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# Women's career development phases

## Idealism, endurance, and reinvention

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the nature of women's career experiences over the life course by examining career patterns, career *locus*, career contexts, and career beliefs.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A qualitative, inductive approach to data gathering and analysis was employed, using life story surveys, semi-structured interviewing, thematic analysis, grounded theory, code development and descriptive statistics.

**Findings** – The data revealed distinct patterns of how women's careers develop over time, particularly with regard to the impact of career contexts (societal, organizational, and relational) and women's own changing images of their careers and career success. A three-phase, age-linked model of women's career development is proposed: the idealistic achievement phase; the pragmatic endurance phase; and the reinventive contribution phase.

**Research limitations/implications** – Future studies should test replicability of these findings to determine whether this three-phase model is embedded in the particular socio-historical context of the times in which the particular women in this sample have lived or is universally applicable across different eras and changing realities.

**Practical implications** – Better organizational efforts are needed to ensure that women receive ongoing coaching and mentoring, work for managers who support their development, have access to organizational resources and opportunities to develop their skills, are given challenging assignments, are acknowledged for their unique talents, and are recognized for aptitude learned through life experiences and "non-traditional" work histories.

**Originality/value** – This is a rare, women-only study that looks at the career dynamics of women over the life course.

**Keywords** Career development, Women

**Paper type** Research paper

A career is broadly defined as a lifelong process of work-related activities that includes both objective and subjective aspects (Hall, 2002). Career development is defined as an on-going series of stages characterized by unique concerns, themes and tasks (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2000). Classic age/stage models of career development have been instrumental in laying a foundation that has shaped career theory over the years (Schein, 1978; Super, 1980). A common underlying assumption behind these age/stage models of career development is that there are a series of predictable tasks that happen at more or less predictable times during the course of a career.

Theorists have noted that such traditional models of career development have been based predominantly on the career experiences of men (Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987; Brown and Brooks, 1996; Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996). What may not be reflected adequately in these classic age and stage models are the progression of women's



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careers, which may unfold differently as a result of their broader life contexts. While there have been calls for gender distinct treatments of careers (Gallos, 1989), to date, career theory has evolved without “a specific explanatory focus on women” (Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 261).

In this study, we specifically examine the career experiences of women. We start by building the case for why women’s careers should be studied separately from men’s careers. We then describe the methods used to examine women’s career development, and the findings that emerged. In the final section of this paper, we pull together the patterns discerned in the data by proposing a three-phase model of women’s career development and defining the characteristics (career pattern, locus, context and beliefs) inherent in each phase.

### **Why women’s careers are different from men’s careers**

The notion that women’s careers differ from men’s careers has received varying levels of support in the literature (e.g. Gallos, 1989; Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996). We believe there are three critical factors that make a compelling case for treating women’s careers as entities worthy of focused investigation in and of themselves:

- (1) the differential impact of family responsibilities on men’s and women’s careers (Burke, 2002; Hochschild, 1989);
- (2) findings from women’s developmental psychology (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976) suggest a distinctive relational emphasis may pervade women’s career development (Fletcher, 1996; Kram, 1996); and
- (3) women’s relative under-representation and subsequent token status at higher organizational levels uniquely constrain their career progress (Ely, 1995; Kanter, 1977).

#### *Family responsibilities*

Bailyn (1989) considers the career an interstitial concept, existing in the space between an individual and a collective level of analysis. This view suggests the importance of closely examining the impact of contextual elements on women’s careers. Increasing recognition of the importance of investigating the impact of contextual factors, particularly family relationships on women’s careers, has been reflected in recent research. This is particularly relevant for women’s career theory since women have increasingly moved into the public sphere while continuing to maintain primary responsibility for the private sphere, in effect further complicating the once neat distinctions between their personal and professional lives. Since women generally continue to perform primary care-giving to children and dependents while simultaneously juggling the demands of their workforce participation, their career development issues, concerns, tasks, and responsibilities, molded by the work-family pressures they experience, may be distinctly different from those of men. Thus, on account of family responsibilities, women’s careers may take on forms, continuity and advancement patterns, and directions substantially different from those of men. In this regard, recent studies have investigated work-life balance and women’s ability to succeed in organizations while continuing to maintain their family responsibilities (Gutek *et al.*, 1991), and the influence of women’s family structure on their career

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advancement and success (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000; Hewlett, 2002; Kirchmeyer, 2002; Lobel, 1991).

*Women's developmental psychology*

170 Studies of women's development posit the essentialness of relationships to women's growth and development (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976) and suggest that "for women, the primary experience of self is relational, that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships" (Surrey, 1991, p. 52). Recent studies on a relational approach to career development (Fletcher, 1996; Kram, 1996) have also suggested that instead of separation and individuation, self-development is "understanding oneself as increasingly connected to others in more complex and sophisticated ways" (Kram, 1996, p. 114). This approach necessitates an examination of the contexts and relationships (Powell and Maniero, 1992) that distinctively impact women's career choices and career patterns, and a recognition that the boundary between women's personal and professional lives is highly permeable (Fletcher and Bailyn, 1996).

There is also evidence to suggest that women's careers may progress in a counter fashion to classic (male) career development models that represent the middle and later career years as those of stability, maintenance and decline. Research on the stages of women's development suggests that women find a renewed sense of purpose, energy, and increased vitality for work pursuits in middle adulthood (Bardwick, 1980; Borysenko, 1996). Margaret Mead's concept of "post-menopausal zest" would seem to dispute the use of such words as stability, maintenance and decline to describe women aged 40 and beyond. Thus, because of their general preference for relationality, women's careers may develop different patterns, paths, concerns, and responsibilities than men's careers.

*Women's minority status at the top of corporations*

Although women currently comprise half of the workforce, they are still heavily under-represented at the highest levels of corporations. The resulting "tokenism" continues to perpetuate an unequal playing field in terms of advancement opportunities for women: women continue to be subject to labeling, excessive scrutiny, and stereotyping as they attempt to rise up the organizational hierarchy (Kanter, 1977). From an organizational perspective, institutionalized patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity continue to affect women's abilities to advance and to succeed, particularly at the highest organizational levels, thus resulting in a general pattern of few or no women in top corporate positions. The gendered nature of organizational advancement also affects the relational interactions between men and women, and among women at different levels of the hierarchy (Ely, 1995), suggesting gendered implications for women's career development. Thus, women in organizations may find that their careers develop in directions, advancement patterns, and forms that are distinctively different from those of men, even in the same firms.

**Methodology**

Given these differences between women's and men's career development issues, we decided to focus only on women's career development by exploring specific constructs drawn from the literature. Derr and Laurent (1989) note that the careers literature has

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predominantly followed either a psychological or sociological stream of thought. The primarily psychological frame in women's career research incorporates constructs such as career choice and orientation (Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987), multiple life roles and psychological well-being (Ruderman *et al.*, 2002), and self efficacy (Hackett and Betz, 1981). The primarily sociological frame encompasses constructs such as career patterns and paths (e.g. Lepine, 1992; Lyness and Thompson, 2000) and environmental influences on careers (Astin, 1984; Ragins *et al.*, 1998). Following earlier work that drew on both the sociological and psychological bases of a career (O'Neil *et al.*, 2004), at present we studied women's career development processes by examining the path of work-related experiences over the life course (career pattern), the personal and professional factors and relationships impacting those paths (career contexts), and the belief set directing those work experiences (career *locus* and career beliefs). We utilized an interview protocol that drew out the life histories and career stories of the women participating in our study, probing for times when transitions occurred and career successes, failures, challenges, and opportunities were experienced. The specific questions asked are described in greater detail when reporting the results.

### *Sample*

In order to examine women's careers over the life course, the primary sampling criterion was age. Professional women in their 20s through their 50s were targeted to capture a range of choice points in occupational and life development. Women in this age range began and shaped their careers within vastly different "structures of opportunity" (Astin, 1984) over the last 30 years.

Participants were randomly sampled from five populations, four affiliated with a Midwestern university in various graduate, executive education and open enrollment programs. The fifth were attendees at a women's leadership institute in New York. The final sample comprised 60 women ranging in age from 24 to 60 years old, with a mean age of 42. The sample was split between married (50 per cent) and single (50 per cent) with more women without children (62 per cent), than with children (38 per cent). The sample was overwhelmingly White (80 per cent), with 12 per cent African American, 5 per cent Hispanic and 3 per cent Asian. The sample ranged from high school graduates (8 per cent) to women with multiple advanced degrees (7 per cent). The largest percentage of the sample was educated at the Master's level (55 per cent).

Almost half of the women in the sample (47 per cent) reported themselves to be at mid-level in their organizations, 20 per cent were in senior levels, and 17 per cent of the women in the sample reported themselves to be in entry level positions. Self-employed women made up 16 per cent of the sample. The majority of the women in the sample (73 per cent) were employed in the private sector, mainly in manufacturing (30 per cent), service organizations such as financial and legal services (20 per cent), or healthcare (15 per cent).

For data analysis and purposes of sub sampling for code development, the sample was split into three age cohorts, reflective of early, middle and later career phases, drawing on the work of Levinson (1996) and Sheehy (1995). Levinson's (1996) adult development stages proposed early life structures and age 30 transitions as encompassing ages 22-33; culminating life structure for early adulthood and mid life transitions encompassing ages 33-45; and entry life structure for middle adulthood, age 50 transition, and culminating life structure for middle adulthood as encompassing

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ages 45-60. Sheehy (1995) proposed age cohorts – the “endangered” generation, ages 21-35, the “me” generation, ages 36-45, the “Vietnam” generation, ages 46-55, the “silent” generation, ages 56-60, and the “Second World War” generation of 61 + .

In this study age cohort 1 (career phase 1) comprises women aged 24-35, and is equivalent to Sheehy’s “Endangered generation” and encompasses Levinson’s early life structure through age 30 transition. Age cohort 2 (career phase 2) comprises women aged 36-45, and is equivalent to Sheehy’s “Me generation” and a combination of Levinson’s culminating life structure for early adulthood and the mid-life transition. Finally, age cohort 3 (career phase 3), comprises women aged 46-60, and reflects a combination of Sheehy’s “Vietnam and silent generations” and Levinson’s entry through culminating life structure for middle adulthood.

The mean age of the 14 women in this study (23 per cent of the sample) who were in career phase 1 was 28. Eight of these women (57 per cent) were single and six (43 per cent) were either married or living with their partners. Only one of these women currently had children. The mean age of the 24 women (40 per cent of the sample) in career phase 2 was 41. There were more women who were married or living with partners in this cohort (58 per cent), than were single (42 per cent). Of these women, 15 (62 per cent) did not have children and nine did (38 per cent). The mean age of the 22 women (37 per cent of the sample) in career phase 3 was 52. There were slightly more (55 per cent) single women than married women (45 per cent) in this group including those who were widowed and divorced. More women had children (59 per cent) than did not (41 per cent).

#### *Data collection and analysis*

A blended approach of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was used to collect and analyze the data in this study. Additionally, parametric and non-parametric measures were used to test for significant differences among constructs and to further explicate the qualitative, inductive findings.

Random samples of women were drawn from each sample population and e-mailed invitations explaining the study and inviting participation. The women who responded to the invitation to participate were e-mailed instructions detailing the interview process and pre-work (Demographic Form and Career-in-Life Story Survey) and were scheduled for interviews.

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 1½ to 2 hours were conducted with each participant. The pre-work surveys required a woman to “plot” her career and life course from the time she first thought of herself as a “working person” to the present, making particular note of transitions and choice points. Each interview consisted of two parts; lifelines discussion – in which the participants talked through their career histories using their previously prepared surveys, and career beliefs – participants’ answers to five specific questions about their careers.

#### *Coding procedures*

A combination of theory driven and inductive code development (Boyatzis, 1998) was used to analyze the interview data. Following previous literature, the unit of coding for the lifeline interview data was each statement by a participant regarding the framing, resolution, action, or evaluation of her career and life choices (Hopkins and Bilimoria,

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2004; Lyons, 1983). The units of coding for the career beliefs interview data were participants' responses to each of the five career beliefs questions.

### *Lifelines coding*

The lifelines coding framework represented a combination of a code (career pattern and career locus) constructed from the findings of a prior empirical study on a typology of women's careers (O'Neil *et al.*, 2004) as well as an inductive code (career context) derived from the data in the current study.

*Career pattern.* In a study of the career patterns of female finance executives, Blair-Loy (1999) clustered the careers of her respondents by job level and size of organizations but found an underlying pattern at work; "the degree of career orderliness" (Blair-Loy, 1999, p. 1359). She found that orderly careers allow for long-term planning and advance along a foreseeable path, with few inter-organizational transitions. In contrast, disorderly careers were characterized by changing career fields and organizations, and unplanned job changes. Other authors make similar distinctions between career patterns. For example Sullivan (1999) contrasted "traditional careers" characterized by firm-specific skills and employment, organizational loyalty and job security with "boundaryless careers" characterized by high mobility, transferable skills, and jobs in and out of organizations.

To reflect the dual reality of "traditional career ladders" or "orderliness" as well as the recognition of more fluid, or "disordered" career paths, we characterized women's career patterns as ordered or emergent. An ordered career pattern is characterized by stable, predictable movement through organizational hierarchies, is strategically planned and executed, reflective of choiceful learning opportunities, and may involve long term planning to accommodate other life roles. An example of an ordered career pattern is the following statement by Alex about her progress in the field of human resources:

I answered an ad in the newspaper for my first job, which was a human resources assistant. I interviewed, got the job and they offered me \$20,000 and it was a really good experience, but a year and a half or so into it I realized that if I wanted upward potential in the organization I would have had to move. So I interviewed with [another organization] and the HR department was 12 people, so it was larger and offered more opportunity without being overwhelming and they offered me \$28,000 which was staggering. From there I managed an employee benefits integration process and then became the benefits manager (Alex: 6).

An emergent career pattern reflects a more reactive than proactive series of job/career moves, unexpected twists and turns, serendipitous events, interruptions for non-career activities, and may be designed to accommodate aspects of one's life other than traditional work. An example of an emergent career pattern follows:

I sold flowers on the weekend for cash so I could have money for my kid ... I mean, I struggled a lot. And I do not glamorize it. It was terrible. But there was also this kind of freedom I had to bring my kid to school, and feed him, and stuff like that. That was very important to me. So in other words, I developed what was important to me, and would find a job that would allow me to accommodate my life as opposed to my life accommodating to work (Ethel: 14).

*Career locus.* The *locus* of a career describes the focal point from which career orientation, motivation, and success emanate. Rotter (1992) described the concept of

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*locus* of control in terms of learning, as skill vs chance; an internal *locus* of control linked to such concepts as planning, persistence, and problem solving, and an external *locus* of control linked to such concepts as passivity and dependency. In the present study women with an external career *locus* are not seen in Rotter's (1992) terms as passive or dependent but rather that their career and life choices have been more other-directed than self-directed, a reframing of the external-internal dynamic. An external career *locus* is reflected in the belief that an individual's career opportunities and career success are due more to chance or luck, external interventions such as others offering her career opportunities or taking them away, or as a result of organizational interventions such as down-sizing or bureaucratic rules. An example of a statement reflecting an external career *locus* is the following:

At that time I didn't know what I wanted to go into (in my career). So at that point, probably the spring of that year, I was asked to take a two-year assignment over in another division. I would become an assistant group leader. So I did (Yolanda: 24).

An internal career *locus* is reflected in a belief that an individual is responsible for her own career success and in charge of creating and managing her future career. This reflects a proactive stance toward career opportunities and a belief in one's self efficacy. An example of a statement reflecting an internal career *locus* is the following:

I had decided, you know what? First of all, I am going to be the manager at (this company) one day. I need to look like one going there (Suzanne: 23).

*Overall assessment of career pattern and career locus.* Emergent and ordered career patterns, and internal and external career *loci*, were not mutually exclusive nor fixed but temporal and dependent on life and career context. This required coding at the level of the codable moment as well as an assessment of the overall career pattern and career *locus* of each participant. For example, each incident of career choice or change was coded as either emergent or ordered and at the completion of each woman's lifeline coding represented as a ratio of ordered to emergent career pattern for that individual. This assured a meaningful context for the number of times a particular pattern was coded (i.e. in relation to the other pattern) as well as ensuring that whether a participant's lifeline data had been coded for patterns frequently or infrequently, the overall count would be evened out across the sample. The same logic and process was employed for *locus* coding.

Frequency counts were conducted on incidents of emergent and ordered career moves (pattern) and internal and external attributions (*locus*) in each lifeline, and an assessment was made as to each individual's predominant career pattern and career *locus*. This overall assessment applied one of three indicators for career pattern: emergent, combined, or ordered, and one of three indicators for career *locus*: internal, combined, or external. Women who had a ratio of ordered to emergent or internal to external that fell in the range of 41/59 to 59/41 were coded as combination pattern or combination *locus*. If their pattern and *locus* ratios were more or less than 60/40 or 40/60, they were coded ordered, emergent, internal or external accordingly. A 60/40 split as the line of demarcation between a clear pattern or *locus* and a combination pattern or *locus* was used since 60 per cent could be reasonably thought to represent a majority. This finer-grained coding scheme better reflected the pattern and *locus* changes over the life course.



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*Career contexts.* The career contexts code was inductively derived, informed by prior studies of women's careers that note the importance of organizational and societal contexts on women's career choices (see Astin, 1984; Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987; Poole and Langan-Fox, 1997). Both the data and prior studies suggested the use of the constructs of organizational and societal context as an additional way to organize and theme the lifeline data in addition to the pattern and locus coding. Context coding provided details of the reasons behind women's choices and the positive and negative factors that had influenced these women's lives.

In addition to the importance of organizational and societal contexts to women's careers, Powell and Maniero (1992) discussed the importance of relationships and represented success in careers and success in relationships as opposite sides of a river-bank. They suggested that over time, women will be pulled more to one bank of the river than the other, or will continue to strive for a balance between the two. Accordingly, relationships were added as a key contextual factor contributing to women's career development and each incident of career context was coded organizational, societal, or relational.

Organizational context refers to the impact of organizational structures such as policies, procedures, culture, environment, or a woman's desire to impact organizational structures (e.g. change organizational policy, make the organization a more welcoming place for women, etc.). An example of organizational context follows:

If you look at the landscape in [organization], there are truly not that many women in a technical field at notable levels, it is that glass ceiling thing. It is true that we have lots of folks in the non-exempt population, but in terms of professionals, we were lacking (Suzanne: 2).

Societal context refers to the impact of the larger society on a woman's choices or considerations. Some examples of societal context are sex role socialization, expectations of women, discrimination, economic conditions, etc. A woman's desire to impact the larger society, e.g. make the world a better place or improve economic conditions for women, also constitutes a societal context. An example of societal context follows:

When I reentered the workforce my feeling was the wait actually turned into a gift. In the 12 years of gap, I had much more responsibility and breadth of experience as a volunteer than I was getting in the workforce. And I found that somewhat frustrating, I supervised many people who I didn't control their pay and there were literally times when I had to fire volunteers. I had raised millions of dollars and yet, returning to the work force, I had to go back to square one because I didn't have any "real" experience (Natalie: 11).

Relational context refers to the impact of key personal (spouse, children, parents, partner, etc.) and professional relationships (managers, peers, clients, etc.), both positive (e.g. mentoring) and negative (e.g. sexual harassment) on a woman's career and life choices. An example of a statement reflecting a positive relational context is Kathleen's in describing why she joined a sorority in college:

I thought of it as a girl's network and that's how I used it . . . I kind of knew in the back of my head that you needed people . . . It just seemed like you should always have people to help you out. And I kept hearing about, oh, the old boy's network, and then I kept hearing about how people would graduate from school, and they would have somebody in line who'd already graduated, working at a place, and he would say, "hey we've got an assistant position open, come on over." You know? And so I guess it just seemed like the right thing to do (Kathleen: 6).

*Career beliefs coding*

The career beliefs code was a purely inductive code developed from the data. This code represented the salient themes found in participants' answers to the five questions about their career beliefs. These questions asked participants' to describe their career metaphors, the meaning of careers in their lives, their definitions of success, the relationships between their personal and professional lives, and their visions of the future.

*Coding reliability*

Both the lifelines and career beliefs codes were subjected to rigorous standards of reliability (Boyatzis, 1998). A sub sample of 20 interviews was randomly selected for lifelines coding. Two coders and the first author went through an iterative process of four rounds of coding and clarifying the code for ten interviews. At the completion of this code development process, the two coders then separately applied the code to five more interviews each from the sub sample. This represented a total of one-third of the interviews, ten of which had been coded by the first author and both lifeline coders in the code development process, five of which had been coded by the first author and lifeline coder 1, and five of which had been coded by the first author and lifeline coder 2. The first ten lifelines used for code development were then recoded using the final code. The final inter-rater reliability on the lifelines code constructs (career pattern, locus, and context) ranged between 89 per cent and 100 per cent. Given these high agreement rates, the lifelines code was deemed reliable for further analyses and subsequently applied to the remaining 40 interviews.

The same process was followed for the career beliefs coding. The initial inter-rater reliability on the career beliefs code was very high (85-97 per cent) and the code was subsequently applied by the first author to the remaining interviews.

**Results**

Table I reports a comparison of career patterns by whole sample and by career phase. Chi-square tests show that overall the women in the sample had significantly more ordered career patterns than emergent or combination career patterns. Across career phase analysis indicates that the only significant differences among the three phases was on the combination career pattern variable, with phase 2 having marginally significantly more combination career patterns than the other two phases. Within career phase comparisons revealed that the women in career phase 3 had significantly

Career pattern	Whole sample (N = 60)		Phase 1 (N = 14)		Phase 2 (N = 24)		Phase 3 (N = 22)		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Ordered	31	51.7	9	64.3	9	37.5	13	59.0	3.307
Emergent	18	30.0	5	35.7	8	33.3	5	22.7	0.899
Combination	11	18.3	0	0	7	29.2	4	18.2	5.024*
$\chi^2$	10.300**		1.143		0.250		6.636**		

**Table I.**  
Career pattern

Notes: \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$

more ordered career patterns than emergent or combination career patterns. Career patterns were not significantly differentiated within phases 1 and 2.

Table II compares career locus by whole sample and by career phase. Chi-square tests indicated that there were no significant differences by whole sample on the career locus variable. However, across phase analyses revealed that the women in phase 1 had an overwhelmingly internal career locus, with the incidence of internal locus diminishing as the career phase increased ( $p < 0.05$ ). This means that the farther a woman advances into her career, the more likely she is to move away from an internal career locus. Chi-square tests also indicated that external locus of control was marginally significantly different among the phases with phase 3 being the most externally focused. Within phase analyses of career locus confirmed that phase 1 women had significantly more internal career loci than either emergent or combination loci. Career locus did not appear to be differentiated within phases 2 and 3.

Table III compares the average number of career context references per lifeline conversation by whole sample and by career phase. Subsequent tables will report the substance of the contextual references which were derived from the individual career context coding of the lifelines data. As shown in Table III, ANOVA indicates that there was a significant difference in relational context between the three career phases with phase 2 women having the highest and phase 1 women having the least. No significant differences were found among the phases on the other context variables.

Table IV portrays the frequencies and percentages of women who reported the impact of organizational context on their career and life choices. An overwhelming percentage of the sample (81 per cent) reported the impact of negative organizational environments, saying that they had worked or currently did work in non-supportive organizational climates. Phase 2 women's overwhelming experiences of discrimination

Career locus	Whole sample ( <i>N</i> = 60)		Phase 1 ( <i>N</i> = 14)		Phase 2 ( <i>N</i> = 24)		Phase 3 ( <i>N</i> = 22)		$\chi^2$
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	
External	21	35.0	2	14.3	8	33.3	11	50.0	4.846*
Internal	20	33.3	9	64.3	7	29.2	4	18.2	8.496**
Combination	19	31.7	3	21.4	9	37.5	7	31.8	1.056
$\chi^2$	0.100		6.143**		0.250		3.364		

Notes: \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$

Table II.  
Career locus

Career contexts	Whole sample	Mean reference per lifeline			ANOVA <i>F</i> -value
		Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	
Organizational	7.4	7.3	8.3	6.3	1.528
Societal	3.9	2.8	3.8	5.0	1.984
Relational	12.8	9.2	15.3	12.7	3.667*

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$

Table III.  
Career context references

**Table IV.**  
Organizational context

	Whole Sample		Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Impact of organizational context on women's career and life choices	N = 58		N = 14		N = 23		N = 21		
Negative organizational environment	47	81.0	11	78.6	21	91.3	15	71.4	3.502
Discrimination and/or harassment against women	35	60.3	6	42.9	19	82.6	10	47.6	8.612*
Positive organizational environment	30	51.7	9	64.3	13	56.5	8	38.0	3.303
Non-supportive organizational policies	17	29.3	4	28.6	9	39.1	4	19.0	2.754
Supportive organizational policies	10	17.2	2	14.3	3	13.0	5	23.8	1.632

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.10$ ;  $n$  less than 60 because two women were not coded for organizational context

and sexual harassment (82.6 per cent) were marginally significantly higher than the women in the other two career phases.

Table V reports the frequencies and percentages of women who reported the impact of societal context on their career and life choices. Almost half of the sample mentioned the impact of the economy on their career choices. The women in career phase 1 were four times as likely to be affected by economic factors as were the women in phase 3 (Chi-square was significant at  $p < 0.01$ ). Almost half of the women in phase 3 reported the impact of the activism of the 1960s and 1970s in making their career and life choices in contrast to none of the women in the other phases. Chi-square tests showed this difference to be significant at  $p < 0.01$ .

Table VI compares the impact of professional and family relationships on women's careers. A significant number of women reported the impact of both positive and negative managers. The impact of negative managers was reported significantly more by the women in career phase 2 than by the women in the other career phases ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Many of the family relationship variables were significantly different among the three career phases. An overwhelming majority of the sample reported the influence of parents on their career and life choices. Every woman in the first career phase reported being impacted by her parents. Parental influence remained high overall in phases 2 and 3, but diminished with age.

Over three-quarters of the sample reported the influence of spouses/significant others on their career and life choices. That influence was felt most by the women in career

**Table V.**  
Societal context

	Whole sample		Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Impact of societal context on women's career and life choices	N = 53		N = 10		N = 22		N = 21		
Economic factors	26	49.1	8	80.0	14	63.6	4	19.0	18.441*
Discrimination against women	18	34.0	2	20.0	8	36.4	8	38.1	6.158
Expectations of women	18	34.0	2	20.0	8	36.4	8	38.1	6.158
Impact of the activist climate of the 1960s and 1970s	10	18.9	0		0		10	47.6	24.668*

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.01$ ;  $n$  less than 60 because seven women were not coded for societal context

Impact of relational context on women's career and life choices	Whole sample (N = 60)		Phase 1 (N = 14)		Phase 2 (N = 24)		Phase 3 (N = 22)		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
<i>Professional relationships</i>									
Negative managers	37	61.7	7	50.0	21	87.5	9	40.9	11.592***
Positive managers, role models, mentors	37	61.7	9	64.3	13	54.2	15	68.2	0.396
Networking	35	58.3	8	57.0	15	62.5	12	54.5	0.309
<i>Family relationships</i>									
Parental influence	53	88.3	14	100.0	22	91.7	17	77.3	4.719*
Spouse/significant other	46	76.7	8	64.3	22	91.7	16	72.7	6.193***
Supportive partners	18	39.1	4	50.0	10	45.5	4	25.0	1.211
Non-supportive partners	14	30.4	2	25.0	8	36.7	4	25.0	2.309
Career moves for partners	12	26.1	2	25.0	2	9.1	8	50.0	6.009**
Partners made career moves	3	6.5	0		2	9.1	1	6.3	1.308
Children	46	76.7	11	78.6	18	75.0	17	75.0	0.070
Contemplating children now or in the future and wondering about career implications	12	28.6	10	90.9	2	11.1	0		30.685***
Made career moves for children	23	54.8	1	9.1	9	50.0	13	72.2	9.779***

Notes: \*  $p < 0.10$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Table VI. Relational context

phase 2, and significantly less by the women in phases 3 and 1. Fully half of the women in phase 3 reported that they had made career moves for their partners, whereas one-quarter of the women had in phase 1, and hardly any women had in phase 2.

The influence of children on these women's career and life choices were felt to a great degree by women in all three career phases, although in different ways. Phase 1 women overwhelmingly reported current thinking about the impact of children on their future careers, whereas phase 3 and phase 2 women reported having made career moves specifically to accommodate their children.

Tables VII-XI report the results of the five career beliefs questions by whole sample and by career phase. Table VII reports the results of participants' responses to the question asking them to describe their career in terms of a metaphor. Careers as a "series of learning opportunities, evolving over time", was mentioned most often, although chi-square tests indicated no significant differences among the career phases on this variable. The most often used metaphor in phase 1 was "moving on up", statistically different from the other phases at  $p < 0.05$ .

Table VIII reports the results of participants' responses to the question asking them to describe what having a career meant to them. The most often mentioned meaning of career was "making a difference, being of service, impacting others", although there were no significant differences among the career phases on this belief. The second most often mentioned meaning of career was as "accomplishment and achievement". Phase 2 women were significantly more likely ( $p < 0.05$ ) to describe the meaning of their careers in this fashion. Marginally significant differences were found in careers as "extensions of selves" and as "paths to personal happiness, satisfaction and

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Question 1: Career Metaphor “If you were to describe your career in terms of a metaphor what would it be?”	Whole Sample (N = 58)		Phase 1 (N = 14)		Phase 2 (N = 23)		Phase 3 (N = 21)		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Series of learning opportunities, evolution over time	12	20.7	3	21.4	2	8.7	7	33.3	3.118
Serendipitous/random/open to opportunities	9	15.5	4	28.6	2	8.7	3	14.3	2.825
Series of challenges/proving ground/hard work and effort	9	15.5	0	0	5	21.7	4	19.0	3.332
Lifetime journey	8	13.8	1	7.1	4	17.4	3	14.3	0.983
“I did it my way”, non-traditional	8	13.8	0	0	3	13.0	5	23.8	4.102
“Moving on up”	8	13.8	5	35.7	2	8.7	1	4.8	7.809*
“Misfits”	5	8.6	2	14.3	3	13.0	0	0	3.055
Quest for balance	3	5.2	0	0	2	8.7	1	4.8	1.279

**Table VII.**  
Career metaphor

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.05$ ;  $n$  is 58 because one no response, one not coded

Question 2: Meaning of career “What does having a career mean to you?”	Whole sample (N = 52)		Phase 1 (N = 12)		Phase 2 (N = 20)		Phase 3 (N = 20)		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Making a difference/being of service/impacting others	22	42.3	6	50.0	8	40.0	8	40.0	0.378
Accomplishment/achievement/application of knowledge and learning	16	30.8	2	16.7	10	50.0	4	20.0	5.681**
Extension of self, identity, self-validation, source of confidence	14	26.9	4	33.3	8	40.0	2	10.0	4.900*
Self-sufficiency/a means to support a life	14	26.9	4	33.3	4	20.0	6	30.0	0.834
Path to personal happiness, satisfaction or fulfillment	10	19.2	5	41.7	2	10.0	3	15.0	4.535*
Integration and balance	4	7.7	0	0	3	15.0	1	5.0	2.708
Community and relationships	3	5.8	1	8.3	0	0	2	10.0	2.028

**Table VIII.**  
Meaning of career

**Notes:** \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ ;  $n = 52$  because six no responses, two not coded

fulfillment”, with phase 2 women most likely to report careers as “extensions of selves” and least likely to report careers as “paths to happiness” ( $p < 0.10$ ).

Table IX reports the results of participants’ responses to the question asking them to describe their meanings of success. Almost half of the women in the sample described success as “personal fulfillment and happiness”, more than twice the number of women who described the meaning of their careers that way. Women in career phases 1 and 2

Question 3: Success “What does success mean to you?”	Whole sample (N = 55)		Phase 1 (N = 12)		Phase 2 (N = 23)		Phase 3 (N = 20)		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Personal fulfillment/happiness	25	45.5	7	58.3	13	56.5	5	25.0	5.314*
Recognition, responsibility, Respect, accomplishment	19	34.5	3	25.0	8	34.8	8	40.0	1.339
Relationship orientation	15	27.3	6	50.0	4	17.4	5	25.0	4.077
Impact on others	13	23.6	3	25.0	5	21.7	5	25.0	0.079
Financial considerations	13	23.6	3	25.0	7	30.4	3	15.0	1.428
Multi-dimensional success (mention of at least three other success themes)	12	21.8	3	25.0	5	21.7	4	20.0	0.110
Changed from more objective to subjective over time	10	18.2	3	25.0	3	13.0	4	20.0	0.828
Adding value/contributing	9	16.4	2	16.7	2	8.7	5	25.0	2.079
Integrity/doing the right thing	4	7.3	0		3	13.0	1	5.0	2.230
Winning or competing	2	3.6	0		1	4.3	1	5.0	0.592

Notes: \*  $p < 0.10$ ;  $n$  is 55 because there were five no responses

Table IX. Meaning of success

were more than twice as likely as the women in career phase 3 to define success in terms of personal fulfillment and happiness, a marginally significant difference ( $p < 0.10$ ).

Table X reports the results of participants’ responses to the question asking them to describe the relationship between their personal and professional lives. Half of the sample described themselves as having “integrated” careers and lives. A highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ) majority of the women who described themselves as “needing to be someone different at work” were in career phase 2, in contrast to the women in career phase 3, none of whom reported themselves in this fashion. Women who described their “personal lives being subsumed by professional lives” came overwhelmingly from career phase 3, with no women from phase 1 describing themselves this way. This difference was statistically significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

Table XI reports the results of participants’ responses to the question asking them to describe their visions of the future. The only statistically significant difference

Question 4: Personal-professional relationship “How would you describe the relationship between your personal and your professional life?”	Whole sample (N = 56)		Phase 1 (N = 13)		Phase 2 (N = 22)		Phase 3 (N = 21)		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Integrated	28	50.0	5	38.5	11	50.0	12	57.1	0.850
A changing relationship moving toward integration over time	22	39.3	3	23.0	10	45.5	9	42.9	1.602
Needing to be different at work	12	21.4	3	23.0	9	40.9	0		10.551*
Separate	9	16.1	3	23.0	4	18.2	2	9.5	0.511
Personal life subsumed by professional life	7	12.5	0		1	4.5	6	28.6	7.868**

Notes: \*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ;  $n = 56$  because two no responses, two not coded

Table X. Personal-professional relationship

Question 5: Future vision "If you were to describe your future what would you say?"	Whole sample (N = 57)		Phase 1 (N = 13)		Phase 2 (N = 23)		Phase 3 (N = 21)		$\chi^2$
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Staying put (in field, function, organization, etc. out of comfort, loyalty, financial considerations, fear, etc.)	24	42.1	3	23.1	13	56.5	8	38.1	4.030
Focus on both work and relationships	22	38.6	6	46.2	9	39.1	7	33.3	0.562
Exploring new opportunities, looking for new challenges	15	26.3	2	15.4	5	21.7	8	38.1	2.552
"Vision questing" searching for happiness/purpose	7	12.3	1	7.7	2	8.7	4	19.0	1.421
Unlimited, wide open possibilities	6	10.5	5	38.5	0		1	4.8	14.218*
Striving for success	5	8.8	1	7.7	3	13.0	1	4.8	0.965
"Que sera sera" (whatever will be will be)	3	5.3	0		2	8.7	1	4.8	1.283

**Table XI.**  
Future vision

**Notes:** \*  $p < 0.01$ ;  $n = 57$  because three no responses

( $p < 0.01$ ) among the career phases was that phase 1 women were overwhelmingly more likely to perceive the future as "unlimited, wide open possibilities" than were the women in the other two career phases.

### Overall findings

An overall examination of the data patterns that emerged from this study indicates that the constructs of career locus, career pattern, career context, and career beliefs have differential manifestations in the three phases of a woman's career, as follows.

#### *Career phase 1: idealistic achievement*

The driving force of phase 1, early career (ages 24-35), is idealistic achievement. Women in the idealistic achievement phase will most likely base their career choices on their desires for career satisfaction, achievement and success, and their desires to positively impact others. Women in this phase are most likely to see themselves in charge of their careers and will doubtless be proactive in taking strategic steps to ensure their career progress (internal career locus). They are achievement-oriented and motivated to succeed and see their careers as opportunities to make a difference and as paths to personal happiness and fulfillment. They believe their futures are replete with unlimited possibilities to "do and have it all" and they see their careers as opportunities to realize their dreams. Although they have a desire to make a difference in their organizations and in the world, they approach this from an internal, self-focused perspective; they know what they want and are determined to make it happen. They are disproportionately affected by the vagaries of economic conditions perhaps due to their overall shorter tenure in the workforce.

These women have been impacted by negative organizational environments but believe they can rise above them. They report experiencing more positive managers than negative ones and parents are big influences on their career and life choices. Of



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these women, 91 per cent did not yet have children, but all were grappling with the issues of how to combine career and family and were already preoccupied with how to arrange their lives so they could be less organizationally restricted when they were ready to become parents. They were concerned by the clear indications they were getting that organizational structures did not seem to be supportive of women having a dual focus on both career and family.

*Career phase 2: pragmatic endurance*

The driving force of phase 2, mid-career (ages 36-45), is pragmatic endurance. Women in this phase are pragmatic about their careers and are operating in production mode, doing what it takes to get it done. Their career patterns are reflective of both ordered and emergent tendencies. They have a high relational context and are managing multiple responsibilities both personally and professionally. Perhaps the high relational context of the women in phase 2 can be attributed to two factors:

- (1) They may have been in the work world long enough to recognize that no matter how internally driven they were (when they were in career phase 1), to a large degree their career development is now impacted by others; professional others such as managers and colleagues, as well as personal others such as spouses, children, families and friends.
- (2) These women may be moving into a career and life phase in which they are questioning the essential centrality of careers in their lives, given the other increasing demands on their time. They may be grappling with demands from multiple constituencies (work, home, community, etc.) and trying to split themselves into ever-smaller pieces to serve them all.

These women are most likely to be dissatisfied and disenfranchised with their workplaces and stalled at the middle management level after having worked for 10 to 20 years. The staggering impact of negative organizations and managers, and discrimination and sexual harassment combine to produce a bleak environment for many mid-career women. These women may likely divert their full energies and talents from their careers to other areas of their lives that provide them with a sense of satisfaction, self-worth, achievement and recognition because the circumstances of their careers are not in and of themselves fulfilling.

The women in the pragmatic endurance career phase see their careers as extensions of themselves, and their identities are inextricably linked with what they do for a living. Perhaps this is related to their career definitions of achievement and accomplishment; if careers are seen as essential parts of themselves it becomes more critical to succeed in them. This may also be related to the number of childless women in the sample in this phase who may have focused on career to the detriment of establishing their own families. The women in this career phase define success as personal happiness and fulfillment, but unfortunately do not see their careers as vehicles to achieve that end. They feel a need to protect themselves at work and feel stuck in their current jobs, organizations, fields or industries.

The middle of this middle phase and its associated angst may be reflective of the many transitions and choice points affecting women's professional careers and personal lives during the mid-life years of 36-45. The women in this career phase are at an age when they have to make firm choices about such things as parenthood and

career commitment. One of the clear concerns of this age is the ticking of the biological clock and the increasing finality of the choice of whether or not to have children (Hewlett, 2002). Part of the dissatisfaction of the women in this career phase may be dissatisfaction with their broader life choices, not just career dissatisfaction. They may be at a point in time when they are searching for more overall meaning in their lives.

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*Career phase 3: reinventive contribution*

The driving force of phase 3, advanced career (ages 46-60) is reinventive contribution. The women in this phase are focused on contributing to their organizations, their families and their communities. They are most likely to attribute personal and professional others as having had input into the direction of their careers (external career locus) and are likely to reflect a stable, planned career path (ordered career pattern).

The women in the reinventive contribution phase have experienced their personal lives being subsumed by their professional lives at some point during their careers. For many of these women those circumstances were as a result of divorce or death of a spouse initiating a renewed focus on work and career concerns. However, as they have advanced further into their careers, these women have reconceptualized and reclaimed their careers in their lives as opportunities to contribute and to be of service to others without losing sight of themselves in the process. The phase 3 women are likely to embody the values of the 1960s, the era in which many of them came of age, and to take an activist stance on issues of fairness and justice. Careers are seen as learning opportunities and as chances to make a difference to others. Success for these women is about recognition, respect and living integrated lives. Women in the reinventive contribution phase of their careers will be more likely to work in arenas that provide them an opportunity to contribute meaningfully through their work.

**Discussion**

The results of the study show that women's careers develop in three distinct age-related phases, characterized by differences in career pattern, locus, context and beliefs. Overall trends observed in the data indicate that there is a movement from mostly positive career experiences in phase 1 to many negative career experiences in phase 2 to a return to a more positive perspective in phase 3. Particularly for women, phase 2 may be reflective of the confluence of pressing career and personal concerns likely to occur during the transitional mid-life period between ages 40 and 45. According to Levinson (1996, p. 370), this is when the "myth of the successful career woman" collides with societal and organizational realities resulting in an often painful process of reevaluation of life, work and relationships. Add to this the question of childbearing for those women who do not have children and this particular life and career phase may quickly become overwhelming. Additionally, according to Levinson (1996), women in mid-life disproportionately find themselves engaged in work that is not psychologically satisfying and may even be self-damaging. This "psychological retirement" (Levinson, 1996, p. 375) may be reflected in the present study in the number of phase 2 women who saw their futures as "staying put" in their jobs, organizations and/or fields although their work environments were not necessarily supportive nor satisfying.

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The findings also indicated that a large percentage (64 per cent) of the younger women in the present study have ordered career patterns. However, when women reach mid-career, their career patterns become a fairly even mix of ordered, emergent and combination. And finally, when women reach their later career years, their career patterns once again reflect more orderliness, with emergent and combination patterns significantly decreasing. One possible explanation for this trend might be that ordered, strategic planning for advancement occurs early on, followed by a period of accommodation for family and non-work related activities during mid career, and then a return to the orderliness of organizational or work-related contexts during a woman's later career years. A focus on family might explain the more emergent syndrome during the mid career years since in this study there are more married women in phase 2 but less phase 2 women with children than phase 3 women. An alternative possibility is that the phase 2 women are experiencing corporate disillusionment and ennui and/or trying other things, such as becoming more entrepreneurial, returning to school, etc.

Women's career loci change from internal to external as they move through the succeeding phases of their careers. Women start out in their 20s and early 30s with a predominantly internal career locus that becomes increasingly external as they age. In fact by the time women reach their late 40s, at least half of them have an external career locus and not even one-quarter of them continue to have an internal locus. Although this seems counter-intuitive, there are two possible explanations for this finding. First, perhaps younger women begin their careers with the assumption that being internally directed and assertive is the way to get ahead based on classic models of career success and norms still operating in many organizations and society in general. Those models reward individual achievement, competition, and hierarchical advancement. We can speculate that some women, once they embark on their careers and find the price to be paid for enacting such models decide to explore alternative routes to career success. Alternatively, this may be a natural process of career growth and development that occurs over time as a result of age and experience. We might presume that the older women in career phases 2 and 3 have more experience and have grown more savvy about the ways in which individuals advance in their careers. They know from years of experience that the way through life is both internal and external, that no one succeeds without help. This trend across career phases reflects a focus on self, on other, and finally a balance between other and self. Levinson (1996) proposes that during the mid-life transition (encompassing phase 2 women in the present study) while essential questions of one's relationship to her work are being explored, there is also an increased focus on relationships with others. He describes this period as a shifting from the egocentrism of youth to the balancing of self and others that will define a person's later years, a trend clearly seen in the present study.

#### *Implications for women and organizations*

Research strongly suggests that organizations need to understand, recognize and support women's career and relationship priorities in order to retain talented professional women. Yet in our study we found strong evidence that while organizations may agree on the importance of that support, they often fall short in practice, resulting in a lack of women who reach the higher rungs of management. Better organizational efforts are needed to ensure that women receive on-going coaching and mentoring, work for managers who support and encourage their

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development, have access to organizational resources and relevant opportunities to develop their skills, are given challenging assignments, are acknowledged for their unique talents and contributions, and are recognized for aptitude learned through life experiences and “non traditional” work histories. It is imperative that organizations do a better job of matching resources to women’s changing needs in order to allow women to continue contributing meaningfully during each phase of their careers.

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For instance, women in the idealistic achievement phase of their careers particularly need access to assignments that will stimulate and challenge them and provide opportunities to develop their skills and their strengths. Women in this career phase are exploring their capabilities and spreading their wings. Managers can encourage them in this creative process by employing a developmental perspective focused on coaching, mentoring, and strategic skill development. In addition, organizational compensation programs must consider both intangible and tangible means of reward in keeping with these women’s desires to be positive contributors as well as be financially successful.

Clearly a critical need for women is a better integration between work-lives and non-work lives. Organizations can support this by legitimizing various career paths and options and providing a climate of acceptance and support for the many responsibilities women have and the many choices they face. Organizational policies supportive of women being active contributors in all spheres of their lives are necessary requirements for enabling this desired integration. For example, women in the pragmatic endurance career phase may need flexible work hours, work arrangements and job restructuring to assist them in mediating the critical junctures of the many different roles they play in their lives. They also need challenging assignments, mentoring and good management. Without recognition and support for their multiple life roles, they may find themselves unable to fully embrace their work responsibilities. Managers must recognize that the careers of these women are embedded in their larger life contexts and work with each individual to identify the necessary resources that will allow them to do their best work. Organizations that create work environments that do not disadvantage women wanting to lead integrated lives will clearly have a competitive edge in keeping their most talented employees.

The unique talents and abilities of the women in the reinventive contribution career phase need to be recognized and utilized. These women have myriad career and life experiences on which to draw in support of organizational objectives. They require opportunities to coach and develop others as well as opportunities to continue to learn and develop their own skills and abilities and feel challenged in their work. Managers can tap into this well-spring of knowledge and these women’s highly evolved relational skills by placing them in leadership positions, in team or task-force oriented roles and by signing them up as mentors for junior members of the firm. These women should seek out younger women to mentor and sponsor even if their organizations do not have formal mentoring programs. It is particularly critical for women in the earlier career phases to have access to successful female role models and to see concrete evidence that organizations are supportive of their desires for career and life success. Also, the women in the reinventive contribution career phase are in the unique position to become proactive members of their workplaces and champions of women in earlier career phases. They can work to create fair and just organizational policies that contribute to quality of work environments for all workers.

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*Future directions for research*

The results of our study are suggestive of specific directions for future research as follows. First, the empirical evidence in this study shows distinctions between the three phases of women's careers in terms of career pattern, locus, context and beliefs. Future studies should test the replicability of these findings to determine if this three-phase model of women's career development is embedded in the particular socio-historical context of the times in which the particular women in this sample have lived or is universally applicable across different eras and changing realities. Clearly the specific contextual elements of these women's lives will change over time reflective of changing organizational and societal norms and values. However, whether women will experience the specific elements of these career phases is a central question to be answered in future research. Additionally the contexts, duration, processes and dynamics of each phase need to be empirically tested in large sample studies.

Second, research is also needed to more specifically explain the consistent finding that phase 2 women were substantially different on many of the variables explored in this study. This consistent difference may possibly be related to the impact of family responsibilities and in particular a sense of child-bearing urgency or other intimacy related factors, but the present study does not provide enough data to draw valid conclusions about such explanations or resultant cause and effect relationships. Also, especially since this is the age grouping that likely comprises the layers between middle and upper levels of management in many organizations, this group of women may be most at risk for leaving their organizations, quitting "corporate America" altogether, or otherwise downgrading their contributions due to dissatisfaction with their workplace circumstances and organizational environments. The failure to understand the particular dynamics of these women in mid-career will likely result in the continued under-representation of women at senior organizational levels, a circumstance that world-class organizations can ill afford.

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