

Gender, Work and Organization
6th international interdisciplinary conference
21st – 23rd June, 2010

Call for abstracts

Frayed Careers: rhythms of working lives

Stream Convenors

Ida Sabelis, VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Elisabeth Schilling, ISEG Hannover, Germany

In the realm of diversity (management) research, research on ageism in particular has produced a number of studies focused on specific barriers in women's careers during the different phases of our working lives. On the one hand, we find studies about young women facing primarily problems of work-life-balance (Leccardi, 2004; Hilbrecht et.al 2008). On the other hand we find studies addressing specific problems of 'the older worker' (i.e. from an ever younger age – compare Duncan & Loretto 2004, Hofmeister et.al 2006, Walker et.al. 2007). Generally, careers are considered to be a linear life project, in which we are supposed to climb the ladder of success. Addressing ageism bridges several perspectives on careers in terms of rhythmicity in working lives. We argue that combining age and gender contributes to new perspectives on working life (also Yerkes, 2009): the rational, step-by-step approach towards the fulfilment of one's development in work basically entails masculine norms affecting both men and women and keeping them from reflecting over the rhythms of life and work.

Women around the age of thirty are sometimes seen as jugglers trying to meet contradictory expectations: striving to be/come committed and dedicated professionals, caring mothers and daughters, supportive spouses, cooperative neighbours, and so on (Acker, 2006). By this time women often experience career 'failures', or so called 'dips', which they tend to attribute to their own personality or assumed incapacity to meet the general standards of working full time and doing care work. Studies about women older-than-forty show women confronted with conflicting expectations of a slightly different kind. They are expected to be fully qualified professionals, by this time having achieved the highest level in their career as well as in their family lives. Simultaneously, they are not expected to be in their best mental and physical form anymore: in working life women after forty / fifty are not supposed to have a great learning ability, be open for new ideas, or be productive at all. Decline is on – despite the current political demand that people should be productive after sixty-five and postpone retirement.

Young women as well as their older sisters (of whatever age) face similar experiences in the sense of contradictory, inconsistent expectations that make up often invisible career barriers and hinder acceptance of their competences and qualifications. Despite the changes in the last decades towards more women pursuing careers, the combination of gender and age is largely understudied. Life itself follows a non-linear pattern; social constructions of age and gender constitute this. Since the traditional male career proceeds in a linear, accumulative way it is still perceived as normal or preferable way of work life design. On this account the female, or patchwork careers are perceived as frayed, not normal, and with different consequences for organizational decisions (e.g. promotion, tenure, appointments etc.), reflexive shifts, individual well-being or personal decisions of women concerned (e.g. reduction of work time and/ or engagement and renouncement of career ambitions).

A lot has been written about the discrimination of women in different age stages because of their 'abnormal' or 'typical' work-life arrangements. This research perspective however ignores the aspect of rhythmicity in working life as the different stages are usually studied apart from each other. We propose to explore the stages of working life (lives) as interlinked and bio-graphic: marking, as it were, a ladder of recurrent hurdles on a meandering path. After all, rhythmicity refers to the reiteration of similarities over time, usually detectable via patterns of behaviour, stories, experiences and observations.

In our stream we focus on rhythmicity of careers, in particular on what happens during the liminal stages, or on the boundaries marking transition periods, or transformations. Women in their thirties and 'older' women are two ways of pinpointing transitions periods in working lives attached to rhythms of life. We are sure that the timescape of female careers is more complex; a vast realm to be discovered and problematized. We are interested in the organizational (managerial) as well as the individual perspective/s; we welcome contributions of a theoretical as well as empirical nature and work-in-progress. Furthermore, we are very interested in inter-cultural, inter-generational and inter-organizational comparisons.

The papers presented in the stream could pick up one or several following questions:

- What happens during liminal / transitional career stages and why? How are events in female biographies (e.g. marriage, child birth, care need of a family member) related to different career episodes? Is it a social attribution, which forces a woman to take over a new "role" after biographic events or in a certain age? Is it the perception of roles and ruptures, abilities and possibilities, which results in different behaviour and different perception of the self? What has changed, if anything, in the past decades and who benefits of change?
- How do women perceive the non-linearity of their careers? Which emotions are connected to recurring ruptures? Do we perceive changes as a privilege, a burden or 'fate'? How do we explain and evaluate transitions and their consequences? Which specific (gendered) strategies of career management are being used in expectation of a transition period, during this period and after it?

Abstracts of approximately 500 words (ONE page, Word document, single spaced, excluding references) are invited by 1st November 2009 with decisions on acceptance to be made by stream leaders within one month. All abstracts will be peer reviewed. New and young scholars with 'work in progress' papers are welcomed. In the case of co-authored papers, ONE person should be identified as the corresponding author. Note that due to restrictions of space, multiple submissions by the same author will not be timetabled. Abstracts should be emailed to both convenors at ihj.sabelis@fsw.vu.nl and elisabeth.schilling@googlemail.com. Abstracts should include **FULL** contact details, including your name, institutional affiliation, mailing address, and e-mail address. *State the title of the stream to which you are submitting your abstract.*