

**Careers of Women in the Middle East. A theoretical review of the protean career
concept.**

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Abstract

Non-Western geographical contexts are under-represented in management studies. This paper discusses the lived career experiences of women in the Middle East region through the lens of the protean career concept, a career metaphor which has originated from the Western context. While global similarities concerning female individualism, agency and self-management are recognised, it is clear that the structural context in which careers unfold requires deeper attention and analysis. We advocate novel approaches to constructing theories specific to the unique contexts in which they take place. In using existing career metaphors, we suggest, existing career concepts may indeed describe and explain women's careers in the geographical context of the Middle East. However, detailed empirical studies of an ethnographic nature would best serve in developing career theories specific to the different countries in this area and their respective unique contexts.

Keywords

Protean career

Gender

Women

Middle East

Introduction

Previous work on the impact of globalisation on the structure of careers has emphasised the concepts and frameworks of the “protean career” (Crowley-Henry, 2007; Crowley-Henry and Weir, 2007), the “boundaryless career” (Arthur and Rousseau 1996; De Fillippi and Arthur 1994; Stahl *et al.*, 2002), and “career capital” (Al Ariss and Jawad 2011; Jokinen *et al.*, 2008). Some of the impetus towards this reconsideration of traditional HR theory has

observed that many of the assumptions of traditional studies of corporate HR including career progression, expatriation, repatriation, training and development for relatively fixed and predictable career paths need to be re-examined. This has come about because of the combined influence of a number of factors including the decline in activity in the global economy with the resulting collapse of some long-established players, and accelerated time-spans of corporate growth, decline and collapse, high unemployment and no new significant “labour intensive” industries on the employment horizon in Western-dominated labour markets, leading to no jobs or careers for life anymore; no or restricted job security, no guaranteed benefits, vacation entitlements, sick leave payments, pensions, or even guaranteed basic pay and salary.

The specific structural context within which careers are enacted is generally noted as region specific (for instance, in Crowley-Henry and Weir, 2007’s study specific to women that relocated to the South of France from other Western countries); however a detailed deconstruction of the relevance of the structural context (national country, culture, religion, gender, ethnicity) on the unfolding of careers in that particular environment is warranted. This is particularly evident when considering careers in non-Western countries, where taken-for-granted Western doctrine and norms must be put aside, and where theoretical discussions must take on a more inductive, bottom-up, insider-out approach in order to better analyse best practice facilitators and challenges that are pertinent in different national environments.

Using the protean career concept as an umbrella concept to capture the structural and agential forces influencing career mobility and flexibility over time and circumstance has been critiqued (Arnold and Cohen, 2008, p. 14). Nonetheless, we argue that the protean career

concept is useful in that it incorporates both structure and agency limitations and facilitators over time in its remit.

Limited studies have moved beyond the Western employment context to consider the careers of women in the Middle East, who are native to that respective country (for example, Metcalfe, 2006; 2007). Omair (2008; 2010) focuses on Emirate women's careers in the United Arab Emirates as she notes the variation in the structural context across the twenty-five Arab Middle Eastern countries. This focus is warranted in Al Kharouf and Weir's (2008) critique of the Western homogenization of countries in the Arab Middle East; rather they underline the heterogeneity of structural elements across the countries in this region and recommend detailed contextual comparative studies in the region due to the wide diversity (Al Kharouf and Weir, 2008).

Our paper offers a conceptual review of the protean career metaphor (see Crowley-Henry, 2012 for a review of career metaphors in the international context), but, in this case, applied to the geographical context of the Arab Middle East. The specificity of the Middle Eastern context with its traditions, customs and dominant Islam religion, as well as due to its 'growing international strategic political and economic importance and in which many women are highly educated and potentially a valuable human resource commodity for international businesses' (Hutchings et al., 2010, p. 62), renders an in-depth insider-out analysis of how careers unfold in this setting to be of international concern.

Our focus is on the *careers of women* in the *Middle East* from a review of recent studies in this area and from an analysis of the protean career concept. This is a conceptual review; we

do not introduce any new empirical insights here, but rather we stress the requirement for further empirical studies to address the specific challenges and facilitators of this grouping.

The remainder of our paper is structured as follows: the next section reviews the protean career concept as it has been considered in the management literature. Then we provide an overview of existing literature concerning the careers of females in the Middle East. We discuss how the protean career concept could act as the framework from which Middle East-specific career theoretical concepts could be established. We conclude by exploring the implications for human resource management theory and practice accordingly, and offer recommendations for further research.

The Protean Career

The protean career is a concept that has entered the vocabulary relatively recently in response to several studies of job histories and on the attitudes and motivations of certain groups in the global employment markets. The word “protean” comes from the mythical Greek sea god “Proteus,” who reacted to danger and controlled his environments by anticipating danger, predicting and foretelling the future, and thus using control of his shape through his versatility and adaptability to adjust to a range of foreseeable futures in which his powers would be appropriate to successfully meet and deal with dangers and thus to thrive in the future he envisioned. It is not therefore just the ability to change shape responsively that marks a capability as “protean” but the ability to foresee what kind of shape would be most appropriate to face futures that to others would appear uncontrollable and fearful. Adopting a shape in response to environmental stimuli is not enough ipso facto to qualify a morphing as “protean”.

The protean career concept appreciates that people 'are more motivated by autonomy, personal values and psychological success' (Hall & Harrington, 2004), thereby incorporating a more holistic discussion on career priorities across time and space. Briscoe and Hall (2006, p. 8) define the protean career as having two primary attributes: being values driven 'in the sense that the person's internal values provide the guidance and measure of success for the individual's career' and being '*self-directed* in personal career management'. Hall and Chandler (2004) link the protean career concept to career calling or vocation toward a particular work-type; as Briscoe and Hall describe 'that is an awareness of a purpose that gives deep meaning to the career' (2006, p. 6). However, this to us is more to do with vocational perspectives of career and career as a vocation, rather than in keeping with the metaphor of Protean stemming from Proteus and the conceptual focus on individual adaptability over time and circumstance.

Briscoe and Hall (2006, p. 7) warn against ambiguity in concept definition and the lack of relevance to empirical reality; they warn that 'the theories may lose their efficacy and relevance for researchers if they cannot be effectively and precisely used to understand the reality of the people and organizations under study.' Other studies have been more interested in measuring the extent to which individuals exhibit protean tendencies (Baruch, 2008; Briscoe and Hall, 2006) through developing scales and profiles to capture this information. Our paper is more conceptual in nature and reverts to the protean career concept in its description in order to ascertain its theoretical appropriateness in exploring the careers of women in the Middle East. Our conceptual review paper therefore focuses on how the protean career concept can be used as a framework of women's careers in the Middle East within which to build elements from the structural and agential perspectives which are specific to countries and sub-regions in the Middle East.

The protean career concept was introduced by Hall (1976; 1996) to describe careers where individual agency is paramount, where subjective career motivations take precedence, where flexibility is inherent as career priorities may shift and change over time. Briscoe and Hall (2006, p. 4) discuss the protean career concept ‘based upon the degree of self-directed and values driven career orientations a career actor demonstrates’. They continue that ‘the protean career orientation ... is a mindset about the career—more specifically an attitude toward the career that reflects freedom, self-direction, and making choices based on one’s personal values’ (Briscoe and Hall, 2006, p. 6). It includes a “‘whole-life” perspective’ (Cao *et al.*, 2013, p. 58), which includes experiences beyond the work domain (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). The protean career focuses on the individual and his/her role in transforming his/her own career path. Hall (1976, p. 201) describes it as follows:

The protean career is a process which the person, not the organization, is managing. It consists of all the person’s varied experiences in education, training, work in several organizations, changes in occupational field, etc. ... The protean person’s own personal career choices and search for self-fulfillment are the unifying or integrative elements in his or her life. The criterion of success is internal (psychological success), not external. In short, the protean career is shaped more by the individual than by the organization and may be redirected from time to time to meet the needs of the person.

The connection between identity, self and career is central in the concept of the protean career. Hall and colleagues (Hall, 1986; 2002; Hall and Harrington, 2004; Hall and Moss, 1998; Inkson, 2007) identified self-direction, identity and adaptability as the career

‘metacompetencies’ facilitating the protean career. A person’s ‘sense of identity – understanding who he or she is and knowing his or her values, needs, goals, and interests’ (Inkson, 2007, p. 94) - provides direction to the other characteristics.

To succeed in the unknown futures of global employment instability requires individuals to objectively possess and be prepared to activate certain skill sets, for example, to monitor and assess the job market, to anticipate future developments, trends, and industry shifts, to gain the necessary skills, qualifications, relationships, and assets to meet the shifts, and thus to possess the controls to adapt quickly to thrive in an ever-changing workplace. To permit protean adaptation, organizations also have to adjust correlatively, to think on a more short term basis, to permit adaptability of rules and control mechanisms, payment and reward systems, recruitment and training protocols to accommodate the challenge of new generation protean careerists with different expectations.

Equally, consideration must be given to the wider context within which individuals enact and live their subjective and personal careers, where priorities in the ongoing work/life negotiation of time and energy change as circumstances change. Protean careerists analyse the constant reconfiguration of values over time in order to best negotiate work and non-work aspects in their lives. Tharenou’s (2010) study shows that role salience shifts and changes over time, which supports the temporal and changing aspect of the protean career concept. She found that career identity, family identity and cultural identity influence the international mobility intentions and actions of her sample, and in turn, have implications for the support mechanisms needed across multiple levels: the micro-individual; the meso-organizational; and the macro-country/global/cultural context (Doherty, 2012).

Crowley-Henry's (2007) in-depth qualitative study of non French national females living in the south of France found the protean career concept to aptly describe the evolving nature of how the female sample's careers unfolded in that region, where differing priorities over time influenced the agential career mobility, within the confines of structural constraints (such as language and educational discrepancies between the women in the sample and host country French nationals). While the protean concept appears appropriate for well qualified, highly remunerated, and inter-culturally competent individuals such as are the subjects of researchers like Crowley-Henry (2007; see also Crowley-Henry and Weir, 2007) when applied to First World managers and professionals in high-status, high-reward environments such as Science Parks in France. But in this paper we seek to apply the concept to the situation of newer demographics in newer employment markets like those of women managers in fast-growing and culturally distinct locations like those of the Arabian Gulf. The next section considers this further.

Careers of Women in the Middle East

There is a dearth of research on Middle Eastern women of Arabic ethnicity in management literature (Metcalf, 2007). Research conducted by Metcalf (2006; 2007) on Middle Eastern women working in their native countries found that the respondents perceived their career opportunities to be impacted by their family needs (work/family conflict), by the lack of equal opportunity frameworks in organisations in Arab Middle Eastern nations, by a prejudiced perception stemming from cultural and religious (Islamic) expectations relating to male/female sex roles, as well as insufficient training support, which together all act as barriers and hinder the domestic women's career progression. These barriers however could be considered global concerns with regards to women's career mobility. It is the specificity of

the context within which these careers unfold that offer the most compelling comparative necessity.

Hutchings *et al.* (2010) propose that the distinction between Western and Arabic women's career experiences 'is the complexity of Arab Middle Eastern gender and management relations and the need to understand business culture without applying a facile generalisation of a Western typology of organisational gender relations to the Middle East context' (p. 67). Of significant relevance is the Islamic religion which provides guidelines on all aspects of life for believers, as well as the specific economic, cultural and political landscape within which careers unfold in the Middle East.

Metcalf's (2006; 2007) analysis suggests that seemingly discriminatory practices (through Western lenses) need not necessarily be considered discriminatory to women's career mobility and development. It can push women toward more entrepreneurial enterprises and has been an influential factor in the development of business women's networks in the Middle East (Hutchings *et al.*, 2010).

Many studies of women managers and qualified professionals focus on the negative and relatively disqualifying aspects of women in Muslim countries, in the Arab Middle East and in what are perceived as patriarchally-structured societies (Al Kharouf and Weir, 2008). But in the socio-political and cultural sphere, others have noted, for example in reportage on the Arab Spring, the apparently increased role of young well-educated and professionally-qualified women. It can be concluded that studying the careers of women in this region is complex and complicated, with women in some areas perceived as inferior to men in a

patriarchally-cultured system, to other cases where women's careers are developing quickly and can be compared along with the broad experiences of developed Western economies.

Marmenout (2009) in a study in Saudi Arabia shows that the mapping of concepts of "manager" on to male/female stereotypes appears to reinforce the received patriarchal paradigm, in that men do rate themselves more closely to a "managerial" profile, and tend to rate women as having lower capability as leaders and that moreover women rate themselves somewhat lower on "leadership" characteristics.

However, Al Kharouf and Weir (2008) indicate that well qualified women in the Jordanian labour market do not appear to be all that different in their attitudes and expectations to their Western sisters. Moreover further examination of Marmenout's (2009) findings of Saudi managers indicates that women in her sample rate certain characteristics more highly than do men and vice versa, Interestingly the "male" profile emphasises the dimensions more appropriate to a corporate, structured, organizational environment whereas women rate such characteristics as 'Creativity, the ability to separate feelings from ideas, knowing the way of the world, being well-informed, ambitious, and desiring responsibility' that appear more characteristic of the "protean" mind set. She concludes that what she characterises as 'female readiness' is understated in respect of Saudi women and appears to be higher than comparable norms for Japan or Germany.

Other studies of in-company training programmes in high-tech companies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) show similar results and that especially younger women in the region are seeking qualifications appropriate to developing control of their life-space, and to evidence the range of attitudes consistent with the "protean" mind set. In most countries in the Middle

East region, there are now explicit programmes, sponsored at a high level in the social and political structures to encourage these attitudes in women, and Al Kharouf shows that contrary to the received “patriarchal” explanations, these expectations may be actively supported and fostered by the older generation of women.

There has been criticism that Western studies have a tendency to consider all Middle Eastern countries as uniform (Al Kharouf and Weir, 2008; Hutchings *et al.*, 2010; Omair, 2010); however the Arab Middle Eastern region consists of twenty-five countries with the key similarities being language and religion. Beyond that, these countries are very different from each other. The ‘diversity and complexity that exist in specific situations’ (Al Kharouf and Weir, 2010, p. 307) is under-addressed in the literature, with generalisations made about women and their employment conditions in the Arab Middle East. Hutchings *et al.* (2010, p. 68) recommend that ‘it is critical in assessing women’s opportunities that we realise that while we can gauge a range of perceptions that women hold, that there is need to avoid generalisation in a region that reflects great diversity’. This paper considers the heterogeneity of women’s career experiences across the Middle East and draws on the protean career as one theoretical career concept which could aid in the deconstruction of structure and agency career dimensions for women in the area.

The context of the Middle East in general is specific in that some countries, in particular along the Middle East, such as Dubai and the United Arab Emirates have more non-national expatriate nationals in the workforce than nationals. It must be appreciated that the workplace experiences of different non-national categories need to be considered heterogeneously, as indeed should the different workplace and career experiences of the native Arabic women in

those countries who have been brought up fashioned in the cultural context of the respective country.

Briscoe and Hall (2006) note that boundaryless and protean careers are enacted very differently in non-Western/non-Anglo cultures and contexts. The centrality of agency, individualism and self-management (De Vos and Soens, 2008) in the protean career metaphor would suggest that the structural context unique to different countries would result in protean careers being played out differently in each of the twenty-five different countries in the Arab Middle East.

Omair's (2010) qualitative study of fifteen women Emirates produced a typology distinguishing four types of career development among women managers in the United Arab Emirates (UAE): progressive, moderate, facilitated and idealistic. The study concluded that social status and family networks have an important part to play in the career development to the women in her sample. The "knowing whom" dimension of career capital (DeFillipi and Arthur, 1996) is emphasized as most relevant in advancing women's careers in the UAE. Thus, in a country and cultural context where social position and family connections are prioritised, the agential opportunity to morph or adapt to different work roles in accordance with wider life concerns over time is restricted and enacted within that in-country normalised context. The structural context where careers unfold is therefore highly relevant in the extent to which individuals are 'free' to be flexible and adjust to changing work conditions over time and circumstance.

Pringle and Mallon (2003) underline the relevance of structure such as country context, ethnic background and gender, which are under-valued with regards to their relevance in contemporary literature on careers (Omair, 2010).

The different way that female careers unfold has been considered by the kaleidoscope (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005) concept, where challenge, balance and authenticity are prioritised over time. Equally the protean career concept (Crowley-Henry, 2007) has shown relevance in being able to explain women's careers as reflexive and different to the linear organizational career path of the traditional male career model.

While such studies appreciate the difference between male and female careers, the context in which careers unfold remains elusive, with consideration for non-Western norms and best practice only discussed in light of Western concepts. While this limitation has received increasing commentary in publications on women's careers in the Middle East, novel approaches to theorizing women's careers in this context are required.

Studies specific to female career experiences stress the variety of factors that impact on career over time and in different contexts (Duberley *et al.*, 2006; Crowley-Henry and Weir 2007). Narrative analysis of qualitative exploratory interview data has been used in order to enable more detailed and context-rich reviews to aid in the explanation of how women's careers are enacted in specific contexts (Bujold, 2004; Crowley-Henry and Weir, 2007; Omair, 2008; 2010). Moreover, we consider inductive (Mason, 2002), grounded-theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) approaches to developing the protean career concept as is relevant for women in the Middle East region to be required in order to ensure that theoretical concepts which have originated in Western contexts are not simply mapped to non-Western

contexts, where different cultural norms are shared. Indeed an ethnographic, insider approach (Crowley-Henry, 2009) is warranted in order to reduce any bias to reverting to Western-originating theoretical concepts which simply may not be relevant in the Middle East context.

Discussion

In this paper we consider the newer literatures like those published in studies from Omair (2008; 2010) and the respective empirical findings, and we apply the notions of the protean career and emerging potential for control of future, unknown life-spaces to the actual opportunities and frameworks available to qualified, well educated women in the Middle East countries. We propose the development of the protean career as an encompassing framework which could be adopted to describe the context specific structural and agential elements most pertinent in different country contexts across the Middle East, appreciating the flexibility and adaptability of career priorities over time and space.

In the case of Middle East, the macro context with regards to the accepted and changing perceptions concerning the role of women, the culture, the Islamic guidelines, etc. is bounded in tradition and everyday practice, which may seem alien to Western women and men.

However, to domestic women following careers in that region, these norms are structurally enforced and agentially enacted in that the macro context renders the individual (micro) focus which the protean concept suggests/stresses of secondary focus, particularly for Western researchers unfamiliar with Middle Eastern structures and systems. It must be noted that the personal values which are key to the protean career concept are in themselves shaped by cultural and traditional/historical factors and so cannot simply be considered context-neutral. The concept of proteanism is about being able to adapt to different contexts. In order to understand how women in different countries in the Middle East do this (adapt to different

contexts), Western researchers need to step back and enable Middle Eastern academic researchers to ethnographically develop career concepts which are pertinent and relevant to their contextual landscapes.

While the contemporary construct of the protean career does stress the ‘psychological dimensions of career’ (Arnold and Cohen, 2008, p. 13), it does not adequately explain the *rationale* of a protean career. It is the contention of our conceptual review paper here that such rationale can only become evident by indeed focusing on the individualised nature of career choice, but in so doing, recognising the need to incorporate structural, contextual and historical elements which impact upon the self and the movement toward ‘proteanism’.

This discussion has relevance for managing people – locals, women - in their domestic country context, where that context is in a non-traditional geo-region. An in-depth comprehension of the changing structural conditions in the specific country landscape is required in order to ensure training and support is provided to encourage female participation in the workplace which is accepted by the wider society. There is a need for in-depth qualitative ethnographic and exploratory studies detailing the contextual, structural and agential elements paramount to women following careers domestically in the Middle East. In inductively building up and/or redeveloping existing career frameworks which are relevant to the population in the non-traditional region, more unbiased comparative studies could be undertaken (if comparisons are indeed possible depending on the degree of difference between countries) so that a more comprehensive understanding of women’s careers domestically in the Middle East is unpacked.

In facilitating a better understanding of women's careers in the Middle East, human resource professionals would be better equipped to support women's career mobility and development in line with specific challenges that may be relevant in the particular country context. In learning more about how women's careers unfold domestically in the Middle East and are influenced by structural aspects, Western scholars can learn how different approaches may be required when managing international employees in different organizations internationally and/or domestically. It can encourage tolerance and understanding of diversity due to cultural and structural backgrounds which may not necessarily be explicit. In this way, it should help make better managers, better organizations, and better global workplaces.

Limitations

This is a conceptual review paper and as such it does not introduce new theoretical or empirical contributions. However, it does focus on an under-explored and increasingly important global region, the Middle East; and it does consider women's careers in that specific and diverse region. In presenting a review of contemporary research on women's careers domestically in the Middle East, we have shown that there is concern in how the Middle East region is homogenised in Western reviews, rather than appreciated for its internal diversity across countries in the Middle East. We stress the need for empirical research on women's careers in specific Middle Eastern countries which allow for theory development rather than attempting to test existing (Western-developed) career theories which may not apply in the specific country context. We have put forth the protean career concept as a potentially useful framework to use as the basis for theory development in that it includes structural and agential dimensions and has a temporal and flexible positioning which should aid in exploring the development of women's careers over different life periods and due to different externalities.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This paper has discussed the theoretical concept of the protean capital in the context of women's careers in the Middle East. Research on careers outside the Western context are as of yet limited and appear restricted in attempts to 'fit' the research into Western-developed career concepts, where the specificity and importance of the Middle East context is acknowledged but not included in career theory development. Our analysis leads us to recommending a development of career concepts from a more inductive research methods approach in order to better address the concept to the lived experiences of the women in the area.

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