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Gendering the Careers of Young Professionals: Some Early Findings from a Longitudinal Study

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Popular opinion suggests that young people no longer seek careers in the same way as a generation ago, seeking identity through 'lifestyle'. There are also debates about whether women, in particular, choose to have a career or to be family centred, seeking only secondary labour market employment. Much of this rests on limited, secondary analysis and cross-sectional studies, mainly of women without problematising the aspirations and choices of men.

This paper will examine the career development of a sample of young Australian professional graduates in engineering, business, social work and library studies/ information sciences participating in a longitudinal study of the influence of gender on the development of their working and personal identities. These graduates were chosen for this study because the majority move quickly into employment in organisations. We ask whether career outcomes for men and women diverge because of their different orientations to work and family or because of limitations and constraints imposed by employers, colleagues and family. What kinds of alternatives are available to male and female graduates and how do they make decisions about them? In order to answer *why* and *how* gender differences and inequalities occur, we examine the processes by which young men and women are making decisions about work, both paid and unpaid, career development and other aspects of life such as relationships and parenting.

The concept of career used in this study includes elements of the traditional definition of career with its emphasis on work as well as more sociological aspects such as luck or chance (Swanson & Fouard, 1999). It includes the concept of 'enactment' as used by Arthur et al. (1999) as well as the sense of potential risk which can lead to the 'portfolio career' involving inter-company movement based on external marketability (Wajcman & Martin, 2001). We question whether the 'unpalatable truth' is that women accept the sexual division of labour and that this acceptance 'underlies fundamental differences between the work orientations, labour market behaviours and life goals of men and women' (Hakim, 1996:179), or whether as Crompton and Harris point out, women's choices and their orientations to work are not independent but the product of women constructing their 'work life biographies in terms of their historically available opportunities and constraints' (1998:119). And we go further to examine the choices made by comparable men in terms of age and education. As Probert (2001) has found, there is now a tendency to expect young women and men to pursue careers but working mothers are still seen as contradicting 'the element of the gender culture that still insists that caring should be done in the home'.

This study began as a questionnaire sent to 993 randomly selected graduates aged 25 or less who finished their courses in 1996 at four (4) Australian universities. A sample of 120 respondents agreed to be interviewed in 1997-8 and a second round of interviews has been carried out in 2001. A third round of interviews is planned for about 3 years' time when decisions about parenting and work will be more urgent and professional and personal identities will be more formed.

The early findings show that there are very limited differences between the young men and women but there are some aspects such as lower salaries for women and some degree of sex stereotyping in job assignment and sexual harassment indicating the emergence of gendered divergence of careers in some instances. While both men and women are working long hours, many – particularly young women and more so at the second round of interviews – see this as unsustainable in the longer run and as incompatible with family life for men as well as women. At this early stage, all are firmly committed to their careers and prepared to invest time and effort to succeed while strongly holding to a view of success which transcends traditional career achievement.

By the time of the second round of interviews, most had moved between jobs as well as between organisations, testing their marketability. Not all risk-taking had paid off. But both men and women were generally satisfied with the (upward) directions of their careers. Some sense of unfair, if not discriminatory, treatment was observed which has the potential for entrenching gendered career opportunities. At the same time there was more awareness of the politics of organisations and the need to 'work the system', including by women.

In the first round of interviews, graduates had mixed views about having children although, particularly in their longer range plans this was generally included. By the second round the difficulties of combining work and

family were becoming increasingly apparent, particularly to those who did still generally subscribe to the view that young children should be cared for by one of their parents. While there is a pragmatic view that children should be cared for by the partner for whom it is most easily accommodated by their career, there seems to be more acceptance that this will be women rather than men.

Perhaps the most interesting result of this study is the broad view of success held by these young professionals – both men and women – which included work, family and community service as well as spiritual and leisure interests. The differences between young men and young women are there but they are not great. However, the subtle pointers to gendered professional identities are there and will be important to follow up in the future.

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