d like to work in a shop. I’d love to work in an antique shop. I’d like to get fit again. I’ll go to Tai Chi.”

Although Janice has not yet retired she exhibits increased energy and the desire for exploration of other interests. She looks forward to new freedoms and to a new level of autonomy with an increased focus on self rather than on primarily giving service to others. While Janice is unlikely to
accomplish everything on her wish list, the “revive” energy is clearly apparent. As Horrocks (1999, p.115) reports from her study of older women in small business:

...there is an overwhelming feeling of invigoration as a result of the changes bought by increasing years, a feeling of new confidence, new strength of purpose.

**Non-linear representations**

We have sketched broad patterns of how women’s lives evolve, but the process is neither linear nor deterministic. At a symbolic level, both circles and spirals have been invoked to better describe the patterns of women’s lives. In her feminist revision of career concepts Marshall (1989) suggests:

...female values offer career theory a more cyclic interpretation of phases, based on notions of ebb and flow, of shedding and renewal (Marshall, 1989, p. 285).

We have tried to incorporate this sense of reflection and renewal in the model (Figure 1).

The pictorial representation of the model shows that the unfolding life development of women is not linear. The circular nature of the model implies it is not hierarchical nor does any one aspect of life have greater value than another. The broken lines are symbolic of several factors: blurred boundaries between facets, fluidity within and between any of the facets, reassessments as abrupt shifts or incremental changes, and external forces and events that can influence and impact women within facets.

**Discussion**

The heuristic model presented in this paper has drawn on the work of earlier researchers to provide a basis for extending the descriptive models of women’s lives. We have proposed a broad, non-linear model, which is inclusive of a multitude of experiences; however, it is preliminary and is intended to stimulate further discussion and research on women’s careers. We acknowledge the difficulty in trying to describe a unitary picture of women’s careers for there is a huge diversity in the specifics of women’s lives. Efforts to describe this range inevitably result in a somewhat fragmented and incoherent picture.

This model has included four facets of development and learning for women: explore, focus, rebalance and revive, all of which are open to both internal and external influences. A woman may remain in one facet or spend her life moving between all or some of the facets. This movement is made through a period of reassessment, which is a time of choices and decision making, and is not linear, nor inevitable, but rather the result of individual choices.

Not all individuals are equal in terms of social power and a number of factors have the potential to impact on how individuals enact their careers. At present career theory does not generalize easily beyond the experiences of white men and women. Still overlooked in theorising about women’s careers is the degree to which their work experiences are influenced by sexism and racism (Grossman and Chester, 1990; Pringle and Mallon, 2003). Other influencing factors include: being from a minority ethnic group, poverty and limited access to educational credentialing. Even the usually optimistic Sheehy (1995) notes:

For many lower-income (US) women, particularly those of minority backgrounds whose educations and life expectancies are foreshortened, the prospects for life after 65 are fairly bleak (Sheehy, 1995, p. 412).

Currently, career theory and models apply most closely to individuals whose lives emulate the pattern of white men. Understanding the experiences of non-Anglo-European cultures could potentially enrich career and life development theories as well as enhancing mutual respect between peoples. Any inclusive career model needs to value the number and variety of life experiences rather than over emphasise consistency and predictability.

Individuals from non-white ethnic groups have raised the question of whether or not careers are a colonial construction, a form of social control that is tightly linked to industrial-style work. Consider, for example, Pacific Islanders living a traditional island
lifestyle based on collectivism, where culture is focal and determines behavioural norms. Paid work, if it occurs, is minor and market based. More important is an obligation to family and village. For these people, involvement in paid work is interwoven with the richness of life’s flow. Career, as we understand it, does not take centre stage but is part of life.

The impetus for this paper was the need to create a broad career model that encapsulated women’s experiences and modes of being in the world as a natural process, not as “a different way” from men. The more inclusive career model outlined here provides another way to decrease the stereotyping and the ascribed value given by society to activities that the dominant members view as “different”. The career theories of white men have emphasised agency, whereas for women the emphasis is directed to seeking a balance of communion and agency. Women’s careers must be inclusive of the subjective – emotional, spiritual, physical, and intellectual, their development through relationships, as well as outer visible achievements. Women’s careers are characterised by diverse experiences in many social roles that are interdependent and fluid. The social roles include paid work, which, along with other experiences, contribute to a development of personal identity and a sense of self. The living of life is not a smooth, staged progression, nor is it unproblematic.

References


