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# Entangled strands: A process perspective on the evolution of careers in the context of personal, family, work, and community life

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## Abstract

The goal of this study is to develop a theoretical framework to illuminate the process of careers unfolding over time in an overall life context. We draw on data from a qualitative field study of the career paths of 81 professionals who pursued working on a reduced-load basis as a strategy for sustaining commitment to both their careers and family lives. Using multiple methods to analyze what happened between two interviews approximately six years apart, we identify five distinct career narratives and present a model of the evolution of careers. The model suggests that individuals construct careers over time through their own sensemaking of constantly shifting entangled strands of their personal, family, work, and community lives and three key dynamics that are ongoing: external events, gradual developments, and individual actions.

## Keywords

careers, customized work arrangements, life course dynamics, part-time professionals, work and family

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## Introduction

Careers increasingly involve complex, dynamic processes and crisscrossing movements between diverse life paths, rather than steady, predictable, corporate ladder ascensions, and established career paths as historically codified (Benko and Weisberg, 2007). Growing numbers of careers today are characterized by job and career customization linked to coordinating or reconciling work and personal life commitments and relationships (Benko and Weisberg, 2007; Clarke, 2009; Valcour et al., 2007). This trend is occurring in an overall context of increasing turbulence in the external economic, organizational, and family environments in which individuals' careers are rooted (Harrington and Hall, 2007). The changing dynamics of modern careers are also influenced by the demographic reality that nearly 50 percent of managers and professionals are women, many of whom are either single parents, in dual career marriages or in single person households as breadwinner (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

As a result of this upheaval, career theory has been challenged to develop fresh models that represent and illuminate those new realities. There is a need for greater understanding of the process through which individuals pursue different career directions as they continuously face career opportunities and challenges, while also striving to achieve desired levels of involvement with family, personal interests, and community activities. To address this issue and begin to fill gaps in the literature, our study was designed to: 1) examine *processes* rather than *factors* that influence career trajectories and transitions over time; 2) give attention to multiple life strands in seeking understanding of how careers unfold; and 3) go beyond a cross-sectional approach to understanding coordination of career and family life.

Overall, the purpose of this research is to examine closely the unfolding careers of professionals in order to surface greater understanding of the processes through which individuals shape and are shaped by their circumstances over time. We chose to explore this phenomenon with an in-depth qualitative study focused on what might be considered 'extreme cases' – professionals working voluntarily on a reduced-load basis for personal or family reasons. They were considered extreme cases from the point of view of norms around how professionals are supposed to work (full time, doing whatever it takes to get the job done, etc.). They were choosing to work less to pursue reconciliation of a meaningful personal and family life with a satisfying career. Their experiences with career customization over time were viewed as rich fodder for examining the processes around careers unfolding over time in the context of personal, family and community life. Our research questions were: 1) What role does the overall life context play in the evolution of careers over time in the case of professionals and managers with family commitments? and 2) What kinds of career processes within the broad life context can be identified that enhance understanding of the shape of career paths as they unfold over time?

Our study shows that examining careers mainly cross-sectionally underestimates the complexity of career journeys and ignores the significance of temporal processes, as well as the influence of fluid relations between career results and the broader life context. Through analysis of the changes and continuities in participants' work, personal, and family lives over time, as well as careful examination of their 'stories' or accounts of what happened between interviews, we theorize about three key dynamics that shape

career direction over time: individual actions, external events, and gradual developments. We also describe five different types of career narratives derived inductively from participants' accounts of their careers and lives over six years; and we suggest how these narratives illustrate the interplay between entangled life strands and the dynamics that undergird career processes over time.

## **Theoretical background**

Our study builds on and extends interdisciplinary career research in several areas: 1) emergent 'new' types of careers arising from the general societal shift from organization management to self-management of careers; 2) career development and life course theory and research on women's careers; and 3) coordination of career and family life over time. These areas will be reviewed briefly below to show how we build on existing theory while also taking it in a new direction in order to illuminate the dynamics of how individuals deal with the intertwining strands of their lives over time.

### *Emergent 'new' types of careers*

A number of scholars have written about the trend toward greater self-management of careers as 'fall-out' from organizations dismantling traditional talent management systems in the mid-1970s and 1980s in response to economic stagnation-inflation and increased global competition. Arthur and Rousseau's (1996) 'boundaryless' careers and Hall's (2002) 'protean' career construct emphasize that the *individual* not the organization is now more in charge; and that individuals can find career fulfillment through individual agency and pursuit of personal meanings of psychological success, even if facing a turbulent, unpredictable organizational and societal context (Arthur et al., 1999). However, it is important to note that these new types of careers do not conceptualize the individual as acting in a broad life context, constrained by family or personal life factors or events beyond the individual's control.

### *Career development and life course theory and research on women's careers*

Classic models of career development have greatly shaped understanding of careers and lives in the last half of the 20th century in North America (Levinson et al., 1978; Schein, 1978; Super, 1990). However, many scholars have raised questions about the current relevance of these theories in view of a number of societal changes. Sullivan and Crocitto (2007) have argued that major career development theories were developed at a different historical period in time (post-World War II) when male professionals and managers typically were employed full time continuously, and worked for one or two organizations before retirement, with an enabling wife at home taking care of the family. Yet today those professionals and managers are likely to be women, whose employment involves discontinuities, interruptions and part-time, contingent or self-employment and whose spouses are unlikely to be at home taking care of the family.

Furthermore, the following themes in a vibrant stream of research on women's careers since the late 1970s raise serious questions about the usefulness of the traditional career development models in management: 1) female development is strongly tied to relations with others, while male development revolves around separation and autonomy; 2) women's careers are marked by the pursuit of employment, marriage and motherhood and acting to sustain multiple nonwork commitments; 3) predictable age, career or life stage passages and personal and family life configurations do not apply to women because of variable timing of having children and variable impact of parenthood on the career; and 4) contrary to men, women's career and job choices are not negotiated independently of personal and family life, but are embedded in a broader life context (Bailyn, 2004, 2006; Buzzanell and Lucas, 2006; Gallos, 1989; Gerson, 1985; Hewlett and Luce, 2005; Marshall, 1989, 1995; Valcour et al., 2007).

Mainiero and Sullivan's (2005) conceptualization of kaleidoscope careers represents a new approach to looking at both men and women's career development patterns, with attention given to three issues being most salient at different points in time over the life span: achievement, balance, and authenticity. However, like many other career development theorists, they emphasize age or life stage as the critical driver of change and shifts in focus on these issues. There is no probing of exactly *how* those shifts take place or what the micro-level processes look like in the evolution of careers. Furthermore, Mainiero and Sullivan (2005), like other career theorists in management, tend to portray the *individual* as the agent acting upon his or her environment. The impact of the environment on the evolution of careers over time, whether organizational or family or other, is underplayed.

Life course researchers have paid more attention to the broad life context than management career scholars, as they focus on changes in human lives but in 'collective contexts,' meaning couples and families, and they consider personal characteristics and individual action as well as institutional and structural conditions (Mayer, 2009). Life-span scholars have theorized three key features of human development that go beyond what career development and adult development theorists posit: age-graded influences, history-graded influences, and non-normative influences; for example, random events that may influence an individual regardless of age or environment (e.g. job loss, death of spouse) (Baltes and Brim, 1979). Scholars in this tradition also talk about the importance of understanding the *structure* of the life course, that is the timing and ordering of events in the life span, as well as multiple rather than single trajectories (e.g. career, marriage, parenthood) (Macmillan, 2005).

### *Coordination of career and family over time*

There is currently a limited amount of research that takes a longitudinal perspective on the evolution of careers *and* family life of both men and women. Career theorists focus on the career with less attention to family; family studies scholars focus more on family with some attention to career. However, there are some exceptions. Moen and Yu (2000) incorporated time in their study of couple-level approaches to managing engagement in work and family at different life stages, documenting three different kinds of 'scaling back' strategies, all of which involved decreasing the total work commitments between

the two members of the couple. Lee et al. (2004) looked at careers and family life over time with a specific focus on how professionals become socialized into becoming parents.

An important related, but under-integrated, stream of research examines alternative work arrangements in organizations used strategically to coordinate career and family commitments over time. Valcour et al. (2007) have coined the term 'customized careers' to refer to three kinds of career patterns that deviate from the traditional model: a) varying the number or schedule of work hours; b) interruptions and discontinuities in work patterns over the life cycle; and c) reliance on self-employment and contingent work. These authors provide evidence that men and women professionals in the 21st century are increasingly pursuing one or more of these patterns to craft and shape their careers and lives.

One manifestation of 'customized careers' is reduced-load or 'new concept part-time' work among professionals (Benko and Weisberg, 2007; Hill et al., 2004; Meiksins and Whalley, 2002), which typically involves a reduction in work hours and load (e.g. three-day or four-day week), as well as a proportional cut in pay, and is undertaken to facilitate sustaining a career and yet having time for personal and family life. Other research has explored how such arrangements are working out, and what leads to positive outcomes (Barnett and Gareis, 2000; Corwin et al., 2001). However, to date none of this research has been longitudinal.

In summary, the current study was designed to address the gaps alluded to above in research on the evolution of contemporary careers. First of all there has been insufficient recognition of the limitations of individual agency in the enactment of careers. Second, there has been a relative lack of focus on holistic understanding of careers as embedded in family, personal, and community life, except in recent literature specifically focused on illuminating women's careers. Third, there has been insufficient attention given to micro-level processes, or the dynamics and mechanisms behind career changes and transitions. Finally, there has been little longitudinal research on how individuals coordinate career and family over time.

## **Methods**

### *Overview of research design*

This study was designed to gain insight into the unfolding of careers in a life context through what Langley (1999) calls 'process research', which aims to comprehend how and why things evolve over time. Process data are most often stories about what happened and who did what when, or in other words 'events, activities and choices ordered over time' (p. 692). This approach is distinct from trying to account for variance in outcomes by identifying key influencing factors or variables (Mohr, 1982); it involves elements of life history and narrative analysis. The theoretical motivation for the current research is to provide a more complete account of how and why careers unfold over time and to contribute to a perspective of careers as unfolding dynamically in a broader life context.

Our research focus is the career, personal and family life experiences of professionals who negotiated reduced-load work arrangements as a means of pursuing their personal priorities and goals. Because of the variation in ways of working and the chance to observe the evolution of these arrangements over time, this sample represents an appropriate target group to study the process of career change. The group could also be viewed as a naturally occurring 'experiment,' as participants were pioneers in negotiating reduced load work (Meiksins and Whalley, 2002).

*Study background: Time 1* The initial study focused on understanding a new phenomenon, reduced-load work, among professionals and managers in the private sector in North America. We studied in depth 87 individuals working reduced-load in 43 firms in the USA and Canada in 1996–8, a time when these arrangements had just begun to appear regularly in North America. To ensure a diverse sample, the researchers worked with national associations of part-time professionals and human resource managers to recruit individuals. Recruitment was monitored to limit the number of cases from any one firm, functional area, or job type. The sample was stratified by gender to include 10–20 percent men, mirroring statistics for men in the population voluntarily working reduced-load.

Overall, the sample included individuals in a wide variety of jobs (finance, marketing, research and development, operations, information systems, project management, human resources) and companies (manufacturing, natural resources, professional and management services, consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, financial). About half were managers with at least three direct reports, and the other half were individual contributors; two-thirds were American, one-third Canadian. Ninety-two percent were married or partnered, and 94 percent were parents.

*Current study: Time 2* By launching a new study 2002–3 to follow up with the previously studied sample, we were able to examine individuals' career and life experiences over time with baseline data from 1996–8. Thus, this investigation was conducted on a US and Canadian sample of 87 professionals who were established 'users' of reduced-load work arrangements in the late 1990s. We designed this study to collect current and retrospective data to understand what had happened to these early pioneers' careers and personal and family lives after a period of choosing to work less. The response rate in the current study was 93 percent, as we were able to locate and interview 81 of the 87 individuals interviewed earlier. Examination of demographic characteristics of the six 'lost' participants and the sample of 81 participants revealed no significant differences. Table 1 shows demographic and employment characteristics of the sample at Time 1 and Time 2 and provides selected career trajectories between Time 1 and Time 2, by employment status at Time 2. This information is included to communicate the variation in the sample in different sequences of job moves and changes over the six year time period.

### Data collection

A team of five experienced qualitative researchers conducted semi-structured interviews (either face-to-face or by telephone), which lasted from one and a half to two hours. Each interview began with the interviewer providing a brief summary of the individual's work, personal and family situation at Time 1 (job title, percent load worked, number of children, etc.). Then the interviewer asked the respondent to describe his or her current situation – in terms of work, family, personal life – to bring the information up to date. The next question was inviting the participant to describe what had happened in between the first interview and the present. In addition, other topics were probed such as: major life events and peak experiences, changes, future plans/goals, etc. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

### Data analysis

We utilized two main approaches to data analysis in this study, and each is explained in more detail below.

*Creating data displays of events and changes over time by domain* Our initial thinking about how to best get an understanding of the process of career evolution among our participants – what happened and how – was to code and plot factually the specific job changes

**Table 1** Characteristics of the sample at T1 and T2 and selected sample career trajectories

		Time 1	Time 2
Demographic characteristics	Mean age	39	45
	Mean age youngest child	5	8
	Mean # of children	2	2
	% Female	90	90
	% Married/partnered	93	94
	% Separated/divorced/ widowed	5	5
Employment characteristics	% Employed FT	0	38
	% Employed RL	100	32
	% Self-employed RL	0	15
	% Unemployed or retired	0	15
	Mean % FT worked (RLers only)	72	66
	Mean% FT equivalent salary (USD)	\$80 949	\$111 314
Spouse employment	% Self-employed	17	25
	% Unemployed	0	15
	Mean salary	\$88 015	\$116 767

(Continued)

**Table 1** (Continued)

T1		Employed full time					T2	
RL 80%	Load chg 100%	Mat lv	Lat mv/career change FT			FT		
RL 60%	RL 80%	Prom 80%	Load chg 100%	Prom. FT	Prom. FT	Prom. FT	FT	
Employed reduced-load								
RL 60%	Mat. lv	Lat mv 60%	Lat mv 60%	Mat lv	Lat mv 80%	load Chg 70%	RL	
RL 90%	Promotion 90%		Promotion 90%			RL		
Self-employed reduced-load								
RL 80%	Prom 80%	Mat lv	Return RL 80%	Left to start own business 80%			RL	
RL 80%	JS 60%	Mat lv 2nd child	JS 60%	Lat mv 60%	Lat mv 60%	Laid off Contr wk 25%	RL	
Unemployed								
RL 80%	Quit: spouse reloc	2nd child	New job/co. 80%	Load chg. 60%	Contr wk	3rd Child	UE	
RL 60%	Prom 60%	Mat lv 3rd child	Return RL 60%	Quit: spouse reloc	4th Child		UE	

RL = Reduced load; JS = Job share; UE = Unemployed; FT = Full time; Lat mv = Lateral move; Mat lv = Maternity leave; Prom = Promotion; Contr wk = Contract work.

and moves recounted in the interviews, placing them in order of linear sequence and creating a representation called a career trajectory. This gave us a sense of the wide range of career experiences in the sample over time, as shown in Table 1, but did not help us with understanding the interplay of events in the workplace and at home. So we proceeded to conduct a systematic analysis of events and changes related to job, personal and family life, as well as the broader organizational context, by creating a chronological data display by domain for each participant. Three graduate students extracted and categorized significant life events and changes mentioned in participants' accounts of what happened between Time 1 and Time 2 interviews in three domains: job, personal and family, organizational. Coders were instructed to look for high-impact significant life events such as those included in Holmes and Rahe's (1967) *Social Readjustment Rating Scale*, like losing a job, divorce, having or adopting a baby, job changes, serious illness, death of a close family member. Coders were instructed to err in the direction of inclusiveness wherever there was a question about how significant an event was. Through this coding process, we discovered that respondents reported some 'events' that occurred at a discrete point in time (e.g. spouse was laid off) and others as extending over a considerable time period (e.g. employer went through repeated waves of downsizing over several years or individual reported growing dissatisfaction with job over months and years). Coders used a consistent system in the charts to indicate the latter as 'gradual developments' rather than events. Examining these data displays across respondents enabled us to identify important elements in the broader life context and to compare them across the sample.



*Narrative analysis* The second analysis involved taking a more holistic approach and examining individuals' accounts of what happened between Time 1 and Time 2. Here we paid attention to the overall story told, the retrospective sensemaking and social construction of how the career evolved over the six years. Given our interest in *process*, we considered careers as journeys (Inkson, 2007), and paid attention to similarities and differences in 'where' participants had been, what the intended destination was, what the 'route' and 'terrain' were like, were there ups and downs, what changes occurred, what stayed the same, how much 'bad weather' was encountered, how many 'detours' had to be taken, etc. We avoided comparing and contrasting narratives on the basis of outcomes at the time of the second interview, since we were focusing on what happened in between the two interviews. We also paid attention to the role participants saw themselves playing in the journey, as well as to what took up the most 'space' in their narrative (e.g. family issues, individual career development, organizational changes, etc.).

We utilized an iterative process of extracting themes from the interviews and a process of constant comparison both within and across cases while also cycling back to the relevant literature for insight and guidance (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). By first looking at half of the cases the first author carried out all of the initial 'open' coding of participants' stories of what happened over the time between the two interviews. At this initial stage the coding was focused on recording the timing and order of events in order to create a brief summary story line for each participant. The second level of coding emerged from making comparisons between these story lines and noting themes that captured similarities and differences across participants, including: a) centrality of the role of the individual vs the organization in the career journey; b) stability vs turbulence of the workplace and family contexts; c) salience of career vs family in the story; d) the locus of control the individual conveyed having about his or her destiny; and e) colorful language used to describe the nature of the career journey over time. Ultimately these and other themes were collapsed and sorted to find those most relevant to all cases, until a set of final dimensions were settled on for placement of participants into five different types of narratives.

Next, the first author used the emergent dimensions to carry out content analysis of the narrative accounts of the other 40 participants to see if they would clearly fall into the same five groups, or would suggest additional types were needed. After some clarification and fine-tuning of the dimensions, all remaining participants were classified in the five groups. In order to further examine the reliability and validity of the typology, the fourth author independently placed 40 randomly selected cases into one of the five types based on the final dimensions. Of 40 cases examined, 33 (82.5%) were classified the same, and seven (17.5%) were discussed until agreement was reached. We concluded that the five types were exhaustive for our sample.

## Results

The results are reported in two parts. First, we provide aggregate findings on the most frequently occurring events and changes in the careers and lives of participants, and we describe different categories of 'events' and 'changes' that emerged from comparing and contrasting participants' experiences over time. Second, we take an idiosyncratic

approach, examining individual career trajectories over the six years by focusing on the narratives that came out of the participant interviews. A typology of career narratives inductively developed from the 81 cases is presented and explained.

### *Analysis of significant events and changes over time by domain*

The most frequently occurring job event was promotion, with 57 percent reporting at least one; 49 percent reported at least one lateral move, and 37 percent took at least one medical, stress or parental leave. The most frequently reported personal and family events occurring at least once over the six years were: serious illness of a close family member (52%), birth of a child (33%), and death of a close family member (25%). Organizational events most often indicated were mergers and acquisitions (46%), restructuring (28%), and financial decline (25%). The frequency of these events and the degree of turbulence participants experienced over a six-year period was higher than expected.

Given the extent of significant events and changes in participants' careers and lives, even over the relatively brief period of time of six years, we pursued further systematic coding of events/changes. We broke down the broad category of events into two different types of dynamics that were evident: 'external events' and 'individual actions.' External events were considered things that *happened to* the individual (emanated from an external source). We called these 'external' to make clear that these were not things originating with the individual and his or her internal needs or motivations; this difference seemed important to capture in light of career development theory's strong agentic orientation. Individual actions were things that individuals *made* happen, including: a) responses to external events; b) initiatives not clearly related to external events; and c) decisions described as involving choices between alternatives. For example, being forced to return to work full time by a supervisor is an example of an *external event*, whereas choosing to return to full-time status because of a spouse layoff is an *individual action*. The first author made these judgments in classifying the two types of events by examining the original data displays and also returning to the interview transcripts where there was description of the context of these events. Charts of events were then generated for each participant showing external events and individual actions by the year of their occurrence in either the job or personal and family domain. Examination of aggregate level data showed that the mean number of external events coded per person was eight (4.5 work related and 3.5 family/personal). Individual actions (initiatives, responses, or choices) also occurred fairly frequently across the sample, with a mean of five per person across the six years (3 work related and 2 family/personal).

### *Participants' perspectives: Emergence of five distinctive career narratives*

Through examination of recurrent themes in the participants' accounts of what happened over the six years of the research, we identified five types of narratives: 1) *Heroic saga*; 2) *Shifting with winds of change*; 3) *Orchestrating career around family*; 4) *Personal transformation*; and 5) *Adrift in a storm*. The labels were chosen to emphasize our focus

on *process* rather than outcomes and to capture the essence of the common story line that distinguished each narrative from the others. Table 2 summarizes the distinguishing characteristics of the five narratives on three emergent dimensions: 1) figure-ground of the individual vs family vs organization; 2) individual agency vs communion in explanations of what happened; 3) the impact of external events in the career trajectory. Figure/ground refers to who the main characters were, or how salient different aspects of peoples' lives were in the narration of the career journey. Participants varied in terms of what was dominant (*figure*) and what was background (*ground*) in these accounts. Second, respondents portrayed playing different roles in their narratives; they described different levels of individual agency or 'communion' in explaining how things unfolded. Inkson (2007) has noted that Bakan (1966) differentiated between these two strategies suggesting that agency involves independent self-assertion and imposing self on the world, whereas communion involves opening oneself up to the world and people and letting the world act upon them. The third dimension captures the variable impact of external events in the different narratives. External events played a role in how careers unfolded over time across all of the narratives, but the extent of the impact and the domain of these events varied widely across narratives. The five narrative types are described below, with a quote illustrating one or more of the distinguishing dimensions discussed above. Some factual details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

*Heroic saga* This narrative involved the individual as *figure*, and agency the dominant modus operandi in moving through time and space. External events were present to a moderate degree, but were not portrayed as strongly influencing career directions. Participants who fit this pattern described at length their individual struggles and accomplishments in their careers against a backdrop of family life, various events, and organizational context. Things had not been easy for them, and they described confronting and overcoming adversity in many different forms – from difficult bosses to job loss to a child's life-threatening illness. There was little attention given to work or family context, just the bare bones of information without elaboration, as part of telling about their personal survival in their career. They clearly attributed their success at prevailing in the face of daunting challenges to individual agency – extraordinary personal initiative, creative strategies, and persistence.

As for the impact of external events, the participants in this narrative related a moderate number of external events out of their control (like a merger or organizational downsizing, personal illness, child's illness, husband's being laid off). But they had managed to navigate through these events and portrayed their careers as thriving. A few excerpts from one participants' story illustrate this narrative type:

*Accounting partner:* I've managed to align myself in the right group now . . . I made the shift to this group in '97 when I took a hard look at where I was and said: 'I'm not getting any business, because there are too many people who are doing exactly what I'm doing.' So I said, maybe I should be going into a different group where there aren't as many people. And that is what I picked . . . and it worked out to be a good pick . . . now I'm head of HR for the whole region on top of my regular job . . . where I bill two million a year, which is the partner goal for the region, even though I am working 90% of full time.

**Table 2** Dimensions distinguishing the five narratives

	Heroic saga	Shifting with winds of change	Orchestrating career around family	Personal transformation	Adrift in a storm
<i>Dimensions</i>					
<i>Figure-ground: Individual vs organization vs family</i>	Individual front & center with references to proving self, performance, achievement	Lengthy description of organizational or industry turbulence & its effects	Individual career & family alternating figure-ground in the story	Individual career change is centerpiece of story	Chaotic organization &/ or family figure, causing big disruption
<i>Agency vs communion</i>	Individual exerting agency battling the elements, prevailing through trials/tribulations, overcoming barriers	Individual in communion, responding to unexpected events, swept up, adapting and going with the flow	Individual in both agency and communion modes –taking charge of crafting work to fit family, while also staying in tune with family & making compromises	Individual in both agency and communion modes in pursuing career change, personal fulfillment	Individual primarily in communion mode trying to accept, adjust and move with circumstances out of their control; agency also evident in efforts to recover and regain equilibrium
<i>Salience of external events outside of individual's control</i>	Present to a moderate degree, usually in a single domain; not a driving force in career trajectory	Organizational events play a dominant role in career journey	Family events present to a moderate degree; play a critical role in career path	External events play a minor role	External events in multiple domains, often simultaneously, result in major difficulties

*Shifting with winds of change* In this narrative the organization, not the individual, was *figure* or the dominant subject, and the story lines conveyed participants' view of themselves in communion rather than agency mode. Organizational events beyond their control were portrayed as having a major impact on their career journey. Participants typically described at some length what had been going on in their workplaces, which included a great deal of turmoil, either because of merger/acquisition/spinoff activity, financial decline, downsizing or reorganization. They also talked about the effects of these changes on them and their efforts to survive and rise above difficult circumstances. Some of these individuals had managed to hold onto or modify their reduced-load positions, to move to a new employer before the hatchet fell, or to gain better positions in the midst of organizational turbulence. However, the recurrent theme in terms of the

posture of the individual was not individual agency but more ‘communion’ – embracing the circumstances, going with the flow, or adapting to changes they had little control over. As for the impact of external events in this narrative, all of these participants conveyed that a critical catalyst in their career trajectory over the six years was an event at work out of their control:

*Assistant Vice President:* So the really big thing that happened is that [Employer] has gone through . . . trying to revamp and upgrade all of our major infrastructure systems and a lot of processes, sort of all at once, a major undertaking . . . which led to a major downturn . . . plummeting stock price . . . loss of customers. And they announced layoffs . . . and I thought I was done for . . . because my job was going to be basically eliminated. But at the last minute a former boss asked me to join him . . . it was just incredibly fortuitous because I would not have made the cut . . . but the work was challenging . . . unbelievable work hours . . . high stress . . . people were rude, we were constantly summoned into meetings and grilled by the consultants on where we were and what the problems were and how we were going to fix them . . . it was crazy. But during the time I was there, my boss had the jobs re-evaluated as part of his re-organization and I actually jumped two job grades and became an assistant vice president . . . but I didn’t want to be an assistant vice present because of the threat it would pose to my life balance . . .

*Orchestrating career around family* In this narrative there was an alternating figure-ground constellation, with the individual and his or her career being center stage for a while and then a shift to family being in the forefront. Participants’ accounts of what happened over the six years involved interweaving career and family events and circumstances. Likewise, the story line involved both agency and communion, with the individual being portrayed as very much acting upon the world, crafting work to fit family, while at the same time having to stay open and responsive to adjust and adapt to changes going on around them.

Participants in this narrative group spoke frequently about their children and in some cases elderly parents whom they had some responsibility for at some point over the six years. They wrestled with fulfilling their conviction that family came first, but they were also very committed to having a successful career. Their stories often detailed how they struggled with how to respond to a child’s needs, or other family members’ situations, while at the same time keeping their careers developing in a reasonably competitive fashion. Some told of struggling and ambivalence about compromises they had made; others were more at peace and talked about the importance of staying the course.

The role of the individual in this narrative was clearly to be in charge of crafting a suitable work arrangement that would be compatible with family life, or ‘opting out’ or changing employers, whatever it took. Individual agency was viewed as critical to reconciling career and family goals and priorities. At the same time, these participants were very in tune with their families and conveyed following more of a communion strategy in that context – embracing their surroundings and being open and responsive to what might arise.

For individuals in this narrative the impact of external events out of their control was moderate, in that they were not dealing with crises or emergencies for the most part.

However, most of the events that did have a significant impact on the career trajectory were personal and family related, for example, serious health problems of family members or self, or the departure of a nanny. Here is one description of trying to orchestrate career around family:

*Marketing manager:* I really feel that the part-time thing has isolated me completely and taken me out of the game. And I don't think I realized when I was doing it the long-term implications of it . . . and the career that I'm in is driven by young people who can work the nights and come up with the marketing plans that build the business. So I actually don't know when I can actually take one of these big jobs that the head hunters call me up about . . . But you know what, it's all what you want on your gravestone, right? Like, so it's not easy to swallow, but I have three wonderful kids, and I would never . . . the thought of leaving them from 8:00 to 6:00 five days a week, I don't care, I wouldn't do it, under any circumstances.

*Personal transformation* The *figure* in this narrative was the individual and the significant changes made in the kind of work being pursued, which had had a major positive impact on how they felt about their careers and their lives. Everything else – from the organization to the family – was *ground*. However, participants in this pattern were in both agency and communion mode, as they orchestrated major changes but also demonstrated moments of letting the world act upon them. External events did not have a significant impact on participants on this journey. However, they talked about gradual developments and realizations unfolding over time.

The changes these individuals made in their careers were not provoked by being forced out of an organization or work group; they were drawn to something new and better. For example, two made a major shift in career focus given their background and knowledge (e.g. research chemist becomes venture capitalist), but were able to find a new position within the same employer. Two others left the private sector to pursue academic careers, and two started up their own firms. The motivation behind the changes that occurred was to pursue self-realization and greater expression of self through work. This narrative was a story of personal triumph, of individuals coming to terms with their inner dreams, standing up to the demands of their organizations, or reclaiming their souls.

Individual agency was very dominant in this narrative. But these individuals were also very tuned-in to the corporate environment and acknowledged the importance of the right timing as well as serendipity in what had transpired, which illustrates their capacity for communion as well as agency. External events were few and had little impact in these accounts of the career journey. Their accounts of internal personal growth and development, epiphanies or turning points that led them to make a change were most salient. Here are excerpts from one story:

*Marketing manager who became a management professor:* I was working and looking through some job postings and there was a job in management development, and my ears started to ring. I thought: 'That's the job for me.' I had a physical reaction to it. So I interviewed for this job which, of course I was not qualified to do, because . . . I really wasn't a facilitator. And the guy that hired me mentored me through this. He taught me how to teach . . . and I loved it. I thought I had the perfect job . . . and then we made a decision to leave the city . . . we moved an hour out of the city into this beautiful rural, small town country thing with a sense of community . . . And

then I quit my job and carried on with part-time teaching at a small college . . . Then this full-time job became available, and I realized that what I had been doing for the last three years totally set me up for this, because I now could combine my professional experience with teaching.

*Adrift in a storm* In this narrative, organization and/or family was center stage, or *figure*, and the individual and his or her career was in the background. External events out of the individual's control were extensive and occurring in multiple domains, sometimes concurrently (e.g. layoffs, spouse suicide, marital crisis, death of parent). The dominant operating mode was communion, though there was also agency observed.

These participants told about chaotic or turbulent work or family environments where external events beyond their control caused tremendous disruption and upheaval. They also described their struggle to recover equilibrium and rebound. They were upbeat about their ability to turn things around and came across as resilient and resourceful, able to exert agency in the face of adversity. For example, several had started up creative new businesses after being laid off, and another had gone back to school to get credentials for a career change. However, they were mostly in reactive mode, trying to cope with what had happened as best they could:

*Senior manager and assistant to executive VP:* So I was in a peak leadership role that was very challenging . . . and they broadened the scope of the job and at the same time raised the bar on the do-ability. At the same time, there was a tightening down of resources while X was entertaining merger with Y. And the result of that was that the merger failed, the chairman quit, my boss jumped ship, and I got put on the short list to get packaged . . . So in April I signed off on the package. I already had another job lined up . . . but when I . . . started the job, it fell apart within six weeks. It wasn't the right fit. They ran out of funding; it was a huge disappointment. So I started my summer vacation and took my parents up north. And my father died in August. Mother was in the hospital when it happened, not well . . . it gets to be my job to do the whole sift, sort and merge on the financial, the property, find a place for mother . . . So I landed on my feet again . . . with a new job offer. Dead father, ailing mother, severance package from my employer of 30 years. I'm excited, ready to rock . . . then nine months into the new job, my mother dies, and I've been working around the clock to implement a new program at the office not paying attention to the fact that I'm tired in a way I don't understand, I'm not sleeping, and something is happening with my teenage son, and I was in a physical state of collapse . . . a colleague at work one day confronted me and sent me in a cab to go see my doctor who ordered me to take a six month medical leave from work. And in my absence they decided that the job I'd done was so good that they could package it and outsource it. So when I went back to work after six months, they handed me a check and said, 'See ya'. On the same day that I got severed, \_\_ [15 year old son] blew up at me and moved out.

## Discussion

In this section of the paper, we first propose a model of career evolution in a life context based on our results. Then we discuss theoretical implications of the model and our findings. Finally, we describe the limitations of the study and make suggestions for future research.

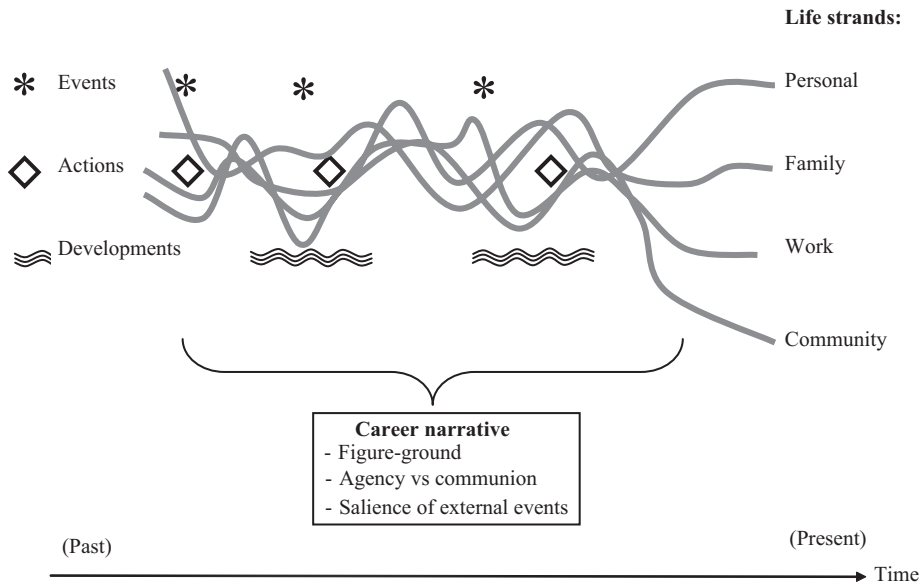
### *Proposing a model of career evolution in a life context*

Drawing on the two sets of results reported above, we propose here a suggestive framework for understanding the process of careers unfolding in an overall life context. Figure 1 portrays the overall life context and key dynamics proposed to represent: a) the process that produces the actual sequence of job changes and moves over time – the individual career trajectory; and b) the interplay of different strands of life and key dynamics in the life context over time from which individuals create a self-narrative to make sense of the career trajectory. The idea behind this model is that an individual's career trajectory is embedded in a broad life context, which consists of entangled strands of work, personal, family, and community life. These strands represent ongoing activities in central domains of people's lives. Individuals lead complex lives where different strands are variably important, provide different satisfactions, involve varying intensity of demands, and are variably intertwined at different points in time. The intertwining of strands is meant to express the interdependency between different aspects of peoples' lives and the fact that shifts or changes in one domain automatically affect others. Interdependent relationships are ubiquitous in most peoples' worlds – most obviously in the family, with children and spouses, aging parents, but also at work in organizations, with co-workers and bosses, and in community organizations around various activities and commitments involving others. Relationships are potential sources of turbulence and change, as well as support, growth and fulfillment. This model suggests that these relationships come to have an influence on careers through events that happen at a certain point in time, through the flow of gradual developments, and through individual initiatives, responses and choices.

The key dynamics in the model are conceptualized as catalysts that precipitate change in the life space and directly drive the processes that determine the career trajectory. They include: 1) external events; 2) gradual developments; and 3) individual actions in the form of initiatives, responses, and choices. External events are beyond the individual's control and occur relatively suddenly (e.g. illness, death, accidents, organizational crises). Gradual developments can be internal, 'inside' the individual (e.g. low-level dissatisfaction with occupation or job), or external, that is something happening in one of the life strands (e.g. a trend of rapid growth, innovation, and global expansion in the organization where one is employed or career instability in one's spouse, which rises and falls over time).

Individual action, in the form of initiatives, responses, and choices, is conceptualized as emanating from one source (the person) but as having complex origins and manifestations. Initiatives are viewed as arising more spontaneously and freely, expressing personal motivations; whereas responses and choices are more reactive to circumstances and more constrained. So, for example, a person might pursue individual action by taking the initiative to go back to school or change careers. This action could arise from gradual developments over time internally or in the environment. Alternatively, individual action may involve a response to an external event, like a change in boss or an elderly mother diagnosed with Alzheimer's. It is important to note that individual action in response to an event may be immediate and contained in time, but may also involve a holding pattern first, followed by a response. Finally, individual action may involve making an explicit decision where specific alternative choices have been laid out, and one is chosen over others.





**Figure 1** Career evolution in a life context

This model draws attention to the importance of temporal aspects of what goes on in peoples’ lives and careers. Most theoretical frameworks that propose to show the different forces and sources of influence on individuals’ career paths focus on *where* they come from; for example, from individual personality traits, skills and knowledge, age/life stage, education, etc. vs social context factors like social class, organizational socialization or career structures, work design, mentoring or developmental relationships, work/family situation, etc. There are debates about what kinds of factors account for more of the variance in outcomes like performance or success.

In this model the focus is more on timing and process. Two of the key dynamics (events and developments) provide dramatic contrasts in timing and flow. External events happen at a discrete point in time. They are sporadic and largely unpredictable in terms of exactly when they will materialize. Gradual developments represent ongoing currents, undercurrents or crosscurrents that build, die down or stay the same but are always in motion. It is important to note that although external events and gradual developments are presented theoretically as contrasting in terms of their temporal patterns, they are sometimes inter-related. For example, external events may involve a more gradual process behind the scenes (e.g. company financial decline occurring over years and then suddenly announcement of layoffs, or a child not eating well and losing weight over a number of months or even years before he becomes critically ill and is hospitalized). At the point of an individual being laid-off or at the point of a child’s hospitalization, there is a moment when there is a ‘breakthrough.’ Something happens that punctuates the status quo. Alternatively, once external events occur, they can generate new continuities or developments (e.g. searching for a new job or new career after a layoff or contending with a child’s chronic, life-threatening illness indefinitely).

Overall, the central point of this model is that individuals lead complex lives that consist of entangled strands of work, family, personal, and community life – that shift and flow, unravel, synchronize, wind up in knots, and get entangled as careers unfold over time. Meanwhile, in the midst of these entangled strands, things happen, change occurs, and people take action, which precipitates new configurations of the strands. Career narratives represent individuals' social constructions of this overall moving picture and sequence of events. The key dynamics of events, actions and developments – singly and in combination – emanate from the different life strands; at the same time, these precipitants disturb the status quo configuration of strands and provoke realignment in the interplay of these different aspects of life.

### *Theoretical implications*

*Illuminating the broad life context* The purpose of this article was to build on and extend existing theory in several ways. First of all, we wanted to increase understanding of the broad life context in the evolution of careers. Our model of the evolution of careers, a suggestive framework derived inductively from the data (Edmondson and McManus, 2007), portrays this life context in a novel way: as entangled strands of life. Our representation of the life context as entangled strands builds on recent research on women's career experiences that has challenged the relevance of classic models of career development by demonstrating the importance of relationships and commitments to activities in multiple domains. Our conceptualization of different life strands incorporates the idea of interdependent relationships and their effects on careers and suggests they are relevant in both men and women's lives.

Our model moves toward what Macmillan (2005: 6) urged in terms of focusing on 'the interlock of role trajectories as the central descriptor of the life course.' Our portrayal of the life context also moves away from representing work and family as separate entities and rather incorporates them both as part and parcel of 'life', which has been called for by a number of scholars (e.g. Collin and Young, 2000; Litrico and Lee, 2008; Moen and Han, 2001; Savickas et al., 2009). The life context as entangled strands also resonates with other scholars' incorporation of nonwork aspects of life in their theorizing. Super (1992) talked about the Life Career Rainbow and the importance of different life roles. Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) use the kaleidoscope as a metaphor for the life context – with its different colors of glass representing different aspects of life. An important contribution of this article is to begin to articulate the broader landscape in which professionals live and negotiate careers, and to capture the complexity and fluidity inherent in a relational and temporal view of individual careers in a life context.

*Reconsidering agency and communion in career development* Our model of the evolution of careers suggests that the role of individual agency has perhaps been over-emphasized in career theory. Our career narrative findings point to the importance of paying attention not only to agency, which is the keystone of a protean career (Hall, 2002), but also to an opposite individual posture in relation to events and happenings in the world: 'communion.' The narratives in our study show clearly that individuals are continuously challenged over time by events and changes in the total context of their lives. These

findings validate life course theory (Baltes and Brim, 1979), which posits the importance of ‘unpatterned events’ in shaping career *and* life trajectories. But our model also extends understanding of the role of such events, and the relevance of agency and communion, through articulation of different kinds of individual action: initiative, response, and choice.

Our model also does not portray the individual as a powerful, autonomous agent capable of shaping the career through careful expression of and channeling of needs and preferences; rather it portrays the individual as a relational being, in the presence of a variety of events and changes, some of which are under the individual’s control and some of which are not. Although the individual is envisioned as having the capacity to act in a variety of ways to metabolize and re-frame events, the image of individuals as solo masters of their fate, captains at the helm of the ship, etc., is replaced by the image of individuals as still having considerable discretion and power, but embedded in a network of interdependent relationships and operating under conditions of high uncertainty, with many variables out of their control. This view may challenge the status quo of organizations rewarding individual agency above all, but could also lead to recognition of what Marshall (1989) has called ‘action based in communion’, which could validate individuals acting forcefully but sensitively, in a communal context, whether in the family or at work.

*Focus on the process of career evolution* Our research has also built on existing literature in going beyond what *factors* influence the evolution of careers or what *life stage* or *career stage* is likely to have an impact. Our model proposes different mechanisms or dynamics that drive change. So, for example, Super (1992) notes the impact of different amounts of commitment and participation in different roles on individual career patterns, and Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) theorize that the individuals’ changing needs lead to their altering the order and pattern of colors of glass. But neither of these theories includes the idea of external events occurring. Our unique contribution is that our model suggests more specifics about *how* careers evolve over time. We propose what the catalysts are that precipitate change and what kinds of interplay occur between these dynamics and different life strands.

Another process contribution of our work is our assertion of the importance of social construction of careers as part of the process of careers unfolding over time, as hypothesized by Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010). Along similar lines, our findings resonate with Savickas et al.’s (2009) suggestion that career counseling these days should be about helping individuals focus on ‘career construction’ and a ‘life designing process’ (p. 241).

### *Study limitations and directions for future research*

There are a number of strengths of this study, such as the fact that data were collected at two points in time with a very high response rate, and participants are from multiple employers in two North American countries. However, the results and theoretical framework must be viewed cautiously given that the sample was disproportionately female, which means that the experiences of men may not be adequately captured. More research is needed to document and compare career narratives in other samples, such as men and

women working full time or using other work-life strategies such as taking time off from work, or telecommuting. It is also important to note that the emergent narrative types are not put forward as generalizable patterns; and they are not viewed as stable, but rather as constantly evolving and in flux. For example, a narrative of *Heroic saga* today may become a narrative of *Personal transformation* a year from now. And what is *figure* or *ground* in the recounting of what happened in one period of six years is likely to be different in the next. What the identification of the five narratives has accomplished is to highlight the sensemaking process that individuals use to understand the changes that occur over time and to examine some of the underlying dimensions that distinguish patterns of careers unfolding over time.

Our model of career evolution constitutes a first step toward representing the complexity and fluidity of the life context in which careers unfold, but more work is needed to explore further the different kinds of intertwining or entanglement of different life strands, as well as the interplay of the three dynamics of change with the strands and the potential differential impact therein. At the same time, research must be designed to further elaborate the significance and validity of different kinds of individual actions – initiatives, responses, decisions – and to examine how these are ‘received’ and responded to by bosses, organizations, spouses, friends in terms of iterative cycles of external events and individual initiatives/responses/choices. Arthur et al.’s (1999) concept of ‘reciprocities’ that link individuals and institutions could be applied to learn more about the conditions under which these constructive interconnections occur. Finding ways to identify and measure gradual developments is another important challenge in future research and requires longitudinal designs that can incorporate such constructs.

Our study illuminates different ways that professionals enact careers in an overall life context. The narrative findings show the vast diversity in how managerial and professional careers unfold in concert with family and personal life developments. It is critical that managers and organizations strive to increase understanding of the needs and experiences of the many different workforce cohorts they employ. For example, generational research suggests GenX and GenY employees will be pursuing even greater experimentation with standard work routines (Deal, 2006). We believe that a focus on the processes underlying career evolution will enable better linking of organizational work-family policies and practices over time with changes in family and personal life over the career and life course. Our study suggests that professionals and managers clearly make career decisions interwoven with their personal and family lives. Career systems must be updated to take this growing reality into account in order to foster more satisfying career, family, and personal life experiences, for the benefit of society and employing organizations alike.

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