Women and Careers:
A Critical Perspective on the Theory and Practice of Women in Organizations
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Women and Careers: A Critical Perspective on the Theory and Practice of Women in Organizations

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Abstract

What is known about the careers of women in organizations? How do organizations "manage" women's careers? What concerns, issues and problems are perceived about women's careers in organizations, which serve to lock women into specific paths and subject them to constraints and limitations? What are the "structures of opportunity" (Astín, 1984), advantage, and disadvantage that have been created by changing societal, organizational, and individual realities for women during the last decade of global advancement? What insights are offered by the empirical literature on women's careers that may unlock these career pathing patterns, societally, organizationally and individually? While the ranks of women in organizations have grown exponentially over the last decade, organizations are still fundamentally male-dominated. This trend continues even given the preponderance of research and anecdotal evidence suggesting that the most successful organizations will be the ones that continue to develop the talents and encourage the contributions of their female employees (Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Schwartz, 1992). How does this continued male dominance affect the career development of women?

In this paper we critically assess the extant conceptual and empirical literature on women's careers that has appeared over the last decade to answer these and other related questions about women in organizations. Based on this review, we identify major patterns that cumulatively contribute to the current state of the literature on women's careers, such as the contextual nature of women's lives captured at the intersection of work and non-work, the impact on women of managing multiple responsibilities and the resulting domino effect on the organizations for which they work, and the differential treatment of women and men in organizations.
We provide direction for a research agenda for future empirical work on women’s careers that addresses the development of integrative career theories relevant for women’s contemporary lives. It is hoped that this research agenda can expand current definitions of successful organizational careers and provide fresh avenues for conceptualizing career success for women.
As women continue to enter occupational life in record numbers, attention is increasingly being focused on their career development and advancement. Transformation in the nature of work and organizing, the surge of women into the workforce in contemporary times, and recent changes in the ways careers and career development are conceptualized e.g., boundaryless (Arthur, 1994), protean (Hall, 1996), kaleidoscope (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) suggest the need for new theory to take into account the expanded occupational opportunities and resultant choices now faced by women, and to explicitly address the lives, experiences, and issues of women in the workforce.

Much of the existing literature suggests that women’s careers progress differently than men’s in large part as a result of the developmental differences between women and men (Bateson, 1990; Gallos, 1989) as well as organizational and societal factors (Betz and Fitzgerald, 1987; Betz, 1993; Fagenson-Eland and Baugh, 2000; Ragins, Townsend, and Mattis, 1998). There is some debate as to the necessity of gender-distinct career theories (Osipow and Fitzgerald, 1996). Some call for separate theories (Diamond, 1987; Gallos, 1989; Larwood and Gutek, 1987) while others argue that although women’s career development is not fundamentally different from men’s, it is considerably more complicated, due to gender socialization and resultant barriers (Fitzgerald and Crites, 1980). Betz and Fitzgerald (1987) suggest that women live their lives in gendered social contexts that are sufficiently unique and different from men’s experiences to require a women-specific research focus.

As we show in this review, more than a decade after these calls, the literature on women’s career development continues to be characterized by diffuse and fragmented research and theory. In the present review, we specifically focused on examining research on the career experiences of women published from the 1990s to the present to see how calls for new
conceptualizations of women’s careers from prior decades have been addressed. Based on this review, we identify the major patterns that cumulatively contribute to the current state of the literature on women’s careers. In the final section of the paper, we provide directions for future empirical work on women’s careers, addressing the conceptual and methodological needs of career theories that specifically attend to women’s contemporary lives. We start our investigation by relying on influential research on women’s careers and women’s development to build the case for why we believe women’s careers should be studied separately from men’s careers.

**Why Women’s Careers Are Different from Men’s Careers**

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 (see O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005): (1) the differential impact of family or care-giving responsibilities on men’s and women’s careers (Burke, 2002; Hochschild, 1989), (2) findings from women’s developmental psychology (Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1976) that suggest a distinctive relational emphasis may pervade women’s career development (Fletcher, 1996; Kram, 1996; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005), and (3) women’s relative under-representation and subsequent token status at higher organizational levels that uniquely shape and constrain their career progress (Ely, 1995; Kanter, 1977).

**Family and Care-Giving 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. 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 and the influence of women’s family structure on their career advancement and success (Friedman and Greenhaus, 2000; Hewlett, 2002a; Kirchmeyer, 2002). In an investigation of dual-employed couples, Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh and Reilly (1995) found that women’s work-family relationships were unidirectional and static, with family taking precedence, while men’s were reciprocal and dynamic. Women’s career satisfaction has been found to be adversely affected by work-family conflict (Martins, Eddleston and Veiga, 2002) suggesting that any examination of women and work must take into account a woman’s larger life context and the interaction effects of work and life variables. Current definitions of careers continue to be based on the traditional male model of continuous employment and advancement which do not adequately reflect the broader scope of women’s responsibilities (Mavin, 2001; McDonald, Brown and Bradley, 2005; Pringle and Dixon, 2003)

Examining the intersection of work and life 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, elderly parents 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, because of family responsibilities, women’s careers may take on forms, continuity and advancement patterns, and directions substantially different
from those of men. This necessitates the study of women’s experiences in and of themselves, not in comparison to a previously male-defined career norm.

Women’s Developmental Psychology – Gallos’ (1989) comprehensive review of the field of women’s development was one of the first to question extant male standards for judging success in women’s careers. Her suggestion that research on women’s development may provide fertile ground for understanding the complexities of women’s careers has been often revisited in ongoing discussions of women and career theory. Powell and Mainiero (1992, 1993) pointed to the need for theory that addresses the complex choices and constraints in women’s career and life development, and that addresses issues of balance, connectedness, and interdependence in addition to issues of achievement and individuation. Their conceptualization of “cross currents in a river of time” proposed a framework for looking at women’s careers that takes into account non-work issues, subjective measures of success, and the impact of personal, organizational and societal factors on women’s choices. Recognition that women’s career and life responsibilities will likely ebb and flow according to life stage concerns (O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005) must be taken into account in any theoretical exploration of women’s career development.

For instance, research on the stages of adult development for women suggests that women find a renewed sense of purpose, energy, and increased vitality for work pursuits in middle adulthood (Bardwick, 1980; Borysenko, 1996). In stark contrast to this, traditional male models of career development represent the middle and later career years as those of stability, maintenance and decline after age 40 (Miller and Form, 1951; Schein, 1978; Super, 1980). 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.
Applications of male understandings such as these to women’s careers and lives thus inhibit the advancement of knowledge about the factors influencing contemporary women’s career development.

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: 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: 114). This approach necessitates an examination of the contexts and relationships (O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005; Powell and Mainiero, 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). 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. Token women in organizations are more likely to experience barriers to career advancement and to perceive a lack of organizational fit (Simpson, 2000). Burke and McKeen (1996) found that women managers employed in organizations with a high proportion of men at all levels and predominantly men at senior levels expressed less job satisfaction and greater intentions to quit than did women employed in more gender-equal organizations.

Ragins, et al (1998) found stark differences in perceptions between CEOs and women executives regarding women’s advancement into senior positions in American Fortune 1000 organizations. CEOs overwhelmingly identified a lack of general management experience and a lack of women in the managerial pipeline as the major barriers to women’s advancement. In contrast, female executives pointed to issues of organizational culture such as stereotyping and exclusion from important networks. Such disparate perspectives continue to work against the advancement of women into senior leadership positions.

For the above three reasons, women in organizations, particularly male-dominated ones, 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.

**The Investigation Parameters**

We sought to conduct an illustrative, not exhaustive, review of recent research and theory to discern patterns and frameworks that can contribute to our current understanding of women’s career experiences. Academic research relevant to women’s careers is scattered across a variety
of fields and publication outlets, including business/management, psychology, counseling and vocational behavior, organizational psychology, industrial relations, sociology, and gender studies. This diffuse and somewhat fragmented literature dilutes and disperses cumulative knowledge, giving rise to a plethora of interrelated constructs, or “bundles of influencing factors” (Pringle and Dixon, 2003: 294) and inhibiting their coherent integration within an overarching theoretical framework (Hackett, 1997). During our search for research on women’s career development, we came across studies investigating related elements such as mentoring, networking, power, sexual harassment, the glass ceiling and sex-based discrimination, career advancement, corporate mobility, opportunity structures, personal development, relational development, work-life balance, career interruptions, women’s leadership, organizational turnover, and human resources policies. While these constructs inform us about how women’s careers develop, the boundaries between these related fields impacting women’s lives and careers remain somewhat blurred, contributing to a disjointed and less than coherent field of knowledge (O’Neil & Bilimoria, 2005).

We chose to examine research on women’s careers appearing in academic journals in 3 primary areas, careers, management, and applied psychology from 1990 to 2005. (See Table 1 for a list of journals searched.) We chose to sample from journals in these particular areas because in addition to career related publications, careers research is primarily found in the management and applied psychology literature. We would expect that by sampling from these 3 main literature streams we could add to our current understanding of the state of the research on women’s careers. We started by examining the reference lists of a sample of key articles and book chapters on career development and women’s careers published in the last decade (e.g., Betz, 1993; Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995; Kirchmeyer, 2002; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005;
Powell & Mainiero, 1992; Stroh & Reilly, 1999; Sullivan, 1999) to determine which journals were most often cited as publishing work on women’s careers. Our search yielded 14 primary journals which we examined for articles relating to women’s career experiences.

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PATTERNS IN THE LITERATURE

Much of the empirical literature on women’s career development that emerged in the past decade or so has focused on testing existing theory, generally using large samples and quantitative analysis methods. While this research has used a wide range of theoretical frameworks, hypotheses, variables, and operationalizations, generally, these studies have attempted to categorize and apply women’s careers into the stages and patterns developed by earlier theorists (e.g., Super, 1957; Lepine, 1992; Levinson, Darrow, Levinson and McKee 1978). Some of these studies have explored the application of theories developed by researching men’s careers (e.g., Super, 1957; Gould and Penley, 1984; Rosenbaum 1989; and Levinson et al, 1978) to discrete segments of women’s career experiences (e.g., Hurley and Sonnenfeld, 1997; Smart, 1998). Others have tested the applicability of categories developed from prior women-specific theories (Astin, 1984; Lepine, 1992) to updated populations (e.g., Poole, Langan-Fox, Ciavarella and Omodei, 1991; Richardson, 1996). Still others have drawn on a wide range of constructs, from trait theory to human capital theory to social roles and socialization theories, to explain the differential factors affecting women’s careers. Many of these studies compare the managerial and executive advancement and success of women compared to men (e.g., Stroh, Brett and Reilly, 1992; Tharenou, Latimer and Conroy, 1994; Schneer and Reitman, 1995).
Predominantly, these studies address various career development issues specific to women in the corporate sector, and to notions of conventional advancement within the corporate hierarchy. A limited number of studies take into account the influence of non-work factors on women’s career development, and the contextual interplay of women’s personal and professional lives (e.g., Gersick and Kram, 2002; Poole and Langan-Fox, 1997; White, 1995).

Another set of empirical studies from the past decade consists of inductive, predominantly small sample research, which seeks to build grounded theory of women’s career phenomena. Topics addressed include the paths, challenges and barriers to career advancement and success of older (50+) women (Still and Timms, 1998); midlife (35+) women’s career and life balance decisions (Gordon and Whelan, 1998); the changing nature of women’s careers over the life course (O’Neil, 2003); and the effects of race, gender, and class on professional development (e.g., Richie, Fassinger, Linn, Johnson, Prosser and Robinson, 1997). These studies pay closer attention to the contextual nature of women’s careers, the intertwining of career and relational development, and the multiple and complex methods of professional and personal advancement and fulfillment.

We identify two major interrelated patterns that characterize the current state of the research on women’s careers: 1) the contextual nature of women’s lives and careers, and the impact on women and organizations of women managing multiple responsibilities and 2) the perpetuation of male-defined constructions of work and careers and the resulting differential treatment of women and men in organizations.

**Pattern 1: Women’s Careers Are Informed by Their Relational and Contextual Experiences.**
Women’s careers and lives are inextricably entwined. In the 1980s, theorists first began to acknowledge that career outcomes were a result of interactions among occupational, personal and family factors throughout a lifetime (Sonnenfeld and Kotter, 1982) and that there was a growing consensus that careers included both work and non-work activity (Driver, 1988), particularly for women. White, Cox, and Cooper’s (1992) study of extremely successful women in the United Kingdom defined career development as “a successive and systematic sequence of attitudes and behaviors associated with work-related experiences, which acknowledges the individual’s personal life, over the entire span of the life cycle” (p. 13). These notions reference the increasingly embedded nature of women’s “careers-in-life” (O’Neil, 2003), and the interconnectedness of work and private life for women (Jacobson & Aaltio-Marjosola, 2001). Protean (Hall, 1976; 1996) and boundaryless careers (Arthur, 1994) require adaptability and flexibility, both hallmarks of women’s lives. This suggests that women’s career patterns will likely be organic, even emergent, and responsive to the life circumstances in which they are embedded, not dictated or bound by organizational structures.

Recent studies on women’s careers reflect the existence of less-traditional, hierarchical career paths as well as the hierarchical career ladder (Lyness and Thompson, 2000). Richardson (1996) investigated the careers of women accounting professionals and characterized them as having snake-like careers compared to the ladder-like careers of male accountants. Gersick and Kram (2002: 31) found that women in their study of mid-life high achievers characterized their career paths as “zigzags that followed opportunities as they arose.”

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” (p. 1359). She found that orderly careers
allow for long-term planning and advance along a foreseeable path, with few inter-organizational transitions. Disorderly careers were characterized by changing career fields and organizations, and unplanned job changes. In a study of women’s career choices, O’Neil, Bilimoria and Saatcioglu (2004) found that specific combinations of career patterns, characterized as a continuum between ordered and emergent, and career locus, characterized as a continuum between internal and external resulted in three career types for women of Achieving, Navigating and Accommodating. Women with emergent career types (Accommodating careers) were poised midway between internal and external career loci reflecting the dual reality of self and other considerations in their career decisions. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) describe the kaleidoscope career as one in which women evaluate their career choices holistically in the context of their relationships, constraints and opportunities, searching for the best fit.

Increasing recognition of the importance of investigating the impact of contextual factors, particularly family relationships on women and careers, is reflected in recent research. Studies have investigated the influence of women’s family structure on their career advancement and success. (Kirchmeyer 2002; Schneer and Reitman, 2002; Stroh, Brett and Reilly, 1996; Tenbrunsel, et al, 1995) with mixed results. There is support for women personally benefiting from multiple roles (Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, and King, 2002), but more evidence to suggest that women’s multiple roles are not rewarded organizationally (Brett & Stroh, 1999; Burke, 1999, Hopkins, 2004; Kirchmeyer, 2002). Recent research on work-family conflict (Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian, 1996; Osterman, 1995) and work-family culture (Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness, 1999) has linked the tension inherent in occupying multiple roles as well as organizational support for work-family integration to employee’s job commitment and satisfaction. In a study of engagement in work and family roles, Rothbard (2001) found that both
men and women experienced enrichment between roles but in opposite directions; men from work to family and women from family to work. Only women experienced depletion between roles and it was in the direction of work to family.

Our review highlights a disconnection between the careers of men and women and a disconnection between research findings and organizational practice. Findings continue to suggest that for women contextual factors need to be taken into consideration, that various career paths need to be legitimized and rewarded, and that organizational policies need to support women in their desires to succeed both professionally and personally. Unfortunately organizational realities continue to be structured around the traditional 1950’s family (Schneer and Reitman, 2002).

**Pattern 2: Male-defined Constructions of Work and Careers**

Theory building and testing of women’s career development continues to draw heavily on frameworks and conceptions derived from male constructions of work and careers. Despite appearing on the surface to have corrected the previous over-reliance on theories and models primarily derived from men’s careers, most large-sample, hypotheses-testing investigations of women’s career stages and patterns continue to subtly perpetuate a male-defined framing of work and careers. For example, over-reliance on measures such as income to determine women’s career success offer an incomplete picture; women’s own definitions of success may have less to do with externally defined, traditionally male, corporate criteria and may be more likely to rely on internal criteria such as a sense of personal achievement, integrity, balance, etc. (cf. Melamed, 1995; Sturges, 1999). Kirchmeyer’s (1998, 2002) investigations, for instance, found that although women earned lower incomes than men, they perceived their careers to be as
successful. Although some recent studies have begun to employ respondents’ own personal definitions of success (e.g., Sturges, 1999; Poole and Langan-Fox, 1997; Kirchmeyer, 1998, 2002), the bulk of empirical studies continue to rely predominantly on traditional (male) career outcomes and externalized definitions of success, such as income, wealth accumulation, and position within the corporate hierarchy.

The dominant organizational culture will have an impact on women’s experiences of career advancement and satisfaction (Rosin & Korabik, 1995). Examining the concept of a career-ambitious person, O’Leary (1997) showed how career “success or failure” varies according to the traditional male “corpocratic” career model based on linear, hierarchical progression likened to tournaments or competitions with winners and losers or a newer female “lifestream” career model. The latter model is based on a holistic framework that looks at the interplay between work, relationships, organizational factors, and various life stages, and measures personal and professional success through perceived degree of challenge, satisfaction, sense of growth and development. Organizations rewarding the corpocratic model will likely be disadvantageous to women.

Many studies use organizational advancement as if it were a synonym for career development, which may not accurately reflect the way women currently conceptualize or construct their careers. For instance, successful women who leave corporate careers to establish their own businesses, do individual consulting, pursue new credentials, change their career field, or rebalance their professional and personal lives do not fit extant criteria for career progression. Studies that continue to tie career development to hierarchical advancement thus exclude a whole segment of non-linear career development experiences and criteria relevant to an overarching framework of women’s contemporary careers. This pattern is of some concern given the recent
“opting out” (Belkin, 2004) of women from corporate America (Marshall, 1995; Moore and Buttner, 1997; Moore, 2000), including many women who meet traditional standards of corporate success.

Biases inherent in the organizational model of success are apparent when we examine the gendered language surrounding women’s career choices. Notions that women are “opting out,” (Belkin, 2004), taking career “off-ramps” (Hewlett & Luce, 2005), and lacking in ambition (Fels, 2004) all reflect a corporate or organizational framework as the only legitimate path to success. Women may find challenge and satisfaction in entrepreneurial and alternative paths but they are still deemed unsuccessful if they leave organizational life.

The differential “impact gap” of policies and practices on women’s and men’s careers is also ripe for investigation. Recent studies (e.g. Stroh, et al, 1992; Tharenou, et al, 1994; Lyness and Thompson, 1997; Kirchmeyer, 1998, Smart, 1998) have attempted to utilize more gender-free frameworks, and constructs applicable to all managers (e.g., geographic transfers for career advancement, access to organizational opportunities, career encouragement, career interruptions, career involvement, the link between individual traits and success, etc.). However, while these constructs certainly pertain to both genders, women frequently may be disproportionately impacted. For example, in Judiesch and Lyness’ (1999) study on the impact of leaves of absence on managers’ career success, the authors found that organizational penalties did not differ by gender; however out of their sample of 523 leave takers, 476 were women and 47 were men. Similarly, while Kirchmeyer (1998) found that career interruptions for both male and female mid-career managers negatively impacted success, women experienced significantly more career interruptions than men, mainly due to family responsibilities. Thus, there would appear to be a disproportionately larger negative impact of career interruptions on women.
In another study, while women and men’s base salary and bonus were not found to be different, women executives received fewer stock options and had less authority than their matched male counterparts, leading the authors to conclude that female executives may be less valued than male executives in the organization studied (Lyness and Thompson, 1997). While the lack of differences in the compensation (salary and bonus) variables studied suggests gender parity in the organizational reward structure, a deeper understanding of the organizational treatment of women and men arises from unpacking other organizational variables.

Our review also indicates that the samples studied consist mostly of highly successful women managers, executives, and professionals, drawn predominantly from white, middle class, and highly educated backgrounds. Samples draw heavily on either corporate executives and managers or MBA alumni and students. This treatment of women’s careers, limited to a select sample of elite or successful women, is of concern because this sampling represents only a small proportion of the population of working women, and generalizations from this group may not be relevant for the majority of women’s careers. Additionally, and most insidiously, the sample selection criteria for inclusion of women in research studies are themselves based on career success definitions emanating from male models and male standards; these women are highly successful in their chosen careers based on objective, traditionally male standards of career success such as advanced organizational level and high income (e.g., Gersick and Kram, 2002; Mainiero, et al, 1994; Ragins, et al, 1998; Richie et al, 1997).

These applications continue to lock us into constructions of linear organizational paths to success, which may be severely limiting to the practice of women’s career development. We may say protean, boundaryless, and kaleidoscope careers are the career patterns of the future, but we still largely organize for success by traditional notions of progression up organizational
ladders. Current organizational career realities continue to reflect the advantageous position of married men with children and non-employed spouses (Schneer and Reitman, 2002). There is continued discussion of how new non-traditional organizational forms should be more conducive to women’s careers. However, little has changed organizationally with women still not making it to the top levels of organizations, not being challenged in their work, and continuing to face discrimination (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Ragins, et al, 1998).

In summary, although the reliance on constructs such as income, career interruptions, and career advancement may provide insight about overall patterns and trends in male and female corporate careers, their differential application to and impact on men and women suggest caution in their use and interpretation.

FUTURE AGENDA

We encourage investigation in four major areas relevant to women’s careers. First, future research should continue to employ holistic approaches to women’s career-in-life development. As Fagenson (1990) suggests for the study of women in management, what is required is an integrated gender-organization-system approach that takes into account the interactional dynamics of individual, organizational and societal factors. This would appear well advised for the study of women and careers as well given consistent findings about the importance of context and relationships to women’s career choices. Powell and Mainiero (1992) call for the examination of personal, organizational and societal factors that influence women’s development. More integrative theoretical development needs to occur in the examination of contextual variables, addressing questions such as: What are the societal, organizational and individual factors that impact women’s career development? How do these factors interact to
influence women’s decisions over the life course? How are women’s working lives embedded in the larger context of their multiple life arenas? Answering these questions can help mitigate the current diffusion and fragmentation of the research on women’s careers.

Second, future research should expand existing definitions of career success for women. Career theorists must question the validity and generalizability of extant male-defined constructions of success, investigate why women are abandoning the pursuit of “success” in corporate careers (Belkin, 2004; Hewlett and Luce, 2005), re-examine the very meaning of career success in light of women’s contemporary lives and choices, and utilize expanded definitions of career success. Future research needs to explore broadened conceptualizations of contemporary work and careers for women, utilizing women-specific framings of these constructs that include not just what one does for work but who one is while doing it. As a few recent studies have begun to do, women’s own subjective measures of career and life success should be explored, extending to the multiple arenas of their lives that interact with and influence their career development and images of success. In this regard, theories of women’s developmental psychology, particularly theories of development-in-relation (Miller, 1976; Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey, 1991) can continue to inform our current understanding of women’s career choices and development (Fletcher, 1996; Kram, 1996; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Additionally, the integrated relationship between women’s personal and professional lives (e.g., Ruderman, et al, 2002) needs to be further explored in ways that deepen our understanding of the complex synergies created by the flows of knowledge, skills, and experience among a woman’s multiple life roles as a dynamic system.

Third, career theorists must utilize new methodologies and samples to create new knowledge on women and careers and contribute to more cohesive frameworks in the literature.
Future research should continue the trend of in-depth examination and inductive theory building of the complex set of factors influencing women’s careers. More research should focus on giving voice to women’s own career and life experiences with the intent of building integrated theory about these experiences (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). Most importantly, sample selection considerations for future research investigations should take these expanded, women-specific definitions of success in careers into account; objective, traditional measures of corporate career success need not be the only criteria for inclusion in studies of women’s career development. Additionally, more varied samples need to be employed in these studies, expanding beyond the relatively homogenous managerial, executive, and professional women that currently comprise the majority of samples studied. Large sample empirical research continues to be needed to apply, test, and generalize about theory that is generated on women’s careers. Finally, to most fully explore women’s holistic career and life experiences over their life course, theorists should focus their efforts on undertaking longitudinal research, both of a qualitative and quantitative nature.

Fourth, critical research on women’s careers is required to inform and advance organizational practice. With the increasing advent of women in the work force and the rapid pace of social change, it is important to continue to explore societal attitudes and norms toward women and work as well as women’s own perceptions of their opportunities. It is incumbent upon career theorists to practice relevant scholarship that will advance women in organizations. For example, a critical need for women is better integration between work and non-work. Organizations can support this need by legitimizing various career paths and options and providing a climate of acceptance and support for the many responsibilities and choices women face. Organizational policies supportive of women being active contributors at all phases of their
lives are necessary requirements for enabling this desired integration. For instance, early career women need challenging assignments, mentoring and good management. In addition, women in mid-career may also need flexible work hours, work arrangements and job restructuring to assist them in mediating the critical junctures of the many roles they play. This means as research has consistently shown, that organizations must discard a “one size fits all” mentality toward career structures and supports (Martins, et al, 2002) and recognize that women’s career dynamics fluctuate over time (O’Neil and Bilimoria, 2005). Women’s varying career dynamics require flexibility of organizational structures, policies and practices to better align with women’s working realities. Failure to provide necessary and appropriate resources and encouragement will continue to result in the devaluing and exodus of talented women from organizations (Marshall, 1995). Organizations that create work environments that do not disadvantage women seeking to lead integrated lives and have access to equal opportunities will clearly have a competitive edge in keeping their most talented employees. Thus, it is the responsibility of career theorists to continue to inform organizational practice.

CONCLUSION

As this review suggests, career outcomes and career success continue to be predominantly structured in accordance with traditional, hierarchical models. In expanding beyond current organizational frames of successful careers, researchers are poised to influence society’s larger framings of women’s career success and development. By documenting the experiences of women successful and fulfilled in non-corporate or non-hierarchical choices and pathways, by examining the contingent factors affecting women’s non-linear careers, and by
addressing the holistic integration of women’s work and personal lives, career research thus has the potential to progressively guide societal constructions of women and their careers.

We believe that women’s careers are different from men’s and should be viewed as distinct and worthy of study in their own right, not as “cut from male cloth” (Gilligan, 1979) and found wanting. Although the genesis of the field of career development was based on understanding the experiences of working men, it is time to free ourselves from the shackles of gendered organizational career perspectives and give voice to the multiple paths to success being pursued by women. Failing to do so will constrain the future of career development research just as surely as it has constrained the careers of women in organizations.
References


Table 1: List of Journals

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<th>Careers</th>
<th>Management</th>
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