

**Negotiating Futures:  
Young Women's Stories of the Space and Place of Work and Family**

*Angela. F. Barns*

*Women's Economic Policy Analysis Unit /*

*Graduate School of Business*

*Curtin University of Technology*

*GPO Box U1987, Perth, Western Australia, 6845*

*Ph: 0409880034 Email: [BarnsA@cbs.curtin.edu.au](mailto:BarnsA@cbs.curtin.edu.au)*

**Introduction**

Since the late 1960's, labour markets within western capitalist societies have facilitated the meeting of many women's demands for emancipation and autonomy and pursuing a career is promoted as a site of and vehicle for self-expression, fulfilling potential and achieving actualisation (Pascall, 1997; Poole and Langan-Fox, 1997; Astin, 1984). However, whilst many women have successfully negotiated the 'world of professional careers', the tenacity of feminism within a patriarchal context ensues that women's participation in the workforce is susceptible to the ebbs and tides of dominant phallogentric social, economic and political discourses (Costa, 2000; Edwards and Magarey, 1995; Gutek and Larwood, 1987). This phenomenon raises a seeming paradox between women's increased occupational and career opportunities and a labour market regulated by anti-feminist neo-liberalism. Within such a context how do young women choose or make decisions about work, occupation and career; how important is a career to their self-concept and identity? What space and place do young women give to having a family, parenting and working, both now and in the future?

**Young women speak!**

At the end of 2002 I undertook a series of in-depth interviews with 12 young women, in their final year of school (TEE – which is the WA equivalent of VCE); seeking their stories and experiences of choosing an occupation and career and their ideas and perceptions of partnership/marriage and children.

### **Meanings of career?**

In discussing the meaning of career, the young women highlighted three significant aspects. Firstly, the career had to be of their choosing, as Laura explains:

*I didn't choose to go to school so I always want to be in a career that I've chosen, I always want to be in a job and think 'Hey! Even if this isn't the greatest day of my life I've chosen this career, I've chosen it for this reason and I'm still sticking to those reasons'.*

Secondly, their career had to involve meaningful work. For Janelle, who has decided to study law, meaningful was equated with a strong sense of social justice;

*I have always particularly had a very strong opinion about the death penalty. I have never quite settled down about that kind of thing. I don't agree with it and I don't like that happening. And to me the only way I can do anything about it is if I go into that type of work...I feel like I want to change something in the world.*

Thirdly, their career had to be enjoyable, as Melissa says:

*...I want to have fun...it's very important, and I want to work for like forever, but I want to enjoy my work. I sort of think people that have jobs and look forward to their two weeks a year holiday, or look forward to retiring, and when you retire it's like well what do I do know, you're counting down the days till you die...I want to do something I like and I want to do it till I die basically.*

### **Career decision making as exploration**

Many of the young women spoke of their career decision making as a process or journey of exploration rather than a ready-made or instantaneous decision (Poole and Langan-Fox, 1997; Savickas, 2002). For Melissa her career journey began during childhood;

*I think the first thing I wanted to be was the voice on Disney...I thought working for Disney would be great because I wanted to do one of the voices and I wanted to draw the cartoons and play the music and all that sort of stuff...then I moved on to marine biology for some strange reason... I think because I've been brought up with Star Trek and all that sort of stuff (and) one of my friends, her father was a scientist and I always thought science was inaccessible to me but then I sat*

*down and thought “oh my gosh I could be a scientist”, I thought well why not so then I went onto that...after marine biology I wanted to be an astronomer...I’ve (also) always wanted to be a computer graphics designer like computer games and stuff, and then I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to do that, like make the graphics or whether I wanted to make the actual game itself so I wasn’t sure but I don’t think maths was really my thing then I’ve also looked at diplomacy, film producing, archeology (and) being a spy.*

### **Changing choices**

Many of the young women commented on the changing nature of career decision making and choice, both in terms of the type of career they wanted (as noted in Melissa’s story above) and how they would like to progress within their chosen career. Laura’s meaning of change whilst linked with career progression, was related to the attainment of experience and knowledge, rather than status;

*I don’t want to stay at the same level but I’m not fussed about being the top nurse as long as I keep progressing, keep learning, keep building up...I don’t mind if after 10 years I’m still just a nurse...I’m not looking for a career to take me somewhere else, I’m looking to go somewhere with it.*

For Sinead, change was described in relation to working in a variety of different roles and contexts;

*....after my work experience I just realized the opportunities, like I met so many people that have been nursing and all the fields that they’re into, they don’t just deal with patients, they do lots of other things...I was at the hairdressers the other day and she was telling me...(that) she worked as a hairdresser on a cruise...if you could do that with nursing...I’d like to do that for a year...as part of what I want to do...and then we had this lady coming in (at school) and she was talking to us about nutrition...and just like health in general for girls our age...and it appeals to me doing that for girls, when I’m older.*

### **Choosing between the ideal and the real**

Many of the young women spoke of their career decisions as separating out 'real' jobs from the 'ideal'. For Laura this selection process was relatively simple:

*I wanted to be an author at some stage but then I realized that I can't actually write that well...you've got to be realistic.*

The real/ideal divide was also discussed in relation to the impact of television on career choices. Although many of the young women identified television shows, such as Law and Order, Ally McBeal, and E.R. as 'interesting' and 'informative' they were wary of the real/ideal component of television. As Janelle expresses:

*...my sisters say 'Oh Janelle you want to be like Ally McBeal'. They are amusing to watch but I think I have always watched them with a very realistic approach and saying this is not how it is going to be like. Because I have never wanted to fool myself into thinking that I was going to be doing something that I won't be.*

### **Family and careers**

For many of the young women, families played a significant role in their career decisions both at an early age and throughout their secondary schooling, particularly through the family's cultural heritage and/or gendering practices (Lindh and Dahlin, 2000; Poole and Langan-Fox, 1997: 231). In choosing to study law, Janelle identified her family's Indian heritage as a significant consideration in her career choice;

*My parents are Indian and it's a joke among the Indians that you either have be a doctor or a lawyer. It's a joke but it comes true. You meet a lot of Indian people and most of their children are doctors or lawyers because they come to places, especially like Australia and they place these things so high, doctors and lawyers are valued very highly especially like; "my child is a doctor or a lawyer" and it's the community thing and its just the culture so my parents ...I guess they wanted me to make the (extended) family proud of us.*

#### *Mothers*

Mothers were identified as a particular source of influence within her daughter's choice of career, often acting as the gender vanguard (Steele and Barling, 1996); this was illustrated through Annie's account of her decision to become a surgeon;

*...Mum, she's not so sure I don't think and she would prefer me not to get blood all over my hands...mum won't stop me if that's really what I want, but I think she just feels that I could be doing an easier job.*

For Laura who has chosen to pursue a career in nursing, her mother, who is also a nurse, was identified as a great support;

*She sort of got the attitude of 'whatever you do I'm fully behind you 110%'. It's nice to have her there but in the same way she doesn't make me feel like I have to do (it), like it's a duty or anything like that.*

### *Parents*

Interestingly, fathers were not identified by many of the young women as a significant source of influence or support in their career decision making (Steele and Barling, 1996). This is not to suggest that fathers' have no influence but rather reference to fathers was often inferred through the young women's discussions of their relationships with 'parents'.

### **Having a career and a family**

In speaking about the relationship between 'women, career and family' the young women were relatively clear about their priorities. For Sharon having children was important as was being able to maintain her career;

*I want two (children) that's my minimum...I think my maximum would probably be four, I mean two works, you know when you get tickets...a family pass is two adults two kids. But I'll keep having them until I'm sick of them...but I'm not having kids until I've lived my life and know what I want to do.*

Kylie, however identified her desire to have children as an integral consideration in her career planning:

*I always wanted to have kids before I'm 30 because I've seen the impact when you have children later in life...I sort of want a decent career first, like I want to take leave when I have kids but I want to be in a job that I can easily come back to.*

For many of the young women, work and family decisions were informed by their experiences with and observations of 'being women' (Smith, 1990). For Eleanor, having reflected on her mother's experiences, entering a relationship was not a 'given';

*I don't even know if I want to get married...and that's not in a negative way...maybe I will get married but sometimes I see my parents...they've been married for 20 something years and I just think, like...sometimes...my mum she just wants sometimes just to be able to go out in the garden and do her own thing but she had my dad to worry about and stuff and sometimes I think, not being selfish...I don't know if I'd want to, like stay with someone for that long and just not have a life of my own...*

### **Parenting**

For the young women who identified their desire to have children, at whatever time in their life, their careers still remained important. In discussing these issues the inevitable question of balancing work and career was raised;

*I guess I'd have to either cut back on my load or I'd have to learn to juggle between the two things...like seeing my mum as a parent, she's always been there for us, because dad had to work, so I think I feel that's a good way to do things as well, having someone there when you need them (Annie).*

Laura also emphasized the importance of a stay-at-home-parent;

*If I could really not take into consideration money I'd stop work and have kids until they're old enough to go to school, ideally that's what I want to do...I don't have anything against mothers who went to work when their kids are small...I just think its so important for kids and parents to have that bond of having those first few years totally together...I don't think I'm old fashioned but I just think when a person has kids its just the thing to do the woman takes time off even just for the first little while....I don't think career should come in the way of raising children.*

### **Life expectations**

After having talked with the young women about their meanings of career, their choices, the various influences on their decisions, their relationships with family and their own

ideas and wants regarding future partnerships and children, we concluded each of the discussions with what the young women wanted, overall from their lives.

Laura:

*I want to have lots of travel and lots of...actually I don't want to have lots of money like I never want to be poor but I really don't want to be I've seen so many kids who have so much money they just have no value of it, they don't respect it and I'd like to have enough money to be financially secure and able to take time off with the kids and have a nice holiday once a year...I'd like to have to work, I also like the idea of sort of being able to get to your retirement, so I've worked a lot of years, got a career and its all paid off and I can spend these last however many years of my life in perfect happiness.*

Janelle:

*I would at least like to know for myself that I fought for what I believed in whether it was the little things or the big things, so even if I change one person's life or did something for one person or helped out someone that I didn't even need to help out. I think that's what I would like, I would be happy if I had known that's what I had done.*

### **Concluding Comments**

In reflecting upon the young women's stories, what is preeminent is the young women's remarkable ability and capacity to actively engage in negotiating their futures. The young women's experiences reveal an in-depth understanding of not only the complexities involved in choosing an occupation and career but the space and place it will occupy within their everyday lives. Perhaps most importantly, these stories disrupt dominant constructions of young women as passive actors forced to perform in patriarchal plays of power and authority. In this disruption the young women also exert a challenge; a challenge to policy makers, future employers and researchers.

## References

1. Costa, Dora. L., (2000), 'From mill town to board room: The rise of women's paid labour', in *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 101-122.
2. Edwards, Anne and Magarey, Susan., (eds), (1995), 'Introduction', in *Women in a Restructuring Australia: Work and Welfare*, Allen & Unwin: St. Leonards, (Aust), pp. 1-16.
3. Gutek, Barbara, A and Larwood, Laurie., (1987), 'Introduction', in *Women's Career Development*, Sage Publications: Newbury Park (California), pp. 7-14.
4. Ireh, Maduakolam., (1999), 'Career Development theories and their implications for high school care guidance and counselling', in *High School Journal*, Vol. 83, Is. 2, pp. 28-42.
5. Lindh, Gunnel, and Dahlin, Einar., (2000), 'A Swedish perspective on the importance of Bourdieu's theories for career counseling', *Journal of Employment Counseling*, Vol. 37, pp. 194-203.
6. Pascall, Gillian., (1997), *A New Feminist Analysis*, Routledge: London.
7. Poole, Millicent and Langan-Fox, Janice., (1997), *Australian Women's and Careers: Psychological and Contextual Influences Over the Life Course*, Cambridge University Press: Melbourne.
8. Savickas, Mark., (2002), 'Career construction: A developmental theory of vocational behaviour', Duane Brown and Associates, (eds.), *Career Choice and Development* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition), Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, pp. 149-205.
9. Smith, Dorothy., (1990), *Texts, Facts and Femininity: Exploring Relations of Ruling*, Routledge: New York.
10. Steele, Jennifer and Barling, Julian., (1996), 'Influence of maternal gender-role beliefs and role satisfaction on daughters' vocational interests', in *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* Vol. 34 No. 9-10 pp. 637-48