

Using career narrative to examine a high achieving New Zealand woman's career

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Abstract

In this qualitative study the career journey of one New Zealand woman was analyzed. Three key findings emerged: the power of narrative as a vehicle for this woman's story, her movement towards greater authenticity and spiritual fulfillment as a mature woman, and the ongoing struggle for concurrent fulfilment from communal and agentic perspectives. The study demonstrates ways in which life themes impose meaning on vocational behaviour and how work can be seen to be a means of fostering self-completion.

1. Introduction

Women's need for meaningful and satisfying work opportunities, has received considerable interest and focus in the career development literature over past decades. Erikson, referencing Freud in 1950 commented that women, like men needed an array of sources of satisfaction and that the well-adjusted human being is able to "love and to work" successfully. Both sexes need to be satisfied not just through relationships with friends and family, but also through achieving in the world of work (as cited in Betz, 2002).

Until recently, definitions of career were separate for men and women with the assumption that men choose a career subsequent to adolescence, whereas women's careers were chosen as a temporary measure. This notion has been said by to be a hindrance to the formulation of a theory of women's career development (Poole & Langan-Fox, 1997). Smart and Peterson (1997) state that the career issues women face are distinctive, and differ from those of men. Pringle and McCulloch Dixon (2003) suggest women's careers are broader than men's careers referencing Bateson "men build careers while women compose lives" (1989, p. 3). They consider a more holistic view of career as "one that has the capacity to embody the emotional, spiritual, physical, psychological as well as the outer achievement of an 'objective' career" (p. 291). Unlike men's careers, women's careers are not exclusively defined by involvement in paid work, and can be considered an amalgam of personal development.

Feminist analyses of women's careers suggest that a new phase of feminism is taking another look at the traditional roles into which women have been socialized, in particular family and relationship roles and reframing and reclaiming the positive aspects of these roles, rather than seeing them through a patriarchal lens as being of low social worth (Marshall, 1989, p. 277). Marshall refers to the work of Bakan (1966) where he distinguishes between two fundamental principles of human performance. Bakan called these "agency" and "communion" and defined them as basic coping strategies of "dealing with the uncertainties and anxieties of being alive" (p. 279). Marshall drew parallels between Bakan's work on agency¹ and employment and concepts of career, stating that there are clear associations between its principles of doing and wanting to be judged by achievement. In contrast communion is associated with "being" with manifestations of trust and acceptance.

¹ Agency is an expression of independence through self-protection, self assertion and control of the environment. The agentic strategy reduces tension by changing the world about it and manifests itself in focus, closedness and separation.

Bakan (1966) was one of the first to link agency with maleness and femaleness with communion²; Marshall (1989) further links them with Jung's concepts of anima and animus, individuation and self-actualization stating that implied in Bakan's work is that women's journey of development is more inwardly oriented than men's. Marshall reverses Bakan's assertion of the need for "agency mitigated by communion" giving her suggestion of the path of "communion enhanced by agency" and states that this model re-values traditional female characteristics, removes them of stereotypes and sets them alongside male characteristics as equals (p. 280). Further, that integrating communion with agency will require a radical re-vision of the value systems against which we judge good performance. Betz (2002, 2005) comments that a combination of agency and communion can be considered desirable for both sexes and that these together make up an androgynous personality style. The struggle for balance between agency and communion has been suggested to be central to women's careers (Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999; Marshall, 1989; Pringle & McCulloch Dixon, 2003).

Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) suggest that a new career definition may more accurately capture the career experiences of women and may provide them with more and better avenues for career success. They suggest their Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) fits the worker's needs for three parameters that influence career decisions: authenticity, balance and challenge, in particular explaining women's desire to operate relationally in their lives. Further, that this model has been used inherently by women for many decades due to multiple needs of caring, coping and discrimination and that the KCM answers the questions, "How do women's careers unfold" and "what meaning does career have?"

Studies exploring the KCM (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Cabrera, 2007) reveal that women and men defined their careers differently. Women examined opportunities and blocks and then forged their own approach rejecting linear career progression, creating 'non-traditional', self-crafted careers. Women indicated they were more likely to have non-traditional careers, characterized by various career interruptions that required attention to non-work needs but not only needs such as childcare concerns, but also needs such as the quest for spiritual fulfillment and to be true to or to care for oneself. In sharp contrast to men, the career histories of women are relational. Mainiero and Sullivan postulate men tend to follow an Alpha Kaleidoscope career pattern of challenge followed by authenticity and balance and that women follow a Beta Kaleidoscope career pattern of challenge followed by balance then authenticity.

Constructivist techniques and career narratives are emerging as a transformative research tool (Bujold, 2004). Savickas Theory of Career Construction (2002, 2005) defines career, that is subjective career from a constructionist viewpoint as denoting a moving perspective that imposes personal meaning on past memories, present experiences, and future aspirations by weaving them into a pattern that portrays a life theme.

Savickas (2002) posits that it is the theme that matters in a person's life story because it describes what is at stake in a person's life, and that it is the theme which matters to a person because it gives meaning and purpose to their work. As a person tells their life stories, there can be the identification of their own personal paradigm for turning essence into interest, tension into intention, and obsession into profession.

The intention of this research was to use narrative methods to study in depth a contemporary woman's career journey.

² Communion is the sense of being 'at one' with other organisms, its basis is integration; it seeks union and cooperation as its way of coming to terms with uncertainty and is characterized by contact, openness and fusion. (Marshall, 1989, p. 279)

2. Method

The participant in this study was a 51 year old, New Zealand European woman, a biographer and life writing teacher, self-employed and working in a freelance capacity. She has a PhD degree attained at age 42 and has written four books. She has taught for several years as a tertiary life writing teacher and is currently developing a life writing programme within the community and is consultant biographer for a hospice. She is married to a medical specialist and has two adult children.

The participant (P) was selected by a purposive process. Three interviews were conducted of approximately an hour in duration. After the first two sessions, the participant was asked and agreed to have a further interview to clarify and extend the transcript data. A third meeting was arranged, and in the interval the tapes were transcribed from the first two interviews. The transcripts were sent to the participant for review and comment to ensure they represented her intent. The participant reviewed the transcripts and made amendments to several sections, which involved the telling of significant stories from her childhood. Conducting a third interview meant that emerging themes and unresolved questions from the first two interviews could be addressed. This interview was then transcribed and also sent to the participant for review.

The majority of the questions were answered during the first two sessions. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) state that qualitative data analysis and data collection go hand in hand, and the analysis is a dynamic and creative process as researchers are constantly theorizing and trying to make sense of their data and keep track of emerging themes and patterns. These notions propelled and directed the interview process.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature. Eighteen open-ended questions focusing on early years, career pathway, education, mentoring relationships and influences were asked. Sample interview questions included items such as: When you think about your career, what unexpected or “chance” events led to new prospects or possibilities? What has driven you to achieve all that you have? Has there been a need for frequent change and self-invention? If so, what do you think has propelled you? What influences have been strongest in attributing to your success? Do you see yourself as different from other women? Probes related to each question were asked as appropriate.

3. Results

The power of narrative

One of the most interesting findings from this case study is the power of narrative in giving voice to the participant’s story and examining the dynamics by which life themes impose meaning on vocational behaviour (Savickas, 1997, 2002, 2005).

Taylor and Bogdan (1998) state that by virtue of being interviewed people can develop new insights and understanding of their experiences. They may not have thought about or reflected on events about which they are being interviewed. During the interview they are encouraged to articulate things they have not previously articulated. Referencing De Vault (1990), Taylor and Bogdan (1998) propose that as with other forms of social interaction, interviews sometimes have to fill in the meanings that people are not able to express themselves. These viewpoints were confirmed in this research, with the participant indicating on numerous occasions that she was gaining further self-understanding or gaining new insights about herself, that she found the process meaningful and that some ideas and thoughts were new. She confirmed the transformative nature of the narrative process and indicated she was making meaning of her life in new ways as a result (Bujold, 2004).

In the series of interviews with P it became apparent through her answers to questions such as “Tell me about your early years and your family” and “How much have these people (mentors) affected you

and shaped you and your career?” that she had suffered considerable loss and subsequent grief in her early years, losing both her father and her brother while she was a very small child. Her mother’s grief and how P describes her as “being overwhelming and causing me to panic” became a pervasive theme in her stories. In the retelling of her life story there was an apparent sense of pain, isolation and of being left out with phrases used such as “a feeling of being stuck” and “made me feel excluded” and “yearned for my father to return and rescue me from the sadness”.

P knows little about her father and has no written letter from him. She describes her early emotion: “Yearning was the emotion I carried through much of my childhood” and she acknowledges her motivation for her work:

I think it is absolutely right about the motivation for gathering and recording stories. It's making up for the loss of my father's stories, in his own words. Yes my mother and grandmothers told stories but there is no record, for me, of his voice. He never left a record, a letter, a gift for me to have. His only gift was to say to my mother, 'Please make sure that P has a good education.' When I write that down I realize for the first time, that perhaps I have been trying all my life to gain that good education and do the best I can with it.

There is a strong sense here of what Savickas would call “Our torments also may, in length of time, become our elements” quoting Milton in Paradise lost (Savickas, 1997, p. 11).

There is a progression, an early loss and sense of grief and isolation, a lifelong preoccupation with enabling others to tell their stories, with giving them voice, which has its roots in an early “torment” of wishing she had a record of her father’s voice. Getting a good education and using it has become a life quest for P as she has turned the tension and pain of her early loss into the intention of enabling others to make a record of their lives, and her obsession with story and writing into her profession of becoming a life writing teacher and biographer.

She describes her current work: “That’s the soul work – the deeper work – spiritually” exemplifying what Savickas describes as using “work as a context for self-development and manifestation of spirit” (1997, p. 3). Her work has provided a context for her needs for advancing herself and the world.

Movement towards authenticity and wholeness

Research to explore Mainiero and Sullivan’s (2005) KCM revealed that women tended to investigate opportunities and barriers and then to craft an individual pathway rather than a linear career progression, constructing non-traditional, unique careers with interruptions due to non-work needs being common. Such is the career path of P who said “What else could I have done? I’ve had to support and be available when needed. Always my work has had to fit in.”

Mainiero and Sullivan (2005) also posit that women’s careers take into account the quest for spiritual fulfilment and to be true to or to care for oneself. This is evidenced in P’s career when she says, “Time melts away and I don’t notice time passing. I think writing is what I will take through life with me” and “It’s more altruistic – the teaching – this is very personal. Somehow it sits with my philosophy...” For P there is a very real sense of career as vocation or calling.

Now as a mature woman P says she is evidencing a new vitality, a fresh sense of purpose aligned with many women involved in Mainiero and Sullivan’s research (2005): a move towards greater authenticity and wholeness in her fifties. She talks about being in a new phase of her life:

I decided that, this is my opportunity, this is my time, because L’s (P’s husband’s) career is so firmly established and the children are older and I’m just jolly well going to be quite single-

mind to do what I have to do as a teacher as a writer, instead of being split to try to be the perfect wife.

She talks about feeling ready to be in this next phase:

Was this the right moment to become a teacher? Yes, I think it was the right moment, because of maturity and all the things I'd learnt along the way that I bring to teaching.It's just the amalgam of all the different experiences the things you've had that you bring into teaching.

The struggle between agentic and communal perspectives

Bakan's (1966) notions of agency and communion have application in understanding the way P has forged and crafted her career. She has throughout, espoused a feminist position, been committed to achieving an egalitarian rather than subordinate dichotomy in her marriage and to seeking a framework which has facilitated the agentic and the communal parts of herself. On acknowledging these two parts she comments that they are well integrated now, but that "this has taken a long time."

Being a good mother and homemaker and evidencing the communal attributes described above are important to P:

Not to say that I don't still love the homemaking and the occasional baking and I really do like turning out a nice meal and having people saying it was delicious. I'm very committed to my children and being an advocate for them.

It could be argued however, that part of P's personal development has been in the melding together and the struggle for balance of these two parts, seeking at various times to be empowered with feminine traits like her maternal grandmother whom she describes as gracious and gentle and at other times with more masculine traits like her paternal grandmother: strong, efficient and empowering. Reference can be made of the importance of role models in establishing a person's goals and interests (Savickas, 1997b, 2002, 2005). This ongoing struggle for balance between agency and communion which has been suggested as being possibly central to women's career development is evident in this context (Arthur et al., 1999; Marshall, 1989; Pringle & McCulloch Dixon, 2003).

4. Conclusion

This research project sought to investigate the career of a high achieving New Zealand woman using qualitative data obtained during semi structured interviews.

The participant's career can be seen to have been effectively analyzed using Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2002, 2005) which has been shown to be a useful tool in providing a framework for illuminating her life pathway, choices and motivations. Her life theme of wanting to enable people to tell and write their life story can be seen to have been borne out of her own early grief and subsequent yearning which manifested itself firstly in a preoccupation for learning and then in an occupation of writing and teaching others to write. Her life story provides evidence that "Occupations can allow people to resolve unfinished business from childhood to create meaning, advance life projects and increase personal agency" (Savickas, 1997, p. 6).

By telling her life story the participant has gained insight into her life theme and she has been able to "comprehend how she has actively mastered what she has passively suffered" (Savickas, 1997, p. 11). For her, work has become an inner journey and of self actualization (Marshall, 1989) and she demonstrates how self completion can be fostered through work (Savickas, 1997, 2002).

The participant's career pathway and pattern has been seen to have been both constrained and contained by her multiple roles. Her pathway has been complex and individual rather than linear, non-traditional and above all unique. Recently, as a mature woman she can be seen to be emerging into a new phase of increased agency and confidence as she experiences the shifting and changing of life roles and a move towards greater authenticity and wholeness (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

A struggle for the concurrent fulfilment of the communal and the agentic was evident throughout her career pathway (Marshall, 1989). Whether or not women are choosing a pathway of "communion enhanced by agency" as Marshall (1989) suggests, the integration of the two and the ongoing tension between them is a notion which requires further investigation. I concur with Marshall (1989) and Arthur et al. (1999) in their proposition that this struggle may indeed be central to women's career success.

In making conclusions from this research project, there are inherent limitations, in that it was a case study undertaken with one woman and with this in mind no attempt will be made to generalize or to overstate the findings. Other limitations include the fact that the participant was a high achieving highly educated European upper middle class woman, working predominantly in a freelance or portfolio capacity. The choices that she has by virtue of her position and context are therefore much greater than those of many women in New Zealand today.

This study will be enhanced by the further undertaking of qualitative research with other high achieving women so that a fuller analysis of emerging themes can be achieved. Research into other women's careers in New Zealand as a counterbalance needs to be considered to offset the biased nature of undertaking a study of a high achieving upper middle class woman.

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