



NUI MAYNOOTH
Coláiste na hÉireann Mhá Nuad

‘BALLS IN THE AIR’: EXPLORING WOMEN’S CAREERS INTERNATIONALLY



Work Family Researchers Network Conference

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Study



- ▶ Considers extent to which contemporary conceptions of ‘dual careers’, ‘gender discrimination’, ‘protean career’ contribute to understanding female SIE experiences.

Approach - Sample



- ▶ Qualitative research - ethnographically informed, semi-structured interviews.
- ▶ Geographical case study.
- ▶ Inductive – focus on primary themes that emerged from interview transcripts.
- ▶ Focus of paper sub-set of 20 females.
- ▶ Snowball sample, but diverse group:
 - Aged between late 20s and early 60s.
 - Native English or fluent English speakers.
 - Married, single, divorced, widowed, with/without partners, with/without children.
 - Resident in France from 2 – 20+years.
 - American, Australian, Swedish, English, Irish, Scottish, German.



Themes from the narratives



- ▶ Many elements influencing careers.
- ▶ The *personal* nature of careers highlighted.
- ▶ Females in particular: Trailing spouse, dual careers, family.
- ▶ Barriers to progression based on gender, education and nationality – country specific?
- ▶ Work/life balance, lifestyle anchor – very evident due to case study location.
- ▶ Protean career: Importance of many elements (Autonomy, Personal value, Psychological success), morphing career due to circumstance.

Trailing spouse, dual careers, family



- Difficulty in finding work locally in the South of France that would reflect their educational qualifications and previous career paths in the domestic country.
- Catherine (Australian, 40, married):
- ‘When I came over here I thought “well I’ve done HR, but I’m open to do anything”. ... And I tried getting professional work but the trouble was because I hadn’t been in French HR, it was really very hard. I didn’t speak French. ... And then I thought that I’d do anything and I was out trying to get secretarial... jobs, but because the French are so focused on a career they wouldn’t accept me when I said I’m happy to do these jobs even though I’m not using all my skills. So I couldn’t get any of those kind of jobs either. And then I basically started as a sort of a computer programmer, I did that for a year. I basically kind of re-wrote myself ... as a technical writer and then used the old technical skills. ...It was a great change, but then I did eventually find some kind of work.’

Trailing spouse, dual careers, family



- Re-constructing paid working career.
- Move can mean changing role in the relationship.
- Alice (Scottish, 43, married, 2 children):
- ‘Until then ... our approach to choices in terms of where we were living, what careers we were doing was totally and utterly even. There wasn’t one that had any ... great importance than the other.’
- Or...

Trailing spouse, dual careers, family



- Milly (American, 34, married, 2 young children):
- ‘I mean right now we’re focusing on [my husband]’s job, since I would ideally like to change jobs... And I’m very fortunate that I have a partner that’s always said: “ok, you came here for me, this was my move, the next one’s yours.” ...So, while I’m the secondary following partner in this case ...I don’t feel placed in that position. ...Although if things continue as they are, we are going to go in different directions and it is going to end up being following [husband’s name] because obviously he’s ... increasing stature and professional experience and all of those things where I’m stagnating. ... The thing is that, I mean if you’d asked me [if I would place my career secondary to my husband’s] before the kids were born, then I would have said: “heck no”, you know “no way” and “we could have made that work”. But the kids came and the priorities just changed for me...’

Trailing spouse, dual careers, family



- Or
- Katharina (German, 37, German, married, 2 children):
- ‘It’s good that I’ve done my PhD. It’s probably one of my best ideas (laugh) - for the career and for my personal satisfaction as well. ... I like being equal to my husband in the work. ...And I also earn almost as much as he does. And I mean that’s just wonderful. ... And probably I could live without it but I’m very satisfied by it.’

Sacrifice



- Most of the women that moved with their partners were the secondary careerists.
- Mary (Scottish, 34, married) admits her jobs in France have been *‘a lot less interesting than what I was doing in Scotland’*, more assistant type work but she took the work because *‘I didn’t have much choice.’*
- *‘I’d quite like to go freelance actually (laugh). Because I realise now that there’s a huge market in France for a native English speaker in scientific medical writing. ... So it’s the way I’d like things to go. ... [But] at the moment [my husband]’s freelance so we need the stability of a salary.’*

Balls in the Air



- Deirdre (Irish, 42, married, 2 children):
- ‘For me it’s balls in the air all the time. ...I think I have the more difficult role in that respect in that, you know, [husband’s name] goes away, he can just concentrate on work all week. Whereas I have to leave at such and such a time because I have to collect the girls here and then I have to bring them there and back. So for me it’s yeah I find the balancing act quite difficult some times. Also because ... maybe once or twice a month I have to do an overnight to Germany and so that adds to the equation as well. So for me it’s very very busy. The week is very very busy because I’m constantly between work and the girls and work and the girls. And I may have something to finish at work, so it would be handy if [husband’s name] were there during the week and I had something to finish that would take me maybe half an hour, three quarters of an hour and I could phone him and say: “can you pick up the girls because I need to finish something”. But I can never do that because he’s not there. Now I have a very good network of friends if I’m really stuck...’

Traditional (intra-organisational) Career Progression



- Tracy (British, 54, widow, two children) complains about her stagnation in the vertical career progression in the organisation.
- ‘My career would have progressed much more if I had stayed in the States. [I]n France they look at your personal situation too much. When I was first hired by [private sector IT Travel organisation] in the US, no one knew or asked about my personal situation. They didn’t know I was a single mother, widowed with 2 very young [children]. That was private. I don’t think I’d have been hired in France in the same situation. Because here they want to know your personal situation; they see it as relevant. [But I think] if you are able to do the job and want to do the job, then your personal situation should not matter. ... Men in France that went to the same grande école [elite French third level education school] and mixed in the same social circles... That is **the** barrier for non-French here.’

Traditional (intra-organisational) Career Progression



- Angie (American, 41, married, 2 children) concurs:
- ‘It’s very French... Here they’re only impressed by – there’s the grande école and there’s everything else. ... I think in [company name] and in France they pay us with the sunshine and the beautiful Cote D’Azur and the 6 weeks of vacation, but there’s still just [laugh] a money limit on salaries. That can be very annoying. I think financially it would have progressed [had I remained in the States].’

Traditional (intra-organisational) Career Progression



- ‘On the day that I came back from maternity leave I was promoted... Which I think is quite a good move for [private sector IT Travel organisation]. ... I got more functionality in the group and more people. And now since April I’ve been promoted to senior manager and I have expanded further and further the group and the responsibilities.’ (*Hilda, German, 41, married, 1 child*).
- => implies progression may be linked to function (marketing versus technical).

Traditional (intra-organisational) Career Progression



- The perception from the sample is thus that women's promotional opportunities are potentially constrained by virtue of their gender, their specialism and contextually in France, their educational background.

Work-Life Balance



- ‘I’m not particularly interested in middle management or rising up a ladder in a corporation, purely because in my [name travel agency] job I was a middle manager and you get the worst from both ends – the directors are pulling you one way and then all the staff are pulling you another. And I really found that the job could get very very stressful ... It got to the point where I ... started to not like it. ... And plus the fact I have a very different attitude now because my father died when I was 25 and before he died my mentality was go it alone, you don’t think of anything else outside of just getting into, getting a job and proving... Now a death in the family of a very close loved one really completely changes your outlook of how you should be living your life and it makes you wake up to hang on, to say “hang on, am I enjoying this?”. And so now I tend to really live my life where ... money isn’t... the be all and end all.’ (*Susan, British, 39, single*).

Work-Life Balance



- ‘Before we were closed I wanted to be the next level up: I was senior manager and the next level up was kind of partner and I was kind of keen to do that. But looking back that would have been selling your soul really, the amount of work you have to put in. Now I’m not quite so keen. I want to be able to do my job and enjoy it, but also have some time for myself which I’d never had before, and enjoy the kids.’ *(Kate, British, 38, married, 2 children)*

Work-Life Balance



- Women in the sample do not position their professional careers at the pinnacle of their priority list; they put their personal life (including family, children) first.
- Sample have all chosen to live in the South of France for lifestyle reasons, despite some perceiving their professional careers would have progressed more had they remained in their home countries.
- The lifestyle anchor (Schein 1978) is emphasised.

Protean Career



- Protean career concept (Hall and Harrington 2004) refers to the ability to morph and alter one's career path depending on life stage and circumstance.
- Individuals demonstrating a protean career 'are less concerned with ... organizational rewards and are more motivated by autonomy, personal values and psychological success' (Hall & Harrington, 2004).

Protean Career



- Sarah (British, 40, divorced, one grown up child):
- ‘A lot of people... say to me “how come you did a French degree and now you’re in Management Consulting?” ... And I think I just found opportunities that built on each stage of my career and today I’d say I’m using everything. I have to do quite a lot of research - so studying at university and now I have to do quite a lot of studying in research for these companies. I have to write reports, which reminds me of when I had to write essays in university so all that’s useful. I have to facilitate which is my teaching background. I have to communicate a lot, there again teaching has been important and helping people see the pros and cons of different situations, all that is coming from the teaching experience. All my customer and sales knowledge has come from working in the customer centre. I really am using everything. I think I’ve sort of managed to intelligently move from one thing to another.’

Protean Career



- Using previous experiences and pulling components of different experiences into constructing current working role.
- Morphed (transitioned) from different working experiences to present state, advocating the three elements most pertinent to protean careers: autonomy, personal values and psychological success.
- More focus on subjective career success.

Implications



- Male / female divide persists - Findings encourage debate on content and potential of female international careers in an era where following a career internationally is less atypical.
- Individualised nature of careers -> Need to individualise career planning.
- Need to widen career research and planning to encompass other life responsibilities.
- Rich data/narratives from respondents describing lived experiences -> value of narrative research.

Conclusions



- Questions for government policy planners and organisations striving to maintain and increase female participation at all levels in the labour force, particularly in an era where following a career internationally is more typical.